

True Black Metal: Authenticity, Nostalgia, and Transgression in the
Black Metal Scene

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Abstract

Black metal as a distinct genre of popular music is characterized by a general yearning for authenticity. This authenticity can be expressed through production values, musical techniques adopted, and style of dress and presentation among members of the scene. In this context, members of the scene are presented with a dilemma given the demand to both showcase individuality in their taste and style while also conforming to what it means to be “true” or authentic within the scene. Due to these traits, “The debates surrounding heavy metal and the people who make it – over meaning, character, behavior, values, censorship, violence, alienation, and community – mark metal as an important site for cultural contestation” (Walser 1993: 10).

This thesis explores ideas surrounding authenticity in the black metal community as they are continually reproduced through the negotiation of normative relations to tradition found within the black metal community. It will also analyse the policing of its borders, examining how certain identities and practices are inherently constructed as more “authentic” to black metal while others are underrepresented, and thus may be seen as marginalized. I want to discuss the problematic conception of authenticity in the genre, in particular its static relation to the genre’s history defined in terms of the styles of older “second-wave” bands (centrally those bands understood to be True Norwegian Black Metal) which are celebrated as the “hegemonic” form of black metal. As well as a discourse analysis of the scene in these terms, this thesis will centrally include a virtual ethnography of online communities for black metal fans. By examining the content and systems of distinction produced within these online communities, I will consider how the static nature of the authentic black metal style

and associated “gate-keeping” in this community regulate how authenticity is produced within the scene.

Keywords: Black Metal, Subcultural Capital, Kvltness, Authenticity, Transgression

Introduction

Like any recognisable scene, extreme metal defines itself through exclusion. In the case of black metal, the overt emphasis on provocation and use of extremely lo-fi production make the genre a daunting venture for any would-be fan. Eric Seal (2016) describes the choice of lo-fi production values as specially distinguishing black metal from other genres, but also as speaking to the history of the genre: “The decision to choose this lo-fi sound is intentional. Historically black metal has done so to outright spite the mainstream sound; more recently it serves to honour a given band’s black metal influence” (Seal 2016: 3). In terms of musical technique, black metal is “characterized by extreme distortion, fast guitar technique, screaming or snarling vocals, and ‘blast beat’ drumming” (Freeborn 2010: 82).

The largely incomprehensible vocals, heavily distorted guitars, and extreme tempos make for music that is difficult to consume ambivalently, with people often either describing it as “noise” or discussing it with great fervor. In setting out to write this thesis it is worth noting that I consider myself to belong to the latter camp, having become immersed in the genre when, as an angry teenager, I was looking for the loudest, most abrasive music I could find. My search ended when I discovered black metal, a subgenre of metal better known for its associations with Satanism, church burning, murder, and other provocations than for the music itself.

Although I’m from Singapore, which is definitely far removed from Norway in terms of both physical and cultural space, black metal still evokes a recognisable atmosphere for me. Even

though I've never experienced a frigid Scandinavian winter, listening to Mayhem's "Freezing Moon" puts me in the middle of a somehow familiar experience. The "cold" (for lack of a better term) production values, the largely indistinguishable guitars and drums, and the vocal stylings all contribute to a sound that is simultaneously appealing and off-putting for me. The music seemed dangerous, as did the culture, which remains unrelentingly insular yet somehow known worldwide due to a wave of violence linked to the genre in the early 1990s. In this thesis, I will not be exploring my personal experience of metal but exploring the scene more generally, focusing on discourses of authenticity as they circulate among fans but also ground the genre. I will focus on two pivotal forms of representing black metal authenticity: transgression and nostalgia.

David Hesmondhalgh outlines and debates between subculture and scene as a concept for analyzing and "conceiving musical collectivities" (Hesmondhalgh 2005: 21). He acknowledges that the term subculture often overemphasizes the structure and fixity of these groups, downplaying ideas of agency in them. Instead, the concept of scene has been utilized for popular music studies, just like in Keith Kahn-Harris's (2007) study of the extreme metal scene. As Hesmondhalgh argues:

Kahn-Harris in effect treated the global extreme metal "scene" as a subcultural counterpublic with contradictory features. He showed that the extreme metal genre internationally allows its participants a safe retreat from the contradictions of modernity, allowing them to experience the pleasures of transgression "in a relatively safe, secure and autonomous environment" (157). Kahn-Harris [...] was sympathetic to these desires, but he also showed how such transgression depended upon "a preoccupation with control of the 'abject', which associates the abject with female sexuality, homosexuality and blackness" (161). Extreme metal provides a strong sense of affective community across time and place for its adherents, but this is a form of (counter) publicness that depends on closure (2013: 149).

I thus utilize scene as my term to designate these musical collectivities because of its inclusivity, which Kahn-Harris (2001) describes as an advantage of the term in comparison to using the terms “subculture” or “tribe”. For Kahn-Harris, extreme metal is “the locus for a huge range of practices, texts, institutions and social phenomena” (Kahn-Harris 2000: 17). Scene thus presumes and allows for a more holistic approach in the analysis of these cultural practices.

Chapter one traces the genealogy of the black metal genre back to its roots in heavy metal, looking at its aesthetic and sonic features. I describe the evolution of black metal, starting from its roots in the 1980s as thrash or speed metal with satanic themes, into a distinct genre in the late 1990s, which had its own ideology as well as musical style. This leads me to discuss the seminal events in black metal’s tumultuous history, culminating in an analysis of modern black metal and the future of the genre. The next chapter looks at the “second wave” of black metal, which is often hailed as the most authentic form of the genre and widely referred to as “Norwegian” or “true” black metal. The emphasis on transgression in this subgenre is explored here alongside ideas of nostalgia for true black metal circulating among fans and musicians. This chapter culminates in a reflection on the limitations of employing such a waves model to describe the history of black metal.

Moving on from this historical contextualization of black metal nostalgia, the next chapters turn to contemporary fan discourses and scholarship on fans. I explore how authenticity is constructed in the scene, describing black metal’s specific measure of cultural capital, called “kvltness”. In explaining kvltness I utilize Keith Kahn-Harris’s (2007) work on subcultural

capital, which he divides into two distinct forms – mundane and transgressive subcultural capital.

Finally, I turn to the website *Reddit*, which I utilize for a brief virtual ethnography, both to support and extend Kahn-Harris's model. My analysis of black metal feeds (or subreddits) on *Reddit* considers both how these forums are structured in ways that reflect black metal's organization around nostalgia and how fans interact in these forums. This analysis is used to map how cultural capital works in these online spaces and how this relates to the forms of nostalgia circulating in the black metal scene. Two very different subreddits were utilized for this analysis, R/BlackMetal and R/MetalMememes. Concluding this study of online spaces, I argue that even though they value two clearly discrete forms of black metal-oriented content, the forms of cultural capital circulating in these communities are largely similar.

History of Black Metal

Stylistically, black metal can be traced back to the roots of heavy metal, whose genealogy “ought to trace the music back to African-American blues, but this is seldom done” (Walser 1993: 8). Robert Walser describes this glaring omission in relation to dominant white discourses around the music: “Just as histories of North America begin with the European invasion, the histories of musical genres such as rock and heavy metal commonly begin at the point of white dominance” (1993: 8). For the purpose of this thesis, however, I will not be delving too deeply into the genealogy of black metal, simply describing the direct influences on what is commonly referred to as the first wave of black metal.

There is no monolithic conception of what heavy metal encompasses, with the term remaining “an open site of conception” (Walser 1993: 3). However, bands such as Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin, who incorporated themes associated with the mythical and occult in their version of rock music, are commonly associated with the genre’s first phase. These bands were also highly influential on the conception of black metal, with “lyrics that evoked excess and transgression” (1993: 9). This emphasis on transgression in particular culminated in the creation of the black metal scene as I will outline below. In this chapter, I will be tracing the history of black metal starting with the “first wave” of black metal in the early 1980s. Table 1 will serve as a reference supporting my discussion as it lists seminal acts in each wave as well as examples of the hybrid subgenres that began to emerge in the mid-1990s and which are also important for my thesis overall.

Dayal Patterson (2013), in his compendium on black metal, acknowledges a sonic and aesthetic shift in the metal genre, beginning in the 1980s with bands such as Venom, Mercyful Fate, Bathory, and Hellhammer/Celtic Frost. In retrospect, these bands might not sound like “archetypical” black metal bands and they were not discussed as black metal artists at the time. Patterson posits that,

While the seeds of black metal were sown during the seventies, it wouldn't be until the eighties that the first wave of black metal would really take form, though it's important to bear in mind that the phrase “first wave black metal,” and in some cases even the term “black metal,” have only been applied in retrospect. Essentially, this first wave was a very small collection of bands who pushed metal toward harsher territories in both sound and imagery [...] Nonetheless, while it's a mistake to consider these bands *exclusively* part of the black metal genre, the work of these pioneers undoubtedly laid the foundations for the cult. (2013: 5: emphasis in original)

Table 1: The “Waves” of Black Metal and a Sampling of Subgenres (adapted from Hagen 2001: 31)

First Wave	Second Wave	Third Wave
Mid 1980s-1990s	Early-mid 1990s	Mid 1990s – present
Bathory (Sweden)	Mayhem	Dimmu Borgir
Celtic Frost (Switz.)	Emperor	Cradle of Filth (UK)
Hellhammer	Darkthrone	...and Oceans
	Immortal	Enslaved
	Burzum	
A survey of commonly recognized subgenres		Example Bands
<u>Folk Black Metal</u> : defined by use of traditional instruments and/or melodies		Nokturnal Mortum (Ukr.), Finntroll (Fin.), Windir (Nor.)
<u>Progressive Black Metal</u> : defined by a musical affinity with 1970s progressive rock bands.		Enslaved, late Emperor
<u>Avant-Garde Black Metal</u> : defined by stylistic pastiche of black metal and non-metal styles		Arcturus (Nor.), Enslaved, Solefald
<u>“True” Black Metal</u> : recreates the raw, “hazy,” and harsh character of Norwegian second wave bands		Leviathan (USA), Xasthur (USA), Weakling (USA), 1349 (Nor.)
<u>Blackened Death Metal</u> : a stylistic hybrid straddling black metal and death metal		Throcult (USA), Zyklon (Nor.), Myrkskog (Nor.)
<u>Industrial Black Metal</u> : defined by use of synthesized and sampled mechanical or electronic textures		...and Oceans, Samael (Switz.)
<u>Symphonic Black Metal</u> : defined by elaborate keyboard or orchestral arrangements		Dimmu Borgir, Cradle of Filth (UK)
<u>Melodic Black Metal</u> : defined by clearly melodic guitar lines. This style is often associated with Sweden.		Dissection (Sweden), Naglfar (Sweden), Dawn (Sweden)
<u>Gothic Black Metal</u> : draws heavily on vampiric imagery and frequently uses female vocals		Cradle of Filth, Rotting Christ (Greece)
<u>Pagan Black Metal</u> : thematically focused on pagan religions and mythology. “Viking” black metal is a specific variety.		Enslaved, Nokturnal Mortum
<u>NS (National Socialist) Black Metal</u> : thematically focused on racism, fascism and/or nationalism.		Nokturnal Mortum, Graveland (Poland)
<u>Post-Black Metal</u> : blends traditional Norwegian second wave elements (dirty vocals, blast beats, raw guitars) with post-rock/shoegaze sensibilities.		Wolves in the Throne Room, Deafheaven, Alcest

Both Patterson's overview (2013: 6-16) and Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind's history of black metal (2003: 10-14) trace the lineage of black metal from the bands listed above, however they both also note that a single band was particularly pivotal to the shift in metal towards the aesthetic and sonic extremes that underpin the black metal genre. This band, Venom, were "the originators of the term 'black metal' itself" (Patterson 2013: 5). Frank Godla of Metal Injection echoes this sentiment, referencing Venom's 1982 album *Black Metal* to argue that, "Although the music style of the LP remains more reminiscent of thrash, the lyrics and imagery associated with the record turned out to be the single biggest influence in spawning the early Norwegian Black Metal scene nearly 10 years later" (2011: 1).¹

Venom began in Newcastle, England, in 1979 or 1980, and several aspects of their music and aesthetic influenced the emergence of the second wave of black metal. To refine their image, members of Venom adopted pseudonyms, calling themselves Cronos, Mantas, and Abaddon. Keith Kahn-Harris posits that this strategy was designed to distance them from the human (see 2007: 38) and further exaggerate their "allegiance" to the occult. The band also adopted a grandiose style of dress for their promotional photos, dressing in studded leather and brandishing chains and primitive weaponry to emphasize the feeling of aggression which was also conveyed by their music (Figure 1).

¹ Godla, F. (2011, February 8). Venom Give Birth to Black Metal. Retrieved from <http://www.metalinjection.net/editorials/back-in-the-day/venom-birth-black-metal> accessed 20 March 2017.



Figure 1: Venom Press Photo. (Teamrock 2005). Retrieved from <http://teamrock.com/feature/2005-01-05/venom-centuries-of-sin> accessed 20 March 2017.

Michelle Philippov describes the sound of Venom as a combination of “raw, aggressive metal with theatrical styles of performance, and lyrics employing Satanic and Norse pagan themes” (2011: 153). Their raw, or “lo-fi”, production values, and their emphasis on satanic themes, helped distinguish Venom, and combined with their visual style these elements produced a coherently transgressive aesthetic. Ian Reyes explains the significance of Venom’s use of lo-fi production in these terms, stating: “They weren’t aiming to be good. They were against the slickness of mainstream rock and wanted to make something truly hard to like”. Reyes also refers to this as “a tried and true tactic of heaviness” (2008: 222), emphasising that this aesthetic was shared with other “black” metal bands of the time, like Bathory and Hellhammer, bands that strongly influenced the Norwegian black metal scene. It is this latter scene that is now also known as second wave black metal, and which picked up where the first wave bands had left off.

True Norwegian Black Metal

While the first wave of black metal bands in the 1980s formed a prototype for the genre, they still mainly played music that was in the vein of thrash or death metal with only slight tweaks – centrally the lo-fi production values and satanic imagery. This all changed with the Norwegian black metal scene in the 1990s, which developed black metal into a distinct genre of music. In contrast with the high production values that other genres of metal bands might value, black metal acts intentionally sought “a raw, primitive aesthetic – low production values, mid-range drone, stripped down song structures and arrangements” (Taylor 2010: 3). In this they distanced themselves from other types of metal while paying homage to the first wave black metal bands discussed earlier. While this scene was largely “underground” during its inception, the music not being received very positively by music

critics (see Patterson 2013: 132), it soon gained notoriety through media attention largely unrelated to the bands' musical style.

Benjamin Olson focuses on how the visual and musical aspects of black metal distinguish it from other forms of metal. He explains:

Norwegian black metal was also a dramatic musical and visual break from any previous form of metal. While virtually all earlier forms of metal music had emphasized clarity, energy and virtuosity, black metal music is dense, deeply distorted, and cacophonous. Black metal exchanges the guitar solos, technical wizardry and song structure of traditional metal for a buzzing, droning wall-of-sound. Abrasive, meandering and extremely dark, black metal is often completely impenetrable to the casual listener. (2008: 9)

This emphasis on exaggeration and transgression in musical style explored by early proto/first wave black metal bands like Venom and Bathory heavily influenced the Norwegian black metal acts, who took this emphasis to new levels. Drawing on the imagery pioneered by bands like Venom, heavy on leather, chains and medieval weapons, Norwegian black metal acts exaggerated this by incorporating even larger, often comically oversized, chains, spikes, and other primitive-looking weaponry while also employing the use of black and white "corpse paint" to create a sinister inhuman aesthetic fitting the music that they played (see Figures 2 and 3). Corpse paint in particular has become synonymous with black metal, with Dayal Patterson arguing that "corpse paint has probably become the most identifiable aspect of the black metal aesthetic" (2013: 144).



Figure 2: Mayhem. (The Quietus 2014). Retrieved from <http://thequietus.com/articles/14975-mayhem-interview-necrobutcher> accessed 25 March 2017.



Figure 3: Immortal. (Norwegian Arts 2015). Retrieved from <http://norwegianarts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/NBM-Immortal-copyright-Nuclear-Blast-e1443452460395-2800x1280.jpg> accessed 20 March 2017.

Although the use of white face paint for live stage performances or for photo shoots was not a novel concept in rock, Kiss and Alice Cooper having utilized similar make-up on stage in the 1970s, black metal corpse paint was not appropriated as a fashion statement or to look cool. Necrobutcher, bassist of the seminal Norwegian black metal act Mayhem, whose former vocalist Dead is argued to have invented corpse paint (Patterson 2013: 144; Moynihan and Soderlind 2003:36), made the following comment: “It wasn’t anything to do with the way Kiss and Alice Cooper used make-up, [...] Dead actually wanted to look like a corpse. He didn’t do it to look cool. He would draw snot dripping out of his nose. That doesn’t look cool. He called it corpse-paint” (Campion 2005: 40). Corpse paint viewed through this lens, I argue, was another step towards the “inhuman” aesthetic Kahn-Harris (2007: 38) claims was sought by earlier first wave bands like Venom.

Their creation of corpse paint and associated reinvention of the black metal aesthetic may seem like a marginal footnote in the story of Mayhem, however, and the band by many accounts “remains the most important and influential band in black metal history” (Patterson 2013: 127). Moynihan and Soderlind draw parallels between Mayhem and Venom, arguing that “in much the same manner as Venom are considered the fathers of Black Metal worldwide, Mayhem hold a similar position in Norway itself. Their infamy has long since spread into an international cult status” (2003: 33). Indeed, the name of the band was inspired directly by a song from Venom, “Mayhem with Mercy” (Patterson 2013: 129-130), solidifying the evolutionary line from the “first” to “second” black metal waves. It must be remembered, however, that the theorization of waves was only retrospectively applied, by fans, to explain the history of black metal. Back in the early 1990s, when Norwegian black

metal hit its “peak”, in terms of representation in the media and notoriety, bands like Mayhem were simply known as black metal bands.

The influence of Mayhem resulted from a plethora of intersecting forces, including sonic and aesthetic experimentation, and transgressive performances, bringing metal music to new extremes. Mayhem was also one of the earliest bands to engage in what Phillipov labels “transcendent violence” (2011: 150). Phillipov uses this term to describe how some Norwegian black metal acts linked their music to actual acts of violence, instead of simply alluding to them as had earlier bands. This brought a new element of danger to the transgressive performances of black metal music and black metal fandom. Owen Fung (2010) describes the best known of these acts of violence as follows: “a series of church arsons, two high-profile murders and a case of suicide involving prominent scene members grabbed the attention of the mainstream media, causing a period of moral panic within Norwegian society” (see, for example, Asadal and Ledang, 2007, Rydehed, 2008 in Fung 2010: 3).

Chris Campion (2005) describes this string of violent acts – a flurry of church burnings and the murders and suicide, but also more generally the nihilism associated with Satan-worshipping Norwegian youth in the early 1990s – as having been relentlessly associated with Mayhem. He argues, “as far as the Norwegian media are concerned, when it comes to Black Metal all roads lead to Mayhem, whose terrible and bloody history eclipses the debauchery of even the most hardened rock bands” (2005: 5). Although Mayhem’s origins date back to 1984 (Patterson 2013: 128), it was not until the early 1990s that they came into this notorious image and became central to the “rebirth” of the black metal genre, also

heralding a sound specific to their region now often known among fans as “True Norwegian Black Metal”.

The band Mayhem first consisted of the members Euronymous, Necrobutcher, Manheim, and session vocalists Maniac and Messiah.² Mayhem released their first demo album, *Pure Fucking Armageddon* in 1986, swiftly followed by their official debut album, *Deathcrush*, in 1987. Although *Deathcrush* is technically the first album released by a Norwegian black metal band, musically it does not resemble what most fans in the present would understand as “True Norwegian Black Metal”. Instead it was a cacophonous blend of punk rock, death metal and thrash metal in the vein of the bands of the first wave, like Venom and Bathory. However, around this time, shortly following the release of *Deathcrush*, Mayhem solidified their “classic”, albeit short-lived, line-up, replacing the vocalist and drummer positions previously held by Maniac and Manheim respectively with vocalist Per Yngve Ohlin (“Dead”) and drummer Jan Axel Blomberg (“Hellhammer”). Although this change seemed trivial at the time, as the band seemingly had a revolving cast of vocalists across their career, the introduction of these two musicians, and Dead in particular, had a profound impact on the ideology or ethos associated with the black metal scene. Dead soon became almost a mythical figure in black metal folklore, thanks to his eccentric behaviour both off and on stage, bringing Mayhem to an increasingly darker and more transgressive level which in turn solidified the band’s place as pioneers in the largely insular Norwegian black metal scene.

² Messiah only performed vocals for a single concert, in April 1986 in Ski, Norway, before quitting the band the following year (www.thetruemayhem.com/bio).

In addition to establishing the use of corpse paint as a core death metal convention, Dead became well known for his bizarre performance style, garnering unusual media attention and attracting people to the live shows of the band. Bassist Necrobutcher recalls this eccentricity as follows:

He used to collect dead animals that he found on the roadside – birds or squirrels that were hit by cars – and took them home because of this fascination with decomposition, the smell... everything to do with death, that was his interest. He kept this picnic basket under his bed and when something happened, like studio or live work, he would bring some of these animals in bags and inhale them between every song, to get this feeling of death. He was getting into the character of “Dead”. He’d also bury his clothes in the soil several days before the gig so that they were smelling of decomposition. I felt it was a little bit weird, but he had this black sense of humor around it and that made it all right. We were all laughing a little bit about it, but we didn’t mind, you know? (Patterson 2013: 142)

This emphasis on transgressive and provocative behaviour translated directly to their live shows, with Dead frequently performing self-mutilation and incorporating impaled pig heads on stage, an accessory which has since become almost *de rigueur* for any self-respecting black metal live performance. According to Dead, in an interview from 1989, his stage antics were not utilized as simply spectacle, but instead to weed out poseurs or people who weren’t “true” and serious about the scene (Patterson 2013: 144). This directly contributes to an ongoing scene discourse in which a fan has to be committed and not simply a “tourist”, and I will return to this in later chapters. In brief, “tourists” in the black metal scene are generally described as people who join without any respect for the scene’s history, simply “visiting” for the experience and then leaving before really understanding the scene.

This ethos of one having to prove “worthy” or dedicated enough to be part of a subcultural music scene is clearly not unique to black metal, with genres like hip hop and punk also

place significant value on authenticity and commitment. However, I argue that black metal, especially the second wave Norwegian iteration, brought a yearning for authenticity to new heights, and took on more visceral forms matching the extremity inherent in the subgenre.

Although grandiose and outlandish displays of violent performance such as those associated with Mayhem might seem asinine to scene outsiders, or at least make little sense, for many fans these performances became akin to a religion. Donna Gaines similarly describes the transformative power of metal for suburban youth in the 1980s and 1990s, positing that “it offered a worldview that made sense when nothing else did” (1998: 195) and effectively taught them “everything” they needed to know about life (see Gaines 1998: 188-192, 195-196). As Gaines suggests, “readings of youth [...] have explored the young person’s long-standing critique of the adult world” (1998: 37). Black metal in Norway in the early 1990s similarly granted “alienated” youth an avenue to be and define themselves in opposition to the adult world, and many fans wholly devoted their time to the transgressive and violent behaviour celebrated in the black metal scene. It must be noted however that not all the fans were young, and black metal fans who grew up with the genre in the early 1990s are evidently no longer youth.

Mayhem’s “Dead” years were among the most influential for the genre, not only because of the advent of corpse paint, and the notoriously explicit social boundary-pushing during live shows, but also because of the cult of personality that emerged around Dead. His eccentric stage antics and media personality attracted large amounts of interest in the group and a burgeoning scene quickly followed, with bands like Darkthrone, Emperor, and Immortal soon playing music in a similar vein. However, it was not long before Dead lived up to his

name. “Increasingly isolated from the world, Dead committed suicide on April 8, 1991, first slitting his wrists and wandering around the house before shooting himself in the head with a shotgun” (Patterson 2013: 146). Dead proved even more influential in death than in life, however, with his suicide acting as a catalyst for a “rebirth” of the Norwegian black metal scene, ushering in new extremes, both highs and lows. Euronymous utilised Dead’s death to garner additional publicity and notoriety for the scene, exploiting his death for transgressive depictions of the scene itself. Infamously, Euronymous and Hellhammer claimed to have “fashioned fragments of Dead’s skull into necklaces, with further pieces sent to other friends and contacts of the band” (Patterson 2013: 147).

It was during this period following Dead’s suicide and the media attention surrounding it that Euronymous helped to create a physical space for the local scene, “operating Helvete, a black metal corner shop in Oslo, and running the Deathlike Silence record label” (Christe 2004: 271). The collective running of these ventures, of which Euronymous was the de facto leader, centred on a mutual appreciation of the dark caustic sound and radical ideologies associated with the black metal genre. Helvete (hell in Norwegian) was more than simply a record shop for fans of extreme metal: “The shop was housed in too large and costly a space, didn’t ever make much money to speak of, but functioned as an expression of Euronymous himself – it became the focal point of the scene” (Moynihan and Soderlind 2003: 38). The importance of Helvete to the Norwegian black metal scene is reiterated by assertions that the shop wasn’t driven by economic success, but instead by idealism (see Moynihan and Soderlind 2003: 38-39, Patterson 2013: 152-154).

A further distinguishing feature of the Norwegian black metal scene at this time was the fact that it spawned an ideology extending beyond the musical genre (Zebub 2007). Kahn-Harris (2008) describes one of the central tenets as antagonism toward organized religion. He elaborates on the reasoning behind this contentious relationship with religion, arguing:

At the centre of black metal ideology lies virulent opposition to religion, particularly Christianity, embodied in the slogan “Support the war against Christianity”. This opposition stems not from a humanistic reaction to religious oppression but from a characterisation of religion as a form of weakness, a deviation from humanity’s lustful, animalistic self. The Satanism associated with black metal is rarely theistic, resembling instead an extreme form of anarchism in which compassion and community are eschewed in favour of individualism and elitism. (2008: 3)

This opposition to religion and affinity toward Satanism was also part of the image of first wave bands like Venom and Bathory. However, even with their gratuitous use of satanic imagery (see Figure 5), “within the scene there was, and is, a clear consensus that the band were not ‘really’ Satanists and that their attitude to Satanism was tongue-in-cheek” (Kahn-Harris 2007: 149-150). The Norwegian black metal acts of the 1990s, however, fully committed to a Satanic image, having reinterpreted these first wave bands as serious in their lyrical content and imagery. As Kahn-Harris argues, “the early 1990s black metal bands attempted to make metal ‘real’ again and remove its mundanity” (2007: 150). This relentless pursuit of transgression by bands of this era was short-lived, however, eventually becoming unsustainable and leading to the dissolution of the early 1990s Norwegian scene, as I will discuss in the next section.



Figure 4: Black Metal Logo from Helvete basement. (Date Unknown). Retrieved from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/72/Black_metal_-_graffity_in_euronymous%27_basement.jpg/200px-Black_metal_-_graffity_in_euronymous%27_basement.jpg accessed 25 April 2017.



Figure 5: Bathory's Self-Titled Album Cover. (1985). and Venom's *Welcome to Hell* Album Cover. (1981). Retrieved from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/4f/Bathory_album.jpg
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/1/14/Venom_Welcome.jpg
 accessed 25 April 2017.

End of the Second Wave

Michelle Philippov, in her work examining the link between the violent aesthetics incorporated in metal and actual acts of violence, describes how “‘real’ acts of transgression can be even more powerful in ensuring longevity [...] they offer popular insight into the one way that metal scenes can be popularized and sustained” (2011: 152). Kahn-Harris describes scenes as often being oriented toward the “logic of mundanity” (2007: 59),³ where scenic practices involve members mostly attempting to “experience ‘everydayness’ in all its regularity and unexceptionality within the scene itself” (2007: 59). By bestowing members of the scene who commit acts of transcendent violence with particular status, black metal bands and fans are actively embroiled in a game of one-upmanship as to who can be the most blasphemous. However, attempts to remove mundanity from the scene (see Kahn-Harris 2007: 150) in favour of an emphasis on capital granted through transgression worked as a double-edged sword. They aided the creation of sustained interest in the scene but also effectively ended the second wave through the imprisonment of most of the key band members.

Of the many second wave acts of “transcendent violence” that occurred during the early 1990s in Norway, one particular event seems to be the most frequently discussed, examined, and interpreted. Even though other murders had been committed during this period, the murder of Euronymous (Øystein Aarseth) by Varg Vikernes on the 10th of August 1993, in the stairwell of Øystein’s apartment (Moynihan and Soderlind 2003: 117), is the most infamous. The perceived significance of this event was most likely due to the

³ See “Mundane Subcultural Capital” (Kahn-Harris 2007: 122-127)

importance of both participants within the black metal community,⁴ and because both assailant and victim were members of Mayhem at the time.

Moynihan and Soderlind had the following to say on the impact of this murder:

The death of Euronymous shook the Black Metal scene to its core. Until that point, many felt they could continue to escape the repercussions of their deeds unscathed - deeds which by now had become a veritable shopping list of church arson, murder, burglary, death threats, grave desecration, and vandalism (2003: 118)

Although there is no real consensus concerning any specific events heralding the end of the “second wave”, the murder of Euronymous coincided with many bands innovating sonically away from the archetypal “Norwegian Black Metal sound”. The acts of transgressive violence formerly prevalent in the scene also diminished considerably, with most bands focusing more on what Philippov (2011) calls the logic of mundanity in their musical output. Philippov describes this as a shift towards a mundanity that had previously been derided by these early Norwegian acts, using the example of the band Emperor.⁵ She details how, “by engaging in both transgressive and mundane practices, the group has been a key beneficiary of the status and prestige associated with criminal activity *and* of the protections afforded by the logic of mundanity” (2011: 156: emphasis in original).

Black Metal Futures

Drawing on the sonic innovation explored by second wave black metal acts, it was during the mid-1990s that bands started to diverge from the “true Norwegian black metal” sonic

⁴ While Euronymous was the owner of Helvete/Deathlike Silence and the guitarist of Mayhem, Varg Vikernes was not only the bassist for Mayhem at the time but had also founded Burzum, another seminal act of the second wave.

⁵ Emperor formed in 1991, and are widely regarded as one of the seminal acts in the second wave of Black Metal.

signature. Bands had also begun to incorporate stylistic elements of other genres into their sounds, resulting in a plethora of different subgenres emerging during this period. Ross Hagen explains the distinction between the second wave and post-second wave acts as follows:

The third wave of black metal began in the mid-1990s and is often marked by more professional production and presentation, although some fans consider anything clearly stylistically outside of the first or second waves to automatically be third wave, with Dimmu Borgir as an archetypal representative (Hagen 2001: 30)

It remains difficult to explain how to classify a band as third wave, and there is not even any clear consensus on whether there was a third wave. However, Patterson (2013) describes two distinct approaches explored by bands during the late 1990s. First, some bands sought to innovate, revamping the sounds of the second wave by adding additional elements not commonly associated with the genre (folk instrumentation or symphonic soundscapes being two exceptionally popular routes to take). Second, there were other bands that wished to stay true to the original Norwegian ideology, and who relished “drawing on their fierce musical inaccessibility while also adopting the ethos espoused by such acts and expanding upon it considerably” (2013: 321).

Evolution of the genre had continued through the 1990s with many of the resulting subgenres from said experimentation visible in Table 1. In the mid-2000s, however, bands moved black metal away from its original ethos, and Patterson (2013), among others, discusses this shift as moving towards “post-black metal” (see Table 1). Patterson explains that while in the mid to late 1990s bands had expanded on the core “true Norwegian black metal” sound and moved further away from it, they still clung onto the Satanic/transgressive ethos celebrated in the second wave. The shift towards what he calls

post-black metal involves how bands in the mid-2000s started to reconfigure the ethos, “taking elements of black metal’s form but rebuilding them in an entirely new emotional, ideological, or spiritual direction” (2013: 468).

Post-black metal is also a contested space, with many black metal fan spaces refusing to acknowledge a connection between bands of the “post-black” persuasion and bands emerging from the second wave. This contestation involves the problem of “To what extent is Satanic ideology and a ‘traditional’ aesthetic still a defining characteristic of black metal for its practitioners and followers?” (Patterson 2013: 480) By deviating from the traditional “values” formed around black metal but playing music that is clearly influenced by earlier black metal acts, it remains difficult to determine if many later bands do or do not belong in the genealogy of black metal. Questions of authenticity are thus of importance to musicians, critics, and especially fans, who frequently focus on whether specific bands belong to this category, and do so through questioning whether ideology or music is the most important in conceptualizing black metal, or if they are both equally essential.

Concluding this chapter, and looking ahead to my further discussion of the waves model of black metal history, I want to emphasize that the term “post-black metal” must be a misnomer. Black metal did not “die” to simply be reborn into the entity that is “post-black metal”. The definition of black metal by forms of sonic innovation remains key, with the genre constantly evolving and taking inspiration from sources outside the original bands of the first and second waves. Patterson posits that it would be “misguided to suggest that the history of black metal is some sort of linear timeline tending toward improvement” (2013: 483). While there are many bands which have appropriated musical elements of black metal

without acknowledging a connection to the trailblazers of the 1980s and 1990s, many others are still utilizing the “template” set by the first and second waves. As Patterson argues:

Black metal will surely continue to innovate and evolve, and this should be celebrated, but it should also be remembered that many of the most powerful efforts have come from bands utilizing conventional black metal frameworks and traditional ideologies, and this will likely continue, even if the spikes, Satanism, misanthropy, and other trappings are a barrier for some listeners outside the genre (2013: 484).

Aesthetics of the Second Wave

Keith Kahn-Harris's work on extreme metal scenes (2007: 54-67) describes how opposition to outside groups creates the boundaries that are essential in the formation of identities within scenes. Benjamin Olson draws on this argument to suggest that "Norwegian black metal is largely defined by opposition; they only exist in reference to what they are opposed to" (2008: 28). This emphasis on opposition is mainly articulated through the anti-Christian/Satanic themes and discourses in their music and aesthetic – that is, it is based on content rather than musical style. Although I have discussed transgression as the cohering principle of black metal, I want to highlight the fact that black metal is at the same time driven by nostalgic yearnings, including yearning for transgression. The emphasis on transgression is often tied tightly to nostalgia, invoking a shift back to a "golden age" of an authentic Norwegian culture. Kahn-Harris thus describes "yearning for a pagan past" (2007: 40) as a key feature of the black metal narrative, in which "bands often invoke the Vikings and mourn the arrival of Christianity in the Middle Ages [...] Pagan society is constructed as lacking the 'weakness' that characterizes contemporary society" (2007: 40).

The culture idealized by the black metal scene thus centrally involves a romanticized past or the construction of "alternative mythologies" (Spracklen, Lucas, and Deeks 2012: 57). As Olson articulates this, "black metal is fixated with notions of a romantic past and the vital, empowering identities that they believe are available through pre-modern and pre-Christian culture" (2008: 19). His account of the reasons for this idealization suggests second wave fans "were attempting to exemplify the sincerity, mystery and romance they felt was lacking in the modern world" (Olson 2008: 34). In keeping with Kahn-Harris's ideas on the way black metal fans have "articulated an ideology of black metal, which is less a coherent doctrine than a common set of reference points" (2005 cited in Kahn-Harris 2007: 38), in this chapter I will be discussing the operation of nostalgia in the black metal ideology.

Emphasis on nostalgia characterizes black metal both in relations between the music and the world from which it emerged and those between fans and the music. Ross Hagen emphasizes it, arguing that "Nostalgia for times when extreme metal was a more obscure genre is a touchstone for black metal fans and musicians even in the 1990s" (2014: 230).

This nostalgic way of thinking in many respects appeared in relation to another extreme metal scene, death metal, which many musicians in the Norwegian scene felt “had become musically and ideologically bankrupt and beholden to the music industry” (Spracklen 2006: 37). The Norwegian black metal scene then was viewed as a way to bring extreme metal back to its roots; that is, to being authentic and uncommercialized. To quote Euronymous:

Normal metal isn't very popular anymore, all the children are listening to death metal now... (we are going to) make a shop where all the trend people will know that they will find all the trend music. This will help us earn money so that we can order more evil records for evil people...we've thought of having total darkness inside (the shop) so that people would have to carry torches to be able to see the records (Euronymous, cited in Moynihan and Soderlind 2003: 63-64)

Ian Reyes also recalls a “black turn” in metal aesthetics, positing that “the original promise of black metal, in its truest or most raw form, can be summarized as a fundamentalist solution to a crisis of metal heaviness” (2013: 241). He quotes Oystein Aarseth, better known as Euronymous, to support this sentiment. Responding to the idea that metal was stagnating in the early 1990s, Aarseth declared: “We must take this scene to what it was in the past” (Moynihan and Soderlind 2003: 60). Although talking about bringing extreme metal back to an apparently literal rather than mythical past, he doesn't explain what exactly this past entails. Reyes (2013) expands on this, describing how “such calls to remember the past and its unfulfilled possibilities were the rallying cry of black metal reformists” (2013: 241).

Nostalgia in black metal is not, however, monolithic, being conceptualized and manifest in many ways among fans and musicians. Today, some members of the scene lament the move of black metal sonically away from the second wave, which they describe as the most “authentic” iteration of the genre. As such, in order to display themselves as true or authentic, “claims of adherence to the musical characteristics of ‘true’ black metal are quite common among bands” (Hagen 2001: 16). By orienting themselves sonically toward the “true” black metal sound, bands are able to tap into nostalgia in order to perform a version of authenticity in black metal.

Such uses of nostalgia are not limited to the sonic sphere, and nor is it exclusively nostalgia for transgression, sonic or otherwise. In the second wave of Norwegian black metal, although most “true black metal” bands were utilizing Satanic or anti-Christian imagery exclusively, nature was commonly a theme used for celebrating an idealized past as well. As Hagen notes:

Frequently, black metal lyrics reference mythologies of trolls and wizards and expound upon the natural beauty of Scandinavia, promoting an idealized existence as a part of a mystical wilderness. Natural scenes are common in black metal cover art and inserts [...] and nature’s rugged beauty and unforgiving brutality are often praised in the music of Windir, Emperor, and Immortal, the latter having a particular flair for lyrics about grim and frozen wastelands (2001: 24)

Olson (2008: 51-65) describes the bands that predominantly emphasize these forms of nostalgia as pagan black metal, distinguishing them from Satanic black metal, which is primarily associated with the second wave. Pagan black metal bands, he argues, “construct identity in direct reference to notions of ancestral lineage, tradition” (2008: 81). The band Immortal might exemplify those bands who can still be considered “true” and authentic but do not utilize Satanic discourse through their music. Immortal invokes themes of “Nordic scenery and heroic narrations situated in the imaginary realm of Blashyrkh” (Marone 2014: 42). According to the band, Blashyrkh describes their surroundings from their point of view, while also being a mythical and idealistic realm. They claim to have conceptualized Blashyrkh in response to feelings of isolation inspired by the lack of a black metal scene in their hometown of Bergen, Norway (Bennett 2009).

Immortal describes this imagined landscape as something they long for, with Blashyrkh offering an escapist and idealistic alternative to modern society that the band, along with many other second wave acts, were dissatisfied with. Although the landscapes conjured by

the band describe a place very similar to Norway, Demonaz, the lyricist and current vocalist and guitarist of the band, stresses its difference:

Blashyrkh has a lot in common with where we are from [...] But it is a world of our own, that we can operate in, where we have creative control. I draw elements from what I like—the woods, the mountains, the darkness, the fog—I draw these things into a creative zone. I think only a few people understand this. People who don't have an intense relationship with music don't understand. They might like how it sounds, or they like it because they can drink beer to it. But for me and Abbath, it is everything (Bennett 2009: 20)

Like other elements of second wave black metal, such as the use of pseudonyms and corpse paint, the realm of Blashyrkh cultivates a sense of transcendence, where one is able to escape from reality. Nostalgic yearnings also play into Immortal's imagination of Blashyrkh as signifying a "pure" nature, one that is a place of escape where they have creative control of their environment to configure as they please. Karen Cardozo and Banu Subramaniam (2013) draw on Donna Haraway's term *naturecultures* to acknowledge "the impossibility of a pure 'nature' that we have not already constructed by observing and speaking about it" (2013: 3). As Haraway suggests is true in general, in black metal mythology nature is appropriated "as a resource for the production of culture" (1991: 150). The construction of nature suggested by Immortal and other black metal bands, then, is predictably as impure as their construction of history, and these are utilized together to promote a fantasy of Nordicness to support the broader "black metal ideology".

An early song by Immortal, titled "Cryptic Winterstorms", describes this yearning for the romanticized past which they associate with an authenticity lost in modern society:

I long for eternal frost and black winters
Asleep in the cold lakes
Awake in the stars in the sky
And silent the valleys in the North

Where I once were a proud warrior

Where I belong

Where I bath my soul in doom fire fog

Where I ride death's cold winds

In the battles in the North

While the second wave musicians deployed nostalgia to explain and to cohere their music, fans in the black metal scene also construct a uniquely nostalgic discourse. Hagen (2014) discusses how the second wave of black metal is often romanticized by fans, positing that

Black metal fundamentalists generally look to the early 1990s Norwegian scene as an essential ideal for black metal [...] For these participants, the genre declined into commoditization and stylistic impurity as its visibility and influence grew (2014: 226)

He justifies his use of the term fundamentalist by acknowledging that, when used in a religious context, fundamentalism describes allegiance to an ancient truth, and the goal of uncovering and bringing back this truth from the past (Hagen 2014: 226). Hagen contends that black metal seems akin to a religion among some fans, and Donna Gaines' ethnography of metal fans (1998) also draws on the seemingly religious aspect of this music. Hagen's elaboration on metal fundamentalism emphasizes fundamentalism's "assertion that the modern world has since fallen away from the truth" (2014: 226). These black metal "fundamentalists", then, use ideas about the past to measure the authentic participation of newer black metal bands, and this pattern is also apparent among fans. The past to which black metal should remain fundamentally aligned is often connected to geographic location, with the Nordic history of the genre's seminal acts still influentially contributing to this discourse. Karl Spracklen's (2006, 2011) research on black metal highlights this connection to Northern Europe (particularly Norway) and to "Nordic-ness". Bands that are Scandinavian in origin are thus seen to be more generally attuned to the past and therefore more "true".

Black metal fundamentalists, however, aren't the only members of the black metal scene and their views generally do not reflect those of the majority. There are also sections of the fan base that Hagen describes as "progressive" participants, who "no longer feel a strong affinity with the roots of black metal" (2014: 226). These participants do not lament the continued evolution of black metal, both musically and aesthetically, feeling that this progression is important to keep black metal exciting and thus in line with the core ideals of the genre. This does not make these fans "immune from nostalgia for the days when black metal was a more obscure and rarefied musical style" (2014: 227) – in fact, Hagen argues, "many of these participants consider that they are continuing to cultivate the genre's reactionary spirit" (2014: 226-227).

In my virtual ethnography below, I will seek to outline the continuing relevance of both these groups of fans and their competing ideologies as manifested in their interactions in *Reddit* black metal forums. Through this I attempt to find out how these fans themselves conceptualize black metal authenticity, with or without nostalgic relations to the waves of black metal. Before turning to these online sites, however, I want to acknowledge that even though this waves model is frequently used to describe the history of black metal (see Moynihan and Soderlind 2003, Kahn-Harris 2007, Patterson 2013), thinking of black metal as structured by waves might also produce some problems.

In critiquing this model of writing the history of black metal, I will be employing feminist critiques of the waves model of that history. Sam Mcbean argues that "there is an overwhelming dominance in stories of feminism's recent history of one linear, decade-

dividing temporality” (Mcbean 2016: 6). She suggests that this singular narrative conception limits how feminist history can be portrayed. The waves model “obscures feminism’s multiple histories and presents as well as creates Oedipal-like relations in the present” (2016: 6). The same problems arise from attempting to utilize a waves model to define black metal’s history, although the resources available to both critics and fans are dominated by that construct. Kathleen Laughlin et al. (2010) locates the central problem of utilizing the waves approach to feminism in the way it “entrenches the notion that feminist politics only occurs in dramatic waves of revolutionary activism” (2010: 77). Similarly, black metal should not solely be thought of in terms of the first, second, and third waves. The genre does not go through such a linear transformational evolution over time, with each iteration being conceived as “superior” or “inferior” to the one before it.

The ways in which historical waves are positioned in opposition to one another can also be problematized by looking at how waves physically interact. Hokulani Aikau, Karla Erickson, and Jennifer Pierce, also reviewing the problem of feminism wave history, note that:

Scientists find that waves do not exist in isolation but are connected to multiple sets of waves or wave trains. Rather than think about the ‘second wave’ and the ‘third wave’ as separate waves that we can count from the shore [...] we look to the horizon for the variety of waves that combine to form a single wave train (2007: 6)

In the case of black metal, this “horizon” would be the position from which fans and musicians perceive the various factors that embody the genre. Black metal’s waves are not, in fact, as distinct as Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind (2003) or Dayal Patterson (2013) depict them as being, and there is a significant amount of overlap between bands that ostensibly belong to each wave. Indeed, many bands that emerged in the Norwegian early 1990s scene, and are colloquially known as second wave black metal, no longer play

anything resembling what most fans deem “true” black metal, and this is the case starting from the late 1990s.⁶ These are bands whose production values had started to increase and which had begun to incorporate elements from other music genres, straying from the “true Norwegian black metal” sonic template. Defining the genre by waves also highlights certain bands while excluding the work of others. The second wave of black metal, in particular, is often defined in geographically exclusive terms, even though there were many other bands outside of Norway playing similar music at the time, including Sigh from Japan, Impaled Nazarene, and Beherit from Finland.

Drawing on these arguments for rethinking the waves metaphor, it is clear that the model has limitations even though it might be useful for outlining some key aspects of the genre’s history for both scholars and fans. A useful way to expand the genealogy of black metal would be to rethink some of the wave-determined history’s key narratives. For example, although the events occurring in Norway in the early 1990s were no doubt significant to the rise of black metal’s visibility and the refinement of the ideology perceived by fans to unite them, the scene was less geographically clustered than a focus on those events suggests. Jeremy Ulrey (2016) explores the impacts of other bands that played similar music at the time, hailing from countries such as Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Japan. These bands are often ignored when looking at the history of black metal in favour of Norwegian bands. As Laughlin et al. state:

Historical narrative is hardly static: Not only does standpoint matter in the construction of the past, but events of our own time push us to ask

⁶ See Darkthrone’s *Ravishing Grimness* (1999), Mayhem’s *Grand Declaration of War* (2000), or Burzum’s *Dauði Baldrs* (1997) for examples of pivotal second wave bands straying from the prototypical “true black metal” sound.

different questions and explain the origins of forces previously omitted, ignored, or dismissed (2010: 97).

Thinking about nostalgic yearnings in black metal through this question, it becomes clearer that the scene's relation to the past looks different based on how fans and musicians relate to the scene. In the early 1990s, black metal musicians yearned for a change from the perceived stagnation of extreme metal at the time, celebrating the transgression displayed by the metal bands of yore. In the present period this narrative has changed, with fans and musicians now yearning for transgression in relation to bands from the early 1990s.

Moynihan and Soderlind (2003) describe how the transgression of sonic and aesthetic boundaries granted these bands incomparable notoriety and capital. Present-day bands thus yearn for this same sense of danger, whether through the utilization of their sonic blueprints or attempting to evolve the sounds pioneered by them.

Subcultural Capital, Kvltness, and Authentic Participation

Virtual ethnography entails the observation of social interactions in online spaces. Peter Holtz, Nicole Kronberger, and Wolfgang Wagner discuss the importance of online spaces in facilitating interaction among people who hold similar interests as follows:

Within internet forums, members of certain (online) communities discuss matters of concern to the respective groups, with comparatively few social restraints. For radical, extremist, and other ideologically “sensitive” groups and organizations in particular, Internet forums are a very efficient and widely used tool to connect members, inform others about the group’s agenda, and attract new members. (2012: 55)

Online communities provide an alternative venue for the reproduction of values associated with scenes, and for metal fans they often play an integral role in subcultural participation, given the fact that individual members of any subcultural scene might not have easy access to public gatherings of fans or performances representing the scene are exacerbated through association with social transgression. Michael Moynihan and Didrik Soderlind stress the impact of this lack of access, finding that “the popularity of Black Metal in America has not yet reached the levels evident in Europe. There are far fewer bands, extremely infrequent concerts, and the genre has remained underground” (2003: 288). As a response to a lack of acceptance and representation in the “outside world”, as well as this uneven access, online forums are often used by metal fans as a way “to re-establish a lost sense of community” (Hine 2008: 258), as theorist of virtual ethnography Christine Hine would put it. Without being drawn too closely into the debates over what constitutes a community online, I want to focus on how online “communities” support the preservation of the exclusive character of metal culture (Purcell 2003; Spracklen, Brown and Kahn-Harris 2011; Olson 2008). In particular I want to consider how this works to reinforce a subcultural mode

of fandom, through rigid moderation of the types of content and discussion allowed in these online spaces.

To this end I decided to conduct a limited virtual ethnography of participants in the subreddits R/BlackMetal and R/MetalMemes, observing the interactions between members of these “communities” to understand how taste and distinction are produced in the online sphere. I utilize these terms in reference to Pierre Bourdieu (1984), where he describes how those who have acquired large amounts of cultural capital are able to determine what is classified as taste in society, and distinguish themselves from those with lower cultural capital. In this thesis however I will not be using Bourdieu’s work directly, instead utilizing the work of a group of scholars working on popular music fan cultures that have attempted to adapt, use, and revise Bourdieu. I have not interacted with the participants in these forums as a researcher, although I have personally been a member of the subreddits concerned. Instead I have closely observed their interactions, including producers/moderators of the forums as well as ordinary participants, and I analyze them here both as a published multi-faceted text and as a record of social interaction and the production of taste communities. My virtual ethnography of these spaces was done between July 2016 and June 2017, checking the subreddits for new posts on a weekly basis and observing the interactions from there. The examples I utilize for this thesis were chosen on the basis that I felt they best represented the forms of identity formation and capital contestation I wished to highlight in my study.

As Hine posits, such an approach “transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the internet” (2008: 257).

Considering the context of black metal, I argue that there is an increased importance to virtual spaces as a site for identity formation and boundary maintenance within the scene, given its oppositional relation to the mainstream and what are often considered, within and outside fan groups, as its “anti-social inclinations” (Moynihan and Soderlind 2003: 65). Through the use of online communities, black metal fans are able to share content across an international audience. These communities also serve as a framework for spreading a hegemonic image of black metal and reproducing black metal “taste”, providing fans with “a symbolic identity to join with, one that provides catharsis for their rebellious impulses” (Moynihan and Soderlind 2003: 267).

Reddit can be described as a content aggregation site, where users submit external content which can then be discussed with other users of the site. “Subreddits” are the discrete channels within the site, with the general appearance of bulletin boards, where content is organized into niche areas of interest. Subreddits are often characterized by distinct rules and have moderators who are not affiliated with other parts of the site, in effect creating a separate space distinct from other subreddits. In the case of metal, although this is also true of many other scenes and subjects, this space serves as a way to unify participants who self-identify as metal fans through the subject matter. If it also thus creates a sense of self-identified togetherness for active members of the forum, such subreddits might even be discussed as communities.

Although there is a sense of community present on the subreddits based on this subject matter, the space also imposes a hierarchy upon the members. Relations between participants in these subreddits are mediated through the accumulation of what Sarah

Thornton has called “subcultural capital”. In the 1990s, Thornton (1995, 1997), drawing on the earlier work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, conceptualized subcultural capital as a distinct form of capital which is defined through “scene-specific knowledge” that confers status on the members of the scene. This status produced and affirmed through a subcultural hierarchy does not necessarily extend in any way to the outside world and is thus very different from Bourdieu’s formulation. Later, Keith Kahn-Harris (2004a, 2004b, 2007) took up Thornton’s conceptual framework and specifically applied it to the scenes associated with “extreme metal”, and I have been drawing on this work throughout the thesis thus far. It is worth recalling here, however, that Thornton’s own approach posits that “subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being ‘in the know’, using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles” (1995: 203). Although this explanation is a description of how knowledge works as authority in relation to the British clubbing scene of the early 1990s, she suggests the same rules would be applicable to any scene.

Kahn-Harris’s (2007) study of subcultural capital in the “extreme metal” subgenre describes two main forms of cultural capital, which he terms “mundane subcultural capital and transgressive subcultural capital” (2007: 121). Kahn-Harris argues that both types of subcultural capital “are struggled over and contested by scene members in their attempts to gain power, status and capital within the scene” (2007: 121). I have referred to these concepts already, through Kahn-Harris’s own work and as adapted by later scholars, but here I want to draw directly on what is meant by “subcultural” in this formulation. As there is not one way of being a black metal fan, not all communities of black metal fans might be viewed as scenes. Paul Hodkinson in his reworking of subculture defines it “as

distinguishable from more fluid elective collectivities by their level of substance” (2002:33). In relation to this concept, the bands involved in the second wave of black metal could be identified as a subculture, involving “a set of tastes and norms which has a significant degree of distinctiveness and internal consistency” (2002: 35). The online communities I observe however are more complex (see Page 53). R/BlackMetal might be considered subcultural in that there are firm boundaries, with rigid rules around what can and cannot be posted. R/MetalMemes however is more conducive to the scene argument, being “flexible and anti-essentializing, requiring of those who use it no more than that they observe a hazy coherence between sets of practices or affinities” (Straw 2001: 248 in Hesmondhalgh 2005: 29). R/MetalMemes is flexible about the content posted, often appropriating memes that were not originally related to metal into content that speaks to the community (see Figure 11).

What Kahn-Harris terms mundane subcultural capital is orientated around the extreme metal scene being viewed as “a space of collective power” (2007: 122). In this sense, scene members showcase their allegiance towards the scene through overt displays of scenic knowledge and being “in the know”, particularly focused on knowledge about “historical narratives, systems of classification and large numbers of obscure bands” (Hagen 2014: 227). Mundane subcultural capital in the context of *Reddit’s* R/BlackMetal Subreddit seems to mainly be displayed through emphasizing knowledge of bands, such as by describing the sound of a band in relation to a fine-grained subgeneric classification (as Ambient black metal, Depressive black metal, Raw black metal, etc.). This use of specialized terminology is important for scene members as “a band’s music tends to be described by reference to

other bands” (Kahn-Harris 2007: 123), which also effectively means described by reference to other fans of those bands.

Through its emphasis on scene-specific knowledge, mundane subcultural capital is thus accumulated through an active participation and commitment to the scene and is internal to that scene. It is through mundane scenic practices, then, that members of the scene display their allegiance or commitment to the collective. By engaging with the scene and participating in the culture, they help to ensure the scene is experienced as a “collective” instead of as a group of individuals who simply happen to share the same tastes in music.

On the other hand, what Kahn-Harris (2007) terms transgressive subcultural capital is claimed where members are critical of the notion of committing and contributing to the sustaining of a collective scene and even gained in some cases by disputing that an extreme metal scene exists in the first place. Kahn-Harris elaborates on the differences between mundane and transgressive subcultural capital as follows:

Mundane subcultural capital is accrued through a commitment to the collective. In contrast, transgressive subcultural capital is claimed through a radical individualism, through displaying uniqueness and a lack of attachment to the scene. Indeed, transgressive subcultural capital can be claimed through a critique of the scene itself and, by implication, of mundane subcultural capital. (2007: 127)

Transgressive subcultural capital nevertheless perpetuates an insider/outsider dichotomy.

Just as black metal fans seek to distance their scene from the “mainstream”, accruing transgressive subcultural capital in the black metal scene involves creating a distance between themselves and other members of the scene whom they label as uncommitted

because they might only be superficially (or mundanely) invested in relation to the music on which the subgenre is based.

The problem of transgressive subcultural capital for the workings of such a self-identified scene lies in the fact that “transgression is often accompanied by a process of adaption, and boundaries once transgressed may not persist any longer into the future” (Hecker 2016: 24). The rules around what can be defined as transgressive in the scene are perpetually being contested, with practices which were once considered transgressive soon being normalized and becoming mundane. As Kahn-Harris posits, “While transgressive subcultural capital circulates within the extreme metal scene, its attachment to the scene is contingent and pragmatic – to possess transgressive subcultural capital is to be *part of* the scene but not *of* the scene” (2007: 129: emphasis in original). Although these forms of subcultural capital seem to be at odds with each other, both are needed in the scene. Mundane subcultural capital ensures that individuals remain committed to the scene while pursuing transgression keeps the scene from stagnating, promoting individualism and innovation within the subgenre. This leads to a culture where artists are encouraged to innovate musically in order to gain transgressive subcultural capital, but not too much for fear of being denounced by scene members who are most invested in mundane subcultural capital.

Black metal has a particularly overt scene-specific measure of subcultural capital that encapsulates both mundane as well as transgressive subcultural capital – this is often termed *kvlt* (pronounced “cult”) or *kvltness* (“cultness”). I have chosen R/BlackMetal and R/MetalMemes for my analysis here principally for how they represent these two distinct interpretations of kvltness. As Ross Hagen explains, kvltness “is flexible and takes on slightly

different aspects when applied to recordings, bands and fans, although a focus on insularity and exclusion remains constant" (2014: 227). Kvltness in the context of discussing a band among fans frequently refers to the stylistic choices associated with that band. The criteria that might make a black metal band "kvlt" are complex, but the term is most often associated with the reproduction of stylistic choices that are read as embodying ideologies associated with the bands that emerged in the second wave of black metal in the 1990s, as discussed in earlier chapters. Kvltness is about both the style of the band and the narrative content of their recordings and performance. As I have already discussed, the second wave Norwegian black metal artists were often explicitly opposed to organized religion and many presented themselves as Satanists, through lyrical content and the appropriation of Satanic imagery in their work, and such reference can attest to kvltness in fan communities (Hagen 2014, Olson 2008, Kahn-Harris 2007, see also Christe 2004: 269-289). With reference to musical style, being kvlt also often refers to the use of the raw or low production values associated with that second wave music, and this extends to any band's relation to its distribution as well. Kvlt involves an aversion to media attention in favour of keeping black metal underground and only for the "committed".

This conception of kvlt as a measure of authenticity, however, stands in stark contrast to the diversity of ways the term is applied within communities of black metal fans. As Hagen argues, "when used to describe black metal fans however, kvltness takes on shades of irony, humour and playfulness" (Hagen 2014: 228). That is, in the actual visible practices of fans, including the subreddits I have selected, kvlt is often used as a form of derision. The terms are most often applied to people who are seen as appropriating the aesthetic of black metal in a way that is seen as trying too hard to be transgressive. Kvlt, in this sense, works most

visibly for contemporary black metal fan communities in ironic ways. It is a term identifying representations of black metal as ludicrous rather than as representing a “true” black metal artist or fan.

Contextualising Reddit

What differentiates *Reddit* and its subreddits from earlier versions of the virtual bulletin board is its emphasis on the ability of *Reddit* users to upvote or downvote a comment or post.⁷ The voting system is simple enough, with an upvote awarding a point and a downvote taking one away, and a displayed score is calculated from the number of upvotes minus the number of downvotes (for an example, see Figure 6). Accumulation of these points is referred to as “karma” among *Reddit* users and the karma accumulated by an individual is also calculated and publicly displayed (Figure 7). Although karma is derided by some *Reddit* users as “imaginary internet points” which serve no actual purpose and grant no tangible benefits, I argue that this is not the case for subcultural communities. Karma points accumulated by users, posts, and comments can serve as a quantifiable manifestation of subcultural capital. As allocation of karma is decided by other users of the subreddit, the karma a post, comment, or user has accumulated can be a useful metric for determining which content is perceived as valuable; or, in the case of R/BlackMetal, as “kvlit”. Generally, karma is awarded to posts or comments that are original, that are relevant to the subreddit in question, and that also “contribute” to the community, whether in the sense of facilitating discussion or by providing information and sharing knowledge.

⁷ This up and down-voting system was pioneered by the website Digg, started in late 2004 (Silverman 2012).

Darkthrone - Artic Thunder, what you think about? (self:BlackMetal) submitted 18 hours ago by AntaineA

Good morning to everyone, what do you think about the last release of Darkthrone? You think they've reached a stable form of sound or we've to wait some other changes in the next future releases? And what you think about the point that the last album include, in limited copies, a tape? Could be a commercial thing to make more money?

29 comments source share hide all child comments

all 29 comments [subscribe](#)

sorted by: best

navigate by: submitter | moderator | friend | me | admin | highlighted | gilded | IAmA | images | videos | popular | new

[-] Dastan1945 10 points 7 hours ago

† I actually really enjoyed it. Nothing about it really blew me away since it was a style that they had down before, but I'm glad that they returned to the sound they had on Panzerfaust and even on Sempiternal Past.

permlink source embed save-RES

[-] klyt 9 points 8 hours ago

† I thought it was just okay. Nothing overly exciting about it but nothing terrible.

To be honest I stopped getting excited about new releases from them after FOAD.

permlink source embed save-RES

search

this post was submitted on 18 Dec 2016

13 points (79% upvoted)

21 votes

shortlink <https://redd.it/5iad9d>

jskadiang

remember me reset password login

WATCH SOMETHING NEW

R/UNKNOWNVIDEOS

Figure 6: Post on R/BlackMetal: karma is circled in red. (Reddit 2016). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/BlackMetal/comments/5izd9d/darkthrone_artic_thunder_what_you_think_about/? Accessed 18 December 2016.

Dastan1945

255 post karma

1,967 comment karma

[send a private message](#)

redditor for 1 year

Figure 7: Publically available post and comment karma of Reddit User Dastan1945 (Reddit 2016). Retrieved from <https://www.reddit.com/user/Dastan1945> accessed 18 December 2016.

Donn Morrison and Conor Hayes discuss the impact of karma and the emphasis on accruing said karma on Reddit, arguing that “to an extent, karma motivates and facilitates participation in the community, with many users eager to increase their karma by appealing and catering to the interests of others, both in opinion and content” (2013: 2260). This is a particularly effective practice for fans of niche cultural forms. As Kahn-Harris claims more generally about metal scenes, “subcultural capital is most effectively displayed through knowledge of individual bands and albums” (2007: 123). This emphasis on displaying “demonstrations of appropriately detailed scenic knowledge” (2007:122) as a form of distinction can clearly be discerned on *Reddit* by evaluating the amount of karma allocated to comments as well as by qualitative assessment of responses and exchanges. Comments and posts that emphasize what Kahn-Harris stresses is particularly valued among metal fans - “the depth of the knowledge of the scene” (2007: 122) - often receive the most karma since they display knowledge only accruable through a prolonged investment in the scene.

Due to the anonymity accorded through *Reddit*, where the personal information of members is hidden behind a curated profile, karma is a principal means of distinguishing members and creating the dichotomy between committed and uncommitted participants that often seems important to black metal forums, as critics like Kahn-Harris would expect. Members who have accumulated more karma are generally seen as sufficiently invested in the scene and thus granted capital while members who have less karma may be perceived as less knowledgeable and either not being fully invested in or new to the scene. Just like “cultural capital” in Bourdieu’s terms, karma is “accumulated through displaying competence in the scene’s cultural practices” (Bourdieu cited in Kahn-Harris 2007: 121). While knowledge of key artists and the history of the scene is integral to emphasizing that

one is “in the know”, members seeking subcultural capital from this context must also understand the more specific “institutions and practices of the scene” (Kahn-Harris 2007: 124) to reap karma. As different subreddits have different rules regarding what constitutes “interesting” or “appropriate” discussion, users with higher levels of karma are expected to have acquired knowledge of these more local rules as well as knowledge specific to the fandom overall. This more local expertise must arise from their investment in the specific community, and not just the black metal scene overall, while those with lower karma might be less attuned to the nuances expected when interacting with other members.

Despite highly visible expectations around karma distribution on *Reddit*, it also requires very specific knowledge of a subreddit to predict if a comment will be upvoted or not. In their research on community reactions to posts on *Reddit*, Aaron Jaech et al. (2015) found that of the million or more comments made every day on *Reddit*,⁸ most do not receive any attention (or karma), and most belong to the “smaller” subreddits with little likelihood of a significant response. Accordingly, “slightly more than half of all comments have exactly one karma point (no votes beyond the author), and only 5% of comments have less than one karma point” (2015: 2). This is a useful content for evaluating the level of responsiveness on the black metal subreddits I have selected, meaning that even two karma points, or a zero or negative karma score, represents a high degree of responsiveness and unusual levels of investment.

⁸ <https://redditblog.com/2014/12/31/reddit-in-2014/>

To properly understand what a “smaller” subreddit is, we must also first understand how the homepage of *Reddit* is structured. According to Matt Silverman, in his introduction to *Reddit*:

The Reddit homepage consists of content submitted to the site’s most popular channels, or “subreddits” — Pics, Technology, WorldNews, Music, Gaming, etc. New users (and visitors who are not logged in) are automatically subscribed to these top channels. As you discover more niche communities, you can subscribe to those subreddits, which will push popular posts from those channels to your homepage. You can always browse those individual subreddits directly, of course. If a subreddit gains enough subscribers, it can become part of the default homepage, thus driving additional traffic and subscribers. (2012: 12-14)

In order to access R/BlackMetal or R/MetalMemes then, because they are more niche communities, one has to actively search for the subreddit and subscribe to it, as opposed to it being subscribed automatically when logging into the front page. This ensures that members of the subreddits are actually interested in the subject matter, resulting in a virtual ethnography that more accurately depicts interactions among fans in online spaces.

In the virtual ethnography component of my research I set out to consider how karma circulation on *Reddit* is defined in relation to conventional scenic practices. As “the scene is a space of conflict, constituted through struggles over capital” (Kahn-Harris 2007: 121), users of these subreddits are required to display knowledge of multi-layered scenic practices in order to adhere to them or actively critique them. In doing so, they are able to obtain mundane and transgressive subcultural capital in the process.

Virtual Ethnography

R/BlackMetal overtly displays its emphasis on the underground nature of black metal, constituting a community based directly on policing subcultural boundaries in relation to the stylistic choices of black metal bands. Black metal bands that are both sufficiently underground and also stylistically “traditional”, and therefore kvlt, are afforded the most subcultural capital, while those that might veer away from the tried and true path of black metal, whether musically, visually, or rhetorically, are depicted as not being “true” and explicitly excluded from discussion in the community. At the other end of a kvlt spectrum, R/MetalMemes is an online community created specifically to subvert the seriousness associated with the metal genre, producing content that commonly makes fun of metal tropes. Even though R/MetalMemes produces and includes content associated with any subgenre under the metal umbrella, a large majority of the memes refer to black metal. This disproportionate representation suggests how the aesthetic of black metal is tied to the perceived seriousness which fans attribute to the genre. Hagen elaborates on this association, stating:

The dourly misanthropic, warlike and occasionally violent aesthetic promoted by Norwegian black metal is so extreme that it often borders on the ludicrous. The black metal costume in particular can easily be read as a comically inadequate attempt at toughness and evilness. (2008: 228)

These two online communities thus both produce content associated with the black metal genre but celebrate different forms of its consumption and thus attribute subcultural capital in ways that privilege different specific relations to and discourses on black metal.

Joining an online community on *Reddit* is simple; and visitors to the site do not need a *Reddit* account to obtain access to posted content. This ease of entry into the online space

makes *Reddit* seem to be a peculiar site for building a black metal community, considering the individualistic ideologies and closure associated with the scene (Venkatesh et al 2015). However, I want to argue that despite the scene's claims about closure there is no one monolithic conception of what a black metal fan should be, and many different people with different ideologies consider themselves part of the black metal community based solely on musical taste. Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg highlight this multiplicity in online communities more generally, finding that "to quote specific individuals as representing the fabric or texture of the community is not a neutral form of sampling but a strategy that slights community practices in favour of token others" (2010: 19). My own interest, therefore, is less in individual posters or how they would describe the site, than in the fabric of the subreddit overall.

An Kuppens and Frank van der Pol, in their study of Dutch black metal fandom, found that only a certain type of black metal fan allowed themselves to be interviewed by people seeking to define the scene (see 2014: 165-166). Individuals proclaiming themselves to be "true" black metal fans often reject such profiles or studies precisely because of their understandings of kvltness; because they want to keep the community closed and avoid any assimilation with mainstream culture or even any external representation. This is one reason for my not seeking out the interviews that would give a different context to my description of these sites. But at the same time, I should acknowledge that my findings are also only applicable to a specific subsection of the black metal fan base, one with less rigid conceptions of being a "true" or authentic black metal fan precisely because they would use *Reddit* to articulate their fandom. This should not negate all results of my analysis, however, as being part of an open community does not make these online fans any less

representative of an “authentic” black metal fan than one who refuses to partake in conversations in the virtual sphere.

Looking at R/BlackMetal first, 15,899 users are presently subscribed to this subreddit (Reddit/BlackMetal 2017: as of 7 June 2017). Understanding what it means to be a subscriber requires recalling the structure of *Reddit* discussed above. People who wish to view this content on *Reddit* can either access it from the homepage, reddit.com, where they can view only posts for subreddits to which they are already subscribed, or by going directly to the subreddit. Another key aspect to subscription, however, is that only subscribers to a subreddit are allowed to submit as well as view content. Subscribing to R/BlackMetal then, is a conscious choice to engage with the forum by adding it to their personal “feed”. This presumes a certain level of interest in the scene among subscribers, since subscriptions are used to curate one’s online experience of *Reddit*. Subscriptions users to customize their experience in relation to their interests, and thus the subscribers of R/BlackMetal create a page that functions around similar interests and facilitates their discussion.

Every subreddit has different rules decided by the moderators and enforced by both moderators and other members of the subreddit. R/BlackMetal has three rules (see Figure 8), focused primarily on moderating the content generated and circulated within the community. These rules are enforced in ways that privilege in-depth knowledge of the scene and perpetuate an “insider”/” outsider” dichotomy within the scene. The creation of a blacklist – a list of bands deemed too popular and thus prohibited from discussion in the community – demonstrates subcultural capital in action. On R/BlackMetal, subcultural capital is generated in relation to the popularity of a band differently than in the kinds of

subcultural contexts Thornton (1995) observes in dance clubs. Here, knowledge of more obscure artists primarily accords a subscriber more subcultural capital.

Interestingly, the bands on the blacklist are exactly those bands that would normally be defined as kvlt, with many of them belonging to the influential Norwegian second wave – the list includes such iconic bands as Mayhem, Emperor, Immortal, Darkthrone, Burzum, and Ulver. The ubiquitous reference to these bands as stalwarts of the black metal genre has resulted in a diminished sense of transgression being associated with reference to them, and means that they do not convey sufficient insider scene knowledge to be considered a cool reference on this subreddit. The importance of transgression for a black metal fan might also be amplified by the relative anonymity granted when participating in an online community. Members of the subreddit are unable to evaluate authenticity of other members through appearance, class, race, or gender, and so the content posted takes on central importance. Hagen highlights this aspect of online interactions, arguing that “contests over status within online communities may be amplified because participants are not able to evaluate appearance and style in person” (2014: 224). Figure 9 depicts an interaction between members of R/BlackMetal when a song from a blacklisted band is shared among members. Here, the policing of boundaries in the community can be observed, with the employment of sarcasm used to reinforce the insider/outsider dichotomy, marking the poster as an individual who does not have the necessary knowledge about what content should be posted, and thus rendering that person an inauthentic member of this scene. In the figure, user soccc claims that he has never heard of the band before, with the reply from wintergreen211 concurring, asking if the band is “totes popular or something” (Reddit 2016: 2). A reply from mercilesssinner remarks that he/she is glad

that the blacklist does the job well, ending the comment with a /s to denote sarcasm.⁹

Sarcasm in this context is used to feign ignorance about which bands might be too popular and thus un-kvlt in order to deride the poster of the song for lacking understanding about how “authenticity” works in black metal. This in turn portrays the “original poster” as new to the community as well as lacking the necessary subcultural capital to be considered an insider. The relative obscurity of bands referred to in this scene is essential to marking kvltness and fans of black metal on this site face the dilemma of being nostalgic for “classic” kvlt black metal bands while also acknowledging the popularity of these acts and how this popularity affects their kvltness. Knowledge of bands that are seen to be both relevant and kvlt is thus essential for a member to produce content that is considered authentic within the community, granting him/her “insider” status in this subreddit.

⁹ /S in Reddit is used to denote the tone of a comment to prevent misinterpretation of the message. OP is an abbreviation for original poster, specific to aggregated online communities, and which refers to the user Helliosphere in the context of Figure 2.

Blacklisted bands (DO NOT POST SONGS BY THESE BANDS*)

What is this?

Popular	Band	blacklist
Mayhem	Emperor	Darkthrone
Immortal	Burzum	Satyricon
Dark Funeral	Marduk	1349
Bathory	Behemoth	Borknagar
Ulver	Carpathian Forest	Enslaved
Dimmu Borgir	Dissection	Shining
Summoning	Rotting Christ	Old Man's Child
Samael	Arcturus	Moonspell
Moonsorrow	Gorgoroth	Wolves in the Throne Room
Belphegor	Anaal Nathrakh	Deafheaven
Drudkh	Watain	Leviathan
Deathspell Omega		

Rules

- **Posting of image macros ("memes") and other parodical media will not be tolerated. (These belong in [r/metalmemes](#))**
- **DO NOT POST FULL ALBUMS / EPS / DEMOS**

Figure 8: Rules of R/BlackMetal. (Reddit 2016). Retrieved from <https://www.reddit.com/r/BlackMetal/> Accessed 6 October 2016.

+5
 Leviathan - Shed This Skin (youtube.com)
 submitted 24 days ago by [Helliosphere](#)
 3 comments source share hide all child comments

+ [-] [socco](#) 10 points 24 days ago
 † Holy shit never heard of this band! Great find OP!
 permalink source embed save-RES hide child comments

+ [-] [wintergreen211](#) 1 point 23 days ago
 † Me neither! Are these guys totes popular or something? Tentacles of Whorror is probably my favorite album of theirs that I have never listened to or something.
 permalink source embed save-RES parent

+ [-] [mercilesssinner](#) 11 points 24 days ago
 † I'm glad the black list does its task well. /s
 permalink source embed save-RES

Figure 9: Policing of boundaries in R/BlackMetal, what happens when a band on the blacklist (see Figure 8) is posted (*Reddit* 2016). Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/BlackMetal/comments/556a44/leviathan_shed_this_skin/?st=ityddf11&sh=0e4cf44c Accessed 28 October 2016.

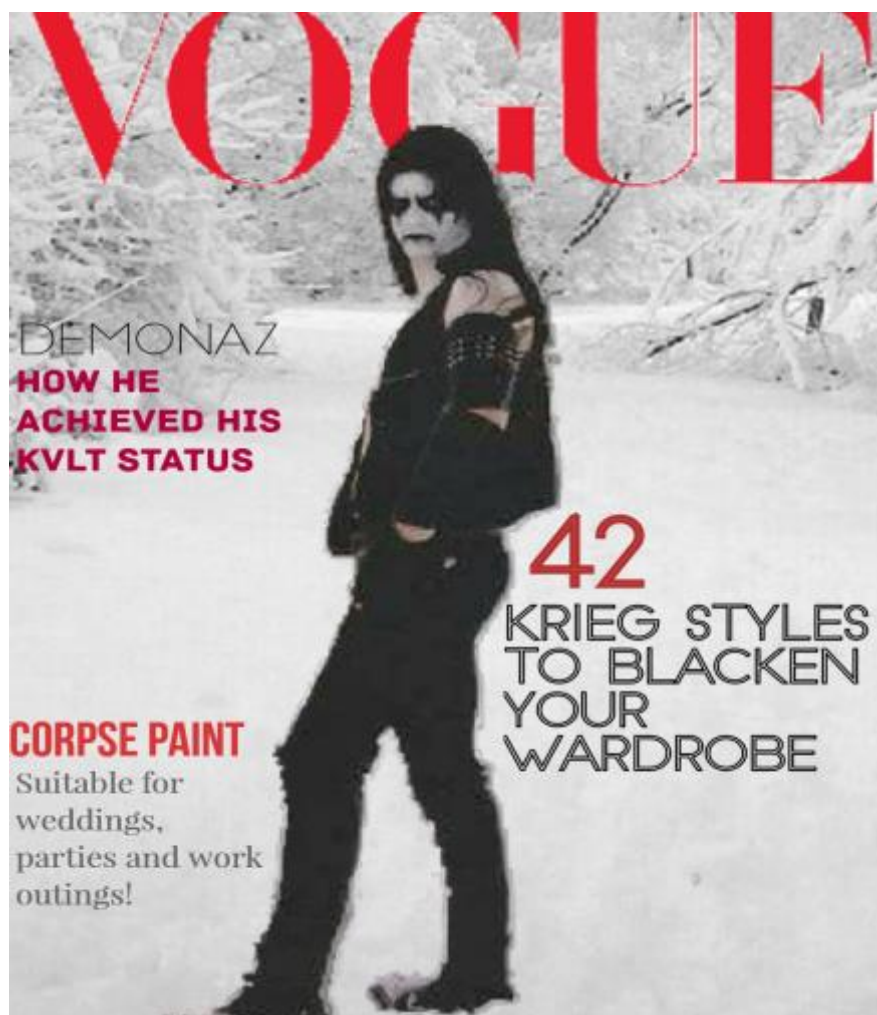


Figure 10: Parody of black metal aesthetic on R/MetalMemes (*Reddit* 2017). Retrieved from <https://i.imgur.com/4xsmPM2.jpg> accessed 28 May 2017.

Turning now to R/MetalMemes, this subreddit describes its content as including “memes, humour, and other lighthearted things related to heavy metal” (Reddit/MetalMemes: as of 27 May 2017). A meme can loosely be described as:

A virally-transmitted cultural symbol or social idea. The majority of modern memes are captioned photos that are intended to be funny, often as a way to publicly ridicule human behavior. Other memes can be videos and verbal expressions. Some memes have heavier and more philosophical content (Gil 2017: 1-2)

Drawing on Kahn-Harris’s (2007) adaptation of subcultural capital, it is clear that this subreddit takes a playful, lighthearted approach to the genre, offering parodies of generic elements and geared more towards the transgressive side of subcultural capital. Looking through the site, although the rules do not limit content to any specific subgenre under the umbrella of metal, the vast majority of memes on the subreddit belong to extreme metal genres like death or black metal. I argue that this is because of the emphasis on transgression inherent in extreme metal, where the aesthetics and sonic signatures are more forcefully present, thus lending them more to parody. However, transgressive subcultural capital is not the only form of capital on display. Elements of mundane subcultural capital are also circulated, and essential for ridiculing the scene, and in turn allowing for the accrual of transgressive subcultural capital. Fans obviously require prerequisite knowledge of the history of the genre and the conventions associated with it in order to critique scenic practices.



**WHEN YOU ONLY LISTEN TO
TRVE METAL AND YOU HAVEN'T
TOLD ANYONE FOR 10 MINUTES**

[-] **EstusFiend** 0 points 6 days ago

Hahahaha this is SO fucking accurate. It's kinda similar to new wave feminism, they just have to offend someone, have to pull someone else into their shit-storm to validate their 'extreme' views.....I cannot even count the times black metal kvltists have slandered me based on my metal not being kvlt enough. Like i give a shit about your emo fag church burning, Boo Hoo you're so sad. For Satan's Sake, it all came from Sabbath anyway, just rock out to whatever tunes you want, no need to incite hate and violence over music : /

Oh wait, that's literally what Black Metal is about. Because of that one group of idiots in Norway, like 30 years ago.....

[permalink](#) [source](#) [embed](#) [save-RES](#) [hide child comments](#)

[-] **silverstudent** 4 points 6 days ago

lol your favorite band didnt even burn any churches? lol do you even metal bro

[permalink](#) [source](#) [embed](#) [save-RES](#) [parent](#)

[-] **EstusFiend** 1 point 6 days ago

lol i guess not!

ヾ(ツ)ノ

[permalink](#) [source](#) [embed](#) [save-RES](#) [parent](#)

Figure 11: Parody of Black Metal Fans and a response to the meme, *Reddit*, 2017, accessed 7 June 2017.

https://www.reddit.com/r/MetalMemes/comments/6ec65r/my_metal_is_more_metal_than_your_metal/

A common theme parodied on R/MetalMemes is what I would describe as the black metal “uniform”, usually consisting of long dark hair, corpse paint, and black clothes. The perceived seriousness associated with this aesthetic choice is often juxtaposed against a decidedly less somber backdrop. Figure 10 ridicules the style of dress commonly associated with the scene by taking it out of context. This recognition of the black metal “rules”, and ironic representation of what it means to be a black metal insider, gains the creator of the meme transgressive subcultural capital in this online forum. Corpse paint, in particular, having become so closely associated with black metal, has become one of the most common objects for derision. Memes focused on corpse paint often point to the way it tries too hard to be evil, coming across as forced and hence inauthentic, undeserving of any subcultural capital.

Discourse around “trying too hard” is a focal point in memes critiquing black metal. Figure 11 depicts a meme followed by an interaction between users on the site. The meme and subsequent interaction criticize the elitist hierarchy and seriousness associated with fans of black metal by presenting them as self-involved and self-congratulatory. The use of the term *kvlt* in a derogatory way is notable here, with “kvltists” being used to describe black metal fans as trying too hard to be transgressive. Both the meme and the interaction can be viewed as accruing mundane as well as transgressive subcultural capital. The meme parodies the ways black metal fans love talking about obscure bands that they listen to as a way of distinguishing themselves from others. This remains clearly in line with Pierre Bourdieu’s original discussion of taste in *Distinction* insofar as this “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (1984: 6). This snapshot of R/MetalMemes displays knowledge of scene dynamics while critiquing the scene, and the poster of this meme and their

respondents are able to simultaneously attain both mundane and transgressive subcultural capital.

Nostalgia is also important in this meme, being utilized in two ways to convey the sense of irony in the image when thinking about black metal culture. First off, the reference to “true” black metal denotes that the poster understands the history of the genre. The post thus critiques the ways black metal fans construe certain bands as more authentic than others, with Norwegian black metal acts from the early 1990s being discussed as the most “true” forms of black metal. Secondly, the use of corpse paint anchors the image in relation to nostalgia. It provokes the viewer to think about the meme as representing unchanging lifestyle commitment to the now past “second wave” scene, with corpse paint representing those early Norwegian bands as the only source of black metal authenticity.¹⁰

The interaction that follows indicates how this forum facilitates critique and parody of the black metal scene. One user describes the meme as accurate to his or her real-life experiences, echoing the sentiment that black metal fans perceive themselves as superior based on their nostalgic musical taste. Derision of this hierarchy of sub-generic “taste” also grants this responding user transgressive subcultural capital through critique of the scene while knowledge of scene-specific terminology such as kvlt ensures that mundane subcultural capital is attained as well.

¹⁰ Most of these early Norwegian bands have since moved away from the corpse paint aesthetic, with only Immortal continuing to utilize it in their press photos and live performances.

These examples represent the way the vast majority of black metal memes poke fun at the seriousness associated with the aesthetics of the genre and fan attachment (Hagen 2008: 238). They align with Kahn-Harris's description of how "black metallers adopted an exaggeratedly humourless attitude" (2007: 45). This includes the way they "scorned moshing" (Kahn-Harris 2007: 45) in reaction to other genres of metal embracing bodily excess, and more broadly embraced asceticism in stark contrast to the way "metal has always been associated with excessive drinking and the abuse of illicit drugs" (2007: 45). Black metal transgression was supposed to be more serious, and this seems hard to align with the ironic modes of fandom that dominate R/MetalMemes.

Fan interactions in these two online spaces seem distinct and yet similar in the ways they accord subcultural capital, and the specific concept of kvltness. R/BlackMetal is mainly geared towards mundane subcultural capital, through its emphasis on discussion of bands which presupposes intricate knowledge of the black metal scene. However, the addition of the blacklist also invests the site in transgressive subcultural capital. By excluding certain bands, mainly bands pivotal to the establishment of the genre, members of the forum are able to showcase their stance on nostalgia in black metal. Instead of discussing bands in a nostalgic context, fans here choose to disseminate the work of new bands. As stated in the subreddit,

posting eminent mainstays of the genre adds nothing to the community [...] This community was never intended to be a museum of black metal, nor even an archive. Its purpose is the elucidation of the darker regions of the genre where those with a pre-existing familiarity with it can share and interact with like cohorts (Reddit 2016: 2).

The idea that this subreddit requires pre-existing familiarity with the genre means users are presumed to have already accrued a prerequisite amount of mundane subcultural capital.

Knowledge of the history, conventions, and integral bands of the genre is necessary for sustained interaction within this space, labelling users as “insiders”. R/MetalMemes also involves an overlap of mundane and transgressive scenic practices, because finding humour in the scene first requires one to be familiar with its conventions. Finally, of course these subreddits should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Fans of the genre are able to subscribe to both R/BlackMetal and R/MetalMemes (as I do), finding humour in some aspects of the scene while also discussing the music through a commitment to the scene. Both sites thus clearly depict how mundane and transgressive subcultural accrual are not at odds with each other, being necessary to sustaining a scene. As Kahn-Harris argues, “both forms of subcultural capital tacitly affirm the necessity of the other” (2007: 130).

Conclusion

Having mapped the trajectory tracing black metal from its early proto roots through to the multitude of genres followed in the present, it is worth noting that for all that has changed, black metal still has a sonic formula and a relatively consistent “ideology” present in all its iterations. The emphasis on transgression still remains significant in all its forms, keeping the genre focused on the “edge”. As Kahn-Harris posits, “extreme metal has always walked a knife edge – between destruction and continuity, between obscurity and popularity, between unity and fragmentation, between radicalism and conservatism” (2007: 166).

While writing this thesis I have constantly asked myself what being “true” to black metal, or truly black metal, entails. Indeed, being seen as “true” or authentic has to be the aspiration of any black metal band, with the term *kvlt* thus lending itself to an encapsulation of the black metal ideology. Authenticity seemed like the perfect springboard for this thesis, and by outlining how authenticity is produced within the scene I found that a nostalgic discourse permeates it, serving as a primary factor in distinguishing what is seen as “true” or not. Mundane subcultural capital accounts for how this nostalgia is balanced against the need to seem on the edge, with knowledge of the history of the genre and acts lending itself to capital accrual.

In my virtual ethnography examining online interactions among fans it was evident that there is not simply one manner of “being” a black metal fan. Fans are able to accumulate subcultural capital in different ways, and this often involves choosing the right online space for the kind of interactions that validate an individual fan’s relation to the genre, although being simultaneously a fan in multiple ways is not only possible but also may be common (it

is impossible to see the list of another user's subscriptions). Some forums might focus simply on mundane practices, displaying knowledge of the scene dynamics or of seminal bands in the genre. Others might be committed to the transgressive, explicitly critiquing the scene to distinguish themselves as having "elite" knowledge, usually by simultaneously positioning others as conformists or ignorant. These different approaches to claiming cultural capital from one's black metal fandom result in spaces that are constantly contested, and in which at least the most visible users are clearly attempting to define themselves in relation to others in the scene.

As Moynihan and Soderlind (2003) state, "a significant degree of Black Metal's allure and stature does not derive from the accomplished musical achievements and originality of the artists playing the music. The grisly crimes have contributed as much, and maybe even more, to its appeal" (2003: XIII). Black metal, then, should not be analysed in solely musical terms. The intersection of visual style, music, and ideology creates a transgressive appeal for fans who yearn for the danger evoked in the rock and roll bands of yore. And turning to fans themselves raises some useful questions about the themes that dominate histories of the black metal subcultural practices that are still the central reference point for the genre.

Fans might not view those famous public transgressions with the same seriousness as the bands that committed or celebrated the crimes. As indicated by my virtual ethnography, many members of the scene now claim transgressive subcultural capital by finding humour in these acts of violence or at the expense of fans who take them seriously. The ongoing evolution of the term *kvltness* showcases this discrepancy between the "ideology" of the genre and how fans in the scene perform authenticity. What was formerly defined as

authentic in relation to the transgression and nostalgia of the black metal bands of the 1990s has now become a focus of derision and parody, supporting the way in which fans strongly committed to black metal may even keep those second wave bands at arm's length. The utilization of irony has become de rigueur in these online spaces, and I argue that this kind of irony could be seen as the strongest way of knowing a scene. To perform this irony, one has to first understand the discourses that permeate the scene in order to critique it. The use of irony is thus privileged as the highest form of knowledge of the scene in these online spaces, granting those users mundane and transgressive subcultural capital simultaneously and distinguishing them from other users.

Further research on authenticity in the black metal scene could warrant alternative forms of research, such as interviews of scene members. However, interviews might be problematic considering that most "true" black metal fans might not consent to be interviewed (See van der Pol and Kuppens 2014: 165-166). The research then would be missing a specific subset of the fan culture – those who define themselves most closely by a notion of authenticity. An observation of live scenes might seem more useful, looking at fan interactions and also band performances in the context of a black metal concert. Observing their style of dress and behaviours might reveal new aspects of how they embrace or oppose nostalgic renderings of black metal, or black metal authenticity more generally. Do they wear the band shirts of older or newer black metal acts, do they don corpse paint, do they respond to the performance with irony or seriousness, and do they form distinct groups within the audience? I speculate, however, that whether through irony or nostalgia, black metal fans offline as well as online seek to transform the mundane into something novel, moulding their worlds into something they perceive as significant.

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