Ecology, Estrangement and Enchantment in Black Metal's Dark Haven

Owen Coggins

Leverhulme Early Career Fellow, Social & Political Sciences

Brunel University London

owen.coggins@brunel.ac.uk

Owen Coggins is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at Brunel University London, investigating ambiguity, controversy and marginal religiosity in black metal music. Previous research has explored configurations of noise and religion in extreme music, particularly in relation to audience discourses and practices. Owen's book, *Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal* (Bloomsbury Academic 2018) was awarded the IASPM Book Prize, and he co-runs Oaken Palace, a record label and registered charity that raises money for endangered species through releasing drone music.

Ecology, Estrangement and Enchantment in Black Metal's Dark Haven

Abstract: Darkly enchanted environments are an important part of black metal, an extreme underground heavy metal music culture that emerged from Northern Europe in the 1980s-1990s and spread worldwide. Black metal's distorted music and stark imagery portrays natural landscapes resonating with occult folklore, myth and fantasy; yet this music bewitched with ancient nature relies on electrical instruments, amplification and distortion, and is primarily performed and consumed in urban settings. This article examines constructions of dissonance and disenchantment in these intense utopian/dystopian juxtapositions of mystically idealised nature and apocalyptic urban society, hearing them as attempts to deal with darkness and ruin in the abstract violence of industrial modernity. Through analysis of recordings, reception, zines and online discourse, the article examines black metal's navigation of tensions about ecology and marginal religiosity; its potential articulation of a reactionary politics of restriction, and its sonic evocations of a sacred yet desecrated environment.

Keywords: Music, Ruin, Black Metal, Dark Ecology, Romanticism, Apocalyptic Literature

Ecology, Estrangement and Enchantment in Black Metal's Dark Haven

Introduction

Black metal music is a subculture of heavy metal in which noisy frenetic sound, stark visual aesthetics and connotations of ideological extremism combine to construct the musical subculture as a dark haven, conjured in a bricolage of diverse but thematically connected enchanted environments evoked in the sounds and themes of each recording. Paganism, mysticism, occultism and other forms of marginal religiosity are combined with idealised depictions of natural or fantastic landscapes. Yet this music bewitched with ancient nature and tradition relies on electrical instruments, amplification and distortion, as well as electronic recording and playback devices, and it is primarily performed and consumed in urban settings. Landscape scenes on album covers represent longing for the natural world while their monochrome reproduction expresses alienation from it. Lyrical messages about tradition and ecology are delivered in indecipherable screams, and acoustic sounds are sometimes complemented, more often overwhelmed, by raging guitar noise. The oft-favoured "low fidelity" mode of recording resonates aesthetically and etymologically with a lack of faith in hegemonic religious institutions, or a critique of faithlessness in the contemporary world; black metal's approach to sound, environment and religion is disenchanted with but inextricable from contemporary urban life. While dissonantly evoking enchanted ecologies, black metal becomes itself a strange, secret ritualised environment, one whose boundaries, definitions, values and preferred or imagined audiences are anxiously guarded by some participants, even while such parameters are evidently unstable and uncontrollable. This gatekeeping, together with an interest in idealised depictions of marginal pagan or folk traditions and a recognition of humanity's dysfunctional relationship with the environment, can lead towards an embrace of elitist and exclusive ideologies concerning land, nature, spirituality and identity. This article examines constructions of dissonance and disenchantment in black metal's intense utopian/dystopian juxtapositions of mystically idealised nature and apocalyptic urban modernity. Through analysis of black metal's productions, reception, zines and online discourse, this article examines how this tension is navigated in relation to ideas about ecology and marginal religiosity; and how black metal sound conjures evocations of a sacred/desecrated environment.

Black Metal: Extremity, Transgression and Crisis

Black metal is an extreme subgenre of heavy metal. It originated in the 1980s, coalesced significantly in the 1990s (especially around Norwegian bands Mayhem, Burzum, Darkthrone, Emperor, Immortal and others) and has since developed into diverse sub-styles and local scenes across the world. While varying between bands, the black metal sound is characterised by a trebly, distorted sound foregrounding a "buzz-picking" or "tremolo-picking" guitar technique, achieved through very fast strumming in combination with heavy distortion, which produces a frenetic blur of sound, very different from other metal styles that tend to value the distinct audibility of complex playing and clear production. Black metal percussion is played with a juddering, off-kilter sense of physicality, or, in slower forms, in a relentless, martial style, while vocals are delivered in screeches or screams. Illegibility and obscurity are key issues in the aesthetics of black metal as well as in sound. The legendary Norwegian musicians tended to prefer "lo-fi" production, and many bands since then have continued to value this indistinct, murky "necro" sound even when higher quality production values are accessible. Similarly, the cassette tape is still valorised among many black

metal listeners for its perceived authenticity and connection to the subgenre's origins, while the medium's analogue sonic ambience complements the noisiness of indistinct playing and recording. Visually, a high-contrast, monochrome style is predominant for album covers, often featuring forests or mountains. On stage or in promo images, some musicians wear black and white "corpse paint" make-up, sometimes adding armour or weaponry such as bullets and spikes to clothing. The fascination in wider metal culture with ornate blackletter, fraktur or "gothic" lettering is continued and extended into band logo designs that are often completely indecipherable to the uninitiated. Marginal religiosity is a key concern, with occult, Satanic, pagan and esoteric forms varying significantly but tending to share an oppositional stance towards the perceived hegemony of Christianity and Abrahamic monotheism more broadly, or alternatively, of secular modernity. In many cases, this connects with a strong interest in natural environment, often depicted in relation to Romantic Nationalist-style imaginings of unspoilt nature and past ways of life, together with mythological themes from fantastic literature and folkloric traditions. Due to the influence of Bathory from Sweden in introducing Viking themes, and subsequent Norwegian "second wave" bands, black metal musicians across the world are captivated by a Nordic imaginary, while also incorporating local sounds and themes into the established sonic, aesthetic and ideological template. Black metal, especially but not exclusively the Norwegian scene, is associated with acts of murder, suicide and church arson, which are much discussed and even unavoidable in treatments of the genre (Hagen 2020, 31). As a result, extreme ideology and actions are associated with the extreme sounds.

Since emerging in the 1980s and exploding in notoriety in the 1990s, black metal has expanded, diversified and fragmented. Variations include symphonic, depressive, primitive, atmospheric, raw, ambient or bestial as well as orthodox and transcendental black metal. There are also offshoots such as dungeon synth (largely sombre electronic music with a similar visual and thematic aesthetic), and combinations such as the upbeat 'black'n'roll', or 'blackgaze' drawing influence from the highly distorted 'shoegaze' style of British indie rock. Influences and crossovers with adjacent metal styles lead to descriptions of 'blackened' doom or death metal. Some overviews of black metal have asserted broad patterns in black metal since the mid-1990s, such as Hunter Hunt-Hendrix's polemical claim that American 'transcendental' black metal will teleologically overtake Nordic 'hyperborean' black metal as the dominant style (2010). Others have adopted this idea, tying the style to nation (Koeppe 2015, 220) or as a more global "third wave" (Shadrack 2021, 68-75). But after the tightly local scene-based Norwegian "second wave" in the 1990s, the music has developed, diversified, expanded and fragmented into a variety of styles and sub-subgenres that do not fit nearly as specific a rubric, and instead are more appropriately considered collectively as a complex subcultural ecology of different, mostly complementary but fairly often clashing ideas and practices which nevertheless add up to a diverse but identifiably coherent black metal culture.

Enchanted Environments: Landscape and Marginal Religiosity

Evocations of environment have been a prominent component in black metal's aesthetic since Bathory's turn from devilish goats towards Nordic myths and Viking adventures on *Blood Fire Death* (1989) and *Hammerheart* (1990). Strongly influenced by Bathory, the outsider Satanism of second wave bands increasingly morphed into identification with paganism inspired by icy Nordic landscapes, connecting national pride to subgenre authenticity under the banner of 'True Norwegian Black Metal.' While Venom's 1980s Satanism has been described as theatrical and even cartoonish (Spracklen 2010, 85), the Norwegian bands took this more seriously, with church-burning Satanist turned racist heathen Varg Vikernes from the one-man band Burzum asserting

'We believe what they pretended to believe' (quoted in Baddeley 2010, 206). Initially, musicians claimed that church arsons were motivated by Satanism, but later revisionism framed them as Odinist protests against the encroachment of Christianity on pagan Scandinavia (Mortiis in Christe 2003, 278; Richardson 2012, 152). A Nordic imaginary is powerful even for bands located far from Scandinavia, as Viking metal bands from Spain, Greece and Cuba attest. An online meme displays a person in corpse paint and a just-visible Burzum t-shirt, with the caption 'True Norwegian Black Metal… from Detroit,' the joke exposing tension in global black metal between the strength of Nordic tropes and an expected emphasis on authenticity rooted in specific local identity. Yet other distant landscapes were imagined by Norwegian bands. One of the most influential records, was named *Transilvanian Hunger* (Darkthrone 1994), while another Norwegian band was named Carpathian Forest. These iconic names for Norwegian music both refer to a region in Eastern Europe associated with dark mythologies of its own, from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to the notorious murders of Countess Báthory Erzsébet, whose name was used by the influential Swedish band. In turn, more recent black metal bands from this region also draw on its dark folklore, building on its place in black metal's own mythologies already established by the earlier Nordic bands. For instance, Slovakian group Malokarpatan identify themselves as from that particular area in their band name, while the band Siculicidium named a recording *Land Beyond the Forest* (2016), a literal translation of 'transylvania', and both display drawings of weird forests on album artwork. In each case, the enchanted landscapes of black metal thus involve elements of both rootedness in locality and connection to alterity, at least in the combination of local signifiers and a global metal style, and at times fascination with specific distant localities.

Idealised or otherwise enchanted landscapes are depicted on black metal album covers. Styles include grainy flash photographs taken at night showing trees and snow, as in Darkthrone's *Under a Funeral Moon* (1993), and more recently Bekëth Nexëhmü's series of covers all featuring falling snow. Others feature naturalistic landscape photos, with Master's Hammer's *Ritual* (1991) displaying a snowy forest, while Enslaved's album *Frost* (1994) shows a fog-shrouded fjord. Others use more stylised depictions, whether impressionistic paintings of forests (Ulver's *Bergtatt*, 1995) or mountains (Mgła's *With Hearts Toward None*, 2012), or with added fantasy elements such as towers or castles as on Emperor's *In the Nightside Eclipse* (1994) or Immortal's *At the Heart of Winter* (1999). Many iconic black metal albums from Norway and beyond bear images taken from paintings by Theodor Kittelsen (1857-1914), in which Nordic landscapes are infused with folkloric and mythological themes. The paintings of German Romantic landscape artist Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) are also widely used. Some bands take such artistic choices as another opportunity to assert a more local identity, such as Quebecois bands Forteresse and Serment who have used paintings by Cornelius Krieghoff (1815-1872) of snowy landscapes and traditional life in Quebec. Fantastical environments are also influential. J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy world, itself strongly drawn from Norse myth and language, has provided enormous inspiration in black metal, with place and character names from Tolkien's Middle Earth providing many artist and band monikers. Varg Vikernes used the pseudonym Grishnackh, taken from the orc character Grishnákh in *The Lord of the Rings* (1968) and the name of his highly influential one-man band Burzum comes from the word for 'evil' in Tolkien's 'black speech' spoken by orcs. Many other bands, from Gorgoroth to Nazgul, have taken names and themes from Tolkien's world, while Austrian band Summoning have based almost all of their lyrics on the author's work. A related approach is taken by Norwegian band Immortal, who set their song narratives in their own invented winter kingdom of Blashyrkh. That imagined world has also provided further inspiration for black metal bands from both France and the US, who have taken the name Blashyrkh for their projects. Local folklore and a mythologised sense of regional history is also important, with bands

Forteresse and Heimdalls Wacht for example each writing music about forests in Quebec and Westphalia respectively, referencing their specific regional-sonic identities in their debut album titles *Métal Noir Québécois* ('Quebecois black metal') (2006) and *Westfälischer Schlachtenlärm* ('Westphalian battle noise') (2005). Landscapes are combined with romanticised, nostalgic, fantastic or mythologised themes, which again involve both local specificity in terms of place, but also dislocation, whether estrangement from a romanticised historical era or from an extreme, fantastical version of reality. In their compelling, atmospheric sound combined with strong imagery and associated themes, these productions do not merely refer to enchantment but promise a particular affective evocation of it.

Elements from different imaginary worlds are often combined. The American band Blashyrkh who took their name from Immortal's winter kingdom, for example, featured a track entitled 'Army of Uruk-Hai' on a 2009 demo, referencing orcs in Tolkien, while the French Blashyrkh used a Caspar David Friedrich ruin painting as artwork for their 2007 release *The True Darkness*. Burzum combined Tolkien's terminology with Kittelsen's paintings, an image taken from a *Dungeons & Dragons* book, and songs about forests, darkness, castles, Jesus, Norse god Baldr and even Mesopotamian deity Ea. Paintings of plagues, monsters, ruins, and historical or imagined battles adorn albums full of poetic descriptions of nature and nation, creating a vague and even ambivalently interchangeable but richly evocative atmosphere of strange landscapes accompanying the chaotically distorted black metal sounds. While some bands may have a highly coherent thematic world, whether historical-geographical such as some of the Quebecois bands, or an almost exclusive focus on Tolkien for example, it is important to consider the context of these productions as part of a more diverse global black metal music culture. However consistent the themes of a particular band, it is hard to imagine, for example, even a single listener who *exclusively* listens to pagan black metal that is from *and* about only one particular country or region. The vast majority of listeners, even if they have strong affiliations with a particular kind of depiction of enchanted landscapes, will also listen to black metal bands with different but related interests and themes, considering each as part of a wider, diverse yet broadly consistent black metal environment. Where research on black metal and ecology focuses on particular bands or albums (Lucas 2015, 2018), detailed analysis can be presented of motivations and themes at play in those examples. Panopticon's concept album about coal-mining *Kentucky* (2014), for instance, is described as 'a sorrowful depiction of what has been lost' (Koeppe 2015, 223) with the possibility of evoking 'a generous humanism' (Lucas 2015, 555), even while the album is acknowledged as an outlier both ideologically and sonically in its inclusion of documentary voice samples (Koeppe 2015, 222; Lucas 2015, 563). However, such approaches may overlook how sounds, ideas and imagery circulate in a far more diversified fashion in the hyper-connected contemporary global online black metal culture. If, for example, in the plant-themed black metal of Botanist, 'an activist environmentalist stance reorganises black metal's priorities, shifting them away from the nexus of Satanism/(neo)-Paganism, nature worship and white nationalism, and towards lamentation and anger over the failures of the human-nature relationship' (Lucas 2019, 484-5), it can only be claimed to do so wholly for Botanist, though nevertheless contributing a particular ideological and aesthetic combination to the complex heterogeneous milieu of black metal which contains and combines these ideas with others. In addition, as with much academic research on popular music, assessment of specific recordings framed by a musician's statements about their meaning risks overemphasising authorial intentions at the expense of understanding how audiences variously understand and make use of it. As scholars who are also black metal musicians, Hunter Hunt-Hendrix has introduced (2015) and Jasmine Hazel Shadrack has developed (2021, see especially 125-40) the idea of black metal as perichoresis, a kind of *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork, which

incorporates all aspects of life; it is similarly necessary to treat black metal as a whole field of diverse, varied yet connected musical and cultural production in order to understand how the music culture may present, shape, propagate and contest ideas about environmentalism, enchantment and modernity.

Mythical or religious imaginings of place have often been prominent in musical cultures, in the dreams of Ethiopia/Africa in roots reggae from Jamaica, or a mythical Albion suggested in folk and underground music in the UK. The spiritual power of these evocations are founded on estrangement: reggae attempts to respond to or repair the uprooting violence of the Atlantic slave trade through an apocalyptic call to return to Africa as Zion; in British or English folk music, the separation is a metaphysical sense that a lost paradise or a deeper, esoteric connection with place might be restored in sound, as suggested by book titles about folk and underground music respectively: *Electric Eden* (Young 2011) and *England's Hidden Reverse* (Keenan 2016). Black metal's rendering of landscapes and environments feature a more diverse and chaotically intersecting range of images and themes, and its estrangement arises as dissonance with contemporary conditions of urban modernity. A range of marginal and oppositional orientations towards perceived secular global culture and/or institutional religion – paganism, nature worship, mysticism, occultism, interest in local folklore and tradition, various interpretations of the Satanic, evocation of a romantic sublime – are deployed in black metal as figures of enchantment. These elements are often locally specific at the level of particular bands or albums, but each must be considered as experienced by most listeners as part of a musical culture which involves a range of black metal from different places, sub-styles and eras and with different thematic concerns. Each specific example therefore appears in a broader context of heterogenous reference points which nevertheless consistently repeat the combination of enchantment in the natural environment, sonic and emotive dissonance between that depiction of enchantment and perceived real conditions of ruin, and a sense of darkness that acknowledges that distance. This consistency through the diversity in black metal's cultural milieu allows black metal itself to become for participants an enchanted environment of its own, sacralised and set apart as a realm of darkness, noise and ruin. Arguing for protection of the spiritually valued natural world against encroaching destruction bears similarity to the imagined defence of black metal as an enchanted environment of its own. Further, antagonistic defence of black metal's imagined borders can overlap with aggression towards perceived others in ethnic or national terms, and the music culture can become associated with chauvinism and ethnonationalism in combination with views about environmental conservation. This is not a new combination, and ecological thinking by no means implies politically progressive ideals, as Johannes Zechner shows in his survey of the forest as imagined in National Socialism, as a place for certain kinds of people and not for others (2019), and Anna Bramwell has detailed as both predating the Nazi era and spreading beyond Germany (1989, see especially 112-125). In black metal there are certainly some participants with explicit or crypto-fascist tendencies, which can be expressed in sentiments relating to the environment. While there are also those within the music culture who vociferously challenge such ideologies, it remains the case that such ideas can be allowed to spread or at least remain unchallenged in a milieu which self-consciously values militant transgression, extremity and radicalism, marginality, ideas about ancient tradition and connection to the land. Ideas of setting apart nature from the perceived corruption of the modern world may be an attempt to sacralise the environment, but care must always be taken that this does not incorporate violent essentialisms about who should and should not be "allowed" to identify with any particular land: assessments of black metal's protectionism and gatekeeping must always be wary of where such tendencies can lead.

Ruin and Dissonance: A Dark Haven

Black metal's landscapes are enchanted, but their presentation is invariably shrouded in darkness, ambivalently depicting ruin and provoking reflections on dissonance. The landscapes depicted are undoubtedly majestic and powerful, but often inhospitable and deserted, highlighting risk and challenge to the individual. References to Tolkien usually involve his evil characters or sinister landscapes, while Immortal's Blashyrkh is perpetually shrouded in winter. Kittelsen's series depicting the black death are among his most popular for black metal bands, and it is Friedrich's paintings of snow-covered ruins surrounded by blackened and broken trees that are most often used on album covers. Beyond depictions of decaying castles, the ruin is a key emblem in black metal, signifying dislocation, haunted absence, and the destruction of communication or of tradition. Ruins are highly ambivalent, however, potentially signifying that contemporary industrial society is a ruin, or conversely that traces of a noble but ruined ancient past still appear for those who can discern them. The combination of ruin and nature adds a further dimension of ambiguity, suggesting protest against the ruining of nature by modern industrial society, or alternatively maintaining that despite human hubris, nature will return to ruin this apparent civilisation. The misanthropic anti-modern (yet, of course, still modern) individual can take vicarious pleasure in this process, in black metal's version of the 'Romantic ruinography' where, as in Shelley's 'Ozymandias' (1818), the onlooker surveys the wreckage of civilisation (Lukes 2013, 71-2).

In a wider sense, ruins connect to ideas of fragmentation, dissonance and decay in communication. Destroyed remains of legibility, convention, communication, and even of musical tone are central to black metal's treatment of sound, image and language. Musically, distortion is at the foundation of black metal's musical extremism. The buzz-picking guitar technique obscures clarity regarding what exact notes are being played, while percussion 'blastbeats' ('intensely subdivided alternations between the kick and snare drum,' as described by Hagen 2020, 86) sometimes prompt uncertain shifts in rhythm perception. Black metal's production aesthetic ignores the idea that musical instruments and parts should be separately audible, rejecting what Mark Mynett calls 'intelligibility' in metal music production (2016: 68). The results are often then transferred to cassette tape, a medium sometimes criticised for its muddy lack of clarity. But this is praised and preserved in black metal, where 'separation between individual instruments ends up in decay and indistinction […] an encrusted, distorted music that is about to rot' (Thacker 2014, 180). Putrefaction and decomposition, as bodily ruin, are processes of intense fascination in black metal, to the point of 'rot-mysticism' (Daniel 2015, 54) or, in relation to the alchemical stage of blackening, a 'ritual decomposition' that must take place before purification (Shakespeare 2014, 107-8). This kind of esoteric resonance connects to black metal's affinity with deep ecological thinking which attempts to decentre the human. This approach has been described as 'blackening the green' (Scott 2014), where black metal can be 'a negative form of environmental writing bearing on a world that has become blackened' (Wilson 2014, 25).

Intelligibility is ruined by singing styles which tend towards the completely indecipherable. These vocals are often then placed lower in the mix than for other metal and popular music styles, submerging language further into noise. Some bands make specific commitments in resisting being understood, such as Gorgoroth's refusal to publish lyrics and legal pursuit of fans who attempt to do so online, or Urfaust who sing in invented or secret languages. Observing the extreme vocal style of Cascadian black metal, and with an ear for resonances with mystical discourse, Steven Shakespeare notes that

> The screams and animal noises are not simply the opposite of language. They are paradoxically both parasitic on structures of clarity and meaning, and also the inarticulate ground from which such structures arise. They act as the ruin and fulfilment of language when confronted with the inexplicable mystery of Nature and the One. (2012, 10)

Language is also visually presented in ruins. Ornate blackletter typefaces are overwhelmingly preferred for black metal titles. One name in German for this kind of script is 'Fraktur', referencing the fracture of broken curves, and linking to architectural forms of the gothic. Together with the heavy dark blocks in each letter, these names suggest fragmentation, ruins and the past. Since reading competence with blackletter text is low for most in the 21st Century, these typefaces also act as a barrier to legibility. Rows of vertical bars with pointed tips can even resemble fences or gates, explicitly so in the early logos of the bands Nuit Noire and Helheim. Friedrich's broken trees and ruins have been linked to blackletter typefaces, expressing a utopian synthesis of the eternal, heavenly and crystalline with the earthly, organic and botanical (Mirsky 1998: 6-9). In Friedrich's painting this is symbolised by the stones of a ruined abbey flanked by black tree trunks; in the gothic letterforms, by the sturdy vertical bars decorated with ornate curved details. However, given the course of German nationalism in the 20th Century, this idea can itself be thought of as something of a ruin, one result being that blackletter text is still often associated with Nazism despite Hitler having banned the use of such scripts in 1941 as 'Jewish letters' (Bertheau 1998: 29). This sense of ruin encoded in ideological, architectural, typographical, visual as well as sonic forms echoes in one black metal musician's description of the music as evoking 'saplings shackled to stone' (Skagos quoted in Shakespeare 2014, 110). Nature is described by the band Amestigon as a 'dark haven' (quoted in Golgotha x The Black Candle 2017, 5). The expression combines danger, perhaps imagined as a threat to others, with safety, arising from identification with nature as opposed to civilisation (see Solheim 2016). Black metal prompts the listener (regardless of real practicalities) to imagine themselves as the heroic individual that can cope with the hostile wilderness while others cannot, an idea perhaps ostensibly supported by their ability to find beauty in music that others reject as unlistenable noise.

The relation between ruined communication and destroyed communion with the natural world is made particularly explicit in the ubiquitous black metal album cover designs which feature forest photographs. It is striking that such a high proportion are black and white or tinted monochrome images: the forest in black metal is not often green (Scott 2014, 67). Rather than music of the forest, black metal is music about alienation from the forest. Black and white photographs may also, like 19th Century paintings, hint at an estrangement from the past and thereby from place, nature and tradition. Bands often take promotional shots in natural landscapes, away from the electricity they need to produce their sound, some musicians or labels even promoting album releases on social media by holding up vinyl records (without sleeves) in outdoor settings, associating the music with natural landscapes despite the improbability of playing vinyl outside and indeed the likelihood of damaging a record or sleeve. These presentations express a desired connection with nature while simultaneously highlighting the difference between outside and inside, between the wild landscapes that inspire the black metal imaginary and the urban settings where the music is primarily produced, performed and consumed. American band Wolves in the Throne Room, known for bringing twigs and branches into indoor performance spaces, have spoken of a 'deep woe' in black metal which is 'about fear—that we can never return to the mythic, pastoral world that we crave on a deep subconscious level,' as well as

> about self loathing, for modernity has transformed us, our minds, bodies and spirit, into an alien life form; one not suited to life on earth without the mediating forces of technology, culture and organized religion (quoted in Shakespeare 2010, 6).

Ruin can be detected in black metal's strong preference for all things lo-fi, from recording techniques to cassette tapes and photocopy-style album covers and zines. "Low fidelity" bears an etymological relation to lack of faith, as in recordings or copies that are not faithful representations or reproductions of their sources, decayed by noise obscuring the signal. Lack of faith resonates with black metal's frequent and vociferous criticism of institutional religion, but also indicates a deeper response to perceived disenchantment and critique of reproduction. In the resolute preference for deliberately noisy, degraded forms of reproduction, black metal stages a denial or a mourning of a lost "pure" original, or an acknowledgement of the impossibility of access to it. In the noise of the music, in the monochrome depictions of unspoilt nature, and in the sustained destruction of fidelity, black metal wrestles with that loss.

Conclusion: Transcendence and Transportation

Ecomusicological discourse has focused on the sustainability of recording media (Devine 2015), and physical instruments (Gibson 2019), or has critically assessed large scale tours or events for their environmental impact while lauding certain artists for raising awareness about ecological issues or encouraging action (Pedelty 2012, 27-35). Except in unusual cases (Lucas 2015), black metal tends not to articulate concerns about sustainability beyond disapproval of the treatment of nature by generalised, unspecified others or by modern society as a whole. Nor does it usually make calls to concrete environmental action or activism. Other ecomusicological approaches analyse how the pastoral (Allen 2011) or the utopian (Ingram 2010, 40) are figured in music. Yet black metal is not pastoral, nor is it anti-pastoral; it is neither utopian nor dystopian, though it contains aspects of each. Idyllic enchanted pasts and imagined folkloric ways of life in harmony with nature are depicted, yet their rendering in heavily distorted and dissonant noise cannot be heard as straightforwardly pastoral. Meanwhile, neither can the social realism of the anti-pastoral (Ingram 2010, 89) be often heard in black metal. As in many musical responses to ecology and environment (Toliver 2011, 14-15; Allen 2011, 36), black metal music tends to incorporate a span of sounds from the straightforwardly indexical to the figurative to the non-representational. Signifiers of the natural environment (such as recorded samples of rain, thunder, wind, or bird calls, for example) are combined with sounds made by musical instruments that may figuratively evoke 'natural' sounds, and sounds such as acoustic instruments that may serve more musical roles while also signalling connotations of folklore or the past, though these are all massively outnumbered by the array of electronically amplified and distorted sounds that are far removed from obvious signification of natural elements. Given the references to unspoilt nature and the past, these juxtapositions might suggest a straightforward association of acoustic folk instruments with nostalgically depicted rural life, imagined enchanted environments that are then literally distorted or disrupted by an evocation of disenchanted urban modernity in torrents of distorted guitar noise and frantic screaming. But if traditional life in sympathy with the natural environment is represented in acoustic folk sounds, then why not solely make or listen to folk music? Or from a different perspective, since metal musicians and audiences are committed to the power of heavy distortion at high volumes, why would their revelry in noise be used to critique the industrial society that produced it? Black metal evokes enchanted nature through furiously distorted electronic noise, tortured shrieks and monochrome imagery, played live in urban venues,

disseminated on industrially produced recording formats or via fossil-fuel-intensive streaming platforms. This jarring dissonance is often described as irony (Lucas 2015, 563), or paradox (Shakespeare 2014, 107; Nelson 2015, 136), or contradiction (Hagen 2020, 97). But while curious and provocative, black metal's evocations of tranquil nature in dissonant noise are not inherently oxymoronic. Movies or novels about Vikings are criticised as anachronistic if they include historically inaccurate elements within their depictions, but not because they have been created using electrical cameras and sound equipment, or printed with technology unavailable in the period they portray. Similarly, black metal may include sonic signifiers of folk tradition, nature and the past, but it does not (absurdly) claim to be truly representative in its soundscape, but instead seeks to sonically articulate the affective human response to sublime nature *in the absence of nature*, through electronically amplified and distorted means which are inseparable from contemporary society in which the music is undeniably, if begrudgingly, situated.

The sense of incommensurability is starkly presented in a zine, *Becoming the Forest*, focused on black metal's philosophical relation with the woodland environments. An unattributed short story in the first issue (2015, vi-viii) is named 'Picca Abies' (a type of spruce tree). Depicting an intriguing dynamic of nature and alienation, the story describes members of a Nordic music subculture 'who had been creating tonal dissonance on a scale that was forcefully out of tune with the rest of society,' so fascinated with the natural environment that they wish to physically become part of the forest (vi). They ate 'bark, sap and earth' or 'wrapped themselves in twigs', until finally 'they looked upon the world with a deepened sense of understanding and finally they felt whole,' (viii) having taken root and actually become trees. Others failed in their attempt, and so they

> silently slipped away, slowly returning to the society they had originally shunned. Their bodies all stooped contours and crooked, curling bones. Embarrassed and defeated, they never spoke of their experiences again. They lived out their days in obscurity, safely confined within the walls of the city, gazes sternly fastened on the concrete beneath their feet. ('Picca Abies' 2015, viii)

The contrasting fates portray a central tension in black metal. On the one hand, becoming part of the forest is a romanticised, metaphorical depiction of human immersion in nature that in global industrial modernity is no longer possible. On the other hand, this desire is instigated and not fulfilled, so the sense of alienated urban isolation is exacerbated, even leading to deformed bodies, muted voices and downcast eyes. But oddly, neither of these outcomes is congruent with the affective, imaginative approaches to darkly enchanted environments that black metal affords. The idea of musically becoming the forest may enchant the black metal imaginary, but actual success would mean to cease playing or listening to music altogether; black metal would dream itself out of existence. Failing to become the forest might then represent disenchantment with the modern world, but where, in the story, the defeated individuals abandon thoughts of nature, in black metal's dark haven this consciousness of estrangement from the forest leads instead to an ever more intense yearning for it. Becoming the forest or turning away would mean the end of black metal; the music's meditation on enchantment and disenchantment is instead sustained in the unresolved tension between these two positions, a 'meeting of extremes without unification' (Shakespeare 2014, 104). Black metal may not offer any perspectives on the environmental sustainability of its materials, or any coherent call to activism or even awareness of real conditions. But in the force of its distortions, it can at least offer an engagement with sound where affective affordances can match the wild dissonance and absurd violence of the contemporary disjuncture between utopian idealised visions of nature and dystopian environmental desecration that is the defining feature of

contemporary society in ecological crisis. Not achieving union with nature, not turning away from it either, but continuing in drastically distorted tones to tell impossible stories about becoming the forest.

Discography

Bathory. 1988. *Blood Fire Death*. Under One Flag, FLAG 26. LP.
Bathory. 1990. *Hammerheart*. Noise International, N0153-1. LP.
Blashyrkh. 2007. *The True Darkness*. Warnoise Black Metal. Demo cassette.
Blashyrkh. 2009. 'Army of Uruk-Hai,' *Dark Victorious Reign*. Self-released. Demo cassette.
Darkthrone. 1993. *Under a Funeral Moon*. Peaceville, Vile35. CD.
Darkthrone. 1994. *Transilvanian Hunger*. Peaceville, Vile43. CD.
Emperor. 1994. *In the Nightside Eclipse*. Candlelight Records, Candle 008CD. CD.
Enslaved. 1994. *Frost*. Osmose Productions, OPCD025. CD.
Forteresse. 2006. *Métal Noir Québécois*. Sepulchral Productions, SP003. CD.
Heimdalls Wacht. 2005. *Westfälischer Schlachtenlärm*. Blutvergeissen Productions, BV010. CD.
Immortal. 1999. *At the Heart of Winter*. Osmose Productions, OPCD079. CD.
Master's Hammer. 1991. *Ritual*. Monitor, 01 0012-1 331. LP.
Mgła. 2012. *With Hearts Toward None*. No Solace. Cassette.
Panopticon. 2012. *Kentucky*. Handmade Birds/Pagan Flames, HB-039. 2LP.
Siculicidium. 2016. *Land Beyond the Forest*. Sun & Moon Records, SM-042. LP.
Ulver. 1995. *Bergtatt*. Head Not Found, HNF005. CD.
Venom. 1982. *Black Metal*. Neat Records, NEAT1005. LP.

References

Allen, A. S. 2011. "Symphonic Pastorals." *Green Letters* 15(1): 22-42.

Baddeley, G. 2010. *Lucifer Rising: Devil Worship and Rock 'n' Roll*. London: Plexus.

Becoming the Forest. 2015. "Picca Abies." In *Becoming the Forest* 1: vi-viii. Self-published, Una Hamilton Helle.

Bertheau, P. Th. 1998. "The German Language and the Two Faces of Its Script: A Genuine Expression of European Culture?" In *Blackletter: Type and National Identity*, edited by Peter Bain and Paul Shaw, 22-31. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Bramwell, A. 1989. *Ecology in the 20th Century: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Christe, I. 2003. *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal*. New York: HarperCollins.

Daniel, D. 2015 "Following the Stench: Watain and Putrefaction Mysticism." In *Mors Mystica: Black Metal Theory Symposium*, edited by Edia Connole and Nicola Masciandaro, 53-68. New York: Schism.

Devine, K. 2015. "Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music." *Popular Music* 34(3): 367-89.

Gibson, C. 2019. "A Soundtrack to Ecological Crisis: Tracing Guitars All the Way Back to the Tree" *Popular Music* 38(2):183-203.

Golgotha x The Black Candle. 2017. "Interview with Amestigon." *Golgotha x The Black Candle* 3: 3-13.

Hagen, R. 2020. *Darkthrone's A Blaze in the Northern Sky*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hunt-Hendrix, H. 2010. "Transcendental Black Metal." In *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium I*, edited by Nicola Masciandaro, 53-66. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace.

Hunt-Hendrix, H. 2015. "The Perichoresis of Music, Art and Philosophy." In *Mors Mystica: Black Metal Theory Symposium*, edited by Edia Connole and Nicola Masciandaro. 279-92. London: Schism Press.

Kahn-Harris, K. 2007. *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*. Oxford: Berg.

Keenan, D. 2016. *England's Hidden Reverse: A Secret History of the Esoteric Underground*. 2nd ed. London: Strange Attractor Press.

Koeppe, K. 2015. "Blossoms Will Sprout From the Carcass: Ecological Thinking in American Black Metal." In *Music at the Extremes: Essays on Sounds Outside the Mainstream*, edited by Scott A. Wilson. Jefferson: McFarland.

Lucas, O. 2015. "Kentucky: Sound, Environment, History – Black Metal and Appalachian Coal Culture." In *Modern Heavy Metal: Markets, Practices and Cultures*, edited by Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Kimi Kärki, 555-63. Helsinki: Aalto University.

Lucas, O. 2019. "'Shrieking Soldiers…Wiping Clean the Earth': Hearing Apocalyptic Environmentalism in the Music of Botanist." *Popular Music*, 38(3): 481-97.

Lukes, D. 2013. "Black Metal Machine: Theorizing Industrial Black Metal." *Helvete: A Journal of Black Metal Theory*, 1: 69-93.

Mirsky, L. 1998. "Foreword: The Crystalline Plant." In *Blackletter: Type and National Identity*, edited by Peter Bain and Paul Shaw, 6-9. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.

Mynett, M. 2016. "The Distortion Paradox: Analyzing Contemporary Metal Production." In *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies*, edited by Andy R. Brown, Karl Spracklen, Keith Kahn-Harris and Niall W.R. Scott, 68-88. New York: Routledge.

Neilson, T. 2015. "Where Myth and Metal Collide: Finnish Folk Metal." In *Music at the Extremes: Essays on Sounds Outside the Mainstream*, edited by Scott A. Wilson, 129-42. Jefferson: McFarland.

Pedelty, M. 2012. *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk and the Environment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Richardson, N. 2012. "Looking Black." In *Black Metal: Beyond the Darkness*, edited by Louis Pattison, Nick Richardson and Brandon Stosuy, 148-69. London: Black Dog Publishing.

Scott, N. 2014. "Blackening the Green." In *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology*, edited by Scott Wilson, 65-78. Winchester: Zero Books.

Shadrack, J. H. 2021. *Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound: Screaming the Abyss*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.

Shakespeare, S. 2010. "The Light that Illuminates Itself, the Dark that Soils Itself: Blackened Notes from Schelling's Underground." In *Hideous Gnosis: Black Metal Theory Symposium I*, edited by Nicola Masciandaro, p5-22. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace.

Shakespeare, S. 2012. "Of Plications: A Short Summa on the Nature of Cascadian Black Metal." *Glossator: Practice and Theory of the Commentary* 6: 1-45.

Shakespeare, S. 2014. "Shuddering: Black Metal on the Edge of the Earth." In *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology*, edited by Scott Wilson, 102-21. Winchester: Zero Books

Shelley, P. B. 1818. "Ozymandias" in *The Examiner*, 11 January, London.

Solheim, N. 2016. "Black and Viking Metal: How Two Extreme Music Genres Depict, Construct and Transfigure the (Sub-)Arctic." *Polar Record* 52(266): 509-17.

Spracklen, K. 2010. "True Aryan Metal: The Meaning of Leisure, Belonging and the Construction of Whiteness in Black Metal Music." In *The Metal Void: First Gatherings, Critical Issues*, edited by Niall W.R. Scott and Imke von Helden, 81-93. Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press.

Stoker, B. 1897. *Dracula*. Edinburgh: Archibald Constable.

Thacker, E. 2014. "Sound of the Abyss." In *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology*, edited by Scott Wilson, 179-91. Winchester: Zero Books.

Toliver, B. 2011. "The Alps and the Alpine Symphony, and Environmentalism: Searching for Connections." *Green Letters* 15(1): 8-21.

Tolkien, J.R.R. 1968. *The Lord of the Rings*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Walser, R. 1993. *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Hanover: University Press of New England.

Young, R. 2011. *Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music*. London: Faber and Faber.

Zechner, J. 2019. "The Nature of the Nation: The German Forest as a Paradigm and Ideology." *Becoming the Forest* 3: 76-91.