

# Abyssal Noise: Representations of Death and Dying in Extreme Metal Music

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## Abstract

This contribution is an investigation into the palpable connection of extreme metal music and concepts of death, dying and mortality. Like other dark subcultures, metal has an intense infatuation with the macabre; many of its subcultures seek to uncover meaning through musical exploration into varying dark themes that emerge when thinking about death and what lies beyond the bounds of existence. From the abrasive and animalistic blood lust of death metal to the melancholic textures of black metal and the sonic void evoked in doom metal, extreme metal is a catalyst through which fans of the macabre can explore many perceptions and conceptions of corporeal fragility; the consuming pain of life, of death, and of knowing; and the existentialist notion of the ungraspable abyss. This chapter explores these varying conceptualisations of death in extreme metal culture, their sonic representations, and their cathartic consolation: delving into the psychoanalytic reasoning and embodied sound of death.

Extreme metal acts as a catalyst through which one can seek consolation of mortality. Its existence at the edges of culture and music permits it the capability to explore the terrors of the unthinkable that are evaded and excluded in the West. Following Ronald Bogue (2007) this chapter takes the extreme metal umbrella to encompass three key genres: black, doom, and death metal. While death metal traverses along a more violent path, black and doom metal subsume their melancholy through notions of the sublime. Death is both confronted and embraced through the exploration of the abject in all three genres, either dethroning death as its virile master or accepting annihilation at the sublime edges of the abyss.

This chapter explores the ideological, conceptual, and sonic representations of death in extreme metal through Grace Jantzen's notion of necrophilia/necrophobia, a violent desire and dread of death in the western habitus<sup>1</sup>, and Julia Kristeva's approach to the abject and the sublime. Ultimately, I argue that death metal embodies the former and black and doom the latter, subjects of both afforded the capacity for cathartic consolation through the conceptualisations and sonic embodiment of death.

## Necrophilia or Necrophobia? - Violent desire in death metal

Modern perceptions of death in the West have experienced a cultural shift away from death as a natural part of everyday life towards, what Philippe Ariès terms, 'the invisible death' (1981), one that is silent, away from the home, and obscured by the advancements of medical and sanitary sciences. The realities of death are evaded at every turn in modern western society, through the private spaces created for the dying in hospitals, the preservation of a life-like image through embalming and other practices, and even the beautiful flower-filled public gardens that comprise graveyards (leaving the

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<sup>1</sup> Habitus, a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu to mean a 'common sense world', is thoroughly explored by Jantzen in *Foundations of Violence* (2004: 6).

actuality of the rotting corpse beneath out of sight and mind). Christopher Partridge has attributed this shift not just to the advancement of science, but also to the 'declining influence of institutional religion' (2015: 12) and modernity's focus on the self, the accumulation of which has 'served to push ageing and death to the margins of culture as taboo subjects' (2015: 12). And yet, images of violence, gore, torture, and various conceptions of death and dying are explicitly depicted in diverse forms of media: books, television, film, and music. There is a definite fascination with death that possesses western society, and it is one that has sought to be explained through multiple academic disciplines. However, Jantzen's (2004) theory of necrophilia/necrophobia that is rooted in psychoanalysis and outlined in volume one of *Foundations of Violence* is both convincing and particularly relevant to the key topic at hand here: extreme metal's morbid obsession. Used in this way, Jantzen widens the term necrophilia to encompass the fascination of death and its forms of violence as opposed to its denotative meaning of erotic attraction, instead embodying the 'preoccupation with death that is both dreaded and desired' (2004: 5). The dread of death, something that is heightened in modern western culture, as explored by Partridge, and which can be seen in the efforts made to prolong life expectancy, is named through the marriage of philia to phobia. This concept is familiar in psychoanalysis and is established through the Freudian theory of phobia: the aversion is a duplication of the desire. Thus, necrophilia is the 'underside' of necrophobia: 'the dread and the desire are two sides of the same obsession' (ibid: 6), uncanny doppelgangers of this western preoccupation.

Jantzen applies this binary to characterise the 'habitus of western society' (ibid: 11), one that is entrenched with (gendered) violence and that finds profundity and an authentic purity in bloodshed as a performance of mastery or control. This is evident in common turns of phrase: one 'battles' cancer, 'kills' something to shut it down, or is 'dead' worried (ibid: 14). It is clear to see how this double-sided coin of necrophilia/phobia is present in extreme metal culture, most significantly in death metal. Jantzen's theory of the western fascination with death being rooted in violence and a need for power and mastery over its threat is directly evident in the ways that death metal and its subgenres explore mortality thematically through lyrics, artwork, general iconography, and how it further embodies it sonically.

The work of three arguably formative and globally-established death metal bands nominated by Keith Kahn-Harris (2007), Cannibal Corpse, Morbid Angel and Obituary, can be used to outline large overarching themes for which an exploration of death is implemented in this genre. To sketch the key themes that arise, the various lyrical forms can be split into the delineation of grammatical person, with these three main tropes: first person centred around 'us against them/it'<sup>2</sup>, second person (commonly mixed with first) and stylistically established as 'I do this to you', and the use of third person gendered, most infamously combined with first person singular 'I do this to her'. While this brief summary of styles of text in death metal does not represent the totality of the genre, arguably, these themes are strong stylistic tropes and thus are able to assist in uncovering the essence of death metal's morbidity.

The use of first person is commonly used in death metal lyrics to provide a sense of community amongst listeners, the power of violence in the hands of an audience and musician fighting together against a common enemy. This can be seen in Morbid Angel's 'I am Morbid' (2011), which begins by explicitly creating a sense of kinship that stands in opposition to the 'big ugly world' and later in the song 'the normals'. This is then realised through violence with an act of destruction.

The second two categories of grammatical person, that of 'you' and 'she' together establish a common style of song in death metal that is centred around corporeal violence: both mutilation and murder. The former can be sampled through Obituary's 'Chopped in Half' (1990) or Cannibal Corpse's 'Hammer

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<sup>2</sup> The same can be argued here for the use of 'I'; the first-person singular connotes a sense of unity in the listener.

Smashed Face' (1992). This type of song often includes first-person singular, whereby the vocalist speaks directly to the listener often detailing a description of how they are going to be mutilated, tortured and/or murdered. The same textual design is maintained in the latter song style that uses third person; these are the most problematic of death metal lyrics as the subject becomes gendered. Cannibal Corpse (see the album 'The Bleeding' [1994]) are an established culprit for this type of targeted misogyny as well as many bands that come under the subgenres 'goregrind' and 'pornogrind'<sup>3</sup>.

From these few examples it already becomes apparent that there is an overarching theme in death metal lyrics that positions the musician and/or audience as the perpetrator of violence and the bringer of death. This expression of violence, Jantzen would argue, is a symptom of the western habitus' necrophilia: death metal enacts 'death and its concomitants, especially anxiety and a drive to control, to exert mastery over anything perceived as threatening' (2004: 11). This is further amplified through iconography: artwork (and band merchandise) thematically portrays images of destruction and/or desolation<sup>4</sup>, supernatural and occult horror<sup>5</sup>, corporeal violence, and the dead<sup>6</sup>. These themes are then explored sonically: death metal commonly includes angular modal riffs with a lack of tonal centre<sup>7</sup>; chugging palm-muted guitars that become percussive with a strong sense of attack; pummelling 'blast beats' that scarcely release their tension; vocals that are animalistically growled in deep registers; and the formal pop custom of melody and structure (verse-chorus unit) is abandoned for cycling guitar riffs. It has already been argued that the focus on death and violence in death metal lyrics is sonically reflected, particularly in the lack of structure and 'primal formlessness'<sup>8</sup> of the music. It can be further suggested that the overall attack and percussiveness of this music is synonymous with intertextual concepts of violence. Of particular significance, as it is an undemanding concept, is the genre signifier of growled vocals in lower registers, being both non-human and yet, through an essentialist and heteronormative lens, explicitly masculine. However, this gendered voice is not a solitary anomaly, as the central theme of violent perpetrator is directly connected to understandings of physical violence in the western habitus; women make up less than 10% of the prison population in the west (Jantzen 2004: 10), and so gender and violence are distinctively interlinked (ibid. 16).

The emphasis on masculinity and power is nothing new to the study of metal music – these elements have been explored in relation to various genres in a multi-disciplinary nature - but what is of significance here is the unequivocal manner in which death metal is a clear symptom of Jantzen's violent and death-driven western habitus. This genre wields masculine violence to appropriate a mastery over death in an attempt to grapple with necrophilia/phobia. Symbolically enacting violence, whether through an imagined collective or as an individual, allows the subject a consolation of both the desire and dread of death, and a comprehension of one's mortality by transcending it: dethroning death and its inexorable annihilation.

While death metal attempts to console the subject through wielding the power of death, other forms of extreme metal take different approaches to assuagement. Black and doom metal specifically, conceptually explore death through a similar sense of transcendence but one that is arguably external to death metal's pursuit of masculine power through violence. These genres take a more inquisitive approach to death, confronting it in different ways that, as I suggest in this chapter, are more to do

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, please see 'Women, Heavy Metal Music, and Trauma (Amanda DiGioia)', pages 31-41 in Jasmine Hazel Shadrack's *Black Metal, Trauma Subjectivity and Sound: Screaming the Abyss* 2021.

<sup>4</sup> See *The End Complete* (1992) and *Frozen in Time* (2005) by Obituary.

<sup>5</sup> See *Altars of Madness* (1989) and *Kingdoms Disdained* (2017) by Morbid Angel.

<sup>6</sup> See *Eaten Back to Life* (1990) and *A Skeletal Domain* (2014) and almost any other album by Cannibal Corpse.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, please see Kahn-Harris' discussion of Harris Berger in *Extreme Metal* (2007: 10)

<sup>8</sup> For more information, please see Kahn-Harris' discussion of Simon Reynolds and Joy Press' work on death metal in *Extreme Metal* (2007:9).

with consolation and catharsis in relation to coping with the existential, melancholic, and the abject and sublime expressions of mortality. With this in mind, one can turn to Julia Kristeva to begin to illuminate both black and doom metal's affinity with death.

### **As the abject - so the sublime**

Extreme metal's infatuation with death transgresses what Judeo-Christian religion and its successor, modern western society, have attempted to name, exclude, and purify. Thus, exploring death, whether through gore and violence, inquisitive terror, or notions of liminality and meaninglessness is an act of abjection: disrupting the hegemonic order by engaging with the life-death dichotomy outside of its perception as taboo. Different sub-genres of extreme metal explore the themes of death, dying and mortality in very different ways. However, they all conjure the horror of the Kristevan abject (1982). Death metal explores themes of the unclean, improper body through examination and abuse of functions, fluids, and innards. However, as Kristeva states, it is not the signification of uncleanness that causes abjection; it is the disruption of order, the fragility of the law. Any crime that is:

Immoral, sinister, scheming, shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you (Kristeva 1982: 4).

The defilement explored in death metal that is so intrinsically linked to death and dying represents a 'parallax view' (Shadrack 2021: 140) of abjection through the disruption of morality and law, and of identity as we are faced with the uttermost of abjection, the corpse: 'death infecting life' (Kristeva 1982: 4). It is this latter and extreme form of abjection that is explored in both black and doom metal. In black metal there is even a visible representation of 'death infecting life' through the phantasm of the corpse externalised as 'corpse paint': the rotting features of the dead reimagined onto the face of the musician (and often fans) using black and white paint. Shadrack describes the use of this stage makeup as what black metal is meant to be 'death masquerading as life' (2021: 155); its purpose is as a memento mori or, as Drew Daniel explains:

Corpse paint is a performative melancholic technology through which the notional certainty of a future status of being dead can be borrowed upon and brought into the lived present: an epidermal vacation into the future (qtd. Shadrack 2021:155).

Corpse paint is attributed to the second wave, Norwegian form of black metal from the 1990s. However, it is still used by bands today less as a 'rule of representation' (Shadrack 2021: 70) but of specification per band. However, its significance still holds true, as 'the sense of theatricality for some now offers an opportunity to commune with the performance of death' (Shadrack 2021: 71). It is this form of black metal, the current third wave, that is of particular interest to this chapter as it moves away from the violent beginnings of black metal and takes on a form of melancholy.

Thus, the significance of death to black metal and as I shall argue doom, is less about brutal and violent depictions of the corpse, but what the Kristevan corpse represents: both the uncanny imagined and material threat of the abyss. In place of the unsettling gesture of corporeal fragility suggested in death metal, and many other forms of heavy metal through images of masculine power, black and doom are concerned with existentialism, absence, and meaninglessness. Abjection is twofold: experienced as both a rupturing of the western hegemonic habitus and its repulsion of death, and the abject horror of the embodiment of the Kristevan corpse: the harrowing uncertainty of the abyss. To begin to unravel the 'transcendent value' (Scott 2014: 24) of black and doom's morbid abjection, it is pertinent to first propose the sublime.

In this chapter, I have turned to Kristeva's exploration of abjection not simply to explicate the existential horror or material threat of death but to seek understanding of how we, as human animals, approach consolation or even catharsis to subsist our mortality. It is here that Kristeva's incorporation of the sublime into her theory of the abject begins to shed light on how both black and doom metal experience and, thematically and sonically, embody death. She states, 'the abject is edged with the sublime' (1982: 11), and it is these edges that prevent us from falling into the abyss and becoming permeated by the abject. It is this 'close proximity' (Ferrett 2020: 83) that connects death with transcendence and allows it to be perceived as both abject and sublime. To position death as abject is to peer into the abyss, focussing on the fear provoked through the disruption of identity, the threat to the subject. To position death as the sublime is to encounter the abyss at its edges, delight in the existential and material disruption and console our sense of mortality. This perception of death as both abject and sublime is uncontroversial to participants of dark subcultures where transgression of western cultural values and pleasure in the macabre are central to the interests and ideologies of communities. However, to bring the relationship between these concepts and extreme metal into fruition, Kristeva's theory of sublimation is pertinent.

In *The Powers of Horror* the intensity and transcendence of the sublime is expressed as a 'bottomless memory' that removes the subject to a 'secondary universe' (Kristeva 1982: 12), interpreted as the boundless perceptions, colours, words, scents, touches, sounds and so on, that are triggered by this intense emotion and that transcend. You instantly forget what triggered the sublime as it dissolves into everything the sublime is: all your encounters of it flood into your memory and are experienced infinitely as one. Kristeva's description confronts the impossibility of the sublime and conjures images of the cosmic: 'dazzlement', 'secondary universe', 'sparkling' (1982: 12). This speaks to some of the earlier and seminal texts on the sublime from Edmund Burke (1757) and Immanuel Kant (1790) that emphasised the intensity of sublimation, of pain and terror, and the ungraspable nature of the sublime successively: both its power and its grandeur. Of particular significance when conceptualising the sublimity of death, is Kant's concept of the (first stage) dynamical sublime that establishes the sublime object as an enormous power that is a force beyond our ability to withstand, and thus disturbs our will and sense of freedom, as we are helpless before it. Nick Groom expands this concept further in relation to British Romantic poetry when arguing that the sublime 'signalled the limit of reason, and beyond that there were monsters' (2008: 39). Consequently, in this sense death is the ultimate dynamical sublime, one that is powerful beyond all reason and resistible by none, whilst still provoking the horror of the abject through the uncanny imaginary of the unknown.

And so, the question remains, how can one experience transcendent pleasure or consolation when confronting death and its monsters? While Kristeva's description impeccably expresses the intensity of sublimation as pleasure, Felicia Miller-Frank (1995) expands upon the rationalisation of this emotion through the sublime in nature:

Examples [of the sublime] from nature include volcanoes, lightning, overhanging rocks, waterfalls, the ocean; all must be a source of fear, but not a direct menace, for the emotion of the sublime to occur. Delight arises from the fearful when it does not menace us directly. Instead, it awakens sublime feelings through the mind's ability to stand above nature and be moved, but not crushed by a sense of enormity (qtd. Ferrett 2020: 116).

The main takeaway from this explanation is that, for sublimation to occur, the threat must be experienced at a distance. This relates to Partridge's (2015) ideas around the aesthetic play with death in popular music, specifically by and through youth culture. He argues that the treatment of death and gore in popular music is due to the distance of the young from the threat of mortality, as well as the transgression of the 'mainstream' in pursuit of authenticity: 'few discourses in the west are more able to distinguish young people from mainstream culture... than those relating to mortality' (2015: 49).

While this statement rings true for much of popular music as well as theories of the sublime (specifically Burke) and of the allure of the abject (Kristeva), it trivialises the exploration of mortality in heavy metal and its diverse participatory culture. Metal music is not as intrinsically tied to youth culture as other forms of popular music: one need only look at the range of festivalgoers from young families with small children to older generations to observe this. And so, I propose another reading of the sublime: that this ability to ‘stand above nature and be moved, but not crushed’ is that of self-actualisation; the pleasure of sublimation comes from the potential of the subject to stand on the edge of the abyss and marvel in its impossibility, embracing the threat of annihilation<sup>9</sup>. This, I argue, is what black and doom metal embody: it is not the allure of the abject horror of death experienced at a distance, but the confrontation of death at its edges through sublimation.

The literature on black metal, most significantly the development of Black Metal Theory, supports this reading of the sublime. As expounded by D Ferrett, black metal ‘is rather in love with death itself’ (2020: 110). Exploring this idea further through Scott Wilson, she expands: ‘black metal is concerned with ‘tragic intensity’ rather than pining sorrow’ (Ferrett 2020: 110), and that the pleasure of sublimation in this music is at the same time haunted by ‘the spectre of the undead eternal bleakness of the universe’ (Wilson qtd. Ferrett 2020: 110). This ‘tragic intensity’ is realised in (third wave) black metal as a melancholy that ‘concerns itself with deference to and representations of the dark unknown of the universe’ (Shadrack 2021:68). This melancholy is deeply introspective, the black metal subject acknowledges both the fear and beauty of mortality in relation to the ungraspable infinite of the abyss: ‘the pain of living coalesces with the pain of knowing, of subjective enlightenment’ (Shadrack 2021: 73), or of subjective sublimation. Niall Scott further explores this concept in his theological analysis of black metal within this text. He theorises the presentation of death in black metal as that of negation, one that values and perhaps celebrates absence and meaninglessness, proffered as ‘total noise’ rather than silent void. Significantly, Scott frames this negation as an opportunity for the black metal subject to experience consolation, freeing oneself ‘from the fear of annihilation’, suggesting the possibility of enlightenment or even sublimation through black metal’s negation of death.

This concept is explored in a more extreme sense through depressive suicidal black metal (DSBM)<sup>10</sup>, as the black metal subject reaches sublimation through the contemplation of suicide. This is evident in the description made by Shining vocalist Niklas Kvarforth of the DSBM band’s name to mean ‘the path of enlightenment’ (qtd. Silk 2013: 6). While this may not be a totally new concept to popular music, what is of significance here is that this melancholy, embracing of death, and subjective sublimation encompasses an immersive ideology that comprises black metal. Through this ideology, black metal offers catharsis and ultimately consolation to the mortal subject where the intensity of the pleasure and pain of life, of death, of the unknown, dissolve ‘in the raptures of a bottomless memory’ (Kristeva 1982: 12) – sublimation. Catharsis itself is the subject of Jasmine Hazel Shadrack’s book, *Black Metal, Trauma, Subjectivity and Sound* (2021) that has been so intrinsic to the formation of the ideas presented in this chapter: ‘My autoethnography facilitates a process of using black metal as a cathartic model for expurgation and sacrifice’ (ibid. 12).

This catharsis (and consolation) is only made possible through the extremeness of this music, something that is exquisitely illustrated in Timothy Morton’s (2013) concept of ‘the smoking pool of death’, an abstract conceptualisation of the music of third wave black metal band Wolves in the Throne Room. The smoking pool of death is the totality of black metal noise, encompassing every blast beat, chord, and scream. He states, ‘a pool evoked in the fjord of sound that does not assault but rather descends upon us with welcome, lapidary intensity – majestic, uncompromising’ (Morton 2013:

<sup>9</sup> Of course, this does not disregard the inability to experience the sublime in relation to an *immediate* threat to life.

<sup>10</sup> Also known as SBM – suicidal black metal. See Silk 2013.



23). The images, emotions, and sensations evoked here recall the 'bottomless memory' of the Kristevan sublime:

There is a cluster of meaning, of colours, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear or think (1982: 12).

The black metal sublime is unyielding as you sink deep into the smoking pool of death, its harsh coldness wrenching away cognizance and triggering a spree of sensations, 'as the inside of the being turns inside out to face the music' (Morton 2013: 24).

Black metal's melancholic sublime and sonic intensity is comparable to the experience of doom metal, though they sit at opposite ends of 'extreme'. Much of doom metal remains relatively unexplored in scholarly literature and thus the next section of this chapter is dedicated to the exploration of doom metal music and its relationship with death, sublimation, and consolation.

### **Abyssal Noise: doomed sublimation**

While doom metal does not have the same ideological weight as black metal, seen as an artistic movement rather than a musical genre (Shadrack 2021: 58), it can be argued that doom's approach to death through sublimation is similar to black metal: musically and thematically through sonic intensity and an emphasis on notions of the abyss. Doom metal can be generally described as low, slow, and loud. The music across its various subgenres is comprised of down-tuned guitars, slow tempos and elongated song structures, and a cultural affinity for 'loudness' in live settings. Thematically, doom foregrounds a melancholic infatuation with death, suggested in the denotative meaning of the genre's denomination; it is the origins of the genre: 'doom metal bands have long dwelt on the inevitability of mortality and decay' (Kahn-Harris 2007: 36). Doom metal can be split into a variety of subgenres, the most significant to this chapter being drone metal and funeral doom. Owen Coggins (2018) describes drone metal as the sonic extremes of 'repetition, extension, lowness, slowness, amplification and distortion' (3) and thematically through various practices, experiences and uses of language related to religion, spirituality, and mysticism (3). Funeral doom can be described sonically in a similar manner although to a less extreme extent, whilst incorporating a melancholic 'association with sombre atmospheres' (Coggins 2018: 59). These doom metal subgenres are of particular interest due to their position at the edges of extremes in the genre, in a similar vein to the extremeness of third wave black metal explored above.

The intense 'fjord of sound' of black metal that washes over the subject enabling them, through melancholy, to reach sublimation holds a significance akin to the immersive vibrations of doom. Indeed, Amanda DiGioia in her autoethnographic contribution to this book refers to the sonic intense 'rumble' of doom as 'soothing', this music becoming a form of consolation and salvation for DiGioia in her confrontation of mortality during her cancer treatment. While the tempos of black and doom are at opposing ends of extreme, both achieve a sense of catatonic stasis. Kahn-Harris (2007: 33) notes this in relation to the use of fast tempos (200bpm and above) in black metal, and Bogue concurs that both genres seek 'to elicit the floating time of a catatonic Aeon' (2007: 45). It is this sense of suspended time that evokes the transcendental; the extreme use of tempo, whether through tremolo guitars or through the undulating vibrations of a drawn-out note, evokes the 'refulgent point of dazzlement', the 'bottomless memory' of Kristeva's sublime (Kristeva 1982: 12).

Contemplating the catatonic stasis of doom specifically, the deep, dragged-out, reverberant notes in doom develop this concept in a new direction. The absence of harmonic and rhythmic movement

evokes the ungraspable nothingness of the abyss, the collapse of time and space. Consonant to the abstract conceptualisation of death as an abyssal void, physical representations of the abyss exist in our world as the vast immensity of space or the inescapable destruction of a black hole. Significantly, as Ferrett (2020: 82) notes in her exploration of dark sound, in 2003 astronomer Dr Andrew Fabian discovered sound waves radiating from a black hole, ‘the frequency of which can be interpreted in musical terminology as a B-flat, ‘57 octaves below middle C, or one million billion times lower than the lowest sound audible to the human ear!’ (qtd. Ferrett 2020: 82). Ferrett, following Eugene Thacker, describes this as an ‘unsound’ (Ferrett 2020: 82), a term that suggests an expression of nothingness from the infinite void. The sonic imaginary of the black hole as pulsating sound waves that emit a note lower than is comprehensible evokes the excessive stasis of drone metal bands such as Sunn O))), whose sonic intensity viscerally swallows the listener<sup>11</sup> in a similar sense to the way a black hole engulfs matter into its dark void. This visualisation and sonic imaginary of the abyss, the black hole of death, is truly evoked in the extreme sublimity of doom’s catatonic stasis, its lethargic, resonant, abyssal noise. Indeed, as Ferrett states, the sonic hallucination of an unsound<sup>12</sup> is ‘conjured in sound and music discourse to express the spatial sonority of both the abject and the sublime at the mouth of chaos, oblivion, the abyss and sonic metaphoric black holes’ (2020: 83).

The feeling of suspended time in black and doom metal is not achieved solely through the extremes of tempo and rhythmic pace but also through the textural assemblage of both genres. As Morton (2013) described black metal as a wash of sound in his ‘smoking pool of death’, so doom metal can be described analogously as having a dense texture whereby no one instrument holds the focal point, and vocals are considered simply as timbres that melt into the overall texture. It is this sonic organisation of black and doom metal into a ‘pool’ of noise that allows it to permeate the senses and conjure the sublime. In doom metal, however, there is a further element that thrusts the subject to the edge of the abyss to experience sublimation: the visceral weight of the music. A combination of the extreme lowness, slowness, and loudness of doom is felt in the bass vibrations in the body: a physical sensation of weight, ‘typically a weight that overpowers or overwhelms’ (Piper 2013: 39). Coggins explains this in relation to drone metal, claiming that its primary focus is ‘the intensely physical experience of very loud, very low frequency sounds’, the literal vibration of listeners’ bodies (2018: 115). This is seconded by Olivia Lucas who states that ‘feeling Sunn O)))’s music is not a metaphor – it is an inescapable physical reality’ (qtd. Coggins 2018: 117) as well as Niall Scott (in reference to the same band), who explains how the ‘distorted sound and volume envelop those present to such a degree that some leave the performance space physically not able to deal with the noise’ (2014: 24-25). Thus, it is the combination of catatonic stasis, textural density, and for doom metal specifically, visceral sonic weight in this music that permits the subject the ability to experience sublimation.

While not all subgenres in doom metal incorporate themes related to mortality and death, it can be suggested that, through the genre’s sonic intensity across these various forms, it has the ability to provoke the sublime in the listener. However, what is of significance here is the more extreme forms of doom metal such as funeral doom, black doom, gothic doom, and, I argue, drone metal, that evoke the melancholic beginnings of the genre and that carry forward this embrace of death. As I have argued, black and doom metal, through the extremeness of their music, confront the abyss of death at its edges, the subject experiencing sublimation in place of abject repulsion. It is clear in the ideologies attached to black metal that the vulnerability of mortality and the abject threat of death are central to its musical exploration. While doom metal does not have the underpinning of academic attention to support its complex reflection on death and mortality, it can be seen thematically from the origins of the genre to album and song titles, album artworks and lyrical explorations. This can be

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<sup>11</sup> Niall Scott discusses the immersive noise of Sunn O))) in the paper *Seasons of the Abyss: Heavy Metal as Liturgy* (2014).

<sup>12</sup> For Ferrett this is in relation to the ‘earthly rumbling unsounds of mothers (including ‘Mother Earth’)’ (2020: 83).



epitomised in the artwork for the album *Mirror Reaper* (2017) from funeral doom band Bell Witch. The artwork depicts the image of the enormous reaper; through a mirror its body is split between three worlds, vast oceans at its back, immense mountains and forests at its front, and the fiery abyss of an unknown at the centre. Below it stands a figure, small and insignificant to the reaper's grandeur. This image portrays the liminal space between life and death, the terror and beauty of the magnificence of nature and of the unknown abyss. It is a visual representation of the embrace of death through the sublime melancholic in doom.

### **Abjection – sublimation - consolation**

Extreme metal explores themes of death, dying, and mortality in different ways, thematically and musically embodying conceptualisations of death in an attempt to sate the necrophilic/necrophobic desires and fears that saturate the western habitus. Death metal is a clear symptom of Jantzen's violent, necrophilic west: symbolically enacting the bloody destruction of death to console the subject of the fatal nature of existence. Death metal concerns itself with masculine power and seeks a mastery over death. While black and doom metal hold a similar sense of transcendence, arguably these genres attain consolation through sublimation. I have offered a re-reading of the sublime, beyond its Burkean traditions, to embody a sense of self-actualisation: one that embraces the threat of death as an essential component on its route to transcendence. And thus, the experience of transcendent pleasure and consolation when confronting the monsters of death is rooted in the potential of the black or doom metal subject to embrace the threat of oblivion at the sublime edge of the abject. The intense beauty and terror of death dissolve into the 'raptures of a bottomless memory'.

I have argued in this chapter that sublimation and, consecutively, consolation are only made possible through the sonic profound ferocity of the extremes in this music. The suspension of time, concentration of the textures and, in doom specifically, the suffocating weight of this music washes over the subject, plunging them deep into an infinite pool of abyssal noise: abjection, sublimation, consolation. Fans and musicians of black and doom metal can take Kristeva (1989: 100) quite literally when she states: 'sublimation alone withstands death'.

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