

Chapter 22

The Dark Ecology of Black Metal

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ABSTRACT

For as much as an encyclopedic introduction to black metal might constitute a helpful orientation to its history or aesthetic character, what such an introduction fails to account for is the question of what black metal music does, or rather what it might do. This particular question is informed by a fundamental paradox that constitutes the core concern of this chapter. While black metal music has been linked to misanthropic tendencies and a general antipathy toward organized religion and bourgeois social mores (see Steinke, 1996) amongst its practitioners and listeners, it concomitantly functions as a highly particularized “therapeutic” vehicle for negotiating feelings of intense despair, depression, and nihilism. Hence, the question of this chapter attends not to what black metal is—a question that creators of black metal music largely reject—but rather the question of how black metal’s affective force works upon the body of the organism.

DARK ECOLOGY OF BLACK METAL

On January 31, 2013, journalist “Grim” Kim Kelly published a short autobiographical essay entitled *How Black Metal Saved My Life, Or At Least My Sanity* (<http://www.xojane.com/entertainment/742:how-black-metal-saved-my-life-or-at-least-my-sanity>). In the essay, Kelly describes how black metal music allowed her to

escape from a spiraling depression brought on by her mother’s hospitalization as a result of a cerebral aneurism. Kelly writes:

Nothing made sense anymore, except...the raw, seething hatred, bottomless despair, and chaotic nature of the music itself spoke to me in a way that my friends and family could not. Only this cold, lightness music that celebrated death, destruction, and elitism could articulate the suffocating, bleak feelings that consumed me.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5206-4.ch022

Online responses to Kelly's essay were not only sympathetic but also affirmative that black metal had for them functioned to mediate depression and existential despair. Posts connecting black metal to notions of catharsis and cleansing were frequent, as was the sentiment that black metal produced positive affects in the lives of its listeners. This response points to a curious impasse. How could black metal, a subgenre known for its vehemently aggressive, punishing and often morbid aesthetic functionally mediate depression, despair, or suicidal ideation?

To broach such a question first necessitates that we dispense with the notion that black metal music is representational. That is, the fact that black metal is non-uniform in its affective force, or rather, is capable of warding off the "negative" traits by which it is frequently characterized suggests that black metal music, imagery, and practices inhere affective qualities non-correspondent to the depressive or anti-social character often ascribed to it. We can put this differently by asserting that *relations are external to their terms*, or rather, that the affective force of black metal might be mobilized for purposes other than what has been dubbed a misanthropic escape from reality (see, for example: <http://www.socialanxietysupport.com/forum/f23/black-metal-anyone-117984/>). Rather, in an effort to affirm the transformative force of black metal music and the 'therapeutic' import listeners ascribe to it, it is more adequate to begin with the question of what kind of body is black metal capable of producing. This is to begin thinking black metal as a model for desire that is ecological in its creation of unique affective relations with the world. That is, where post-psychoanalytic theory contends that the subject is produced through its relation to the ecological backdrop into which it is enfolded, the particular ecology of black metal presumes the emergence of both a unique subjectivity and model of desire out of synch with socially conditioned morals and orthodox images for how one 'ought' to live (Guattari, 2000; Masciandaro & Negarestani, 2010).

To what kind of body does black metal aspire, but one delinked from the world as it is given? Black metal performs such delinking in several ways, not the least of which is its fabulation of archaic and primeval worlds dominated by the implacable inhumanity of nature. While black metal is certainly not oriented to the fabulation of a *single* world, what it ostensibly shares as a common trait is the creation of worlds 'raw' for their suspension of placating veils and human-all-too-human social-symbolic edifice. Such modes of fabulation are nascently explored in the online documentary *One Man Metal: Black Metal's Unexplored Fringes* (Noisey, 2012), in which Tasmanian black metal musician Sin Nanna of Striborg describes himself as less a composer than as a medium for the raw and violent force of nature. Transversally actualized through often sinister and decrepit instrumentation, Sin Nanna produces an open, melodic, and archaic aural world in which the human is both traversed and devastated by the non-representational forces of untempered nature. Herein, black metal assumes a different quality of time and perception, evoking through sound and image the archaic duration of storms, seasons, and cosmos. Such fabulation is equally evident in the ambient black metal of Agalloch's...*And the Great Cold Death of the Earth* or Coldworld's *Dream of a Dead Sun*, which actualize an aural world that breaks from a representation of the world as it is given through the evocation of a 'blackened' cosmic event (the dead earth) both yet to come and yet already transpiring as the earth is pushed beyond its 'carrying' to sustain life as we know it (see Colebrook, 2010).

To think astride black metal is hence to produce a dilated ontological account, yet one that tends toward an inhuman or anti-human ecology. If black metal could be considered music of the 'natural' world, it is hence an evocation of 'nature' radically unthought for its break from the anthropocentric phenomenology of time, territory, and ontology. Linked to the overthrow of daily life or rather, an image of life given anthropocentrically, black

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