ABSTRACT

This article intends to dissect black metal’s interestingly twisted relationship with decay. A deep study encompassing symbols of atrophy, with the eventual intention of observing and analysing them through a kaleidoscope of philosophical thought, influenced by, amongst others, the musings of Bataille, Kant and Nietzsche. Issues appearing in both the real and the metaphorical will be placed under inspection, and a suitably blackened light will be shone towards the extent of how black metal exists and thrives in the organic collapse of matter and sound. There will be discussions on how black metal has itself become attuned to decay and how the two processes feed off each other, exist in harmonic conjunction and on rare occasions, oppose the other’s being. How black metal has metastasized with atrophy. Here we shall see two forces inexplicably intertwined, the numerous links given exposure and attempted understanding in the realm of black metal theory.

KEYWORDS

black metal
decay
atrophy
subculture
entropy
metal

Walking through genocidal remnants
With a hate-fuelled heart
Stabbing even at the tears of withering corpses,
Will there even be a word known as death anymore,
When left is nothing to kill?1

1 Xasthur (2004).
The objective of this article is to isolate and analyse themes of decay within black metal music and culture. It will become apparent that examples of decay permeate the subculture and its output and that these examples are multifaceted in their presentation and meaning. For example, the basic descriptive, literal interpretations of decomposition, as seen in the top part of the above extract, to more complex, interwoven ideas that derive from such a concept. In the lyrics, the description of bodily decay, from the perspective of a surviving victor on a battlefield, quickly turns into a philosophical question as to the nature of being in a state where there are no longer living things. The passage asks if death ceases being corruptive, when life is no longer a phenomenon itself. This is a perfect example of how this article will progress. There are three main perspectives of decay in black metal that are analysed within: ‘decay within physical sound’, ‘decay as a lyrical theme’ and ‘decay as transgression from the self’ – each of these will be further sub-categorized as required, for clarity and depth. Following this, there will be some alternative perspectives grouped that do not necessarily fit into the main categories.

In this genre, decay can form complex relationships between the narrator and various subjects. Each significant in its own way, purposefully espousing hidden meanings behind black metal; the raison d’être of its putrid existence. The suggestion of decay occurs both within and beyond the lyrics, entwined into the music itself, emphatically deriding the futility of man’s struggle in the face of this overwhelming putrefaction. Messages of decay symbolize a flowing force echoing the disgust and abjection central to the tenets of the scene. This article will attempt to dissect black metal’s relationship with decay and place it in the spotlight in terms of philosophical thought with particular reference to the work of ‘Black Metal Theory’ and implications on the wider spectrum of the entire subculture.

Black metal theory, the contextual blueprint for such study, provides a number of entry points into an analysis of decay. This strain of theory takes a number of themes and looks at them through a ‘blackened’ lens, being that of a terminal state of finality as an ‘un-life world’ dies. This un-life world – a world that exists without possessing the qualities for living well within it (Fox 2009: 7). Consequently, all inhabitants of this un-life world exist in perpetual suffering. Black metal theory deftly intersects black metal, philosophy and academic discourse (Wilson 2010: 35), offering equal favour to all. ‘Not black metal. Not theory. Not not black metal. Not not theory’ as stated by Masciandaro (2010), implying that this discipline’s objectives are an effective double negation, therefore an affirmation of black metal and theory. Black metal revels in its own mystique and existence outside of understanding, and theory ‘blackens’ it adding a critical gaze, changing its scope towards an all-encompassing negativity. This article concentrates on atrophy exhibited within the genre and wider subculture, using black metal theory as a starting point.

A brief overview of black metal and decay

Arnett, in his book, Metal Heads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation, provides case studies that conclude that level of devotion to the heavy metal subculture is indicative of a youth’s discordant relationship with society (Arnett 1996). Regrettably, black metal is mainly absent from this research piece, due to the time frame and the almost complete lack of black metal influence in the United States at the point. However, the general consensus, if assumed to be accurate, provides evidence that heavy metal fan culture corresponds
Decay as a black metal symbol

to previous work on subcultural relationships. Higher levels of alienation and
estrangement from society may lead to further and deeper submersion in
the music and adoption of cultural tropes and styles, as a specific rejection
of societal dominant culture (Arnett 1996). This idea can be likened to decay,
in that the amount that the individual’s relationship with mainstream society
is ‘decayed’, the level of their devotion rises, filling the schism. Black metal’s
appeal is unlikely to garner the same level of attention as the wider heavy
metal subculture; hence the numerous isolated microcosmic scenes spread
throughout the world (Harris 2000). Scenes that achieve their notoriety in part
due to the globalizing effects of the Internet and the ease of transmission of
music and cultural output (Kristiansen 2011: 34) leading to larger distribution
networks and cross-pollination of scenes (Ekeroth 2008: 48). All iterations
will look at decay at some point, as a physical concept, a horror aesthetic or a
result of their influences.

Kahn-Harris’ work, Extreme Metal: Culture on the Edge (2007), offers a series
of ethnographic studies into the subculture, which are far more descriptive
than Arnett on the theme of countering the connection between alienation
and consumption in a culture where even ‘buying a CD means to become
“involved” in the scene’ by ‘causing some sort of effect within it’ (Harris 2007:
22). He surmises that it is difficult to make distinctions between ‘active’ and
‘passive’ scene membership (Harris 2007: 22). Comparing this to a state of
decomposition, within the scene – when even the briefest of peripheral contact
with the subculture can be effective in altering the landscape, as opposed to
this ability being exclusively available to central figures, decay moves outwards
infecting more, drawing from the peripheries to feed the sickness at the
epicentre. Subcultural capital, or the currency gained from the act of attaining
subcultural status provides individuals with inexplicable value that displays
their prominence over other members. This can result in levels of influence on
the scene as a whole. The black metal subculture subverts this and engages in
the pursuit of 'transgressive subcultural capital' (Harris 2007: 127). Subcultural
capital obtained through transgression becomes the macabre one-upmanship
that defines the black metal culture’s attitudes, particularly during the notori-
ous ‘Second Wave’.

When an object is putrefying, it is being consumed at an exponential rate.
Decay is not an immediate process, but long and slow. Decay can be observed
from the beginning to completion, upon which the victim is fully destroyed
(Negarastani 2010). It is here that the most nihilistic and destructive strains
of black metal find a spiritual home, observing, condemning and encouraging
different forms of decay. This will be covered in the hope of expanding upon
the meaning of decay as a symbol of near-infinite power within the subcul-
ture. It must be stressed that this article will only focus on destructiveness as
a slow, systemic process. The immediate annihilation that runs concurrently in
the genre is outside of the target of this article.

Decay embedded within physical sound

Before looking into the decay observable in the lyrics of black metal, there
is also the symbolic decay that takes place in the commonly ‘lo-fi’ record-
ings and the soundscape. The following are four ways that the recordings
provide this putrefaction. Primarily, one must consider the importance of the
music itself. The black metal sound is as pivotal to the concept of decay as
any metaphorical categories that can be drawn from deeper attention. As the
ultimate counter to the overproduced music created for mass consumption – the outwardly poor recording quality of the subculture’s sonic output is both a construct and circumstantial. Circumstantial in that the recording studios would not allow the bands in to record their material, refusing to acknowledge the artistic content of black metal (Ekeroth 2008: 266). Henceforth, the earliest black metal recordings were made as cheaply as possible, in the homes of the musicians, on amateurish recording material (very often a cassette recorder in the centre of the rehearsal room) on a very limited budget. This lack of a budget led to the second revelation of the black metal recordings, since these early demos were recorded to cassette, and reproduction was a case of using a hi-fi system to record onto another tape (either supplied by the consumer or from a stock of cassettes). The quality of the recording would diminish with each generation of reproduction. As such, one original rehearsal tape used repeatedly would eventually collapse – enveloping the initial recording in muddying amounts of fuzz and distortion. Thus, the music itself would effectively rot from a state of relative fullness and clarity, towards disparity and confusion (Russo 2010). In this way, it can be argued that black metal forges towards its own completion, long after the recording is finalized. A Kantian ‘striving for completeness’ comes to mind, but also Husserl, in that such completeness of knowledge is unattainable, and striving for it can therefore never be relinquished, thus the journey is self-defeating (McGuirk 2014: 7). Here decay becomes a charge for completeness. Exponential reduction as a process, in order to make oneself whole, in black metal terms, forging a path towards increased disparity.

Black metal revels in the abject. Kahn-Harris writes: ‘The abject is that which is formless, disgusting, terrifying and threatening. [...] The abject has to be removed from orderly society and/or destroyed’ (2007: 29). Black metal, in self-identification as the abject, signals that it wishes to be outside of society, waging war on it and begging to be destroyed by inciting hatred among Christians (amongst others). The abject decay; the formless, disgusting collapse, bring to mind a subculture that brings rot to polite society while simultaneously holding up a mirror to it, that is itself, in the process of atrophy. The constructed part of the black metal sonic template was meant to stand against the ever increasingly complex guitar tones that musicians in other genres, particularly the burgeoning death metal scene, would adopt. Effects pedals would increase in number and function and guitarists especially would have ‘signature’ custom models of their favourite instruments and amplifiers for both their own personal use and to sell to other musicians who wanted to approximate/replicate their signature sound. In reaction, black metal bands would use as minimalist of a set-up that they could be satisfied with, introducing long-standing elements of primitivism to their work. Many early demos were made by plugging a guitar directly into an amp selecting the distorted channel, turning it to 10 and then ‘dialling in’ the following settings: bass: 0-1, middle: 0-1, treble: 8-9 (Moynihan and Söderlind 2003). This resulting tone is high-pitched, cutting through all other instruments, whereas in other genres, the guitars would work in tandem with the rest of the instruments, all operating on roughly the same tonal pitch and frequency. It emphasizes the distorted nature as the sound constantly threatens to self-destruct, the natural ‘buzzing’ from the overdriven guitar adds to the ominous atmosphere in the finished mix. Along with this, the bands would often further give presence to the lack of bass or ‘low end’ in their sound by playing high-pitched tritone riffs. In direct contrast to the power chords used by death metal bands,
black metallers chose to strike full chords. Thus creating a disorientating
atmosphere, as the signal through the amplifier would be muddied by what
the listener would interpret as missing notes.

Thirdly, due to the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) attitudes of members like Oystein
Aarseth of Mayhem who wished to keep their scene to themselves, they would
produce and print their own cassette covers. Crudely hand-drawn logos and
pictures of rotting corpses or Satan himself, or photos of forests at night (to
name but two recurring themes) photocopied repeatedly until the quality of
these too would diminish. The fourth and final instance of decay in the record-
ings came from photographs taken of band members. The pictures would very
often be blurred and of very poor quality – concealing the musicians’ iden-
tity as they stood clad in black, faces adorned with corpse paint standing in
graveyards or in forests. The image of death featured everywhere in this music.
The artists would do everything they could to appear dead and sound hell-
ish and demonic. These early black metal demos can arguably, at least to the
musicians and their dedicated fans, be a close approximation to what death
itself sounds like (Moynihan and Söderlind 2003). Furthermore, looking at the
soundscape holistically, analysing intentional use of lo-fi recording methods,
stripped song structures, adding wild amounts of distortion – all construct a
template that wallows in decay as musical atrophy. Such decay can be seen as
a negation of the completeness of music, resulting in music that rots, eating
away at concepts of melody and the basic musical form. Black metal leaves
us wondering about the difference between music and noise, breaking down
the metaphysical barrier that separates them (Thacker 2014). Decay in this
way is transgression against not only the perceived generality of music, but
against society itself. When Erik Danielsson of Watain, for instance, combines
his transmission of pain with such hellish, atrophied notes, a soundtrack to
suffering emerges and ruptures, spreading to those who choose to consume
it. Consequently, listeners are encouraged to share in that transcendence as a
result.

Decay as a lyrical theme

To accurately place lyrical decay in context, it will be presented in three distinct
sub-categories: physical decay, societal decay and effectual decay. Physical and
societal decays are merely observed by the artists and then regurgitated and
explored in the music’s lyrics, whereas ‘effectual decay’ we will see as being
the concept of wilful decay on the outside world intended by the artists them-
selves, in other words, where the artists seek to proffer or encourage decay
and destructiveness (Russo 2010).

Physical decay

Hot tears spill
From the sky’s open scam.
An ash breeze pours
From our pure mouths
Partake of this dying fruit²
I will lay down my bones among the rocks and the roots of the deepest
hollow next to the streambed
The quiet hum of the earth’s dreaming is my new song
When I awake, the world will be born anew³
While black metal artists are outwardly atavistic and delight in primitivism, selecting rural, misanthropic existences over urban living, such as the farm homestead owned by the Weaver brothers, who make up the band Wolves in the Throne Room. Even if the actuality of this is difficult for many, the fantasy still remains. This lust for a primitive existence can manifest in observing urban decay, commenting on the soullessness of the concrete jungle, highlighting the struggle against the ‘dying fruit’, as in the above extract from Fauna’s ‘Rain’. Quite often, bands will contrast this with rural decay in forest settings, either as a direct comparison or as a statement that suggests that in the city, decay consumes and destroys – however in the forests, decay contributes to forming new life (Shakespeare 2012). This dichotomy – decay as an expression of ultimate and finite destruction versus decay as an ingredient in continuing life exemplifies the view of destructiveness in the subculture. Whereas decay is destructive in the weak urban landscape, it reveals a creative face in the stronger rural wilderness. The above extract from Wolves allows listeners to realize that the forests however decayed or dilapidated will spring forth new life. ‘When I awake...’ can be interpreted as the continuation of the narrator’s life force transposed into a new form, the identity of which, he is uncertain. This amalgamation of life forces presented and transformed across the gamut of flora and fauna shows that life is not individualistic, but a universal collection of equivalent souls that can change their outward form, but internally are never changing. By synchronizing himself with the natural world, he becomes one with it. Breaking down existing barriers between continuous and discontinuous life. Once the narrator is born a new, that dividing line between continuousness and discontinuousness is lost forever. The very act places him outside of mortal humanity, symbolic of the desire to return to the Earth and pare oneself from society. Therefore decay, in itself, is once again contradictory, both illusory and vital for continuance of nature, dependent on context and/or location.

Comparing the two lyrical extracts displays the diverging attitudes towards decomposition. On the one hand, Fauna have declared themselves differentiated, beings ‘of pure mouths’ who are outwardly suffering amongst the remains of the natural world, the ‘ash breeze’ being symbolic of the lack of nutrition, consumable from this world. In stark contrast to this, Wolves equate themselves with the natural world and willingly submit to it. Fauna effectually suffer from man’s domination of nature, whereas Wolves, in their submission, do not.

The physical decay elements also applies to bodily integrity, the most famous example proving this is the cover of Mayhem’s bootleg Dawn of the Black Hearts, which features Aarseth’s photograph of Per Yngve Ohlin’s (aka ‘Dead’, the band’s tragic vocalist) bloodied corpse. With the advent of corpse paint, it is clear that the wearer wished to appear dead and rotting. Re-imagining the body as perpetually rotting from birth, as opposed to the more common concept: ‘from the moment we are born; we are dying’ (Russo 2010). Through references to the physical decay of the human body, the black metallers propose that humans are essentially all equal. Without personality, without knowledge, without a soul, we are the same. It is the components that are drawn out upon death and decay that constitute our differences. We choose our own weaknesses. Weaknesses such as religion, consumerism, humanity, etc., these differences are illusory, and black metal is the hammer picking away at these illusions, similarly as to how the corpse state is a fleeting one and eventually will return to the earth after decomposition has taken possession.
Societal decay

Drifting In the air above a cold lake is a soul
From an early better age
Grasping for a mystic thought In vain [...] but who’s to know
Further on lies eternal search for theories to lift the gate
Only locks are made stronger and more keys lost as logic fades
In the pool of dreams the water darkens for the soul that's tired of search
As years pass by the aura drops as less and less feelings touch
Stupidity has won too much the hopeless soul keeps mating

Considering societal decay through black metal themes, one may believe that suddenly the genre begins to engage with the political world; however, the truth is far more complex. Although smaller politically active iterations exist, they are incredibly niche. It is still rare for black metal to outwardly procure political themes in their lyrics, despite the often overemphasized National Socialist Black Metal subgenre. Aarseth, a communist, decided that in mastering this genre, he would stand as far apart from the ‘socially conscious’ death metal scene, as he possibly could. Black metal allows for all the youths’ negativity to shine through – death, decay, darkness, hatred and gore constitute a larger mass of the overall lyrical content. Mainstream politics for the most part is left alone.

In black metal, it is common to find the theme of the loss of the enhanced ability of primitive man. Varg Vikernes (of Burzum, aka Count Grishnakh) when speaking about the song ‘Feeble Screams from Forests Unknown’, he maintains that this is the ultimate Burzum song, in which the project’s message is at its zenith, the remainder of his material has been weaker interpretations of the same message. Vikernes suggests that society as a whole is decaying and we are getting further from our roots. Unable to understand the mystic thought of our pagan ancestry, and no longer do we have the keys to lift the cosmic gates to ethereal knowledge.

Furthermore, each generation decays and gets progressively worse. This message is reiterated in many places. The cover of Ulver’s Nattens Madrigal: Aatte Hymne til Ulven i Manden (‘Madrigal of the Night: 8 Hymns for the Wolf in Man’) features a shadow of a wolf howling at the moon. This wolf is dead-eyed and hungry (Richardson 2012), the silhouetted tree behind it appears twisted, gnarled and ugly, enhancing the intimidating nature of the image. Humanity has evolved so far from our natural form that we have made symbolic enemies of the natural forces. What should be so familiar to us is now strange and foreboding. We have evolved into an alien race unfit for the environment – where our ancestors would cooperate and work the land; now we use machinery and pesticides to achieve our ends, altering the land to suit our wishes. Now, the environment is both intense and ominous. It is also seemingly in direct competition with humanity for control of this planet. The black metal subculture hopes the natural world will emerge triumphant.

Effectual decay

So I will wait, sit on my throne,
Gazing at the sky, in search of answers
And time will fade out, slowly over my corpse.
Day after day, I rot
Expecting light that will bless me for the rest of eternity.

5. Burzum (1992)
6. Aites and Ewell (2009)
I will tend to forget the taste of all the seeds I had to taste\(^7\)
Bleed down to the fucking core
You’re going down for fucking more
Screw your slimy guts
Driving me fucking nuts!
Chainsaw in my bleeding hands
As I start to cut you in two
Your guts are steaming out
And I just love the sight!
Maggots crawling in her cunt
I just love to lick that shit
Bury you in a slimy grave
You will rot forever there!\(^8\)

The adjective ‘effectual’ when placed ahead of decay will be used here to describe decomposition that is encouraged and/or celebrated by the musicians of the black metal subculture, either physical or societal. It can be reflexive, as in the former example from Celestia or focussed on outward bodies or agencies such as inDarkthrone’s ‘Natassja in Eternal Sleep’ where the narrator watches his love, Natassja, burned at the stake announcing his soul had been immolated too, but now recognizing his love is eternal. Here, the act of decay has elicited a response, in that Natassja’s life force will go on without her body, inside him. Not so much an afterlife as the Christian religion would believe it – but a continuation of life in a new form, such as is the case with Wolves. This turns us towards Hegel’s notion of digestion, followed through by Zizek, in that inner potential only finding truth in external expression (Stephanou 2012). Hegel’s apple transforms after its dematerialization into a new form, the extraction of the nutrients from within, and as Stephanou points out, the apple seeds carry life further growing out of excrement. A fitting allegory for black metal decay.

Decay as transgression from the self

Decay in black metal can also be used in such ways as in that found in the song ‘Chainsaw Gutsfuck’ by Mayhem (lyrics reproduced above). In this song, the narrator (here, ‘Maniac’) directs a particularly brutal murder of a female he is sexually attracted to. Here the decay of the female body serves two distinct purposes – the language itself, consisting of the graphic nature, and the abundance of expletives is the perfect example of the unrefined nature of the music of youth. In this song, the band wanted to disgust their listeners and set about to perform this task. By taking the lyrics to such an extreme, one can visualize the youthful exuberance of the band in question. A group of young men clearly obsessed with slasher-type movies, trying to create the equivalent of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre in musical form, albeit it with tongue firmly set in cheek. The sexual content of the song was unashamedly violent, ‘Chainsaw...’ can be interpreted as both a youthful blast of sickness and a will to submit to selfish carnal desire. The woman in question is clearly not too pleased by the prospect of having intercourse, but due to black metal lawlessness inherent in the sovereign – the perpetrator will have what he wants. In essence, this also resembles Hegel’s digestion in that the narrator’s attraction to the subject increases with the destruction of her flesh. The corruption of the perfect form,
the breaking down of tissue merely fuels desire. Hegel and Bataille’s notions
of the individual’s pursuit of death and violence manifesting in erotic pleasure
are both observable in this mutation.

Decay, as discussed, carries with it multiple layers of meaning that are
tailored to express the writer’s particular interest. It can be seen as all-encom-
passing, as it bleeds logically into the themes of nature, eschatology and
atavism and can serve as a link in the chain binding such seemingly disparate
ideas together.

Tonight all flags must burn in place of steeples.
Autonomy must return into the hands of the people.
This is war on our oppressors.
The concept of capitalism robs us of our very nature.
Destroys our tribes, torn apart our families.
Gagged and bound, we slit the throat of the henchman then laugh at
the contradiction.
Falsify our inspiration, numbed by media.
The tools of complacency market our fucking rebellion.
Behold the chains of profit.
There is nothing sacred!
We are convinced that we are free because we are not starving.
But our souls starve for more than profit and convenience.9

The above lyrics by black metal artist Austin Lunn (performing as A. Lundr
in Panopticon) offer the idea that the dual evils of capitalism and religion are
contributors to societal decay and that fighting back is not only possible, but
herein lies a call to arms. The title itself suggests that he who burns the flag
in protest will bear a torch that lights the way for the revolution. Others are
less inclined to fight back and simply satisfied to make the ultimate nihilistic
sentiment and watch the world burn. Some however display ideas that could
be called revolutionary, whether these ideas are well conceived or not is up to
the individual that made the observation, but interestingly the juxtaposition
of archaic descriptors such as ‘souls’ with more modern lexicon indicates here
that the answer lies in the transformation of the people following a return to
the old ways before capitalism. Consequently modern life can exist without
such bondage to our oppressors.

Erik Danielsson of Watain comments that:

I think we can all feel disgusted by corpses and the smell of blood and
I think that is great. It hardens you and it gets you to the point where
you do not give a fuck. It takes a knife and it cuts that part of your
brain out and leaves it backstage because you can’t take it onstage
with you.10

Metallers such as Danielsson use pain and suffering in their work to
create disgust, such groups still recognize the taboo nature of what they do,
but operate in that sphere. This is part of their transgression, a transgression
that leads to transcendence. The change that black metal forces upon the
performer is deemed necessary, perhaps a must in order to survive within
the black metal culture. This can be further interpreted as encouraging a state
of temporary sociopathy to adapt to life in the extremes. As he explained in another interview:

I came to the point where I’m going to let the pain be not only in my band where I can perform music which I love, but it’s also going to be my tool of exploring the Satanic nature of myself. It’s going to be my vessel of transcendence. That changed my whole outlook.11

He speaks of using his transgression to further his own knowledge, becoming ever more aware of the darker aspects of his psyche. Such exploration is only possible with this vessel. Here we see a link made between decay and Satanism itself, a prominent feature of black metal (to varying degrees), adding yet another layer to decay’s relevance within the scene.

As decay is such a popular topic, the potential for it to be subsumed by those who would be deemed ‘posers’ and regurgitated in an attempt to ‘sound true’ is quite high. The early Mayhem song ‘Chainsaw Gutsfuck’ is an example of a band using lyrics to that imply decaying flesh, but not particularly using decay in a metaphorical, or even particularly deep, sense. In this track, it is solely an attempt to ‘gross out’ the listener and push the envelope of what even the most hardened metalheads would accept. Instead of being deemed ‘posers’, Mayhem would go on to perform a vital role in the scene, this example helps reaffirm a horror access ‘entry point’ into black metal. As they became more mature, reliance on this kind of ‘slasher fiction’ itself transforms and reveals more maturity and complexity, comparable to the process of atrophy itself.

**Alternative perspectives on decay**

Decay as a physical process can be quite divisive. When considering the system of consumption that takes over a body until it has fully returned to the earth. How black metal fans react towards physical atrophy diverge roughly parallel to their listening choices within the subculture. It appeared that black metallers who had spent their time singing the praises of nature-worshippers Wolves in the Throne Room would correspond more to a belief that decay was a necessary part of the cycle of life and therefore part of nature’s majestic beauty.

An interesting analogy offered is the comparison of the relentless drone prevalent in some black metal styles to the ‘Om’ or ‘Aum’ chant practiced by followers of Dharmic religions (Gurjar et al. 2009). The chant itself in Hinduism is said to be the first sound and has no translation, the first manifestation of God and therefore equating to the Earth’s own vibrational frequency, a reflection of reality, and therefore the ultimate state of harmonic transcendence with the Earth. Considering this in terms of black metal, particularly the extremely atavistic side of the genre, bands such as Burzum and Wolves create imitations of this vibration to aid in transgressing societal bonds and achieving a higher state of being.

In Wilson’s *Melancology* (2014), his contributors ‘blacken’ ecology with black metal theory. The resultant articles conceptualize a reintegration of the ideas of the flora- and fauna-worshipping Cascadian black metal style and the misanthropic, Satanic template espoused by Mayhem and Darkthrone. This blackened ecology can paint nature as a wilful powerful, oppressive force that should be respected – possibly viewing nature as a dark energy inclined
to destroy the known, human world. It is surmised that in the absence of
humanity in which these songs exist, we are actually hearing further misan-
thropy, as the musicians turn away from society (Scott 2014). The closest to
human qualities we get are anthromorphized creatures, which even then
are used metaphorically to allegorize the animalistic nature man has sepa-
rated from: ‘As animals we gather around the womb-hole in the ground, shed
this flimsy skin, ignite our eyes again’.12 In this passage for instance, there is a
gathering in the rain of beings striving to return to the womb hole from which
they emerged. They wish to remove the flimsy skin of civilization and find
wonder in arcane knowledge.

The lyrics reproduced at the beginning of this article from black metal solo
artist Xasthur express an early question central to the theme of decay. After
the world has been destroyed, if death will even exist or, in less specific terms,
what follows from decay’s completion? Here Xasthur presents a wandering,
etheoreal presence fuelled by hate. Death may have ceased, and nothing is left
to kill, so life is too rendered meaningless. Xasthur’s spectre suggests an incor-
poreal hatred that extends beyond concepts of life and death. If we assume
that total decay is the ‘death of death’ upon which the cycle of life/death is
rendered inert, the conclusion is that once decay has completed (therefore
there is nothing left for even atrophy to feed itself on), the only remnant is the
spirit of hatred itself. This fits comfortably into the beliefs and rituals of black
metal, where hatred is best described as a primordial force. Another view put
forward by the author and essayist JG Ballard surmised that we have created a
world that is purposefully unsustainable with the intention that it will collapse
and we can return to a previous existence free from the constraints of civilized
society (Boyle 2011). Kristeva argues along a similar path, arguing that the
abject contains similar desire to return to primal formlessness (Kristeva 1982).
So this ultimate destruction could consequently lead to either a liberation of
new ideas and state of being or a wave of new creation. Black metal offers little
consolation here, besides extolling the virtues of a profane, irrereligious society.
It does however, put purpose in this level of destructiveness, surpassing death
metal in supplying meaning to the ‘fantiful violence and bloodlust of death
metal [which isn’t] anything in itself – making it ‘real’ to ‘hold greater purpose’
(Moynihan and Søderlind 2003:32).

Through the ‘wriggling biomass’ of worms that feature as the subject of
Masciandaro’s ‘Worm Sign’ (Masciandaro 2014), we see decay as a living, all-
consuming presence, which changes the host organism. It survives by ‘eating
the dead, or infecting living flesh’, an appropriate metaphor for the black
metal subculture itself – with their propensity to use the appearance and char-
acteristics of death whether aesthetically, lyrically or musically. Through this,
the subculture grows as more individuals become ‘infected’. As more fall to
to this disease, black metal expands into darker corners of the world, growing
pocketed scenes everywhere it can find an anchor point. A minute number of
spores is all that is needed to introduce a new series of hosts, as the DIY atti-
dudes manage themselves particularly well.

Conclusion

As this article has provided, decay and atrophy offer multiple opportunities for
metaphor and importantly social commentary, within black metal. Here in this
culture, atrophy helps define black metal and vice versa. The use of black metal
theory highlights such thoughts, echoing the blackened nature of what lies

12 Fauna (2007).
beneath the purposely obfuscating soundscape. This cult of decay permeates
the genre at every conceivable level, all aesthetic properties and the feel of these
representations. We, under instructions from the artists pointing towards it, stare
into this abyss and it stares back. Consequently, the act itself blackens us, infecting
us. We reach new levels of ontological understanding with decay through black
metal. It twists and manoeuvres into shapes that resemble the horror aesthetic
that draws listeners into the genre, but upon our inspection adds multitudinous
layers of meaning that demand attention and deciphering. Black metal through
this lens becomes a more viscous body, reflecting the pulsing biomass that expon-
tentially consumes dying organic matter. Decay will be a permanent feature of
black metal going forward, as the process of rotting fits completely within the
systems and beliefs of the subculture. As long as black metal continues to pulsate,
there will be space for insight into rotting and decay, as this metaphorical group-
ing accurately describes one of the driving impetuses of the subculture itself.

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Decay as a black metal symbol


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