‘Humörets Bottenvåning’: Suicide in depressive suicidal black metal music
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‘To take one’s life is to force others to read one’s death.
To embrace death is at the same time to read one’s own life.’ (Higgonet 1985)

Death plays a defining role in human life, and there have been many theories about how this inevitability affects human thought, and social life. According to Bloch & Parry (1982), death and death-related phenomena, including rituals, music, the meaning of death are shaped by the cultural context in question. From this perspective the cultures of black metal represent interesting case studies, due to their preoccupation with death. ‘depressive suicidal black metal’ or DSBM takes this further, as a style primarily concerned with death, with its own particular set of symbols, meanings, and music relating to death. In this paper, I will use examples from the repertoire of DSBM to investigate and provide a view on the meanings of suicide in the music.

Scott Wilson in Melanchology states that ‘the mourning and melancholy of black metal is essentially […] [a] mourning of death –not the death of someone, or something or some lost past, but for death itself’ (2014), black metal concentrates on death through the concept rather than the grief attached. Consequences of death, even a physical one, rarely exist in these representations. Death is usually a relief, an escape, but also it is individualistic in DSBM. According Scott Wilson, the voice in black metal strongly suggests that the only meaning that is to be found in life is the meaning of death (2010).

Taking this into consideration, I will interpret the presence of death in DSBM through sociology of death and the idea of ontological security. Ontological security, developed by Anthony Giddens, is:

‘persons having a sense of order and continuity in relation to the events in which they participate, and the experiences they have, in their day-to-day lives’ (Mellor 1993, p. 12)

Moreover;

‘The feelings of ontological security find their emotional and cognitive anchors in a practical consciousness of meaningfulness of our daily lives. This meaningfulness,
however, is always shadowed by the threat of disorder and chaos. This chaos signals
the irreality of everyday conventions [...] Society strives to keep this dread [in a
Kierkegaardian sense] at bay by bracketing out of everyday life those questions which
might be raised about the social frameworks which contain human existence. [...] The
existential confrontation with death, one’s own or the death of others, has the potential
to open individuals up to dread, shattering their ontological security’ (Mellor 1993, pp.
12-13).

When this ontological security and the confrontation of it is explored within black metal, it has
the potential to point to these ideas as coping mechanisms with the idea of death.

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anchors in a practical consciousness of meaningfulness of our daily lives. This meaningfulness,
however, is always shadowed by the threat of disorder and chaos. This chaos signals the
irreality of every day conventions’ (1993: 12). The ‘irreality’ may be understood here as the
artificiality of every day acts. In connection to this, Mellor argues that ‘the existential
confrontation with death [...] has the potential to open individuals up to dread, shattering [their]
ontological security (Mellor 1993: 13).

On metal fans’ side, According to Burge et al., suicidal thoughts are higher in heavy
metal listeners than others, while suicide acceptance does not differ (2002, p. 501). The find
that death is more present on the minds of extreme metal music listeners shows implications of
ontological security at play here, and how this music may challenge this security.

Seale suggests that ‘dying has the potential to become a form of mortuary ritual
renewing the hopes of the living by imbuing the experience of care, death, and grief with
broader meaning’ (1998, p. 92). Additionally, considering ‘we begin to live the moment we
begin to die’ according to Seale (1998, p. 105), and that ‘the only meaning is the meaning of
death’ according to Wilson (2010) points to a perpetual idea of coping with death throughout human life.

What makes extreme metal music ‘extreme’ is the way the material is handled and used
in the music, in the lyrics, in live settings, in the media, in the lives of the musicians, and their
personas. This final point highlights an authenticity issue, because earlier extreme metal
musicians in particular stress the way their musician personas were just that –an act that they
have put on to better entertain. These same musicians also accuse later extreme metal artists,
especially from early 1990s onwards, of taking the music and its ideas too seriously. This,
however, is a debate that has largely dissipated since the end of the 1990s, as the events
surrounding extreme metal musicians have become increasingly represented showing the genuine nature of musicians, their music and lyrics, and their actions. I assume authenticity or the genuineness of the music and musicians. In other words, the musicians are considered to be actually involved and engaged with the ideas and themes presented in the music rather than the music being a fad or a trend that people follow in order to gain financial or any other type of capital. Of course, there is strong evidence to support this assumption from the perspectives of the musicians, the audience, and the media.

‘The answer to the question of who ended up getting egg on their faces must be the Norwegian Dark Throne who made the death metal masterpiece “Soulside Journey” and have now joined the Norwegian black metal trend (which suuuuuccckkkkssss) [sic]. –Mikkel Westenholz, Denmark’ (Terrorizer 1994: 31)

This letter shows the expectation of the audience from the musicians of being genuine, and not ‘wimping out’ in the words of another fan, down the line.

The lyrical themes in DSBM, as one might expect, mainly revolve around depression, suicide, and death. The idea of grief does not exist in the lyrics. This tendency to think of action without consequence is described as psychopathic in one instance in relation to Herr Morbid of Forgotten Tombs (Patterson 2015: 272).

Bethlehem’s Dictius Te Necare (1996) is one of significance in DSBM, because it is the earliest example of the specific DSBM vocal style you just heard, and at the same time, this album is one of the first ones to talk about death as an inner personal phenomenon rather than the battle or mythology related death themes present in the second wave of black metal. While the black metal voice in the second wave of black metal is one of a corpse in its essence according to (Daniel 2014), this corpse has a powerful agency which is usually actively and more importantly externally violent. The main difference in DSBM, thus emerges as the forcing this agency into a more passive one –justifying the ‘depressive’ adjective within the style’s name. This approach depicts the narrator as the helpless one, rather than the dominant one. ‘Die Anarschie Beifung Der Augenzeugenreligion’ [The Anarchic Liberation of the Eyewitness Religion] may be analysed as an example of this:

The narrator has the smell of decay, which suggests a rotting corpse. They also portray themselves as powerless, so much so that they are sold to the slaves. Another figure of powerlessness comes with the final four lines. A self is portrayed in these lines as a nothingness, interestingly a nothingness in a mathematical sense, which can be interpreted as a sense of worthlessness if one takes numbers as an indication of quantitative worth, it can
mean an insignificant person. In this sense, through a decaying narrator, death is a state of nothingness, which in turn causes worthlessness.

The idea of death can sometimes become the object of desire in depressive suicidal black metal. Make a Change… Kill Yourself (Denmark), for example, delves into this desire in their self-named album (2005) as follows:

Three interesting points emerge from these lyrics. Firstly, in the line ‘death is what I hunger to experience’ presents death as beyond a desire; as something for which the narrator ‘hunger’s. One may deduce from ‘hunger’ that the experience of death is something essential, a physiological need without which one cannot live, so to say. This fervour for death is motivated here by the sole reality of death in the first line, as opposed to ‘wasted’ and ‘rotten’ experience expressed in the last line. Death, here, is also intriguingly referred to as ‘profane’. This may stem from societal conventions, as it is later indicated in the song: ‘I drag myself outside to die in public./Hopefully giving these humans trauma.’ Because of the taboo state of death in the perceived society of the narrator, it aims to use death as a tool to traumatisise ‘these humans’. Furthermore, the way to achieve and experience death is again a passive act here, with the pleas towards an unknown entity to ‘strangle’, ‘stab’ or ‘poison’.

Similarly, the lyrics portray death as an escape or a release from life that is unbearable. Shining uses a sound clip from Sean Penn’s character as he is crying in the movie She’s So Lovely (1997), describing this idea:

‘No need to kill yourself, there’s hope’ is an important part of the monologue that gives one possible explanation to the suicide advocacy in Shining’s music. Also, death is a necessity here again, because according to the monologue, only if the described human condition were the reality, then there would be ‘no need to kill yourself’. However, in the recognised reality of the album, it implies the fundamentality of suicide to achieve the release of death. This is a more active death idea than it is discussed so far, yet the character is intensely helpless at the same time, and desires death to consume without effort or even consciousness.

As observed so far, death is usually a desirable state, however it is important to note that it is mainly a state, rather than an occurrence. We also observe a masochistic approach to death as an occurrence without mentioning the deadness state.

It can be seen in this example the ‘I’s declaration of the enjoyment of the violation of its body. ‘Lost and mutilated’ along with the colouring the ground suggest the occurrence of death. It is a death caused by external entities, and the longing for this occurrence is only enjoyed throughout its progress. Death is longed for because the body is ‘bitter’, and the
dissemination of ‘misery’ – which is caused by the ‘angels of misery’ with their ‘claws and kicks’ is resulting in a ‘lost and mutilated’ body-ordered.

The longing for death analysed in the lyrics of DSBM so far has been one that is strong yet inactive. This only showed one side of the picture, because on the other side, we can see the lyrics talking about doing something about this desire, or relief. First approach to suicide is one only concerns the voice in the text, an internal monologue, which does not address anyone, and one which presents the suicidal thoughts with different levels of engagement.

Climbing into the ‘nil realm’ suggests a different idea of death than previously discussed; in this case, death is seen as the nothingness, rather than life; however, life is still a source of pain, and death could arguably be viewed as a relief. The idea of suicide and the intention is undeniably present in this example, because possible methods are listed, to be taken ‘in mine own hand’. However, this is a distant engagement with the idea, as it is ambiguous whether the narrator is actually doing the actions listed. The excerpt starts with a sense of immediacy, not one of future or past with ‘I bid the body farewell’, yet then this presence is destroyed with ‘a blade, a rope, bitter poison’ line and further distanced from the action of suicide, and suicide becomes a suggestion, and an idea where one may reach ‘beyond the mortal pain’.

One may see an interchanging voice between ‘I’ and ‘you’, especially concerning lyrics about suicide. The Leviathan example was subtler in this way, however Xasthur uses this interchange in an obvious way, which can be interpreted as a distancing from the idea of suicide, and at the same time building a camaraderie with the audience through suggestions.

The first part of the excerpt is externally directed, and the second part turns inwards. One can see that, in this example, suicide is more a metaphorical killing of the self, as it is suggested to ‘kill the human nature inside’ all the while ‘remaining alive’ as in the previous example. Death is seen as a relief from the constant regret that is brought on by, possibly, life. The same song ends with ‘loss of all love, hate for love, end of life will break the chain and cause you to be free’. This is significant, because suicide is treated as a cleansing act that will free the self of the baggage of the recognised life.

This example has a striking contrast of the death of self and other. The first verse has anti-religious undertones with misanthropy as the dominant idea. However, there is a sense of communal behaviour as well, when the subject turns to suicide at the second part. More importantly, final part of the excerpt talks of the misanthropes, even in the act of suicide, as the ‘masters of life and death’: this shows a crucial desire for control. In addition, the death depicted here has no reason except for an appetite to control; there are no indications to any
suffering—besides the one caused by the depicted characters—resulted from the ‘agony of life’, so to say, or death is not an escape or a relief. The killing in question is pleasure (*Laughing till death*). It is also important to note the use of ‘we’, when the lyrics are about suicide, while it remained as a depiction of the feeling of a single individual before. The misanthropic inclinations seen in this example, can be considered as the second main approach to suicide in DSBM. However, the paradox of misanthropy and the idea of togetherness present here should also be taken into consideration.

This example uses a poetic suicide, which has no real connotations of actual physical harm, but rather a killing of the self to deal with extreme grief resulting from a loss, which also seems to be unrelated to death. The narrator talks of a ‘now’ which is implied to be after the implicit suicide, where ‘my wrists are [...] opened’, this suggests that the loss of a probable lover is not caused by death. Suicide here seems to be motivated towards hurting the other, in almost a demagogic sense. One may argue that in this example, suicide is a tool for revenge over another action of an external being.

The main contrasting feature between these themes then emerges. While desiring death is a passive, almost apathetic act, suicide and taking one’s life can be seen as doing something about that desire. Suicide is an individualist act without the consideration of any external factors except for human life.

Suicide can also be, in DSBM, a way out, which cannot be said to be a relief as previous examples, but a last resort combining the depressive nature of the majority of death representations with the power of activity:

In this example, the narrator lacks energy, it conveys despair and disappointment. Life and its futility, and the frivolous nature of trying to find meaning in life with the last line. This idea of death and suicide can be interpreted as a nihilistic thought.

In ‘Tiden Läker Inga Sår’ the narrator is trying to be manipulative, and in Niklas Kvarforth’s words *force-feed* the idea of suicide to the listener. While the narrator is not ordering the suicide, it is suggesting that it ‘is the only way’. In other cases, suicide is sometimes portrayed as a perversion, and not as a necessity but as something that needs to be forced.

Depressive suicidal black metal as discussed takes death and suicide themes in an intimate capacity. Many of the musicians with interviews published admittedly either were pathologically depressed for at least part of their lives, or expressed themselves as depressed during the particular interview (Azhidahak 2004; Blackwulfaz 2013; Hensley n.d.; House of the Whipcord 2012; Khaosis 2012; noktorn 2007; Sun n.d.; Terrorizer 2003d: 67; Terrorizer
Another trait is that some of these musicians have experienced suicide, suicidal tendencies, self-destructive behaviour in one way or another throughout their lives (Hensley n.d; Terrorizer 2003d: 67 Terrorizer 2011b: 44). However, it is important to note that none of these musicians have committed suicide, and only one musician (Niklas Kvarforth) admits to having tried such an act (Terrorizer 2008a: 64; Terrorizer 2011b: 44). Moreover, all the musicians from these examples state that the music that they create is intensely personal, and they try to convey what they are feeling in lyrics (Azhidahak 2004; Blackwulfaz 2013; Haan n.d.; Hensley n.d.; House of the Whipcord 2012; Khaosis 2012; noktorn 2007; Sun n.d.; Terrorizer 2003d: 67; Terrorizer 2011b: 44; Woodlum n.d.). Considering these, the lyrics discussed become possible interpretations of the intentions of the authors. In the light of the analyses, these approaches to suicide can be categorised as one that is misanthropic in nature and more forceful, at the same time more external and distant to the actual idea, and one that is introverted, desperate and giving death a more positive spin in the form of relief.

As I mentioned before ontological security can be interpreted as the inherent tendency to give human life a meaning through actions of a particular order and continuity, where death is a very clear interruption. Mellor also argues that this security may be shattered when existentially confronted (1991), leaving a nihilistic perspective of the world. One may argue that depressive suicidal black metal is intended to force this confrontation for all the parties involved, furthermore it can be argued to provide a tool to question the self (Shining 2005: ‘I Och Med Insikt Skall du Förgå’). What this confrontation in this context achieves is to reach ‘dread’ destroying the inherence of any security in order to arrive at a form of existence beyond the symbiotic –but parasitic in this case rather than mutualistic- relationship between meaning and order. With dread and temporary meaninglessness, one may argue that death is accepted as belonging to the continuity and order.

After the continuity is re-established without death as an interruption, meaning that is required for life to continue is also re-found, a meaning which can be expressed through Connole and Masciandaro’s blackened version Meher Baba’s reading of life (Connole & Masciandaro 2015): ‘life is dying’. So this shows one reason as to why DSBM musicians while fixating on suicidal thought, remain alive! Furthermore, as expressed by these musicians (Azhidahak 2004; Blackwulfaz 2013; Haan n.d.; Hensley n.d.; House of the Whipcord 2012; Khaosis 2012; noktorn 2007; Patterson 2015; Sun n.d.; Terrorizer 1994-2011; Woodlum n.d.), DSBM is an outlet for negative feelings and thoughts, which helps the musicians deal with them.
The case of Niklas Kvarforth shows exactly this progression between the interviews of him, conducted in 2003, where he says ‘All those people or bands that are supposedly black metal or whatever, they should try a day or two to live my life then believe me, they wouldn’t be so enthusiastic about darkness. Shining is a mere reflection of me only and I’m a pretty sad figure.’ (Terrorizer 2003c: 24) and 2011, where he is quoted as: ‘I want to live a life and I want to continue with Shining as long as I can.’ (Terrorizer 2011b; 44). Considering the lyrical content of Shining discussed close to 2003, and taking this as the reflection of Kvarforth’s mental state, 2011 quote shows a drastic change in world view. Other DSBM musicians repeatedly state that they would not want to be the cause of someone ending their lives, but rather DSBM is a way of pouring the ‘poison’ outside, and a way of dealing with the idea of death easier. Another example is Georg Börner (ColdWorld); he says his music is ‘medicine for the soul. I don’t want to drive somebody to suicide. I feel good when I am listening to my music and that’s why I’m doing it.’ (Haan n.d.)

DSBM becomes a way to engage and cope with the idea of death for musicians. This takes shape as the representations of death and suicide from many different angles, and the resulting provisional shattering of the ontological security of the person.