‘Golden Hatred’: anti-war sentiment and transgression in death doom metal

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Anti-war culture made its way to popular culture as a high point during 1960s and 1970s as part of the hippie culture movement. Metal music, being originated around the same time with bands like Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin, could be thought of having connections to this hippie movement. This connection, obviously, is not as visible as other cultural connections however, it becomes prominent in some parts of the doom metal music culture especially after the 1990s extreme turn as Keith Kahn-Harris calls it. One of the major propellers in doom has always been the idea of transgression ever since the style’s embodiment in Black Sabbath’s first album. Noisey author Nathan Carson states that in an interview in 2013 with Tony Iommi of Black Sabbath, he ‘asked him when they first used the term "doom" to describe their music. [Iommi’s] answer was “Doom? …from day one, really.”’

So what are the transgressive elements in doom metal from the very beginning? As you heard in the excerpt from Black Sabbath’s ‘Black Sabbath’ from the album Black Sabbath, tritone occupies a significant space in the opening riff of the song. In fact, the introduction only consists of an arpeggiated tritone in a sombre tempo with little ornamentation. And until we reach the metal era, tritone has been an interval that required resolving and it has been described as ‘diabolus in musica’ from at least early 18th century. Iommi, on the other hand, structures the whole first section of the song based on the interval alone only supported by the root’s higher octave, admittedly decreasing the effect of the tritone but at the same time effectively avoiding giving the listener a comforting consonant interval in between arpeggiated notes.

Another visible transgression can be observed in the imagery of the bands of the era. Let’s have a look at these photographs from Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin from around the turn of the decade.

As you can see, from clothing to postures and facial expressions, Black Sabbath is going against the grain of the era. Doom metal, in this sense, is an interesting area of research because of its stratified and complex inner structure, and as a result of the combination of the transgressive tendencies inherent in the culture with this complex layering, doom becomes a sea of both internal and external clashes. In this presentation, I will focus on two sub-styles of doom metal that took shape after the 90s turn, namely stoner/doom and death/doom.
I will not attempt to discuss here the origins and the structure of doom metal exhaustively, however a brief mention helps to position these sub-styles of doom metal appropriately within larger cultural makeup. In this slide, you can see different styles within doom metal, most of which began after the 1990s with exceptions such as traditional doom and epic doom. So where does the connection to hippy movement become prominent in doom metal?

As you can expect from this list, stoner/doom is the sub-section of doom metal culture most obsessed with 70s, drugs and psychedelia which show a clear connection to this movement. Now, let’s take a look at this in more detail. Firstly, there is the drug use, as apparent from the name ‘stoner’. Marijuana use is such an important part of the listener culture, conversations like these come up often in social network-based fan groups of this style.

Here’s an excerpt from ‘Building a Haunted House’ by the American band Snail released in their 2015 album Feral. You can hear the 70s psychedelia here in both the harmonic structure and the timbre of the instruments. You can also see the distorted colours and the mushrooms on the album cover. We should look at the other album covers of some well-known stoner doom bands, we see further this sound’s visual translation.

When you inspect these covers, the 70s influence is again apparent. Without the band logos, these images can easily be assumed to be from that era, especially notice the Orange Goblin cover. In lyrics, this connection further continues.

First there is the inner conflict within this stoner doom music world. As you can see from this text, Bongripper, an American band that has mostly instrumental music, claims the rift between their own culture and the hippie culture. But if we explore more, we see the similarly dominant pagan imagery in the lyrics alongside the idea of love.

Here you see four excerpts from two bands. Growing and reviving are important concepts in both bands’ songs. Furthermore, Mother Earth or Moon Goddess are clearly part of the pagan terminology. So even though there is a rejection within the culture of the hippie culture connection, with relative confidence I can say this connection is alive and well within the stoner doom music world.

I focussed on stoner doom because it is the most visibly hippie culture connected music world within doom metal. I will discuss death/doom now, because superficially, this music world, while very far away stoner doom culturally, the unexpected and relatively common appearance of the anti-war theme suggests a subtle connection to the same movement. However, a deeper exploration within death/doom showed a different picture than what one might expect. Before
discussing the anti-war theme in early doom, stoner doom and death/doom though, in order to give you a better idea of where we are musically, here is an excerpt from the English band Anathema’s ‘Sleepless’.

We cannot hear a 70s musical influence easily in this excerpt and in this style in general. Visually, these bands also fall into a distant category.

Ethnographic research becomes useful here in order to trace this style musically. From the outside one might make three different assumptions to what death in death/doom means musically or culturally. The first obvious assumption is that death/doom is an amalgamation made by promoters or distributors early in the style’s conception, I mean here the early 1990s, in order to introduce this style of music in their mail order lists or concert flyers in a few words. Second assumption is that death in death/doom refers to the style being death-metal-like, or in other words having the death growls compared to other doom metal music. I only include here the growls because musically there are no other consistent overlaps with death metal style in death/doom. And the third assumption is that the word ‘death’ refers to the thematic content of the lyrics in this style. In my initial interview with Aaron Stainthorpe, the vocalist of My Dying Bride, one of the pioneer bands of death/doom style, he said that they were first called that by magazines however he also thinks that it is an appropriate definition of the music they do, adding however that maybe doom/death is more appropriate now instead of death/doom. From this statement, also considering the stylistic development of My Dying Bride, one can infer that Aaron thinks of the terms death and doom as pointers to two different styles under extreme metal: doom metal and death metal. Here are two brief examples to show the differences between what Aaron calls death/doom and doom/death.

Finally, a brief scan of lyrics in this style also confirms the third assumption as you can see in these excerpts from different death/doom bands.

So which assumption is the ‘correct’ assumption when interpreting this culture’s origins? In my later interactions with the band My Dying Bride, both their vocalist and one of the founder guitarists confirmed that they were and are big fans of death metal and black metal bands such as Morbid Angel and Celtic Frost. In fact, during the foundation of the band My Dying Bride in 1990, according to again Aaron Stainthorpe, they used to watch Paradise Lost’s rehearsals, another pioneering band of death/doom style, and after Aaron Stainthorpe saw that Aaron Aedy and Gregor Mackintosh, the guitarists of Paradise Lost, were slowing down death metal riffs to create Paradise Lost’s music, he suggested that Calvin Robertshaw and Andrew Craighan
do the same. From this anecdote, I can suggest that death/doom is essentially a slowed down death metal, at least during its conception in late 80s and early 90s. Considering this, how can we interpret the anti-war theme’s presence in death/doom metal? Is this where the connection to doom comes from?

In order to find this connection, I looked at three areas of doom metal: Black Sabbath, stoner doom because it has the most connection to a 70s cultural movement after the extreme turn in doom metal, and death/doom. First the iconic anti-war song in doom metal: War Pigs.

In this song, you can see that the approach focuses mainly on the power structure among the ruling and the working classes. There is only a brief picture of post-war society and realistic imagery has been avoided. Here are three examples from the stoner side of doom metal.

If we look at the Conan lyrics, the same tone present in War Pigs is apparent here. There is an allusion to powerlessness in relation to the ruling class and destruction that follows this. The same voice is in the High on Fire lyrics. The difference here from Black Sabbath and Conan lies in the change in perspective. In the previous two examples, the voice was an observer, a third party to the opposing sides depicted. High on Fire takes a more active approach especially with the line ‘End all wars call, stand your ground and try, hopeless victim’. This excerpt also shows how the imagery changed to more explicitly dystopian one compared to Black Sabbath.

The Monolord example shows a drastic change but it still rests on the same idea of the friction about who has the power. Here, it is the voice that is suffering but it is still ‘in the hands of fools’.

On the death/doom side, we observe a significant change in the approach to war. All these lyrics as you can see focus on the consequences. Except for the My Dying Bride, the lyrics do not mention the people who have the power, which were the main cause according to previous examples. Death/doom focuses on the experience of the individuals from an introspective perspective. In these examples, there is not much else left to do. The damage is done and there are explicit depictions of dystopian consequences of an unnamed war. These examples show a clear break or rather an apparent disconnect between the thematic treatment of war between death/doom and other doom styles. I also looked at the admitted influences of the musicians I interviewed so far to see whether a connection there exists in this regard.

In these examples, you can observe how the war theme is treated. It is along the lines of death/doom in some respects. The voice is the active one and is among the people who are affected by the violence. These examples show that the power is in the hands of the narrator.
rather than the victim perspective we saw before. The description of the consequence of war is also explicit in all the three cases. Death/doom style does not quite fit into the categories of either black or death metal but it better fits compared to doom metal.

I checked how the listeners of death/doom see the anti-war theme present in this style of music to see whether this inclination towards anti-war themed songs match up with the one in drone as discussed by Owen Coggins which would be a connection to doom metal however indirectly. After my interviews with 72 fans from 30 countries, exactly none of the fans mentioned the anti-war sentiment in the music. The fact that 83 percent of the participants mentioned lyrics as one of the major factors in making them listen to this type of music and none mentioned the anti-war theme clearly shows that this is not a significant feature of this music, or one might even suggest a feature at all.

So finally, why do these songs exist? As I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, doom metal is inherently transgressive from the its very beginnings. The examples I’ve shown of death/doom demonstrate more parallels with black and death metal compared to doom metal. However, death/doom’s altered approach exhibits the transgression of black and death metal cultures, which in turn justifies the cultural label: death/doom instead of just categorising this music and culture as an odd form of death metal. In this talk, I tried to show how a genealogical approach in the so-called sub-genres of metal music can benefit in finding political ideology underneath these small but significantly different music worlds.