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# Hipster Black Metal?

Deafheaven's *Sunbather* and the Evolution of an (Un) popular Genre

*Paola Ferrero*

A couple of months ago a guy walks into a bar in Brooklyn and strikes up a conversation with the bartenders about heavy metal. The guy happens to mention that Deafheaven, an up-and-coming American black metal (BM) band, is going to perform at Saint Vitus, the local metal concert venue, in a couple of weeks. The bartenders immediately become confrontational, denying Deafheaven the BM 'label of authenticity': the band, according to them, plays 'hipster metal' and their singer, George Clarke, clearly sports a hipster hairstyle. Good thing they probably did not know who they were talking to: the 'guy' in our story is, in fact, Jonah Bayer, a contributor to *Noisey*, the music magazine of *Vice*, considered to be one of the bastions of hipster online culture. The product of that conversation, a piece entitled 'Why are black metal fans such elitist assholes?' was almost certainly intended as a humorous nod to the ongoing debate, generated mainly by music webzines and their readers, over Deafheaven's inclusion in the BM canon. The article features a promo picture of the band, two young, clean-shaven guys, wearing indistinct clothing, with short haircuts and mild, neutral facial expressions, their faces made to look like they were ironically wearing black and white make up, the typical 'corpse-paint' of traditional, early BM. It certainly did not help that Bayer also included a picture of Inquisition, a historical BM band from Colombia formed in the early 1990s, and ridiculed their corpse-paint and black cloaks attire with the following caption: '*Here's what you're defending, black metal purists. THIS*' (Bayer). The use of Inquisition as a negative example meant to mock BM purists and their theatrics was probably unfortunate and a little misinformed: Inquisition had, in fact, just recently issued *Obscure Verses for the Multiverse* (2013), a critically acclaimed album much lauded on indie webzines for its intricate guitar work and powerful melodies.<sup>1</sup>

The question framing the article was indeed humorous but also very provocative, as it pitted 'traditional' BM of the 1990s, here represented by Inquisition, against a new wave of experimental BM bands founded around the mid-2000s of which Deafheaven are the most popular example. As a result, a long-winding debate ensued in the comment section of the

article over the nature of 'authentic' BM. While comment sections on online music webzines are notoriously a haven for 'trolls' and people generally insulting each other's opinions, the discussion arising from Bayer's piece was surprisingly articulate and rational.<sup>2</sup> Opinions ranged from the mellow live-and-let-live argument to outspoken attacks on the perceived closed-mindedness of BM fans' and also to more articulate and certainly debatable notions of what constitutes 'real' BM. Several identitarian positions arose: the uncompromising BM fan defending the genre from mass co-optation, the open-minded BM fan allowing for the genre's hybridization, and the BM 'neophyte', a fan extraneous to the genre's history that happens however to like Deafheaven. What emerged from the comment section debate was a host of different ideas concerning BM's place in the contemporary musical market. While the article was purposefully vague on Deafheaven's actual musical production and proceeded to bash BM's elitism (or at least the author's version of it), commenters pointed to a much more interesting issue concerning Deafheaven's polarizing music: the relationship between the band's overwhelming popularity on indie music webzines and the historical, entrenched, even sought for 'unpopularity' of BM.

Deafheaven's first album, *Roads to Judah* (2011), was well received on musical webzines and earned them some honorable spots in end-of-the-year lists on Pitchfork and NPR, though strictly in metal lists. However, nothing could prepare them, and BM fans, for the sudden and mind-blowing success of their next excellent album *Sunbather* (2013). The album received stellar reviews and topped Best Album lists in many indie music webzines and mainstream music publications like *NME* and *Rolling Stone*, and the band was unexpectedly catapulted into indie music stardom. Sounding like the lovechild of Darkthrone and My Bloody Valentine, Deafheaven are not your traditional BM band, and they stand at the forefront of a movement that sees young BM bands, especially from the U.S. and France, playing with the traditional boundaries of the genre in both its musical and formal aesthetics. The band's overall appearance, the unusual composition of their audiences or the choice of a pink cover instead of the mandatory black of most BM releases are the elements that have drawn the most criticism and skepticism from BM fans. While *Sunbather* was indeed the spark that ignited the controversy concerning 'traditional' vs 'hipster' BM, and while it still remains the most popular object of contention, the critical interest in the album is not an isolated phenomenon. Deafheaven are only the most visible product of an undeniable trend that sees BM albums and tracks being reviewed with increased frequency in general interest publications like *The New Yorker* or the *San Francisco Weekly* or in indie music webzines

like *Pitchfork* and *Stereogum*.<sup>3</sup> These two online zines are considered the strongholds of musical 'hipsterdom', and for good reason. They have quickly become important cultural powerhouses, musical trendsetters with the ability of directing musical tastes and pushing unknown artists into the spotlight.<sup>4</sup>

Readers of these webzines in the last couple of years could notice a steady increase in the number of heavy metal releases reviewed, particularly extreme metal records. Once obscure bands like the veterans Agalloch, Alcest, Blut aus Nord, Krallice, Locrian, Wolves in the Throne Room, Horseback or Panopticon and newcomers like Ash Borer, Castevet, Deafheaven, Cara Neir, Vattnet Viskar, Raspberry Bulbs and many others often feature as 'Albums of the Week' or as 'Top Track' selections in indie music webzines, a fact that has significantly increased their visibility. How can we therefore explain this shift of BM from the realm of the unpopular to that of the 'cool'? How has the genre become part of indie music discourse despite the fact that it usually poses serious challenges to an uninitiated listener, revels in obscurity and insularity, and is usually perceived as static and impermeable to outside influences? And how is the reception of BM in indie webzines related to the stylistic evolution of the genre from its early Norwegian roots to the present day? I will answer these questions by illustrating the receptive strategies put into practice by reviewers in indie webzines when dealing with new BM records by using Deafheaven's latest controversial album *Sunbather* as a case study. In doing so, I will rely on the methodological tools of popular musicology, and particularly on the analysis of musical events through the study of 'musical collectivities' and their 'musical competences'. My analysis, a sort of online ethnography of BM, will be based on reviews and articles dedicated to Deafheaven and BM in indie webzines like Pitchfork, Stereogum and Noisey and on the reactions of fans in the comment sections to those articles.<sup>5</sup> BM fans intervene in the definition of BM's identity by displaying their own 'subcultural capital' against newcomers to the genre and uphold an idea of BM as transgressive and alien to the mainstream. I will argue that the growing popularity of BM in indie webzine is a result of the reification of Deafheaven's *Sunbather* as a paradigmatic shift in the history of genre by indie music critics, a reading counteracted by the fan's own ideas concerning the nature of BM as a historically unpopular genre. The tension arising from this controversy reveals the way a music subculture as carefully protected as BM polices its own boundaries and how processes of cultural appropriation threaten the very identity of the genre.

## 1. 'Nobody burns churches anymore'. A Brief Introduction to Black Metal

The reasons for BM's historical unpopularity can be attributed to several complementary factors relating to its origins, style and musical affiliation. Indeed, musicians and fans of heavy metal, the 'mother' genre, have always characterized themselves as 'proud pariahs' (Weinstein 93). Since its inception, heavy metal has always been occupying a place at the margins of music history, being either ignored or vehemently attacked by mainstream music critics (cf. Walser 21). During the 1970s, Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath were criticized for their harsh sound and their provocative lyrics, while in the 1980s trash metal bands (Metallica, Megadeth and Anthrax, among others) were attacked by both rock journalists and subculture theorists for their lack of political commitment and musical unsophistication (cf. Weinstein 240). Heavy metal has been routinely accused of instigating suicide among teenagers and to be symptomatic of a dangerous alienation among young people (cf. Kahn-Harris 598).

As an extreme subgenre of Heavy Metal, BM was bound to become even more controversial. Early representatives of the genre like UK's Venom, Switzerland's Hellhammer (and its later iteration, Celtic Frost) and Sweden's Bathory, the so-called 'First Wave' of the late 1980s, used Satanic imagery and mixed heavy metal and crust punk in often chaotic-sounding productions (cf. Patterson 6–16, 25–35, 36–57). However, BM's musical codification came to fruition in the genre's 'Second Wave' in Norway: between 1990–1994 a number of Norwegian bands from Oslo expanded and radicalized the musical and ideological codes of the genre's first wave. Bands like Burzum, Darkthrone, Mayhem, Emperor, Enslaved and Ulver (only to cite a few) created a whole new musical subculture. BM's musical style was characterized by high-pitched screaming vocals, full chord progressions and a droning, buzzing sound resulting from the guitar technique of buzz-picking<sup>6</sup> (which created a denser and less clearly resonant timbre) coupled with the drumming technique of the 'blast beat'<sup>7</sup> (cf. Hagen 2273–2293). The imagery was harsh and obscure: everything, from the convoluted and almost unintelligible band logos to the menacing stage names and the use of corpse-paint, had to suggest an image of inaccessibility and mystery. The majority of the bands wrote lyrics relating to Satanism and Viking or Norse mythology and advocated a return to pre-Christian Paganism as a form of rebellion against the establishment. The scene was plagued by a series of violent incidents, namely the suicide of Mayhem's singer Per Yngve Ohlin, aka 'Dead', the murder of Mayhem's



guitarist Euronymous by Burzum's main man Varg Vikernes and a series of church burnings that created a moral panic in Norway and helped to crystallize an all encompassing and misleading image of the entire scene as violent, Satanic and leaning towards National Socialist ideologies (cf. Patterson 209–214). While the story of the Norwegian scene is too complex to be dealt in full here, it is true that the sensationalistic events surrounding it helped to make Norwegian BM an export product, but most importantly, it crystallized the genre's stylistic and aesthetic elements as integral to 'authentic' BM.<sup>8</sup>

US Black Metal (USBM) as we know it today was born partly out of the influence of the Norwegian scene, but also as a result of the early USBM of the 1980s and 1990s by American bands like Von, Absu, Profanatica, Krieg, and Weakling. The latter band in particular was instrumental in codifying the more recent wave of experimental USBM with their only album *Dead as Dreams* (2000), which was in its turn heavily influenced by Burzum's *Filosofem* (1996), a seminal record characterized by a wall of repetitive BM riffs accompanied by an eerie synth line and mantra-like lyrics (cf. Patterson 212). Weakling's *Dead as Dreams* blended Burzum's penchant for expansive and repetitive compositions with the emotionally surging riffs of post-rock, combining emotive resonance and personal lyrics about solitude and paranoia, with the typical BM wash of sound and the wailing, wraith-like vocals, through towering, twenty-minute long compositions (cf. Nunziata). Deafheaven, probably the most famous contemporary USBM band, have conflated the most important strands of the genre's evolutionary pattern while subverting some its most identifiable trademarks. Their penchant for post-rock-infused BM is matched by the use of an unusually colorful artwork and the simple, unassuming appearance of the band members. The publication of their sophomore record, the highly anticipated *Sunbather* (2013), had a twofold effect on the BM scene: it spawned a debate surrounding the current state of BM, with some commenters declaring the death of the genre in its traditional form, and retroactively created an increased interest towards a genre that has usually been the subject of specialized metal magazines and webzines and the exclusive territory of BM fans. So, why is BM suddenly a popular topic of discussion on indie webzines? What are the processes and the actors involved in the sudden popularity of such an unpopular genre? And most importantly, what really is at stake in the debate over BM's identity and its co-optation (or fears thereof) by what is disparagingly defined as 'hipsterdom'?

## 2. Subcultural Capital and Transgressive Power in the Black Metal Musical Collectivity.

One way to explain the shift of BM from the realm of the unpopular to that of the cool is to understand the way BM as a musical event has been received by the indie music audience and the meaning of this co-optation. Popular musicologist Richard Middleton in his *Studying Popular Music* tries to interpret musical meanings and analyze the reception of musical events by relying on the dynamics pertaining to 'musical codes' and 'musical competences' of a 'musical collectivity'. BM can be defined as a musical event characterized by a set of 'musical codes', i.e. characteristics that relate musical sounds to extra-musical factors (cf. Middleton 246). These categories allow us to describe a particular musical work according to its generic norms, its musical and historical context as well as its musical content. The term 'musical collectivity' has been devised by Italian musicologist Franco Fabbri to describe all the social actors involved in the creation and fruition of music and the definition of musical genres (cf. 85). According to his definition, a musical collectivity includes musicians, composers, promoters, label executives, fans, journalists, music critics and scholars.

Said music collectivity is endowed by what another Italian musicologist, Gino Stefani, has termed 'musical competence' (*Il Segno della Musica* 21), i.e. the way a musical message is received and interpreted by a musical community. Stefani has devised a general scheme of musical competences according to the analytical 'tools' used by the music 'receiver'. All these codes are grouped into two specific competence types, 'high competence' and 'popular competence' (Brackett 13).<sup>9</sup> The most common example is the difference between a receiver approaching a piece of music with a knowledge of music theory and one that approaches it at what Stefani calls an 'anthropological' level, as a daily practice (cf. *La Parola all'Ascolto* 12–13). Stefani's model complements Middleton's in that it introduces the concept of 'context' of the musical event by 'telling us about the larger social and cultural context, about the individual backgrounds of the senders and the receivers of the message, and about the background of the message itself' (Brackett 14). In other words, musical works may be received and codified by a musical collectivity according to different levels of musical competence, a process that in turn influences the way in which musical works are perceived and evaluated. In the case of BM's reception by both the indie and the BM musical collectivity, musical competence does not relate specifically to a knowledge of the inner workings of a BM song in terms of, say, chord progressions, melody, or harmonic structure: BM has rarely if ever

been analyzed from a music theory perspective, and certainly not in music webzines.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the musical competences of BM's fans relate to a knowledge of the history of the genre, of its musical and ideological evolution both temporally and spatially, and of the musical characteristics linking the 'old guard' with this new host of young BM bands. This may be true for most fans of very specialized genres, but in the case of BM, a very unpopular genre now experiencing a sudden increase in popularity, this aspect becomes crucial and arguably unique.

The process through which members of the BM 'musical collectivity' define themselves through their level of 'high competence' of the genre produces two complementary effects. Firstly, it endows them with 'subcultural capital', a concept that Sarah Thornton, adapting it from Bourdieu's own theory of cultural capital, has used to study dance-music subcultures in the United Kingdom. Translating the concept to the extreme metal subculture, Keith Kahn-Harris has observed how the display of musical knowledge within the scene produces an accumulation of subcultural capital. Extreme metal fans are eager to show that they know all the intricacies of the scene and the evolutionary paths of influence from one band to another. Secondly, it creates 'hierarchies of status' and 'hierarchies of power' (Kahn-Harris 2367) within but, most importantly, as a reaction to outsiders trying to get in. As Frith argues, if 'social relations are constituted in cultural practice, then our sense of identity and difference is established in the process of discrimination' (*Performing Rites* 18). Part of the pleasure of belonging to the extreme metal scene is in fact derived from the profound knowledge of the genre's history, a kind of subcultural capital that allows scene members to exclude or discriminate newcomers. BM fans and practitioners have always proudly been conscious of the unpopularity of the genre and have therefore reveled in the idea of being a part of a 'secret society' of like-minded individuals exclusively conscious of the inner workings of the genre.

BM fans have also been proudly conscious of the genre's 'extreme' or 'transgressive' nature. Generally speaking, the fact that BM's lyrics and imagery usually deal with death, violence and the occult is part of the reason of its unpopularity. More specifically, the pleasure of transgression from the norm of acceptable musical practice that extreme forms of metal afford their listeners is crucially linked to questions of subcultural identity formation. Keith-Kahn Harris has individuated three types of transgressions in extreme metal: 'sonic', 'discursive' and 'bodily' (Kahn-Harris 660). Without going into the detail of musical analysis, extreme metal transgresses the 'norm' of mainstream music and even classic heavy metal by emphasizing elements such as heavy guitar distortion, down-tuning and volume. Other



characterizing sonic elements of BM, such as the screaming vocals or the furious technicality of the drum signature, make the genre even more inaccessible. At the level of discourse, extreme metal has made themes like death and violence even more explicit than in classic heavy metal. As Kahn-Harris notes, seminal extreme metal bands like Carcass, Cannibal Corpse, Death, Dismember and Obituary routinely resorted to revolting images of torture and suffering in their lyrics and artwork (cf. 787). BM bands, particularly from the genre-defining Norwegian scene, have instead embraced Satanism (or anti-Christianity) as an extreme form of individualism. Kahn-Harris writes: 'Satanism is generally more concerned with liberation from the perceived constraints of humanity than with worshipping the devil' (856). As such, Satanism in BM transforms into a form of rebellion against the establishment that enhances the fans' perception of the elitist and unpopular nature of the genre. Bodily transgression like heavy consumption of alcohol and drugs are less central to the scene and certainly not unique, and they do not constitute a defining factor of the genre's unpopularity. The streak of violence associated with the Norwegian scene of the 1990s has instead assumed a 'mythic significance' (Kahn-Harris 999), and the genre has certainly capitalized, if unwittingly, on the allure of this violent origin story. As such, the transgressive elements associated with BM, coupled with the fans' deep knowledge of the genre's musical codes and accumulation of subcultural capital constitute the building blocks of its unpopular identity. These elements intervene significantly in the way BM fans negotiate their own sense of identity and how they respond to co-optation by the popular mainstream.

The critical space generated by *Sunbather* through reviews, op-eds and their respective comment sections illuminates the dynamics of appropriation of subcultural musical genres by mainstream culture and the way fans negotiate questions of authenticity and belonging. Fans and critic-fans alike are part of one or several overlapping musical collectivities, in this case the BM and the indie one. In fact, the blurring of boundaries caused by the sudden entry of BM into the world of indie webzines is one of the main forces behind the debate over BM's identity. In the next section of this essay, I will use *Sunbather* as a case study in order to flesh out the different voices of the BM musical collectivity: the fans, the indie webzine's journalists as critic-fans, and the musicians themselves. The participants in the debate display their own specialized knowledge of BM musical codes and their accumulated subcultural capital to either reinstate or redefine what they believe can be considered BM and what can be excluded from it. The discussion of Deafheaven's explosion of BM musical codes reveals how inclusionary and exclusionary processes taking place at the limits of

subcultural spaces amplify the fans' concerns over cultural appropriation. Now that BM is up for the taking, so to speak, now that it has burst through its prescribed boundaries into indie cultural consciousness, its very identity as an unpopular genre is put into question.

### 3. 'Death to Black Metal': Deafheaven's *Sunbather* and Black Metal in a 'Post-Pitchfork' World

The increased coverage of BM in indie webzines following the publication of Deafheaven's *Sunbather* has led to an exponential rise in reviews and op-eds debating the current status of the genre and to the consequent extension of the debate among fans in the comment sections. As Sexton argues, the proliferation of critical discussions about music in online zines has significantly blurred the boundary between the professional rock critic and the critic-fan (cf. 6). Publications like *Pitchfork* and *Stereogum* can be described as 'semi-fanzines', a term developed by Frith to describe those music publications where the critic's 'knowledge and authority proceed not from formal, educational or professional training but primarily from autodidactic, amateur enthusiasm' (Atton 9). Consequently, music criticism of BM in these websites does not subscribe to the classic narrative that pits established rock critics upholding some 'universal critical values' (Atton 5) against expert fans of a subgenre. The debate surrounding BM's sudden popularity in articles on indie webzines involves a musical collectivity where most actors involved possess high musical competence and a good quantity of subcultural capital.

The articles devoted to *Sunbather* argue for the death of traditional forms of BM in favor of multiple new forms of BM that take a decisive step away, stylistically and most importantly ideologically, from the 'mother' genre. Furthermore, they argue that the musical codes of BM have changed dramatically for the better and Deafheaven's *Sunbather* has been instrumental in igniting the change. An example of this kind of argumentation is Michael Nelson's op-ed 'Deconstructing: Alcest's *Shelter* and metal in a post-Deafheaven world' on *Stereogum*. Nelson, it must be noted, is *Stereogum*'s metal columnist and author of the monthly 'Black Market' column, so his musical competence on BM is beyond doubt, yet I take issue with his interpretation of Deafheaven's *Sunbather* as a watershed moment in the history of BM, producing a sort of paradigmatic shift in the genre and a 'post-Deafheaven' world. In the article, Nelson introduces Alcest, a French BM band mixing BM with the shoegaze of Slowdive and

My Bloody Valentine, as another similar example of the way the genre is breaking away from tradition. With their latest release, 2014's *Shelter*, Alcest have abandoned BM altogether and essentially put out a shoegaze record. According to Nelson, Deafheaven are direct descendants of Alcest's 'blackgaze', who provided Deafheaven's 'blueprint', and he triumphantly proclaims *Sunbather* to be 'the most important moment for American metal since the release of Nirvana's *Nevermind*'. The publication of *Shelter*, Nelson points out, comes at a 'fortuitous' time, since just when Deafheaven release a watershed, genre-defining record, Alcest decide to 'joyously' abandon BM altogether. What Nelson seems to suggest here is that *Sunbather*'s unexpected success (according to Metacritic, *Sunbather* was 'the best reviewed album of 2013') has created a decisive break in the evolutionary trajectory of BM, and that Alcest's *Shelter* marks the next logical step. In other words, *Sunbather*'s critical popularity is integral to the break with the tradition of BM, a tradition that will remain unpopular because it cannot survive in a post-Deafheaven world.

To back up his argument, Nelson cites another controversial op-ed, *Decibel*'s Michael Bergrand preface to his 'Best Metal Albums of 2013' article. In his introduction to the list, Bergrand essentially declares the death of metal, or at least its current status of creative 'atrophy'. Any innovation in metal, according to Bergrand, comes from bands actually overstepping the received boundaries of the genre and embracing forms as diverse as shoegaze, kraut-rock, progressive, jazz, etc. Bergrand states that this process of 'border-crossing' has been happening for at least the last ten years, and Deafheaven's latest record is a crucial part of this process:

Deafheaven's 2013 album *Sunbather* just might be the first major splintering that will eventually see 'extreme music' separating completely from actual heavy metal. [...] It remains the most critically acclaimed album of 2013, of any genre, marking the first time an album that has occupied that grey area between 'metal' and 'extreme music' has captured the attention of so many mainstream critics and audiences. Some critics still call *Sunbather* 'metal', but to do so is to forget what makes heavy metal heavy metal in the first place, merely clutching to the few metallic threads in an otherwise richly varied musical fabric. In reality, *Sunbather* is a tremendous example of extremity transcending the metal ethos entirely.

Bergrand expresses a very stylistically conservative view of metal with regard to style, but he makes an interesting though ultimately debatable

statement: that metal and extreme music are two different things. More importantly, he claims that *Sunbather*'s success with mainstream audiences is a result of an excision of the musical elements of metal in favor of the gray area of extreme music. As he goes on to conclude, while metal lingers in a state of crystallized motionlessness, extreme music is 'the true limitless form of music'. Using Bergrand's argument about *Sunbather*, Nelson goes even further and questions the nature of metal itself: if *Sunbather* is extreme music and thus not bounded by BM's 'rigid confines' (Nelson), then Alcest's *Shelter* is also extreme music, and so are Burzum's with his 'washed-out, lulling and gentle' records. In a post-Deafheaven world, metal is indefinite.

While I may spend paragraphs arguing why I find very little 'gentleness' in any Burzum record, my interest lies more in the way BM has been shoe-horned into indie cultural consciousness by positing this 'post-Deafheaven' world in which BM itself is eliminated from the equation in favor of the all-encompassing 'extreme' label. Initially, Nelson seems to disagree with Bergrand's uncompromising view of metal, but he then utilizes his definition of extreme music to equate extremity with musical innovation and BM with musical rigidity. Ironically, Burzum need also to become undefinedly extreme because identifying them strictly with BM would automatically make their disciples, Deafheaven and Alcest, still BM. BM musical codes, the ones Burzum allegedly helped to create, are therefore made irrelevant because they did not exist in the first place. The way BM, and particularly *Sunbather*, is received by the indie music collectivity, in this case reviewers and fans or commenters, dramatizes exactly how the unpopularity of the genre has been metabolized through a narrative that downplays its BM elements and at the same time posits the evolution of BM in the 'post-Deafheaven' world as a decisive break rather than an evolutionary narrative.

Brandon Stosuy's enthusiastic review of *Sunbather* on Pitchfork also favors this narrative of rupture in the BM continuum. First he lists all the influences present in the record, an impressive roster of bands that, quite ironically, makes you wonder where Deafheaven's groundbreaking originality truly lies: we have the massive, cinematic post-rock of Mogway, Goospeed You! Black Emperor, and Sigur Rós, but also the 1980's art rock of The Cure and The Smiths, and of course the shoegaze of My Bloody Valentine. He then concludes his review by also positing a 'post-Deafheaven' world where 'black metal won't be the same now that [*Sunbather* has] been released'. Nelson's review of *Sunbather* runs along the same line of thought and tends to stress Deafheaven's non-BM elements:



If you were to remove all Clarke's vocals from Deafheaven's new LP, *Sunbather*, and replace them with anodyne, ethereal cooing courtesy of, say, Bilinda Butcher or Rachel Goswell, you would be unlikely to hear *Sunbather* as anything except a shoegazer album. Or you could axe the vocals entirely and just call it a post-rock record and you wouldn't be wrong. Clarke doesn't even look like what a guy in a black metal band is supposed to look like: He's dapper, smartly dressed, cleanly cropped. You'd be more likely to mistake him for a member of Morrissey's backing band than a member of Inquisition or Immortal. But as soon as he opens his mouth... ('Premature Evaluation')

He later ascribes to Deafheaven an almost single-minded need to create controversy by going against everything a BM record is supposed to be:

In a studio diary published earlier this year on Invisible Oranges, Clarke wrote: 'I named the record *Sunbather* because that's the feeling it gives me. It is the sadness and the frustration and the anger that comes with striving for perfection. Dreaming of warmth and love despite the pain of idealism'. I don't (entirely) mean to question Clarke's sincerity, but that seems like an *enormous* stretch to me. He couldn't find a better metaphor to capture Sisyphean angst than *Sunbather*? Nah, I'm not buying it—as I said in my review of *Sunbather*'s lead single, 'Dream House', I think he's trolling the trolls: Black metal bands don't have pink album covers, and they don't have album titles that refer to vapid summertime outdoor leisure. That is the *exact fucking opposite* of what black metal bands do. I think it's deliberately intended to inflame. (Nelson, 'Premature Evaluation')

As a phoenix reborn out of the flames, Deafheaven have, according to this reviewer, metaphorically 'killed' their elders and done away with BM's traditionalist and insular approach, making it finally acceptable to a wider audience. Rather than accepting the fact that BM musical codes have evolved for the better, he needs to create a reassuring narrative in which pink covers and 'vapid summertime outdoor leisure' may never become part of the BM imaginary. This kind of rhetorical strategy is present in many articles and reviews of these new BM bands on indie webzines: the gist is that these bands become acceptable once their style points more to something other than BM. The reviews on Pitchfork and Stereogum are all eager to point out, for example, how the sound of new USBM bands like Locrian, Castevet or Vattnet Viskar owes more to the kraut-rock of Popol



Vuh or the post-rock of Mogwai and Godspeed You Black Emperor! than to Mayhem or Darkthrone. Yet, while these bands hybridize their sound with other genres and do away with the more spectacular elements of early BM (the corpse-paint, the Satanic or occult imagery), stylistically they do not, or at least not completely. Stereogum's Chris DeVille pointedly states in an article on Deafheaven's crossing over to the 'dark side' of hipsterdom ('Deconstructing: Deafheaven, Disclosure and Crossing Over'), that indie music critics are usually eager to present themselves as open-minded omnivores. Reviews of *Sunbather* in both indie webzines and mainstream publications will therefore embrace the album as a break with traditional BM and disparage BM's purists supposed backlash.

However, as I have already pointed out at the beginning of this essay, such a purist backlash is actually rare and discussions on comment sections to articles about Deafheaven are usually cogent and well-informed dissections of BM's myriad influences and subcurrents. Of course, exceptions apply: some commenters are openly hostile to metal, feeding off the usual stereotypes about metal fans' musical immaturity, herd mentality, and elitism. Other listeners approaching BM for the first time with what we could term 'low' musical competence of the genre, tend to find fault with some of its most inaccessible musical elements, but they nevertheless show a certain degree of open-mindedness, certainly fuelled by the hype created by their favorite indie webzines. A commenter on *Sunbather*'s reviews on *Stereogum* named 'KiDCHAIR' states that he would definitely listen to Deafheaven, he loves the melodies, the emotional surge of the blast beat coupled with the frantic chord progressions, but he really cannot swallow a singing that to him is just a series of 'YAI, YAI, YAAHAHAH' that does not communicate any emotion to him. 'Why can't he sing?' he asks (Nelson, 'Premature Evaluation'). Some commenters on the articles by Baher, Nelson and DeVille define themselves as 'metal outsiders' and are usually confused by metal's endless breakdown into currents and subgenres, but still express interest in giving BM a try. A commenter on the DeVille article named 'spo' for instance states how his enjoyment of the Deafheaven album has encouraged him to listen to other bands, like Wolves in the Throne Room.

The most interesting insights on the debate come, however, from BM fans, people with medium to high musical competence about the genre. The concern of these fans revolves around the crossover of the genre from the unpopular underground to the popularity of indie music culture, a fact signaled by the success of Deafheaven. Fans tend to respond to the hostility of mainstream culture by further asserting and promoting heavy metal as an exclusive subculture. Heavy metal fans, as Weinstein has noted, take

pride in the fact that they listen to good music that outsiders tend to either misinterpret or denigrate (cf. 143). While metal's subcultural status has historically relied on several 'external' signifiers such as the long hair, the leather jackets and tattoos as well as communal gathering places like the metal festival or the local record store, the music has always been its most defining factor. Metal is a 'music based subculture' (Weinstein 143) in that it is grounded in the fans' assumption of its innate greatness. This, in turn, generates a heightened sense of commitment and social belonging: heavy metal fans are loyal to their favorite bands and assume a defensive attitude towards criticism coming from the outside. In other words, heavy metal is a quintessentially unpopular genre, a fact that fans take as a point of pride rather than as a defeat.

Some BM fans commenting on Bayer's article actually indicate elitism as the force behind BM's musical quality. They argue that BM's co-optation from indie culture will inevitably result in a decline in the quality of the music as well as a 'softening' of the distinctive features of the genres. The 'selling out' paradigm is indeed integral to indie music culture. Kembrew McLeod's study on the mid-1990s American hip-hop scene has revealed the dynamics through which a subculture tries to preserve its identity from mainstream assimilation. He argues that when members of a musical community

disparage inauthentic symbols of identity and valorise authentic symbols of identity, they implicate themselves in a larger cultural logic shared by other cultures and subcultures which face the contradiction of being inside a mainstream culture that they define themselves against. (51)

BM fans' fears of co-optation by mainstream culture induce some of them to assume a defensive posture and single out those features of BM that they deem authentic (obscure imagery and themes, traditional sound) from those they feel are inauthentic (mainstream music influences, imagery and style). Therefore, these fears are exasperated by fans' own perception, as user 'Dave Emerson' puts it, of the genre's 'strictly defined boundaries' (Bayer). Another user named 'hi arc tow' reinforces this idea of BM's uniqueness by upholding elitism as a distinctive feature of metal in general. Counteracting accusations of BM's lack of musical openness, 'hi arc tow' positions the genre as a force against what he perceives as a mediocre musical panorama. He asks his fellow commenters: 'Not open to what?—having a distinct and difficult musical genre we care about absorbed by the morass of mediocritising, lowest common-denominator indie/pop/rock that western culture is

saturated in?’ (Bayer) As this last comment renders evident, some fans share a romanticized view of BM as uncorrupted by the forces of the global music industry. But as Spracklen points out, BM ‘is part of the Westernised, commercial pop and rock music industry that has imposed itself on the rest of the world, and as such BM reproduces the instrumental actions that govern that industry’ (9). In other words, whatever subcultural capital BM may afford its fans, the genre produces actual capital for its practitioners and promoters and is part of the same processes of supply and demand that characterize mainstream musical cultures. The co-optation of BM by other musical subcultures becomes therefore a battle for the genre’s identity, one that is still conceived by many fans as the only alternative to mass-produced pop or the latest indie fad.

Still other BM fans take a completely opposite view and see BM as naturally suited to hybridization with other genres. Commenting on Bayer’s article, user ‘Arif Aksit’ interestingly questions *Sunbather*’s sudden success, but most poignantly, he points to BM’s past history of musical innovation, discarding the reading of *Sunbather* by indie music critics as a groundbreaking, genre-altering record. A good number of fans also take issue with the definition of *Sunbather* as a non-BM record or a generally extreme record that transcends BM altogether. This is most evident in the Nelson article on a ‘post-Deafheaven’ world, where fans competently point to the preponderance of BM musical elements like tremolo picking, the blast beat, and the high-pitched screaming vocals in *Sunbather*. A user named ‘themetalpigeon’ counteracts Nelson’s argument and voices an opinion shared by most commenters to the article: BM, and metal in general, is not a static genre and Deafheaven are not revolutionary. As he argues: ‘Metal’s malleability is its core strength after all—long before there were Alcests and Deafheavens metal was already branched out in a myriad of different directions with unique styles’. User ‘A. Darryl Moton’ re-asserts the same concept: ‘I like the new Alcest album, much like I enjoyed the Deafheaven album, but I don’t think anything truly revolutionary is going down here—to me, it’s pretty much the same thing that metal’s been doing since Black Sabbath made blues slower and louder’. These comments show that musically competent BM fans counter the construction of *Sunbather* as a break with the tradition and reject the fable of its threatening nature to the status quo on two accounts: it is not a genre-altering recording and it *is* a BM record. The fans’ reading of Deafheaven’s phenomenal success clashes with a dubious narrative, constructed mainly by the indie webzines, that sees new BM bands breaking decisively with a monolithic earlier tradition that is still staunchly defended by a supposed backlash of close-minded purists.

Even the bands themselves, as evinced for example in Brandon Stosuy's interview with Deafheaven and Liturgy on Pitchfork, never repudiate their BM roots and are quick to acknowledge their debt to traditional bands. In several interviews after the release of *Sunbather*, Clarke and McCoy refuse to be pinned down as 'controversial' or of having 'an outlook or an agenda' and just point to BM's 'underlying beauty' (Stosuy, 'Show No Mercy') from the very beginning. In an interview with metal webzine *Invisible Oranges* McCoy answers a question about his BM 'touchstones' by acknowledging his major influences and unwittingly confirming BM's evolutionary trajectory:

*McCoy:* Pretty much all the stuff we're influenced by is the Ukrainian stuff like Drudkh or Hate Forest. Or the German bands like Lantlos or Cold World. More of the atmospheric, post-rock kind of thing. Other than that the French bands, especially. And I hate that I'm about to say this but Wolves in the Throne Room and Panopticon are great. [Laughs] Then early Darkthrone, early Burzum, Ulver.

Deafheaven's music, as the musicians themselves also seem to imply, is neither modeled after a 'blueprint' of Alcest, nor is it an undefined form of extreme music that completely transcends BM, but it is rather a further proof of the evolutionary potential of BM's musical codes. The linear trajectory became a network after early Norwegian bands ignited BM's global expansion. However, this evolutionary narrative of BM clashes with the fact that the genre's musical codes are usually perceived as static, monolithic and thus inaccessible by listeners unfamiliar with the genre. It also clashes with readings in indie webzines that see *Sunbather* as a paradigmatic shift in the genre, and which have an even more controversial subtext: that Deafheaven's popularity is a *result* of this paradigmatic shift, a final abandonment of the (problematic) BM heritage. But is this really the case? Have Deafheaven actually rewritten BM's musical codes and finally transcended them, thus rescuing the genre from its undeserved unpopularity? Or is *Sunbather*, an excellent album by all accounts, just a further realization of BM's incredible evolutionary potential?

Deafheaven's 'Dreamhouse', the opening track from *Sunbather*, opens with a somewhat typical buzz-picked chord progression, soon followed by the blast beat and Clarke's screaming vocals. What makes Deafheaven an heir to Burzum's and Drudkh's tradition is the centrality of melody. The layers of guitar, heavily delayed, buzzing and lyrical and the fuzzy blast beat blend seamlessly with the vocals to create an emotional surge that relies heavily on melodic crescendos. The song swings from darkness



and ferocity to light and sweet melancholy, an effect both Burzum and Drudkh achieved through repetition of heavy guitar riffs accompanied by uplifting, melancholic tremolo-picked melodic lines or sequences of arpeggios. With Deafheaven, melody becomes a key element of the composition and the tremolo picked guitar crescendos are as much a product of post-rock experimentations of bands like Sigur Ros, Explosions in the Sky and God Speed You! Black Emperor as of the melodic overtures of Burzum and Drudkh. Deafheaven's music is not a break or a watershed, but rather a continuum in BM's ongoing evolutionary narrative of constant rewriting of its *own* musical codes. BM is 'extreme' insofar as it has always been the metal subgenre that has been playing the most with the outer hedges of metal, its 'extremities', so to speak.

## Conclusion

The reason for the indie webzine's increasing coverage of BM resides in the fundamentally experimental attitude of the genre since its very beginnings. If we set aside the corpse-paint and the Satanic or Pagan imagery and listen to it, we will find that precisely because BM is the most extreme of metal subgenres, always skirting at the edges and playing with other genres, especially electronic music, dark ambient, drone music, and punk, it is also the most malleable and experimental, the one most prone to a hybridization of its core elements. The Norwegian bands of the second wave of BM, far from remaining monolithic protectors of the traditional 'true' sound, have also continued to deconstruct the genre from within, a fact that has had a direct consequence on the experimentations of the new BM bands. This evolutionary reading of BM as it travels from Europe to the US and back reinscribes a narrative of continuity that counters some of the indie webzines' narratives of appropriation, discontinuity and disavowal. One just needs to listen to the latest record by Norwegian BM veterans Darkthrone, *The Underground Resistance* (2012), alongside the music of newcomers Rasperry Bulbs; or the 'black' prog-rock of another BM institution, Enslaved, alongside the psychedelic experimentations of younger bands like Vattnet Viskar or Oranssi Pazuzu. Musically speaking the core elements of BM are still present, but they are mixing with other genres, crossing and disrespecting boundaries to create new brands of BM. Lyrics express anguish, pain and frustration with the modern world, with society and with relationships in a different, maybe more personal language, but the feelings typical of BM are all there. This is a testament to the fact that BM is today the most vital



subgenre of heavy metal, a genre that contrary to charges of conservatism and insularity is able to reach out of its received boundaries to new audiences while still retaining a relation with its past.

The progressive cross-over of BM from unpopularity to indie culture popularity, as epitomized by Deafheaven's *Sunbather*, dramatizes the battle over BM's contentious identity among old and new fans and between fans and indie music journalists. The analysis of a selected number of articles on Deafheaven by critic-fans and the response from fans in the comment sections has revealed that while both camps share a view of BM as a genre in constant stylistic evolution, they do not always agree on the actual direction it is taking. These particular BM fans value important factors such as respect for the history of the genre and belonging to a musical subculture and resist readings of BM that reject that history and compromise its identity. In other words, they use their subcultural capital to assert a kind of 'righteous' unpopularity of BM, one that is connected to the history of heavy metal as a misunderstood niche genre and the fans' conviction of its innate musical quality. At the same time, this identification of BM as unpopular allows them to protect it from co-optation from the mainstream, which they see as creatively stultified. Conversely, the critic-fans of BM mentioned here use their own deep knowledge of BM musical codes to create a narrative of rupture that sees old forms of traditional BM as obsolete and advocates a new course for the genre paradoxically without or beyond BM. This narrative, as my analysis of *Sunbather* suggests, is open to contestation and debate, considering the band's musical lineage. However, if we go beyond mere judgment of taste we can see how it is precisely this narrative that has propelled the band from the BM underground to instant popularity. Deafheaven's global reach through such an unpopular genre as BM is in fact crucially related to the overwhelming power of indie music webzines and the gatekeeping function of indie music journalists. Older bands, like for instance Burzum or Darkthrone, were born in an era where web-based music journalism and internet-based music distribution did not exist. They created and cultivated a cult following fuelled by fanzines, trade-taping and specialized printed magazines that enhanced the scene's circumscribed (un)popularity and its sense of community. Today, as Deafheaven and other young BM bands grow in popularity, the ripple effect produced by heightened media coverage puts BM and its embattled identity under the (uncomfortable) spotlight.

And now to come full circle. Inquisition's guitarist Dagon, our infamous BM 'purist', recently pondered over a question about Metal's broader acceptance and coverage outside of the underground:

There is absolutely a wider acceptance of heavy music now. [...] Musicianship has evolved. Skills are sky high in every sense and anyone with a brain knows skill when they see it and hear it. What made metalheads different from the masses years ago is that we could hear talent through the muddy productions and looser performances. Today I feel that Metal is almost the new jazz or classical music. There is tremendous skill and pushing the envelope is the building block of this music much like classical music was or jazz. (*Steel for Brains* interview)

I may be pushing this a little too far, but there seems to be a forbidden pleasure in redeeming BM from its unpopularity, freezing it in perpetual elitism and immutability, and positing a 'post-Deafheaven' reality, an almost post-apocalyptic renewal of BM into popular indie culture that erases its roots and history. But as Dagon reminds us, pushing the envelope constitutes 'the building blocks' of this genre, and its staunch, sought for, and well-guarded historical unpopularity is linked to this intrinsic experimental drive and to the 'cultural awareness' of it by BM fans. The crossing-over of BM into the popular realm of indie webzines is just the realization of this cultural awareness.

## Notes

1. Inquisition's *Obscure Verses for the Multiverse* received stellar reviews from most specialized metal webzines (*Cvlt Nation* and *Invisible Oranges*, among others) as well as an 8.1 score from *Pitchfork Magazine*. See Kim Kelly 'Album Reviews: Inquisition: *Obscure Verses From the Multiverse*'.
2. The act of 'trolling', described by the Urban Dictionary as the act of 'being a prick on the internet because you can,' consists of insulting or offending other people's opinions and tastes in the comment sections of various specialized and non-specialized websites in order to spike controversy. Most webzines, for example *Stereogum*, apply a certain degree of censorship and hide particularly offensive comments, while others, like the overwhelmingly popular *Pitchfork*, have done away with comment sections altogether. *Wired* Mat Honan has declared the death of the comment section in favor of social network services like Facebook and Twitter. I would however counteract that, at least in the case here at hand of music webzines, a carefully moderated comment section creates very fruitful and focused conversations among musically literate individuals as opposed to social network's dispersal through information overflow. See, Mat Honan, 'Comment Sections are Wastelands Ruled by Trolls. Here are Alternatives'.

3. The term 'indie' has quickly come to be used, starting from the 1990s, to describe the music produced by labels independent of the major record label system. R.E.M. are often cited as the primary example of an indie band, together with the meteoric explosion of the Seattle grunge scene, with bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains and others. Nowadays the term 'indie' is used in a much looser sense and indicates those artists walking a fine line between the underground and the mainstream. For more on the history of the indie genre see Azzerad and Kruse. For a tentative definition of indie music see Hibbet.
4. Simon Frith defines rock critics as the 'opinion leaders' and 'ideological gate-keepers' (*Sound Effects* 117) of the musical communities they write for. They become veritable 'consumer guides for adults' and are able to stir the listeners' tastes concerning the palatability of certain artists and their place in the pantheon of music history. The process of 'legitimization' of BM by mainstream rock and indie critics constitutes a crucial aspect of the genre's problematic relationship with popularity. On the ideological function of rock music criticism see also Frith, *Performing Rites*, and McLeod.
5. 'Online ethnography' or 'Netnography' is a fairly recent anthropological field, originally developed for marketing and consumer research, dealing with online communities and online social interactions. For an introduction to the methodological tools of Netnography see Robert V. Kozinetz, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*.
6. Tremolo picking: double picking of the strings at a fast tempo. It favors chord progressions around arpeggios.
7. Rapid alternating or coincident strokes, primarily on the bass and snare drums.
8. The growing interest in the history of Norwegian BM, certainly fuelled in part by the mythologization surrounding Euronymous's death, has since spawned a series of publications on BM of which Michael Moyhinian's *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (1998) is the earliest example. However, Moyhinian's book focuses more on the history of the Satanic 'inner circle' surrounding the scene rather than on the music itself. A recent, interesting oral history of BM, dedicated but not limited to the Norwegian scene, is *Metalion: The Slayer Mag Diaries*, a volume collecting the *Slayer Magazine*, a seminal DIY metal magazine published in Norway between 1985 and 2010 by Norwegian BM 'insider' Jon Kristiansen, aka Metalion. Other recent publications specifically dedicated to BM offer a more global history of the genre's musical output, particularly an essay collection edited by Tom Howells, *Black Metal: Beyond the Darkness* (2012) and an encyclopedic volume by Dayal Patterson, *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult* (2014). Of specific interest to Norwegian BM is the recent documentary by Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewells, *Until the Light Takes Us* (2009), which features an extensive interview with Burzum's Varg Vikernes.

9. Gino Stefani's musical competences are part of a much more complex categorization of musical codes that takes into account other intra-musical levels, namely 'Tecniche Musicali' (Musical Techniques), 'Stili' (Styles), 'Opere' (Works), 'Pratiche Sociali' (Social Practices) and 'Codici Generali' (General Codes). 'High' and 'popular' competence levels work along these categories, with high competences being related with the first three categories and popular competences being related with the last two. See Middleton and Stefani, *Il Segno della Musica*.
10. To my knowledge, the only essay attempting an analysis of BM's musical characteristics (Norwegian BM to be exact) is Ross Hagen's 'Musical Style, Ideology and Mythology in Norwegian Black Metal.' Hagen rightly laments the lack of rigorous music theory analysis in most studies on BM in favor of historical, cultural, literary, or critical theory approaches. It has to be noted, however, that BM is just part of a larger trend that has seen a progressive disappearance of music theory from popular music studies and more evidently in music criticism on music magazines and webzines, a fact noted by jazz historian Ted Gioia in his controversial and much-discussed article on *The Daily Beast*, 'Music Criticism Has Degenerated into Lifestyle Reporting.' BM fits right into this polemic, since extra-musical elements relating to the genre's ideology and presentation have always been an integral part of the its reception by mainstream audiences.

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