
THE REJECTION AND REDEMPTION OF TECHNOLOGY IN BLACK METAL

Technology in Contemporary Musical Practices

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PREFACE

The Birth of This Thesis

Technology in Contemporary Musical Practices

With the arrival of technological advancement in music came also new ideological discourses. Musical objects are “made under late capitalist labour conditions” and sell the pretence of being able to become a rockstar from the comfort of your bedroom (Prior 1-2). The advancement of being able to record or produce your own music on your laptop or your phone had “significant changes in how music is produced, who makes it and where” (2). Music cannot be analysed anymore without considering the technological mediation through which it is circulated, produced, and consumed because music as we know it now is “always already technological” (3-4). Even an acoustic guitar was at one point seen as a technological invention. Yet there has always been a binary opposed to classic rock music and electronical music, as the latter would not involve ‘real musicianship’ (6). “[T]he paradox being, of course, that rock’s affirmations of authenticity are possible only because of modern technologies like microphones and guitars” (7).

These notions interested me greatly, as I had not thought of them this way before. When deciding on the topic of my thesis, I wanted to keep these paradoxical ideologies of acoustic and electronic music in mind, which eventually lead me to the genre of black metal.

As a metal fan myself, I am not unknown to the supposed notion of rock and metal music being superior to EDM, I even believed it for a long time myself. Older peers whom I followed into the world of metal confirmed this, and thus I did not know better than to call everyone else ‘posers’. It was growing older and working at an actual music venue that broadened my ideas about music. Although I still predominantly listen to and love black metal, I am currently employed as a stage manager for dance productions specifically, where electronic music is played predominantly. I found sincere appreciation for this music, and it made me wonder about the reservations of this style of music by many metal fans.

Another question that arose was about the production value of black metal. While Prior’s and Cook’s literature made clear that technology had advanced greatly during the 1980s, I wondered why black metal was often of such low production value, and why this

was celebrated in the metal community, while I enjoyed current highly produced post-black metal much more.

Research Question

This paradox between technology and authenticity interested me greatly, hence the following research question: In what way does black metal, a genre that would not have existed without the technological progress in music inherent to the 80's, reject that same progress?

Literary Review

Since metal is a young genre, it is not surprising that its research is as well. It is noticeable that Chew & McPherson, Prior and Cook mostly write about technology and music genres such as classical, rock, and EDM. Metal is not often regarded as an academically interesting genre, but fortunately this has been changing. In *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies* it becomes clear that a field of study about metal indeed exists. Brown et al. notes how its emergence partly had to do with its neglect and conflict of its legitimacy, which is partly the reason why I am writing my thesis as well (1). Sources about the ideology of first and second wave black metal were easy enough to find, such as the article about authenticity by Kuppens and van der Pol, the evil ideology of Norwegian black metal by Jason Wallin et al., and heathen influences in black metal by Kennet Granholm. Apart from that I found countless sources about race and gender in black metal. In 2008 metal studies was finally considered being “a field of study in its own right” (8). However, it mostly focussed on the “historical and socio-cultural themes that the genre exhibits”, and hardly ever on technology or production (Thomas and King 499).

There were some academic texts about the productional aspects of black metal though, and they were certainly not without merit. Thomas and King, whom I quoted earlier, wrote about *Production Perspectives of Heavy Metal Record Producers*. Although it is mostly about the processes of production in first wave black metal, it gave me a framework to understand what second wave black metal was inspired by. Another extremely important source for my thesis is *It's Kind of in the Middle* by Méi-Ra St-Laurent. She uses multiple black metal tracks and analyses these on the spectrum of being low- or high-fidelity. With these sources I was able to put together the history, ideology, and technology of black metal in a compact and accessible academic thesis that analyses the genre on all these angles to

determine the influence of technology in black metal, from the 1980's until now. By doing thorough desk-research using the previously named sources and more, I will answer my research question 'in what way does black metal, a genre that would not have existed without the technological progress in music inherent to the 80's, reject that same progress?'.

Chapter Summaries

This research question will be researched in three separate chapters, which I will now shortly set forth together with the literature used for every chapter. In the conclusion of my thesis the answer to my research question will be formulated clearly.

To understand black metal, it first ought to be specified. Black metal in general is not hegemonic, as it consists of many subcultural groups bound to their geography. However, it can generally be split into three waves: first wave black metal, second wave black metal and third wave metal, the latter we call post-black metal. In the first chapter, *The Birth of Black Metal*, the first and second wave will be discussed in detail, starting with the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) that originated in the 1980's, to Scandinavian second wave black metal from the 1990's (St-Laurent 271). Dayal Patterson's *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult* (2013) helps to make sense of these influential waves within the genre.

In addition to the history of black metal, the ideology inherent to this genre will be reviewed. Multiple sources have been consulted to give a complete overview of the discourses at play, such as Kennet Granholm who wrote about 'heathen influences in black metal and neofolk music' and Jason Wallin's et al., who writes about Norwegian second wave black metal in particular, and the ideological notion of 'evil' that is often related to this genre. To make sense of the concept of authenticity I consulted "True Black Metal: The Construction of Authenticity by Dutch Black Metal Fans" by An J. Kuppens and Frank van der Pol. This chapter then offers an adequate overview of black metal to continue our research further into the technological aspect.

The second chapter continues in the realm of the technological advancement of the 1980's, partly because a lot of progress was made then, but also because the origin of metal lies in the 80's. The most important developments in technology will be mentioned with the help of the literature of Nicholas Cook, Nick Prior and Elaine Chew & Andrew McPherson, who all write about the global developments of technology in music and their cultural consequences. Their theories give a well-rounded understanding of the influence of

technology and their relation to music, which will help me understand their influence on black metal. Complemented by Thomas and King's work about the production perspectives of heavy metal record producers, a foundation of first wave black metal should become clear.

The third and last chapter will continue the question of technological influence on second wave black metal. The literature at the core of this chapter is Mié-Ra St-Laurent's paper "It's kind of in the middle". Her paper researches the production value of second and third-wave black metal songs, and how post-black metal can still adhere to the notion of authenticity set by their fans all the while being far from low in production value. The answer to this question will be answered by Richard Coyne, who coined the term *Technoromanticism*, which helps to make sense of the paradox between technology and authenticity in black metal.

CHAPTER 1

The Birth of Black Metal

The History of Black Metal

Black metal is a relatively new genre that came up around the 1980's, and then there is still a difference between the black metal of the 80's and the black metal of the 90's. The metal from these different eras can be split up in the 'first' and 'second wave' of black metal. The first wave was the predecessor of what we now know as black metal and arose from the heavy metal scene in England, while the second wave surfaced in Scandinavia and is most recognizable by the band Mayhem from 1984, who were the first band to self-identify with black metal as a genre (Granholm 526). This genre is "characterized by heavily distorted electric guitars, fast aggressive drums, and growled or screamed vocals" (515).

The term black metal came from the album name of English heavy metal band Venom from 1982. Yet already prior to this album, metal had been going through a transformative time because of bands such as Black Sabbath, whose first album came out on the (lucky) date of Friday the 13th, February 1970 (Patterson 1). We could go back endlessly in time to determine the start of any genre, as Black Sabbath was just as much inspired by the Blues as their fellow famous hard rock bands such as Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple, yet Sabbath pushed much further into a darker and heavier territory which inspired other artists to follow in their footsteps of heavy metal, and eventually, black metal (1-2).

Venom was one of these bands, who took inspiration from Black Sabbath and expedited the dark turn their music took (25). Venom was heavy and "explicitly blasphemous" (6). They made Satanic references and even changed their names to "unearthly pseudonyms" such as "Cronos" and "Jesus Christ" (9). The message of counterculture of the 1960s was still present, "[h]owever, the music was made more extreme and the Hippie message of love and peace was turned on its head as a grimmer worldview was presented" (Granholm 525). Besides other bands from the 80's, Venom was very influential and "will always be the band responsible for the term [black metal] itself ... even if the later bands that

appropriated the phrase would interpret it somewhat differently”, which refers to the bands of the second wave¹ (Patterson 16).

The band whose “sudden notoriety” seemed to launch black metal into its second wave was Mayhem, a band from Norway who released their first demo in 1986, called *Pure Fucking Armageddon*. This demo can hardly be called black metal as it sounds much more experimental and avantgarde. They had also not yet claimed black metal as the name of their genre and described themselves as “brutal, extreme death metal” (149). This changed around the time when their singer, Pelle, who went by the pseudonym Dead, committed suicide in 1991. From this moment on the band’s formation and relationship changed drastically. Øystein (whose pseudonym was Euronymous), the guitarist, opened a record shop in Oslo named Helvete (Norwegian for “hell”) and capitalized on the singers’ death by using a photo he took of Pelle’s blown out brains as the cover of a demo (152). This angered the bass player, Necrobutcher, so much that he left the band, leaving only Euronymous and the drummer, Helhammer. Helvete became an important meeting ground for all kinds of metal enthusiasts and Euronymous preached his ideas about black metal, which according to him had to be about “real” Satanism, and not the Satanism from Anton LaVey. LaVey founded a Satanic Church in America in 1966, but his thought on Satanism were rooted in Romanticism and embraced Satan as “a misunderstood hero” like in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Andrade 34). LaVey’s Satanism emphasised “humanistic values and self-empowerment, rather than literal devil worship”, which was not the Satanism Euronymous preached (Patterson 121).

Dead was, to say the least, quite the character. He had bag of dead animals that he would sniff before performing in order to get into the right “atmosphere” (145). He even ‘invented’ corpse paint, even though Kiss and Alice Cooper also used make-up to look cool, Dead used it to look genuinely dead: “it was green, decomposition colours, snot coming from the nose” (144). Euronymous was very intrigued by Dead’s extreme tendencies. The same applied for when he met Varg Vikernes, originally Kristian, who called himself Count

¹ Although the metaphor of the “waves”, that is often used to describe different phases in feminist history is proved to be problematic for numerous reasons, it is still a straightforward way to define these different concepts of black metal (Laughlin et al. 77). Of course, they are far from two separate waves, and one bleeds over into the other. It was mostly the “sudden success, notoriety and proliferation of bands in the early nineties that created the appearance of an entirely new scene” (Patterson 58). Yet beyond this there were and are endless underground scenes all over the world that cannot be confined to the simplicity of the term ‘waves’. However, for the convenience of the limited number of words I have to my availability I will use the simplified and popular terms of ‘waves’ of black metal.

Grishnack because of the aversion he felt for his given Christian name. Varg had a one-man project called Burzum, and Euronymous was so impressed he signed him to his label while also offering him the position of playing bass in Mayhem during the absence of Necrobutcher (159).

The same year that Vikerness joined the band in 1992, the Fantoft Stave Church in Bergen went up in flames on June 6 (160). It was these church burnings that were preached and executed by Varg and his friends that gave Mayhem the notoriety they still enjoy today. It was the first time that the anti-Christian ethos of black metal has been turned into action, and the people behind this were called the “Black Metal Mafia”. Although it was not as militant or organized as this might make it sound, it was a shocking turn of events that would only get worse (161).

On August 21, 1992, Bard “Faust” Eithun, an eighteen-year-old drummer known for his work in Thorns and Emperor, was walking in Lillehammer’s newly finished Olympic park. There he met an inebriated stranger, a homosexual who approached Eithun and suggested they go to the woods for sexual intercourse. Eithun agreed and walked with him before attacking him with a penknife, stabbing him a total of thirty-seven times. When the man kept making sounds, Eithun walked back to kick him in the head to make sure he was dead.

The day after Eithun went to Helvete to tell Vikerness and Euronymous, who were so impressed by his story that they dissuaded him to turn himself in. Instead, they went to Holmenkollen Chapel to burn it down. When Eithun was finally arrested after Vikerness had spilled too much information about the murder in an interview, he told the press that he just wanted to “see what is [was] like”, and that it had nothing to do with the man’s sexuality. However, Necrobutcher was sure that it was self-defence against a “homo [who] trie[d] to fuck you in your ass” (167).

This is not the only murder that happened within the Inner Circle of Norway’s black metal community. On August 9, 1993, Euronymous was killed in his apartment by Varg. Why this happened is still not entirely clear. Vikerness himself said he killed him because Euronymous attacked him, but Snorre, who was with Vikerness, confirmed that he had planned it all along. The relationship between the two had gone sour already before the incident, since Varg became more interested in right-wing politics, while Euronymous was more of a communist. Varg also claimed that Euronymous owed him money (174). He

eventually received a 21-year sentence for the murder and his other crimes (178). The passing of Euronymous “essentially marked the end of the Inner Circle and the peak of Satanic/anti-Christian activities within Norway”, but “the explosion of criminal activity and media coverage had put black metal on the map, giving it a momentum that even today has yet to fade” (179-180).

The Ideology of Black Metal

It is hard to pinpoint a defining ideology due to the brief history of first- and second wave black metal. It is a relatively new genre that has mostly lived underground and has many bands with different ideas. However, anti-Christianity, Satanism and to a certain extent, right-wing politics, seem to be overarching topics.

To explain this further it is important to note that black metal is not just a musical genre, but a cultural system that provides “ideology, meanings, and practices for their adherents” (Granholms 514). The root of black metal’s ideology can be found in “nineteenth and twentieth century manifestations as romanticism and occultism”, when “modernity and the modern West” were seen as “spiritually dead” (517-519). This was because the Enlightenment had put everything up for debate, even religion, and secular ideas were becoming normalized. This lessened the power of the Christian Church and made way for other religions to be practiced openly. As Christianity lost its credibility and the Enlightenment failed to bring answers while emptying the world of all magic and mysticism, the Romantic movement came to the rescue (520). Everything pre-Christian became an object of interest (519). Romantic philosophers viewed this era as more “natural, organic and positive” (521). Pre-Christianity however was often sources from different cultures and made Nationality more visible. This created the idea of the *Volksgeist*, based on the ideas of Johan Gottfried Herder, who rejected the Enlightenment’s idea of everyone being equal, and instead believed every nation to have its own unique abilities. This interest in both nature and nation & race makes it understandable that paganism, satanism and other black metal ideologies have “managed to manifest in both radical right-wing racist white power movements and anti-racist, environment and leftist groups” (512).

These pre-Christian occult beliefs have been embraced by metal from the very beginning: “[a]lready the blues that preceded it involved many stories of deals between musicians and the Devil. Black Sabbath had a certain flirtation with darker occult themes,

apparent in the name of the band itself as well as in image and lyrics” (526). Most subgenres of metal were occult in their nature, yet none to the extent of black metal. Although it is the second wave that is considered more overtly Satanic, this was limited mostly to Mayhem because of their criminal acts. However, it was the first wave that was much more explicitly Satanic lyrically (527).

Although black metal is obviously anti-Christian, this does not equate to Satanism per se and should be seen mostly as pagan or heathen (529). “[M]edia representation of Satanism in Norway predate the rise of “Satanic” Black Metal” (530). Second wave black metal uses Satan in the context of a longing for a lost pre-Christian past. This is supported by the numerous references to Old Norse mythologies as well as Satanic ones. Burzum for instance wrote about “lost traditions” and the longing for an “imagined lost pagan past” on his self-titled debut album in 1991.

Even corpse paint seems to relate to Scandinavian folklore. Walling, Podoshen & Venkatesh draw upon the similarities of corpse paint and the dead army of Odin, called ‘Odin’s Oskorei’: “In Norse mythology, the Oskorei are the spirits of vengeance that return to judge the judges and hunt the righteous. They are repressed energies and bodies that both haunt and demand indemnification, disinclined to fade away like good ghosts are made to do” (166). Norway was of course a pagan land that was conquered by Christianity, “and there’s no doubt that many participants did indeed see themselves as fighting an ideological battle” (Patterson 162).

The core of black metal, however, is authenticity. From the countercultural hard rock out of which it bloomed, to the ‘authentic’ mythologies that predate Christianity and black metal’s aversion to ‘posers’. When Satanism had already been done by first wave black metal bands, “[h]eathenism was one logical choice, as it provided the rebellious appeal of being “rejected knowledge”” (Granholt 537). Authenticity is the most important ideology within the black metal community. Authenticity is, however, difficult to describe as it is “manufactured, ascribed to others [and] in flux” (Kuppens & van der Pol 152). It is a very Romantic philosophy to believe in authenticity, something pure outside the post-modern society: “[i]f we wish to assert that we can be something other than fetishized commodities, sexual objects, slaves to the system, then we must believe that there is some authentic real from which our social structure continues to try to disconnect us” (Tetzlaff qtd. in Kuppens & van der Pol 113).

During this chapter I have elucidated the history of black metal from its birth during the 1980’s to the three waves under which black metal can be classified. By highlighting a

few influential bands that were important to the formation of both first and second wave black metal, this chapter should have given a general understanding of the genre. Next to a musical genre black metal can also be seen as a cultural system that provides ideology and meaning, which we have identified to entail counterculture, occultism, and authenticity (Granholms 514). These notions led to a multitude of possible definitions for black metal's ideology, both radical right-wing and radically leftist (512). Nevertheless the political direction, it became clear that these notions were deeply rooted in 19th century Romantic thinking. When the Enlightenment erode the world of all its mysticism, Romantics looked back at nature and their own emotions to give meaning to their lives (520). The same can be said about black metal, where authenticity and emotive music give consolation for the helpless feelings that are felt by youth who in whatever way feel mistreated or misrepresented in mainstream culture (Harper qtd. in St-Laurent 270).

CHAPTER 2

Welcome to the Machine

Technology in Music & first and second wave black metal

As formative the 80's had been for metal, so it had been for technological development within music. Although we cannot successfully define musical genres from the 80's only by "romanticiz[ing] the 1980s or selectively trace back our current predicament to a couple of years", we must start somewhere, and the 80's have certainly been an influential time (Prior 13). The fact that the 80's were so influential in music and is thus the starting point in this thesis has multiple reasons. As I already explained in the first chapter, black metal's origin is directly linked to the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) that originated in the 1980's, but it had also been a time of great technological development, a topic which ultimately is at the centre of this thesis.

Although the production techniques of first wave black metal from bands such as Black Sabbath were relatively simple, they were innovative in their sound, inspiring many bands to come. One of the techniques their producer, Tom Allom, used, was stereo recording the drums (Thomas and King 505). This is a technique where two microphones are used to record one instrument and in this case was done by placing two overhead microphones above the drums, which created "a sense of width in the recording" (E-Home Recording Studio). This is only one example of how technology could enhance recordings and offer "new sonic possibilities" (Thomas and King 499).

As for any new genre, there was not a set way to produce heavy metal just yet. Tom Allom trusted mostly on his own emotional response (507). The width that Black Sabbath created in their recordings however gave another way of thinking about producing metal music, as the width of the recording made listeners able to relate to the recording as a live experience (500). This, again, shows how important authenticity was in the early production of heavy metal and still is, as feeling and liveness were put above aesthetically pleasing recordings (514).

The four-track tape record method that Tom Allom used in his studio was democratised in the 80's, when TASCAM brought out the 'Portastudio', a portable four-track cassette recorder

(Beecher). Since this kind of technology became more portable and affordable, the chance for musicians to record their own music became more democratised (Thomas and King 498). Musicians could record albums from their own bedrooms, which is exactly what happened (Prior 23). Darkthrone recorded their first album *Transylvanian Hunger* in 1994 on a four-track Portastudio in their studio ‘Necrohell’, which was just their singer’s bedroom (St-Laurent 273). Of course, it was not easy for musicians to learn how to operate new technologies next to mastering their instrument. (Chew 303). Perhaps that is also why Mayhem could not seem to figure out their Portastudio with which they recorded their demo *Pure Fucking Armageddon* in 1986, of which only one side contains vocals (Patterson 132).

Tapes of demos from bands would be traded within the metal community to share their music, which is how their music could spread and earn notoriety (Patterson 79). The system was built on a “youthful enthusiasm” to share their music but also an “international camaraderie” that allowed them to a “network of reciprocal influence and competitive development” (Brown et al. 5). Although the internet did already exist since the 1950s, it was mostly reserved to “academia and military”, and it was only in the 1990s that “[t]he Internet took on a more recognisable form ... with the development of the World Wide Web” (Cook 6). When YouTube became popular this became the epitome of “digital participatory culture”, or according to Henry Jenkins “a gift economy where goods are circulated freely for shared benefit rather than sold for profit” (249). Of course, nowadays there is a lot of money to be made in this “gift economy”, with YouTubers who have millions of followers making good money from advertising products in their videos. However, it did create a new mode of consumption, “prosumption”, where content-creators are both the producer as well as the consumer of the commodity. However, black metal tape trading preceded that long before the internet became mainstream.

User-generated websites made it possible for people to develop “virtual communities” (Cook 7). Virtual communities took many shapes and forms, such as the virtual world *Second Life* and WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link) where the Grateful Dead’s fanbase found a way to communicate with each other, but also Reddit and Facebook, which we might still actually know today (Cook 9). These virtual communities have had a lot of impact on how we as people negotiate with each other, but also our own personality, which only shows how much impact the Internet has had on musical subcultures. Black metal fans could now find each other much more easily, which had very particular ramifications for the scene. In his research *Black metal not Black-metal*, Tristan Kennedy states that the casual racism inherent to black metal was amplified on online heavy metal spaces (97). As the contributions to the

Internet are quite permanent, certain ideologies have been perpetuated in the scene (98). One example are the overtly racist and Neo-Nazi utterances by Varg Vikernes, the person behind Burzum and the one who stabbed Euronymous 23 times, on his blog (96). Most members of the black metal community disregard his opinions under the guise of misanthropy, but it has given black metal the stereotypical alt-right status it still has today. However, the internet has also given people the opportunity to contest the racist ideologies of black metal and the opportunity for all kinds of bands to voice their music and opinion (99).

The internet's influence did not end there, as it played a significant role in the demise of record companies (Brown et al. 27). The cause of this was peer-to-peer download services, which really took off in the 2000s. Peer-to-peer download services allowed people to share certain files on their computer with others who were connected to this network (Spracklen 40). This way people could download music without paying for it. This is how famous sites such as Napster and Pirate Bay work. Record companies were under siege by teenage boys who would not take their websites down since they were convinced that music should be for everybody, not just for the ones who could pay for it. As the circumstances grew more dire, another player entered the game: Spotify. They convinced record companies to sell the rights of music to them so they could have the best of both worlds: people who can listen to free music while record companies still make money by selling advertisements, special Spotify subscriptions or data-mine their users (Cook 27). To this day Spotify holds an enormous power within the world of music, creating dreadful circumstances for artists.

With Pirate Bay coming up, record companies could barely hold up against the access of free music. Record companies had already mostly forgotten about rock music, especially heavy metal, which made Pirate Bay even more popular for people looking for an accessible entrance to the genre (Brown et al. 27). The underground nature of black metal encouraged the habit of downloading this genre of music, as you should only be so lucky to walk into a record shop where "the clerk knows something about Norwegian ... Black Metal" (Lewis 55). As a counter-cultural music genre it made sense that black metal was difficult to find in the mainstream, as many bands would not even go there, except for Dimmu Borgir, the first black metal band to break through to the mainstream. They received a record deal and changed their Norwegian songs to English to be more palatable, to great disgust of the underground black metal scene (Patterson 304).

As I have laid out this chapter, technology made big strides in the 1980's which influenced music in general enormously, but also heavy metal specifically. Innovations in production of heavy metal music were made that set the tone for metal production in later years, such as

width and the imitation of live experiences (Thomas and King 500). Authenticity in this regard was seen as important, as it had to be true to the real performance (507). When portable four-track recorders came out it became possible for bands to make recordings outside of professional and expensive studios, which created a very specific sound in second wave black metal, about which I will expand in the next chapter. The possibility of recording tapes for bands themselves made it possible to directly record their demos on tapes which were traded in a large scale with other bands which led to the spread of the subculture itself (Patterson 79). Eventually with the coming of the internet, music piracy and the underground reputation of the genre, tape trading went on similarly on a digital scale, because record companies mostly sold pop music instead of heavy metal, so piracy gave people accessibility to discover more niche music (Brown et al. 27). All this technological advancement led to the specific sound and culture that surrounds black metal still to this day.

CHAPTER 3

Rage Against the Machine Technology in Black Metal

As we have now laid a foundation about technology in music in the 1980's and black metal in general, it is possible to dive deeper into the question of the low production value of second wave black metal. In order to do this, I will rely on the authors and theories that have already been discussed during former chapters, but most of all on Méi-Ra St-Laurent, a scholar who wrote about a similar topic, titled "It's kind of in the middle": *The 'Mid-Fi' Aesthetic: Toward a New Designation of Black Metal Aesthetic of Recording. The Case of the Québec Black Metal Scene*. Of course, my research is not pointed toward a specific province in Canada, but as I read her research it became clear that the conclusion is far from region-specific and exemplifies "a more general tendency in the contemporary aesthetic production of black metal around the globe" (St-Laurent 285). Her research helps a lot in making sense of the production value of black metal, but her conclusion will be complemented with my own ideas and findings.

A different way of saying the production value of music is low, is "lo-fi", an acronym for "low-fidelity". The first time this term was used in relation to sound was in the late 19th century, when people were still trying to understand "the relationship between sounds made by humans and those reproduced by machines" (St-Laurent 269). When the reproduced sound was faithful to the original, it could be deemed "worthy of faith". "High-fidelity", then, suggests that the sound is "highly faithful" to the original. However, in the 1930s this mostly had to do with the concept of liveness, and the recording was seen as faithful when the authenticity of the live performance was captured. Lo-fi, however, originated in the early 19th century as a reaction to the Enlightenment with "imperfect, rough" and simple sounds (269). Social musical conventions kept being rejected in the 20th century: "[i]t was truly in the 1990s that lo-fi was recognized as a category, particularly with indie rock and grunge, and it was linked with the disillusionment of society felt by Generation X" (Harper qtd. in St-Laurent 270). It became an aesthetic on its own by inviting "unwanted" noises such as "harmonic distortion, tape hiss, [and] the noise of unplugged cables during the performance" (270). Tape hiss being a frequent problem with Portastudios (Beecher).

Harper also states that music “cannot be fundamentally good or bad, nor lo-fi or hi-fi. Rather, it is understood as being good or bad in relation to the technological environment from which it arises” (St-Laurent 11-12). While pop-music, and heavy metal for that matter became more “hi-fi”, countercultural music genres went the opposite direction. As technology had been much more reliant during the 90’s already, the question arises whether in relation to the technological environment, second wave black metal was lo-fi or not.

Although more high-end studios worked with the same kind of technology, their sound production was of a much higher value. So, on the one hand you could say that the home recordings of black metal bands were lo-fi, on the other end it was not too strange that it sounded the way it did, as tape-hiss was a common problem for Portastudios and bands could not have known exactly how they worked yet, which also impacted the sound quality (Patterson 132). Nowadays it is considered strange when music still sounds that way, as even black metal artists have embraced technological developments more by making use of programmed drums, click tracks and even auto production (280). Yet there are also still bands who deliberately record their music to sound exactly like second wave black metal bands, for instance German black metal band *Dark Frost*, who also sells their songs exclusively on cassettes (Dark Frost).

Another reason black metal demos often sounded very lo-fi was simply because producers did not know how to record the voluminous sound of black metal bands. These recordings were often not mixed before or afterwards either, which according to the band Deathcrush made it so authentic: “[t]hat’s why people can *feel* it nowadays, it’s not been tampered with. There were no overdubs – bass, drums, guitar are live and then we recorded the vocals after” (Patterson 135). This is the opposite of what Kromhout stated about lo-fi, about which he said that “lo-fi aims at non transparency; it is noisy, ‘inaccurate’ and consciously establishing itself as a *recording*” (Kromhout qtd. in St-Laurent 270). I agree with Deathcrush however, that lo-fi productions hold a certain authenticity. As I stated before, liveness was an important factor when talking about low- or high-fidelity and heavy metal recording in general during the 80’s. Although the sound of black metal demos was rough, it “achieved the accurate recreation of the same pattern of sound waves at the listener’s body as would have occurred at the body of a listener who was present at the recording” (Evens qtd. in St-Laurent 269).

It is thus ambiguous to say that second wave black metal is lo-fi, as the liveness and lack of knowledge certainly redeems the quality. However, in contrast to other music it was on the low spectrum of fidelity, Dimmu Borgir being on the hi-fi end. Yet the lo-fi sound of Darkthrone has been revered by metal fans, while Dimmu Borgir has been labelled as “sell-outs” (278). Although Darkthrone’s music has been labelled by many academics and sound producers as “the example of all things you must not do when producing an album”. Black metal fans understand its aesthetic statement as “being authentic, since it is intended for an audience of insiders, who understand its codes” (275).

Technology in Post-Black Metal

Nowadays, however, you will hardly find post-black metal² that sounds the same as the second wave productions, yet you will also not find post-black metal that sounds as slick as pop-music does. St-Laurent thus defines post-black metal as “mid-fi”, a “recording aesthetic of good fidelity, while not being completely free of sound imperfection, and that can satisfy most listeners” (273). A lot of post-black metal is described as “not entirely clean but offering a higher level of dynamic” (278). One of the still present lo-fi aspects being “the omnipresence of reverb added on all the instruments” (276). Bands such as Watain and Mglá certainly hold up a much more hi-fi aesthetic, yet they are still well regarded by black metal fans, which is not the case for Dimmu Borgir (278-279).

Clearly, post-black metal bands have had access to even more improved technologies and sound engineers have more expertise than they used to (282). In addition to that, second wave black metal had already laid much of the norms and formats for black metal as they had none and had to invent these themselves. When going from analogue to digital media, noise imperfections from machines no longer influenced the recording. Bands would now even be worried that it would sound ‘flat’ or ‘fake’. Mid-fi is thus the perfect mix of lo- and hi-fi that marries the technological advantages of current times with the lo-fi characteristics of second wave black metal, resulting in a more professional musical sound that is still authentic to the subculture of black metal (284).

Although the growing use of technology in black metal seems paradoxical to the Romantic values of the genre, I would like to propose this is not the case. Richard Coyne

² Although you might suspect current black metal to be called “third-wave black metal”, it is actually referred to as post-black metal.

wrote in his book *Technoromanticism* that just like during the industrial revolution, cyberspace technologies offer people “means of creativity, productivity, and control over the shapes of their lives within the new information and media environment” (27). For instance, the way how second wave black metal bands were able to produce their own music because of the advanced technology of Portastudios. On the other hand, it also brings about a new admiration of the nontechnological: “isolating and clarifying, by sheer contrast, the value of *unmediated* realities – such as the natural built environment, and such as the human body – as the source of older truths, silence of a sort, and perhaps sanity” (27). This appreciation of the nontechnological is evident in the ideology of black metal and the subjects of their music, which is often inspired by esoteric and pagan mythology (Granholms 512). “[I]n this way, extreme metal styles can be said to employ the technology of modernity to express their profound estrangement from it, offering a range of ‘youth identities that are not burdened by religious or authoritarian pressures of conformity, traditional culture, or mainstream commercialism’” (Brown et al. 8).

During this chapter I have clarified the productional sound of second wave black metal music, which is deemed “lo-fi”. Although this is what was seen as authentic in the 1980’s and 90’s, technology has advanced thus far that black metal has as well. Even though highly produced music would be possible, post-black metal bands still incorporate lo-fi characteristics of second wave black metal, resulting in a more professional musical sound that is still authentic to the subculture of black metal (284). Although this seems paradoxical to the Romantic values of the genre that I have described in the first chapter, this is not so. Technoromanticism explains how cyberspaces have given people control over their own lives, which for black metal bands was being able to record their own demos. On the other hand, technology caused an admiration for the non-technological, which recurs in the often-esoteric subjects of their music. The technology in metal thus employs an estrangement from modernity while applying it to their music (Brown et al. 8).

CONCLUSION

As technology advanced during the 1980's, so did its music, and with that came new ideological discourses (Prior 1-2). A paradox originated between 'acoustic' and electronic music, while both were the product of technological invention (7). Black metal seems paradoxical in this regard, as it clearly relied on technology concerning its recording process, yet it also seemed to reject this by bringing out music of low production value. Based on this the following research question was formed: in what way does black metal, a genre that would not have existed without the technological progress in music inherent to the 80's, reject that same progress?

The answer to this question is not clear cut. By investigating the ideology of black metal, authenticity seemed most important to this subcultural genre (Kuppens and van der Pol ...). This notion can be traced back to 19th century Romanticism which contested Enlightenment philosophy by returning to emotiveness and esotericism (Granholms 514). In regard to recording production this led to the importance of liveness (Thomas and King 500). When Portastudios came out in the 80's, bands were able to record their own tape demos that were traded on a large scale (Patterson 79). The internet made this physical practice redundant, but also gave the possibility of continuing this on an even larger scale online, spreading the genre even further (Brown et al. 27).

The practice of recording in their own bedrooms instead of in large-scale recording studios caused for a very specific lo-fi sound which became typical for second wave black metal. Because bands were not proficient with the technology yet and background noise was hard to filter, certain sound such as tape-hiss became ... to this music (Patterson 132). Bands who had a high productional value were often seen as inauthentic or sell-outs (St-Laurent 269).

Nowadays recording technology is of a much higher quality and sound engineers are not as clueless about loud music as they used to be (St-Lauren 284). Post-Black metal has a high sound quality, but still incorporates lo-fi aspects such as reverb on instruments (276). It is best classified as mid-fi, a "recording aesthetic of good fidelity, while not being completely free of sound imperfection, and that can satisfy most listeners" (273).

All in all, black metal seems to have a dual relationship with technology, but in the end can best be seen as 'technoromantic'. Just as in the 19th century, technology offered

people “means of creativity, productivity, and control over the shapes of their lives”, while at the same time causing a yearning for the nontechnological which can be traced back to the esoteric subjects in black metal (Coyne 27). “[I]n this way, extreme metal styles can be said to employ the technology of modernity to express their profound estrangement from it, offering a range of ‘youth identities that are not burdened by religious or authoritarian pressures of conformity, traditional culture, or mainstream commercialism’” (Brown et al. 8).

My thesis has given a broad overview of black metal’s paradoxical relation to technology by making use of previously existing research. However, instead of separating ideology from technology, I have merged both in this essay to give an insightful answer to black metal its relationship to the technological advancements that made the genre possible. However, different questions arise, for instance other metal genres its relationship with technology, and whether that is also motivated by a Romantic 19th century framework. The ambiguous connection to technology exists in multiple other subgenres, such as grind core, crust punk and death metal. Their relationship to technology and production value would be an interesting follow-up research, although I suspect different ideologies to be at play than with black metal. There is still a lot to research left to do within metal studies, and I am eager to see where it goes.

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