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## **THE 'FAILURE' OF YOUTH CULTURE: REFLEXIVITY, MUSIC AND POLITICS IN THE BLACK METAL SCENE**

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## **THE 'FAILURE' OF YOUTH CULTURE: REFLEXIVITY, MUSIC AND POLITICS IN THE BLACK METAL SCENE**

Abstract: This paper examines an enduring question raised by subcultural studies – how youth culture can be challenging and transgressive yet ‘fail’ to produce wider social change. This question is addressed through the case study of the Black Metal music scene. The Black Metal scene flirts with violent racism yet has resisted embracing outright fascism. The paper argues that this is due to the way in which music is ‘reflexively anti-reflexively’ constructed as a depoliticising category. It is argued that an investigation of such forms of reflexivity might explain the enduring ‘failure’ of youth cultures to change more than their immediate surroundings.

Keywords: Subculture, reflexivity, politics, Black Metal, racism, youth culture, scenes.

## **Introduction: Subcultural theory and the ‘failure’ of youth culture**

It is hardly necessary to point out that cultural studies, and in particular the study of youth culture, owes a massive debt to subcultural theory, as developed by members of and those allied to the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s (e.g. Cohen 1987; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdidge 1979; Willis 1977, 1978). Nor is it necessary to reiterate the persistent and important criticisms made of subcultural theory since the 1970s, indeed, criticism of subcultural studies is now almost *de rigueur* in studies of youth culture (e.g. Bennett 1999; Gelder and Thornton 1997; Muggleton 2000; Redhead 1998; Skelton and Valentine 1998; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995). What I want to do in this paper is to highlight a question raised by subcultural theory that has been inadequately addressed in subsequent work.

The broadly Marxist (albeit unorthodoxly so) theoretical framework drawn on by subcultural theorists imbued researchers with both a strong desire for wholesale social change and a bleak appreciation of the difficulty in producing it. In a capitalist world in which the possibility of revolution seemed improbable, there was nothing left but to look for the possibility of anti-hegemonic resistance in the margins of societies. The ‘tragedy’ of subcultures was that they were too unstable and too marginal to ever provide more than fleeting challenges to capitalist power. Subcultures could not be sustained over long periods of time and could not grow to become genuine mass movements that might produce large-scale structural change. The potential growth of subculture was always stunted through self-defeating obscurity, through moral panic, or through transformation into neutered, commodified ‘style’. Faced with this seemingly intractable problem, subcultural theory oscillated between dystopian despair at the limitations of subcultures and celebration of their all too tenuous achievements. For the CCCS, subcultures are ultimately heroic failures.

Studies of youth culture since the 1970s have tended to jettison all but the remnants of subcultural theory’s Marxism. This has not necessarily meant that such studies have been any less ‘critical’ –

indeed, the influence of feminism and post-colonial theory has brought an even more subtle appreciation of the ways in which power relations help to structure contemporary culture. Without Marxism's yearning for the radical structural change, post-Marxist studies of youth culture have not shared subcultural theory's sense of disappointment at the ultimate 'failure' of youth culture. Radical society-wide social change is generally not the standard by which cultural practice is measured. Indeed, youth cultural forms may be celebrated (albeit cautiously and critically) as providing means for the 'survival' of individual subjects within new forms of symbolically creative community in a complex and difficult world (e.g. Jenkins 1992; Radway 1987).

Yet subcultural theory raised questions that remain important and worth asking in a modified form: It is clear that contemporary capitalist societies contain a myriad of cultural forms that rework, transgress and provide safe space from oppressive structures of domination. Such cultural forms may indeed have a substantial effect on the wider culture, for example through increasing its symbolic vocabulary or acting as a 'seedbed' for new forms of cultural practice. One might cautiously claim some role for youth culture in contributing to the (highly imperfect and variable) emancipation of women and ethnic minorities in recent decades. Yet whilst radical youth radical cultures have certainly enriched and complexified contemporary capitalist societies since the second world war, and in particular since the 1970s, society remains organised on capitalist lines with its concomitant oppressive structures. Indeed, since the 1970s many of the safeguards against capitalist domination, such as the welfare state, have been weakened. A contemporary re-reading of subcultural theory therefore alerts to the parallel development of a profusion of forms of radical youth cultural and of a deepened, globalised system of capitalist domination.

Subcultural theory therefore alerts us to a continuing gap between the radicalism of the micro and the overall domination of the macro. I would argue that subcultural theory had great difficulty in explaining this other than in reductive terms as 'failure', since it only had a very limited appreciation of micro-processes of reflexivity. In this paper I want to show how attention to the forms of

reflexivity present in youth cultural forms can lead us to a more profound appreciation of why subcultures ‘fail’. I will focus on the role that music play in this process. Music was a crucial part in the subcultures that the CCCS focused on and remains at the centre of youth culture. The following case study will look in detail at the reflexivity and politics of the global Black Metal music ‘scene’ before drawing some preliminary conclusions about the relationship between reflexivity, politics, music and youth culture.

### **The Black Metal scene**

In 1994 Black Metal, an unambiguously Satanic offshoot of Heavy Metal, came to public attention with the murder of the Norwegian musician Euronymous of the band Mayhem by Varg Vikernes (aka Count Grisenacht) of the band Burzum. The murder was linked to the arson of a number of churches in Norway and another, apparently motiveless, murder of a stranger by musician Bard ‘Faust’ Eithun from the band Emperor. These events brought a certain notoriety to Black Metal and led to features in the non-Metal media throughout the world (e.g. Steinke (1996), BBC Radio One Documentary 8/95). Michael Moynihan and Didrik Söderlind’s book ‘Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground’ (1998) brought renewed revelations about Black Metal in Norway and elsewhere and resulted in further features in the music press (e.g. Wells (1998)). The book revealed the misanthropy and hatred that lead to the Norwegian murders and details other murders in Germany, America and Sweden. It also examines the fascist and racist views of many involved in Black Metal including Vikernes, who has become an outright Nazi. This brought Black metal to the attention of the British anti-fascist magazine ‘Searchlight’, who published a detailed investigation into its far right connections (Cayton 1999). Although other studies have depicted Metal cultures as oppositional and alienated (Arnett 1995; Gaines 1990), Black Metal has come to be associated with an unprecedented level of violence and hatred. My own research into Black Metal, based on case studies in Sweden, Israel and the UK (Harris 2001), found plenty of material that reinforces accounts of the image of the disturbing nature of Black Metal

I do not want to deny the importance of highlighting such aspects of Black Metal. I do however want to question the partiality of accounts of Black Metal that focus on its more ‘spectacular’ and horrifying features. Such accounts that marginalise difference are an inevitable consequence of readings of youth culture produced without a proper appreciation of how meaning is negotiated within the micro-politics of everyday interaction (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995). As Robert Walser has argued (1993), although Metal has generally been seen from the outside as monolithic, its meanings are highly contested and fans are well attuned to difference. In this paper I want to produce an analysis of Black Metal that is more attuned to this difference and contestation. This reading will be produced by contextualising Black Metal within the space defined by the conceptual framework of ‘scene’ (Harris 2000; Shank 1994; Straw 1991; Olson 1998). Scene is a concept in increasing use in recent years, whose rich connotations encourage a productive kind of theoretical and analytical promiscuity (Blum 2001; Straw 2001). This promiscuity means that concept is less likely to overdetermine or homogenise the context within which Black Metal is produced.

I will treat the scene as a space produced by the intended and unintended consequences members’ ‘reflexivity’. Giddens (1984) describes reflexivity as ‘the continuous monitoring of action which human beings display’ (8). He ties the micro operation of reflexivity into macro processes of ‘structuration’. arguing that ‘structures’ (‘rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction’ (ibid.: xxxi)) are reproduced within the fine detail of everyday interaction. There is a ‘duality of structure’ in that structures ranging over large expanses of time and space are both independent of individual actors and yet, at the same time, have no existence outside everyday interaction. Giddens argues that the very nature of reflexivity has changed in modernity:

The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character. (1990:28)

In modernity, reflexivity ensures that all structural principles are continually revised and redefined. The concept of reflexivity thus takes on some of the connotations of 'reflectivity', signifying the capacity to relentlessly question certainties. To practice reflexivity in modernity is to acknowledge tacitly that the world is changeable and that structures are changeable. It is also to acknowledge that no certainties exist regarding the consequences of human action – the results of practice can never be fully anticipated. Scott Lash (1994) develops Ulrich Beck's concept of 'reflexive modernisation' by arguing that it involves the 'empowerment of subjects' as agency becomes freed from structure and agents are empowered to reformulate the rules and resources that constitute structure. Crucially for Lash, reflexivity is more present in certain areas of modern societies than others. And one place in which reflexivity is extensively practiced is within 'reflexive communities'. He defines reflexive community in four ways:

...first, one is not born or 'thrown', but 'throws oneself' into them; second, they may be widely stretched over 'abstract' space, and also perhaps over time; third, they consciously pose themselves the problem of their own creation, and constant re-invention far more than do traditional communities; fourth, their 'tool's and products tend to be not material ones but abstract and cultural. (ibid.: 161)

Reflexive communities are continually active, self-searching and contingent. They are founded on the breakdown of certainty that modernity engenders. The concept of reflexive community highlights the reflexive character of contemporary music scenes such as the Black Metal scene.

### **The history and context of Black Metal**

The Black Metal scene is one of a closely interrelated collection of Extreme Metal scenes that developed as 'fundamentalist' (Weinstein 2000) responses to the excesses and popularity of 1980s



Heavy Metal. Death, Doom, Thrash and Black Metal have radicalised certain features of Heavy Metal, in particular tempo, timbre and vocal styling and tend to eschew its melodic and the blues-originated features. Alongside this, a set of highly decentralised scenic institutions emerged through which such musics are produced, consumed and circulated. Distinct scenes have developed around particular genres on regional, national and global scales, yet they share enough musically and institutionally that we are able to talk of them as quasi-autonomous parts of a wider, global Extreme Metal scene. The relationships between scenes and the degrees of autonomy they possess vary enormously in time and space and are the constant objects of struggle.

The term 'Black Metal' has been used since the early 1980s to refer to Satanic and occultist forms of Extreme Metal. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a distinct, self-conscious Black Metal scene began to coalesce, affirming a spectacular, serious and uncompromisingly Satanic vision of Metal that attempted to merge music and practice as an expression of an 'essential' identity. . Under the slogan 'No fun, no mosh, no trends, no core', a tight-knit scene developed in Norway that attempted to be 'genuinely' Satanic and evil. The scene developed a mythology in which Satanism was constructed as part of a pagan history of resistance to the conquest of Christianity. Scandinavian Black Metallars drew on Norse and Wotanist mythologies as exemplar of a heroic past free from the 'weakening' influence of Christianisation. In some cases this resulted in the affirmation of a racist, exclusivist national identity.

Some readings of Black Metal tend to assume an absolute connection between 'theory' - as demonstrated in its music and other texts such as fanzines - and 'practice' - everyday activity by scene members. The racism expressed by certain Black Metallars is taken to be evidence of the essential racism of the scene. Yet the relationship between theory and practice, far from being a given, is an issue that is constantly renegotiated and struggled over. The Black Metal scene emerged in the early 1990s as the result of a reflexive attempt to redefine the relation between theory and practice within

the Extreme Metal scene. A close examination of the Black Metal scene reveals the reflexive nature of the struggles and tensions that constitute the scene.

### **Racism in Black Metal**

Clearly, scene members are capable of enormously destructive and repellent discourses and practices. Yet despite the notoriety of the Norwegian scene, with occasional notable exceptions, the violence of the early 1990s has not recurred. The early 1990s Norwegian Black Metal scene resulted from a peculiar set of interactions at a particular time and place. Whereas the early 1990s Norwegian scene self-consciously attempted to marry theory with practice, it is striking how often they jar in contemporary Black Metal. For the most part, Black Metal fans and musicians live in the same world that everyone else does (Kahn-Harris Forthcoming). Many hold down responsible jobs, have non-Black Metal friends and maintain good family relationships. The dominant archetype of the Black Metal fan is the hard working male, in his early twenties, living at home in a dull provincial town who spends his time corresponding with other scene personnel and collaborates with a small set of other musicians on a number of musical projects. Indeed, many of the key activists in the early 1990s Norwegian scene now live quietly in this way, concentrating on producing music.

A close examination of Black Metal discourse also shows that straightforward and unambiguously racist statements are actually quite rare. When racist statements do appear in Black Metal discourse, they are often contextualised in contradictory ways. One extraordinary example comes from the Norwegian fanzine 'Imhotep' (issue 3) from a 1997 interview with the Danish Black Metal musician Peter Mesnickow, who also works for the record label Euphonious:

As some have probably noticed we (Euphonious Records/Voices of Wonder DK where I work) have placed an anti-nazi logo on our releases. This doesn't mean we are nigger-lovers

or something like that. But since Voices of Wonder have been accused of being a nazi-label several times we just had enough!! (38)

Whilst all discourse is contradictory (Potter and Wetherell 1987), this statement is so extraordinarily schizophrenic that existing analytical tools barely seem to cope. Yet such a contradictory construction may achieve certain discursive ends. Mesnickow's comments were not challenged as stupid, bigoted or contradictory by the interviewer. Mesnickow appears to attempt a practice and a discourse in which he can be both racist and anti-racist. The remark that seems most salient is his denial that the label are 'nigger lovers', but it is contextualised in such a way so as not to build an unambiguously racist and fascist discourse.

This is one of a variety of techniques through which racist discourse is occluded within the Black Metal scene. Racist comments appear with little comment from interviewers, as though they were unimportant and made in passing. This can be seen as disingenuous as the interviewer has final say in what is printed, yet it is for interviewee and interviewer to collude in producing racist discourse. Racism and fascism are constructed as contingent and isolatable parts of Black Metal discourse - elements that are rarely put into the centre of what Black Metal means.

This sort of technique is common within a scene that has a remarkable ability to tactically ignore troubling information. An example of this is a 1996 face to face interview with Terrorizer magazine (issue 28) conducted with Varg Vikernes in his Norwegian prison. It would have been thought that the interview would have contained a detailed dissection of his beliefs and actions. Yet the interview focuses mostly on his activities as a musician. The author announces his intentions with the following statement:

Nobody ever really talked about your musical roots and evolution, first as a fan and then as musician; maybe nobody really ever thought about you as a musician at all. (13)

Whilst this makes a serious point about the process of notoriety, the interview is noteworthy in only coyly hinting at Vikernes's more controversial opinions and activities. His view of his victim Euronymous as a 'commie rat' is only raised in passing during talk of how Vikernes played bass for a while in his group. His racist opinions are only hinted at in his talk of his distaste for modern art and his preference for 'a certain kind of Norwegian nationalist and romantic painting' (13). These techniques ensure that a potentially explosive and divisive topic is never confronted head on. This is important for Terrorizer as the magazine covers a range of extreme music scenes including hardcore punk, sections of which are strongly anti-racist.

Black Metal's position within a globalised and diverse Extreme Metal scene ensures that there is enormous scope for conflict. Yet there is a common tendency to quietly deflect these potential problems. The limitations and problems of this are shown in the conflict that arose when in 1996 the Israeli Black Metal band Bishop of Hexen received a bad review of their demo 'Ancient Hymns of Legend and Lore' in the prominent Norwegian fanzine Nordic Vision (issue 7). In the following issue Bishop Of Hexen vocalist Balzamon wrote a letter furiously complaining about the bad review concluding:

You hurt us really bad and we will never ever forget what you have done to us. We will never forget 'Nordic Vision'. Never!!

The editor Melankol X printed the letter together with a heavily sarcastic and insulting reply which began 'First of all you are from Israel and that alone is enough to hate you forever'. This incident has gained a certain notoriety and was frequently referred to during my fieldwork in Israel and elsewhere. In other fanzine interviews Balzamon has complained bitterly about his band's treatment in Nordic Vision and the racism of Melankol X. In another Norwegian fanzine Mimes Brunn: Storm Frå Vest (1997), he gave an impassioned defense of being an Israeli Black Metal band and of 'the noble Jewish

race'. In the Swedish fanzine *Nekrologium* (issue 7, 1997) he is quoted as saying 'That vegetablebrain (sic) from Nordic-fucked-up-Vision can kiss my Jewish ass!'

Some Israeli scene members told me about the Bishop Of Hexen incident in order to demonstrate the racism that Israeli scene members have encountered. However, many others told me that it demonstrated the idiocy of Balzamon in protesting against the review. In my interactions with scene members outside Israel, Bishop Of Hexen were frequently mentioned and laughed at when I said that I had visited Israel. Yet as in Israel, the grounds for this were that Balzamon should not have complained in the way he did and given that he deserved everything he got. One contributor to the newsgroup `alt.music.black.metal` drew the following lesson (16-5-99): 'There will always be people who think you suck for whatever reason(s). Get used to it, and get over it.'

It appears then that many scene members see the controversy as noteworthy, but that Melankol X's racist comment was not its most important aspect. Melankol X has in fact interacted in unproblematic ways with other Israeli scene members and enjoys good business and personal relationships with some of them. It has been reported to me by a reliable source that Melankol X has said that he used racist language in order to 'wind Balzamon up'. Indeed, in a letter to me he described his response to Balzamon's letter as 'just an overdone way of replying to his not so smart letter' (26-5-99). Had Melankol X liked Bishop Of Hexen's music, it would have been highly unlikely that their Israeliness would have been given anything other than a passing mention. Since he did not, the apparent lack of taboos against racist language in the scene gave him ammunition in his humiliation of Balzamon. Balzamon appeared to treat the Black Metal scene as a space in which theory and practice were unified. From this perspective, a bad review is seen as a direct and personalised assault that required a response that was equally personalised. Melankol X turned this against him by producing the most venomous response he could. He achieved a devastating result by drawing on racist discourse in order to attack someone whom he knew would take it as evidence of his racist intentions.

There are numerous other cases of Black Metallers who have drawn on racist discourse in one context and acted in non-racist ways in others. Peter Mesnickow, whom we quoted earlier, has become friends with a number of members of the Israeli scene and has released a CD by an Israeli band. Indeed, he has visited Israel and when I placed an advert in a magazine looking for advice on visiting the Israeli scene, he sent me a letter encouraging me to go and warmly commending the scene's friendliness. A recent visit to Norway by two Israeli Black Metal musicians resulted in them becoming friendly with a number of prominent Black Metal musicians who have made racist comments. The visit included an extraordinary encounter with Fenriz, the leader of the band Darkthrone who, as we shall see below, has made openly anti-semitic remarks. When the two Israeli visitors met him, he was wearing a T-shirt from the prominent Israeli trance music band Astral Projection and asked whom they were voting for in the upcoming Israeli election. Other improbable compromises abound: the notoriously racist Norwegian Black Metal musician who is half Moroccan, the signing of Euronymous's band Mayhem after his death to Burzum's label Misanthropy, the Israeli Black Metal band photographed wearing Burzum T-shirts.

The central paradox of the Black Metal scene is that almost anything is publicly sayable and potentially usable in discourse, yet almost any difference and conflict can be privately worked through. Black Metallers are expert at moving reflexively between very different discourses and practices at different times and spaces. This produces a radical split between public and private spheres. In the public sphere essential, transgressive identities and implacable stances are proclaimed. In the private sphere, identities are multiple and contingent and differences can be negotiated and accommodated. The private sphere effectively ironises the public sphere.

### **Music and politics**

Such a public-private split results from a particular attitude to the politics of music within the Extreme Metal scene as a whole. Within Extreme Metal *nothing* matters as much as music. No difference,

conflict or debate can ever be allowed to overshadow this. That is not to say that difference cannot be tolerated and debated within the scene. In fact, in the 1990s ethnicity has been an important musical resource in Black Metal. Furthermore, racist and fascist discourse may be vociferously challenged, particular by those who have a closer relationship to punk. Yet pursuing such debates cannot be allowed to happen as an end in itself and no difference can ever be elevated in importance above the essential 'musicality' of the scene. Non-musical debates raise the spectre of 'politics' and this is seen as absolutely antithetical to 'music'.

A revealing example of this attitude can be found in a notorious incident involving the long-established Norwegian Black Metal band Darkthrone. In 1994, Fenriz, the leader of the band, asked their label Peaceville to include the following statement on the sleevenotes to the forthcoming album 'Transylvanian Hunger':

We would like to state that Transylvanian Hunger stands beyond any criticism. If any man should attempt to criticise this LP, he should be thoroughly patronised for his obvious Jewish behaviour.

Peaceville Records has its roots in the 1980s anti-fascist punk scene and could not simply ignore this statement. Yet neither were they willing to overtly censor the band. The compromise they came up with was to agree with Darkthrone's request but to refuse to promote or advertise the album. A statement was issued to the press explaining the incident and the label's position on it and explicitly distancing themselves from the band's opinions. Darkthrone quickly capitulated and the album was issued without the statement. A press release from the band was issued by Peaceville in which the statement was explained as simply a matter of cultural difference - arguing that the word 'Jew' simply meant an innocent Norwegian term for 'jerk' - and denying that the band had fascist or racist sympathies. As Moynihan and Söderlind point out, the statement was utterly disingenuous considering that Fenriz had previously made a number of fascist statements in fanzines. Moreover,

when 'Transylvanian Hunger' was finally issued, the phrase 'Norsk Arisk Black Metal' ('Norwegian Aryan Black Metal') was printed prominently on the sleeve.

The most revealing aspect of this incident was the following words in Darkthrone's apology:

Darkthrone is *absolutely not* a political band and we never were.

(emphasis in original)

Darkthrone's use of the term restricts 'the political' to interventions in the public sphere consciously designed to have an impact on social institutions. This upholds an 'autonomous' view of music that sees it as ideally removed from social structure. Such a viewpoint accomplishes certain ends within the scene. The ridiculous explanation of their actions and the final version of the album sleeve suggest that Darkthrone were ultimately defiant. Yet the fact that they capitulated at all is significant. This is after all a scene whose 'Satanist' values claim to eschew compromise and weakness. Had Darkthrone not compromised, they would have become enmeshed in public controversy within and without the Extreme Metal scene. To refuse to back down would have foregrounded their supposed attitudes rather than their music. In a similar way, Peter Mesnickow puts anti-Nazi labels on his CDs more from a desire for a quiet life than from any commitment to the anti-Nazi 'cause'.

If Darkthrone are racists, then their commitment to racism is only lukewarm. Interviews with Fenriz suggest a more eccentric worldview:

Q: To the casual observer, it would appear as though you change your philosophy as often as you change your socks. Would this be a fair assertion?

A: Oh yeah, sure man. Every fortnight there's a new vision that comes to me under my pillow. I find a little note there with instructions and shit. It's really weird. The philosophy fairy, hahaha!



(Terrorizer 62, 1999, p15)

Darkthrone certainly delighted in flirting with shocking discourses as far as they could for its own sake, but only to the point at which they could disengage from them. Racist discourses are part of a wider set of transgressive discourses that are drawn on within Extreme Metal including Satanism, the occult and extreme violence. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, the scene does not seek to shock as a way of provoking moral panic (Kahn-Harris 2002). There is a tendency to make practice mundane and uncontroversial as a way of disengaging from the extremity of texts produced within the scene. The scene provides a measure of 'insulation' that allows members to play with a range of highly transgressive themes. The related public/private, theory/practice and music/politics splits enable this insulation and safety. The split is maintained through the silence and inarticulacy through which scene members confront any discussion that might engage with the implications of the discourses and texts they produce.

None of this is to say that open and committed Nazis such as Varg Vikernes are not a problem in Black Metal. There are a number of cases of bands flirting seriously with the far right music scene, such as Graveland from Poland. There are signs that Russian Black Metal has developed a close relationship to fascist activity (Padamsee 1999). There have been a number of examples of companies refusing to deal with bands from Israel and other countries. Yet, at least at for the moment, such cases tend to be exceptional. The ethos of disengagement within the Extreme Metal and Black Metal scenes is for the moment strong enough to ensure that such practices are contested and has not come to dominate the scene. After 1994, Norwegian Black Metallers either toned down their activities and stayed in the scene or become overtly political and left it (as Vikernes has done). Moreover, however vocally racist some Black Metal bands have been, there have been very few attempts to write racist lyrics. Even Burzum's lyrics are opaque and refer only very obliquely to race. It is also striking that openly Nazi Black Metallers have in recent years been forced to form their own scene whose links to the Black Metal scene is tenuous.

In addition, there is active opposition to racism within the scene. The proximity to the punk and hardcore scene means that there are individuals circulating in the scene with anti-fascist backgrounds. There have been some notable confrontations with racist Metallers, the band Napalm Death in particular has been involved in a number of actions against far right elements. However, the majority of the opposition to racism is less politicised and more pragmatic. As with the use of anti-Nazi stickers by Euphonious Records, it is based on a desire to keep the peace and keep the scene out of trouble. Racism may be opposed less because of its innate repugnance than its threat to the musicality and 'safety' of the scene. When racism is opposed, care is generally taken not to become overly 'political', as in the following example from the Terrorizer magazine e-mail list (15-4-99) in which a list member criticises another member for making a racist joke:

No, I don't find racism amusing, just fucking moronic...There's a world of difference between political correctness and disgust for racist tossers.

The writer has to avoid the accusation that he might be 'politically correct'. Racism, therefore, becomes something 'moronic' rather than an affront to a particular political or ideological position. Through practices like these, members reproduce the theory/practice and attendant splits that ensure that the scene has remained centred around music rather than becoming an ideological battleground.

### **The problem with music**

Black Metal scene members seek to separate music from politics as part of a wider set of practices that render the relations between theory and practice and public and private, contingent and disengageable. These practices are reflexive in that they demonstrate a considerable awareness of the structuration and politics of scenes and the wider society. Yet they are also anti-reflexive in that they wilfully seek to exclude that awareness from scenic practice. This 'reflexive anti-reflexivity' is

demonstrated in different ways at different times and places. In exposing considerable gulfs between theory and practice it is frequently ironic. Scene members may or not be aware of participating in such a practice and they may use it in more or less successful ways. Some scene members such as Fenriz or Melankol X, seem to thrive on such a practice, demonstrating a knowing, post-modern, 'jester' - type sensibility. For others such as Peter Mesnickow, reflexive anti-reflexivity may appear to be little more than wilful stupidity. Other scene members such as Balzamon may fail to participate in such a practice entirely and in doing so find the scene an uncomfortable and upsetting place.

Reflexive anti-reflexivity may undermine most attempts at forming a committed racist praxis, but it remains deeply problematic. It produces a politics of depoliticisation in which the structuration of the scene and the consequences of certain practices are wilfully ignored. The scene is riven by divisions of capital that refract divisions of capital outside the scene. It is true that some of these divisions are attended to. For example, the business side of the scene is a constant source of debate and friction. Yet there are other important issues that reflexive anti-reflexivity ensures are hardly attended to. As we have seen, the contiguity between Black Metal and racism is one such issue. The Black Metal scene remains dominated by white people and scene members from outside Europe and North America are frequently marginalised. However much racist discourse may be reflexively anti-reflexive, this does not detract from the very real resentment caused to scene members such as Balzamon who do not get the 'joke'. In addition, the uses of racist discourses, however complex, desensitises scene members from more straightforward racisms both within and without the scene.

Another, more deep-rooted, form of structuration that reflexive anti-reflexivity ensures is never questioned, is gender and sexuality. The Black Metal scene is dominated by men and casually sexist and homophobic language is commonplace. In this, the Black Metal scene reproduces a common limitation of subcultural practice that was long identified by Paul Willis in *Learning to Labour* (1977). Sexist practices are virtually never commented on, let alone challenged within the scene. Certainly this silence also ensures that women can and often do become active in the scene since

unspoken barriers against women are never attended to and thus never turned into concrete barriers. However, the presence of some women in the scene on its own does nothing to challenge the stubbornly persistent workings of capital within the scene, since the difference they represent is simply ignored. Sexist discourse persists since no one deems it serious or important enough to challenge and this puts off women who want to become involved in the scene without ignoring their difference.

In many ways the problem of Black Metal is a very traditional one. Scenic discourses and practices attempt to assert that good music must be 'autonomous' from social structure. This is part of a long tradition of idealist western musical discourse that has obscured the connections between music and society (Chanan 1994). Music is seen as non-verbal and hence unknowable and abstract (Durant 1984; Fornäs 1997). This renders forms of musical and para-musical practice as natural and unchangeable. Yet Black Metal is different from the realms of the dominant musics, particularly western art music, where such discourses arose, in that the relationship to hegemony and power is much more ambiguous. The problem of Black Metal is not a simple one of discourses of autonomy concealing a set of dominating power relations. The problem is also that avant-gardes become isolated and irrelevant as they remorselessly pursue the logics of their aesthetics. As Adorno commented:

In the process of pursuing its own inner logic, music is transformed more and more from something significant into something absent - even to itself (1973: 19)

Avant-garde music such as Schoenberg's 'sacrifices itself' (132) within a dreadful paradox:

Undoubtedly, such music preserves its social truth through the isolation resulting from its antithesis to society. The indifference of society, however, allows the truth to wither. (21)

Extreme Metal and Black Metal scenes have used reflexive anti-reflexivity to maintain the stability and isolation of avant-garde obscurity. In doing so they have sacrificed their ability to address capital and power within and without the scene. For all the exciting and provocative forms of music it has produced, much of scenic practice is ultimately nihilistic.

### **Conclusion: Politics, Black Metal and subcultural theory**

At the start of this paper I argued that a reconstituted version of the question why subcultures ‘fail’ is still worth asking. In the case of the Black Metal scene, the ‘failure’ is partially the failure to produce a thoroughgoing racist practice – which is of course something to welcome - but it is also the failure to turn its transgressive aesthetics and underground structures towards a thoroughgoing critique of large-scale structures of domination – which is much more problematic. It is a consideration of the reflexively anti-reflexive attempts to ‘protect’ the depoliticised, musical character of the scene that I think sheds some light on the issues that I set out at the start of this paper.

The Black Metal scene reveals something very problematic about music. Music is always the subject of competing definitions and is bound up in structures of power and ideology (Attali 1985), but it is also effective in de-politicising and obscuring those structures. Black Metal does not seem to be the only scene that elevates ‘the music itself’ above all, indeed it may be a feature common to other music scenes. Do they also exhibit this kind of reflexive anti-reflexivity? Certainly, ignoring contradiction and avoiding conflict may be a widespread and important part in the creation of post-modern identities, resulting in hybrids such as gay fascist skinheads (Healy 1996). But are scenes that do not cohere around music less likely to exhibit these features? Are they more susceptible to political engagement? Within scenes with overt agendas, such as the Contemporary Christian Music scene, the use of music is the subject of great debate since too much attention for its own sake detracts attention from the ‘message’ (Howard and Streck 1996). Political practice may be reflexive or anti-reflexive,

but it may not be able to contain the reflexive anti-reflexivity that a strong interest in music may encourage.

Furthermore, is it just music that produces this depoliticisation? Perhaps the desire to protect oneself from a full engagement with the politics of everyday life is a strong motivating force behind youth culture from at least the time of the subcultures that the CCCS studied. Perhaps scenes that are not organised around the consumption and production of music also exhibit similar tendencies. Perhaps the desire to survive a difficult and complex modernity and to feel a sense of personal satisfaction in one's own cultural life is stronger than any desire to follow through the transgressive desires projected in one's aesthetic activity. The 'failure' of some youth cultures to engage with the political is therefore a 'success' in building pleasurable ways of surviving everyday life in a complicated and difficult modernity. Does this success then validate the failure? The problem is that, as the case of the Black Metal scene shows, the inability to engage with politics outside the scene also implies a difficulty in dealing with the politics of the scene itself. The reflexive anti-reflexivity of the scene protects the illusion that a safe space can be created from the workings of power and capital in modernity, when at best all such scenes can provide is the complex refraction of power that Bourdieu described in his work on fields of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993). This leads to forms of power and domination being enacted inside the scene itself. It may be understandable that scene members may not want to tackle the seemingly impregnable structures of capitalist modernity, but this ignores the fact that the politics of everyday life can provide an important precursor to any large-scale social change. Indeed, the experience of scenes that are more unambiguously oriented towards radical social change show that it is common to neglect such a 'micro' politics (LeBlanc 1999).

The 'failure' that the CCCS identified in youth culture is still very much in evidence. Indeed, my contention is that the practices of empowerment and personal survival that post-CCCS researchers have focused on, are precisely those practices that make it extremely difficult for forms of youth culture, particularly those involved in the production and consumption of music, to provide any kind

of precursor to wider societal change. Again, as Adorno pointed out, 'cutting edge' aesthetics provide no guarantee of social change beyond a minuscule circle. For all the political nature of everyday life and the aestheticisation of politics, there is still no substitute for 'traditional' political practice.

In this paper I have tried to do more than simply reiterate the continued relevance of the pessimistic visions of Adorno and the CCCS. The focus on the 'micro' operation of reflexivity presented in my analysis of the Black Metal scene, offers productive analytical and political possibilities. The great advantage of forms of analysis that are alive to the local production of meaning is that they identify new possibilities for a locally constituted micro-politics. In the Black Metal scene for example, such a politics would focus on the disturbance in the way 'music' and 'politics' is constructed within the scene. The marginalisation and irrelevance of radical culture remains as endemic a problem now as it was in the 1970s and earlier. What has changed is the sensitivity of the analytical tools that can be brought to bear on such cultural forms. Such forms of analysis can, as shown in this paper, provide more sympathetic readings of seemingly oppressive cultural forms, showing the possibilities inherent in them. The potential of all human beings for reflexive practice produces hopes for change and political engagement in the most unlikely of settings as well as acting as an antidote to despair at the 'failure' of subcultural radicalism.

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