

*Skald Av Satans Sol:
An exploration of early Norwegian
black metal through topic theory*

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Abstract

This thesis offers a novel way of understanding the meanings and conventions of black metal music. It does so by using topic theory, an insightful yet underutilized form of music analysis. Topics are cultural or subcultural concepts referenced using musical, lyrical or visual signs to create larger webs of meaning. The interplay between topics makes up the essence of a form of expression, in this case, the black metal genre. Topics in black metal include violence, darkness, and death – as well as the scream topic, the melancholic topic and the nature topics. The latter three, less discernable on the surface of the genre, are the ones I look at in this thesis. By studying these topics, I show that while black metal presents itself as a form of opposition to established norms (both social and artistic), the genre cannot be fully understood without analyzing how, at a deeper level, it expresses ideas and values that constitute the core of western thought and art.

I make this argument by analyzing the music of early Norwegian black metal and its meanings, and connect it to a more interdisciplinary tradition, bringing in visual art and literature through album covers and lyrics. My focus is on music by the bands Darkthrone, Burzum, Mayhem and Ulver from the years 1992 to 1994. Through the thesis, I analyze the topics by connecting them to the black metal character – an abstract figure that is representative of black metal. Through the investigation of topics, the black metal character appears as an archetype based on the topics of the genre.

Topic theory is not widely used within the context of popular music studies, but this thesis shows that it is a useful way of understanding the meanings expressed in popular music. By using topic theory not only when looking at music, but also as a way of looking at lyrics and visual art, I show how topics are cultural concepts that transcend specific media. Topics are cultural concepts that appear together and that are referenced by conventionalized signs to create webs of meanings within art, and topic theory is a way of bridging the gap between text and context within the area of popular music and metal studies.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the meanings and conventions of early Norwegian black metal through the use of topic theory. It shows how topic theory is a highly useful, yet underutilized tool for investigating the relationship between art and meaning. This project frames Norwegian black metal as an expression of violence, despair, darkness, melancholy, and a supposedly strong connection to Nordic winter landscapes. By using topic theory, I show that the conflict between strictly formalist approaches and strictly cultural approaches to art research becomes redundant. Topic theory bridges this gap by focusing on the connections between the artistic text and its cultural context. I also expand the field of topic theory – extending it to include lyrics and visual art, showing how topics are cultural concepts that transcend specific media. I also argue that despite black metal's efforts to express absolute opposition to society, it is in fact an extension of core ideas in western art and thought. I will now go on to explain the main project of the thesis, introducing key concepts and mapping out its structure. This introduction is made deliberately brief; all the ideas and moments presented here will be explored and explained in greater detail in later parts of the thesis.

The Norwegian black metal of the early 1990s is known worldwide for its extremity. The music is extreme, and so is the history of the genre. Its history is a story of violence, murder, and suicide – and a musical expression that is characterized by chaos, violence and noise. Bands like Mayhem, Burzum, and Darkthrone gained notoriety in the early 1990s, partly because of their music, and partly because of their transgressive acts of violence combined with their extreme music. This music is obviously an expression of something, and in this thesis, I will show some of the meanings at play in the genre through the analytical framework of topic theory.

Topic theory was introduced by Leonard Ratner in his book *Classic Music: Expression, form, and Style*, published in 1980. The idea of topic theory is to identify and analyze cultural concepts and ideas referenced in the musical text through signs. These cultural concepts and ideas can for example be rooted in philosophy, aesthetics, or history. Topic theory is a reaction to strictly formalist music analysis and is based on the reading of

meaning in the musical text by connecting it to the culture in which it appears. By looking at how the musical text refers to the culture around it, we can achieve a deeper understanding of the meanings and conventions conveyed in music.

Topic theory is based on the idea that music, or art for that matter, is meaningful. If art is meaningful, then something must be carrying and creating that meaning. When using topic theory, we find cultural or sociological signs within the art itself. These signs link the art to the cultural, subcultural, or/and sociological context in which the art is working. The signs are what carry the meaning within the art and are very often references to topics. It has to be mentioned that the act of referencing topics through art is not necessarily intentional. It can also be accidental or coincidental. Topic theory is unfortunately not widely used in the field of popular music studies, but William Echard's book *Psychedelic Popular Music* is a good example of how it is a useful approach to understanding music, meaning and culture – and this thesis is an effort to further expand the field of topic theory in popular music studies. While most earlier uses of topic theory have been connected to the study of the musical text, I will show how topics also appear across different media, specifically in lyrics and visual art. By using topic theory as my approach, I will show how the artistic text and its context are not two separate phenomena or two separate objects of study. They are connected to each other, and this connection is what creates meaning in music and art – it is what makes art meaningful.

The black metal genre is filled with references to violence, darkness, and anti-Christian sentiments, in both music, lyrics and visual art. These references are available practically at first glance, through song titles, lyrics, album covers and the music itself, and they are of course very important. For this thesis, I will be focusing on three other, less discernable areas: the scream topic, the melancholic topic and the nature topics. I show how the scream topic is connected to violence, but also sadness, despair and the melancholic topic. The melancholic topic has strong connections to the same sense of despair and profound sadness but in a resigned way rather than violent. The nature topics show how the genre is connected to a constructed image of the Nordic winter wilderness, and that Nordic nature is a key part of what black metal is.

In this thesis, I focus mainly on the specifically Norwegian black metal subculture of the early 1990s. The main objects of study are the bands Darkthrone, Burzum, Mayhem, and Ulver. I argue that these four bands can be seen as representative of the range of black metal expression in Norway in the first half of the 1990s. I have decided to limit the scope to a three year period (1992, 1993 and 1994) as these years could be said to be the years in which the first Norwegian black metal subculture had its creative peak. I will be looking at not only music but also lyrics and visual art to show how topics appear across different media and forms of expression.

The thesis starts with an overview of the field of topic theory, connecting my work to the larger theoretical body of work regarding the theory, before introducing some other concepts regarding cultural studies and genre studies. The second chapter contains an epistemological justification, as well as a presentation of the black metal genre and subculture, connecting it to a larger metal tradition and a tradition of transgression. The topic analysis part of my thesis is split into three different subchapters: the scream topic, the melancholic topic, and finally the nature topics. I will also connect black metal music to a larger western tradition of art and thought through the exploration of these topics by showing how they appear in classic works.

My analysis of these topics is connected to what I call the black metal character. The black metal character is an abstract figure embodying the ideas and meanings of black metal – he is the ideal of black metal. He is a character that works as an archetype and is constructed through the topics at play within the genre, and members of the subculture strive to live as the black metal character. The main attribute of the black metal character is his extreme opposition to the semi-Christian social democracy of the late 1980s and early 1990s Norway. *He* is masculine, nihilistic and violent, but also a depressed and melancholic character who seeks to exist in his idea of the Nordic wilderness, away from the strictly regulated urban society which he opposes. All these characteristics are connected to his opposition and protest, but they also stand in a dialectical relationship with some central elements of western art and thought, as I will go on to show later in the thesis.

Theory and literature review

Topic theory

In this chapter I present the theoretical framework for my thesis. I will introduce topic theory and its origins, and show its connections to various theories of signs from the 20th century. I will also show how topic theory has been used by central proponents of the theory over the last 40 years, before mapping out my specific approach to the field. I will then give a short introduction to a few relevant works on the fields of culture and genre studies, as they are also useful for the study of early Norwegian black metal.

Early black metal is in its nature a very specific type of music. I will look more into the criteria for this genre later in the paper, but it is almost instantly recognizable as itself, as long as the listener has a basic understanding of rock music. The distinct sound of the genre, a combination of composition, music technology and production, mixed with its seemingly strongly defined aesthetical project would therefore suggest that early Norwegian black metal could be understood using topic theory. Both the musical and the extramusical expressions are conventionalized both in forms of composition, recording, and imagery and these conventions are the places I will look for topics and their meanings.

Broadly speaking, topic theory is a form of study of musical signs. One could say that a sign is anything that functions as something other than its physical form, that provokes a certain set of connotations, associations, or connections to a certain culture. This idea was first introduced by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs and has later been the center of debate in modern linguistics, as well as in literature theory, aesthetics, and anthropology (Gasparov, 2021). To put it simply, one could say that a sign carries another meaning than how it looks or sounds. If we assume that music is meaningful to people, it suggests that musical signs have to exist. Music provokes emotion, ideas, or memories. By studying how these musical signs carry or create meaning we can hopefully say something about why music is meaningful and how music works to create meaning.

The type of meanings I look into in this thesis is the meanings of topics. The core of topic theory is the question of how or why does something like only a short snippet of sound, only a bar or two, provoke specific feelings and connects instantly to a very specific cultural world? And then, how does a sound or image become standardized in a way that it provokes these very specific images or feeling with the listeners, i.e.: how does something become a topic?

The origins of topic theory

Topic theory is a hermeneutic discipline, at its core based on sign theory. In the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, editor Danuta Mirka writes:

The rise of topic theory in the 1980s coincided with the rapid growth of semiotics, which developed from an arcane discipline to an all-embracing theory of signs aspiring to redefine the terms of human knowledge. As a source of meaning and expression, topics yielded themselves to this theory and the study of topics became the foremost branch of music semiotics. So far the semiotic status of topics has been framed in terms of modern semiotics developed by twentieth-century authors such as Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Umberto Eco (Mirka, 2014, p. 24)¹

But as Mirka writes, the growth of semiotics, especially topic theory, as a way of looking at music and meaning is vastly influenced by the writings of for instance Saussure. Because of how Saussure's thoughts are at the very core of this theory of signs, I provide a brief introduction to Saussure's ideas. Bear in mind that this is from a musicologist's perspective, I am no linguist or philosopher per se, so I will only be scratching the surface of the implications of Saussure's theories.

In the book *Course in General Linguistics*, based on his lectures, the main concepts of Saussure's theory of linguistic signs are presented. The first concept is concerned with how we connect so-called *sound images* to *concepts* to form a linguistic sign. In other words,

¹ Mirka finishes this passage with a few words on how she has tried to approach topic theory more from an eighteenth-century point of view, but this is strictly not relevant for my work on topic theory and more modern popular music.

linguistic signs consist of two parts: the sound image created from speech, and the concept – the thing which the sign is supposedly symbolizing. He also proposes a change in terminology to fit his theory: “sign (*signe*) to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by, signified (*signifié*) and signifier” (Saussure, 2011, p.67). These terms are still used widely in linguistics, semiotics, literary criticism, and poetics, of course with modifications – but they can all, at least to some degree, be traced back to Saussure.

Concept two is that “the linguistic sign is arbitrary” (Saussure, 2011, p. 67). By this, Saussure argues that the sign is not linked to its signifier by its sequence or structure, using the French word *soeur* (sister) as his example. There is nothing in neither the written language nor the spoken *s-ø-r* that represents the idea of a female relative, therefore it is unmotivated or arbitrary. He goes on to declare how this fact is also supported by the very existence of different languages: “the signified “ox” has its signifier *b-ø-f* on one side of the border and *o-k-s* (*Ochs*) on the other” (Saussure, 2011, p. 68). The meaning of the linguistic sign comes from convention. The meaning of the sequence *soeur* is conventionalized in French speaking areas, because most French speakers, except maybe very young children, agree on the meaning of the word.

After Saussure

Saussure’s theories largely influenced the French structuralists of the 1960s. The structuralists used Saussure’s analytic methods and applied them to other disciplines than linguistics – especially influenced by the idea that words are arbitrary and defined by their relation to other words and by convention. By taking this idea further and applying it with some modifications to other disciplines, the French structuralists proposed that “phenomena [can] be considered not in themselves but in terms of their working relationship to the organized structures within which they exist” (“Structuralism,” 2019). Claude Lévi-Strauss applied this to his structural anthropology, and Roland Barthes applied it to investigate the relationship between language, politics and power. The combination of linguistic and Marxist inspirations is especially apparent in his book *Mythologies*, where he reads contemporary culture and aims to uncover the so-called myths of the bourgeois (Barthes, 1979).

The ideas of Barthes and Lévi-Strauss, mixed with inspirations from writers like Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault inspired writers such as Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu to embark on their post-structuralist, postmodern projects. Derrida aimed to challenge what he saw as the binary structures that western philosophy and culture are based upon and how they constitute power; for example, the tendency to favor masculinity over femininity (“Derrida and Other Theorists,” 2019). By deconstructing these binary oppositions and exposing western culture, some of Derrida’s work also resembles and influenced that of feminist writers like Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva. From a feminist point of view, they aimed to challenge many of the same binary oppositions in language that Derrida pointed out. Cixous, Kristeva, and other French feminist writers were of course inspired by writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Jacques Lacan, and some of them argued that a feminine style in writing and literature was needed, as the male style was oppressing and authoritarian (Cixous, 1976, p. 883; «Feminist writers», 2019).

As these examples show, the implications and consequences of Saussure and other linguists’ theories are vast. They inspired a whole new way of looking not only at language but also at society as a whole. Especially Barthes’ reading of signs has been highly influential on the field of topic theory. The criticism of power structures both in language and western culture that Derrida and Cixous represent is not directly a part of topic theory, but one still has to consider them and their at the time revolutionary effects. This segment is of course, as I mentioned earlier, only an extremely brief introduction to the theory of signs that forms the core of topic theory. I still think it is an important part of any discussion on semiotics, aesthetics and of music itself, and I strongly suggest that any reader of either of these subjects to seek out the works of these writers as they mark an important change in western academic literature.

Musical topic theory

In his 2007 article “On topics today” Nicholas McKay describes some of the challenges of musical analysis as a discipline in the twentieth century. For a long time, formalism was the norm of musical analysis – and many would argue that this completely ignored music’s social and expressive qualities. Musical topic theory appeared as a reaction to the abstract, “non-social” musical analysis and formalism. Topic theory aims to discover

and analyze the expressiveness and meanings of music by combining more traditional musical analysis with semiotics. Topic theory places music in a social context. Those of us who are proponents of using topic theory strongly believe that music is an exchange of signs, ideas, and feelings, not just a series of musical structures. The objective of topic theory is not necessarily a complete opposition to the twentieth century formalism, but rather “the rehabilitation of music as meaning, which a generation of formalism did its best to repress” (Cook, 1996, p.123).

Musical topic theory as we know it today started with American musicologist Leonard Ratner and his book *Classic Music: Expression, form, and Style*, originally published in 1980. Here Ratner presented his view on how to approach music and meaning by using topics. Ratner’s thoughts were further built upon by especially Kofi Agawu and Wye Allanbrook, in their books *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* and *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: le Nozze di Figaro e Don Giovanni*. Both Ratner, Agawu and Allanbrook focus exclusively on western art music, especially that of the 17th and 18th centuries. It is common to consider them the “first generation of topic theorists” (McKay, 2007, p. 3). The music of these periods is to a large degree conventionalized, and the connections between musical features, expression, and meaning are perhaps more obvious. It might therefore be seen as an easier subject matter to apply a new theory of music and meaning to.

Raymond Monelle and Robert Hatten could be considered the second generation of topic theorists. I will go more in-depth on Monelle’s work in the next part of this chapter, but the main thing separating the so-called first generation from the second generation is the depths and complexities their works offer. Hatten and Monelle further expand Ratner and co.’s theoretical universe, and they offer more complex analyses of sign theory and its relation to culture and history, as they expand the area of topics. They also include performance aspects and a more inclusive definition of musical topics. In my eyes, this makes their uses of topic theory more useable, and more open to the wide range of appliances of topic theory. More recently, William Echard published his book *Psychedelich Popular Music, a History through Musical Topic Theory* (2017), which in my eyes expanded the field of musical topic theory even more by applying topic theory to popular music instead of western art music. I will look more into Echard’s work later in this chapter.

Raymond Monelle: The musical topic (2006)

Raymond Monelle's book *The Musical Topic* is one of the most known and recognized works on music and topic theory, along with the forementioned Ratner, Agawu and Allanbrook, and his contemporary Robert Hatten. Monelle's object of study is western art music, especially from the 18th and early 19th centuries. Monelle uses topic theory to try and interpret different musical works and their meanings. He focuses on three musical topics: The hunt, military and pastoral. By looking at instrumentation, melodies, and other compositional techniques, Monelle chooses these three topics as examples of how topic theory can be used to understand music. Monelle also uses topic theory as a way to position music in history and culture, as opposed to the "abstract analysis of music, which tends to deculturalize this most social of arts" (Monelle, 2006). Monelle's work is of course influenced by Ratner, Agawu and Allanbrook, and he seeks to refine their approach – and to "address some of its semantic, expressive, semiotic and socio-historical shortcomings" (McKay, 2007, p. 3-4), to create a more complete theory of topics and signs. According to Monelle, musical topics represent certain cultural or historical ideas – or rather, ideas of a certain cultural or historical phenomenon. These ideas might not correlate perfectly with the actual cultural or historical phenomenon, but they play on stereotypes to evoke an association of a many times stylized version of them:

At every point in the study of topics there is a need to seek historical reality. Both signifier and Signified have their roots in the social, cultural, and technological world. In the case of indexical topics, the signifier – the sign, embodied in a musical event – will naturally tend to be contemporary. The hunt topics in the eighteenth century could only be signified by the music of the brass trompe de chasse, though its object was in many ways not contemporary. The innocent world of the shepherd was best evoked with bagpipes and flutes, although the classical shepherd whose world lay behind modern pastoralism, had played the reed aulós and the syrinx. (Monelle, 2006, p.29-30)

Here, Monelle shows how the signifiers of the hunt and pastoral topics are not necessarily directly tied to the topic itself. For the topics to function in their contemporary cultural environment, they have to be signified by something known to the audience, and that they

associate with the topic. This association has to be conventionalized to such a degree that the majority of the audience perceives it as a signifier for the topic in question. Only then can the musical feature in question be understood as a topic. He then goes on to describe his thoughts on the signified:

The signified, too, had its roots in the contemporary world, but in a more complex way. It is a little surprising to find that the heroic, manly, noble hunt evoked by music, portrayed in operas and described in hunting books, was not very much practiced in the lands of its chief currency, the Austro-German territories of eighteenth-century Europe. (...) The musical topic was significative of an older, more sporting hunt, but it was also significative of the falseness of contemporary heroism; indeed the brass hunting horn was itself a feature of baroque redundancy, since it was adopted largely for its festive sound, rather than its practical superiority to the older oxborns and cornets de chasse. (Monelle, 2006, p. 30)

As Monelle writes with regards to the hunting topic, the hunt that is signified and the hunt of the contemporary society in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries were technically two very different things. Monelle goes on to describe the contemporary hunting of the upper classes. This type of hunting could easily be described as a lazy, constructed game, where the hunters are guaranteed success. The hunt that is signified by the musical topic, on the other hand, is a more “heroic” and honest hunt, a “man against the wild” scenario. A possible reason for this mismatch based on my reading of Monelle can be the “falseness of contemporary heroism”. The musical topic acts as a sort of confirmation and justification for the upper classes. In other words, a musical topic and variation of the topic in the real world of the audience are not necessarily the same. Musical topics do not represent the real world, they represent ideas by the construction of mythology when studying the history: “the imaginative world of topical signification is alive within consciousness, but not to be found *tout simple* in the world of everyday reality.”(Monelle, 2006, p. 30).

Monelle also focuses on the understanding of contemporary society when looking at topics and uses the horse in Schubert’s *Erlkönig* as his example. When Schubert composed the lied, the horse was everywhere in Europe as the primary mode of transportation, and there

was a distinction between the real-life horse and the musical term for a horse. In a contemporary society, on the other hand, horses are rarely seen by the listeners of Schubert. The distinction between the musical horse and the real-life horse no longer exists in the same way, but because of our understanding of both earlier and contemporary culture, the contemporary listener perfectly understands the musical horse.

William Echard: *Psychedelic Popular Music* (2017)

In his book *Psychedelic Popular Music*, Canadian musicologist William Echard looks at how topic theory can be used to understand and analyze popular music, specifically psychedelic music from the mid-60s to the late 90s and early 2000s. He points out how topic theory largely has been applied to western art music, but also how topic theory is relatively close to certain semiotic practices in popular music studies and ethnomusicology. Because of these similarities, topic theory might be a useful tool for semiotic work on modern popular music as well. By identifying musical topics in psychedelic popular music, Echard opens a set of ways to understand how popular music carries meaning, and how it connects itself to a larger cultural world. I find his approach to his subject matter very interesting and refreshing, and his book is the book that has inspired this thesis the most.

Echard's main sources of inspiration for his idea of topic theory are Raymond Monelle and Robert Hatten, and to me it seems that especially Monelle has been influential on Echard's idea of topic theory. Echard points out the two features he thinks are the most important for topical signifiers; "that they are easily recognized as such by listeners and, second, that at least some of their features are strongly conventionalized"(Echard, 2017, p. 16). He also points out how the signifiers themselves are not enough to call something topical. The properties of the signified are equally or even more important in his eyes, referring to Monelle's idea of how "each topic may signify a large semantic world connected to aspects of contemporary society, literary themes, and older traditions" (Echard, 2017, p. 17).

Like Monelle, Echard also emphasizes how the indexicality of the musical sign is an important part of its topicality. A sign is an index by direct contextual connection, and Echard illustrates this by showing how smoke signifies fire or footprints showing how someone has

walked somewhere earlier, as opposed to symbols, who serve as more abstract signs and only have their meaning from convention. As indexical signs get increasingly conventionalized, they often tend to change into more symbol-like signs, referring to larger cultural concepts, still connected to the original context, but more overall references to a certain cultural concept or context. When this happens, Echard still mentions the importance of indexicality, but now more as one link in a larger chain connecting the more general symbol to the more general concept.

Echard also draws in Philip Tagg's concept of *musemes*, a concept created for popular music studies. He is especially interested in how Tagg finds that looking at the combination of these *musemes*, instead of just one of them at a time, is more useful for semiotic work. Echard then notes how the idea of looking at the combination of topics and how they work has become increasingly popular among topic theorists.

One of Echard's main criticisms of more traditional topic theory is that it is too general, almost universal. According to Echard, traditional topic theory does not acknowledge how topics are dynamic and changeable. In Echard's view, both the meaning and character of topics can change over time, and he describes the more traditional approach to topic theory as far too general and almost universal. He sees it as unwilling to recognize the dynamic nature of musical topics. He acknowledges that this might come from the linguistic roots of topic theory but points out how music and language strictly function in different ways. One can use linguistics as a starting point for a theory of musical meaning, but not necessarily as the only point of inspiration.

Echard gives an in-depth analysis of the various aspects of psychedelic popular music starting from the mid 1960s by focusing on certain artists. To justify what artists he chooses to focus specifically on, he has included an overview of his musical samples and explains why he has chosen the specific artists that he has. Echard's in-depth topic analyses are focused and concrete and his main focus is to show how topics interact with each other in musical expressions, and how they are not necessarily set in stone, but more dynamic musical signs.

Why topic theory?

I have chosen topic theory as my approach as it is a way of looking at popular music which has not been done that much, but that I have found to be very useful. Its use in the context of western art music is relatively well known, but it has not achieved the same in the context of popular music. I find Echard's work very interesting, and I am seeking to prove that topic theory can be a very useful tool for decoding meaning and understanding black metal music, lyrics and visual art. Because of its connection to both formal musical analysis and approaches that are more oriented towards culture, history and interpretation of meaning, topic theory lends itself to an interesting way of understanding music and its meanings. By understanding the meanings of artistic features as signs, one has the opportunity to further look into their cultural and aesthetical aspects. Topic theory acknowledges the fact that music is a highly social form of art, connected to and working within culture and subcultures, while it at the same time accepts that scholars of such an artform need actual evidence from the texts we are studying, i.e. the art itself. Inspired by the words of Richard Middleton, we can say that topic theory is a way of bridging the gap between text and context in the studies of popular music (Middleton, 1993).

I find it very interesting to see how relatively simple artistic ideas can convey large quantities of connotations and meanings in a very short amount of time. A guitar riff based on a known topic within a certain culture or subculture could provoke countless associations to other works of music, specific values, specific eras of history or certain aspects of culture. Echard illustrates this very well when bringing up the topical "Chuck Berry guitar riff" (Echard, 2017, p. 2, 16-17), and another example could be the d-beat² of certain kinds of 80s hardcore punk or the high pitched vocals from 70s hard rock bands like Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, Aerosmith and so on. Topic theory can in other words be used as a tool to show the vast cultural, historical, and intertextual aspects of art that very often appear as strong but indescribable presences in art.

² Drum beat inspired by the british hardcore punk band Discharge. Consists of kick drum on the first, fourth and sixth eight-notes of the bar, snare on beat two and four, and cymbal/hi-hat on all four beats

Criteria for something to be a topic

By now, I have written a lot on topic theory, its roots and some of the most important writings on the field. Readers of this paper may already have an idea of what a topic is, but I will now write out what sort of topic-term I will use in this paper, mainly inspired by Echard and Monelle. This will also show the difference between an artistic sign in general and a topic. It can be summed up into these three points:

- **It consists of an artistic sign**

In musical signs, this can include but is not limited to: melodic features, rhythmic features, harmony, vocal performances, production techniques and manipulation by technology and timbres. In literature and visual art, these signs are mainly imagery and metaphors. The artistic sign refers to a concept, which is the signified – the topic. The signified could for example be a (sub)cultural phenomena, a period in history or a philosophical concept.

- **The reading of the sign as a topic must be conventionalized to a large degree**

For something to be a topic, the reader of the sign has to accept the connection between the signifier and the signified topic. This means that the artistic sign will have to be read as a topic for a long enough time (or on enough records/songs/works) for the listeners to have accepted its topicality. This acceptance of the conventionality of the sign does not have to be universal, but listeners within the (sub)cultural, social and historic context of the art in question have to accept the sign's topicality. In other words, an audience who speaks the relevant artistic language has to accept the artistic sign as a topic.

- **The indexicality of the topics content is carrying most of the meaning**

The meaning of the topic is not explicitly apparent in the music itself. The reader of the sign has to use her cultural, social, and historical knowledge to decode the connection between the artistic sign and the signified. This process of giving the sign meaning usually happens through association. When the sign is sufficiently conventionalized as a topic, this connection between the signifier and the signified is apparent to the listener.

These three points highlight the difference between artistic features in general and topics. Not all artistic features can be said to have all these abilities. Topics carry greater meanings than other signs, they invite the listener to a stream of connotations. With regards to the conventionalization of topics, I have been careful not to base my analyses on the earliest Norwegian black metal. Most of my musical examples are from the period between 1992 and 1994, as I have found that music released from 1992 and onwards to a large degree has topical features. This is because by then, the black metal expressions had been sufficiently conventionalized, at least in my eyes. I will of course interact with both earlier and later records, but the main focus is on the years from 92 through to 94.

Challenges of topic theory

This thesis is not a proposition to make topic theory the only, universal way of looking at music and meaning. Every single musical feature in a song or a work, every single note, can't be a topic. This means that topic theory cannot be used to explain every musical phenomenon and every musical feature's meaning in a selected work. This does not necessarily mean that there is a specific limited number of topics available, but it means that every project, book or thesis has to limit itself. Another challenge is the difference between topics and artistic features that strongly resemble topics. Echard for instance points out that there is no clear line between a "clear cut waltz and other $\frac{3}{4}$ metrical frameworks" (Echard, 2017, p. 19). As Echard points out, these grey zones have to be explored with attention to context. Yes, $\frac{3}{4}$ time is one of the defining features of a Viennese waltz, but a metal song with $\frac{3}{4}$ time is obviously not a Viennese waltz written by Strauss jr. – one must consider the context in which the $\frac{3}{4}$ time appears.

A word on intertextuality

Literary theorist Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality must be considered when dealing with modern semiotics, and the concept is also one that appears in musicology, for example with Serge Lacasse (Lacasse, 2000). The concept is at the core of the understanding of texts and their relationships to each other and the world in which they exist. The concept is inspired by Saussure's theories on language, but even more importantly by Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of literary works as "a mosaic of quotations"(Quoted from Kristeva, 1986, p. 37). In her essay *Word, Dialogue and Novel*,

originally published in 1966, Kristeva presents the term intertextuality while looking at Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. The core idea of intertextuality is that "no text [...] stands alone; all texts have their existence and their meaning in relation to a practically infinite field of prior texts and prior significations" (Allen, 2019). Because texts do not appear in a vacuum, they are written by language users, they have to have a connection to other texts. These connections and relationships may manifest themselves in different ways. They can both be intentional and obvious, like quotations, or they can be more unintentional, vague, and opaque. Either way, the text gets its meaning not on its own, but from its intertextual relationship to other texts.

The concept of intertextuality is closely connected to topic theory. When we say that a topic has to be conventionalized, it means that intertextuality is at play in the creation of topics. Topicality arises from the relationship between new and former musical texts – as musical works, like texts or language, do not appear in a vacuum. The artwork is always placed in relation to other works of art, and the interplay between these works and their traces is what creates the different references and meaning in the works. When works include topical features, they do so because they stand in a very strong intertextual relationship to other works that include similar or identical features.

On culture: Sara Thornton – subcultural capital and Bourdieu

Sarah Thornton's writings on subcultures and subcultural capital provide an interesting angle when looking at subcultures. Thornton is inspired by modern subculturalists; she specifically mentions Howard Becker and Ned Polsky, as opposed to for instance the Birmingham school. Her main argument against the Birmingham school is that they are too "naïve" in their approach to youth subcultures. These subcultures are more complex and have more layers of meaning than what for instance Dick Hebdige takes into account in his book *Subculture: The meaning of style*. Thornton argues that subcultural capital "reveals" or defines itself "most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn't" (Thornton, 2005, p. 208). In other words, cultural capital defines or reveals itself by means of negative relations to surrounding cultural expressions. Subcultures and their capital are a way for the youth to strive for classlessness, as subcultural capital defies social, cultural and economic standards. Instead of focusing on opposition against the hegemony like Hebdige does,

Thornton's focus is more on distinction from the "mainstream" or other social or cultural groups.

The crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves. Taking part in club cultures in turn, builds further affinities, socializing participants into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture (...) Clubs and raves, therefore, house *ad hoc* communities with fluid boundaries which may come together and dissolve in a single summer or endure for several years. (Thornton, 2005, p. 200)

This is how Sarah Thornton describes club subcultures in the book *The Subculture Reader* (2005). This description could also have been adapted to fit the early Norwegian black metal subculture of the 1990s. The focus on meeting people who have the same tastes, ideas, values and references as oneself could maybe even be considered a cornerstone of youth subcultures. When looking at why these factors matter in youth subculture, Thornton coins the term "subcultural capital". Thornton bases this term on Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital as a way of looking at social structures as complex and multidimensional instead of vertical. Thornton points out the similarities between Bourdieu's term and her own, especially how both can be objectified with paintings, record collections, or embodied in manners and dancing. Another similarity Thornton highlights is how it is valued that these embodiments are like second nature to the possessors of them. As she writes: "Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying to hard" (Thornton, 2005, p. 403). According to Thornton, the main difference between subcultural capital and Bourdieu's cultural capital is how subcultural capital is not necessarily as class bound as cultural capital and how media and consumption of media play an important role in the circulation of subcultural capital:

I would argue that it is impossible to understand the distinctions of youth subcultures without some systematic investigation of their media consumption. For within the economy of subcultural capital the media is not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction (which is the way Bourdieu describes films and newspapers *vis-à-vis* cultural capital), but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of

cultural knowledge. In other words, the difference between being *in* or *out* of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure. (Thornton, 2005, p. 203)

In the other half of *The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital*, Thornton turns to focus on what she thinks of as the basis for subcultural capital: the “hip” versus the “mainstream”. By first looking at how some members of subcultures feel that commercialization and the increasing popularity of subcultures ruin their respective subcultures, and then looking at youth spending as a way for the young to experience Bourdieu’s “taste of liberty”, almost regardless of class, Thornton points out the gendered aspects of the dichotomy of “hip vs. mainstream”: “Although clubbers and ravers loathe to admit it, the femininity of these representations of the mainstream is hard to deny” (Thornton, 2005, p. 207). The mainstream, represented by “Sharon and Tracy”, is a feminine cultural expression, associated with so-called chart pop. The concept of being hip or in the know, on the other hand, is a masculine concept. Not necessarily exclusively male, but still masculine as the girls who take part do so on account of being “one of the boys”. This final point is very interesting to bear in mind when dealing with the early Norwegian black metal subculture, as it was almost exclusively male.

On genre: Franco Fabbri

Bearing in mind that this thesis is about early Norwegian black metal, which many would consider a musical genre, I will have to approach the subject of musical genres. That being said, I will not give an in-depth presentation of the properties of the music and how it differentiates itself from other forms of extreme metal from a genre perspective, as my focus will mainly be on topics and their connection to subcultural values. In other words, this is not a thesis on musical genre, although it could be an interesting subject for further research.

Italian musicologist Franco Fabbri has written extensively about the concept of genres in popular music – and I find his definition of genres relatively complete, at least considering the attention genre theory will receive in this thesis. In his paper *A Theory of Musical Genre: Two Applications*, Fabbri sets out to give his definition of musical genre which he gives a synopsis of in his overview of works,

Genre theories and their applications in the historical and analytical study of popular music: a commentary on my publications (2012):

A musical genre is “a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules” the community accepting these rules – in an explicit or implicit way – involves authors (if any), performers (if any), audience (if any), critics (if any), promoters (if any) and so on. Rules accepted concern acoustics, musical composition, performance, economy, perxemics, behaviour etc. (Fabbri, 2012, p. 11)

Here Fabbri shows that musical genres are social constructs. The rules that apply to composers within a certain genre are created in a social situation, where the composer can either experience backlash for breaking with these rules or be celebrated for pioneering. Either way, Fabbri’s definition is a strong one, as it recognizes that genres are not strictly musical, they need the extramusical social world to function, as music is a social phenomenon. Fabbri continues:

Such a definition allows us to examine in any given period the division of genres as well as their overlap, according (or in contrast) to the different social functions of music.

However, as the rules defining genre may change (some of them becoming socially unacceptable or substituted (or not) by others), genres are neither categories outside time nor living organisms subject to a predictable development from birth to decadence to death: their “life” is rather the story of a complex community, of society as a whole and of the use of music in it. (Fabbri, 2012, p. 11)

This paragraph acknowledges the organic nature of music and musical genres. No musical genre is constant or frozen in time, because then different musical expressions would not exist like they do today. As he says, musical genres and how they work are instead highly complex and concern not only music itself, but music’s role in society – and society itself.

As I mentioned earlier, this thesis is not a paper on the subject of genre per se, hence this short presentation of the subject. Fabbri's definition of genre still deserves attention because of it not being too exclusive. Its focus on music in a social space and the everchanging nature of music makes it useful also in a thesis that focuses more on semiotics and the relationship between semiotics and culture. One could maybe find Fabbri's theories less useful in other projects, and I do not think of it as a universal theory of genre, but it is what I, as a student of semiotics instead of genre find most covering. Fabbri's views on genre, as well as Thornton and Hebdige's work, are not necessarily at the core of this thesis, but their work represents ideas that serve as a backdrop for the paper.

Method and background

A few remarks on epistemology

Competency is very important in the field of topic theory, used by many of the topic theorists I presented earlier in the thesis. The term is inspired by linguistics and is based on the idea that people as language users have a shared competency in their common language. This competency in terms of language is both interpretive and productional. Language users both interpret words and sentences, and they produce them themselves when speaking or writing. Connecting this to topic theory, one could say that shared competency is crucial to the scientific nature of topic theory; interpreters of music must speak the same musical and semiotic language. 17th, 18th and 19th- century art music has an established, maybe even universal semiotic language, but when studying contemporary culture and emerging topics, competency is not universal, but more like a chosen language or dialect (Echard, 2017, p. 24). In my case, one could say that everyone is not necessarily fluent in the “language” of extreme metal music, so these interpretations are not necessarily universally understood by “non-speakers” of the “language”. This is an example of how music differs from language, as the productive and interpretive competencies are not linked, or as Echard puts it: “It is not uncommon for a person to be very adept at interpreting music but almost completely unable to produce it” (Echard, 2017, p. 23).

Because of the recent nature of the musical samples, I will engage with, it invites us to examine not only topics and how they appear in music and art but also how they become topical. I will mainly look at the years 1992 to 1994, but when looking at topics that appear I will also be interested in how these topics are connected to a larger tradition of western art history. This will point out the connection between early Norwegian black metal and the larger western art canon and helps us not only understand the topics of the music but also places these topics in a larger historical context. Tracing some of these topics and looking at their origins will mean that some of my inquiries into topics might contain a certain aspect of negotiation between different signifiers and signifieds. This does not mean that they are not conventionalized topics as of today, but it rather shows the complexity of topics and their processes of creation.

If we are to consider the intertextual aspects of this thesis, the fact that I am looking at a type of music that is still present and constantly evolving means that both new music within the genre, new releases of earlier material (compilations, demo tapes, live records) and recent live appearances might affect both mine and other's perception of music released between 1992 and 1994. I, as a contemporary reader, might read some of the music differently than how it was understood or intended thirty-odd years ago³. I think interacting with both more recent and earlier releases than 1992-1994 is important to get a broader overview of the artistic expressions I am looking at in this thesis. It will also be useful for contextualizing the works. The intertextual aspect of course applies to all studies of artistic works – and the relationship between works is especially interesting from a topic theory point of view. When using topic theory as a tool, we can discover connections between different works across vastly different media by looking at how these different expressions make use of some of the same topics and concepts.

One of the main strengths of topic theory and topics themselves is that they connect art to the world outside the art. In addition to this and as mentioned earlier, topics also appear in extramusical forms of artistic expression, for example poetry in the form of lyrics, or visual arts in the form of album covers and press photos. My thesis is mainly dealing with three main forms of expression, I am aiming to show how topic theory can be used as a way to connect other forms of expression to music. I will therefore look at album covers and lyrics, in addition to the purely musical examples. It is after all at the core of this project, where I am trying to show how topic theory can be used to understand popular music cultures⁴.

Writing about black metal as a young Norwegian

The early Norwegian black metal subculture is very apparent in recent Norwegian national history, especially due to its extreme and violent non-musical side. Murders and church burnings created massive media coverage and speculation in the 1990s – often

³ I am aware of the term “intended” and its implications regarding artistic intention and the complex academic discourse regarding the topic, but for the sake of simplicity I will not go into the details of this in this thesis.

⁴ I realize that it would also be possible to look at fashion, press photos, band shirts and music videos, but I have concluded that I would focus on three elements and go more in-depth on these than giving a more superficial analysis of more elements.

credited to Satanist musicians. The scale of the violence and media coverage has made a lasting impression on Norwegian culture, and one could maybe even call it a part of Norway's collective memory.⁵ In my experience growing up in Norway in the 2000s, extreme metal and especially black metal was to a certain degree considered not only an extreme form of musical expression, but a subculture connected to actual violence and danger and was therefore to be avoided. My impression is that the Norwegian public's view of extreme metal has changed to being a bit more favorable in the last ten to fifteen years, but it still seems relatively controversial in the eyes of the "parent" generation.⁶ These are all things I have to consider when black metal is relatively "close" to me both culturally and historically, and I will have to try and maintain a certain analytical distance to the subject matter and avoid Romanticization and idolization of history, people and art.

Canonization

When looking at any kind of music or art, one has to be aware of why the specific music or art is the one that's being looked at, as we as scholars exclude some art and favor other art in our work. Why is Bach considered *the* great composer and not one of his contemporaries? The answer to this question is not necessarily found solely in the music of Bach. Critical reception, writings, and discussions, both scholarly and of the everyday sort also play their part. Because of this, scholars need to be aware of canonization and the problems and challenges related to it. This is not a thesis on the canonization of extreme metal, so I will not do a deep dive into the scholarly debate regarding it, but I will present some points from William Weber and Anne Danielsen that I have found useful when engaging with seemingly canonized music in the extreme metal world. In his chapter "The History of Musical Canon" in the book *Rethinking Music*, William Weber addresses some of the important canonical aspects scholars have to consider when writing about music:

Musicologists have been slow to recognize the problem of canon, because it is so embedded in their assumptions about music, and controls so much of what they do. If

⁵ Norwegian film maker Torstein Grude argues that the media coverage was to a certain degree an overreaction that led to further violence in his 1999 movie *Satan rir media*.

⁶ This is of course anecdotal. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to prioritize a survey on this subject, but it could be a very interesting, standalone project.

we are to understand the canon historically, we must become skeptical of it, and free ourselves from its authority, its ideology, and the whole manner of speech that surrounds it. Only by questioning this tradition can we understand either its musical or its social foundations. (Weber, 1999, p. 337)

This is how Weber describes the sometimes selective or lazy relationship some of his contemporaries have with the concept of canon and canonization. He points out how we have to meet the concept of canon with an attentive eye, and as he puts it, be skeptical of it. This skepticism is important when we are striving to maintain a reflective and analytical distance from the art we are studying. By becoming aware of how some works become canonized we can be critical of the history of art – which in turn leads to the aforementioned reflective and analytical distance required to perform good and fruitful research.

Weber continues: “we need to look carefully into the context of its reception and perpetuation: we need to define the terms - musical, social, ideological, and semiological – in which the society considered musical works part of a canonic tradition” (Weber, 1999, p. 338). Weber points out two main factors: reception and perpetuation as important parts of in the process of canonization. One could argue that the reception of the work in its contemporary social environment plays an important role in how it is looked upon later. This reception does not necessarily have to be positive, artists can for instance be “ahead of their time”, and early Norwegian black metal is a good example of this. The almost condemnation-like response to the subculture as a whole has helped mythologize the whole early Norwegian black metal subculture, before it slowly gained more respect as a legitimate artistic expression in more recent years, maybe partly thanks to the perpetuation of what I call the black metal mythology⁷.

In addition to Weber’s chapter, I also want to draw attention to Anne Danielsen’s 2006 article “Aesthetic Value, Cultural Significance, and Canon Formation in Popular

⁷ Mythology/mythologize is used in a more everyday meaning here. I am not referring to Barthes’ concept of “mythologies”.

Music” as an addition to Weber’s writing. Danielsen further explores how the process of canonization works and talks about it as an “experience”:

The canonizing experience, or to use the vocabulary of Kant, aesthetic judgment, and the critical discourse preceding and following this judgment, should not be collapsed together. Put differently, one might say that they belong to different stages in the epistemological process. While aesthetic judgment is a wordless, subjective, pre-discursive activity, discourse is a domain of communication and intersubjective exchange, or put differently, for debate and struggle over these judgments. (Danielsen, 2006, p. 64)

According to Danielsen, the “canonizing experience” is split into two main parts. First, the internal aesthetic judgement that the listeners make up on their own, based on their subjective aesthetic preferences. The second part is the discourse between the separate listeners and their aesthetic judgements of the works. This can be seen as a negotiation between the different listeners, and if these negotiations are successful so to speak, the work becomes canonized. I would also like to suggest that what Danielsen calls the discourse is first a part of the Weberian reception, but because of people’s almost constant discussion of canonized works, it is part of a negotiation that also leads to the Weberian perpetuation. Danielsen continues to describe what happens when new music is included in the popular music canon:

In fact, any change in the canon formation of popular music may be read as a sign of an underlying change in the relations of power in the field of popular music. In a perspective such as this, the history of popular music, understood as the history of a broad variety of popular music styles, may be regarded as an ongoing negotiation of high and low within the field of popular music. Every decade new genres make the leap from low to high, and as a consequence of these processes new artists, bands and songs are being included in the pop/rock canon. (Danielsen, 2006, p. 68)

This is very interesting with regards to the validation of Norwegian Black Metal, which has gone from being highly controversial and frowned upon to now being looked upon as one of Norway’s prime cultural exports along with Ibsen and Grieg. I would say that it is now a substantial part of the Norwegian musical canon, and also the international rock and metal

canon. Examples of this could be the inclusion of Darkthrone's *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* in the Norwegian national library's permanent collection, or Mayhem winning "Hedersprisen" at the 2020 Spellemann awards.⁸ This all contributes to the perception that black metal has become far more "accepted" in contemporary Norway than it was in the early 1990s.

Approach and scope

The objective of this thesis is to show how topic theory can be used to understand the early Norwegian black metal genre, and how different forms of expression are connected within the genre through topics. To do this, I will look at three main categories of expression:

- **Musical expressions**

The musical and sonic aspects of black metal. Examples of this could be, but are not limited to; composition and form, timbre and music production, instrumental and vocal performances

- **Written and spoken expressions**

Aspects of black metal expression that are concerned with the use of language. For this thesis, it will mainly be lyrics from songs. In larger projects, it could also include any type of written or spoken artistic expression by relevant artists like letters, poems, elaborate press releases and liner notes.

- **Visual expressions**

Any visual expression of black metal subculture. I am mainly dealing with album covers. Press photos, band merch, posters or music videos are good places to look further for a potential later project.

To look at these different forms of expression I will have to use different approaches. My aim is to see how topics appear across these different types of expressions and media, and how they together form large parts of the web of meanings within the black metal genre. I will use musical analysis, and I will also do visual and lyric analyses. I will try and use as broad of a

⁸ Honorary award at the so-called "Norwegian Grammy Awards"

pool of examples as possible for the basis of the analysis, and then do more in-depth looks at certain releases or artists. I will explain why I have chosen the specific ones in the introduction of the respective analyses.

It has to be said that the variation in artists in the Norwegian black metal movement in the early 1990s is not that big – it has grown a lot since then, but the production of (sub)-culturally significant works is of such a volume that I still have more than enough material to work with for a master's thesis. Any translations from Norwegian to English have been done by the author. All transcriptions are done by the author, and they include one lead guitar providing the melody and one rhythm guitar providing chord information. This is done for the sake of simplicity and does not necessarily reflect the way things were recorded down to every last detail. The recording quality of some examples also affects how I have decided to transcribe examples. Because of the poor quality of some of these recordings, some specific voicings and inversions might not be 100% correct, but I am confident that the most important parts of what I'm showing, the melodies and chords, are transcribed correctly. All examples are tremolo picked with 16th notes, but I have decided to transcribe them as longer note values instead of writing in the tremolo picking as an effect to not create unnecessary clutter in the note images. All album cover-illustrations have been downloaded from discogs.com.

Narrowing the field: 1992-1994

Now the question is: why have I chosen specifically Norwegian black metal between the years 1992 and 1994? This is based in a fascination of the connections between music, other forms of expression and culture – and the question of how we associate for example a black metal album cover with black metal culture and its subcultural values and meanings. When it comes to why I have chosen the specific Norwegian subculture the answer is that the music has a recognizable and distinctive sound and a seemingly clear aesthetical project. The concepts and ideas that seem to make up the aesthetical project of the movement appear to be connected across different media. Due to its distinctive and easily identifiable expressions, it is a good example of how topic theory can be used to explain not only meaning in music but also music related subcultures. I will also mention that I am not proposing topic theory as a universal approach to music, meaning and culture, but applying topic theory across media

and different forms of expressions it lends itself to some interesting approaches and new angles on the field.

I chose the period from 1992 through 1994 because in my opinion the musical genre and culture had by then been established as a clear and more or less coherent artistic project. An earlier selection would have had too many different and less coherent expressions, and the stereotypical black metal expression had not been sufficiently established before, except from in a very few cases. Another important point is how topics must be conventionalized for them to be understood as topics by the audience. This is connected to the establishment of the aesthetic project, and topic theory would not necessarily be a fruitful way of looking at a simply emerging expressions and genres, it is better suited for somewhat established genres. It is of course interesting to look at how topics evolve and emerge, but the importance of the conventionalization aspect of topic theory is not to be understated. I chose 1994 as the end point of the analysis because a larger selection would prevent me from going in depth on a relatively limited project like a master's project. 1994 is in my eyes also a natural end point of the early years of Norwegian black metal as it was the year that some of the important figures in the movement either died or were imprisoned, and Mayhem's *De Mysteriis dom Sathanas* was released the same year, as a climax of the early Norwegian black metal scene. Later releases by both existing and emerging bands changed character at least to a certain degree and would not be classified as "early". Therefore *De Mysteriis dom Sathanas* marks a good end point of the main part of my analysis⁹.

Black metal – an introduction

I will now give a presentation of early Norwegian black metal. I will give a quick presentation of black metal's artistic features mainly musical, but also lyrical and visual. I will then give an overview of Norwegian black metal history and introduce a few notable artists which will be based around documentaries and interviews. I will also try to give a short presentation of early Norwegian black metal's connection to violence and look at it as a form of transgression, and what I call the "black metal myth" and the "black metal

⁹ I will of course still interact with both earlier and later releases in the course of the thesis, but the main focus is the years 1992-1994.

character”. I will not try to define the aesthetics of black metal as certain artists or critics perceive it, but I will give a short introduction to some of the ideas that are common in black metal lyrics and subculture.

The artistic characteristics of black metal

One of the main characteristics of black metal as we know it today is the blast beat. In its simplest form, it consists of kick drum and cymbal/hi-hat on the downbeats, and snare drum on the offbeats, but it has many variations. It is reasonable to think that it originated from the so-called “skank beat”¹⁰, often found in punk and thrash metal, as Helge Kaasin points out in his radio series *Mørke meditasjoner* (Kaasin, 2019, 05:36). By removing every other eighth note in the right hand and turning it into a more alternating figure, drummers were able to increase the tempo of the beat and play it faster –either in double time, as sixteenth notes, or as eighth notes in higher tempo songs. Blast beats can be found in many different genres of extreme metal and are common in both death metal and grindcore in addition to black metal, but it serves a different purpose in different musical contexts. In black metal, I see it as a way of creating a “wall of sound” and setting an atmosphere, and the effect of the blast beat is closely connected to the production of black metal and other techniques applied by other instrumentalists.

Black metal guitarists often use a technique commonly referred to as tremolo picking. The core idea of tremolo picking is to alternate the right hand at high speeds, often sixteenth notes, while the left hand is playing chords or single note lines. This is also often done by bass players. The effect of this is like that of the blast beat, and when they work together, they create a high speed, high intensity “wall of sound” which in my eyes contribute to setting a dark, chaotic mood.

When it comes to vocal performances, black metal vocalists often scream their lyrics. Where death metal vocals traditionally have deeper, so-called growled vocals, black metal usually has more high pitched screams. These screams, combined with dark and gloomy lyrics about themes like occultism, death, cold and darkness, also strongly contribute to the

¹⁰ Kick drum on the downbeats of each measure, snare drum on the offbeats of each measure, and cymbals/hi-hats on every eighth note (Fleury, 2017).

dark atmosphere of the music. Some of the black metal screams in my ears resemble screams of pain and desperation, almost animal like and primal.

While many, more modern black metal releases have a high level, expensive sounding productions, the early releases from both the Norwegian movement in the 1990s and earlier international releases have a more lo-fi sound. This lo-fi sound usually comes from the albums having sharper, more piercing distorted guitar sounds, more distorted drums and vocals and less bass-heavy mixes. This distorted, mid- and treble-heavy sound works in conjunction with the earlier mentioned techniques to create a sonic palette which is sharp and almost unpleasant. This gives the music a certain sense of hostility against the listener as if it is trying to make itself unavailable to the public, except for the ones that are “insiders” and familiar with the sounds of extreme music.¹¹

Visually, black metal has a very clear profile. A lot of classic album covers and press photos are in black and white, or dull colors, often with photos of winter forests, dark landscapes or masked or hooded characters. These bleak color schemes and motives along with the recognizable, but often unreadable black and white logos create a certain mysticism around the artists and their works. Many of the well-known metal bands, both related to heavy metal, hair metal, but also death metal, in the late 1980s and early 1990s had bright colored press photos and album covers and photos with all the members on being recognizable. Black metal’s visual profile could be seen as a reaction to this, and this opposition between black metal subculture and other forms of rock and metal subcultures is a good example of early Norwegian black metal’s innovative nature.

Black metal lyrics often play on themes of death, satanism, occultism and violence. In addition to these themes that are also found in other types of metal music, Norwegian black metal lyrics also have aspects of Norse mythology and history, as well as a deep connection to a stylized version of Nordic nature and wilderness. The occult, violent and Satanist imagery is not necessarily part of a completely developed ideology or spiritual belief. It is seemingly more a mix of different types of inspirations similar to that of other subgenres of

¹¹ This is not exclusive to black metal, as it is an aspect of the act of listening with regards to many forms of extreme music, be it metal, experimental music, free jazz or hardcore club music.

metal. The mix of more traditional metal themes and the more Nordic centered aspects give the lyrics of the genre a specific tone and style, seemingly deeply connected to its Nordic roots. In some cases, the praising of Nordic culture and nature gives the lyrics a nationalistic aspect. This nationalistic aspect, mixed with borderline racist, or sometimes explicitly racist imagery, connects some black metal lyrics to a far-right extremist political landscape.

The roots of Norwegian black metal

The roots of black metal can mainly be found in three forms of rock music:

- The “New wave of British heavy metal” – with notable bands like Iron Maiden and Saxon (Barton, 2020). By taking inspiration from the early 1970s like Black Sabbath and Deep Purple and according to journalist Geoffrey Barton, a DIY spirit and attitude similar to that in the punk movement, the bands increased the speed of songs, becoming more aggressive than their early 70s counterparts. The movement gained a large following, and bands like Iron Maiden and Judas Priest still fill arenas and stadiums around the world to this day.
- Thrash metal: Influenced by NWOBHM¹² bands and early 1980s hardcore punk, bands like Metallica, Slayer and Megadeth are at the center of thrash metal. An even more aggressive form of music than NWOBHM, characterized by even higher tempos, riffs that to a larger degree emphasize atonal and chromatic tonalities, and vocals that are shouted and screamed rather than sung traditionally (Norberg, 2020b).
- Hardcore punk: Inspired by the initial punk movement of the late 1970s, bands like Discharge, Black Flag and Bad Brains began to incorporate even higher tempos and more aggressive vocals in the early 1980s (Bergan, 2021). While some bands went in the direction of “New wave”, the hardcore bands seemingly aimed to create an even more aggressive and chaotic sound.

Black metal music is of course also inspired by other musical expressions than these to varying degrees. Mayhem bassist Jørn Stubberud tells how the band's guitarist Øystein

¹² New Wave of British Heavy Metal.

Aarseth was a fan of experimental and avant-garde music in an interview with *The Quietus*, explains how the intro to the band's first EP *Deathcrush* was composed by German krautrock musician Conrad Schnitzler, and how they in addition to punk and metal bands listened to experimental electronic music (Doran, 2014). To add to the many different aspects of black metal inspirations, Darkthrone drummer Fenriz is also known as an avid listener of techno and house music (Ravens, n.d.)

The Norwegian black metal of the early 1990s is what people often refer to as the “second wave” of black metal. This of course implies a first wave of black metal as an inspiration for the second wave. The so-called first wave of black metal is commonly associated with bands like Venom, Celtic Frost, Mercyful Fate and Bathory, from the early to mid-1980s. The music of the first wave is characterized by minor and chromatic guitar riffs, fast tempos and screamed vocals. I find it helpful to think of the sound as a mix of that of thrash metal bands like Slayer and NWOBHM bands like Motorhead, but with a noisier, more lo-fi production. The imagery of both the lyrics and visual art has aspects of occultism, satanism and death in a way that I have not found to be as widespread in other forms of rock and metal music at the time. I will look more into some “first wave” releases later in this chapter.

The emergence of Norwegian black metal

The second wave of black metal, according to various documentaries started in the suburbs outside Oslo in the years 1986 and 1987, especially with the band Mayhem (Bråthen, 2020a; Seltzer, 2017). The band consisted of Øystein Aarseth, Jørn Stubberud and Kjetil Mannheim, as well as various vocalists in the starting years. Every member of the band took stage names; Euronymous, Necrobutcher and Mannheim, as did their two main vocalists of the period, Messiah and Maniac. In 1986 they released their first demo tape *Pure Fucking Armageddon*. The demo has a very distorted sound, and it is hard to pick out exactly what riffs are being played. The vocals are also extremely distorted, and I struggle to hear any of the lyrics. The demo sounds like it has been recorded straight to cassette tape, a practice that could be seen as a great democratization of recorded music as a media, and it became important for the development of many “underground” genres of music.

In 1987 Mayhem released their debut EP *Deathcrush* which features some of the same tracks and music with the same qualities as those on *Pure Fukcing Armageddon*, but with a less distorted sound as it was recorded in a professional recording studio (Bråthen, 2020a, 28:50). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the band went through several line-up changes, toured, and released live recordings. Mayhem, fronted by Aarseth, started their own record label, Deathlike Silence Productions to release the EP and it was released on cassette and vinyl (Bråthen, 2020a, 28:30). The record label would later play an important role in releasing records for among others Mayhem, Burzum and Enslaved. It was run from Aarseth's record store "Helvete" in Oslo which became a gathering point for the movement, and Aarseth acted as a leader for the black metal subculture (Aron Aites & Ewell, 2008, 51:20). The band went through several line-up changes especially in terms of vocalists, but had a consistent line-up from 1988 to 1991 (Bråthen, 2020b). Mayhem's debut album *De Mysteriis dom Sathanas* was released on Deathlike Silence Productions in 1994, after Aarseth's death with a different line-up than *Deathcrush*: Øystein Aarseth, Varg Vikernes (stage name: the Count), Jan Axel Blomberg (stage name: Hellhammer) and Attila Csihar (stage name: Attila).

Other bands in Norway started doing extreme metal in the same period, and especially Darkthrone gained a certain popularity playing at various Oslo venues, as well as with their debut record *Soulside Journey* released in 1991. The record is often described as more of a death metal record than a black metal record, with more complex riffs and song structures and a cleaner sound. Their second album *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* is commonly referred to as one of the albums that pioneered the Norwegian black metal sound, and I will give a presentation of the album later in this chapter (Gaare, 2020). Darkthrone continued to release several records that many describe as some of the most important releases of the genre in different online forums and publications (Mendes, 2016).

Other notable bands based around the Helvete store are Varg Vikernes', also known as Count Grishnak, one man band Burzum which released a series of important releases in the early 1990s as well as Emperor. Parallel with the development in Oslo, black metal bands also started to emerge in Bergen, where Vikernes was originally from. Bands like Old

Funeral¹³, Immortal and Gorgoroth are important bands from the 1990s based in Bergen. There is not a considerable artistic difference between the Oslo based bands and the Bergen based bands as the whole black metal movement was relatively small, consisting of few individuals who are likely to have known each other and each other's music fairly well.

Essential listening – a brief guide to Norwegian Black Metal and its roots

This subchapter is included as a contribution to competency, and I strongly advice readers to give these releases a listen so that we have a basic idea of the musical expressions that we are discussing. This is by no means complete discography of early Norwegian black metal and its inspirations, and neither a complete list of the music I have worked with and interacted with in the course of writing this thesis. The releases appear in alphabetical order. These are releases that have informed the development of early Norwegian black metal, and they serve as a good introduction to the music and an overview of essential tendencies and inspirations. While I have tried to have a conscious mind about canonization, I have still included albums that many consider classic – because as Danielsen wrote: “different bands, artists and songs have become canonical because they were experienced as good music – and perhaps still are” (Danielsen, 2006, p. 68). This list gives a short description of each release and is organized in alphabetical order. The full discography for this project can be found in my appendix.

Burzum – *Aske*

Aske is the second release by Varg Vikernes' one man band Burzum. With a playtime of twenty minutes and only three tracks, one of them an interlude, it would be easy to dismiss it as a less important EP than the full-length releases that came before and after it. I have decided to include *Aske*, instead of some of the other Burzum releases because I think it is the release that most efficiently sums up the Burzum “sound”. More static, almost monotone than other black metal releases, and with a slightly more traditional use of harmony and melody by focusing on minor riffs instead of atonal riffs. Longer passages using the same riffs, slower tempos and more traditional, static drumbeats contribute to the monotone character of the EP. This monotone, static sound evokes a melancholic quality in the music, and this, mixed with

¹³ With Vikernes on bass.

the screamed vocals gives the release a certain aspect of sadness and longing. I will get more into the melancholic nature of some releases later in the thesis. The cover of the EP features a photo of a burnt church, supposedly Fantoft Stave Church outside Bergen¹⁴, and the first 1000 copies of the EP shipped with a lighter carrying the same photo. This strongly connects to the satanic imagery found in the lyrics and song titles.

Celtic Frost – *Morbid Tales*

Celtic Frost, along with Venom and Bathory are by many considered a part of the first wave of black metal, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Their 1984 release *Morbid Tales* is characterized by a mix of NWOBHM¹⁵, hardcore punk and darker passages similar to those of Black Sabbath. The riffs are based around minor and atonal structures, the drumming is centered around double bass drums and is seemingly inspired by punk and heavy metal drummers of the time. Lyrically the themes are, like the title suggests, centered around death and occultism. The production of the record does not have the lo-fi qualities that especially second wave releases have; it is more like the productions of bigger, more traditional heavy metal bands like Iron Maiden with a focused sound, and only the guitars are noticeably distorted. The vocals are shouted, similar to the vocal performances of hardcore punk bands from the 1980s. The cover has an imagery that brings associations to the occult, with dark red and black colors, skulls, swords and, a star similar to a pentagram.

Darkthrone – *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*

Darkthrone's second studio album, released in 1992, is by many considered as the album that pioneered the sound of Norwegian black metal (Gaare, 2020). The production is thin and centered around the mids and treble side, and is also characterized by distortion not only on the guitars but on the production as a whole. This puts the album in a sharp contrast to its contemporary extreme metal, especially death metal. The vocals on the album are screamed and sometimes sound almost gurgled, and the lyrical themes brought up range from melancholy and nature to darkness, occultism and satanism. The drums are playing blast beats along with using more traditional rock techniques, and the guitar riffs are mainly atonal

¹⁴ Virkernes was charged, but found not guilty for the burning of the church (Galtung & Fossåskaret, 2017).

¹⁵ New Wave of British Heavy Metal.

– and have a sharp timbre. The forms of the compositions are complex, but unlike in for example death metal, the music achieves a sense of setting a mood; creating a cold, dark listening atmosphere, rather than giving an expression of perfectionism and straight forward aggression. This aspect of black metal music is hard to pinpoint and might seem a bit vague, but I will explore this more in the analysis part of the thesis.

Darkthrone - *Transilvanian Hunger*

I have decided to include Darkthrone's 1994 release *Transilvanian Hunger* because of how it shows the band taking the sound they set on *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* even further. An even more lo-fi production, thinner and more distorted – and the vocals sound harsher and less articulated. Especially the drums have a more lo-fi sound to them, they sound muddier, and the album has a lot more blast beats than its predecessors. This contributes to an almost wall-of-sound like effect, but in a harsher way and in a very different context than Phil Spector used his technique in the 1960s and 1970s. The songs on the album are also less atonal, and rather more based on minor scales and modes, utilizing more “traditional” melodic lines and chord progressions than for instance *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*. This gives the album even more of the earlier mentioned moody aspect, and it also gives the record a melancholic tone, which I will look more into in later chapters. The lyrical themes of the record seem more refined, focusing on forests, cold winter nights, Norse mythology and war as well as the well-known black metal themes of satanism and death.

Mayhem – *Deathcrush*

Mayhem's 1987 EP *Deathcrush* could be considered a forerunner for the black metal sound that later became established. *Deathcrush* is less noisy than Mayhem's 1986 demo tape *Pure Fucking Armageddon* but more chaotic than later releases by black metal bands. Odd time signatures like 5/4 are used, along with highly energetic drumming and high-pitched vocal screams. The lyrical themes are not necessarily what I would describe as typical of black metal lyrics; body decomposition, gore and explicit violence, which are themes usually found more in death and gore metal lyrics. *Deathcrush* could perhaps also be seen not only as chaotic but almost sloppy, at least in a metal context – and this gives the recording a punk “feel”. Whereas later releases have a seemingly clearer vision of creating an atmosphere and a “mood”, *Deathcrush* seems more fueled by energy and aggression.

Mayhem – *De Mysteriis dom Satanus*

De Mysteriis dom Satanus is Mayhem's debut LP, released after Øystein Aarseth's death and Varg Vikernes' imprisonment in 1993. The album was recorded in Grieghallen in Bergen in 1992, a large concert hall named after Edvard Grieg (Bråthen, 2020d, 04:40). The album has a more refined and cleaner sound than for instance Darkthrone's records but is still relatively noisy. Vocals are half-whispered, half growled or screamed, with lyrics about satanism, occultism and death, winter, cold and darkness. A mix of atonal and minor riffs make up the harmonic and melodic structures of the album, while the drums mix blast beats with more traditional drumming techniques. The natural reverb of Grieghallen can be heard clearly, especially on the drums, and it gives the record an epic aspect – along with the guitars and bass not leaving a lot of room in the mix. This gives the impression of a massive and sublime sonic experience. It is also interesting to note that the cover features the Nidarosdommen cathedral in Trondheim draped in moonlight, which connects to the satanic imagery of the lyrics.

Slayer – *Reign in Blood*

Released in 1986, this record set a new tone for aggressive metal in the “mainstream” metal audience. Slayer's previous records could be considered more “traditional” thrash metal, closer to the sound of early 80s thrash bands like Metallica and Megadeth. While other contemporary, “mainstream” thrash bands had started branching out their sound into longer, more complex compositions, for instance, Metallica's *Master of Puppets*, producer Rick Rubin and Slayer recorded *Reign in Blood* which is higher paced and frenetic, and with shorter, more intense songs (Wiederhorn, 2021). Despite the roughly 29 minutes of playtime, the album contains ten tracks, with song titles bringing connotations to satanism, Nazi imagery and death. Musically the album is characterized by eighth and sixteenth note chromatic and atonal guitar riffs, screamed and yelled vocals instead of so-called clean vocals and fast, seemingly hardcore punk inspired drumming. The album is considered a classic in the metal community, and many claim it paved the way for more extreme forms of metal music like black metal and death metal (Ruskell, 2021; Wiederhorn, 2021). It has to be said that there were of course other bands making fast paced metal similar to that of *Reign in Blood*, or even more extreme – like Repulsion, but the reason I am focusing especially on

Reign in Blood is because of its status as a classic and a forerunner for other extreme metal genres, as well as its relative commercial success.

Venom – *Black Metal*

Like Celtic Frost, Venom is usually considered a part of the first wave of black metal. The sound is similar to that of Celtic Frost, but the production is slightly more lo-fi. There is only rhythm guitar track, and the sound is less defined, covered in reverb – and the guitar and bass are tuned down, to achieve a heavier sound. From a compositional standpoint, the riffs used on *Black Metal* are more similar to those of early 1980s heavy metal bands like Judas Priests, Iron Maiden and Dio; centered around minor scales and pentatonic scales. The songs are higher tempo than those of Celtic Frost, seemingly more inspired by hardcore punk – and more traditional rock n roll sounds are also included on for instance “Teacher’s Pet”. The lyrical themes are mainly centered around death and occultism, and this also connects to the cover, depicting a demon-like creature with horns. *Black Metal* and *Morbid Tales* give a short and good introduction to the sound of the so-called “first wave” of black metal, and they clearly lead the way to the second wave centered in Norway ten years later.

Norwegian black metal and violence

The Norwegian black metal subculture of the early 1990s is known for being notoriously violent and extreme. Many people associate the movement with burnings of ancient churches, suicide, and murder. While it seemingly started out with young men and teenagers, and their attempt to make extreme music and to shock Norwegian society, it gradually transformed into a movement characterized by right wing extremism, hate crimes, and arson¹⁶. The second episode of the TV series *Helvete, Historien om norsk black metal*, made by documentarist Håvard Bråthen focuses on arguably the most famous vocalist in Mayhem, Pelle “Dead” Ohlin. Known for an extreme interest in death both lyrically and

¹⁶ I find the gender aspect here very interesting as well. As far as I can gather, the Norwegian black metal movement was an exclusively male subculture, at least among musicians. Robert Walser addresses metal music and gender more generally in his book *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* from 1993, and it is a theme with a vast scientific discourse. I don’t have time to do an in-depth analysis of these themes, but the gender aspect is very interesting with regards to both the art and violence of the black metal movement.

performance-wise he quickly gained the attention of the then-small black metal crowd. He supposedly sent a demo tape to the band, accompanied by a crucified mouse, decomposed by the time it got from Sweden to Norway. He supposedly also brought bagged up animal carcasses to rehearsals and concerts to “smell death” (Bråthen, 2020b, 08:05; Ledang & Aasdal, 2007, 18:00).

During one of their famous early shows in Jessheim, Ohlin purposely cut himself severely, to make the performance as extreme as possible (Bråthen, 2020b, 27:00). During the easter of 1991, Ohlin committed suicide using a shotgun in the house he shared with Aarseth and Blomberg. When discovering Ohlin’s body, Aarseth supposedly went to a nearby store to buy a camera and started photographing the body of his bandmate. These photos were then sent to connections around the world and almost used as promotional material (Bråthen, 2020b; Ledang & Aasdal, 2007, 21:45). According to people involved with the black metal movement, Aarseth also kept pieces of Ohlin’s skull and sent them to various people who were “insiders” of the subculture in Norway and Sweden, a group that later became known as “the black circle” (Bråthen, 2020b, 34:30). It is fair to say that these actions largely contributed to Mayhem’s notoriety in the movement, and established Aarseth not only as a musical pioneer of the early Norwegian black metal but also as a leader of the subculture as a whole.

The Norwegian black metal movement of the early 1990s also gained attention for its extreme anti-Christian values and activism¹⁷. Especially the many church burnings gained massive media coverage both nationally and internationally and were to a certain degree used by members of the movement to promote their music and beliefs. According to Kjetil Mannheim, this anti-establishment and anti-church notion started as a protest against the then half-secular, social democracy in late 1980s Norway, and the perceived monotony and blandness of contemporary society seen from the perspective of boys in their late teens

¹⁷ I am purposely calling it anti-Christian instead of Satanist. This is because I see it as a rebellion against the established Christian, social democracy of Norway in the 1990s, rather than an expression of satanism as a spiritual belief. I realize that this interpretation of course is open for discussion, but for this chapter I do not have the space to go into the depths of satanic beliefs and spirituality.

(Bråthen, 2020a, 18:45). The actual church burnings did not start before the early 1990s, after what seemingly was a radicalization of certain members of the movement.

The main portion of church burnings related to the Norwegian black metal movement took place in 1992, and the most famous ones are the burnings of Fantoft stave church outside Bergen and Holmenkollen Chapel in Oslo. According to *snl.no*, about one third of the approximately 50 church fires in Norway in the early 1990s could be credited to the black metal movement (Norberg, 2020a). Varg Vikernes is known for being responsible for several of these, alongside various other members of the movement, for instance, Bård Eithun of Emperor. The church burnings along with the unsettling history of Pelle Ohlin's suicide and its aftermath gave these at the time small and obscure Norwegian bands wide press coverage, and they quickly became known to a wider audience.

An example of some members' willingness to use the violence and burnings as a way of promoting the movement and its music is Varg Vikernes' now famous, anonymous interview with the Norwegian newspaper *Bergens Tidende* printed 20th of January 1993. In the interview, he gives detailed descriptions of church burnings and talks about murder and connections to neo-Nazis, as well as complaining about the hopelessness of Norwegian contemporary society (Tønder, 1993). The interview does not mainly focus on the music of Norwegian black metal bands, but rather gives the impression of the existence of a Satanist terrorist cult, recruiting through the musical subculture, aiming to spread fear in society – as if the musical side of the movement is secondary to the activist side. The tone of the headline and the descriptions of Vikernes as cold toned, surrounded by knives and Nazi effects certainly gives the interview a sensationalist impression. One could argue like Harald Fossberg does, that this interview marked a starting point for the massive media attention around the black metal movement (Bråthen, 2020d, 11:36). Øystein Aarseth can also be heard glorifying the burning of stave churches in the *Helvete*-series, as a means of spreading “sorrow and despair”, not only in the Christian communities but in society as a whole (Bråthen, 2020c, 42:07).

Murder is also a part of Norwegian black metal history. Øystein Aarseth was murdered in his apartment in 1993. This of course attracted even more police attention than what had previously been in connection with the church burnings, and Varg Vikernes was

later arrested and convicted for the murder and three church burnings. In 1992, Magne Andreassen was killed at Lillehammer, not long before the Holmenkollen chapel in Oslo was set on fire. Bård Eithun, the drummer of the band Emperor, was later convicted of both these crimes (Norberg, 2020a). Because of how small the early Norwegian black metal community was, these events made three of the largest bands of the early Norwegian black metal movement unable to tour and build their name for a long while. Mayhem's debut record was released after Aarseth's death, and Vikernes continued to release music from prison, but newer bands like Satyricon and Gorgoroth¹⁸, together with veterans Darkthrone were now at the center of the Norwegian black metal movement.

Black metal as opposition

The Norwegian black metal of the early 1990s can be seen as a protest against the structured socialist democracy and the watered down, semi-secular Christian norms of society. The Norwegian concepts “dugnadsånd” and “samfunnsånd” are important for understanding what black metal is protesting¹⁹. These two concepts are based on trust and willingness to contribute to a greater good without seeing any economic profit and are often experienced as mandatory, especially by younger members of society being forced by parents to contribute. These two concepts, along with the government's broadcasting monopoly and other limitations on capitalistic enterprises in Norway in the 1970s and 1980s, create a picture of a society where young people might have felt like there was no room for individualism and freedom. Kjetil Mannheim describes Norwegian society as “monotonous, grey and pressing” (Bråthen, 2020a, 18:46)

Black metal both as a genre of music and as a subculture can be seen as an attempt to express ultimate opposition to this society. It is an expression of anti-Christian, hyper-

¹⁸ Gorgoroth frontman Gaahl was in 2005 convicted of severely beating a man and threatening to drink his blood (*Gorgoroth Singer Sentenced to 14 Months in Prison*, 2005). In other words, violence connected to Norwegian black metal did not stop completely, but it has not been a widespread campaign like the wave of crime in the early 1990s.

¹⁹ Very similar concepts. Dugnad is a sort of unpaid labor, where people in for instance the same neighborhood or apartment building work together to improve their local area. It is sometimes also used as a concept on a larger scale, regarding whole cities or the whole country, especially in times of crisis, like the covid-19 pandemic or the refugee crisis of 2015. Samfunnsånd very similar to this, but it is a more abstract concept referring ideas like to respect and humanistic ideals.

individualistic and sometimes even proto-fascist and right wing, racist values. Some prominent members of the black metal subculture have expressed far-right sympathies and actively use Nazi and racist imagery in lyrics, stage performances and videos, most notably Varg Vikernes and Ørjan “Høst” Stedjeberg of Taake (Neilstein, 2018; *Neo-Nazi Musician Vikernes Freed after Arrest in France*, 2013; NTB, 2012). These expressions of far-right sympathies also to some degree contain a denunciation of the center-leftist basis of post WWII Norwegian society. Black metal embraces violence, chaos and destruction and denounces rationality, both musically, culturally, and politically. Black metal lyrics focus on darkness, violence, death and occultism, as well as pre-Christian Nordic culture and Norse mythology – and many lyrics contain a longing for a changed society, similar to that of pre-Christian Norway.

The black metal myth and the black metal character

The mythology surrounding artists or subcultures is important to understand the fascination with a subculture or the position of certain artists. This mythologization of artists or movements is something that is an integrated part of the image and perception the outside world has of the relevant artist or movements, and it is a concept that we see throughout the history of art and music. Stories and tall tales of erratic behavior and eccentric lifestyles commonly circulate in the field of art history, for instance those of Vincent van Gogh’s or Salvador Dali, and they are especially present in the field of modern popular music. More or less true stories of drug use, violence, diets and criminal records are important parts of an artist’s image, especially in genres and subcultures with a “hard” image. These stories form a mythology surrounding the respective artists or subculture and are a part of the perpetuation of both art and artists, driven by documentaries, interviews and word of mouth.

When it comes to black metal, the violence and extreme behavior are at the core of its mythology, some might even find the stories more fascinating than the music and art itself. The transgressive, violent behavior of members of the subculture is an integral part of both the perception and of the genre and subculture itself, as it is one of the most important aspects of the black metal mythology. Another important part of the black metal mythology is the black metal character. The black metal character grows out of the black metal myth as a mysterious, misanthropic figure. Øystein Aarseth becomes Euronymous and Varg Vikernes

becomes Count Grishnak by masking the private person with corpse paint and aliases, as Helge Kaasin points out in his series of radio essays *Mørke Meditasjoner* (Kaasin, 2020a). The masking contributes to the mysterious image of the black metal character, as the identity of the people behind the masks is hidden. The masking also has another side to it, it plays a part in musicians getting into character, much like that of mimes, kabuki actors or shock rockers like Kiss or Alice Cooper. In an interview in the fazine *Slayermag*, Bård Eithun, drummer of Emperor, describes the masking and corpse paint like this:

When we, under a gig or during a photo session, are using corpsepaint, we are usually in a state of mind that makes us feel like we are getting nearer darkness (and maybe even on with darkness). Corpsepaint shouldn't be used everyday. It should only be used when you feel like some dark event would happen (...) At such events, I look at myself as one of creatures of the night ... a child of darkness. (Daniel, 2014, p. 61)²⁰

By dressing in the characteristic corpse paint, the people involved with the black metal movement try to become the black metal character, putting on masks that symbolizes death. It acts almost like a ceremonial mask, where the ceremonies are concerts, press photos or violent, transgressive behavior like for instance church burnings. By masking themselves with corpse paint and aliases, the artists can more easily access the black metal “state of mind” and feel more connected to the darkness of the black metal myth. This shows how different forms of masking are important parts of both the black metal character and the black metal myth. Masking their true identities and trying to become the black metal character makes behavior and acts that are not possible for a citizen, possible. These acts are the acts of the black metal character.

The black metal character is in a way a Romantic artist, a character that is enlightened compared to the rest of society. Varg Vikernes', or rather Count Grishnak's image is for instance that of a lonely, misunderstood genius, hated by society and imprisoned for his activism and art. This is similar to the individualistic aspects of the Romantic period, where

²⁰ I could not find any copies of *Slayermag* available – neither in physical or digital form, though it is referenced both in Daniel's text and in Kaasin's radio essay. Because of it not being available, I have had to cite the interview from a secondary source.

the contrast between the creative genius and society was emphasized to a large extent (Bjerck Hagen, 2022). The black metal character longs for a different connection to nature, and channels this by playing on the nature topics, evoking images, and lyrics about a stylized northern wilderness, similar to the thematization of nature found in Romantic art.

Violence is an important part of the black metal character, as well as other forms of extreme behavior, like Pelle Dead Ohlin's extreme fascination with death. By being exposed to and creating extreme conditions that are positioned between life and death, like Dead's self-harm, or murder and extreme violence perpetrated by other black metal artists, the black metal character ends up as an inbetween. The nihilistic black metal character lives outside society and opposes it, and constantly negotiates the borders between society and individualism, and between life and death.

Violence and transgression

The relationship between violence and music, especially metal music has been discussed widely over the last twenty years. Deena Weinstein for instance discusses both moshing and accusations of metal being a force of degeneration in modern culture (Weinstein, 2000, p. 229, p. 257).

Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan, like Weinstein, argue that the connection between violence and metal music often stems from a form of moral panic in the greater society. According to them, it is hard to connect the music itself to the acts of violence as "connections with violence are often logistical rather than moral" (Johnson & Cloonan, 2008, p. 116). I think this point is valid with regards to metal music in general, where connections between music and violence have been made purely because of lyrical content or visual imagery for instance. However, I do not think the point is valid when it comes to the violence of early Norwegian black metal. The violence is a part of a transgressive behavior from members of the movement, and this behavior plays an important role in creating and manifesting the black metal character, and in mythologizing the black metal movement. Because of it being an integral part of the black metal myth, it is connected to and a part of the music and art that is created within the genre. I also think it plays a role in the creation of the subcultural ideology of early Norwegian black metal. Johnson and Cloonan's points on

the connection between music and violence are as I mentioned earlier valid when it comes to genres not connected to actually practicing violence, but the practicing of violence *is* a part of the black metal genre and its subculture.

In his book *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Keith Kahn-Harris connects the violence of black metal to transgression. Kahn-Harris argues that transgression and transgressive behavior has occurred throughout history, mentioning among other things Mikhail Bakhtin's descriptions of carnival culture. He goes on to describe how in modern times transgression and transgressive behavior is are "legislated against and marginalized" and do not play the same kind of role as it they did earlier²¹ (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p.29). Kahn-Harris describes transgression as a way of embracing the totality of death and escaping everyday life:

... the transgressive is an important category of human experience. Further, the concept of transgression captures the central elements of the extreme metal practices that I will describe in this chapter: they are excessive, testing and breaking boundaries, invoking the joys and terrors of formless oblivion within the collective, while simultaneously bolstering feelings of individual control and potency. (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 30)

As Kahn-Harris writes here, the transgressive as a phenomenon has deep connections to extreme metal. If we see it as a way of embracing or acknowledging the totality of death and as an escape from a mundane and strict societal order, we can say that the transgressive and violent behavior of certain black metal musicians in the early 1990s is a way of pushing the limits and exploring the spaces between life and death, between society and individuality. It may also be a way of attempting to "become" the black metal character; the Romantic enlightened, individualistic, and transgressive character living a life outside society. By engaging in these forms of extreme transgressive behavior, one makes the transition from a "normal" individual to a criminal, extreme anti-establishment individual living outside the laws and rules of society. It also has to be mentioned that it would be hard to deny that these

²¹ This is not to say that transgressive behavior does not exist in modern society, but not in the same formalized ways that it has done historically (carnivals, the Dionysus festivals of ancient Greece)

acts of transgression contributed to mythologizing the movement, the genre, certain bands and certain individuals. Whether or not some of these acts were performed with the sole intent of seeking transgressive experiences, or if the aspect of self-promotion and mythologization played a part is hard to say, but one cannot deny the effectiveness of the “black metal myth” when it comes to the notoriety of the genre and movement.

If we consider Sarah Thornton’s points on subculture and subcultural capital, we could look at the violence and transgressive behavior as something that is a part of the subcultural ideology of early Norwegian black metal:

Subcultural ideologies are a means by which youth imagine their own and other social groups, assert their distinctive character and affirm that they are not anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass. They are not innocent accounts of the way things really are, but ideologies which fulfill the specific cultural agendas of their beholders ... Distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*.

We could say that the transgressive behavior is a part of the early 1990s black metal subculture’s distinctive character, along with of course fashion, music, visual art etc. By either taking part in or condoning these often criminal acts, members of the subculture had a way of showing that they were insiders. The point Thornton makes about the claim to authority is also interesting. The black metal subculture of the 1990s was, as far as I can gather, not a very inclusive one (Ledang & Aasdal, 2007, 35:08). By discriminating between those “in the know” and the naïve, inferior “others”, the subculture also gained a type of exclusivity. This exclusivity became especially apparent when members of the subculture started their transgressive behavior, because of the extreme, and sometimes criminal nature of some of their acts. This led to the exclusion not only of those who did not know the “right” music or magazines but also of those not willing to partake or be associated with the violent transgressive behavior of some members of the subculture. One could also imagine how condoning or partaking in these acts could increase certain individuals’ subcultural capital, in addition to it being a part of the exploration of the black metal character.

Tape trading and zines

The early Norwegian black metal subculture initially grew from tape trading and fanzines. Because of dissatisfaction with the response to their music in Norway, black metal musicians turned to contact ads in underground metal zines as a way to get their music out in the world (Bråthen, 2020a, 23:50). By trading their demo tapes and DIY fanzines by mail to likeminded people around the world, the artists could both promote their own music and get inspiration from music that most likely would not have ended up in Norwegian record stores in the late 1980s. In his book *Japanoise*, on Japanese noise music and its circulation, David Novak reads the concept of tape trading as a type of feedback loop. People send music out into the world as output, and then they get music back as input (Novak, 2013, p. 17). Together they form a feedback loop – and this, much like a feedback loop in a noise musician’s mixer, creates a new sound which is different from both the output and the input. This is a useful way of imaging how to tape trading breed creativity in the smaller extreme metal subcultures of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite not getting much attention in their local surrounding, artists received support from an international web of more or less isolated groups and individuals which encouraged further exploration of extreme artistic expression²².

²² This is a vast subject, but I unfortunately only have space to mention it briefly in this thesis as it is a bit on the side of what I am exploring for the project.

Analysis

In these next three subchapters, I will give an analysis of the three main topics of my thesis. These topics are the scream topic, melancholy topic and the nature topic. Each part will be concerned with one topic, and then I will try to summarize my findings on black metal and on the use of topics as a tool for understanding musical genres and subcultures. These subchapters could have been divided by their different media: one on music, one on visual expressions, and one on lyrics. By instead focusing each subchapter on the specific topic(s), the interdisciplinary aspect of topics becomes clear. It also saves the reader a lot of jumping back and forth between the different subchapters to find the connections I am trying to show. While a lot of my approach is based on the ideas similar to Echard's in *Psychedelic Popular Music* the form of this next part of my thesis will be more inspired by that of Raymond Monelle, in the sense that I am not looking at a large number of topics, but rather concentrating on three main topics. This approach will give me the possibility of a more in-depth look at the specific topics and how they manifest themselves across different forms of expression and media.

Early Norwegian black metal and black metal as a whole is a form of art which has a lot of different topics at play – connecting and working with each other. Some of the first topics I identified when I started working on this project were the topics of death, darkness and occultism or satanism. These topics are in a way very available to any reader or consumer of black metal subculture, and they are very interesting topics to address. They have large philosophical, aesthetical, and ethical implications and are sources of a seemingly endless array of associations and meanings. The three topics I have chosen to focus on the other hand might be a bit more hidden at first sight. They are not readily available in the same way that for instance the occult topic or darkness topic is, but that makes them more interesting. They show another layer, so to speak, of black metal and its meanings, and they are useful for providing a more nuanced picture of the genre and how different, sometimes seemingly contrasting topics form a larger web of meanings. The depth that this other layer provides shows a larger emotional range at play when it comes to the meanings of the genre;

not only is aggression, violence and darkness a part of black metal but sadness, desperation and a fascination with nature also play an important role.

The scream topic

I was basically interested in trying to find something that would have a similar emotional impact to Edvard Munch. I think that black metal is very similar to that emotional outburst of darkness that is in Munch. To me, it was the only thing that I saw that had the emotional intensity of “The Scream”. (Binlot, 2016)

This is how controversial Norwegian contemporary artist Bjarne Melgaard explains his fascination with Norwegian black metal. Through a lot of his art in the early 2000s, he explored black metal through his view as a contemporary, queer artist. His projects *Sons of Odin* and *Black Low* negotiate and contextualize black metal subculture and art, and connects it to a larger artistic tradition, not only in music but in visual and written art as well. The *Black Low* project was highly controversial, as it contained movies, pictures and performances of extreme acts of violence. A photo series of a man cutting off his nipple and drilling the wound, a performance where Satyricon drummer Frost castrated and set himself on fire, and forbidden horror movies were all a part of an exploration of death, both visually, emotionally, and aesthetically according to Melgaard. The exhibition was closed because of the “promotion of inhumane acts” (Larsen, 2018, 18:00). These extreme aspects of Melgaard’s art are similar to many aspects of black metal art and subculture, and I think Melgaard’s way of looking at black metal shows the art and subculture in a new way²³.

Melgaard’s comparison of black metal to Munch’s artistry, and especially *The Scream* is very interesting, as the scream is a very important topic when it comes to understanding black metal art and subculture. The scream topic is at the core of black metal, and one of its defining features – appearing both in vocal performances on a vast majority of songs, in lyrics, in visual art, and in instrumental sides of the genre. A way to look at *The Scream* is as an expression of an existential crisis, a scream of desperation and pain, and this is supported

²³ Melgaard is also featured in Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell’s 2008 documentary *Until the Light Takes Us*, and clips of Fenriz visiting and commenting on the *Sons of Odin* exhibition play an important role in the movie.

by the text connected to the painting, written by Munch himself (*Edvard Munchs Skrik-tekst*, n.d.). If we compare this to the black metal scream, the similarities become clear. The scream of black metal, both literal vocal screams and the music as a figurative scream have many of the same qualities as Munch's painting. It has to be mentioned that the comparison to Munch does not cover the whole range of meanings and qualities inherent in the black metal scream. For instance, I do not think *The Scream* contains the same violent and aggressive qualities as the black metal scream sometimes has, but the despair and pain found in *The Scream* is very similar to that of black metal.



Transilvanian Hunger (1994)

Comparing Munch's painting to black metal music is useful, but I also find it very useful to compare it to some black metal's visual art, especially the cover of Darkthrone's *Transilvanian Hunger*. The similarity is striking; a figure letting out a scream that seems desperate and filled with pain or despair. Both the figures have almost hidden facial features – in Munch's painting the figure's face is stretched and warped, and on the album cover, the face is covered in the characteristic corpse paint. The eyes are hidden in both pictures, and they blend into the face of the figures. These features give the paintings a certain mystique as

both figures are in a way “hidden”. Munch’s painting is very colorful with different tones of orange, red, yellow, green and blue, while the *Transilvanian Hunger* cover is the exact opposite with only two colors; black and white. The use of color in *The Scream* brings associations to a red sunset or the burning red sun. The fire is also present in the Darkthrone cover in the form of candles, and I think this is another interesting parallel between the two works. I think both works are at their core an expression of an extremely strong emotion, almost like a primal scream of desperation and anxiety and pain. The similarities between the two makes it tempting to call the *Transilvanian Hunger* cover a 1990s parallel to *The Scream*, altered to fit in the black metal template. By comparing Munch’s *The Scream* to both literal black metal screams and black metal’s visual art, I have hopefully shown how I think the topical black metal scream is connected to a larger, not only musical, artistic tradition of expressing existential crises through the “scream” topic.

The scream as a common topic in rock music and some of its subgenres

The scream is a historically important topic in popular music, especially in rock-based music, and has played an important role in a lot of rock genres, almost since before the beginning of rock music itself. Blues singer Screaming Jay Hawkins released “I Put a Spell On You” in 1956. It features Hawkins singing in an almost screaming like manner, with inarticulate screaming in between verses – and in the ending of the song. This kind of screaming in a song about a kind of failed love serve as an expression of desperation and sorrow. The screaming-like singing, combined with actual screams is also present in the music of Little Richard. For instance, one can hear him screaming before the solos on many of his songs, for instance on some of his most famous songs “Long Tall Sally”, “Tutti Frutti”, and “Good Golly Miss Molly”. Contrary to Hawkins’ scream, I understand Little Richard’s scream as an expression of excitement and joy with the music and performance, connected to the energetic nature of his performances (Behr, n.d.). In other words, the scream as a signifier has different meanings in the music of the late 1950s, depending on the character of the scream, perhaps because it had not been properly conventionalized and established as a topic.

In the early years of British rock music, bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones used screaming for the same kind of effects as Little Richard did, as they often covered his or other 1950s rock n roll pioneers’ songs or made songs similar to these. Later in the 1960s, the

scream in my eyes changed character from the expressions of excitement that one finds in 1950s rock n roll music, to a more expressive, sometimes destructive character. Songs like “Helter Skelter” by the Beatles, “My Generation” by The Who and “Break on Through (To the Other Side)” by the Doors have a screaming like vocal performance that, in conjunction with the rest of the music and the lyrics, give off a more aggressive impression. There are also examples of this in more underground releases. For instance, the singing, shouting and screaming of Iggy Pop of the Stooges, or that found on MC5’s *Kick out the Jams* live record from 1969 have a more aggressive, destructive element to it. The screams also seem more visceral and random, more like a bodily response to the aggressive nature of the music.

The early 1970s brought a new type of harder rock music, with bands like Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple having a more distorted and aggressive sound. The singing screams in this type of hard rock are often high pitched, with the lead singer often doing solo-like passages, like in Deep Purple’s “Child in Time”. These types of screams often have a sense of virtuosity to them, as if the singer is more an integrated part of the instrumentalists of the band. Later in the 1970s punk vocals also involved screaming and shouting, especially in the rougher punk and hardcore bands. Examples of this are the shouting and screaming in the song “Banned in D.C” by Bad Brains or in “I’ve Had It” by Black Flag. This type of shouting and screaming is often less musical, has more of the aggressive, destructive energy that I mentioned earlier, and is a clear contrast to the more virtuoso-like screams of the earlier 1970s hard rock.

The New Wave of Heavy Metal combined punk and hard rock in many ways – also with regards to the screams of vocalists like Bruce Dickinson of Iron Maiden and Rob Halford of Judas Priest. On a song like “The Number of The Beast” by Iron Maiden, the vocals have parts that are high pitch screams, going from being tonal to fading into actual screams that have a certain rough sound to them. With thrash metal, there is especially one particular scream that I think is important. The scream in “Angel of Death” marks an important shift. Where screams earlier had been screams of excitement or aggression, the scream in the intro of “Angel of Death” sounds like someone screaming in pain. It starts high pitched, falling into the breaking of the voice, and is in a way unmusical, compared to the other examples I have illustrated. It has a haunting sound to it, and it works as an illustration

of the horrors in lyrics, describing the atrocious acts of Josef Mengele. The scream becomes an important aspect of the song as a whole, and together with the music and the lyrics, it contributes to a set of unpleasant and violent connotations.

During the late 1980s variants of screaming gained a strong foothold in emerging extreme metal genres, both in death metal, black metal and grindcore. The death metal scream is often growled²⁴, lower pitched and aggressive. Examples of this are the screams in songs by Entombed and Morbid Angel. I read the use of growling as a way of expressing masculinity, power, and strength. Grindcore vocalists often use a combination of growling, shouting and high-pitched screams. These different techniques are used to create relative dynamic within the songs, and it contributes to the chaotic nature of the music.

The black metal scream compared to the scream of death metal

As I have shown here, the scream as a topic was already established by the time the second wave of black metal started. In my eyes, the black metal scream is a different scream than what had come before it, though it connects to some of the same signs and meanings that the scream had traditionally signified. A useful way to show this change in the signification of the scream topic is, as with a lot of black metal related material, to compare it to death metal. They are two genres that emerged relatively simultaneously as a way of seeking extreme musical expressions, each with their own respective subcultures. As I mentioned earlier, the vocal scream of death metal is lower pitched and more aggressive. The death metal scream is an expression of physical power and masculinity, like the growls of Entombed's "Left Hand Path", or Cannibal Corpse's "Hammer Smashed Face". The black metal vocal scream is usually higher pitched and less aggressive, in that it lacks the explosive deliverance often found in death metal. The screams that are not high pitched often have a whispering-like snarling quality, but at the same time, they have a sense of volume. The screams are usually longer, and the vocals often have a rubato-like feel. Good examples of these types of screams are Burzum's "Stemmen fra Tårnet" or Darkthrone's "Transilvanian Hunger".

An important part of the scream is the physical aspect of it. The scream is undeniably painful to perform, distorting and straining the vocal cords in a way that is normally only

²⁴ Hence the name growling

used for expressions of extreme emotions. There are extreme metal vocalists that perform screams and growls with virtuosic precision, for instance Dylan Walker of the grindcore band Full of Hell or Randy Blythe of Lamb of God. These singers deliver their vocals in a way that sounds extreme, but controlled, organized and not necessarily painful – because their consistency is bound to be a result of good vocal technique. The scream of black metal has a whole other artistic ideal than these virtuosic performances. The scream of black metal is raw and primal, and not consistent in the same way.

A lot of the character of the screams of early 1990s black metal lies in its tendency to always be at a breaking point, where it sounds like the sometimes-impressive performances come from a strong need for expression rather than technical ability. An example of this is the scream at the three-minute mark on Darkthrone's "Kathaarian Life Code", which sounds almost like a voice crack of a boy hitting puberty. In Burzum's "Ea, Lord of the Depths" similar effects are present throughout the vocal performance, where it sounds like Vikernes is reaching above his technical abilities as a singer, not being able to control his performance. This quality, or rather lack of technical quality, is an important feature in the physicality of the black metal vocal scream, as it brings the listener to associate the black metal scream not only with the pain written into the lyrics being performed but also with the physical pain of the black metal musician when he is performing the scream. The black metal vocal screams connection to actual physical pain rather than virtuosic performances is a very important part of the haunting qualities of the black metal scream. This physicality is one example of how the scream acts as a more complex topic in black metal than in other genres of extreme metal, and I will now try to show the complexities of the topic through a few more examples of vocal screams and more figurative screams.

The screams of Burzum

One of the most characteristic vocal screams of the early Norwegian black metal is that of Burzum. It is one of the most saturated in terms of meanings, signifying some of the core signs and connotations that are at the center of the genre. The focus of this subchapter will be Burzum's self-titled first album. The scream is high pitched, distorted and seems relatively uncontrolled. As mentioned earlier in the thesis, many black metal screams have a rubato-like feel, and that of Burzum is no exception. The instrumental music is pretty straight

forward rhythm-wise, except for the ambient synth tracks. The rubato vocal screams act as a contrast to the steady instrumental backing. The character of the vocal scream is somewhat similar to that of Mayhem’s “Deathcrush”, but the scream of Burzum is more complex and I have therefore chosen it as one of my main objects of analysis for the scream topic.

As mentioned, Burzum’s vocal scream signifies a broad array of the important signs and meanings of the Norwegian black metal genre of the 1990s. It has a sometimes sigh-like sound, with a falling pitch at the end. This effect is present in a lot of Burzum songs, for instance in “Det som engang var” or “Black Spell of Destruction”, and it is a part of a reference to the topic of melancholy which I will discuss in my next subchapter. It signifies several abstract phenomena; the loneliness of the black metal character, pain and hopelessness, and sadness and longing for a more true existence. A lot of the time no lyrics are being sung, just wordless screams. An example of this is the outro of “Spell of Destruction”, where these screams act as an illustration of the theme of the lyrics – a dark spell destroying the world as we know it, and the screams work as a way of strengthening the image of destruction and darkness. The screaming in the song “War” from *Burzum* works in a similar way, but the screams do not signify the same meanings. The screams work both as a musical performance and as an illustration of the lyrics:

This is war

I lie wounded on wintery ground
With hundred of corpses around
Many wounded crawl helplessly around

On the blood red snowy ground

War!

Cries of the (ha, ha) suffering sound
Cries for help to all their dead moms
War!

Many hours of music

Many drops of blood
Many shiverings and now I am dead
And still we must never give up
War! (*Burzum “War” Lyrics*, n.d.)

The scream of the victims of war plays an important role in the lyrics of “War”, and this shows how the scream as a topic also is a part of the lyrical universe of black metal. The vocal scream is connected to the lyrical scream and signifies the suffering and desperation of the victims of war, instead of the melancholic longing of the earlier examples. The vocal performance is more aggressive and rhythmic which connects to the steady beat and riffs of the song, which acts as a way to illustrate the aggression of war, while the scream also signifies the pain of its victims. This is a good example of the complexities of topics, signifying different meanings within the same performance, even the same scream.

The literal screams of Mayhem with Dead and Darkthrone

I am now going to look at a few examples of vocal screams that arguably differs from the high-pitched screams of Burzum, but still signify some of the same meanings. I will focus on three examples; Darkthrone’s albums *Under a Funeral Moon* and *Transilvanian Hunger*, and recordings of Mayhem from 1990 with Pelle “Dead” Ohlin on vocals.

The vocal screams on Darkthrone’s *Under a Funeral Moon* (1993) are more focused around the midrange than for instance that of Burzum. The main example I will use from *Under a Funeral Moon* is the second track, “Summer of the Diabolical Holocaust”. The scream is an aggressive one, and it has the seemingly non-technical, anti-virtuosic aspect that is a defining characteristic of the early black metal scream. The vocals sound guttural as if they are being created deeper down in the chest or stomach. The deeper pitch and more aggressive performance play a part in how the scream is not necessarily connected to the melancholic topic or significant of the sorrow of the black metal character. In the case of “Summer of the Diabolical Holocaust” and most of Darkthrone’s early releases, the scream is signifying violence and aggression.

The same can be said about the vocal screams of Mayhem with Pelle “Dead” Ohlin as lead singer. Though this thesis is mainly concerned with the years 1992 through 1994, I have

decided to include Dead's scream, because many members of the movement, among others Snorre Ruch of Thorns, mention him as a big inspiration (Bråthen, 2020, 18:58). The material available from this period is mainly live recordings and a demo recording, all from 1990. My main example will be the demo recording of "Freezing Moon" and "Necrolust" from the *Live in Leipzig* recording. The vocal scream of Dead is in a lot of ways similar to that of Darkthrone as it is centered around the midrange and the attack and rhythmic aspect of it is somewhat aggressive. On "Necrolust" and other the older, more hectic Mayhem material, the vocals are more aggressive and violent – signifying the same or similar meanings to that of Darkthrone. When it comes to "Freezing Moon", Dead's vocal has an interesting "hollowness"²⁵ to it. This hollowness gives it a quality that the other examples I have shown do not have. In my eyes, it acts together with the mystic side of the black metal character as I find the voice is similar to the stereotypical voice of ghosts or spirits from older horror movies. When the scream signifies the mysterious sides of the black metal character it connects to the black metal character as a figure between the living and the dead. The scream is not a scream of fear of dying like that of Burzum's "War", but rather a scream from a haunting character that is neither among the living nor among the dead.

The instrumental intensity of black metal

I have shown how the scream topic manifests itself in the visual art, lyrics and vocal performances of early Norwegian black metal using a few select examples. I will now show how the scream topic also is a part of the instrumental side of the genre with a special focus on drum and guitar performances and production. The blast beat has been an integral part of black metal since the Norwegian wave of the early 1990s to this day. It is topical in many different forms of extreme metal but signifies different meanings in different genres. In the context of black metal, I consider it a sub-topic of the larger scream topic. Most of the Norwegian black metal releases from 1992 to 1994 that are considered classics today utilize the blast beat in one way or another. As I mentioned in my chapter describing the origins of Norwegian black metal, Darkthrone's *A Blaze in The Northern Sky* is widely considered as the album that pioneered the sound of the genre. The album's opening track "Kathaarian Life

²⁵ By "hollowness" I mean that the screams seem to lack certain lower midrange frequencies and overtones that make them sound less full.

Code” opens with an ambient, eerie intro, resembling what Echard calls the “Gregorian chant-topic” (Echard, 2017p. 37). After this intro, drums, guitar, bass and vocals come in with a wall of sound-like quality.

At the core of this massive sound is the blast beat. The blast beat sounds chaotic and creates an intense, violent sound, filled with aggression. The same musical feature is included in countless songs by both Darkthrone and other central bands of the genre. All Darkthrone’s three releases between 1992 and 1994 feature wide use of blast beats, the same goes for Mayhem’s *De Mysteriis dom Sathanas*, Emperor’s *In the Nightside Eclipse*, and Immortal’s first three albums among others. Tremolo picking on guitars and bass has many of the same qualities; mainly intensity and a certain wall of sound-like effect. Together they form a chaotic and overwhelming sound, and they also have a clear extreme physical aspect to them, which make for violent expressions of sound, feelings and meanings – similar to the other forms of screams I have looked at earlier. Both the blast beat and tremolo picking could be considered topics on their own, but in my opinion, it is useful to think of them as a part of the larger scream topic in the context of 1990s Norwegian black metal. They are both similar to many of the vocal screams of the genre, and the meanings they signify are very similar to that of the more general scream topic. They are extreme, distorted and violent, like the vocal scream, and they also have an element of physical pain to them. These extremely fast instrumental performances mean pushing the instrumental techniques of the performers, and they are most likely exhausting to perform, and could potentially be harmful if not performed in the right way.

The production and technological parts of these early 1990s black metal records are a part of the different topics I am discussing in my thesis. This is also true when it comes to the scream topic. It is not necessarily as obvious as the other areas I have shown in this subchapter, but I find it very interesting, nonetheless. The specific aspect of production that I am referring to when it comes to the scream topic is the distortion of black metal recordings. Distorting and overdriving signals is a key part of the early Norwegian black metal sound. The distortion of the guitars is harsh and focused on the upper mid-range and high end, and the same can be said about the bass sounds. What separates black metal from many other of its contemporary genres is the distortion of not only the guitars and bass but on the vocals,

drums and mix as a whole. When the whole mix is analogically distorted either in post-production or at the input stage, the recorded music gets a set of sonic qualities that are similar to that of a scream – and it all plays into the concept of black metal as a scream itself.

Black metal as a scream

I have now shown how the scream topic is at play in large parts of black metal music, across media and forms of expression – from visual art to vocal performances through lyrics and ending up at instrumental performances and music production techniques. I have shown that the scream as a large, more general topic is a complex one. It is a central part of the history of rock and metal music, and it has different meanings in different contexts. In black metal, it can signify for instance aggression, violence, chaos, pain, longing and melancholy depending on the context in which it works to create meaning. The meaning of the scream is also dependent on what other topics are at play in the relevant work. Sometimes the scream might be a scream of aggression or violence, while it at other times might be a scream of sorrow or desperation. This shows, as I have mentioned, that topics signify different meanings in different contexts, and the interplay between different topics in art also plays a role in how topics are perceived and interpreted. All these different meanings of the scream can be summed up as a sort of existential scream of protest. The scream of black metal, both the literal one and the figurative one, is the black metal character's scream of protest against contemporary society – both when it is a scream of sadness and when it is a scream of violence and aggression. The black metal character of the early 1990s black metal is seeking violent individualism and anti-Christianity. He is in direct opposition to the semi-Lutheran, semi-secular, socialist democratic Norway of its age, and the scream is one of his ways of expressing his frustration and opposition

The melancholic topic

Throughout western history, the concept of melancholy has been a way of describing different mental illnesses, moods and states of mind. As a topic, it is present throughout art history, also in Norwegian black metal. A lot of black metal music contains different elements of melancholy, and I will try to describe these in the course of this subchapter.

The term melancholy has been assigned different meanings over the years. As Telles-Correia and Marques write in their 2015 article “Melancholia before the twentieth century: fear and sorrow or partial insanity?” the most important meanings of melancholia have had to do with either “affective disorders (mainly depressive mood), and abnormal beliefs” (Telles-Correia & Marques, 2015, p. 1). In ancient Greece, melancholy was connected to the humoral pathology of among others Hippocrates, which was concerned with the balance of what was known as the four main body fluids blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. These four fluids were the bodily representative of the four essential elements of the world. Each fluid was connected to a certain set of illnesses and mental states, and a healthy person would have a balanced amount of each of these fluids, known as eukrasia. An imbalance and excess or lack of certain fluids, dyskrasia, would cause illness, physically and/or mentally (Bujalkova, 2001, p. 491). *Melancholia* was thought of as the excess of one of these bodily fluids; black bile. The melancholic was characterized by fear and sadness as the main symptoms (Telles-Correia & Marques, 2015, p. 1). The humoral pathology remained prominent until the breakthrough of more modern cellular pathology in the 1850s (Holck, 2021). Descriptions of the melancholic state began to also include delusions, abnormal beliefs, so-called “partial insanity”, and a sense of monotony in the Middle Ages through to the 18th and 19th centuries before regaining its connection to purely affective symptoms in the 20th century (Telles-Correia & Marques, 2015, p. 2-3).

Today, melancholy is used to describe certain form of depression: usually known as endogenous depression. This kind of depression is characterized by the presence of profound sadness, anhedonia, loss of emotional resonance, vegetative symptoms (insomnia, anorexia, circadian variability in mood), a seasonal pattern, motor retardation and presence of delusions and/or hallucinations. It is thought that the endogenous depression has mainly an organic cause (with several neurobiological alterations, including psychoimmunological), and a better response to medication (and in severe cases electroconvulsive therapy) than the reactive depression (also called neurotic or situational depression). (Telles-Correia & Marques, 2015, p. 3)

As this modern-day definition shows, melancholy has gone from being a vaguely defined form of depressive symptoms and delusions to being an actual concrete diagnosis. As Telles-

Correia and Marques write, it is now used to describe a certain type of severe depression. Profound sadness and lack of emotional responses are at the center of it, as well as weight loss and unfounded feelings of guilt. The diagnosis is connected to an extreme feeling of suffering and it is therefore considered important to treat patients, even though the condition is likely to pass with time (Malt, 2021).

The brief historical description of the history and modern-day pathology of melancholy creates a useful basis for the further discussion of the term. In the everyday language of people not connected to the studies of medicine, psychology, and psychiatry the concept of melancholy is more vague, similar to the more historical descriptions of the term. In its use in daily life, it is not necessarily connected to the actual diagnosis itself, but it encompasses a loose web of various mental states and illnesses related to depressive moods and feelings of sadness and sorrow. In Norwegian, it is strongly connected to the word *svartsinn*, literally translated as black mind, which plays on how many associate darkness with negativity and negative feelings. The etymological origins of the word are not clear to me, but it also brings associations to the humoral body fluids and the excess of black bile as the explanation of melancholic states. The term has a certain undertone of depressive nostalgia as well, and if we read this with the black metal character in mind, *svartsinn* can be used as a way of describing a lot of black metal's longing and depressive themes.

Melancholy as a theme in art history

Melancholy has been a central theme of western art history from the times of the ancient Greek and Roman tragedies. According to Peter Toohey, we find various descriptions of different stages and forms of melancholy in for example Sophocles' *Ajax* and Seneca's *On the Tranquility of the Mind* (Toohey, 1990, p. 152, p. 158). Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* from 1514 is one of the more well-known depictions of a melancholic state. The print depicts a winged female creator or artist, struck by apathy despite there being several items that could provide inspiration and spark creation. The winged figure is accompanied by an angel, and both have dark complexions, which could be seen as a visual expression of their excess of black bile. An interesting aspect of Dürer's print is the connection between melancholy and the artist. According to the website of the Metropolitan Museum, the humor of melancholy

was linked to artistic and creative genius in the renaissance (*Melencolia I*, 2022). In other words, the melancholic humor became the artistic humor.

Another example of melancholy in art is Shakespeare's Ophelia. Ophelia is a naïve, lonely character, torn between her father's instructions on how to act as a woman in court and her feelings for Hamlet who rejects her and murders her father. These situations drive her to melancholy and disillusion, and she ends up drowning herself in a stream. John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* from 1851-1852 depicts the body of Ophelia floating downstream, with a large dress surrounding her, and large amounts of flowers with different symbolic meanings on both her dress and along the riverbank. Her eyes and mouth are halfway open, giving her an empty expression, which further accentuates the fact that she has passed away without giving her the look of a corpse – it retains her humanity after she has died. The image illustrates the tragic fate of Ophelia at the hands of the men around her and shows her innocence and melancholic state.

Melancholy also has a long history in music history. An example of this is John Bennet's madrigal "Weep, O Mine Eyes", characterized by a low tempo melody in A melodic minor. The text for the madrigal is a short verse describing the despair of the lyrical I, wishing to drown in its own tears. Different forms of laments, among others Monteverdi's "Tu se' Morta" from *Orfeo* or "When I am Laid In Earth" from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* are also expressions of melancholy, by operatic characters mourning the passing of their loved ones. Melancholy could also be used to describe the relationship between Tristan and Isolde, the main character of the poem *Tristan and Isolde* which has been used as inspiration and basis for countless works of art, maybe most notably Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. It is a story of two separated lovers who die in despair. The musical expression of this melancholic state and the despair which awaits the lovers is perhaps most apparent in the prelude of act one. It is characterized by a slow and expressive melody and visiting elements of atonality. The melody is a foreshadowing of the hopelessness, sorrow and tragic ending that Tristan and Isolde experience throughout the libretto.

Edvard Munch also worked with melancholy in his paintings and made several paintings with *Melankoli* as title. One of them, originally called *Aften* from 1892, depicts a male character, holding his head in his hand, facing away from a house, boat and a pier.

Three distant characters can be seen standing on the pier, and this shows the melancholic figure turning his back on society and human interaction and into loneliness. There are other versions of the same motive with different color themes, but they all consist of the same basic figures and express different nuances of the melancholic state. In 1900-1901, Munch did another exploration of the melancholic theme, also titled *Melankoli*. It shows a female character sitting in the corner of a room, facing away from the room's window and the landscape and outside world. The woman has an empty, blank stare and seems completely struck by apathy, only to concentrate on the feelings of sadness and sorrow within her. Melancholy continues to be an active and central theme in more modern art as well. A good example of this is Lars von Trier's 2011 movie *Melancholia*, depicting a recently married woman's depression and apathy in an apocalyptic time, where the world is getting destroyed by a giant rogue planet. The film draws on the large tradition of melancholy in western art. Millais' painting is imitated in the trailer, with the main character is floating downstream in an intertextual reference to both Millais and Shakespeare, and the soundtrack of the film is mainly using Wagner's prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*.

As I have shown in this brief overview of melancholy in western art, it has been a source of inspiration and motives for artists for thousands of years, and the depression and existential sorrow illustrated in these examples (and countless other works of art) is a key part of western art history. It is not isolated to one form of art or a certain set of musical, literary, or visual features, it is present throughout history in different forms and expressions. I have also shown how melancholy is connected to the humor and mindset of artists and creatives. I will now go on to show how these historical aspects of melancholy manifest themselves in early Norwegian black metal, mainly through music and lyrics, and how melancholy works as a topic within the genre and subculture.

Melancholic artistic features

A few musical features appear to me to be more tied to the melancholic topics than others. In western musical traditions, major keys are mostly associated with more positive feelings and themes, and minor keys are often associated with more somber feelings and themes. This is culturally determined and originates from earlier art music, and especially

madrigals of the 16th century according to Yale professor Craig Wright (Wright, n.d.)²⁶. The minor key and other forms of minor modes are key features that define melancholic musical features. Another melancholic feature is a musical sign; the musical sigh. Because it resembles the human sigh, a musical sigh is an iconic sign. It consists of a descending melodic line – and in its simplest form, it is formed by a descending half step, often in minor keys (Tolbert, 2001, p. 88). The musical sigh is present through large parts of western musical history, both in the aforementioned “Weep, O Mine Eyes” and Wagner’s prelude – and in forms of popular music, for example early Norwegian black metal. Other musical features that are examples of melancholic features are monotony and drone-like passages, signifying the monotonous and resigned nature of the melancholic character or patient.

Lyrical features connected to melancholy are more apparent and available. Lyrics about themes of sorrow, longing, despair and hopelessness are common in many forms of black metal. These lyrics show an array of aspects of the melancholic state of the black metal character, but sometimes they lack one or more of these features, creating more complex meanings, connecting them to other topics which might be more related to for instance violence or action. All these artistic features, both musical and lyrical are present in early Norwegian black metal, and I will show this in the following analysis

The dialectic relationship between the melancholic and the scream

The attentive reader might have noticed a certain form of opposition between the scream topic and the melancholic topic. The scream is at its core violent and expressive, while the melancholic is often expressed more quietly and impressionistically. The opposition between these two topics is not an absolute, binary opposition, but rather they stand in a dialectical relationship to each other. For this thesis, I’m using the term dialectical in a simple form, not the more complex theories of Hegel, Marx or Althusser. A dialectical relationship is formed by two opposing parts, in this case, the expressive scream topic, and the quieter melancholy topic, who in dialogue with each other is connected to a larger, deeper concept or idea. I have already shown how the scream topic and melancholic topic are connected, with the scream in some cases signifying a form of melancholy and sadness expressed by the black

²⁶ I realise that this could be up for debate, but I have settled with this for this thesis for the sake of simplicity.

metal character. When these two topics appear together, the deeper concept they are referring to is the existential crisis of the black metal character. The black metal character's inability and unwillingness to fit into his contemporary society, and his negotiation of life, death and the spaces between are expressed through both violent and expressive screams, both literal and figurative – but also through sadness, hopelessness and despair; the melancholic.

Melancholic musical features in Ulver's "I Troldskog Faren Vild" and "Soelen Gaaer Bag Aase Need"

"I Troldskog Faren Vild" and «Soelen Gaaer Bag Aase Need», from Ulver's 1994 album *Bergtatt* have a range of melancholic musical features that I will use as examples of how the melancholic topic manifests itself in 1990s black metal. The clear and easily identifiable minor key of the two songs stands in contrast to other songs based on chromatics and diminished scales. The chromatic, dissonant, and diminished riffs, for example found on Darkthrone's "Where Cold Winds Blow", have a more chaotic and aggressive nature. By using these forms of relatively unconventional and dissonant scales and harmonic structures, the tonality and tonic of the song are not as clear and established as in a more traditional major/minor situation²⁷. When artists use unconventional and dissonant harmonic structures, the listener does not necessarily have clear associations of the meanings being conveyed, or at least the harmonic elements of the music are not one of the elements that work to express these meanings. The minor key used on these two Ulver songs on the other hand gives the listener clear associations to a set of more somber meanings being conveyed, as I showed earlier.

«I Troldskog faren Vild» – main riff

²⁷ Unconventional scales in the context of western popular music, as they are not based on diatonics and functional harmony.

The vocals, specifically on “I Troldskog Faren Vild” and the chorus of “Soelen Gaaer Bag Aase Need” are monotonous and resigned clean vocals, resembling that of earlier church music. This brings in the aforementioned Gregorian chant topic, but the rounded and hollow timbre gives the vocals a sombre tone, bringing associations to laments. A relatively simple melody in minor, without large jumps in intervals, further works to support the melancholic tone. The vocals I refer to here are dynamically static. This works as an illustration of the resigned nature and hopelessness of the melancholic character – and plays on what Telles-Correia and Marques call “loss of emotional resonance” (Telles-Correia & Marques, 2015, p. 3).

Both songs have parts with acoustic nylon string guitars playing minor chord progressions, similar to the riffs and progressions played by the full electric band. These acoustic passages are dynamically flat, similar to the clean vocal performances. The same can be said about the full band arrangements. The instrumental aspect of the music is characterized by a limited dynamic range within the band, especially on “I Troldskog Faren Vild”²⁸. Here, the full band is playing throughout the song, except for the acoustic passage starting at 5:40. The main dynamic difference is in the bass drum pattern, which is alternating between all eight notes and a basic shuffle pattern. Because of how the record is mixed, with guitars and bass being in the center of the mix, these differences do not make a huge impact on the dynamic range of the song. The relatively limited dynamic range of the songs is, like the clean vocal performance, also connected to the resigned nature of the melancholic character through its monotony. I will also look at the album that these two examples are taken from when it comes to the landscape topics in my next topic subchapter.

Melancholy in Burzum’s *Filosofem*

Burzum’s album *Filosofem* is one of the clearest examples of the melancholic topic in early Norwegian black metal²⁹. It has a longing and atmospheric quality to it, with stretched out drone-like composition and lyrics about sorrow and darkness. It also has longer, more ambient oriented tracks emphasizing the contemplative, resigned nature of the melancholic

²⁸ “Soelen Gaaer Bag Aase Need» also has the scream topic explicitly active with both vocals and instrumental scream along with both the melancholic and landscape topics as well.

²⁹ The album was recorded in 1993, but not released until 1996. I have decided to include it in my paper because of how the recording date is in the scope of my thesis.

topic. The first example that I am going to look at from *Filosofem* is “Gebrechlichkeit I”, or “Decrepitude I” depending on the version of the record. The song takes the two-chord element of the Darkthrone songs mentioned above even further. There are only two chords, both minor, for the duration of the song, and the main movement, both harmonically, rhythmically and melodically is a five note synth pattern. The main elements of the soundscape on “Gebrechlichkeit I” are guitar, synth and vocals. The absence of driving drums, mixed with the repetitive motives and lack of dynamics contributes to the standstill-like quality of the song. The drone-like monotony and lack of rhythmic, harmonic, melodic or dynamic development plays with the concept of music as a time-based form of art, and create a static musical work. This static, drone-like quality signifies the same sort of melancholic resignation found in the songs by Ulver that I mentioned above. Another interesting aspect of the musical side of the melancholic topic in “Gebrechlichkeit I” is the synth sound. It is practically without modulation or vibrato, almost sterile. It also has a hollow and resigned quality, resembling the vocal timbre of the clean vocals on “I Troldskog Faren Vild”. This synth sound is not necessarily signifying the Gregorian chant topic, but it is signifying the melancholic character’s lack of emotional response by being un-expressive and resigned.

I will now take a look at the lyrics of “Gebrechlichkeit I”, and how they are a key element of signifying the melancholic topic in the song. The most apparent meaning of the lyrics is the description of death:

Tears from the eyes so cold,
Tears from the eyes
In the grass so green.
As I lie here, the burden is being lifted once and for all,
Once and for all.
Beware of the light, it may take you away
To where no evil dwells.
It will take you away, for all eternity.
Night is so beautiful
We need her as much as we need Day

(Burzum “*Decrepitude I*” Lyrics, n.d.)

The lyrics have a depressive tone, with tears, coldness and darkness being strong presences. The way in which the tears of the character contrast the green grass shows how the black metal character is ignoring what is often considered beautiful and peaceful. The description of death as a process of lifting a burden suggests that the character is experiencing life as a burden, and welcoming death as a relief – which is a strong reference to the melancholic topic. The line warning against the light creates an interesting duality. It is a reference to the idea of people seeing light when they are dying, but it is also a direct warning from the black metal character. “Beware of the light, it may take you away to where no evil dwells” – in other words, avoid the light if you want to live as a true black metal character, embracing evil as a natural part of existence.

The opening track of the album, *Dunkelheit*, has many similar features but is put in a more traditional rock instrumentation. Compared to other black metal songs, the tempo is slow, with less intense instrumental performances – which suggests that the song is signifying a less violent side of black metal. The minimalistic composition is based around a core figure: the musical sigh. The main riff consists of two descending figures based on minor chords that act as musical sighs, giving the song a droning, melancholic character. The lyrics also play on a lot of the same ideas as the musical side of the song:

When night falls

She cloaks the world

In impenetrable darkness

A chill rises

From the soil

And contaminates the air

Suddenly...

Life has new meaning

(Burzum “Dunkelheit” Lyrics, n.d.)

The main themes of these lyrics are darkness and cold – both literally and figuratively. The darkness topic is present in a lot of black metal art, and so is the cold topic. The way the darkness and cold topics work in the lyrics to “Dunkelheit” is by describing both the concrete concept of nightfall, but also to signify the darkness and coldness of the black metal character’s mind. Considering the minimalistic, moody musical context in which this signifying takes place, we see that the darkness and coldness signified is referring to the melancholic as the senior topic. Another interesting aspect is how the lyrics are equally minimalistic to the music, keeping in mind that the song is over seven minutes long. By consisting of these few short lines, and them being repeated, the form of the lyrics echoes the form of the composition. Both these formal aspects of the song further support the resigned, hopeless condition of the melancholic black metal character.

Melancholy on Darkthrone’s *Transylvanian Hunger* and *Panzerfaust*

I will now take a look at how the melancholy topic appears in the works of Darkthrone, specifically on their albums *Transylvanian Hunger* and *Panzerfaust*³⁰. I will focus on two songs from *Panzerfaust*: “En Vind Av Sorg” and “Hans Siste Vinter”, as well as the title track from *Transylvanian Hunger*. The main musical element of “En Vind Av Sorg” is a riff based on two minor chords, with descending melodic lines played on top of them. The instrumental part of the song is relatively static, with blast beats and tremolo picking as its defining features. This form of static wall of sound arrangement connects to the scream topic, but it is mainly signifying the melancholic topic. The static minor riffs signify the same aspect of the melancholy topic as the monotony found on Ulver’s album: the resigned melancholic character.

«En Vind Av Sorg» - main riff

The musical notation shows a main riff for the song "En Vind Av Sorg". It is written for two electric guitars in 4/4 time. The top staff features a melodic line of eighth notes on the 16th fret, with a tremolo picking effect. The bottom staff provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords, also using tremolo picking. The chord progression is Em, G#m, Em, G#m.

³⁰ *Panzerfaust* was not released until 1995, but it was recorded early 1994 according to the liner notes. I have decided to include it because the recording date is within the main scope of my thesis.

The lyrics of the song are also referring to the melancholic topic:

En vind av sorg

La seg tungt omkring

De eldstes hus

En eim av frost

På en allerede frossen sjel

Et savn av hyllest

Fra disse de edles sinn

Minnes de svundne tider

Et hav av tid

Har gått siden den gang

Norrønes tro og skikk

Til skogen hjem en kom

Og trakk luften inn

Her lukter det Kristen manns blod

Igler på våre hjerter

(Darkthrone “En Vind Av Sorg” Lyrics, n.d.)

The lyrics describe a deep and profound sorrow connected to the loss and decay of Norse culture and beliefs, mixed with images of cold, winter and forests. The melancholic topic is in other words appearing with both topics connected to Norse mythology, nature and landscape topics, violence, and anti-Christian themes. The lyrics have a longing and mournful tone in the first three stanzas, before taking a more aggressive turn in the fourth stanza, referring to the smell of Christian blood. The use of “tung” to describe the wind of sorrow surrounding the house of elders also connects to the Norwegian concept of “tungsinn”³¹, an old term for depressive, melancholic moods. The black metal character with “tungsinn” is weighed down by his melancholic state. The reference to a frozen soul in the second stanza is also

³¹ Very similar meaning to the term mentioned earlier in the chapter, “svartsinn”.

interesting with regard to the melancholic topic. It can be used both to describe a soul of a cold, dead human and also to describe the passiveness of the melancholic character, as he acts numb and resigned.

The basic compositional tool used in “En Vind Av Sorg” can also be found in “Hans Siste Vinter” and “Transilvanian Hunger”. Both songs have the same type of minor riff, based on two chords, along with the static, mid-tempo blast beat and tremolo picking. On “Hans Siste Vinter” the second riff acts as a way to emphasize the melancholic, minor tone of the main riff. The main riff is based on the I minor and bVI major chords, while the second riff is based around the bVII major and the bVI major. When the main riff returns after the second riff, there is a lift up to the tonic, I minor chord, which puts further emphasis on this riff - which is the most stereotypical melancholic riff of the two because of its strong minor tonality. In all three songs, the wall of sound-like quality of the instrumental arrangements creates an atmospheric soundscape, with simple minor movements, and this drone-like quality gives the songs a certain contemplative aspect. This is also referring to the resigned and melancholic black metal character through its monotony in the same way it does in Ulver’s music.

«Hans Siste Vinter» - riff A

Musical notation for riff A of "Hans Siste Vinter". It consists of two staves for Electric Guitar. The top staff shows a melodic line with notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with a double bar line and repeat sign. Above the staff are chord markings Bbm and Gb. The bottom staff shows a bass line with chords Bbm and Gb, with a double bar line and repeat sign. Both staves are marked with "tremolo picked 16th notes".

«Hans Siste Vinter» - riff B

Musical notation for riff B of "Hans Siste Vinter". It consists of three staves for Electric Guitar. The first two staves show a melodic line with notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with a double bar line and repeat sign. Above the staff are chord markings Ab and Gb. The bottom staff shows a bass line with chords Ab and Gb, with a double bar line and repeat sign. All staves are marked with "tremolo picked 16th notes". A finger number "5" is written above the first staff.

The melancholic state as a part of the identity of the black metal character

All these examples of the melancholic topic in early 1990s black metal are connected to the alienation of the black metal character. The black metal character is, as I mentioned, opposing the humanity of modern western society, and therefore also struggling to fit in – becoming alienated. The black metal character turns his back to society in the same way that the figure in Munch's *Melankoli* turns his back on his community. By connecting the alienated black metal character to the melancholic topic, and the melancholic state as the mood of the artist, the black metal character becomes a Romantic artistic genius, enlightened, but misunderstood and living outside of society. The melancholic topic is used to express the protest and alienation both when it comes to the depressive mood of the black metal character and his alienation, but also as a form of longing. This longing can be a longing for death, but also a longing for what the black metal character sees as a more true and honest existence: the idolized and Romanticized ancient Norse culture. Lyrics working with themes of Norse culture and mythology are common in Norwegian black metal, especially in the works of Burzum and Darkthrone, for example in "En Vind Av Sorg". This expression of melancholy over the loss of these cultural ideals is an important part of the identity of the black metal character. His goal is to reach an existence in which these Romanticized Norse values are the ideals, and he creates his art to express these goals, and church burnings and anti-Christian activism can be seen as a way of trying to provoke change.

Another important aspect of the melancholic topic and black metal identity is the winter. The home of the black metal character is in the Romanticized Nordic wilderness, which I will look further into in my next subchapter. Black metal art is focused on winter and coldness – suggesting that the black metal character is existing in a constant state of winter. By connecting this constant state of Nordic winter to the melancholic topic, we can say that the melancholic state of the black metal character has connections to the concept of winter depressions. The idea of winter depression is a known presence in Nordic cultures and according to Bjørn Bjorvatn at Bergen University, it is more common the further away from the equator one lives. According to Bjorvatn, winter depressions are caused by the lack of daylight in the far ends of the northern (or southern) hemispheres during the winter, which disturbs the body's internal clock, leading to depressive symptoms (Bjorvatn, 2021). When the black metal character exists in a constant dark, cold winter – he also goes into the wintery

mental state: the winter depression. While winter depressions do not seem to be as severe of a diagnosis as melancholia³², the black metal character exaggerates this mental state, as he exaggerates all aspects of life, because exaggeration is a key part of his existence. This part of his mental state is then expressed through the melancholic topic – and the melancholic state is a part of the identity of the black metal character, which in turn connects him to a longstanding tradition of depicting melancholy in western art.

As I mentioned earlier, the tension between these the scream and melancholic topics creates interesting and complex forms of expression. The contrast between the violent nature of the scream and the depressive, moody melancholy topic is not only emphasized from one artist, album or song to another but within the same songs, the same verses and the same bars. Both these topics can be at play simultaneously as I have shown with the melancholic nature of some screams, or with the screaming of melancholic lyrics. This is an example of how the tension and contrast between the two topics allow a broader spectrum of meanings to be expressed within the same musical or artistic features. It shows how the black metal character is protesting something else, or protesting at another level than other forms of protest music. The black metal character is protesting the humanity of society rather than a political point of view.

The nature topics

As I mentioned in my previous subchapter, the ideal home of the black metal character is his stylized and Romanticized image of the Nordic wilderness. This part of my analysis is dedicated to what I have called the nature topics and will cover different aspects of the landscape forming and surrounding black metal music. Whereas the previous subchapters on the scream and the melancholic topic have been more about a certain, specific aspect of black metal expression, this subchapter is concerned with a more complex set of topics. I am going to look at how different aspects of nature and natural phenomena appear as topics in black metal art and how it is an important part of the black metal expression. The two main nature topics that I am going to look into are the forest topic and the winter topic. Both

³² At least this is the impression I, as a non-medically trained person get, comparing the descriptions of the diagnoses given by Bjorvatn and Telles-Correia and Marques.

musical compositions, sonic characteristics, visual art and lyrics within the black metal universe are connected to these different aspects of the nature topic, and I will now show what sort of meanings these topics are signifying. I will also connect this to both the condition and the identity of the black metal character, as he is at the core of my analysis³³.

Nature in Norwegian art from the 19th century

Norwegian and Nordic nature is often thought of as sublime and overwhelming, making it a suitable material for expressive and dramatic art. Large mountains, deep fjords and glaciers – along with a long coastline makes it varied, and according to some, also very characteristic. Norwegian landscape and nature have been an important part of different art movements throughout Norwegian art history, but especially since the national Romantics of the 19th century. Since the late medieval period, Norway had not been an independent sovereign state, but rather governed as a part of the Kalmar Union and later Denmark (Salvesen et al., 2022; Tor Ragnar Weidling & Njåstad, 2022). Following the creation of the Norwegian constitution of 1814, inspired by the French and American Revolutions, and other nation building efforts, artists started depicting and working with material that was supposedly *specifically* Norwegian. Norway was now under partly Swedish rule, but the idea of a completely independent Norwegian national state was gaining momentum. Inspired by Johann Gottfried von Herder’s idea of the “Volksgeist”, artists, writers and thinkers started an effort to collect and write down what we now call the folk culture, often focusing on traditions and customs in more rural and poorer areas rather than the often Europeanized, bourgeois cities (Vold, 2022). The Norwegian farmer or at least the bourgeois’ idea of the Norwegian farmer and his culture became the blueprint of the specifically Norwegian culture. The rural Norwegians’ long traditions of folk tales, dances, music, arts and crafts, and building and construction created a platform upon which the idea of the Norwegian national culture could be built (Vold, 2022).

³³ I realize that the nature topics invite aspects from modern ecology into this paper. It would be very interesting to do an in-depth analysis of the relationship between black metal and ecology within the context of topic theory, but this is unfortunately outside the scope of this thesis. The book *Melanchology*. (2014), edited by Scott Wilson and published on Zero Books give a lot of interesting insights into the relationship between black metal, melancholy, and ecology. I will briefly touch on themes from modern ecology through William Cronon’s article “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”.

In literature, this manifested itself in descriptions of wildlife and nature in the form of travel diaries, poems, short stories or short novels, and the collection of folk tales. The famous collections of folk tales by Asbjørnsen and Moe were released in the 1840s, based on their reworkings of a large number of folk tales (Beyer, 2019). Poets like Johan Sebastian Welhaven described Norwegian nature and folk culture, along with Andreas Munch (Vold, 2022). Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's farmers' tales, are perhaps the most well-known example of Norwegian national Romantics within the literature. Written as short stories or shorter novels, they are tales of young people in a rural environment, often in a transitional period between young and adult. The most well-known examples are *Synnøve Solbakken* and *Faderen* (Undheim, 2020). Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* is often considered a humorous, almost ironic take on the national Romantic direction of literature and art in Norway in the mid 1800s³⁴. If we look at national Romantic literature in the context of black metal, we see that Ulver for instance used old folk tales as the main inspiration for the lyrics on *Bergatt*.

In visual art, the specifically Norwegian national Romantics are often associated with the works of Adolph Tiedemand, Hans Gude, and Johan Christian Dahl. These painters worked with Norwegian nature and folk culture as their main subject matters. Paintings of fjords and mountains, as well as life and folk culture in the valleys of Norway, characterize a lot of their output from the mid 1800s (Vold, 2022). Another Norwegian artist often associated with the national Romantic movement is Theodor Kittelsen. Although his most known works were created between the 1880s and the 1910s, which many would say is after the wave of national Romantics that the aforementioned artists belonged to, his works are unmistakably connected to the original Norwegian movement. He is known for his illustrations of Asbjørnsen and Moe's folk tales, as well as his illustrations and drawings to other books of the time. His work has also been used as illustrations for several black metal albums, which I will come back to later. A lot of his work is connected to folk culture and myths, like trolls and other creatures found in superstition and the time – blending nature and folk culture (Kalleklev, 2021).

³⁴ Edvard Grieg composed the music for the staged version of *Peer Gynt*, and it is interesting to notice how the music does not necessarily convey the same distance to the national Romantic movement as the play does.

The most well-known composers within the world of art music connected to the Norwegian national Romantics of the 19th century are Halfdan Kjerulf, Rikard Nordraak Ole Bull, and of course, Edvard Grieg. Kjerulf is by many considered the first Norwegian composer to bring elements of traditional folk music into an art music context, an important aspect of the music of Norwegian national Romantics (Andersen, 2021b). Ole Bull's main work was as a performing violinist, but his compositional work further embraced the Norwegian traditional music – and according to snl.no, he was a great inspiration to Edvard Grieg (Andersen, 2021a).

Out of the composers mentioned here, Edvard Grieg is the most widely known, both within Norway and abroad. His catalogue of works is vast, and many, if not most of his works are related to the idea of the national Romantic Norway. Grieg mixed more common Romantic art music ideals with traditional folk music in a certain harmonic context, giving his music a distinctive sound. The traditional Norwegian folk music inspired many of his melodies and motives, both directly and indirectly and folk tales and adventures served as inspiration for lyrics for many of his pieces (Benestad & Andersen, 2021). In his book *Grieg: Music, landscape and Norwegian identity*, Daniel Grimley looks into the connection between Grieg's music, the Norwegian landscape represented in the music, and the idea of a Norwegian identity. When looking at Waldemar Thrane's *Fjeldeventyret* Grimley notes that folk music is evoking landscape topics through association with the countryside and nature (Grimley, 2006). Another interesting example is how Grimley looks at Grieg's "Gangar" from *Lyric Pieces, Book 5, Op. 54*. Grimley shows how "Gangar" can be understood as landscape music in several ways – especially through two aspects. The first one is how it is a reference to a cultural concept, a "pictorial representation of Norwegian folk life" (Grimley, 2006). The gangar is both a folk dance and a folk music form, connecting it to nature through association with peasant lifestyles and the landscape in which these cultural events happen. The other landscape aspect present in the "Gangar" is the repetitive nature of the rhythmic patterns and pitch. This repetitive nature "creates a partial suspension of regular musical time, and encourages the listener's psychological conversion of time into space through the mapping out of highly regular musical units" (Grimley, 2006). By converting time into space – and music appearing in space instead of time, the listener has to create a form of mental landscape in which the music plays out. Grimley also points out how echoing motives in

music signify mountainous landscapes (Grimley, 2006). All these references to landscapes in Grieg's music are a part of the creation of a specifically Norwegian identity through music, as all these references are references to concepts and images that are often thought of as specifically Norwegian.

Beyond national Romanticism

The art of the national Romantic period had a very clear and specific project in being a part of a nation building effort by constructing a specific Norwegian culture. By focusing on rural and peasant culture and impressive and sublime depictions of nature, it contributed to the image many today have of Norwegian culture and traditions. It is important to notice that this art was mainly created by the upper classes of Norwegian society, living in the larger cities, and it was therefore created from an outsider's point of view. The values and ideas conveyed in the art had been streamlined and approved to fit the world view of the upper classes – creating a Romanticized image of both Norwegian nature and life in the Norwegian countryside. This depiction and representation of Norwegian nature and landscapes can be seen as naïve and simplistic – and the national Romantic project and movement created counterreactions. Even though the period we think of as the national Romantic period in Norwegian art and culture ended in the 1870s, some of the ideas and concepts from the period remained relevant and found other forms and continue to do so to this date.

I do not have time to do a deep dive into the dynamics at play regarding the creation or construction of national identities, as it is outside the scope of this project. However, I think it is interesting to notice that some of the ideas of Norwegian identity that gained traction in the mid 1800s are still present in Norwegian culture to this day. The supposedly deep connection between the farmer and nature, both when it comes to livestock, land, and nature as a concept is a part of the image of the Norwegian farmer. The real or imagined connection between nature, especially Norwegian mountain and forest landscapes, and the Norwegian people is a large part of Norwegian culture and is seen as specifically Norwegian. This connection to nature is also at the core of Norwegian hiking and cabin culture, as well as the sporting side of culture; many Norwegians take great pride in the performances of athletes in winter sports.

In Norwegian art following the national Romantic period, the connection to nature has continued to be developed. One example is Knut Hamsun's 1894 novel *Pan*, where lieutenant Thomas Glahn spends his summer in a hunting cabin in Norland, the northern part of Norway. Nature and landscape topics are strong presences in the novel, creating the geographical framework for the book, but they also act as symbolic descriptions and references of mental states and the narrative itself (Hamsun, 2009). Another example is in the lyrical works of Tarjei Vesaas, for example his poem *Snø og Granskog*, which I will look at later, in the context of 1990s Norwegian black metal. Musically, the use of traditional folk music and instruments is relatively common in Norwegian popular music. Artists like Ingebjørg Bratland, Odd Nordstoga, and Valkyrien Allstars are examples of artists creating a form of crossover music, heavily inspired by traditional folk music, but within the context of more modern popular music.

The relationship between wilderness and civilization

At first glance, one might be tempted to say that the wilderness is a stark contrast to the structured environment of the civilized, modern cities that many live in. Navigating through the chaotic nature of the forest or skiing in the extreme weather of the highlands in the winter might seem like the complete opposite of a subway commute in a metropolitan area. In many ways it is, and for many people living in modern society, these risky wildlife endeavors are thought of as something honorable and true, compared to the habit-driven daily life in the city.

In his 1996 article “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”, William Cronon looks at how he thinks the image of the wilderness has been created and how it works in modern society. First, he describes how the wilderness up until the 18th century had been seen as something more or less useless, a barren area, and how it in some biblical context had been connected to sin and moral decay (Cronon, 1996). When the Romantic movement and its artists started to express their admiration for the wilderness and the power and beauty of nature, they connected it to the idea of the sublime. There were in other words areas in nature with the power to create strong emotional responses, creating feelings of something sublime. These places could be places of beauty, like mountains or valleys, or places of pure energy, like thunderclouds or waterfalls – but the thing they had in

common was a certain aspect of something grand. When these parts of nature were connected to the idea of the sublime, they became a place to see God, or as Cronon puts it “a symbol of God’s presence on earth” (Cronon, 1996). Cronon then goes on to describe how the idea of the American wilderness also is connected to the ideal of the frontier, as the last place for individualism – in a way a nostalgic concept. The main point Cronon is making is that the idea of the wilderness is a construction:

But the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world. The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living - urban folk for whom food comes from a supermarket or a restaurant instead of a field, and for whom the wooden houses in which they live and work apparently have no meaningful connection to the forests in which trees grow and die. Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the Romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land. (Cronon, 1996)

Cronon shows that the virgin, uninhabited American wilderness is a construction, as natives lived there long before white settlers came to the continent – it was hardly untouched, and the people worshipping its beauty and purity were, and are, mostly wealthy tourists with time and capital to spare. These people are living detached from the wilderness, and therefore are more susceptible to the wilderness myth, while people who depend on nature on a more direct level have a more nuanced relationship to it.

This point makes itself relevant to the discussion on black metal and nature. As I have established, the black metal character is a Romantic figure, longing for a more true and pure existence, and he sees the Romanticized Nordic wilderness as the place to find this existence. The black metal character aims to live his ideal life in the Nordic wilderness, a place

seemingly untouched by the society he so fiercely opposes. By idealizing the Nordic wilderness, he partakes in the exact same dynamic of construction that American wilderness tourists do and that the rest of the hike and ski-loving Norwegian society does. The musicians and artists that try to play the role of black metal characters are middle class, white men, who grew up in and live in one of the nations in the world with the highest standard of living. They are not the ones directly depending on nature in the same way as farmers, fishermen, or Sami reindeer herders are. They do not have the same nuanced relationship with nature – they have only their Romanticized ideal, created by the centuries of mythologization through art and thought about Nordic and Norwegian nature by the society they are trying to escape.

The winter topic and the idea of coldness in black metal music

I am now going to look at how the winter topic is a part of 1990s Norwegian black metal, what sort of meaning it conveys, and connect this to the general idea of coldness in black metal. I will first look at a specific lyric example; Mayhem's "Freezing Moon", as it is perhaps one of the most well-known songs from the movement³⁵. I will then look into how the sonic aspect of 1990s black metal ties into the winter topic. I will then go on to show how winter and coldness appear as a recurring topic in lyrics by bands like Darkthrone and Burzum, before connecting it to the black metal character and his characteristics.

The case of "Freezing Moon"

"Freezing Moon" is in my eyes one of the best examples of the complexity of topics in early Norwegian black metal, as it covers a vast array of topics and meanings. Everything from the scream topic to the darkness topic and the winter topic. It also covers a range of central compositional and musical aspects as well. In covering both a range of important musical features as well as a range of central topics and meanings, it appears as a good example of the standardized early Norwegian black metal sound. I will now focus mainly on the lyrics of the song:

³⁵ At the time of writing this in April 2022, the song has over 11 million streams on Spotify, while the rest of Mayhem's five most played songs have streaming numbers ranging from 2,7 million up to 4,8 million. The song is also mentioned and practically praised in the documentary series *Helvete* (Bråthen, 2020b)

Everything here is so cold
Everything here is so dark
I remember it as from a dream
In the corner of this time

Diabolic shapes float by
Out from the dark
I remember it was here I died
By following the freezing moon

It's night again
Night you beautiful
I please my hunger
On living Humans
Night of hunger
Follow its call
Follow the freezing moon

Darkness is growing
Eternity opens
The cemetery lights up again
As in ancient times
Fallen souls die behind my steps
By following the freezing moon

(Freezing Moon Lyrics, n.d.)

In the first stanza, the main focus is on cold and darkness. The character is surrounded by absolute darkness and coldness, connecting it to the winter topic, and the mention of dreaming also shows a form of Romantic aspect, as the Romantic character is in many ways a dreamer.

In the second stanza, the main theme of the song is clarified: death. This shows that the coldness and darkness, i.e the winter topic is also connected to the concept of death in black metal art. The title of the song is also very interesting. By characterizing the moon as freezing, the contrast between the moon and the sun is emphasized. The sun is warming and full of energy, signifying life, while the moon is the opposite. The moon is connected to a web of associations and meanings that usually have more negative connotations. Through its appearance at nighttime, the moon is connected to darkness, only giving off a pale light, similar to the color of the black metal character's corpse paint. Traditionally, the moon has been associated with lunacy and madness, as well as the transformation of humans into vampires and werewolves (Arkowitz & Lilienfeld, 2009). It is possible to read the lyrics on "Freezing Moon" as the description of the afterlife, or maybe the life of someone undead. The character leads a cannibalistic life – neither dead nor living, and the lyrics describes the life of someone transformed into a (super)natural creature by the moon. This connects to the desired transformation of musicians and artists into the black metal character, a creature of the night, so to speak. In being a creature of the night, the black metal character is a cold character, living in the light of the "Freezing Moon".

Examples of the winter topic and coldness in Darkthrone and Burzum lyrics

As one of the main criteria for something to be a topic is that it is conventionalized, I will now go on to show other examples of the winter topic in early Norwegian black metal. I will not do any in depth analyses, the goal is rather to show that the winter topic is in fact an established topic within the genre. The winter topic appears widely in song titles and lyrics by both Darkthrone and Burzum. Darkthrone's "Where Cold Winds Blow", describing the death of a warrior, uses pictures like "To the Domain of Hate – Where Cold Winds Blew" (*Darkthrone Lyrics: A Blaze in the Northern Sky*, n.d.) and riding the "North Wind". The idea of the Nordic is also important in "A Blaze in the Northern Sky", and here it is also connected to the and signifying among other things, the winter topic – through the association of the Nordic and northern to the cold and the winter (*Darkthrone Lyrics: A Blaze in the Northern Sky*, n.d.). On Burzum's self-titled album, the winter topic appears on several tracks as well. An example of this is the "Blood red snowy ground" on the track "War" as I mentioned earlier in the thesis, as well as the coldness described in "A Lost Forgotten Sad Spirit" and "My Journey to the Stars" (*Burzum Lyrics: Burzum*, n.d.). Similar examples can

also be found in Darkthrone’s “Skald av Satans Sol”, “Transilvanian Hunger” or “En Ås I Dype Skogen”, or on Burzum’s “Inn I Slottet fra Drømmen” and “Beholding the Daughters of the Firmaments”.

Sonic qualities signifying the winter topic

As I have mentioned earlier, a lot of black metal releases have a highly distorted and noisy sound, especially releases from the late 1980s and early 1990s. I will now show how aspects of this characteristic sound are a part of the many elements signifying the winter topic in early 1990s Norwegian black metal. The most notable of these aspects is the harshness or brightness of the productions³⁶. The harshness is a central part of the *cold* sound of the genre. Warm sounds, both in music production and in everyday speech, are sounds with a more pronounced low end and tamed top end – while what we normally call cold sound has a less low end and more high end³⁷. This aspect is especially present in Darkthrone’s releases in the early 1990s. On *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*, the main harshness and coldness comes from the guitar sound. The guitar is thin sounding, almost piercing, cutting through the mix and adding a lot of the distortion found on the record. On the two following releases by Darkthrone, the coldness is a presence throughout the mix and emphasized even more than on *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*. The drums sound less full, thinner, and more distorted and the same can be said about both the bass guitar and the vocals as well. The mix as a whole is not full sounding per se, it is mainly focused on the midrange and treble, with bright and cold guitars, cymbals, and vocals and the bass is less pronounced. A lot of frequencies that would have been removed from the mix in a more traditional rock mix, often because of their unpleasant nature, are emphasized – to give not only the guitars but the whole mix a so-called

³⁶ There are nuances to this picture. Mayhem’s *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* a more refined sound compared to for instance Darkthrone or Burzum. The reason I think it is an important aspect is because of how the black metal sound compares to other metal and rock releases from the same period. The trend is obvious, black metal production generally have a harsher, thinner sound than for instance 1990s thrash records.

³⁷ I realize that the idea of brightness can also be connected to the sun and its warmth through association, but within the context of music production and discussion of sonic qualities – brightness is commonly connected to cold sounds

“cold” sound. In other words – the sonic qualities of these records are signifying the winter topic by being cold sounds³⁸.

Another sonic quality of black metal that connects to the nature topics and the winter topic is the extensive use of long, bright reverbs. The use of these reverbs is a key part of especially the vocal and drum sounds of early Norwegian black metal. On Darkthrone’s *Under A Funeral Moon*, the vocals are nearly soaked in reverb and a long delay, mimicking the sound and echo of large mountains. Similar vocal effects can be found on *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*, Mayhem’s *De Mysteriis Dom Satanias*, and Burzum’s *Filosofem*. The effect is of course more pronounced on some records, songs, or passages than on others – but the presence of it on all these releases shows that it is an important part of the 1990s black metal sound. The use of long reverbs is even more noticeable on drum productions on many of the same releases. Perhaps the most well-known example of this is the drum sound on *De Mysteriis Dom Satanias*. Despite the characteristic hectic drumming filled with blast beats and fast fills, the mix is filled with a large, relatively cold reverb with a long decay. A good example of this use of reverb is the opening track, “Funeral Fog”. The drums for the album, as well as other black metal releases from the same period, were recorded in Grieghallen in Bergen. Grieghallen is a large concert hall, with considerable space for the sound to travel and reverberate in – leading to a massive, almost overwhelming reverb sound. The vocals and drums on these releases are punchy, but the use of reverb forces the listener to create a mental image of the place in which the music is taking place. This process is what links the sonics of the music to the winter topic. By association and mimicking, these large reverbs and echoes are connected to large Nordic mountainous landscapes – in the same way, Grimley finds echoes in Grieg’s music (Grimley, 2006, p. 30). This connects black metal to a larger tradition of depicting Nordic nature in music. These mountainous landscapes are then connected to the idea of the winter topic and coldness. Norwegian mountains are places of

³⁸ It is interesting to notice that a lot of this music was originally released and published on cassette tapes, as it was cheap and accessible. Cassettes have a certain compression and top end roll off, and some people talk about the warm sound of cassettes. In other words: the sound of these records is not the same on digital streaming services as it is on cassettes. This means that the amount of top end experienced by cassette listeners is not the same as for listeners who stream the music. This could mean that the winter topic and the cold sound of black metal was experienced and received differently at the time of the music’s release, depending on what form of media it was communicated through. This question – about how topics change together with media would be a very interesting area for further research.

cold, extreme weather, and in some places permanent snow. In other words, these aspects of the sound of black metal signify nature – and more specifically Nordic mountains and the winter topic.

The black metal character in a winter landscape

The reason why the winter topic and the coldness of black metal music are relevant to the idea of the black metal character is that it, as both the scream topic and the melancholic topic, adds to the complexity and range of expression in 1990s Norwegian black metal. The winter topic, as I have shown, often appears in conjunction with various other topics, as well as more abstract concepts and ideas. It is connected to coldness and darkness, two central themes in black metal, and the black metal character is drawn to these two concepts – as they are the opposite of what society praises. The Nordic identity of the black metal character is also strengthened through the winter topic. The black metal character sees the Nordic winter as one of a kind, and as a specifically Nordic phenomenon. By connecting with the Nordic winter, the black metal character achieves a deeper connection to his Nordic identity. Another reason why the winter topic is important is how it represents a lack of life. In nature, animals and vegetation either die, migrate or hibernate, emptying the landscape in which the black metal character is of life. This absence of life is in turn a part of the death topic in black metal, and it is a good example of the connections between topics and how they interact.

The coldness that the black metal character seeks is not only a literal form of coldness. It is also a description of the personality he tries to possess. Coldness is thought of as a negative personality trait by society in general. It is connected to a lack of empathy and being calculating and cynical. As the black metal character is trying to oppose society and be a purely evil character, coldness becomes a virtue for him. He seeks to bring absolute sorrow and absolute evil to the society he opposes, and by being cold he is taking personal responsibility, and he comes one step closer to achieving this goal³⁹.

³⁹ This, together with the black metal character's extreme fascination and supposedly deep connection to his Nordic identity, could be one of the reasons for the many far-right musicians and fans within the black metal subculture.

The Nordic winter can be extreme, and it is a violent phenomenon. The winter storms, blizzards, tall mountains, and freezing temperatures are examples of things in nature that could provoke a feeling of something sublime. This comes from the mix of nature's power and the dangers of the Nordic nature, or in the case of the black metal character, the constructed Nordic wilderness. Where the Romantics saw the sublime in nature as a sign of God in nature – the black metal character sees it as the weakness of the society he is trying to escape. Civilization has not been able to tame those kinds of forces, instead, it hides in its cities, apartments, and houses. By seeking the Nordic winter, the black metal character can prove himself more powerful and braver than the normative society he is opposing, and at the same time stage himself as a nihilistic version of the Romantic wanderer.

The forest topic

The second topic that falls under the nature topic umbrella is the forest topic. It is equally important, if not more important than the winter topic as the forest is the home of the black metal character. Helge Kaasin explains the connection to the forest as “The natural home of the night man. The place the black metal character is seeking” (Kaasin, 2020b). When the black metal character seeks his idea of the wilderness, he seeks the wintery coniferous forests of Norway. The forest topic appears especially in lyrical themes and motives, and the visual art of black metal – and I will now take a look at how it appears with a few examples. First, I will take a look at the forest topic in black metal lyrics. I will look at its connection to superstition and folk mythology based on Ulver's *Bergatt*, then I will look at how it works as the scenery and stage of many black metal lyrics and the whole black metal mythology. I will then go on to look at how the forest topic appears in the visual expression of black metal by looking at a selection of album covers.

***Bergatt* and the connection between the forest and folklore**

Ulver's album *Bergatt* takes a lot of the themes for its lyrics from older Nordic folklore and mythology. The album is almost concept-like, as all the lyrics are based on the same themes, and together form a coherent and complete narrative. The language used is a sort of hybrid of archaic Danish/Norwegian, connecting the lyrics to their historic origins. The title itself refers to the concept of “bergtaking”, a common motive in Norwegian folklore. Bergtaking translates directly to “taken by the mountain”. It is the process of being taken into

the mountain halls by trolls or creatures of the underworld while out in the forest. When people got lost in nature, especially after dark and in forests, they were in danger of becoming *bergtatt*. Young women and girls were especially targeted by the trolls, as well as children herding livestock. They could become trapped in the mountain halls forever, or they could be released after some time – usually, if they avoided eating food offered by the trolls, or by the ringing of church bells, as trolls were thought to avoid Christian symbols (Sivertsen, 2000). *Bergtaking* is a motive not only found in folklore but also in some of the Norwegian literature's most famous works, for instance in Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavrandsdatter* and Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (Sivertsen, 2000, p. 52-53). As mentioned earlier, Edvard Grieg composed music for *Peer Gynt*, and one of his most famous works, "In the Hall of the Mountain King" is Grieg's musical representation of *bergtaking*. These aspects, along with Ulver's fascination with folklore similar to that of the national Romantics of the mid 1800s, are strong examples of the intertextual relationship between canonized Norwegian classics and black metal music.

In the case of *Bergtatt* the album, the lyrics describe the story of a young woman or girl being taken into the mountain and then getting killed by the creatures of the underworld. The different songs tell different parts of her story –the wintry Nordic Forest is the backdrop of the story through to the fourth track "Een Stemme Locker". The forest topic is especially emphasized on the first track, "I Troldskog Faren Vild":

De ventede Tøsens Hiemkomst

Hun Vaer I mørck Skog faren vild

Sneens Tepper hafde bredet sig hen

Paa Stien hiem – hendes eeneste Ven

(...)

Skogens mørcke Arme forbarmede sig ofver dend fremmede Giente

Giorde hende vaer i siine inderste Tankers Veemod

At i Bergekongens Kammer tørstes efter Christenblod

(...)

Ofver hendes Hode
Det drybber fra Qviist
Draabe for Draabe som Blodet
Fra Kroppen til Jesu Christ

(*Ulver Lyrics: Bergtatt - Et Eeventyr i 5 Capitler*, n.d.)

The forest is described as dark and snow covered, clearly with reference to a Nordic winter landscape. In the final line of the second stanza, “Blandt disse mørcke Graner”, the forest is further described as a spruce forest. Spruce are larger trees, and they are conifers, so they have their characteristic pine needles. These needles are not aggressive or harmful per se, but they are uncomfortable and sharp. The pine needles are a good picture of the treacherous nature of the forest in Nordic folklore: the forest might seem welcoming and beautiful, for instance in the line “Skogens mørcke Arme forbarmede sig ofver dend fremmede Giente”, but if you get too deep into the forest, or too close to the pine needles, it is not as friendly anymore, as the girl in *Bergtatt* experiences. Another example of this is the description of the pine trees as thorn covered in the sixth stanza of “Graablick Blev Hun Vaer”. In the fifth stanza of “I Troldskog Faren Vild” (the last one cited here), there is an interesting connection between the forest and Christianity. The snow falling from the branches is compared to the blood dripping from the body of Christ. In other words, the forest is connected to the death of Jesus in Ulver’s universe, and therefore also to the anti-Christian topic in black metal. The forest appears as a non-Christian environment – and this is one of the reasons why the black metal character is constantly seeking the dark wintery forest.

The forest topic and its connection to satanism and occultism

I will now look further into a few other examples of the connection between the forest topic and the satanism topic in black metal⁴⁰. In Darkthrone’s “Skald Av Satans Sol” from *Transilvanian Hunger*, the calling of the forest is connected to a lot of traditional Satanist and anti-Christian imagery. The sun of Satan is referring to the moon and its connection to darkness and madness. There are also references to the “beast”, a common name for Satan,

⁴⁰ The forest topic also appears commonly as a more general backdrop for black metal lyrics, especially in Darkthrone’s work, but my main focus for this chapter is on how it connects to the satanism topic.

angels fleeing, and evil, violence, and torture. The most interesting aspect happens towards the end of the song, in the fifth and sixth stanzas. The line “Når helvete engang kaller er det ingen vei tilbake” is directly followed by the chorus of the song:

Tåken tetner

Mørket faller

Ondskap Slumrer

Skogen kaller

(Darkthrone Lyrics: Transilvanian Hunger, n.d.)

The calling of hell and the calling of the forest is here revealed to be the same kind of calling. Hell, and the forests are both symbols of the same aspect of black metal: the Anti-Christian values of the black metal character, and they are the places where he finds them.

A similar connection can be found on Burzum’s “Hvis Lyset Tar Oss” from the EP with the same name. Here, sunlight acts as a representation of God, and it hits a glade, making the characters unable to escape God, which leads to their death. The forest is here seen as a safe, dark place, away from God, but the glade in which the characters are killed is not (*Burzum Lyrics: Hvis Lyset Tar Oss, n.d.*). The title track on Mayhem’s *De Mysteriis Dom Satanis* is also set in the forest, and it uses the forest as the backdrop of the satanic ritual being described as well as connecting it to other kinds of Satanist imagery, like the idea of the goat as Satan (*Mayhem Lyrics: De Mysteriis Dom Satanis, n.d.*). On the Burzum track “Jesu Død” from *Filosofem*, the forest is again connected to the death of Jesus Christ – describing him as a dark, evil force (*Burzum Lyrics: Filosofem, n.d.*). This is a form of contradiction one sometimes finds in black metal art, as the black metal tries to be as evil and dark as possible, but at the same time, he is describing Christianity as evil and dark. I do not think this contradiction is a result of lazy work from black metal lyricists, it is rather a symbol of the black metal lyricist’s eagerness to get his point across to outsiders. Most outsiders are likely to associate Jesus Christ and Christianity with light and kindness, and by turning the tables, the black metal character can express his perception of Christianity as the ultimate enemy of his project.

The visual art of black metal and the forest topic



Under a Funeral Moon (1993)



Panzerfaust (1995)

I will now take a look at how the forest topic manifests itself in visual expressions of black metal art⁴¹. A lot of black metal cover art is centered around the forest topic, and the forest motive is used extensively in both early 1990s black metal and more modern examples⁴². The cover for Darkthrone's *Under a Funeral Moon* shows a cloaked figure wearing the characteristic corpse paint next to a tree losing its leaves. The picture is dark black and white, and the body of the figure is hard to make out, as well as the background of the picture. Despite the darkness of the photo, the tree in the forefront of the picture leads the viewers' mind to construct the mental image of a forest in the background. The album cover shows the black metal character in the dark, cold forest – his home, and at the same time it shows his connection to death through his corpse paint, and his coldness through the almost naked tree, as trees of course lose their leaves in winter. Another example from Darkthrone's catalogue is the cover for *Panzerfaust*. This cover sums up a lot of the black metal character's relationship with nature, and it is centered around the forest topic and winter topic. It shows a snow-

⁴¹ I think it is interesting to notice how some black metal logos almost resemble dried out, dead twigs. Examples of this can for instance be the logos of Darkthrone and Emperor. However, I have decided not to include this point as a part of my thesis, as I did not have the capacity and time to go in-depth on it.

⁴² More recent examples are Djevel's *Tanker Som Rir Natten*, *Norske Ritualer* and *Blant Svarte Graner* as well as Mörk's *Eremittens Dal* and Darkthrone's *Arctic Thunder*

covered ground, naked trees next to larger pine trees, and the moon is also included. There are contours of a silhouette in between the trees, which is likely the dark black metal character as a wanderer through the wintery forest landscape, only illuminated by the moon Satan's sun.



Hvis Lyset Tar oss (1994)



Filosofem (1996)

The illustrations of Theodor Kittelsen have also been used for various black metal album covers, both more recent and from the 1990s, and the cover for Ulver's *Bergtatt* is very similar to the style of Kittelsen, without actually being his work. Burzum's *Hvis Lyset Tar Oss* features the drawing *Fattigmannen*, from his illustrations to the book *Svartedauden* (Kittelsen, 1901). The image shows the body of a male figure, or rather, the skeleton of a male figure, lying on a forest road. The forest is dark and arid, consisting of a combination of pine trees as well as other, naked trees. A flock of crows or ravens pass the body of the man, continuing down the road as if they are moving on from tearing away at the body. By using *Fattigmannen* as the main illustration, the connection between black metal and the forest is in focus, and it also shows how the black metal character's idea of the forest is not that of a lush green, landscape, but rather that of a dark and godless place. Kittelsen's work combined with the forest topic is also used on the cover for Burzum's *Filosofem*, but here it is used in another way. The illustration used is Kittelsen's *Op under Fjeldet toner en Lur*, and it shows a female character in a valley landscape playing the traditional instrument, *lur*, a non-valve wind instrument, with the forest in the background. The illustration serves the purpose of referring to motives and values more similar to those of the National Romantics of the mid

1800s. The character is a pale blonde woman, standing in what is natural to refer to as a stereotypical Norwegian valley landscape, playing a traditional Norwegian instrument. The forest is in the background, as if the female *lur*-player act as a representative for the black metal character, who for once has taken the step out of the dark forest into the world, and she is trying to signal the values of the black metal character to society and civilization through the *lur*.

Snø og granskog – the home of the black metal character

On Darkthrone's *Panzerfaust*, the closing track is a reverb heavy, spoken word rendition of Tarjei Vesaas' poem *Snø og Granskog*. The reading is accompanied by N ambient, horn like synth, and drums. By using Vesaas' poem, the black metal character's relationship with the larger Norwegian canon is emphasized. In the poem, the forest is illustrated with a language and in a way that in some ways is far from that of black metal, but at the same time strikingly similar:

Tale om heimsleg -
snø og granskog
er heimsleg.

Frå første stund
er det vårt.
Før nokon har fortalt det,
at det *er* snø og granskog,
har det plass i oss -
og sidan er det der
heile heile tida

Meterdjup fonn
kring mørke tre
- det er for oss!
Innblanda i vår eigen ande

Heile heile tida,
om ingen ser det
har vi snø og granskog med.

Ja lia med snøen
og tre ved tre
så langt ein ser
kvar vi er
vender vi mot det.

Og har I oss ein lovnad
om å koma heim
koma heim
gå borti der,
bøyge greiner,
- og kjenne så det fer i ein
kva det er å være der ein høyrer til

Heile heile tida,
til det er sløkt
i våre innlandshjarte.

(Vesaas, 1981, p. 10)

Snø og granskog can be interpreted and understood in many different ways, and the way I am reading here is within the context of the black metal character and his relationship with the forest. The poem is obviously a description of the snow-covered pine forest, but it is also a description of a home. It is cold and dark – pine trees are evergreens, so the roof of the forest blocks out the light all year round, and the colors on the forest floor are mainly dark green, brown, grey, and black – in addition to the white snow. In the second stanza, it becomes clear that the snow-covered forest is something that is a crucial part of the identity of the black

metal character. It is an innate and instinctive part of the black metal character, built into his DNA because he seeks it naturally, “Før nokon har fortalt det”. The line “om ingen ser det” implies the basic misunderstanding between the black metal character and the society around him. Society has not opened its eyes to the truths and values of the black metal character, so they do not understand him, but he longs for the forest despite what people think both of it and him. On *Panzerfaust* the word “Utferd” is added to the title of the track. The word is connected to leaving, especially by crossing oceans (“Utferd,” 2022). This addition implies a process of venturing out – similar to that of the travels of the Vikings in the Viking age, crossing oceans and pushing limits. The black metal character feels a strong connection to his Norse and Viking past, and “utferd” might suggest that he sees himself in the same situation. This is even another element of the black metal character’s framing of himself as a type of Romantic wanderer. He is leaving the society he opposes, venturing into his Romanticized and constructed idea of the Nordic wilderness and forest – he is heading home. Into the dark, cold, chaotic, and evil place that is the forest; the “Domain of the beast”.

Summary and conclusion

Through this thesis, I have shown that topic theory is a useful tool when exploring not only western art music but also when exploring the meanings of popular music. Inspired by William Echard's work on psychedelic popular music, I have used topic theory to understand the meanings of popular music. I have looked into the music of early Norwegian black metal and its meanings and connected it to a more interdisciplinary tradition, bringing in visual art and literature through album covers and lyrics. I have shown that even though black metal is trying to be a form of complete opposition to established norms, both societal and artistic, it is still connected to large parts of western art history through the topics at play.

I have shown how topics are connected across different media – and that they are not necessarily exclusively musical. For this thesis, I have shown how they appear both in music, lyrics, and visual art. By doing this, the connection between musical and non-musical expressions becomes clear, and together they form the artistic output of the genre. This interaction makes the musical genre recognizable outside music as well. For instance: one of the reasons the audience can tell a black metal record is highly likely a black metal record just by looking at its cover, is because the cover is using the topics that create the meanings of the genre.

There are many topics at play in 1990s Norwegian black metal, and some of the most obvious and available ones are death, darkness, violence, satanism, and occultism. These all play their parts in creating the complex meanings of black metal. By making a deliberate choice of exploring other topics than these, I have emphasized the complexity of both the field of topic theory and the meanings of the genre. While the genre might have strong connections to violence and darkness, my exploration of the scream topic, the melancholic topic, and the nature topics has shown that the meanings being conveyed are more complex, covering primal, existential screams, deep melancholy, and a strong connection to Nordic nature. Topics do not appear on their own, they always interact with each other, mixing and blending together. These interactions between topics create complex webs of meanings, signs, and references which connect the art to society and culture.

In the case of early Norwegian black metal, these meanings, signs, and references are a part of the creation of what I have called the black metal character. The black metal character is an abstract character symbolizing the values and meanings of black metal – he is the sum of black metal art. At the core of his identity is a protest against the semi-Christian social democracy of Norway, an existential protest rooted in his constant exclusion from both society and life itself. When musicians perform black metal art, their goal is to be as close to the black metal character as possible. He is a dark Romantic figure – similar to the lonely, wandering, artistic genius of the 19th century Romantics, and he is constantly negotiating the spaces between society and individualism, and between life and death. He is violent, nihilistic, extreme, and drawn to darkness as a form of opposition against society. Through this thesis, I have also shown how he is a melancholic, depressed character, and how this melancholy is also rooted in the same form of protest. His home is in the snow-covered Nordic forests, which he sees as the opposite of the urban, modern society he is opposing. Through his supposed deep connection to nature and his fixation on Nordic identity, he seeks what he sees as a more true and honest existence in the winter forest – where he can live a pagan life in darkness and cold as an extreme individualist.

Again: by using topic theory as a way of looking at Norwegian black metal I have shown that topic theory is a highly useful approach for understanding both popular music itself, as well as its connections to the culture in which it operates. In other words, topic theory is the combination of reading both text and context, as they are both key parts of how topics work. By using topic theory, the whole supposed conflict between text-oriented analysis and context-oriented analysis becomes redundant, because topic theory bridges the gap between the two approaches.

My suggestions for further research are mainly connected to the further expansion of the field of topic theory within popular music studies and metal studies context. It would be interesting to investigate how topics appear across genres within extreme metal, and what topics are at play in other genres of metal, or popular music for that matter. Another interesting question is the question of how topics might change with whatever media format they are experienced through – for instance how the coldness of sound is experienced on

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cassette versus on digital streaming platforms. These are ideas for projects that I hope either myself or others might try and look into at a later stage.

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Appendix

Musical sources (All releases available either on Spotify or Youtube)

Primary (Early Norwegian Black Metal)

- Burzum – *Aske* (1993)
- Burzum – *Filosofem* (1996)
- Burzum – *Hvis Lyset Tar Oss* (1994)
- Darkthrone – *A Blaze In The Northern Sky* (1992)
- Darkthrone – *Hate Them* (2003)
- Darkthrone – *Panzerfaust* (1995)
- Darkthrone – *Soulside Journey* (1991)
- Darkthrone – *Transilvanian Hunger* (1994)
- Darkthrone – *Under A Funeral Moon* (1993)
- Emperor – *Anthems To The Welkin At Dusk* (1997)
- Emperor – *In The Nightside Eclipse* (1994)
- Gorgoroth – *Live in Bergen 1996* (2007)
- Gorgoroth – *Pentagram* (1994)
- Immortal – *Battles in the North* (1994)
- Immortal – *Diabolical Fullmoon Mysticism* (1992)
- Immortal – *Pure Holocaust* (1993)
- Isengard – *Høstmørke* (1995)
- Mayhem – *Deathcrush* (1987)
- Mayhem – *De Mysteriis dom Satanias* (1994)
- Mayhem – *Live in Jessheim* (2017)
- Mayhem – *Live in Leipzig* (1993)
- Mayhem – *Live in Zeitz* (1993)
- Mayhem – *Pure Fucking Armageddon* (1986)
- Satyricon – *Now, Diabolical* (2006)
- Satyricon – *Dark Medieval Times* (1994)

Satyricon – *The Shadowthrone* (1994)

Ulver – *Bergtatt* (1994)

Ulver – *Nattens Madrigal* (1997)

Secondary – background material

Bathory – *Bathory* (1984)

Bathory – *Blood Fire Death* (1988)

Celtic Frost – *Into the Pandemonium* (1987)

Celtic Frost – *Morbid Tales* (1984)

Entombed – *Left Hand Path* (1990)

Hellhammer – *Demon Entrails* (2008)

Morbid Angel – *Altars Of Madness* (1989)

Napalm Death – *Scum* (1987)

Repulsion – *Horrified* (1989)

Terrorizer – *World Downfall* (1989)

Slayer – *Hell Awaits* (1985)

Slayer – *Reign in Blood* (1986)

Slayer – *South of Heaven* (1988)

Venom – *Black Metal* (1982)

Venom - *Welcome to Hell* (1981)