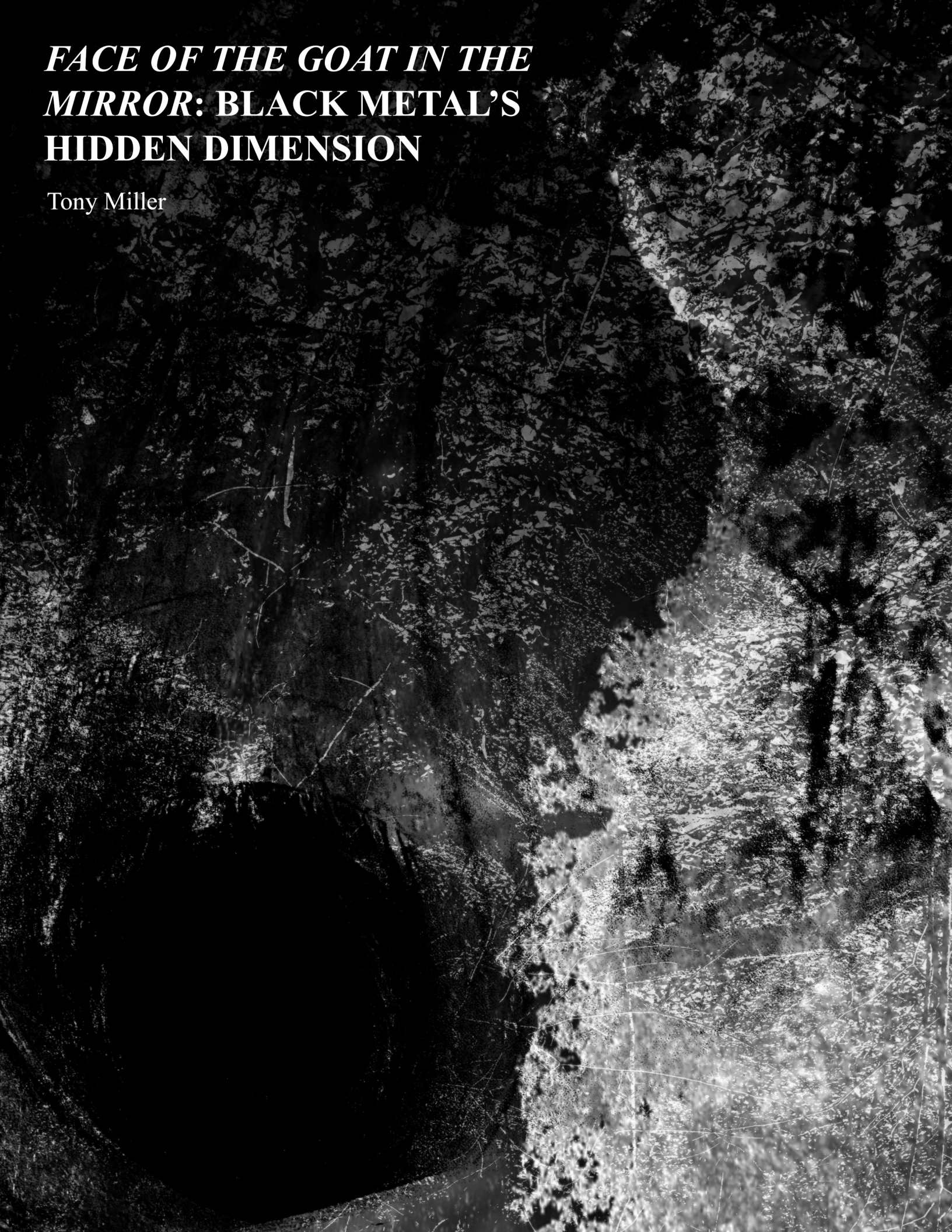


***FACE OF THE GOAT IN THE  
MIRROR: BLACK METAL'S  
HIDDEN DIMENSION***

Tony Miller



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### ***Face of the Goat in the Mirror: Black Metal's Hidden Dimension***

“Face of the goat in the mirror  
We’ve become a race of cursed seeds  
I entered the soul of the snake  
We are a blaze in the northern sky”

- Darkthrone, “Kathaarian Life Code”

As the sun of the old millennium begins to set, a new form of metallic expression begins to take shape. This expression, Black Metal, serves as one of the penultimate manifestations of metal music’s extremity, typified by themes of darkness, evil, hatred, and seclusion, alongside (though not limited to) Satanic, Pagan, and Gothic imagery swathed in the harsh filtering of a two-toned black and white visual aesthetic. Black Metal thrives in intensity, and in doing so becomes magnetic towards extreme politics and beliefs - most prominently and controversially, those of nationalism and anti-semitism, but also anti-fascist and leftist ideologies in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Even in its most primordial state, Black Metal has been a potent vehicle for the extreme individual, even when politics have been thrown to the wayside. To embrace Black Metal is to cast aside mainstream culture, and at once embrace all that it regards.<sup>2</sup>

In the mid to late 1980s, Black Metal would see its inception and fruitful development throughout the world, forming notable subcultures in South America and Europe.<sup>3</sup> Established alongside Death Metal, the two genres heavily influenced and at times became indistinguishable

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<sup>1</sup> The Norwegian Black Metal scene (which this essay seeks to focus on) has occasionally dabbled with fascist and nationalist ideologies, most notably with the infamous Varg Vikernes, who has gained much notoriety since the 90s for his strongly outspoken Nazi views and in the murder of fellow bandmate Euronymous; Some notable anti-fascist Black Metal bands include Blasphemy, Panopticon, and Iskra among many others.

<sup>2</sup> There is the question of if there is any ethical consumption of Black Metal given its prominent (and as some may say, inherent) associations with Nazism alongside other xenophobic ideologies, even when concerning the contributors that oppose such. While it is certainly a compelling and fruitful topic, this essay does not serve to answer such, and the personal views of its author have been temporarily cast aside to provide an unbiased analysis of the subject at hand.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the most influential and cited bands in Black Metal’s history include Switzerland’s Hellhammer, Sweden’s Bathory, Germany’s Sodom, and Brazil’s Sepultura and Sarcófago.

from each other. It would not be until the early 1990s in Norway that Black Metal would become truly defined with Darkthrone's 1992 release, *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*.

For the Norwegian Black Metal scene specifically, *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* acts as a manifesto for this movement, situating itself within a myth-like narrative that entails stories of suicide, church burnings, murders, and other sensationalized acts that would spur a new wave of moral panic throughout the world.<sup>4</sup> Those who were most closely associated with this music in this place and time were, in their words, at war with modern society. By engaging with themes of fantasy alongside those of Satanism and Paganism, artists such as Darkthrone, Mayhem, and Burzum largely sought to return to an inverted, pre-Christian Scandinavia. This sentiment can be determined by and is even perhaps obvious to Black Metal's casual listener however, and so it is alongside this that I make an argument for Black Metal not just as an anti-modern expression, but one that is religious as well. In analyzing the visual culture, lyrics, themes, and the genre's "economy of inversion," a dimension of wholly personal religious experience begins to unfurl itself from the genre's unholy depths.

We may first begin by addressing the question of Black Metal's desirability. For what could possibly inspire such a movement, one composed of primarily young white men, who paint their faces and dress in black robes, wander through the woods at night, dedicating themselves to one of the most harsh and distorted forms of metal music, all in the name of a Satanic Lord? This is of course a generalization, as the genre as a whole does not always align with its more popular signifiers; in any case, even with all its associations and reputation as an "outsider" movement, Black Metal still thrives throughout the world, even after what some may consider its peak era in 1990s Norway. The first part of this essay will concern the genre's tool of inversion, its

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<sup>4</sup> Grude, Torstein, director. "Satan rir Media." 1999. YouTube video, 50 min, Nov. 10, 2012. <https://youtu.be/S1vLC637cx0>; Aites, Aaron & Audrey Ewell, directors. "Until the Light Takes Us." Field Pictures: 2008. 1 hr., 33 min.

fascination with primitivity, and its anarchic anti-societal viewpoint. This will be crucial in understanding part 2, which dissects these characteristics of Black Metal through the religious theoretical works of Rudolf Otto and William James. In doing so, we will uncover an experiential religious aspect to the genre. Altogether these areas of focus may reveal to us crucial aspects towards Black Metal's hypnotic allure.

Before carrying on, there is an important distinction to be made. The convention of Black Metal functions as an umbrella under which its subsets take form, such as that of, for example, sectarian religions. Atmospheric Black Metal, Blackened Noise, War Metal: these are just a few of the seemingly infinite forms of expression that fall under the label of Black Metal, which all carry their own minute aesthetic and ideological differences. For our purposes, our focus will concern that of Norwegian Black Metal, primarily through the works of Darkthrone, their contemporaries, and their album *A Blaze in the Northern Sky* (which will be henceforth referred to as *Blaze*), whose influence on Black Metal as a whole cannot be overstated.

### **Part 1: *We Are a Blaze in the Northern Sky***

Perhaps the most notable symbol of inversion in Black Metal's visual canon is that of the inverted cross, which appears in countless logos, album covers, promotional material, and as a common stage prop and accessory in live performances and band photographs (figs. 1-3).<sup>5</sup> The symbol signifies a rejection of Christendom through a turning of the crucified Christ downward



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

<sup>5</sup> Examples shown are: logo for Mayhem (fig. 1), logo for Abruptum (fig. 2), and promotional photo for Sarcófago (fig. 3).

towards hell, and simultaneously an adoration for the prince of darkness, Satan.

However, an inversion still presupposes its origin and perpetuates the existence of such.

In other words, an inverted cross is still a cross, and even turning Christ on his head still acknowledges his existence and sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> Is it truly possible then, to defy the existence of Christianity while still embracing Satanism? For it was God himself who created Satan, and in the



Fig. 3

orthodox tradition embodies a “perfectly realized goodness, depending on nothing,” including evil.<sup>7</sup> Like a mirror, the inversion becomes merely a reflection of that which it intends to negate; in other words, the inversion enforces a binary system in which it and its opposite revolve around a single axis of meaning. This is Black Metal’s economy of inversion, where opposites contradict and at once enforce each other. This understanding of inversion becomes essential in regards to that which follows.

One of Black Metal’s major qualities is that of primitivity. It is often said that the genre’s fascination with such lends itself to the “primitive” rock and roll qualities of early Black Metal bands such as Venom and Bathory, and as a rejection of the increasingly polished production quality of Death Metal. The use of this phrase within Black Metal likely originates from Fenriz, the drummer, lyricist, and sole founding member of Darkthrone. His role as the leading force

<sup>6</sup> Walter, Brenda S. Gardenour. “Through the Looking Glass Darkly: Medievalism, Satanism, and the Dark Illumination of the Self in the Aesthetics of Black Metal.” *Helvete: A Journal of Black Metal Theory*. No. 2 (Winter 2015): pg. 19. Punctum books.

<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare, Steven & Niall Scott. “The Swarming Logic of Inversion and the Elevation of Satan.” *Helvete: A Journal of Black Metal Theory*. No. 2 (Winter 2015): pg. 2. Punctum books; James, William. “The Varieties of Religious Experience.” Edited by Martin E. Marty. Penguin Books, 1985: pg. 131.

behind Darkthrone's sound and image has earned him the position of one of Black Metal's major authoritative voices.

The innovation of *Blaze*'s sound becomes all the more prevalent when considering the band's prior output. The band's debut album *Soulside Journey*, while still concerning themes of Satanism and anti-Christianity, largely falls under the label of Death Metal.<sup>8</sup> While both genres are labeled as "extreme metal", they represent two different faces of the same coin. Black Metal often emphasizes qualities of hypnotic repetition, dissonance, and high end distortion in its guitar and vocal styles, while sublimating the technicality and low end heaviness characterized by its Death Metal counterpart.<sup>9</sup>

This move away from Death Metal was a conscious decision for Darkthrone, as evident by the words of Fenriz: "We wanted to move quickly from reasonably intricate Death Metal to primitive Black Metal. A regression."<sup>10</sup> It becomes clear then that Black Metal's primitivity acts in opposition to Death Metal, an inversion of its precise technicality, but this aspect extends far beyond the genre's sound. There is a clear social dimension to this desire for primitivity, as we shall see in analyzing one of the major themes of *Blaze*, that of the fantastical, pre-Christian Scandinavia.

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<sup>8</sup> These themes were not uncommon within Death Metal at large however, as evident with bands such as Immolation, Morbid Angel, and Incantation, who are considered some of the most influential artists within the genre.

<sup>9</sup> Black Metal is not limited to these characteristics, however, with many bands inhabiting characteristics of both genres and the label of "Blackened Death Metal" being innovated as well. As mentioned earlier in this essay, the two genres also inhabited a more amorphous definition early in each of their developments in the 1980s. This is evident in Darkthrone's early demos and in the early demos of American Death Metal pioneers Death and Possessed, where the line between Death and Black Metal becomes so blurred that the distinction becomes almost nonexistent. It may perhaps be more appropriate to consider Black Metal in this era as the "yin" to Death Metal's "yang", with the two genres being dependent and at times inseparable from each other. As I have stated, however, *Blaze* has acted as a catalyst for Black Metal's transfiguration.

<sup>10</sup> Nasjonalbiblioteket. "The album that defined early Norwegian black metal - interview with Fenriz with English subtitles." YouTube video, 5 minutes, Nov. 16, 2020. <https://youtu.be/d858ZECeNCY>.

The lyrics of the album's second track, "In the Shadow of the Horns," recalls an ancient historical kingdom that stands in opposition to the Christian God. The track's chorus establishes this kingship and dates the track's narrative to the early first millennium of the common era:

In the shadow of the horns  
 Only seen by the kings  
 Of the dawn (of the) first millennium  
 Upon the thrones

The final verses concern the motives of these imaginative kings and places the narrator alongside them as their follower:

(We've become) a race of the cursed seeds  
 For five united forces  
 In the eternal dawn  
 The Kings that held (their) heads high

The triumph of chaos - Has guided our path  
 We circled the holy Sinai - Our swords gave wings  
 Invisible force of our Abyssic hate  
 Our seeds boil as we gaze upon the new millennium

Weeping by the graves of the Glorious Ones  
 (So) the hardened frost melts away  
 Clouds gather across a freezing moon  
 I kiss the goat - Witchcraft still breathes.

However, it is not just the narrator who paints himself as a supporter of the kings' motives; the use of "our" and "we" also implies a united force. Fenriz, the only credited songwriter for the album, intends to implicate the dedicated Black Metal listener into this figurative ideological narrative. It is them, who, along with the band members—the "race of cursed seeds"—circle in opposition the holy mountain that Moses receives the word of God with weapons held high. In the last verse we are brought back to the modern day, mourning the "Glorious Ones" of this ancient past and keeping alive the systems of belief which Christianity had sought to eradicate: "I kiss the goat - Witchcraft still breathes."<sup>1</sup>



The album's title track expands on this pointed ideology, and shares a number of parallels with "In the Shadow of the Horns." Its second verse, as well as a number of lyrics in the album, places an emphasis on a northern origin point:

Coven of forgotten delight  
Hear the pride of a northern storm  
Triumphant sight on a northern sky.

This motif continues in the fourth verse, which also recalls the ancient kings as well as a similar time frame:

It took ten times a hundred years  
Before the king on the northern throne  
Was brought tales of the crucified one.

Here an ancient monarchy is established in a northern geographic region, most likely that of the band's homeland of Norway or perhaps Scandinavia at large. According to our narrator, this region had not been exposed to the religion of Christianity in any capacity until 1,000 years after Jesus was crucified: the "first millennium" again mentioned in "In the Shadow of the Horns."

Once again, the last verses bring the listener back into the modern day:

Coven of renewed delight  
A thousand years have passed since then -  
Years of lost pride and lust

Souls of blasphemy  
Hear a haunting chant -

We are a blaze in the northern sky  
The next thousand years are OURS

These are perhaps the most politically charged lyrics within the album. The narrator directly addresses the listeners of the song to listen closely to the verse that follows: the "souls of blasphemy," to "hear a haunting chant."

The album's namesake is thus revealed, fully contextualized as a call for violent protest against the Christian society which had stolen a thousand "years of lost pride and lust." The lyric "a blaze in the northern sky" recalls the act of arson, specifically the stark imagery of the burning church. Between the years 1992 and 1996, Norway bore witness to at least 50 premeditated attacks on Christian churches, a number of which were directly linked to individual artists in the Black Metal scene.<sup>11</sup> While no members of Darkthrone were ever convicted of such, their stance on the matter seems clear.

Darkthrone aligns themselves positively with these attacks, and even personifies themselves as the revolutionary act itself. "*We are* a blaze in the northern sky," rather than "we condone" or "we advocate." Black Metal is not simply a vehicle for a revolution, but becomes the revolution itself. In the words of Varg Vikernes, the artist behind the massively influential solo Black Metal band Burzum and collaborator of Darkthrone,

We stockpiled weapons, munitions to prepare for war, because we not only suspected there might be a third World War, we hoped that there would be a third World War. Not because we enjoyed destruction so much, but because we knew that if you want to build something new, you have to destroy the old first.<sup>12</sup>

For the Norwegian Black Metal artists, the genre acted as a movement against the modern way of life, and sought to replace the Christian ideals of society that had infected Norway in the previous millenia: "The next thousand years are OURS."

So it is through a desire for an ancient past, to return to the "way things once were," that Black Metal expresses its anti-modern sentiment.<sup>13</sup> Just as it had sought with the inverted cross and other signifiers, by aligning itself with "primitive" Pagan belief systems alongside Satanism

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<sup>11</sup> Grude, 49:12.

<sup>12</sup> Aites & Ewell, 22:55.

<sup>13</sup> While it may seem like a premature conclusion to base an ideological motive of Black Metal through an analysis of just 2 songs from a single album, similar themes can be found in the lyrics of other Darkthrone songs and in the works of influential bands such as Bathory, Burzum, Mayhem, and many more.

and witchcraft, Black Metal seeks to reject the modern Christian society that many of its major contributors had been raised within.<sup>14</sup> The belief systems, symbols, and themes used by Black Metal act as an inversion of Christianity's, and the adoration of the primitive as an inversion of the modern.<sup>15</sup>

The material in which we have explored within Black Metal as such —the economy of inversion, primitivity, and the anti-modern— can perhaps be gleaned by Black Metal's most casual listener, and certainly by the genre's adepts. However, these topics must be established as we move through the genre's shadowy folds, and become foundational in understanding a hidden dimension to Black Metal's substance: that of the religious experience.

## **Part 2: *The Inverted Other***

When concerning the arts and experience, the latter tends to be understood more so as the experience of living, the day to day life of the artist(s) or peoples in question: a lived experience, in other words. In regards to religious theory, "experience" can be more so understood as a particular occurrence. The "religious experience" as we will discuss is not the experience of day to day religious life, or even the experience of being religious per se, but rather describes an event, an encounter with a higher or sublimated order of reality. This order can be characterized as encountering the "divine," "God," or in the form of paranormal and supernatural phenomena.

In unraveling this experience within Black Metal, this essay will largely concern the writings of two scholars, Rudolf Otto and William James. While certainly products of their time

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<sup>14</sup> "Norway has long had an exceptionally stable economy and a static bourgeois culture; it is likewise a bastion of Lutheran conservatism, a world in which everyone is expected to adhere to Christian mores, or at least appear to." Walter, 17; It must be stated that while the scope of this essay largely concerns Norwegian Black Metal, the destination of the anti-modern sentiment largely remains similar with Black Metal throughout the world: "In both Japan and Mexico, the black metal aesthetic serves as a means of expressing abjection toward and reclamation of the subjected body from the Christian and colonial invader." Walter, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Walter, 18.

and by no means comprehensive,<sup>16</sup> their work proves to be crucial in understanding the fundamentals of such an experience. The religious experience, as titled by William James, or the “numinous” in the case of Rudolf Otto, both describe on a base level an undifferentiated sense of reality, the objective feeling and sense of “something there.”<sup>17</sup>

James understands the religious experience as multivalent, concerning emotions of intense awe, fear, joy, etc., and embodying “the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight,” or that which “[makes] our flesh creep,” for example.<sup>18</sup> As for what is deemed “religious” itself, James writes,

In our definition of religion we speak of the individual’s relation to ‘what he considers the divine,’ we must interpret the term ‘divine’ very broadly, as denoting any object that is *godlike*, whether it be a concrete deity or not.<sup>19</sup>

James also considers the likes of science and Atheism to be religious, as its “laws of nature” create an understanding of reality and meaning for its believer just as the belief of gods (and more philosophically-oriented belief systems such as Buddhism) do.<sup>20</sup> Whether Satanic, Pagan, or Atheistic, we can understand Black Metal to be religious in a similar way, as it shapes and constructs the reality of its dedicated listeners.<sup>21</sup>

Otto expands upon James’ writing with his concept of the “numinous.” This concept entails all that is associated with the term “holy,” while also setting aside any moral implications. For Otto, it is the numinous that inhabits the core of all religious belief, and defies proper categorization and definition - like James’ religious experience, it can only be properly

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<sup>16</sup> As with Otto, whose religious scholarship can be said to have been committed through a Christian-tinted lens (though perhaps this is fitting, as Black Metal’s religious commentary can also be described as Christian-centric), and James, whose *Varieties of Religious Experience* concerns largely Western accounts of the subject at hand.

<sup>17</sup> James, 58.

<sup>18</sup> James, 27.

<sup>19</sup> James, 34.

<sup>20</sup> James, 34; 57; “[...] and the more fervent opponents of Christian doctrine have often enough shown a temper which, psychologically considered, is indistinguishable from religious zeal.” James, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Though it may be more accurate, however, for Black Metal to fall under the umbrella of mysticism rather than religion, just as witchcraft may, for example. This is to be addressed in the following section of the sublime.

understood once it is *experienced*.<sup>22</sup> One of the fundamental aspects to this religious emotion is what Otto names the “mysterium tremendum,” of which he writes,

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its ‘profane’, non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of [...] that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures.<sup>23</sup>

We can begin to see Otto’s Christian bias here, as he writes of “crude, barbaric antecedents” as opposed to a more realized form of “something beautiful and pure and glorious.” However, as it has become clear with Black Metal’s economy of inversion, it does not seek to attain anything of the sort that associates with such positive qualities.

As we look deeper into these theoretical concepts of religious expression and feeling, we can draw a number of parallels in regards to Black Metal in terms of sound and in its visual components. Otto writes directly in regards to the methods used to express the numinous feeling in art and music, and these must be considered if we are to analyze Black Metal as an expression of such. In our application of these aspects, we can find a number of key components in which Black Metal seeks to express the numinous. This essay shall dissect these components into two distinct parts: darkness—and its sonic correlate, silence—and the sublime. We shall begin with what Otto describes as the most effective method of representing the numinous in the arts: the sublime.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Otto, Rudolf. “The Idea of the Holy.” Trans. by John W. Harvey. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966: pgs. 6-8.

<sup>23</sup> Otto, 12-13.

<sup>24</sup> Otto, 65.

### *The Sublime*

Otto finds that the sublime evokes the numinous most especially through architecture. He notes this form of numinous expression to date as far back as the megalithic architecture of the stone age, and also notes the Gothic as “the most numinous of all types of art.”<sup>25</sup> While we may relate this notion of the primitive megalithic back towards Darkthrone with one of their earlier works “Cromlech”<sup>26</sup> and the Gothic towards a rich subset of Black Metal known as Vampiric Black Metal,<sup>27</sup> it will prove fruitful to place the sublime into our well-established economy of inversion.

Black Metal’s themes and signifiers (Satanic evil, hatred, war, witchcraft, primitivity, and countless others) act as inversions of those used by post-enlightened Christian society, and “provoke sublime terror in uninitiated outsiders.”<sup>28</sup> While the sublime manages to excite viewers with its “optical frisson,” it remains purely a sensation for the eye.<sup>29</sup> Black Metal in contrast inverts the sublime by extending this terror outwards towards society, either through the carnivalesque live performance (often by incorporating acts of self-mutilation, pyrotechnics, and decapitated heads of goats or pigs as stage props)<sup>30</sup> in terroristic threats as we have discussed above, or perhaps most notably through the acts of murder, such as those committed by musicians Faust and Varg Vikernes in Norway in 1992 and 1993 respectively.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Otto, 65-67.

<sup>26</sup> Seen as the opening track of *Soulside Journey* as well as the title of a 1989 promotional demo.

<sup>27</sup> Most notable bands of this vein include Cradle of Filth, Mutilation, and Necromantia (the third being mentioned directly on the back cover of the vinyl sleeve for *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*), who all implement heavy use of Gothic imagery and themes.

<sup>28</sup> Walter, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Bellion, Wendy. “Phantasmagoria.” *Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art*, edited by Robert Cozzolino. pg. 41. Chicago & London. Minneapolis Institute of Art in Association with the University of Chicago Press.

<sup>30</sup> Walter, 17-18.

<sup>31</sup> Grude.

The sublime in these cases, is enacted by the Black Metal individual. This further emphasizes the claims made earlier that Black Metal is more than music; it is a revolution, it is religious, and it is in this manner that it becomes a way of living. We may break away from the subject of the numinous then for but a moment in order to dissect this notion further, for we are to understand Black Metal as expression of a religious experience, it becomes essential to understand its inherent religio-philosophical tendency which shapes the reality of its participants.

As one becomes enveloped in the Black Metal consciousness, a new inverted individual emerges from within:

In donning the externals of black metal, an individual is defining him or herself as separate from mainstream culture, as a purportedly empowered evil “other.” Like a living mirror, the black metal self manifests the repulsiveness of Christian and mainstream society, mocks its fetid hypocrisy, and reflects it back outward, laughing as if to say “This is what you are.”<sup>32</sup>

This inverted selfhood, unbounded and free from social constructs, bears much resemblance to the philosophical tenets of Satanism. Just as Satan was cast down from heaven and forced to contemplate his own being, he became free to live as he chose fit by the workings of his inner self.<sup>33</sup> While Satanism’s (and in turn Black Metal’s) embracing of the individual and inner godhood may bear more in common with mysticism than religion, we may consider what James says about such: “One may say truly [...] that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness.” It is not the case that Black Metal is *religion* per se, but that it is *religious*. This mystical emphasis of the individual in Black Metal can be elucidated in its initial rejection of Death Metal and in the phenomenon of the one-man Black Metal band.

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<sup>32</sup> Walter, 19; We may also look towards these lines in *Blaze*’s “Paragon Belial:” “My soul like layers of frost / Simulating a spectre shadow / Frozen in time and space / I was hacked out of ice // Faded am I, behind a wall of consciousness / Still feeling a different world / Surrounding me.”

<sup>33</sup> Walter, 21.

As Darkthrone began to fully realize their Black Metal sound, the band also forbade themselves from performing live. In an interview in *From Beyond Zine*, Darkthrone guitarist Nocturno Culto has said this on the matter,

[...] we soon realized that live performance was something everybody else did. We think that Darkthrone shall darken your soul in solitude, not in a sweaty, stinking pub or hall. Outdoor performance is the only way we should play gigs. *If* we were to do it!<sup>34</sup>

In Darkthrone's 1994 release *Transilvanian Hunger*, Fenriz committed himself to performing all the instrumentation for the album, as well as writing lyrics for half the album with Varg Vikernes of Burzum providing lyrics for the other half.<sup>35</sup> Varg is cemented as being one of the most noteworthy individuals in Black Metal, not just for his scandalous presence in the media after the murdering of fellow musician Euronymous, but in being one of the most influential musicians in the genre as well.

In releasing some of the most popular Black Metal in the history of the genre, Varg Vikernes' work as the one-man band Burzum cannot be overlooked when discussing the genre's emphasis of the individual.<sup>36</sup> By committing himself to every aspect of the writing and recording process Varg had inspired countless to do the same, to the point where the one-man band has become something of a phenomenon within the genre.<sup>37</sup> Like Darkthrone post-*Blaze* (save for one performance in 1995),<sup>38</sup> Burzum and a number of Black Metal's other notable bands and

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<sup>34</sup> "From Beyond Zine: Extreme Metal Fanzine." No. 6 (Winter 2000): pgs. 8; 23. Norway, Red Stream. Accessed from [sendbackmystamps.org](http://sendbackmystamps.org), May 5, 2023.

<https://www.sendbackmystamps.org/2016/10/31/from-beyond-zine-6-norway/>

<sup>35</sup> It should be stated that this album in particular displays a noteworthy political shift towards nazi ideology beyond its associations with Varg Vikernes, with the packaging for the album's first pressing bearing the phrase "Norsk Arisk Black Metal" (Norwegian Aryan Black Metal), as well as the album's second track (written by Fenriz) "Over fjell og gjennom torner" containing the lyrics "Den Nørrøne Rase må Slakte den andre / Nar blåmenn dunker for tungt på var dør," which when translated advocate for the merciless killing of black people by Nordic hands.

<sup>36</sup> As of this essay's publication, Burzum's 1996 album *Filosofem* has gathered over 20,000 ratings on the music database site [rateyourmusic.com](http://rateyourmusic.com), and is even listed as the top-ranked Black Metal album:

<https://rateyourmusic.com/release/album/burzum/filosofem/>

<sup>37</sup> For more on this, consult Noisey's YouTube docuseries *One Man Metal*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQl6PzXU4cQ>.

<sup>38</sup> "From Beyond Zine: Extreme Metal Fanzine," 8.



projects have never performed live. In its deconstruction of the traditional band format, Black Metal becomes affirmed as a means of *self*-expression; by eliminating any outside influences, the individual is free to create without sacrifice or compromise. There can be no coincidence this turn towards the individual is not in part related to some sort of “religious feeling.”

This inward philosophy with the inversion of the self is most poetically touched upon in the very first verse uttered in *Blaze*, compiling various lines from throughout the album to create the album’s “abstract:”

Face of the goat in the mirror  
 We’ve become a race of cursed seeds  
 I entered the soul of the snake  
 We are a blaze in the northern sky

As one gazes into Black Metal’s mirror, a bestial, Satanic self reflects back towards them. The narrator “[enters] the soul of the snake,” becoming spiritually unified with Satan’s corporeal form of the snake as he was witnessed by Adam and Eve. They at once become their own god, projecting their will onto the outer world in the form of “a blaze in the northern sky.”<sup>39</sup>

If we may consult the words of James once again:

Religious feeling is thus an absolute addition to the Subject’s range of life. It gives him a new sphere of power. When the outward battle is lost, and the outer world disowns him, it redeems and vivifies an interior world which otherwise would be an empty waste.<sup>40</sup>

This sentiment towards a “religious feeling” also bears remarkable relevance to Schopenhauer’s description of music, as it exhibits “serious and profound significance that refers to the innermost being of the world and of our own self.”<sup>41</sup> Music, just like Otto’s numinous and James’ religious experience, defies proper rationalization through language and familiar emotions; they are all at

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<sup>39</sup> This is once again touched upon more directly in the track “Paragon Belial:” “The ancient white light writings / Were just lying men and their pens / You are the same, only in black. / Return with the knowledge / Of making your own God.”

<sup>40</sup> James, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Gallope, Michael. “Deep Refrains: Music, Philosophy, and the Ineffable.” Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2017: pg. 37.

once “wholly other.” Otto is quick to distinguish the non-rational quality of music from that of the numinous, but they are each, however, “something in its own right.”<sup>42</sup> It is not any and all music that expresses the numinous feeling, though in the following section regarding darkness and silence, a numinous quality in music begins to unravel itself.

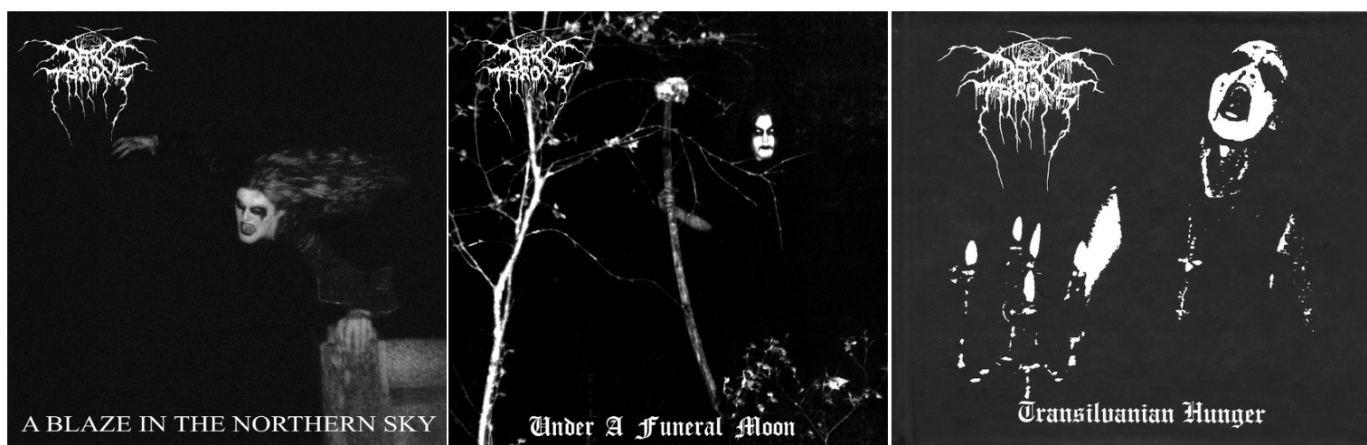


Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

### ***Darkness and Silence***

We may first begin by emphasizing the importance of darkness within the Black Metal aesthetic. This value is most evident in the cover for *Blaze* (fig. 4), as it depicts Darkthrone guitarist Zephyrous’ screaming, painted face emerging from the darkened night. In viewing the covers for the band’s subsequent albums (figs. 5 and 6), we again are met with a similar sight of a ghastly figure placed against a flat black backdrop. Themes of darkness and the night are omnipresent in the Black Metal canon, notably evident in the covers and lyrics of Burzum’s *Hvis lyset tar oss*, Mayhem’s *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas*, and Bathory’s *Self-Titled*, to name just a few other examples.

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<sup>42</sup> Otto, 48-49.

This fascination with the night and darkness, while perhaps an inversion of Norway's extended daylight hours, is more so associated with notions of winter and death.<sup>43</sup> As so eloquently put by Schopenhauer, "the sun is simultaneously the source of *light*, the condition for the most perfect kind of knowledge, and therefore of the most delightful of things; and the source of *heat*, the first condition of all life [...]"<sup>44</sup> As much as Black Metal revels in darkness, there is still yet the faintest glimmer of moonlight in the darkest of nights.

While Otto lists darkness as an effective representation of the numinous, he is quick to clarify that it is rather semi-darkness where its effect becomes all the more noticeable:

The darkness must be such as is enhanced and made all the more perceptible by contrast with some last vestige of brightness[...] hence the 'mystical' effect begins with semi-darkness. Its impression is rendered complete if the factor of the 'sublime' comes to unite with and supplement it. The semi-darkness that glimmers in vaulted halls, or beneath the branches of a lofty forest glade, strangely quickened and stirred by the mysterious play of half-lights, has always spoken eloquently to the soul [...]<sup>45</sup>

In the visual examples provided (figs. 4-6) there is of course the presence of light, as minimal as



it may be in some, and most especially in our case study. In painting portions of the face white, or in the applying of "corpse paint" as it has been named, the reflection of light on the face's pale surface makes it all the more visible within darkness, and creates the ghastly effect as we see in figs. 4-6. In *Under a Funeral Moon* (fig. 5) as well as Darkthrone's *Panzerfaust* (fig. 7), we are given indications

Fig. 7

<sup>43</sup> From *Blaze*'s title track: "Where the days are dark / and night the same / Moonlight drank the blood / Of a thousand pagan men."

<sup>44</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. "The World as Will and Representation: Volume I." Trans. by E.F.J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1969: pg. 203.

<sup>45</sup> Otto, 68.

of a forested environment, further enhancing this “mystical effect.”<sup>46</sup>

For Otto, it is silence which “corresponds to [darkness] in the language of musical sounds.”<sup>47</sup> As one listens to Black Metal, it becomes clear that there is very little silence at all, and many an outsider has been so inclined to label it as “noise” rather than music proper. They are not wholly incorrect, for there is perhaps no subset of rock or metal music which aligns as closely with hellish noise (and the extremity of noise music) as Black Metal.<sup>48</sup> We may relate this notion of silence to Darkthrone’s *Transilvanian Hunger*, in which songs end with deliberately extended portions of silence so as to create an uncanny or eerie feeling. As effective and relevant as this may be in expression of the numinous, this is not a common practice for the genre at large.

It would prove more useful in this analysis of numinous silence to embrace Black Metal’s noise rather than to disregard such a prominent aspect of its being. As we consider noise within the economy of inversion, silence reveals itself as its opposite; but, as we have understood, opposites such as these revolve around the same axis of meaning. Noise commands the space it inhabits, demanding silence from all else; it is at once *silencing* and deafening.

There is a potent account in James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* in which darkness and silence plays a central role. In it, a clergyman experiences what Otto describes in his writing

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<sup>46</sup> This rendering of the self into a demonic, dehumanized and inverted other, further emphasized by the use of personalized pseudonyms as opposed to an artist’s real name (As we can see with the likes of Darkthrone members Fenriz, Zephyrous, Nocturno Culto, and other notable musicians such as Faust, Dead, Euronymous, and Caller of Storms), has become one of Black Metal’s biggest tropes and perhaps its most recognizable signifier.

<sup>47</sup> Otto, 68.

<sup>48</sup> An exploration of extremity and anarchic chaos, noise music and Black Metal at once push the limits of what “music” may be. Among the first to explore the territory of “Black Noise” is Swedish band Abruptum (releasing their first demo in 1991), with some notable contemporary acts being La Torture des ténèbres, Gnaw Their Tongues, and Sutekh Hexen; It may also be argued that the metal subgenre of Grindcore inhabits characteristics of noise just as much as, if not more than Black Metal. This is not wrong, and there are perhaps even parallels to this and the numinous feeling alongside Grindcore’s themes of death and bodily destruction, though this is certainly a topic for another essay.

as the ‘feeling of identification,’ a characteristic of mysticism, where the personal self identifies as the “transcendent Reality,” the divine presence, the absolute:<sup>49</sup>

I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer [...] The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that *He* was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.<sup>50</sup>

It is an identification of this sort that Black Metal seeks to achieve, and *Blaze* serves a perfect analogy of such. The inverted demonic self emerges from the dark and empty void, bringing with it sublime terror and a deafening noise.

This is Black Metal’s religious experience: its numinous feeling, an experience which at once is revealed to the inverted self and to the outsider. For Black Metal’s outsider, whether they be Christian or not, the inverted individual instills a religious terror reminiscent of what Otto describes as a primitive form of religion and the numinous emotion, the “daemonic dread:”

[...] with its queer perversion, a sort of abortive offshoot, the ‘dread of ghosts’. It first begins to stir in the feeling of ‘something uncanny’, ‘eerie’, or ‘weird’. It is this feeling, which emerging from the mind of primeval man, forms the starting-point for the entire religious development in history. ‘Daemons’ and ‘gods’ alike spring from this root, and all the products of ‘mythological apperception’ or ‘fantasy’ are nothing but different modes in which it has been objectified.<sup>51</sup>

This “primitive” religious experience<sup>52</sup> is what Black Metal seeks to convey. In dehumanizing the self - initiated by painting the face black and white with esoteric markings, performing a

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<sup>49</sup> Otto, 22.

<sup>50</sup> James, 66-67.

<sup>51</sup> Otto, 14-15.

<sup>52</sup> Otto believes this “daemonic dread” as an antecedent stage of the numinous or as the numinous not yet fully realized, and as a sort of “primitive” religious experience. This of course becomes questionable as it forms a hierarchy of religious experience, and it seems subjective as to what is deemed primitive. As we have attained an impartial analysis of Black Metal thus far, it would be appropriate to extend this neutral sentiment towards the religious experience as well. Whether or not this encounter with spirits or demons forms the basis of religious belief or is primitive or lesser in any way is besides the point, as it is religious all the same. However, we must also note Black Metal’s enthusiastic involvement with all things primitive, namely religion, neutralizes any semblance of hierarchy or superiority from sophistication and the modern, as we have seen with its many inversions.

distortion of the voice through shrieks and growls, and enveloping themselves in darkness - the inverted individual seeks to appear demonic or as a ghostly apparition, and instills a primordial unease to the outsider. Fear sets in as this figure imposes violence upon those that stand in its way, actualizing Otto's daemonic dread.

This dread, Otto describes, "necessarily and naturally looks more like the opposite of religion than religion itself."<sup>53</sup> The daemonic dread then, is an inversion of the numinous or religious feeling. Furthermore, it is this that arouses Black Metal's fascination with the fantastical primitive landscape, where pagans, demons, and witches have conquered their Christian other and live without persecution or moral expectations.

In analyzing Black Metal's most prominent aspects and contributors through this religious lens, we can understand it to be a means of expressing both mystical and religious feeling in its participants, and upon its occasional outside observers. Black Metal is a mirrored portal from which an army of inverted individuals, taking the form of demons, ghosts, pagans, and witches, emerge from a darkened, primordial land to wage war against the modern Christian society that replaced it. In entering this dark and deafening portal of inversion, the Black Metal enthusiast and artist experiences a religious and numinous feeling, undergoing the mystical feeling of identification and bearing witness to their inner god. As they emerge from this void, they inflict sublime terror that at once elicits a primordial fear of ghosts and demons upon those who have not yet enveloped themselves in darkness.

The desirability of Black Metal can be understood as such. To imbibe oneself in the genre is to commit to a journey of the soul and experience that which is wholly other, to transform the

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<sup>53</sup> Otto, 132.

self to the “unholy other:” to become detached from societal expectations and moral upstanding, a total and absolute liberation of mind and body from inner and outer worlds alike.

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