



AKADEMIN FÖR UTBILDNING OCH EKONOMI  
Avdelningen för kultur-, religions- och utbildningsvetenskap

---

# Spiritually uncontrolled art: Exploring aesthetics of evil in contemporary music

Robert Andersson

2011

Uppsats, magisternivå, 15 hp  
Religionsvetenskap

Människa, natur och religionsprogrammet

Handledare: Juan Carlos Gumucio  
Examinator: Peder Thalén

---

## Abstract

This essay investigates interpretations of evil as expressed in contemporary music, focusing mainly on lyrics in contemporary popular music. The purpose is to analyze whether there is a certain aesthetic embracing of risk and innovation on display when discussing such subject matters, and to relate such aesthetic connotations to cultural and religious aspects.

Lyrical interpretations of evil in a musical context appear to be existent in different forms and are in various ways attempts to integrate the existence of evil acts, as leading to suffering and pain, by incorporating such themes into lyrical material.

There appears to be a possible aesthetic embraced when artists are advocating evil acts, however, not totally separable from the aesthetics of the extreme metal scene. Such forms of creative practice appear as reliant on the dialectic between historical perceptions of morality, modern society as globalized, segmented and restructured and the reoccurrence of religion in a secularized perspective.

Themes regarding evil appear in this form of aesthetic in different ways to traditional discourse; making use of historical and contemporary images of evil and portraying them as desirable in various ways. In some instances such creative release is also linked to religious belief and practice, making the artistic performance equivalent of a transcendental event.

## Keywords

Aesthetics, contemporary music, culture, extreme metal, evil, modernism, music lyrics.

## Table of contents

Abstract .....	2
Table of contents.....	3
1. Introduction.....	4
2. Aim/Research questions .....	4
3. Theory.....	5
3.1 Defining evil.....	6
3.2 Music, modernism and postmodernism .....	8
4. Material & method.....	11
5. Background.....	12
5.1 The incorporation of themes regarding evil in contemporary music and its lyrics .....	12
5.2 Considering instrumental music.....	13
5.2.1 Evil without words.....	13
6. Evil related themes in contemporary music and lyrics .....	14
7. The terms of inclusiveness in contemporary music.....	15
7.1 Reconciliation .....	15
7.2 Contemplation.....	16
7.3 Description .....	18
7.4 Oblivion .....	21
7.5 Embracing.....	23
7.6 Adjusted aesthetics .....	26
8. A new kind of aesthetics .....	27
8.1 Religious themes .....	28
8.2 Cultural effects .....	30
8.3 Defining an aesthetic.....	31
9. Conclusions.....	34
Bibliography.....	35
Literature .....	35
Magazines.....	37
Phonograms .....	37
Internet resources.....	38

## 1. Introduction

Everybody has some form of relationship to music; may it be in the form of casual listener, professional performer, hardcore music collector, shower-singer or other variations. In Western civilization, music in the past century has become easily accessible to the general public. Music is heard everywhere; in shopping malls, in church, on the town square, in the privacy of our homes, in the pub or night club. Where much of music deals with themes such as love, self-indulgence or other mundane topics, there are also artists that explore traditionally transcendent, philosophical or religious areas. As exemplified by several researchers in the field of religion,<sup>1</sup> music has the possibility and power to assist the individual in creating identity, meaning, and connection to the world. It can also be a means to reinforce and determine religious beliefs and create a sense of connection to transcendental powers.

The power and impact of music is universal; but the shapes and forms they appear in are versatile, as is the function of musical works. Aesthetic preferences may also differ depending on cultural context. In this essay I explore musical works that in some way deal with the topic of evil and analyze how they interact with the cultural background of their creation; I also relate them to historical concepts of contemporary music and discuss their relation to human religious and cultural experience. It is a dualistic subject matter; concerning the conflict between good and evil, regarding eventually controversial interpretations of evil, bringing the foul and unbearable, the repulsive and despicable into the limelight. It brings out into the open things we possibly don't really want to talk about. Perhaps that's why it is such an interesting subject.

## 2. Aim/Research questions

In this essay I particularly attempt to analyze descriptions and concepts of evil in contemporary Western-civilization music. With an overall appraisal of the significance of suffering, pain and evil as expressed in modern music in general, focus will be mainly on descriptions of evil in music lyrics, related to the subject of evil and what they may represent. By this examination of the presence of evil in contemporary music and lyrics I want to show how this aesthetic expressiveness is part of a contemporary effort to somehow integrate the

---

<sup>1</sup> Bossius 2003, Kahn-Harris 2007, Moberg 2009

existence of pain and suffering in recent history. It is, in other words, an artistic protest against something that by opening up to what is perceived as meaningless, challenges our deepest human emotions. While exploring such aesthetics, the artists are working on the outskirts of mainline society; similar forms of aesthetics are more accepted in other forms of art, such as literature or film, and in those forms an integral part of Western culture.

My purpose with this essay is to find out in what different ways this subject matter is described in contemporary music and for what purposes. I also intend to analyze if and how using evil as a subject matter in music can make the existence of evil in this world in some way easier for the individual to understand.

The essence of the matter is analyzing why themes of evil are prevalent in contemporary musical works and why, with a subsequent discussion of their potential effects on culture and religion, including a reverse analysis of the cultural and religious inspirational impacts on the musical works. Hypothetically, they are intertwined in the sense that religion and music under the social segmentation that is culture on different levels share a similar purpose in the turn from the mundane to the transcendental.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Theory

I will perform my research by analyzing musical pieces with special emphasis on lyrical content. I will select material with lyrical content touching on the subject of evil, but there will also be musical works in this study which have no actual lyrical content. As described by Keith Kahn-Harris in a discussion of the aesthetics of hate music, when we speak of hate music we generally mean hate *lyrics*.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, when speaking about an aspect such as evil in music, it is generally lyrical descriptions of evil we are referring to. However, musical works can also be dealing with the topic of evil without actually including lyrics, since they can be written with a specific event in mind that is universally regarded as evil, for example the Holocaust, or trying to express feelings such as despair, anguish, remorse etc. in the musical work or performance.<sup>4</sup> My essay is limited to Western-civilization musical offerings with emphasis on rock music, in order to adequately limit my field of research to an appropriate level.

---

<sup>2</sup> Adorno 1989:44, Bossius 2003:169-170

<sup>3</sup> Kahn-Harris 2009

<sup>4</sup> Frith 1996:254-259

### 3.1 Defining evil

A general definition of evil is needed in order to properly discuss this subject; I do not attempt to extensively elaborate on the subject of what evil is, for my intended purposes I believe a general definition will be quite adequate. I will base this definition of evil on relatively recent literary efforts from two philosophers, Adam Morton and Lars Fr. H. Svendsen. Although they by no means are the only researchers who have tried to define the subject, they are selected since they offer distinct, secular definitions that correspond relatively well to one another.

Both accept the notion of man as *both* good and evil, a stance necessary if trying to understand human evil, and they categorize human evil in distinct and easily applicable typologies.<sup>5</sup> Determining humans as both good and evil also implies that humans are capable of performing both good and evil actions, and to identify and separate between these two forms of actions. However, interpretations of the boundaries of good and evil are not rigid but fluctuating somewhat, and are to a certain degree dependant on cultural context and paradigm. With this fact noted, there are actions that are or has been regarded as evil by almost all cultures in the world, current and historically. There is also a place for a separation between actions regarded as evil and actions regarded as merely wrong. An action that is wrong does not necessarily have to be evil; the latter act indicates it having more serious consequences than a wrongful act would.<sup>6</sup> This necessitates a further elaboration regarding the differences between the two forms of actions.

Morton argues that transcendent or demonic evil as such does not exist as a force in this world, but actions caused by belief in a divine being can be regarded as evil.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, according to Morton, only evil as performed by active agents in this world are to be defined as valid, along with evil in the form of natural causes without any human participation. Identifying the need for separation between acts that are “wrong” and acts that are “evil”, Morton also formulates what he calls “the barrier theory of evil”, which is the idea that evil acts are defined by a crossing of boundaries and a conscious act of deliberation:

---

<sup>5</sup> Svendsen 2005:183-186, Morton 2004:65

<sup>6</sup> Morton 2004:9-15

<sup>7</sup> Morton 2004:32-33

[...] a person's act is evil when it results from a strategy or learned procedure which allows that person's deliberations over a choice of actions not to be inhibited by barriers against considering harming or humiliating others that ought to have been in place.

(Morton 2004:57)

This is a theory which demands the performer of evil acts to ignore or disrespect a barrier, and crossing that barrier allows the performer to act and behave in ways that humiliate or harm others.

Svendsen also generally rejects the prospect of a transcendent form of evil and more or less neglects natural evil, since these forms of evil lies beyond man; instead he opts for defining a moral, human evil as either a) demonic, b) instrumental (in accordance with Kant), c) idealistic or d) trivial (in accordance with Arendt).<sup>8</sup> Moral evil in this sense is related to activity and intent. A general definition of evil used by Svendsen is as follows:

[...] a morally evil agent is a free agent causing harm to others against their will and without considering their human dignity.

(Svendsen 2004:82, my translation)

Note that, as implied above, these definition theories are only applicable when discussing active, free agents in the world.<sup>9</sup>

The prospect of metaphysical or transcendent evil however exists as an idea or belief, and is present in many musical works in different forms. Therefore it is reasonable to briefly elaborate further regarding this type of evil, albeit without acknowledging the presence of the divine; but rather based upon the fact that as part of human spirituality, such ideas exist and has had an enormous impact on human perceptions of evil. This fact is certainly discernable in several of the examples following in this essay.

The biblical idea of evil is based on the presumption that God is exclusively good and all-encompassing. The problem of integrating evil with the image of an omnipotent and omniscient God has produced a number of theodicies. For example, in the words of Augustine, evil is rationalized as merely the absence of good.<sup>10</sup> Evil has also been attributed to man's free will; by an act of turning away from God, man has embraced evil and the

---

<sup>8</sup> Svendsen 2005:81-85.

<sup>9</sup> In applying naturalistic ideas about human, moral evil, separated from supernatural agency, Morton and Svendsen are not unique; philosophers such as Pierre Bayle established such ideas in the seventeenth century (see Israel 2006:476).

<sup>10</sup> Morton 2004:25, Peterson & Zachariasson 1999:260-261, Clack & Clack 1998:53

traditional Christian character of Satan, the great adversary, as its prime representative, working out of malice and influencing human actions of evil. In present-day Christianity, general opinions on the potential existence of Satan vary greatly; some Christians have abolished belief in the actual figure altogether.<sup>11</sup> Metaphysical evil implies the acceptance of divine or otherworldly beings, working as free agents and with the power to exert influence on the world and its inhabitants. This is a form of evil often described in music lyrics, and one that evidently exists as an idea in many individuals, obviously influenced by religious beliefs and imagery. If evil is in some way attributed to man's free will, we are actually discussing a form of human evil.<sup>12</sup>

With the definitions above in mind, we can conclude that when defining an evil act, there is a need for the act to be inflicting pain and/or some form of suffering to the individuals targeted, but there is also a need for the act to be deliberate, in the sense that actions that are not deliberately meant to cause harm can nevertheless be harmful, by the agent performing the act being neglectful or ignorant. This deliberation forms the separation between "wrong" and "evil" actions. With this separation in place, we have criteria's that any interpretation of evil that later is discussed have to live up to in order to be successfully classified as describing an evil act.

There are evident problems when trying to produce a distinctive definition of what evil is, since the very foundations of what evil actually is very much lies in the eye of the beholder. Actions regarded as evil from one point of view may seem very different seen from another perspective. This implicates that ideas of what is regarded as evil in most cases are highly subjective.

### 3.2 Music, modernism and postmodernism

Modern or contemporary music is most easily defined as music happening in the present, but there is also a point in complementing this view with regard to modern music as specific forms of musical and/or lyrical creation. Modern music is more than what can be regarded as contemporary music; it is also set in a specific frame going back to the modernist view of the world and the rejection of classical values regarding music. Modern music in this sense can be

---

<sup>11</sup> Pagels 1995:182

<sup>12</sup> Morton 2004:25-26

classified as based on breaking traditional norms and values of what music should be, but is also reliant on social criticism.<sup>13</sup>

The definition of modernism at use in this essay is the one communicated by Matei Calinescu,<sup>14</sup> where a separation from classical values and deviance from normality is of the essence and where re-evaluation and progression is vital. Modernism is also regarded as somewhat coexistent with the postmodern condition, where a notion and rejection of the concept of a universally valid metanarrative is evident, adopting a rational, critical and eclectic view of culture and the world.<sup>15</sup> The concept of postmodernism has been advocated primarily by Jean-Francois Lyotard and his followers. The postmodern condition has been heavily criticized by among others Jürgen Habermas, claiming that modernism was not obsolete, merely unfinished, and that there still was validity to be found in the modernist idea of rationality.<sup>16</sup>

The musical works I dissect in this essay are created in a modern or postmodern cultural setting and are in many ways rejective of historically classical concepts of music; in the sense that they are often embracing diversity, experimentation and innovation. This contemporary music is in stark contrast to what is known as popular culture or mass-culture, where individuality often is compromised for accessibility.<sup>17</sup> Theodor Adorno has been the main critic of the effects of mass-culture, accusing it of standardization, banality and little aesthetic merit.<sup>18</sup> Although many of Adorno's theories remain applicable to this day, they are also a product of the cultural and historical environment in which they were created and acknowledged and should be understood as such. Adorno is Marxist in essence, and capitalist mass-culture is perhaps his single greatest enemy.<sup>19</sup> With the notion in mind that such contemporary music has little regard for mass appeal, these forms of musical experimentation possibly have a higher degree of risk-taking and a larger interest in more controversial themes such as, for instance, evil.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Adorno 1989

<sup>14</sup> Calinescu 1987

<sup>15</sup> Lyotard 1993

<sup>16</sup> Calinescu 1987:246-247, 259-265

<sup>17</sup> Adorno 1989:25-30

<sup>18</sup> Adorno 1989:27-29

<sup>19</sup> Paddison & Deliège 2010:8

<sup>20</sup> According to Max Paddison, this especially seems to be the case regarding art music, as elaborated upon in Paddison & Deliège 2010:269-270.

That this separation between popular music and contemporary art music exists does not suggest that the two are totally incompatible.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, many of the musical works I analyze in this essay could be classified as essentially part of popular culture, in the sense that they draw heavily on the heritage of pop and rock music and are not, by definition, art music. Despite this fact, these works are to certain degree also subversive, innovative and not actually supposed for a mass-market audience. In that sense, they are contemporary music rather than popular music. The term *contemporary music* used in this essay is therefore equivalent with music created in a modern/post-modern cultural setting and embracing of an aesthetic of risk and innovation, and I use it predominantly to avoid slipping into a discussion regarding the use of the term *modern music*: using modern music as a term would indicate inseparable links with modernity, something I believe is not exclusively the case in this scenario.

Max Paddison advocates a classification of contemporary music as radical and advanced, labels which indicate the exclusion of popular music from the concept.<sup>22</sup> I generally adopt this first description, leaving the second to be considered in my discussion.

As for music lyrics, they are not really lyrical in the common usage of the word. They are texts accompanying a musical piece and are just as varied in construction and prominence as the musical works themselves. Some are more than capable of holding their own in a literary sense, while others are little more than some words to be vocally abused.<sup>23</sup> However, the lyrics are an integral part of the musical work and should be interpreted as such.<sup>24</sup> If separated from the music, the lyrics are out of context and, although in theory capable of having an aesthetic value of their own, not easily interpreted and often making little sense outside of their original context.<sup>25</sup>

Popular music has a tendency to stick to tried and tested formulas musically, what with the expectations of the commercial market, and therefore the lyrical dimension has to adjust to the musical framework, often resulting in less emphatic lyrics- they are music-driven as opposed to lyric-driven. Other contemporary music, not as concerned with eventual commercial success, does not to the same extent need to take such matters into consideration and

---

<sup>21</sup> Frith 1996:20, Kahn-Harris 2007:165-166

<sup>22</sup> Paddison & Deliege 2010:3-4

<sup>23</sup> Adorno 1989:25

<sup>24</sup> Storey 2010:131-133

<sup>25</sup> Frith 1996:179

consequently demonstrate greater diversity regarding music lyrics and is more often aware of the balance between different elements. That is not to claim that popular music can not be in possession of high-quality lyrics; in that respect much has happened since the early beginnings of pop and rock culture.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. Material & method

The core material used and investigated in this essay consists mainly of musical works with and without lyrics. In addition, theoretical literature regarding religiosity, popular culture and music is used in order to contextualise the examined material.

I will examine my primary material in order to analyze of how the expressions of evil have manifested themselves. Primary material in this study equals material, predominantly musical *and* lyrical but also exclusively musical, produced by artists working within a modern or postmodern spectrum. In order to properly be able to discuss different types of evil and how they appear in the material, I have made an attempt to postulate a wide definition of the concepts of evil, derived from previous research on the matter. I have also defined the cultural settings in which the musical works examined have been created, since this is of importance when trying to understand what said cultural influence has had on the actual works.

The nature of this work will hereby be a hermeneutic analysis of musical works regarding the topic of evil, with focus on contemporary music. Lyrical material expressed in these formats are not entirely separated from the musical context in which it is found, and therefore I will on occasion discuss this fact and its implications.<sup>27</sup> The necessity of analyzing the material from within the context of the cultural background in which it is created is obvious; music, or arts in general, is not created in a cultural vacuum. This will also contribute to the interpretation of the musical works at hand and is related back to the hermeneutic method, focusing heavily on an interpretational dialectic where the analysis moves from detailed to more general horizons, adding comprehension in the process.<sup>28</sup>

The fact that most of the selected works dissected in this essay belong to extreme metal subgenre is indicative of the emphasis within said genre to explore topics regarding evil; this

---

<sup>26</sup> Frith 1996:176-177

<sup>27</sup> Häger 2004:42

<sup>28</sup> Molander 2003:171-173

fact is at the heart of the genre and is for many artists the single largest lyrical matter. This is not to say that such matters are restricted to extreme metal; it certainly is not, but nowhere else has such interest in evil been as evident and as integral in processes of formulating aesthetic expressiveness.

## 5. Background

### 5.1 The incorporation of themes regarding evil in contemporary music and its lyrics

The concept of good and evil is with varying frequency a topic in music lyrics today, perhaps not surprisingly, since humanity in general occupy themselves regularly with questions regarding good and evil and the nature of these phenomenon's. In light of the enormous changes music has gone through, in aspects of availability, technology and evolution etc, and with a cultural landscape transformed, descriptions of good and evil in musical contexts are no longer limited to their traditional arenas. In the past, the subject matter of good and evil has mainly been discussed under a religious or metaphysical banner, whereas today this is not exclusively the case. Religion is in the present age more eclectic and diversified than ever, enabling individual interpretations or answers to religious questions.<sup>29</sup> The dialectic of good and evil as a subject matter has also found its place in popular culture and contemporary music. This fact has also had an impact on *how* these, originally exclusively religious or metaphysical, themes are dealt with and interpreted. With multiple artistic arenas available for individuals eager to present their views of the subject at hand, increased economic wealth and a higher degree of individual freedom coupled with the regression of traditional religious values has resulted in a vast landscape of differing interpretations regarding controversial themes.

In the liberal societies of the present age, evil has not been a factor frequently discussed outside of a religious context, at least not until the events of 9/11. In the aftermath, evil has once again been accepted as a term and used to brand adversaries, in statements from political and religious leaders.<sup>30</sup> The re-acceptance of the term evil in society at large may be rather new, but the fact is that in music, the concept of evil has never really gone out of style. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there have been many examples of this, as mentioned

---

<sup>29</sup> Clack & Clack 1998:169, Partridge, Beskow & Johansson 2005:10-16, Hammer 1997:286-287

<sup>30</sup> Svendsen 2005:219-221

previously the Holocaust has been a particular event that has inspired many musical interpretations of evil; for instance *In Memoriam Holocaust* by Ruth Schontal. The emergence of rock music spawned an interest in the darker sides of existence that never really have gone away. With further branching out into new forms of extreme music, topics regarding evil have been very prevalent and are in some subgenres more or less aesthetically essential.<sup>31</sup> This is also an arena where we find experimentation and subversity in several aspects of the musical works; musically, graphically and lyrically, focus has been on transgression and little notion of mass-appeal or popularity has been evident.<sup>32</sup>

With the rapid developments of culture of the past century in mind and the subsequent democratization of information technology in the western world, the ability to partake in forms of musical expression has been spread to parts of the population where such self-expression was previously impossible. The fact that more people from different backgrounds now have the ability to create music could indicate the forming of new and different aesthetics in contemporary musical works, and with this I am not only implying the music itself but also accompanying lyrics and graphical presentation; this is what in this essay will constitute a musical work.

## 5.2 Considering instrumental music

Instrumental music mediates emotions solely by the way of musical perception; where vocal music generally has accompanying words or lyrics, the instrumental musical work relies on the impact of the instrumentation alone. While less obvious in its interpretation, there are still musical pieces that evidently deal with the topic of evil in different ways. I will give an example of an instrumental work dealing with a topic that can be classified as evil, as a contrast to works that also integrate lyrics.

### 5.2.1 Evil without words

*Ruth Schontal's String Quartet No.3: In Memoriam Holocaust* is a piece, an arrangement for strings, as the title implies inspired by the Holocaust, which is an event that is almost universally regarded as one of the most evil string of events to have taken place. The piece consists of two movements, "Grave" and "Lament and prayer", where the first part initially

---

<sup>31</sup> Kahn-Harris 2007:100, 128

<sup>32</sup> Kahn-Harris 2007:29

applies an ominous mood, later mounting into dramatic instrumentation, at times intense and intermittently invoking images of dramatic events. The second part is rather more laid-back and thoughtful, with an at times rather reflective touch to it, but not derived of intensity.

While the title itself is a dead giveaway of how to interpret this musical work, the music itself also complements this interpretation. With the composer also being of Jewish heritage, being born in Germany and forced to flee the Nazi regime, there is no doubt that the Holocaust has a special significance to her, as to all sharing her heritage.<sup>33</sup> We are here listening to a musical work that thematically considers an event, the Holocaust, which was evil, both on an individual and collective level. With so many people killed, and so many others living with the aftermath, there are definite grounds for this classification. The musical piece at hand seems to deal with both the death of kin, and the sorrow of those left to grieve those that were forsaken.

## 6. Evil related themes in contemporary music and lyrics

As previously stated, my area of investigation will be interpretations of evil in contemporary music. My precognition of this subject is the one of a long-time listener to what could be described as controversial contemporary music, or with a practical and more defining term, extreme metal music, without ever being a practitioner or critic. I intend to identify themes regarding evil in contemporary music and investigate what different forms of evil are evident in the material. By doing this I am then able to analyze in what manner evil is used in the musical work via different themes; is it simply a descriptive theme, does the artists problematize evil in different ways, is it possible to find innovative forms of religious expressions of evil, etc. In the end, my intentions are to contribute to an understanding of the values of incorporating themes regarding evil in musical works; be it for the purpose of provocation, comprehension, reconciliation, in short: what are the motives behind the embracing of the topic of evil in contemporary music?

I do not attempt to delve deeply into musical theory; I am no musical theorist and the purpose of this essay is to focus on the aspect of evil as interpreted in musical works as a whole, thus I am inclined to interpret the musical works from a listener's viewpoint rather than from a music theoretical one.

---

<sup>33</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth\\_Sch%C3%B6nthal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth_Sch%C3%B6nthal), 20101221

## 7. The terms of inclusiveness in contemporary music

When discussing an object of the arts, it is of importance to note that the discussion is concerning an interpretation of the object; one person's perception of the piece of art is not the only side of the story, works of art is certainly open to interpretation from many different angles.

While moving on to contemporary music including lyrics, it is essential to note that the musical work in actual fact is consisting of so much more than just music.<sup>34</sup> While I in this essay concentrate heavily on the lyrical aspect of music as interacting with the sounds, I would like to add another factor that contribute in varying degree to the totality of the musical experience. Accompanying the music and the lyrics is also the graphic element, which can be consisting of complementary album artwork, adding to or detracting from the totality of the experience. This element has been used by some artists to great effect, and while not an essential part of this essay, on occasion references to the graphic part of the musical work will be drawn, especially when I have considered this being a factor of importance to understand the totality of the musical work. These factors certainly interact to great extent in many contemporary musical works.<sup>35</sup>

### 7.1 Reconciliation

As an example of contemporary music involving a reconciliative take on evil, we have *War Requiem*, written by *Benjamin Britten*, set on a poem by *Wilfred Owen* and first performed at the reconsecration of Coventry Cathedral in 1962. It appears as a statement fuelled by the composer's views of anti-war and pacifism, inspired by and dedicated to the fates of friends who were casualties of war.<sup>36</sup>

[...] It seems that out of battle I escaped  
down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
through granites which titanic wars had groined. Yet  
also there encumbered sleepers groaned,  
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred. Then,  
as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared With  
piteous recognition in fixed eyes,  
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.  
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.  
"Strange friend," I said, "Here is no cause to mourn."

---

<sup>34</sup> Häger 2004: 42-43, Frith 1996: 166

<sup>35</sup> Particularly religious symbolism is often used to further emphasize and complement the musical and lyrical factors.

<sup>36</sup> Phillips 2006:48-49

None", said the other, "save the undone years,  
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,  
Was my life also; I went hunting wild  
After the wildest beauty in the world,  
For by my glee might many men have laughed,  
And of my weeping something had been left,  
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,  
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.  
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.  
Or, discontent, boil boldly, and be spilled. They  
will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,  
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.  
Miss we the march of this retreating world  
into vain citadels that are not walled.  
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels  
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,  
Even from wells we sunk too deep for war,  
Even from the sweetest wells that ever were.  
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.  
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned  
yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.  
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.  
Let us sleep now..."

(Benjamin Britten: War Requiem, 1963 - excerpt)

Being a mammoth of a musical work, the segment included here is merely a small part of the entire piece. It concerns itself with the necessities of reconciliation, resembling an encounter with an enemy of war, but acknowledging the fact that both personas are first and foremost fellow humans and only secondarily enemies, opts for a reconciliative yet mournful mood ending in an utterance of sharing eternal sleep together. Set on a war poem, the lyric is depicting schemes of possible evil, in the sense that dealing with loss and death of friends in the setting of unjustified war can be seen as evil.

As reconciliation of the events of war, this piece is a remembrance of those horrors and significant of the cultural paradigm of the post-war years where understanding of the evil deeds performed at the World War II was high on the agenda.

## 7.2 Contemplation

British band Black Sabbath arose to fame in the early seventies with their sombre take on rock music, coupled with lyrics about war, injustices and existential issues. Despite often being associated with occultism<sup>37</sup>, many of their lyrics actually acknowledge divine powers and some even directly refer to the Christian God in an affirmative manner.

---

<sup>37</sup> Partridge & Stephenson 2009:83, Arlebrand & Wallin 2001:171

[...] Generals gathered in their masses  
Just like witches at black masses Evil  
minds that plot destruction Sorcerers  
of death's construction  
In the fields the bodies burning As  
the war machine keeps turning  
Death and hatred to mankind  
Poisoning their brainwashed minds, oh lord yeah!  
Politicians hide themselves away

They only started the war Why  
should they go out to fight? They  
leave that role to the poor  
Time will tell them they are powered minds  
Making war just for fun  
Treating people just like pawns in chess

(Black Sabbath: War pigs, 1970- excerpt)

The lyrics tell the tale of corrupted politicians, waging war to benefit their own needs and sending less fortunate souls out to die. Deliberately sending fellow humans into war for selfish reasons, as implied in the lyric, would certainly be possible to regard as an act of evil. However, there can be underlying motives here we don't understand-perhaps the war is fought in order to hinder a greater evil, and is thus justifiable? It's not possible to deduce if this is the case from the lyric, what is certain is how the lyricist describes this situation, as an event of persons causing harm to other individuals for selfish reasons- an act classifiable as evil.

Musically, the band performed as an electrified rock ensemble, and applied traditional pop/rock structures with easily discernable verses and choruses. Some experimentation in the form of psychedelic parts was integrated into their sound and song tempos varied greatly. The uniqueness of the guitar sound was what set them apart musically, as guitarist Tony Iommi had created an inimitable style of playing due to an accident where he cut off a couple of his fingertips.

Black Sabbath's whole aesthetic concept was built upon images of darkness, horror and the unknown, but often their lyrics also manifested feelings of hope, as in this lyric:

[...]well I know its hard for you to know the reason why  
And I know you'll understand more when it's time to die  
Don't believe the life you have will be the only one  
You have to let your body sleep to let your soul live on  
Love has given life to you and now it's your concern  
Unseen eyes of inner life will make your soul return  
Still I look but not to touch, the seeds of life are sown  
Curtain of the future falls , the secret stays unknown  
Just remember love is life and hate is living death  
Treat your life for what it's worth and live for every breath

Looking back I've lived and learned but now I'm wondering  
Here I wait and only guess what this next life will bring

(Black Sabbath: A national acrobat, 1973-excerpt)

The story is one of reincarnation, of what happens after you die, but also attempts to mediate the importance of living life to the fullest. This appears to be a positive message, of hope and of accepting life as the mystical experience it is. As exemplified by these quoted lyrics, a fascination with subject matters of evil and darkness does not necessitate ignorance or disinterest in other, less controversial themes of hope or even repentance. It seems quite possible to combine what seems like very disparate themes within the same musical work or in the wholeness of the aesthetic concept.

Thus, in Black Sabbath's lyrics we find examples of a variety of currents that flow within the overall aesthetic. Images of darkness and despair combine with those of hope and piety to create the totality of the musical experience. The ambivalence of the earthly existence and the underlying emotions associated with being is at the heart of the matter; questioning the traditional cultural and religious paradigm. In a sense, they are connected to the existing detraditionalization of the times, questioning authority, attempting apprehension on their own merits.

Black Sabbath is representative of an overall aesthetic where contemplation and questioning are essential features; by contemplating life and the components of human existence they are appearing to search for comprehension of the ambiguity of worldly events. This aesthetic does not primarily attempt to provide answers; rather it is promoting the personal acts of self-reflection and acknowledgement of the surrounding world, including the actions of mankind within these margins, good as well as evil.

### 7.3 Description

The American thrash metal band Slayer's 1986 song *Angel of death*, the opening track of the album *Reign in Blood*, is thematically linked to the Holocaust, a common source of inspiration for many artists. The song represents a shift in the lyrical focus of the band; where previous songs almost exclusively had dealt with occult and satanic themes, this lyric is about

the medical experimentation and human suffering inflicted by Joseph Mengele, Nazi doctor and scientist.<sup>38</sup>

[...] Auschwitz, the meaning of pain / the way that I want you to die  
slow death, immense decay / showers that cleanse you of your life  
forced in like cattle you run / stripped of your life's worth  
Human mice for the Angel of Death  
Four hundred thousand more to die!

Angel of Death!  
Monarch to the kingdom of the dead

Sadistic, surgeon of demise / sadist of the noblest blood  
Destroying, without mercy / to benefit the Aryan race Surgery,  
with no anaesthesia / feel the knife pierce you intensely Inferior,  
no use to mankind  
Strapped down screaming out to die!

Angel of Death!  
Monarch to the kingdom of the dead  
infamous butcher, Angel of Death!

(Slayer: Angel of Death, 1986-excerpt)

The lyric describes the horrors of the medical experiments taking place in the Nazi concentration camps, and in a realistic and direct fashion: the events are described as they are interpreted by the author, with little regard of the potential controversy of the subject matter. It is a blunt way of lyrical writing, fitting to the surrounding musical work that is furious in tempo, with high speed guitars, drums and bass and an accompanying vocal performance of the shouting kind prominent in this style of music. The structure is verse/chorus based (in a broad sense), with additional bridges and intertwining dissonant guitar solos. As in most of Slayer's songs, the lyrics complement the aggressive music, adding to each other to create musical works that is in-your-face, powerful and uncompromising.

As noted before, the Holocaust and topics related to World War II is not unusual; these events have affected many people's lives and few would argue the fact that the attempted extinction of a perceived inferior race was an act that can be classified as evil. In this case, references to actions performed by a single man under the Nazi banner makes it even easier; here are activities portrayed that inevitably lead to the pain, suffering and death of thousands of people, with sadistic overtones that extended said suffering. The figure of Mengele allegedly had little regard for the suffering caused to his victims, crossing boundaries that most people

---

<sup>38</sup> McIver 2008:84-85

have, ignoring the harm caused, and therefore his performed actions can be deemed as intrinsically evil.

So, what possible reasons are there for choosing a Holocaust-related theme as lyrical inspiration? In this case, there is no obvious kin relation; no member of Slayer is Jewish. It seems that one of the reasons is first and foremost an intellectual interest from several members in Nazi history and World War II. Guitarist and lyricist Jeff Hanneman stated that the lyric was akin to a history lesson, and that he held a certain fascination for the horrors and extremity of the Third Reich.<sup>39</sup> Another reason is the way the lyric is integrated with the music; when performing aggressive, angry types of music, the lyrical topics usually follow along the same lines.<sup>40</sup> Singing about flowers or everlasting love could seem unfitting to the musical material, and could seriously exert influence on an extreme metal band's capacity to build subcultural capital.<sup>41</sup> This lyric was at the time of the album's release met with outrage from some of the public, branding the band as Nazis and condemning the subject matter. However, the band has always rejected all accusations of such kind, referring to the fact that vocalist Araya has Chilean heritage and drummer Lombardo is of Cuban heritage. In actual fact, the lyric does not value the actions described; it merely addresses the evil actions performed. This indicates no desire on the lyricist's part to instigate reconciliation, understanding or any other kind of emotive perception; it is nothing but a fascination of some of the morbid actions of the Holocaust. A fascination of themes similar to this, of things that are considered morbid or aesthetically unpleasant, has with time become something of a commodity of sorts in certain forms of artistic expression. A further elaboration on this fact is the following example.

---

<sup>39</sup> McIver 2008:85

<sup>40</sup> Exceptions to this statement do certainly exist. There are several musical acts performing contemporary, aggressive music while still having lyrics that are communicating love, understanding and the like.

<sup>41</sup> Subcultural capital is a term in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital, which indicates that a struggle between actors in competition to accumulate capital is taking place. The concept has later been adopted and restructured as theories on subcultural capital, where actions within a subcultural scene that are accepted accumulate capital, in the process leading to respectability within the scene. Likewise, performing acts could also lead to a decrease in subcultural capital; for example, inconsistent lyrical material, transgression into unaccepted areas or lack of respect towards the subculture itself could lead to loss of capital. In this sense, should a band like Slayer abolish their origins and start writing lyrics about unanswered love, for instance, the result would most probably be a loss of subcultural capital and less respect within the scene. For further elaboration on these subjects, see Bourdieu 2010:225 and Kahn-Harris 2007:121-139.

## 7.4 Oblivion

German thrash metal band *Kreator* were in the 1980's renowned for their violent-style lyrics and rather chaotic handling of the instruments. Performing music in a similar fashion to the one sported by Slayer but being rather more on the social/political side regarding lyrical matters,<sup>42</sup> the following example, taken from their 1988 album *Extreme Aggression*, rather well represents a typical Kreator song, musically and lyrically.

[...] girl so sweet and once so innocent your  
life is so brutal, true emotions suppressed  
you scream but he won't hear a word till he's had his way  
victim of the cruellest kind of love

against his urges there is no defence  
the one who gave you life stole your innocence  
you want to be free at any cost  
but you're chained by the shame  
and everything seems to be lost

bringer of torture you're

not afraid of dying  
nothing could be worse than this life  
you're terrified of the pain  
the pain that returns with the night

bringer of torture

insanity and terror, hand in hand till  
childhood dreams come to an end  
this situation, so vile and insane will never be over  
he's coming back again, again and again

(Kreator: Bringer of Torture, 1988)

This lyric deals with the act of child molestation; the victim of the lyric being totally helpless and in the hands of the one that brought her to life, the performer that is the bringer of torture. The subject matter is consistent with what Kreator usually writes lyrics about, social injustices, war, famine, abuse, and etcetera.<sup>43</sup> This lyric is descriptive without being reflective, not defining the horrors of the victim in detail but acknowledging the pain and suffering she has to go through. It mediates emotions of despair, hopelessness, terror and shame, amongst others. It is a lyric that through its descriptive nature does neither condemn nor condone the actions performed, but remains neutral to the horrific act itself. The music in this case is loosely structured; the only reoccurring musical trait is the screamed chorus, consisting only

---

<sup>42</sup> Sweden Rock Magazine #55, 2008

<sup>43</sup> Kahn-Harris 2007:116

of the title. Other than that, it is fast guitar chords that do not reappear in the form of verses or bridges.

As in the previous case, the subject matter also is an appropriate match to the music; Kreator's brand of music is similar to Slayer's in many ways. They share an obsession with fast-paced tempos and short intense songs, but differ in some ways: Kreator have harsher vocals and are less instrumentally competent, rendering their musical works a rawer, less polished and more chaotic feel.

The motives behind writing this lyric could be similar to the one above; a fascination about the darker aspects of life, of which child abuse certainly is a part. It could also be an informative piece; child abuse in the 1980's was not as commonly discussed as it is today. Another alternative could be the previously mentioned match to the music; with Kreator's raw and unpolished brand of thrash metal music, topics regarding various forms of evil fit in very well; many of their songs deal with the horrors of war and plague, for instance. The final image left by the lyrics is the one of torture without end; here is no room for mediating emotions of any other kind than the pain suffered by the victim, which is the sole remaining factor.

As another form of musical expression occupied with descriptive manifestations of evil acts, the musical works Kreator create are part of a current within these musical scenes; while embracing images of horrific acts and using them as subject matter, they are focusing on aspects of the dark sides of human existence and pushing them to the forefront of the musical experience. This current has later been further elaborated upon in different forms; some have moved on to different religious themes, some have focused on the extremity of the act of murder, while others yet have wandered into philosophical renderings on the different nuances of human life.<sup>44</sup> In the following sections we will find examples of these approaches to artistic creation.

The sort of aesthetic performed by artists such as Kreator or Slayer seem to consist of a less self-reflective core; the lyrics are less contemplative on the surface, and there appears to be a conscious act of separation from the often gruesome acts portrayed within them. The music in itself complements this aspect; the artists are opting for a less organic style of musical

---

<sup>44</sup> Mudrian 2004:181-183, Kahn-Harris 2007:35-38, Partridge & Christianson 2009: 16-20

performance, with emphasis on immediacy in the mediation of the song, as evident in the short, compact structures they apply, as opposed to having multi-faceted songs where repeated listening may add to and possibly enhance the experience. This is obviously a generalization, as there are examples of artists embracing this sort of aesthetic who have preferred long, complex and less immediate structures. Nevertheless, the artists generally appear to incorporate these musical, lyrical and graphical elements into a whole concept and where focus is leaning towards social realism, integrating topics regarding evil in a descriptive fashion. What seems important is not always to question these acts or elaborate upon them, even if this also can be the case; but what matters is displaying the acts, for various reasons, and by this act adopts a position in reference, as an observer rather than as an opponent.

The increase in fascination with images of pain and suffering evident in the cultures of modern-day society is obvious, and perhaps correlating with the fact that mankind, while becoming urbanized and distanced from its origins, have also been alienated from the very fabric of life where pain, suffering and death were integral parts of human existence. Effects of such alienation could be lack of comprehension and connection to general society.<sup>45</sup> Seeking comprehension, sensational acts of cruelty instigates contact with those phenomena, potentially making the concepts of evil existent and comprehensible in the minds of contemporary man.

## 7.5 Embracing

Representative in some ways of the 1990's wave of black metal bands, *Cradle of Filth* embrace an aesthetic of controversy on many different levels.<sup>46</sup> Regarded by many as offensive lyrically, as well as visually and musically, they are attempting an aesthetic heavily reliant on romanticism, vampirism and occultism.<sup>47</sup> They also seek inspiration in their native English literary traditions. Writers such as William Blake and Lord Byron, for example, are essential inspiration to their style of lyrical writing. While not as fundamentally extreme as several Scandinavian acts, they nevertheless are an apt example of how black metal aesthetics can be manifested.

---

<sup>45</sup> Giddens 1984:195-197

<sup>46</sup> Baddeley 2006:199, Kahn-Harris 2007:44

<sup>47</sup> Partridge & Christianson 2009: 41-43

[...] spells lay daggers before me  
Passion speaks in grue vehement stabs  
trance my eyes, fix my focus to pain  
the tumour grows until the enemy is slain  
Slightless storm, knee-deep in hate I seethe  
My purpose here has woken to breathe  
total war on the brethren of Men  
Millions regardless dying by my hand

A black age of fire  
brief in its vicious eloquence, removing the dross  
Love will arise from the ashes of your loss  
then and only then will the pleasure of Eden be mine  
and the sinews of life itself will be tied in the very veins of my bloodline  
and their tears taste like wine...  
I will rule as a king and the Goddess will sit as my guiding Queen  
in the glory of the earth our crowns are studded with the jewels of blasphemy  
The blood is the life!

I seek to evoke a new order in Man, a flood of compulsion to resurrect Khem  
the lion is vexed to uproot and descend  
Chaos my steed in the thick, clinging dust, tempering weapons of criminal lust  
I hold sway from the East to fulfil prophecies  
Thinning the cause as fresh cells to disease  
The blood is the life!

Even the moon will not lend thee her light  
The darkness serves will to snuff out human life that  
I might reclaim the world as my right  
I kill without scruple or silent regret  
In haunts of the sinister lunar aspect  
for I am the pleasure that comes from your pain  
tiny red miracles falling like... rain  
the incessant pall of death surrounds me,  
But this is not the part of me that wishes to breed  
there will be no dread thereafter  
The mysteries I reveal unto thee  
I stir the hearts of the wisest  
By the fools I will always be feared my  
Kingdom feeds off their slaughter... A  
crescendo of passion bleeding...  
On the pale reflection of dawn  
devour the Sun

(Cradle of Filth: A Crescendo of Passion Bleeding, 1994)

This lyric represents a rather different perspective; this representation of evil is a theoretical one, of the narrator reflecting upon a contemplated scenario where he rules supreme by oppressing and slaying the opposition. The narrator projects events of horror upon mankind and the world, promoting his own wills and desires. While some of the portrayed events undoubtedly can be classified as evil, they are clearly hypothetical; no such event is likely to ever take place. The lyric as such draws occasionally on religious imagery, a trait regular to the subgenre, but it also on vampirism as in the hailing of the blood as life-giving. Overall, this kind of text is highly representative of black metal lyrics; several elements are regular to

the genre, such as the incorporation of different religious thematic, not confined to merely Christian mythology but also incorporating influences from other religions. The horror-inspired vocabulary is also common, as are the glorification of oppression and the projection of control.<sup>48</sup>

Regarding the musical aspect, this is a quite typical black metal standard; while primitive in structure and instrumentation, it is one step up in terms of ambition. Opting for a less straightforward approach, there is little in the way of repetition of the musical parts and virtually no discernable chorus. Instead, the music attempts to follow the lyrical story, making the piece text-driven. The vocal arrangement is also inconsistent, beginning with high-shrieked vocals but later transforming into a rather more dominant, almost “normal” vocal style. Adding atmospheric features is the presence of synthesizers, an instrumentation embraced in parts of the black metal scene but abhorred in other sections of the extreme metal scene. Incorporating such elements suggests the desire to create unique forms of musical works; by challenging the accepted forms of instrumentation within the genre, new musical possibilities appear. The synthesizers are, however, generally a background instrument in this form of music and are most frequently used as support or contrast to the guitars.

When considering the musical work as a whole, it appears to be a work embracing of an aesthetic glorifying evil acts; as seen above the pictured acts are condoned and even advocated. This appears to be common in substantial parts of the extreme metal genre, where lyrical and musical concepts regarding evil are frequent, and where artists regularly promote evil acts in a potentially subversive and provocative way.<sup>49</sup> While possibly being alternative formulae ignited in order to cope with issues of pain and suffering, and attempting to integrate some form of meaning into acts of cruelty, there is certainly an aspect of conscious provocation on display. The levels at which the English language is used indicate good knowledge of their cultural heritage; apparently there are some sort of literary ambition embedded in their interpretational aesthetic, while also being highly aware of their cultural religious background, using such discourses to some extent.

---

<sup>48</sup> Kahn-Harris 2007:35-36

<sup>49</sup> Baddeley 2006: 171

## 7.6 Adjusted aesthetics

The Swedish band *Ghost* is not one to be as easily classified as previous artists in this essay; they are to a certain degree a band firmly rooted in the past, taking musical inspiration from 1980's bands such as *Mercyful Fate* and merging them with an almost pop-esque style of arrangement. Their debut album *Opus Eponymous* was released in 2010.

[...]Underneath the moonlight of old Hungarian skies  
buried in the blood-drenched earth

These barren lands of ice  
She was an evil woman with an evil old soul  
Piercing eyes emotionless  
a heart so black and cold

Elizabeth, in the chasm where was my soul  
Forever young, Elizabeth Bathorii in the castle of your death  
You're still alive, Elizabeth

Her pact with Satan  
Her despisal of mankind  
Her acts of cruelty and her lust for blood  
Makes her one of us

Our ancient countess was refused her desires will  
To bathe in pure fresh blood  
She'd peasant virgins killed

Elizabeth, in the chasm where was my soul  
Forever young, Elizabeth Bathorii in the castle of your death  
You're still alive, Elizabeth

(Ghost: Elizabeth, 2010)

The lyrics to this song are about Countess Elizabeth Bathory, a woman who believed smearing blood on her skin would prevent her skin from aging, and subsequently ordered the murdering of peasant girls to use their blood in her process. This is a woman who has inspired several artists to write about her actions.<sup>50</sup> Her actions are casually described, without going into great detail. However, the fact is that her actions, which no doubt can be deemed as evil, are advocated in the lyrics, implying a positive stance towards her actions. While this may seem puzzling, the overall themes of the album do follow the same lines; a general embracing of the dark sides of existence is prevalent. Whether it is genuine or merely an act, this fact positions this lyric as one of many in contemporary metal music that are consenting of acts usually seen as repulsive or even evil. This means that the lyrics are mediating positive and affirmative emotions about evil acts, and are not occupied with problematizing them. This musical work resembles the structure of a pop song; the verse builds the mood up for a catchy

---

<sup>50</sup> Partridge & Christianson 2008:42

chorus and these parts are then repeated until the end, with virtually no experimentation going on musically. The vocals are akin to those sported in the 1980's by the artist *King Diamond*; the style of the vocals is rather high-pitched, theatrical and light.<sup>51</sup> The music and lyrics of *Elizabeth* at first glance seem incompatible, but they are forming a somewhat odd unity where the instantly memorable melodies help support the lyrics. Nevertheless, it is an odd coupling to the ears.

Ghost is essentially embracing of the same form of aesthetic as Cradle of Filth; they are in some ways two sides of the same coin. While these artists are influenced by traditional contemporary rock and metal aesthetics, they are also incorporating other aspects into their concept. Ghost and Cradle of Filth may differ slightly in the musical department, using different song structures, but there are apparently more in the way of similarities between the two.<sup>52</sup> They can be both regarded as part of a kind of newly-evolved contemporary aesthetic; a phenomenon in itself which will be further elaborated upon in the following discussion segment.

Integrating innovative elements into a traditional musical aesthetic is a challenge to accepted norms; positioning is not the essence but a cross-breeding of seemingly incompatible influences is in progress, generating a potential shift in cultural perceptions of contemporary rock music.

## 8. A new kind of aesthetics

Integrating material from other popular culture in the form of horror films and stories, as well as flirting with religious themes while using both historical and modern frames as setting for their lyrics, are resulting in a different kind of aesthetic to the one practiced by preceding artists. This form of aesthetic is reliant on the projection of control, power or dominance in various forms; be it images of the desired destruction of kingdoms, mankind or even the world.<sup>53</sup> This mediated desire can alternatively be projected towards different groups of

---

<sup>51</sup> King Diamond (Kim Bendix Petersen) was also the vocalist of the previously mentioned band Mercyful Fate, which in the 1980's released several critically acclaimed albums. He later formed his own band under the name of his alias of King Diamond, developing an original vocal style of high-pitched, almost shrieking kind, making the band's music almost instantly recognizable. He is also a long-time member of the Church of Satan, a fact visible in his lyrics, making his music and lyrics an accepted inspirational source to many extreme metal artists.

<sup>52</sup> Cradle of Filth has also used Countess Bathory as inspiration for lyrics; the entire "Cruelty and the Beast" album is thematically based upon her life history.

<sup>53</sup> The projection of such desires are frequent in these types of lyrics, and not, as could be expected, exceptions to the norm. For further elaboration on the subject, see Kahn-Harris 35-41.

people, such as religious groups (usually Christians, considering the cultural aspect quite natural) or towards selected individuals. In several cases these projections are based upon ideas of the superiority of the strong; a form of adjusted social-Darwinism of sorts where the strong inherently has the power and right to oppress the weak. These projections seem to be fuelled in many cases by related ideas from the modern type of Satanism; the one popularized by *Anton LaVey* in *The Satanic Bible* where individualism is advocated and where retaliation is a virtue, as well as other similar or related writings.<sup>54</sup> Another essential part in this aesthetic is the embracing of the acts of evil and suffering, closely connected to the projections of power, control and dominance mentioned previously.

### 8.1 Religious themes

The factor of the incorporation of religious themes is of the essence in this aesthetic; in several examples produced in the analysis section there are references to religion. While firmly rooted in the western traditions, themes in these cases are highly eclectic. Though much of the themes base themselves on the opposition to and rejection of Christianity, inspiration is often found in religious traditions outside western civilization. Examples are abounding of references to Egyptian, Hindu, or Pagan traditions as well as Gnostic thought.<sup>55</sup> These are then integrated into the existing pattern of thoughts, as exemplified above in the case of Cradle of Filth's reference to the Egyptian fertility god Khem. These traditions are not only used in lyrical form, they are often flowing through entire artists' concepts, as there are bands such as for instance *Behemoth*, who integrate these influences into their graphic presentation as well as their music. There is also a ritualistic aspect to this religiosity; several artists have proclaimed their musical endeavour as having that element embedded within either the creative or the performing part of the experience, like the band *Watain* who have stated that their concerts have a religious, ritualistic aspect to them where they attempt to create a connection to otherworldly dominions.<sup>56</sup> In these instances creative release is also tightly linked to religious belief and practice, making the artistic performance equivalent of a transcendental event.

---

<sup>54</sup> LaVey's writings have been inspirational to many artists; this is especially obvious when reading interviews with young musicians who frequently refer to LaVey. Many artists however oppose themselves to the atheistic form of atheism he promoted, and opted for a diametrically different view of the essentials of Satanism focused on the spiritual aspects. For further references and elaboration, see Bossius 2003:114-117, Partridge & Christianson 2009:26-33.

<sup>55</sup> For examples of respective areas mentioned in this statement, see references in the "Phonograms" section of respectively Nile, Behemoth, Amon Amarth and Dissection.

<sup>56</sup> Close-Up # 106, 2008: 48

This type of aesthetic is also partly in conflict with established society and its values; included in the aesthetic is the importance of transgression and provocation. While some practitioners are dedicated to the matter in their artistic expression, others are less dedicated, applying such matters for other purposes. The perceived aesthetic images may however hardly be distinguishable from one another on the surface.

So, what are the potential reasons for expressing an aesthetic where evil is at the core of the matter and projections of power are of the essence? Embracing evil as a subject matter seems to have multiple possible reasons, with one being the need to establish the existence of the portrayed evil act in order to possibly understand it. When described, several approaches towards the act are possible. Where some artists use the subject matter to achieve comprehension or consolation, others are using it for purposes of fascination and others still are using it to project desires of power. Descriptions of evil acts vary greatly, from mere descriptions of the acts to interpretations of possible reasons for them. In light of artists confronting traditional religious and spiritual concepts, organized religion has had to acknowledge a shift in spiritual focus instigated by such expressions and adapt to a partially new order, where they no longer is the exclusive accommodator and authority to which people turn in the advent of spiritual quest.

To this end, the methods of which religious denominations have reacted to an outside phenomenon questioning their dogmas have varied; basically all sorts of action from instant rejection to attempted understanding have been attempted, with varying effect. It is of essence to the matter to see these artistic expressions not as isolated events but as a part of the constantly mobile modern culture; religious innovation appears to be permanently in motion and the resurgence of religion in contemporary music is just a part of this larger puzzle. Art, music and religion are constantly in transition, existing in a continuously evolving world and changing with it; what is different today is the possibility being awarded to alternative forms of said phenomenon's to exist, to be visible and to be discussed within the margins of the existing cultural paradigm.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> The relations between music and society were discussed already by Plato: [...] this is the point to which above all, the attention of our rulers should be directed –that music and gymnastic is preserved in their original form, and no innovation made. And when any one says that mankind must regard “the newest song that the singers have”, they will be afraid that he might be praising, not new songs, but a new kind of song; and this ought not to be praised, or conceived to be the meaning of the poet; for any musical

## 8.2 Cultural effects

The effects on culture by such descriptions and interpretations of evil are complex; while societies today are fragmentary and reflexive, and also much less coherent than they used to be, different forms of artistic expression are influenced by one another. With the advent of the globalized world, no cultural expression exists in a vacuum; they are constantly interacting to form new alliances and interpretations.<sup>58</sup>

As we have seen, musical artists have often been inspired by other media, such as film or literature, with less of the opposite order going on: very few films or literature have as of yet been inspired by music. With the fact that the artists in this essay generally have had little commercial success, the possibility of influencing debate in a wider cultural sense is also limited. On the other hand though, the musical works are clearly dependent on the time in which they were created; there is a clear sliding towards more extreme forms of artistic expression and ethnocentric inspiration as we close in on present-day activities. This seems to be closely connected to the general increase in human cultural diversity and independence as an effect of the globalization process.<sup>59</sup>

The factor of globalization also seems to have had effects in the form of diversity of the religious subject matters; an openness to new thought from above has brought the effect of artists broadening their spectra, embracing influences from the world's abundance of different religions. Undoubtedly religious topics of various forms are frequent in contemporary music today, despite the secularization process that have taken place over the last century. What has happened, and what is also reflected in those musical works influenced by religious schemes, is a rejuvenation and internalization of the religious or spiritual experience, leading to more personalized forms of religion.<sup>60</sup> It is in this light possible to see the eclecticism of religious themes in contemporary music as a natural side effect of the same eclectic restructuring that is taking place on a larger scale. Combined with this rejuvenation there is an increase in interest

---

innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited. So Damon tells me, and I can quite believe him; -he says that when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the State always change with them. Plato 2000 (1894):93.

For other elaborations regarding the interactions and correlations between music, society and culture, see Adorno 1989:222-223.

<sup>58</sup> Storey 2009: 167

<sup>59</sup> Storey 2009: 167-168, Kahn-Harris 2007:157-158

<sup>60</sup> The secularization process has had effects such as these, as shown by, for instance, the arrival and development of the New Age movement. Such matters are discussed in greater detail in for example Frisk 1998, Hammer 1997, Larsson 2003.

of older religious traditions, where among others Pagan traditions and Gnostic thought as well as Eastern influences have proven inspirational to several artists. Taking into consideration the huge impact Eastern philosophies and the like has had in latter-day Western culture, such phenomenon's fit the picture reasonably well; when the overall acceptance of influences from such sources increase, the knowledge and interest about said influences follow the same path, resulting in an increased availability, making them accepted and of use to larger numbers of people.

The cultural acceptance of individual interpretations of spirituality has with time become an integral part of Western societies, and, combined with the tolerance towards provocative artistic expression it is not surprising to find a vast array of artists pursuing such avenues in their quest of creative expression. This far, such provocative or controversial expressions have been partly fuelled by the possibilities of self-expression through said elements; the added edge of transgressive features has had the potential to function as an instigator of creative energy.<sup>61</sup> However, as the fountains run dry in this department as a result of continuous use, and as culture adapt itself to these extreme forms of creative expression, it seems possible that such transgressive actions no longer can retain the same levels of functionality for a sustained period of time; theoretically resulting in a future scenario wherein less artists are taking an interest in such embodiments of the creative arts. It is important to a subcultural aesthetic of risk to remain on the outskirts of accepted society, if it is to avoid being drained of importance to the individuals partaking in these subcultural activities; thus, an all too encompassing introduction into society would not necessarily be beneficial to the development of a subculture.

### 8.3 Defining an aesthetic

By attempting to define the characteristics of a specific contemporary musical aesthetic occupied with the different concepts of evil, acknowledgement towards other contemporary variations regarding such concepts is of the essence. As we have seen in previous examples, evil acts are a relatively common topic when used as a theme to mediate the horror of said acts and to subsequently attempt an understanding or reconciliation of those evils. This position indicates an abhorrence of evil. It is also rather common to use such acts out of mere fascination of the subject matter, without actually valuing those actions in either way. The

---

<sup>61</sup> Kahn-Harris 2007: 158-160

contemporary aesthetic on display here is one where evil acts are actually advocated or appreciated, not merely condoned. In basically accepting existing principles of what is good and evil, but all the while promoting evil acts as desirable, such ideals are challenging general opinion in both Western culture and religion. The question of the fundamentals of the actual existence of evil in this world in these latter cases derives from an acceptance of otherworldly schemes as influential on this world; in this respect artists pursuing such an aesthetic seek transcendental inspiration to their works. The religious aspect is of importance here; it seems as if such an aesthetic is partially born out of a desire of conflict and confrontation with traditional religious beliefs, where mere ignorance of established religion no longer is enough but actual opposition is deemed necessary. It is out of this urge of revoking traditional religiosity that such a contemporary aesthetic is formed; built upon trying to establish alternative ways to interpret human moral values while advocating evil acts. While exploring such an aesthetic, the artists are balancing on the outskirts of mainline society; the interest in this form of artistic expression is not at the same levels as those enjoyed by other forms of arts such as literature or film, where similar forms of aesthetics are more accepted and part of Western culture.

Where popular music can be discerned from contemporary art music, the forms of music discussed in this essay often appear as intermittently belonging to both these sets of classification; while taking influences from popular culture and originating from pop and rock culture, it is at the same time rejective of mass-culture and not concerned with commercial limitations of arts. Therefore I consider such musical expression as essentially existing between and within the two, as a dichotomy and a form of contemporary *and* popular cultural manifestation. Popularity is not of the essence in the case of these extreme metal bands; on the contrary, there appear to be a strong inclination among the artists to emphasize their autonomy and their independence of commercial accessibility. This fact is expressed in interviews, but is also indicated in the continuous resistance of adjustment: though many artists within the genre have been affected by censorship, having concerts cancelled, album covers banned and stores refusing to stock their products, there is no universal tendency of adjustment, rather the opposite. Therefore, in essence, these forms of aesthetic expressiveness do not appear to be wholeheartedly popular culture: it is not designed to be popular, although

on occasion, extreme metal artists do reach unexpected levels of commercial success, often alienating some of their original audience along the way.<sup>62</sup>

So, the question remains to be answered: is there such an aesthetic as described above, which clearly and distinctively can be recognized? I believe this essay does not provide undisputable answers to that question; while there certainly are signs of artists pursuing of an aesthetic of risk embracing evil acts and challenging moral values, it is hard to distinguish such an aesthetic from the overall subcultural aesthetic of the extreme metal scene, as little interest in such matters have been evident outside of such circles. This fact could indicate that an oppositional aesthetic of this kind merely exists as a part of the larger scheme. While displaying some characteristic features such as using the musical work for religious mediation, coupled with focus on cultural oppositional features in forms of transgression, there are still questions to be asked whether it is valid classifying a separate aesthetic for such phenomenon's or not. In order to formulate such a distinctive aesthetic, further research would be necessary; perhaps in coming years, additional examples of artists embracing of an aesthetic of risk will surface, adding to the empirical material and maybe even developing the scenery.

---

<sup>62</sup> This is a regular scenario when an extreme metal band achieves widespread commercial acclaim; when this occurs, part of the original audience often becomes alienated.

## 9. Conclusions

Lyrical interpretations of evil in a musical context are existent in different forms and are ranging from the merely descriptive sort to forms attempting understanding or reconciliation, and also include interpretations advocating evil. They are in various ways attempting to integrate the existence of evil acts, as leading to suffering and pain, by incorporating such themes into their lyrical material.

There appears to be a possible aesthetic embraced when artists are advocating evil acts, fuelled by rejection of and conflict with traditional religiosity as well as a desire to distance themselves artistically from Western cultural ideals, using such aesthetics to position themselves on the outskirts of general society. However, it is not totally separable from the already existing aesthetics of the extreme metal scene. Such forms of creative practice appear as reliant on the dialectic between historical perceptions of morality, modern society as globalized, segmented and restructured and the reoccurrence of religion in a secularized perspective.

Themes regarding evil appear in this form of aesthetic in different ways to traditional discourse; making use of historical and contemporary images of evil and portraying them as desirable in various ways. By advocating evil acts artistically, provocation and transgression allows the artists to fulfil creative purposes previously rarely explored while also positioning themselves towards general society. In some instances such creative release is also linked to religious belief and practice, making the artistic performance equivalent of a transcendental event.

## Bibliography

### Literature

Adorno, Theodor W., *Introduction to the sociology of music*, Continuum, New York, 1989.

Adorno, Theodor W., *The culture industry: selected essays on mass culture*, Routledge, London, 1991.

Arlebrand, Håkan & Wallin, Kerstin, *Den onde: från forna tiders djävulstro till modern satanism*, Libris, Örebro, 2001.

Baddeley, Gavin, *Lucifer rising*, Plexus, London, 2006 (1999).

Bennett, Andy, *Popular music and youth culture: music, identity, and place*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2000.

Bossius, Thomas, *Med framtiden i backspeglarna: black metal- och transkulturen: ungdomar, musik och religion i en senmodern värld*, Daidalos, Diss. Göteborg: Univ., 2003, Göteborg, 2003.

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, Routledge, London, 2010.

Calinescu, Matei, *Modernitetens fem ansikten: modernism, avantgarde, dekadens, kitsch, postmodernism*, Dualis, Ludvika, 2000.

Clack, Beverley & Clack, Brian R., *The philosophy of religion: a critical introduction*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998.

Frith, Simon, *Performing rites: on the value of popular music*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996.

Frisk, Liselotte, *Nyreligiositet i Sverige: ett religionsvetenskapligt perspektiv*, Nya Doxa, Nora, 1998.

Giddens, Anthony, *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984.

Hammer, Olav, *På spaning efter helheten: New Age, en ny folktro?*, Wahlström & Widstrand, Stockholm, 1997.

Hammer, Olav & Raudvere, Catharina (red.), *Berättelser om ondskan: en historia genom tusen år*, Wahlström & Widstrand, Stockholm, 2000.

Häger, Andreas (red.), *Tro, pop och kärlek: en antologi om religion och populärmusik*, Åbo Akademi, Åbo, 2004.

- Israel, Jonathan Irvine, *Enlightenment contested: philosophy, modernity and the emancipation of man 1620-1752*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.
- Kahn-Harris, Keith, *Extreme metal: music and culture on the edge*, Berg, Oxford, 2007
- Kahn-Harris, Keith, *The aesthetics of hate music*, Keith Kahn-Harris selected writings 2003-2009, 2009.
- Larsson, Göran (red.), *Talande tro: ungdomar, religion och identitet*, Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2003.
- LaVey, Anton Szandor, *The Satanic Bible*, Avon Books, New York, 1969.
- Lyotard, Jean-François & Jameson, Fredric, *The postmodern condition: a report of knowledge*, Univ. of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993.
- McIver, Joel, *The bloody reign of Slayer*, Omnibus, London, 2008.
- Moberg, Marcus, *Faster for the master!: exploring issues of religious expression and alternative Christian identity within the Finnish Christian metal music scene*, Åbo Akademis Förlag, Diss.: Åbo Akademi University, 2009., Åbo, 2009.
- Molander, Joakim, *Vetenskapsteoretiska grunder: historia och begrepp*, 1:a uppl., Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2003.
- Morton, Adam, *On evil*, Routledge, London, 2004.
- Muchembled, Robert, *Djävulens historia*, Norstedts, Stockholm, 2002.
- Mudrian, Albert, *Choosing death: the improbable history of death metal & grindcore*, Feral House, Los Angeles, Calif., 2004.
- Middleton, Richard, *Studying popular music*, Open Univ. Press, Milton Keynes, 1990.
- Paddison, Max & Deliège, Irène (red.), *Contemporary music: theoretical and philosophical perspectives*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2010.
- Pagels, Elaine, *The origin of Satan*, 1. ed., Random House, New York, 1995.
- Partridge, Christopher, Beskow, Per & Johansson, Lars (red.), *Nya religioner: en uppslagsbok om andliga rörelser, sekter och alternativ andlighet*, Libris, Örebro, 2005.
- Partridge, Christopher Hugh & Christianson, Eric S. (red.), *The lure of the dark side: Satan and western demonology in popular culture*, Equinox Pub. Ltd., London, 2008.
- Peterson, Michael L. & Zachariasson, Ulf (red.), *Religionsfilosofiska texter*, Nya Doxa, Nora, 1999.
- Phillips, Daniel: *Benjamin Britten's War Requiem: Meaning and audience*, Herodotus Volume 16, Stanford's Undergraduate Journal of History, Stanford, 2006.
- Plato, *The republic*, Dover Publications, Mineola, N.Y., 2000[1894].

Rienecker, Lotte & Stray Jørgensen, Peter, *Att skriva en bra uppsats*, 2., [rev. och uppdaterade] uppl., Liber, Malmö, 2008.

Safranski, Rüdiger, *Det onda eller frihetens drama*, Natur och kultur, Stockholm, 1999.

Storey, John, *Cultural studies and the study of popular culture*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2010.

Svendsen, Lars Fr. H., *Ondskans filosofi*, Natur och kultur, Stockholm, 2005.

Ziehe, Thomas, *Kulturanalyser: ungdom, utbildning, modernitet: essäer*, 3:e uppl., B. Östlings bokförl. Symposion, Stockholm, 1993.

### Magazines

Close-Up Magazine #106, 2008

Sweden Rock Magazine #55, 2008

### Phonograms

Amon Amarth: *Once Sent From the Golden Hall*, Metal Blade Records, 1998

Behemoth: *The Apostasy*, Regain Records, 2007

Black Sabbath: *Black Sabbath*, Warner Music, 1970

Black Sabbath: *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*, Warner Music, 1973

Britten, Benjamin, *War requiem opus 66: in loving memory of Roger Burney*, Decca, 1981

Cradle of Filth: *The Principle of Evil Made Flesh*, Cacophonous Records, 1994

Cradle of Filth: *Cruelty and the Beast*, Music For Nations, 1998

Dissection: *Reinkaos*, Black Horizon Music, 2006

Ghost: *Opus Eponymous*, Rise Above Records, 2010

Kreator: *Extreme Aggression*, Noise International, 1988

Mercyful Fate: *Don't Break the Oath*, Roadrunner Records, 1984

Nile: *In Their Darkened Shrines*, Relapse Records, 2006

Ruth Schontal: *String Quartet No.3: In Memoriam Holocaust*, Jewish String Quartets, Naxos Records, 2006

Slayer: *Reign in Blood*, Def American Records, 1986

Watain: *Lawless Darkness*, Season of Mist Records, 2010

### Internet resources

Dark Lyrics: <http://www.darklyrics.com/>

Metal Archives: <http://www.metal-archives.com/> Wi