

---

Michelle Phillipov

# Extreme music for extreme people?

## Norwegian black metal and transcendent violence

---

**Michelle Phillipov** is Lecturer in Journalism, Media and Communications at the University of Tasmania. Her research interests include extreme metal, media controversy and food media. She is the author of *Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits* (Lexington Books, 2012).

University of Tasmania  
Private Bag 82  
Hobart Tasmania 7001, Australia  
Michelle.Phillipov@utas.edu.au

### Abstract

This article focuses on the events of the Norwegian black metal scene in the early 1990s, a period in which violent aesthetics in metal music became explicitly and deliberately articulated to real acts of violence. Concentrating on the musical and criminal activities of the band Emperor, the author suggests that the group's success was, at least in part, the result of members' simultaneous promotion and disavowal of their involvement in violent crime. The case highlights not only how not all claims of a link between music and violence are entirely fabricated, but also the necessity of rethinking conventional approaches to music, violence and controversy, given the ongoing legacy of the events of the early 1990s within the contemporary black metal scene.

**Keywords:** Emperor; heavy metal; moral panic; neo-Nazism; Norwegian black metal

Concerns that heavy and extreme metal music promotes or glorifies violence have been circulating for much of the past four decades. Sustained campaigns by the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC) and criminal actions taken against Ozzy Osbourne, Judas Priest and their record labels in the 1980s, civil proceedings brought against the record labels of Cannibal Corpse, Deicide and Slayer in the 1990s, and metal's implication in the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, have each been premised on the notion that music can cause or contribute to violent actions, either against the self or against others (Moynihan and S oderlund 1998: 290–91; Walser 1993; Weinstein 2000; Wright 2000). Such concerns have resurfaced more recently in fears that Deicide's album *Once Upon the Cross* could incite 'violence, hatred and the killing of Christians' ("Anti-Christian" CD Faces

Ban' 2003: 9), and in the claim that a German trainee teacher's performances with his death metal band Debauchery constituted 'a form of mental instability that made him unsafe to be around children' ('Death Metal Teacher Sacked' 2010).

Perhaps because 'metal studies' as a field of scholarship emerged shortly after the height of metal's moral panic in the 1980s, studies of heavy and extreme metal have often focused on debunking such claims of connections between metal, violence and other problematic behaviours. Controversies in which metal music is implicated as a contributor to violence are typically understood by scholars as being fabricated by conservative groups seeking to impose their own moral agendas on those with different values, tastes and cultural practices (see Richardson 1991; Rosenbaum and Prinsky 1991; Walser 1993; Weinstein 2000; Wright 2000).

Much of this work persuasively demonstrates that lyrics or music do not 'cause' violence in any straightforward way, and that metal is rarely as extreme as its critics suggest, but critics' insistent distancing of metal from claims of violence misses an important opportunity to explore more complex connections between music and violence in the metal scene. This article focuses on the events of the Norwegian black metal scene in the early 1990s, a period in which violent aesthetics in metal music became explicitly and deliberately articulated to real acts of violence. Concentrating on the musical and criminal activities of the band Emperor, I suggest that the group's success was, at least in part, the result of members' simultaneous promotion and disavowal of their involvement in violent crime.

The case highlights not only how not all claims of a link between music and violence are entirely fabricated, but also the necessity of rethinking conventional approaches to music, violence and controversy, given the ongoing legacy of the events of the early 1990s within the contemporary black metal scene.

## **Metal and violence**

Since the emergence of metal studies, critics have generally sought to distance metal from claims of a connection between music and violence. Walser (1993) and Weinstein (2000), focusing on the high-profile controversies of the 1980s, present criticisms of the genre as part of a moral crusade to neutralize challenges to parental and other authority, rather than as an indication of any real connection between metal and violence. Pettman describes the Australian response to death metal as a 'moral panic' in which media reports were 'distorted through both ignorance and the consistent need to find a scapegoat' for problematic behaviours (1995: 217). Roccor argues that metal's 'negative public image' has developed because the music has been interpreted without 'detailed knowledge of its historical development and current stylistic diversity' (2000: 84–85).

Similarly, Kahn-Harris argues that extreme metal musicians and fans might play with violent imagery, but apart from a few anomalous instances of violent crime, activities in the extreme metal scene are generally oriented not towards transgression and violence, but towards what he calls a 'logic of mundanity' (2007: 59). Musicians and fans might play with the *imagery* of violence, but their *actions* within the scene mostly revolve around the more 'ordinary' activities of listening to music, writing to other fans, and collecting and exchanging recordings (Kahn-Harris 2007: 56–57). For Kahn-Harris, the logic of mundanity is what enables scene members to explore transgressive themes textually without their own behaviour or the scene itself ever becoming unequivocally transgressive (2007: 156). Indeed, a commitment to overly transgressive practice threatens the very survival of the extreme metal scene as it inevitably leads to the death or imprisonment of scene members—something undesirable for most extreme metal aficionados (Kahn-Harris 2004: 116).

While such studies convincingly demonstrate the frequency with which both heavy and extreme metal are mischaracterized and its transgressiveness overstated, not all controversies surrounding metal are simply moral panics fabricated by conservative interest groups. Although real acts of violence are rare, the unusual cases in which metal musicians and fans have deliberately attempted to articulate music to violence provide productive case studies for understanding the more complex functions of violence and controversy within the metal scene. As Thornton has argued, academic criticism so often views youth cultures as innocent victims of negative stigmatization and moral panic, yet conservative condemnation is welcomed—even desired—by music fans who see such criticism as a certification of their scene's transgressive impulses (1995: 135–36).

If controversy alone can extend the life of otherwise ephemeral musical moments (Thornton 1995: 122), the Norwegian black metal scene is an example of how evidence of 'real' acts of transgression can be even more powerful in ensuring longevity. Such cases should not simply be explained away as unrepresentative of the majority of extreme metal practice; rather they offer valuable insight into one way that metal scenes can be popularized and sustained.

### **'True' Norwegian black metal**

The Norwegian black metal scene in the early 1990s is perhaps metal's most famous example of the prestige and status that can be gleaned from connecting music to real acts of transgression. This is one case in which violent imagery was employed not simply as part of a 'performance' of transgression, but as a serious attempt to construct music as a springboard from which violent actions could logically emerge. In the case of the Norwegian black metal scene, such actions

included arson and murder. Indeed, the notion that those who engaged in such activities were authentically 'living out' the sentiments of the music has been crucial to the meaning and significance attributed to the black metal genre, and to the sustained interest that this movement has enjoyed for the past two decades.

Black metal as a genre traces its roots to the early 1980s, with the formation of bands like Venom and Bathory, which combined raw, aggressive metal with theatrical styles of performance, and lyrics employing Satanic and Norse pagan themes. Venom's influence on black metal is especially clear, with the group's outrageous blasphemy an important precursor to the Satanic inclinations of some bands in the Norwegian scene (although the playfulness of Venom's 'Satanism' was largely lost in the work of black metal bands whose music it influenced).

Contemporary black metal now encompasses a diverse range of styles, ranging from commercially popular symphonic black metal to drone and noise, but it is the genre's incarnation in the early 1990s that is still the most well known. The status and authenticity attributed to the music of this period are evident by the label that this movement is sometimes given: 'true' Norwegian black metal.

In the late 1980s, a group of young Oslo bands—among them Mayhem, Burzum, Emperor, Darkthrone and Immortal—sought to turn what they saw as the fake theatricality of earlier metal acts into a more authentic commitment to the sentiments of the music. The music was initially quite primitive, characterized by poor production values, fast tempos, and 'rapid flat-pick reiterations of massive, muddy triads' (Bogue 2004: 106). Some bands later adopted more polished styles of production, and incorporated melodic and symphonic elements into the music, but this early style of black metal is characterized overall by an aesthetics of 'evilness' or 'grimness' that is expressed in both sonic and ideological terms. For example, bands such as Immortal have described the harshness of the Norwegian winter landscape as a natural inspiration for the coldness and brutality of black metal music. Others have suggested that aggressive musical forms are the most appropriate conduit for the expression of nihilistic, anti-Christian, Satanic and (later) Norse pagan ideologies.

Black metal band members adopted demonic stage personae, painted their faces with sinister black-and-white make-up known as 'corpse paint', and employed aestheticized images of war, battle and violence, donning stage costumes that included bullet belts and arm spikes and adopting medieval weaponry as stage props. In contrast to Venom's playful theatricality, members of the Norwegian scene stressed that their music and personae were genuinely evil, rather than something contrived only for the purposes of performance.

For example, Deathlike Silence Productions label founder and Mayhem guitarist, Euronymous, explained in interviews his desire to make and release only 'truly

evil' music (quoted in Moynihan and Söderlind 1998: 66). Burzum's Varg Vikernes has claimed that the purpose of black metal is to 'spread fear and evil' (quoted in Moynihan and Söderlind 1998: 93). Other figures in the scene have criticized music that employs only aestheticized (i.e. not 'real') representations of death and destruction, arguing that metal music should function as a springboard for action. For instance, in the *Kerrang!* article that first brought Norwegian black metal to the attention of the international metal community, Emperor drummer Faust said: 'The old bands just sang about it [i.e. death and violence]—today's bands do it!' (quoted in Arnopp 1993: 43).

In contrast to other extreme metal musicians who generally reject the idea that music is or should be linked to real acts of violence (see Kahn-Harris 2007), between 1992 and 1993, key figures in the black metal scene sought to prove the seriousness of the music by undertaking criminal acts. Within the space of only a few years, 15 members of the scene were arrested for crimes including arson, grave desecration, burglary, assault, rape and murder. Most famously, members of the black metal scene were involved in arson attacks on somewhere between 15 and 20 of Norway's historic wooden stave churches (the exact number has never been officially established). No longer confining anti-Christian sentiments to song lyrics, key figures in the scene claimed that these attacks constituted retaliation against Christianity and a reclaiming of a pagan heritage that the Christian religion was thought to have destroyed (see Moynihan and Söderlind 1998). There were 11 arrests for the church arsons, including: Varg Vikernes, who was convicted for his involvement in arson attacks on Holmenkollen Chapel, Skjold Church and Åsane Church; Bård 'Faust' Eithun, who was involved in the arson of Holmenkollen Chapel; and Samoth (guitarist of Emperor) who served a 16-month sentence for the burning of Skjold Church. These acts were constructed as natural (and inevitable) expressions of the music's blasphemy and anti-Christianity. For example, Vikernes described one of Burzum's recordings as a 'hymn to church burning' (quoted in Arnopp 1993: 43). He told *Kerrang!* magazine that 'it's saying, "Do this. You can do this too"' (quoted in Arnopp 1993: 43).

The black metal scene's criminal activities were not merely confined to the destruction of property. Faust received a 14-year sentence for the 1992 murder of Magne Andreassen, a homosexual stranger who approached him in a Lillehammer park that was well known for cruising. Andreassen died from blood loss following 37 stab wounds with a pen knife. Faust was released from jail in 2003, after serving approximately 10 years of his sentence; he has never expressed any remorse for his crime. Vikernes was also convicted of the murder of his former friend, Euronymous. In August 1993, Euronymous's body was found in the stairwell leading to his apartment; he had sustained 25 stab wounds to his face, back and chest. Vikernes'

motive for the murder is still subject to much speculation. Some have speculated that the murder resulted from a conflict between the two men over money; others have suggested that Vikernes was seeking to outdo Faust with an even more outrageous murder (Moynihan and Søderlind 1998: 116; Baddeley 1999: 196). For his part, Vikernes testified in court that he killed Euronymous in self-defence—somewhat speciously, given the number of stab wounds that Euronymous sustained to the back as he was being chased by Vikernes down the stairs of his apartment block. Vikernes was sentenced to 21 years in prison, Norway's maximum prison sentence. He was released in 2009, after having served nearly 16 years—including the additional 14 months served for an attempted escape in 2003. Snorre Ruch, the Thorns guitarist who drove Vikernes to and from Euronymous's house and witnessed the stabbing, received an eight-year sentence as an accessory to murder.

While the events of the early 1990s signalled the height of black metal's violence, occasional violent incidents have occurred since. For example, in 1998, Dissection's Jon Nödtveit was sentenced to seven years in prison for being an accessory to the murder of gay man Josef Ben Madaour; Nödtveit committed suicide in 2006 following his release from prison. In 2005, Gaahl, frontman for Gorgoroth, was sentenced to 14 months in prison for beating a 41-year-old man and threatening to drink his blood.

Such incidents have now become an important part of the identity of black metal; they have received a level of interest in both the metal and non-metal media that can only be described as disproportionate to their 'objective' significance. This is especially true of the events of the early 1990s: after all, this was a small group of young men from what was, at the time, a peripheral metal scene, who engaged in acts that were (and are) entirely unrepresentative of those of the rest of the international metal community. Yet the activities of this small handful of bands have been subject to a book-length exposé, in the form of Moynihan and Søderlind's salacious *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (1998, revised in 2003), several documentaries, including the feature-length *Until the Light Takes Us* (2008), and a forthcoming fictional film based on Moynihan and Søderlind's book, also called *Lords of Chaos*. Long-running extreme metal magazine, *Terrorizer*, has released a *Secret History of Black Metal* (2009), which compiles previous articles from the magazine's archives and devotes a significant proportion to stories on the Norwegian bands.

Even Peter Beste's coffee-table book, *True Norwegian Black Metal* (2008), which otherwise focuses on the ordinariness of black metal musicians and on the constructed theatricality of black metal performance, still reiterates a narrative of crime and violence as being central to the emergence of the black metal scene. The fact that this is a narrative that is continually repeated—and repeated even

in recent texts—highlights the extent to which violence has become a lynchpin in the mythology and meaning of the genre. While it is precisely the anomalousness of this violence that has contributed to its ongoing interest, this interest has bestowed the Norwegian black metal scene with a level of importance that would have been unlikely had this scene been governed by the 'logic of mundanity' characteristic of most other extreme metal scenes.

Black metal's links to violent crime, and the bestowal of those involved with 'transgressive subcultural capital' (Kahn-Harris 2007: 128), has contributed to the endurance of what might otherwise have been a transitory moment in extreme metal's musical history. However, it is important to avoid any overly simplistic understanding of black metal's relationship to violence. While at certain times, some bands in the Norwegian black metal scene have engaged in deliberate attempts to articulate the music to violence, at other times, bands have also sought to disengage their music from any such connections. This produces an ongoing tension between transgression and mundanity in the black metal scene (see Kahn-Harris 2007: 133).

Exploring how this tension works in relation to the music of Emperor helps to better understand the scene's articulations and disarticulations of music and violence. While the media coverage of early 1990s black metal focused primarily on Euronymous, Vikernes and their bands Mayhem and Burzum, Baddeley has argued in his history of the movement that it is Emperor, more than any of the other Norwegian groups, that was most active in black metal's 'brief, blasphemous rampage' (1999: 195). Emperor has also been among the most commercially successful of the early Norwegian groups, particularly in the period after members' involvement in criminal activities had ceased. As a result, Emperor highlights both the complexity and malleability of black metal's articulation to violence. By engaging in both transgressive and mundane practices, the group has been a key beneficiary of the status and prestige associated with criminal activity *and* of the protections afforded by the logic of mundanity.

## **Transcendent violence**

Emperor was formed in 1991 by guitarist Samoth and vocalist/guitarist Ihsahn. The group officially disbanded in 2001, but have since reformed several times for one-off appearances and live performances. Three of Emperor's founding members have served jail time in the early- to mid-1990s for crimes associated with the black metal scene: drummer Faust for murder, guitarist Samoth for arson, and bass player Tchoert for burglary, assault and grave desecration. Of the original membership, only Ihsahn has no criminal convictions. Between 1994 and 2001, the group released four studio albums.

The band's debut, *In the Nightside Eclipse*, was recorded in 1993, and was released during Samoth's imprisonment in 1994. The music and performance strategies associated with this album offer clear examples of the textual conventions through which black metal music was articulated to violence in the early 1990s. In contrast, its follow-up *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk* (1997) was written, recorded and released following Samoth's parole in 1996; it represents a concerted attempt by Emperor's members to style themselves as serious musicians who no longer wished to perpetuate their criminal past. The fact that Emperor was able to do so without a substantial shift in musical direction was in part due to the music's sonic and lyrical complexity. Rather than a simple springboard from which violent acts must (or must not) emerge, Emperor's music employs conventions that, under some conditions, can become a springboard for real acts of violence; under others, it can lead to the construction of powerful, but ultimately benign, sonic affects.

In Emperor's work, violence is conceived primarily as a source and signifier of transcendence: something that invites the listener (and performer) to step outside of their everyday identities and become something 'other'. While this changed somewhat as the band's career progressed, in the case of the early releases—*In the Nightside Eclipse* in particular—the 'otherness' that the band sought to create was one associated with 'evilness'. For example, live performances and promotional materials from this time employed the kind of violent imagery that was generally viewed as an authentic merging of music and practice. Live performances saw the members don full corpse paint and regalia signifying war and battle (e.g. spiked arm bands, bullet belts, and weaponry). Emperor, like other black metal bands, has claimed that such performance styles assist in leaving the conventional self behind and more completely embodying the sentiments and atmospheres of the music. On the subject of corpse paint, Faust has said:

When we, under a gig or during a photo session, are using corpsepaint [*sic*], we are usually in a state of mind that makes us feel like we are getting nearer darkness (and maybe even one with darkness)... At such events, I look at myself as one of the creatures of the night...child of darkness (quoted in *Metalion* 1994: 5).

The idea of becoming something 'other' is also conveyed through the band's promotional photos. One of the promotional photos for *In the Nightside Eclipse* shows members in corpse paint, black band T-shirts and bullet belts, wielding various weapons, including a sword and a double-headed axe. Among other images on the back cover of the album is a corpse-painted Faust ready to attack with a machete.

As Faust indicates in his discussion of corpse paint, these performance styles are employed as a source of transcendence of the ordinary and everyday, but it is a transcendence explicitly centred around iconographies of violence. Significantly,

such performance styles are not used to construct purely fictional personae, but are presented as an embodiment of real values, desires and actions. For Faust, there is a particularly obvious synchronicity between the imagery employed in performance and his real actions, but the connections between music and practice have also been asserted by other band members. For instance, while Ihsahn has never been implicated in the criminal activities of his bandmates, he has nonetheless sought to connect the imagery represented in the music to his real beliefs and values. Particularly early in the band's career, he was outspoken about his commitment to Satanism: in interviews, he explicitly identified himself as a Satanist, which was presented as a nihilistic, hyper-individualistic and anti-Christian philosophy that was also reflected in the band's music.

Conforming to the dominant view in the black metal scene at the time that the music should inspire 'hate and fear' in the listener, lyrics on *In the Nightside Eclipse* represent a straightforward embrace of Satan, evil and other forces of darkness as both desirable and all-powerful. 'Inno a Satana', for example, is an invocation and pledge of allegiance to Satan. 'Into the Infinity of Thoughts' endorses fear, hatred and suffering in the name of Satan. Unlike other popular forms of Satanism, Ihsahn's lyrics do not seek to challenge or re-evaluate Christian understandings of evil but rather employ the image of Satan as symbol of the misanthropy, misery and extreme individualism that the band members claim to embrace in their 'real' lives. For example, in an interview with *EsoTerra Magazine*, Ihsahn declared that, 'It is the law of nature. The strong survive. That is basically the mentality behind my Satanism—the individual. Strong, intelligent, and powerful' (quoted in Hensley 1995). These values of dominance, power and social hierarchy, then, find ideological compatibility with the iconography of weaponry and battle—other such symbols of these values.

Sonically, Emperor's music invites the listener to view this embrace of evil and cruelty as noble and awesomely powerful. On 'Into the Infinity of Thoughts', a section of the song which depicts brutal slaughter in the name of Satan is preceded by a stirring keyboard section. This section resolves the dissonance of the previous riff, and connotes a sense of majesty and splendour by contrasting the tension of the riff (which employs the interval of the tritone) with a consonant harmony ( $B^{\text{min}}-F^{\#7}$ ) and I-V movement. On 'Cosmic Keys to my Creation', lyrics that describe the cosmos as holding 'unlimited wisdom and power for the Emperor to obtain' are paralleled with a repeated, ascending keyboard pattern ( $A^{\text{min}}-B^{\text{min}}-C^{\text{maj}}$ ) that sonically conveys the enormity and magnificence of this power.

While Emperor's debut album is characterized by a greater melodic sensibility than many of its contemporaries, it can ultimately be seen as a product of the values that typified the early 1990s Norwegian scene. Violence and oppression are

positively evaluated on *In the Nightside Eclipse* and in the promotional interviews that accompanied it. However, following Samoth's parole in 1996 and the release of *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk* in 1997, Emperor's members began to style themselves as more 'serious' musicians. The band was very explicit in this, and included in the liner notes of *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk* the statement: 'Emperor performs Sophisticated Black Metal Art exclusively!'

One of the key departures from *In the Nightside Eclipse* was the eschewal of much of the obvious imagery of weaponry and battle. While the album's back cover shows Samoth holding a sword and several of the other members wearing forms of armour (such as a chest plate and a chain-mail vest), the overall sensibility of these images is one of solemnity and majesty: none of the members is wearing corpse paint, but sit proudly and regally on thrones. The most frequently reprinted promotional photo from this period features a shot of the four band members, heads bowed and solemnly looking downward. Although Trym (Faust's replacement as drummer) is wearing a chain-mail vest, there is little other evidence of the paraphernalia of weaponry that characterized earlier band photos.

The lyrics are still characterized by the misanthropic Satanism of the debut album, but they are tempered by atmospheres of questioning, yearning and longing that are largely absent on *In the Nightside Eclipse* (and, indeed, on many of the early black metal releases). When hate is described, it is increasingly self- rather than other-directed, as is the case in 'With Strength I Burn': 'I hate my flesh... It made me question the essence of the <I>'. Such lyrics express a desire to transcend the corporeality of the body and to become the true 'I' with no reliance on the weakness and mortality of human 'flesh'. The song expresses desires that were previously expressed through the wearing of corpse paint and adoption of the regalia of weaponry and battle: to leave the ordinary self behind and to become something stronger and more powerful than one's existence in everyday life. At the same time, however, this power is not absolute and suggests a greater acknowledgement of individual weakness.

Meanwhile, while hatred might be expressed lyrically in 'With Strength I Burn', it is not reflected musically. The vocals in this section are sung, rather than growled or rasped, and this singing is melodic, full-throated and expansive—a significant contrast with the more aggressive style of 'grim' vocals that otherwise dominates Emperor's music (and which may have signified hatred and disgust in a more straightforward way). Hatred is described in this song, but it is also—sonically—transcended. Similarly, on 'Thus Spake the Nightspirit', lyrics suggest a valuing of individual power and control, but the repeated, transcendent vocal line which concludes the song ('Nightspirit...embrace my soul') implies willing-

ness to also relinquish such power and control and be subsumed by a more powerful spirit.

While both *In the Nightside Eclipse* and *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk* retain many connections generically, sonically and thematically, *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk* is, on the whole, less certain in the value it places on violence and evil as desirable and appealing goals. This shift from the signifiers of 'evil' associated with the first album to the more complex emotional palette of the second parallels the band members' decision to no longer participate in the destructive acts of violence that had characterized the early black metal scene. With the release of *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk*, the change in members' attitudes and practices is reflected in the band's creative outputs, which were no longer focused on violent one-upmanship but on producing 'sophisticated black metal art'. For Kahn-Harris, this would be considered evidence of how the logic of mundanity ultimately 'saved' the black metal scene by redirecting scene members' energies to more 'ordinary' practices of musical production (2004: 116).

However, it was never the case that *In the Nightside Eclipse* straightforwardly signified the 'evil' that was a fitting soundtrack to murder and church burning, and that *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk* signified a more mature or mundane sensibility that accompanied members' transitions to a more 'respectable' and crime-free life. Although an ideological shift between the two albums was evident in the band's changing performance styles, lyrical themes and iconography, sonic differences between the two albums are less dramatic than they may initially seem. *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk* is certainly a more polished album characterized by more sophisticated song writing and a more explicit melodic sensibility, but the music's expansive and transcendent impulses, which would seem to complicate its potential to straightforwardly promote evil and violence, are also evident on *In the Nightside Eclipse*. On the band's debut, sounds which lend depictions of violence a sense of majesty and splendour can also offer pleasures disconnected from violent actions. For example, the consonant harmonies and ascending melodies on 'Into the Infinity of Thoughts' and 'Cosmic Keys to my Creation' may be interpreted as sonically conveying the magnificence of unchecked power and domination (as argued above) or simply as connoting *magnificence* and an aesthetics of transcendence not necessarily connected to violence. Both of these songs feature images that suggest the expansiveness and incomprehensibility of the self and the natural world in ways that are similar to those on *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk*. Repeated motifs of 'infinity' (e.g. 'May the infinity haunt me') also suggest a transcendence of the self, but this transcendence need not be about power or aggression.

In other words, Emperor's aesthetics of transcendence is what constructs violence as appealing and noble, but it is what also provides opportunities for the

construction of different kinds of sonic affect. The music's majesty and splendour can be used as a springboard for real acts of violence, but it also offers experiences of listening that do not necessarily require musicians or listeners to connect the music to their real actions or values.

Rhetorically, as well as sonically, Emperor has been careful to leave both possibilities open. While the members of Emperor were no longer engaged in criminal activities following Samoth's imprisonment and release, at no point have they disavowed their own or others' involvement in these crimes. For example, while Samoth claims that he can now see more effective ways of attacking or undermining Christianity, he has described church arson as a 'good symbolic anti-Christian act' and acknowledged that he 'still find[s] the concept of reducing a church to a pile of ashes appealing' (quoted in Moynihan and Söderlind 1998: 100–101). Ihsahn has similarly declined to fully distance himself from the violence of the early black metal scene. Reflecting on the events of the early 1990s, he said:

That there were burned churches, and people were killed, I didn't react at all. I just thought, 'Excellent!' I never thought, 'Oh, this is getting out of hand', and I still don't (quoted in Moynihan and Söderlind 1998: 99).

Although since the release of *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk*, Ihsahn and Samoth have claimed to be 'tired of the arson talk' (Whalen 1997), they are also reluctant to fully relinquish the status and prestige that comes with black metal's reputation for violence. The black metal scene from the mid-1990s onwards might well be described as one characterized by a logic of mundanity, but there is still a valuing of 'real' transgression as something that is central to the meaning and importance of black metal music.

With its members no longer involved in criminal pursuits and other acts of violence, Emperor was able to achieve a level of commercial success with *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk* that was unavailable to many of the other bands in the early 1990s Norwegian scene. In this sense at least, Emperor offers one of the clearest examples of how black metal, and individual bands within the scene, can not only be 'saved' (Kahn-Harris 2004: 116) by the logic of mundanity, but can also prosper as a result of it. The fact that the music never promoted violence in any simple or straightforward way perhaps assisted Emperor to be more successful in this transition than many of their contemporaries, particularly because the shift into a more 'mature' and 'sophisticated' musical sensibility did not require an overly radical sonic or thematic change. But Emperor is also an example of how the logic of mundanity wins out to 'save' the music only because of the 'transgressive subcultural capital' conferred through members' previous association with violence.

## Conclusion

The legacy of the black metal scene has perhaps not been its ability to balance tensions between competing impulses of transgression and mundanity, but through its ability to sustain itself through both its logic of mundanity and its reputation for transgression. Apart from a small number of violent incidents that have occurred since the early 1990s, the events of the Norwegian scene are largely aberrant in the context of the global extreme metal scene; however, the value and importance that continues to be placed on them suggests that 'violence' is still an important part of what black metal means. This is indicated by the ongoing interest in books and films about the Norwegian scene, the fact that many of the most commercially popular black metal bands today are the 'survivors' of this early scene (Hinchliffe and Patterson 2009: 71), and the fact that the success of some contemporary black metal bands (such as Gorgoroth) continues to hinge on a notion of black metal as 'authentically evil' music.

Given that academic studies have conventionally viewed claims of a connection between metal and violence as evidence of a moral panic designed to scapegoat metal and/or to serve conservative social and political interests, the events of the early 1990s problematize some of this conventional thinking about heavy and extreme metal. These events show that the relationship between metal and violence is not always one entirely exaggerated or fabricated by conservative critics. Indeed, an understanding of black metal requires that transgression and violence be thought *with*, rather than dismissed as aberrant or unrepresentative of extreme metal practice. Rather than seeking to simply defend metal from attack, critics' attempts to think with metal's violence contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the importance of transgression and controversy for past and current metal scenes.<sup>1</sup>

## References

- "'Anti-Christian' CD Faces Ban'. 2003. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 August.
- Arnopp, Jason. 1993. 'We are but Slaves of the One with Horns...!'. *Kerrang!* 436, 27 March.
- Baddeley, Gavin. 1999. *Lucifer Rising: Sin, Devil Worship and Rock'n'roll*. London: Plexus.
- Beste, Peter. 2008. *True Norwegian Black Metal*. Brooklyn: Vice Books.
- Bogue, Ronald. 2004. 'Violence in Three Shades of Metal: Death, Doom and Black'. In *Deleuze and Music*, ed. Ian Buchanan and Marcel Swiboda, 95–117. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- 'Death Metal Teacher Sacked'. 2010. *Orange*, 6 May. [http://web.orange.co.uk/article/quirkies/Death\\_metal\\_teacher\\_sacked](http://web.orange.co.uk/article/quirkies/Death_metal_teacher_sacked).

1. Assistance with the musical analysis was provided by Julius Schwing, supported by NARGS funding from the University of Tasmania.

- Hensley, Chad. 1995. 'Legion of the Night: An Interview with Emperor'. *EsoTerra Magazine* 6. <http://www.esoterra.org/empor.htm>.
- Hinchliffe, James, and Dayal Patterson. 2009. 'Soaring on Blackened Wings'. In *Terrorizer's Secret History of Black Metal*, ed. Louise Brown, September (Special issue of *Terrorizer* magazine).
- Kahn-Harris, Keith. 2004. 'Unspectacular Subculture? Transgression and Mundanity in the Global Extreme Metal Scene'. In *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris, 107–118. London: Palgrave.
- 2007. *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*. Oxford: Berg.
- Metalion. 1994. 'Emperor'. *Slayer* 10: 4–5.
- Moynihan, Michael, and Didrik Söderlind. 1998. *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground*. Venice, CA: Feral House.
- Pettman, Dominic. 1995. "'It'll All Come Out in the Mosh": The Articulations of Death Metal'. *Southern Review* 28: 213–25.
- Richardson, James T. 1991. 'Satanism in the Courts: From Murder to Heavy Metal'. In *The Satanism Scare*, ed. James T. Richardson, Joel Best and David G. Bromley, 205–217. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Roccor, Bettina. 2000. 'Heavy Metal: Forces of Unification and Fragmentation within a Musical Subculture'. *The World of Music* 42: 83–94.
- Rosenbaum, Jill Leslie, and Lorraine Prinsky. 1991. 'The Presumption of Influence: Recent Responses to Popular Music Subcultures'. *Crime & Delinquency* 37: 528–35. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0011128791037004007>
- Thornton, Sarah. 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Walser, Robert. 1993. *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Weinstein, Deena. 2000. *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture*. Boulder, CO: Da Capo.
- Whalen, Gregory. 1997. 'Emperor: Their Satanic Majesties Request...'. *Terrorizer* 39. <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~jasen01/warsongs/emperorinterview.htm>.
- Wright, Robert. 2000. "'I'd Sell You Suicide": Pop Music and Moral Panic in the Age of Marilyn Manson'. *Popular Music* 19: 365–85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0261143000000222>

## Discography

- Emperor. 1994. *In the Nightside Eclipse*. Candlelight MIM7318-2CD.
- 1997. *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk*. Candlelight MIM7327-2CD.

Copyright of Popular Music History is the property of Equinox Publishing Group and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.