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Title

True Aryan Black Metal: the meaning of leisure, belonging and the construction of whiteness in black metal music

Introduction
Debates in leisure studies over the meaning of leisure, couched in terms of freedom
and constraint, have hinged on the postmodern turn (Bramham, 2006; Henderson,
2006; Spracklen, 2006). At the same time, researchers of popular music have
theorised the development of neo-tribes as the effect of postmodernity on practices of
consumption and identity formation (Hodkinson, 2002; Bennett, 2006). Black metal is
a form of heavy metal music taken to extremes of image, content and ideology,
exemplified by the church burnings and murders in Norway at the start of black
metal's recent history (Kahn-Harris, 2007). Previous work on black metal (Spracklen,
2006) has linked the discourses of identity in the scene to a Habermasian framework
of communicative and instrumental rationalities at the end of modernity (Habermas,
1981:1984). In this paper, previous and new research into the discourses about black
metal on an internet forum will be examined alongside scene literature to explore the
tensions between black metal as a neo-tribe and black metal as a site of the
construction of whiteness (Garner, 2006) and white (racist, Aryan, heathen) identity.
As an insider in the black metal scene, I use my knowledge of that scene to observe
discussions on a black metal on-line forum about what it means to be a black metal
fan (being "kult"). In addition, six adult black metal fans were interviewed about their
involvement and understanding of the music and its extreme ideologies. In identifying
the tensions between playful belonging and elitist ideology, it will be suggested that
an imagined, white community is being created that resists notions of postmodernity,
globalisation and consumption and casts doubt on the completeness of the postmodern
turn. In turn, this doubt about the postmodern turn will raise issues for our
understanding of leisure.

Methodology
In addition to insider, ethnographic reflections on the scene (cf. Hodkinson, 2002;
Urquia, 2005), the material used in the critical analysis of discourses in black metal
was gathered over two ten week periods observing and recording comments made on
a black metal website forum (Spracklen, 2006), as well as ethnographic work
complemented with six informal, semi-structured interviews with black metal fans.
This approach to on-line data collection followed the work of Hodkinson (2002), Hine
(2000) and Kanayama (2003) in using publicly available discourses on-line to
establish how understandings and identities are represented and constructed. The
forum, at www.blackmetal.co.uk, is a publicly accessible one. Knowledge of the
scene (Hodkinson, 2002) established this forum as a key on-line space for black metal
fans, both British and International, to discuss the music and its surrounding culture in
English. The forum has private spaces accessible to members who sign-up; on
reflection, the decision was made not to use material from these private spaces, as this
research project was about understanding the public discourse of black metal and
whether the rationality was communicative or instrumental in debating the 'essence'
of the scene and the music. Also, by limiting the research to public postings and
discussions, ethical issues of consent were avoided.

Black metal as elite resistance
On the blackmetal.co.uk open forum, it is clear that the majority of people posting
comments see black metal as something beyond the bounds of normal, respectable
society. In a discussion about the possibility of Varg Vikernes visiting the United
Kingdom on his release from prison, the posters were largely dismissive of
mainstream white working-class culture and contrasted the conformity of belonging

and passive acceptance with the elite individualism of black metal. As one poster claimed: "Black Metal is for the 'intellectual elite' therefore chavs will never listen to it" (Diabolical, posted 21 November 2005). The poster who instigated the discussion started by saying:

> I think he's gonna be shocked if her ever visits the UK, as to the fucked up social class of people we like to call chavs… maybe one of them will go shout something at a 'fuckin skater', not knowing that the 'fuckin skater' is Varg, and end up in a world of pain (Valtam, posted 20 November 2005)

Immediately, then, Valtam was making a distinction between himself and the black metal scene, and the white, working-class 'chav' subcultures. But there are two other themes in his posting. The first is one of elitism: what offended Valtam was potentially being misidentified as a skater, a member of a teenage subculture who might dress in black but who wouldn't be a member of the black metal elite. The second theme is that of the fantasy of revenge: Varg Vikernes killing a chav on behalf of all the black metal fans who had faced abuse for the clothes they wore, the hair they grew long and the music they listened to. This theme was picked up by another poster, who criticised the violent nature of white and black working-class youth then asked, seemingly without being aware of the irony: "Why aren't there more groups of BM warriors setting clubber's (sic) cars on fire, instead, and attacking people, in a more meaningful way?" (Lesh, posted 23 November 2005)

The forum is governed by tacit rules about what one posts, and what one says about black metal or particular bands. For instance, when someone asked the question – what is black metal to you? – a member called jonesmark, who was one of the most prolific commentators on the forum, was the fourth person to reply to the initial posting and tried to fix the definition as follows:

> First and foremost for myself is the music, period. Second comes the ideology and philosophical standpoints (jonesmark, posted 9 December 2005)

Although this thread continued to be discussed through 148 posts over a period of two months, in essence the debate was about the relationship and balance between the music as an aesthetic style (coldness, anger) and as a vehicle for elitist ideology (Satanic, pagan, misanthropic, nationalist). In other words, jonesmark's intervention at the beginning, had limited the focus to a debate along those lines, which stressed the elitist nature of the music and the nature of the music itself. The tacit rules of the forum encourage posters to conform to a view of black metal that is elitist, that resists a mainstream defined by inferior people and inferior attitudes: "Black metal is a musical and idealogical (sic) form of seperating (sic) myself from the flock of sheep that is modern life" (Nelly75, posted 14 December 2005).

Black metal as neo-tribe?

Heavy metal is white man's music (Weinstein, 1991), and despite high-profile black rock stars such as Jimi Hendrix and Phil Lynott, the music has always been associated, in the West, with white, male, working-class communities. The adherence to norms and values associated with hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity is evident in the language of the forum: bands not liked are called gay, and sexist and homophobic jokes and pictures are often posted. The homoerotic, hypermasculine nature of black metal is not so evident, but comes across in the sense of male-separateness and bonding in the following comment:

> I remember reading an interview with rob darken (Graveland) where he stated that black metal should not be used to impress chicks, but rather scare them

away… if I play a show and some chick comes onto me saying that she loved my music and would like to get to know me better, then that is just the surest way NOT to get me to know her better (Nattestid, posted 2 January 2006)

At the gigs I've attended, there have been barely a handful of black and Asian metal fans. On the forum, this whiteness is largely tacit, but comes through when extreme nationalists make postings and others react to the racism. For the nationalists, black metal is a music solely by and for various permutations of white/Nordic/European elites, and there are tediously regular and frequent statements along those lines. When other black metallers attack this racism, they still couch their attacks in terms of a white, eurocentric world view that conflates ethnicity with exotic, foreign Others:

I couldn't care less what people do in their spare time… (whether they) worship hitler or are asian (if anything, being a black metaller in a country like Malaysia where you risk prison and even the death penalty deserves more credit than being a BM fan in social-democratic tolerant Norway) (Arkeos, posted 14 December 2005)

Black Metal Fans
This section of the paper summaries the findings of a small-scale research project talking to and interviewing six black metal fans in the north of England – three of whom were personal contacts. The other three were identified through talking to the first three and finding out the contact details of people I had seen at gigs or in the Hellraiser metal/punk shops in Leeds and York. All six of the black metals fans were white, male, and all were aged over twenty. Half of them had partners of some kind – and one of them attended gigs with his long-term girlfriend. All six were serious consumers of black metal music: they went to gigs across the north and in London, two were regular customers at the Hellraiser shops, one of them infuriatingly being the person who beat me to the Leeds shop on a Saturday to buy rare imports. One of the fans was a collector of black metal vinyl, and had built up an obsessively huge horde, which he then burnt to CD to play during the working day. Everyone used the internet to buy records: Supernal Music was an on-line retailer (and underground record label) they all recognized and used, and two of the fans had built up a close friendship with Alex Kurtagic, its owner. The fact that Kurtagic has been one of the standard-bearers of elitist ideology in black metal - through his column in Zero Tolerance magazine, the use of his catalogue to support revolutionary conservative views associated with nationalism and purity and European identity, and through his record label releasing albums by National Socialist BM bands like Hate Forest – did not worry the fans I interviewed. Melkor, who in his day job worked in the public sector in a traditionally left-wing profession, admitted that 'there's a lot of edgy stuff put out [written] by Alex, for sure, but it's all provocation'.

In my research with black metal fans, a common theme that quickly emerged was a sense of (some) ironic distance from the seriousness of the genre's elitist ideologies. That is not to say that the fans I spoke to were actively against those ideologies. Far from it: all were sympathetic towards the anti-Christianity and anti-conformity of the ideologies, and all wore Thor's Hammers at gigs, signifying an empathy with the scene's (Scandanavian, Nordic, Aryan?) heathen turn. They all agreed with the view that black metal was more than just music, and that there was a distinctive depth to the genre's ideologies which went far beyond the cartoonish Satanism of 1980s metal bands like Venom. One of the fans, Gothmog, even went so far as to claim that black

metal was 'against everything in the modern world, and back to the old gods'. But they all saw black metal as being something visceral, to be enjoyed as a feeling or a sound, rather than an exposition of political beliefs. In this sense, the fans were similar to those interviewed by Kahn-Harris (2007) in his ethnographic work with people involved in the black metal scene in England and Israel. Bauglir, for example, told me that black metal was about 'aggression, darkness, hatred', but also that 'you can't tell what they're saying anyway, so it doesn't matter what they're singing about'. Another black metaller, Glorund, was more precise, when he told me that it was always 'about the MET-AHL!' and nothing else. For him, a heavy metal fan who first got into the music in the mid- eighties thrash era, and who still listened to and played (as a drummer) all kinds of extreme metal, black metal was just the most metal – the most evil, the most Satanic, the most hard – of heavy metal's many genres and scenes. Like the other older (post-30) black metal fans, he had progressed from the thrash of Anthrax and Megadeth to the first 'true' extreme metal genre, death metal, before that scene was in turn overshadowed by Norwegian black metal. As such, the older fans had been on the fringes of the death metal 'tape-trading' scene in the late eighties and had expressed support for bands like Obituary and Death (Kahn-Harris, 2007). But of course, as I have already mentioned, it was this death metal scene that the Norwegian Black Metal Circle condemned for not being serious about Satanism. The arrival of demo tapes of black metal bands like Mayhem and Emperor, the conversion of Darkthrone from a death metal band in baggy shorts and trainers into corpsepaint-wearing monsters, and the fall-out from the church-burnings and murders, ensured that these extreme metal fans knew the difference between their gumby thrash, poser death and the true music of the dark side.

What these fans got from black metal was a feeling that the scene, but especially its music, expressed something authentically (primevally) evil. The Devil has always had the best tunes: heavy metal, right from its roots in the Crowley-worshipping Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin and the Hammer Horror theatrics of Black Sabbath, has always flirted with darkness and Christian ideas of Evil. Black metal is just another iteration of that relationship with evil, darkness and anti-conformity. Melkor described it as 'playing around with the things that we were told were scary, just to get a reaction from normal people… and you don't get more scarier than Satan'. The contrast with normal people typifies the tension in black metal between the explicit elitism and individualism (physically retreating into the snow-bound woods and mountains of northern Europe) and the need to have the transgression recognised. All of the fans expressed a need to have their anti-Establishment, anti-modern, anti-Christian music vindicated by the reaction of people outside the scene: on dicussing Nocturno Culto's self-produced and directed film about his home in the Norwegian wilderness, Thu, one of the younger fans interviewed, contrasted Culto with his bandmate Fenriz: 'Black metal is about opposition, not hiding away. Fenriz lives in Oslo surrounded by shit. That's what makes him angry. That's what makes Darkthrone a proper metal band. Anger, and watching the faces of the people who look at you when you walk past them. Fenriz walks the streets.'

Foe these fans, then, black metal resembled a neo-tribe, in the way in which they were able to be 'true' and yet be aware of black metal's playfulness and relationship to other forms of extreme metal. None of the fans wore corpse-paint and spikes round town, and only two of them had gone to gigs in the full black metal costume. But they did wear Thor's Hammers, black metal tee-shirts and other items of extreme metal

jewellery to perform black metal in public. And for all the fans, black metal marked a space in which masculinity, individuality and freedom of thought were privileged over conformity and commodification.

National Socialist Black Metal
I returned to the blackmetal.co.uk forum in 2007 to further examine the extreme ideologies of the scene. I was particularly interested to explore the tensions between black metal as a neo-tribe and black metal as a site of the construction of whiteness (Garner, 2006) and white (racist, Aryan, heathen) identity. During my time observing the comments made by the fans on the forum, two threads came to my attention. The first was a discussion about the band Drudkh; the second was about NSBM itself. This last thread proved to be very timely and useful for this research, as the discussion was connected to an anonymous on-line poll of forum users. On 10 July 2007, after just under a month of discussions, and after the heated arguments had faded away, the poll showed a majority of the black metal fans agreeing with the statement that National Socialist ideology in black metal was stupid: 54% of respondents (31 where n=57). Only 16% believed that the ideology was 'great', seemingly approving of the music and its ideology; 14% believed NSBM was 'entertaining', a more ambivalent position to take; and 11% said that black metal was 'supposed to be bad', apparently supporting NSBM as an extension of the provactive nature of the scene. In addition, a further 5% believed that NSBM was 'just a bit of fun'. This on-line poll, while clearly not representative of all black metal fans, was reflective of the ambiguity of NSBM in the wider scene, and perhaps the majority-held opinion of NSBM as something that is a provocation too far. It is also instructive to see that the people who did see a place for NSBM in black metal were not automatically in accord with its white (racist, Aryan, heathen) supremacist, romantic nationalist politics: the 11% who saw in it an extension of provocation and anti-conformity; and the 5% who saw NSBM as a big joke on the anti-NSBM fans who took it all too seriously.

The thread on black metal ('What do we all feel about NSBM?) resulted from an original posting on 15 June 2007 by someone called diseasedmind. It is worth quoting from this original post at length, as diseasedmind made a number of articulate arguments against the legitimacy of National Socialism and its ideological influence in black metal:

> I have a massive axe to grind with NSBM… the problems I see are these: 1) Most importantly, it's an invasion of the scene by people with political agendas who have no actual regard for the broader BM scene itself… 2) Politics has no place in a musical form focussed on the destruction of everyone… I'm not including bands who simply write about their cultural heritage in this, though there's quite a degree of crossover which is of course exploited by… NSBM activists… 3) The assertion that the demise of our culture is the fault of one section of society is again incomatible with a musical form which recognizes (and often celebrates) the inherent self destructiveness of the human species. National Socialism is an idiot's philosophy in which history is romanticized… stupid people exist in all races and cultures and a mass global cull would in purely logical terms be no bad thing. NS subscribers are the most intellectually stunted of the lot so logically we should start with them. NS activism in BM is a cancer which threatens the long term health of the BM scene as a whole and needs to be checked. That's my position anyway. I expect there'll be some neo- fascist sympathizers

lurking in the wings to have a rant… anyway, figured it'd be interesting to see how many sympathizers vs. passive acceptors and objectors.

This initial posting is interesting in the way diseasedmind asserts that black metal is purely misanthropic in its ideology. For diseasedmind, black metal's pure misanthropic message is in danger of being subsumed by an elitism based around (white) racial supremacy – though he/she does allow room for heathen romanticism (bands that write songs about their pagan/heathen cultural heritage), as long as that romanticism does not spill over into nationalism. This racial supremacy is critiqued by diseasedmind as being the antithesis of black metal's misanthropic elitism: there is no culture or race or nation that is any better than any other, because the whole of humanity is rubbish. Note that diseasedmind is quite happy to criticise National Socialsim for its irrational logic of supremacy, while at the same time writing about global 'culls' of the stupid (ironically, starting with the neo-nazis as prime examples of stupid people). Also note that diseasedmind ends the post by suggesting this is just his/her opinion: an explicit declaration of black metal's commitment to individuality and freedom of speech and thought.

By 28 June 2007, 133 postings had been made on this thread, making it one of the liveliest discussions on the web-site that year. The first response to diseasedmind's argument came at 8.58pm on 16 June 2007, a mere three minutes after the original post. The poster, Invocation, added to his position at 9.03pm. He/she agreed with "everything" but suggested that "nazi's will never, EVER change their opinions". Invocation's second post added the point that "one of the goals of the Pagan Front is to remove all Satanism from black metal". The Pagan Front are a key organisation promoting extreme right-wing propaganda in black metal: Invocation's comment demonstrates the way in which the neo-nazis are seen to be trying to dissociate black metal from Satanism (something he/she presumably thinks has a place in black metal, given his/her name and their comment).

More ambivalent comments followed soon after Invocation's. One poster, a heathen romantic based in the United States, said
> I find European history and paganism really interesting, and I like it when bands incorporate that stuff into their music. I only think it becomes stupid when it just turns into Hitler Worship, but most of the worthwhile NSBM bands don't do that (jeffnogo, posted 16 June 2007)

Some other postings made similar points that legitimised some NSBM as being about paganism and local (white) identities, against NSBM that supported Germany and the Holocaust.

The first challenge to diseasedmind from a supporter of National Socialism appeared at 10.43pm on 16 June 2007. Carpathianhell may have adopted a cod-horror name, but their comments justified and supported the aims and objectives of National Socialsim and its black metal sub-genre. "NSBM supports the destruction of the judeo-christian regime does it not?" they argued, "NSBM supports the elimination of all who are 'impure'… anything that supports the destruction of something, at least human-wise, is welcomed in black metal as far as I'm concerned". Here, Carpathianhell was linking black metal's anti-Christianity to a wider resistance against something they called 'judeo-christian' religion, an extrapolation that allows

anti-semitism to be justified as being part of a wider defence against religion. Carpathianhell continued

> BM needs allies to achieve it's (sic) ultimate goal, the destruction of all humanity, the destruction of all judeo-christian like filth. If NSBM supports any part of that ultimate goal (which they do) then BM must accept these allies. And from what I've seen, NSBM groups such as the Pagan Front have a much more real chance… of making actual changes in society… what is better the destruction of some people (whose who NSBM wantss destroyed), or of no people at all?

Carpathianhell's comments were immediately criticised by other posters. Some postings argued that ultimately black metal was about the music: "I'll start by stating I don't agree with any NS ideology but half the time I haven't got a fuckin' clue what the hell their on about anyhow… don't give a toss if they goose-step round their bedrooms all night so long as they don't bother me… give me a good toon [tune]" (posted by no-necro-name.com, 16 June 2007). But one poster, Nemesis, provided a critical demolition of National Socialism and NSBM, which led to Carpathianhell retreating from overt support of neo-nazi genocide to a position that attempted to establish National Socialism as a genuine political philosophy. But by 17 June 2007, at the twentieth post in the thread, others were picking up the defence of NSBM in more crude terms: "it's the fucking bestest, haha cunt fuck off" (posted by Wehrwolf). After others continued to try to justify NSBM by equating it with freedom of speech and freedom to provoke, diseasedmind and another anti-NSBM poster, centurion, ended up caught in a number of debates with ambivalent or pro-NSBM black metal fans. On the latter side, for example, someone argued that "you can hate everyone, but hate certain groups less… some people may endorse NS movements (not necessarily white power movements), due to the fact that they bring death" (posted by schadel_reich, 18 June 2007). The thread continued to grow over the next few days as more defenders of NSBM appeared, but diseasedmind continued to answer their comments. In the end, by the time the thread tailed off at the end of the month, the NSBM defenders had stopped posting, and more anti-NSBM posters had appeared, as well as a number of prople who had been sidetracked into a discussion about the lack of non-white musicians in black metal (and the existence of black, black metal musicians such as Mystifier, and the Pashtun Muslim black metaller Taarma).

The second thread involved Drudkh. Drudkh are a Ukrainian pagan BM band, whose key members were also musicians in Hate Forest, a NSBM band. When the initial posting advertised the availability of Drudkh's new album, it drew two responses from those critical of NSBM. The originator of the NSBM thread, diseasedmind, was quick to point out Drudkh's link to the Pagan Front and Hate Forest. Another poster, Tantalus, mocked Alex Kurtagic of Supernal Music by claiming that the high price of the deluxe edition was due to a surcharge on "all those dedicated to the downfall of ZOG [the codeword used by neo-nazis for the secret Jewish conspiracy]" (posted 21 June 2007). Again, many black metal fans said they would buy the record, even though there was a question mark about the band's ideology (especially since the lyrics, translated from the Ukrainian original, do not seem to be explicitly pro-NS). The situation wasn't made any clearer when a fan of Drudkh claimed that the band was "not involed with the PF… the Pagan Front is completely irrelevant to Drudkh… I've been to the site before… none of the money from this deluxe edition is going to some NS organization" (posted by Kveldulf, 24 June 2007). When diseasedmind tried

to make people realise that the Pagan Front was actively supporting neo-nazi activism, one fan, Valgrinder, asked "black metal is about hate and death… but how come hating for example jews is a bad thing then?" (posted 23 June 2007). So, even if Drudkh are not National Socialist, they have fans who are.

Conclusions
Black metal can be understood as a self-referencing community, or neo-tribe, in which action is communicative. Following Habermas' definition of communicative rationality and action as democratic, communal and non-hierarchical (Habermas, 1981:1984), we can begin to analyse actions and words within the black metal community as being representative of communicative rationality. Black metal is against the instrumental rationalities that dominate Western society: it is anti-Christianity, anti-State, anti-commercialisation. In talking about black metal, the posters on the form were keen to distinguish the communal, democratic nature of black metal from the mainstream, commodified world of corporate rock. Black metal exists outside of traditional or modern social structures, its meaning and purpose are the subject of discourse and debate (Habermas, 1981:1984). Even the streak of nationalism and extremism associated with black metal can be seen as an example of the liberal nature of the meaning-setting discourse and action: there is no bureaucratic, hierarchical structure to remove or impose such extremism, which ironically allows such extremism to prosper without censure. Black metal's essential nature is individualist. So individuals choose to consume black metal as a way of expressing their individuality and their ability to rise above instrumental rationalities and make informed, civilised choices about consumption and leisure.

However, in many ways black metal can be also understood as a place that reaffirms instrumental rationalities and promotes instrumental action in leisure and consumption. Whatever individuals in black metal might think about the nature of the music, the community, the genre, it is still a business operating in a market in a commodified, globalised industry. Black metal is not a communal music played live in a free setting. Black metal is part of the Westernised, commercial pop and rock music industry that has imposed itself on the rest of the world, and as such black metal reproduces the instrumental actions that govern that industry. Music is recorded and sold. The symbolic boundaries of the neo-tribe are shaped by the consumption of commodities such as records, tee-shirts and fanzines. Small labels and specialised shops and websites cater and foster demand for commercial products. People make a living from black metal. The most successful black metal bands are booked by professional agencies to undertake tours in venues owned by multi-national corporations. More obscure black metal bands send out press releases, establish web-sites, upload music files. Rather than being truly democratic, communal and liberal, black metal is governed by instrumental rationalities associated with the music business, and by ideologies of elitism that owe their origin to nationalist debates in European nation-states going through the phase of late capitalism (Habermas, 1981:1984).

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