

4.4. Depressive Suicidal Black Metal and borderline personality disorder: A journey into the depths of emptiness

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Abstract

This paper aims to realize a psycho-ontological analysis of the Depressive Suicidal Black Metal (DSBM) subculture and subgenre in comparison with the contemporary literature and diagnosis of the “Self” in terms of psychological and psychiatric anomalies categorically defined as Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Thus, stating DSBM as an extremely complex musical style — featuring an overall monotonous sound, long and repetitive distorted guitar riffs, occasional keyboard usage and an overuse of sadly mourning voices — and the emotional unstableness, inconsistency and intense fear of abandonment patent in patients diagnosed with BPD, I will demonstrate that both creative/artistic and mental/health vectors are in fact intimately related as well as they can be somehow a “parasitic” vehicle to each other: this means that DSBM musicians and listeners would possess a natural/genetic predisposition for BPD and BPD individuals would have a certain attraction for this particular subgenre of Black Metal.

Keywords: bpd, dsbm, emotion, ontology, psychopathology.

1. The journey begins...

Black Metal is usually said to be born with the 1982 Venom’s album “Black Metal”. That album had the particularity of serving as kind of stylish glue which approximated a group of bands with similar sonorities which were back then more labelled as Speed or Trash Metal than Black Metal *per se*. That was the case of Mercyful Fate, Bathory, Hellhammer, Celtic Frost, Kreator, Bulldozer, Death SS or Sodom. This historical period is commonly known as the First Wave of Black Metal and lasted until the early nineties, when the Second Wave — the True Norwegian Black Metal Wave or the Satanic Black Metal Wave — emerged through the sound of Mayhem, Burzum, Darkthrone, Immortal, Emperor, Carpathian Forest or Gorgoroth.

We shall note that the main differences between the two Waves were not so much in the musical composition (which tried to take into the extreme both instrumentalism and lyricism, making truly raw and brutal music through fast guitar picking with heavy distortion, fast drum tempos and blast-beats as well as shrieking voices), neither in the anti-gregarious, anti-religious or anti-Christian propaganda (Bathory, for instance, did it over and over again during the eighties), but especially in the ways they showed their discontent: the adoption of pseudonyms inspired in Jew-Christian demonology, the Church-arsons (see the iconic case of Varg Vikenes, Burzum’s mastermind), their general public proclamation as neo-Nazis, Pagans or Satanists and, particularly, the crimes, murders and tragedies they were associated to.

2. Dark days in Norway

Here, we must refer Øystein Aarseth (also known as Euronymous, Mayhem’s founder, lead guitarist and a legend within the scene) and his homicide by the hand of Varg Vikernes and, even more important for the emergence of the particular sub-genre of Depressive Suicidal Black Metal (DSBM),

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the suicide of Per Yngve Ohlin (Mayhem's Swedish vocalist since 1988, otherwise known as Dead). Per was an extremely depressive person who was frequently cutting himself during the shows and smelling rotten carcasses he used to found in a forest nearby Mayhem's rehearsal house. Euronymous once said about him (Eide, 1987): "I honestly think Dead is mentally insane. Which other way can you describe a guy who does not eat, in order to get starving wounds? Or who has a T-shirt with funeral announcements on it?".

Dead's suicide in 1991 achieved such a psycho-ontological status within the scene that many bands had offspring from his personal tragedy, trying to dig deep in matters of existentialism, namely through messages and actions of self-mutilation, suicidal behaviour/invitation, substance abuse (both alcohol and drugs), splitting and disturbed stage identities (which are expressed from minimal corporal movements to exacerbated moments of ecstasy) and the overwhelmingly presence of (in practical terms) "negative" emotions — such as guilt and anger of life — and "negative" personality moods, as anxiety and depression.

3. An aside on existentialism

In a philosophical vocabulary, existentialism defines a search for the fundamental parts of one's own existence, for the meaning of life. Although there are obviously many different ways of interpretation for philosophical existentialism, including phenomenological, scientific, religious and anti-religious perspectives (e.g. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre, and many others), the key-point of all of them is pretty simple: to understand the roots of every single part of the human's sphere, actions, beliefs, urges and motivations. Thus, DSBM simply takes it into the most blackened caves of the human mind, into the depths of emptiness. And that work is made through some bands such as Suamnucaedere ("to kill oneself by his own hand" in Latin), Werther, Nocturnal Depression, Shining and Make A Change...Kill Yourself.

4. Shining, Nocturnal Depression and Make a Change...Kill Yourself

Before we get into a psychiatric analysis of the prevalent factors of this particular sub-genre and sub-culture and seek for possible correlations with the Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), we shall underline what is the real purpose of the DSBM according to its performance, this is, its musicians' statements and the lyricism involved. In fact, Niklas Kvarforth — Shining's vocalist — seems to agree with Dead's legacy and this self-destructive status of DSBM. He shouts it loud and clear during an interview to Black Terror Magazine (2001):

Of course we support suicide. Shining supports all that is negative in this bastard world of ours. We have a couple of cases in the past with people whom have ended their lives under the influence or partially under the influence of our work and of course this is true blessing indeed, yet we pray for increased numbers of fatalities.

These disturbing words of Nicklas — who deeply wishes people to commit suicide under his musical influence — have their perfect resonance in several Shining's lyrics, such as "And Only Silence Remains..." from the album "Within Deep Dark Chambers". We can listen:

Hate me/Complete patterns known as shameful/Cut me deeper than/Hate me/And collect the twelve daggers of infinity/Follow to my paradise/Fulfil yourself, harass yourself for me/And follow to my paradise/Cut yourself, a productive code to manipulate the holiness/And share your pains/Your pains.

Also Nocturnal Depression's "Nostalgia" from "Nostalgia — Fragments of a Broken Past" shows up a similar message. They sing:

And once again despair is kissing me/With her cold ghostly lips/My own destruction is leading me to my grave/That I digged for many times/And once again I'm becoming a spectral thought/Forgotten, sad, miserable shit/As I fall into the black spheres among lonely memories/You've broken us, piece by piece/The score of my soundtrack is written by blood/Music of suicide written in red/I did it myself, my wrists are also opened/And my tears, it's cascading/Everything has been lost behind us (...).

A final example from Make A Change...Kill Yourself homonymous album from 2005, where is wondered:

Is life just another test to prove me wrong?/Is this never-ending struggle just another lie?/Are these shitty feelings just another fairytale of happiness?/Are these scars real or just another open wound?/Are these people real or just ghosts in the wind?/Is this a fork or a knife? The blood seems real/This knife seems to kindly touch my skin/This is dying, not living/This is the border between life and death/Only death is real/Strangle me. Stab me to death/Only death is real (...).

According to these examples, self-mutilation (mainly through cutting), the blood-loss as well as suicide thoughts seem to represent a kind of escaping catharsis from mundane life. Life seems to be wrong and an error from which one must escape. Shining's lyrics keep repeating the words "cut" and "follow to my paradise"; Nocturnal Depression's insist in the idea of open wrists, blood and loss; and Make A Change...Kill Yourself — in a very Burzumish nihilistic overview — keeps questioning about facts of life (like it was a test, a never-ending struggle, a lie) with the "knife" appearing once again — like in Shining's example — as a main-protagonist of the story.

5. A psychoanalytic aside

The question is what the knife is, and why is it so quoted. At a first look, one could argue that is merely a simple object that can be found basically everywhere for those who want to commit suicide or cut themselves. It's a kitchen object; it's a quotidian object. One can buy it in the supermarket at tops, or find it in the trash. However, if we try to figure it out from a psychoanalytical (not yet psychiatric) point of view, it might represent another thing. Freud argues the knife might be a fetish, a psychological substitute for the repressed sexual urges — the libido — and the supervenience of a "death drive" (*Todestrieb*) over a "life drive" (*Lebenstrieb*) is not just a symbol of rebellion against those who raised the suicidal/self-harming individual (like parents or school) but also a way of releasing all the tension generated. In fact, and according to Freud (1993, p. 232), "there is a strong renouncement of the ego's affirmation" in suicidal individuals, and this means they have the inclination to succumb to their "id" (*Es*) contradictive wishes. The id is the deepest part of our minds, the place where all energies and wishes are found in total anarchy.

Now that we have stated DSBM as an extremely complex musical style featuring an overall monotonous sound, long and repetitive distorted guitar riffs, occasional keyboard usage and an overuse of sadly mourning voices, as well as its sub-culture as essentially a sub-culture of emotional unstableness (both for musicians and listeners), we will relate it to the BPD in matter of inconsistency and intense fear of abandonment.

6. BPD symptoms

Thus, according to the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) from the American Psychiatric Association (APA), a BPD is a "pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity" (APA, p. 645) which begins by the early adulthood and is presented in a variety of contexts. This manual says that an individual has to comprehend at least five-out-of-nine criteria in order to be classified within this particular psychiatric category (see APA, p. 663): (1) he must show frantic efforts to avoid reality or imagined

abandonment; (2) possess a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating states of extreme idealization and devaluation (the periods of numbness and ecstasies we referred); (3) have his identity disturbed, as a markedly and persistently unstable self-image; (4) demonstrate impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging (as alcohol or drug abuse, depraved sex or reckless driving); (5) show recurrent suicidal behaviour, gestures, threats or self-mutilation; (6) have affective instability due to a marked reactivity of mood (like long-lasting anxiety or irritability); (7) have chronic feels of emptiness; (8) have inappropriate and intense anger; and (9) possess stress-related paranoid ideation or severe dissociative symptoms — Freud would call it an “ego-splitting” or an “ego-division” (*Ichspaltung*).

7. DSBM encounters BPD

Considering some of the material presented before about the lyricism and ideological thought of some the main bands of DSBM, one can easily understand why it seems pretty obvious that both musicians and listeners which belong and share this particular sub-culture might suffer from mental illnesses and, in particular, from BPD. It is true that we don't present any statistical material or empirical data in order to prove our hypothesis, however the reason for that is very clear; in fact, those musicians like Nicklas — or Dead before him —, as well as the fans of the scene would hardly be able to compromise themselves with a complete psychiatric evaluation. Besides that, it is also very important to mention (again, without statistical data) that the different agents of DSBM still constitute a small group, a minority, among the Metal universe and even the Black Metal sub-genre (we see it through the number of gigs, festivals, albums or simply public resonance, which is barely none). Another crucial fact is that we must not misunderstand the hypothesis and consider that all individuals whom suffer from BPD must enjoy DSBM; in fact, there are individuals mentally insane in every single musical spectrum (for instance, Kurt Cobain and Amy Whitehouse also harmed themselves with drugs and alcohol, clearly showing patterns of mental and affective unstableness and generic feelings of emptiness — or even the Japanese vocalist Kyo, from the Experimental Rock-Metal band Dir En Grey, whom keeps cutting himself during the shows or also the Australian Justice Yeldham, a live audio artist whom crushes large sheets of glass with his face all through his performances). Thus, we don't have here exactly a causal relation but somehow a certain predisposition.

When we think about Suamaucaedere's song titles as “Coagulated Blood” or “To Forget” from their single album “Mortem Sibi Consciscere” (from the Latin “death knows itself”), or Werther's “A Night of Drugs, Misanthropy and a Violent Death”, “Senseless Sickening Life”, “Walking Through the Depths of Sadness and Hate”, “In the Valley of Death...I Can rest” and “The Final Letter of the Young Werther” from their 2012 EP “The End” or even the single “The Fall of Man” — where they used a supposedly EVP recorded by the Spanish occultist Germán de Argumosa —, we can perfectly understand what their motivation is, even without listening the songs. DSBM has an obvious message of death, which somehow contrasts with its Norwegian roots, like Darkthrone's or Burzum's ontological nihilistic questionings that were very far away from simplistic suicide invitations.

In fact, Gylve Nagel — Fenriz among the scene, Darkthrone's vocalist — used to say that Black Metal is supposed to be “all cold” (Aites & Ewell, 2008), a hyperborean musical style. Vikernes also adopted both a message of rebellion (especially during his first demos) and introspection (with particular emphasis on his “Filosofem”, from 1996, and the albums released after his parole in 2010). Even Mayhem, where all of this started through the morbid personality of Dead, preferred to adopt more an anti-Christian position and callosity than a self-harming motivation and style.

8. And only emotion remains...

In order to conclude this paper, we shall repeat that the emotional unstableness, inconsistency and intense fear of abandonment which are patent in patients diagnosed with BPD can work somehow as a mirror for the personality of the individuals belonging to the DSBM scene, especially for the musicians. The existence of certain common patterns among them — as the case of self-harming, suicidal behaviour/invitation, substance abuse and disturbed identity — combine themselves into peculiar experiences of intense grief followed by an urge of immediate relief from the emotional pain, promoting them an ontology of void, of pure emptiness. This doesn't mean, however, that every person which experiences DSBM musicality must be a potential suicidal; one can easily listen to those band and simply ignore their lyrics — in fact a huge quantity of them are barely perceptive. Nevertheless, for those who play it, like Shining's vocalist, the subject is very real — and, because of that, very dangerous.

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