

**J'ai froid**

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## Mediating Darkness

The following text consists of excerpted transcriptions from a series of conversations about the permeations of darkness in contemporary art and music, and the permutations of Black Metal across countries, that Staffan Boije af Gennäs and Amelia Ishmael conducted via Skype as the snow thawed in early 2014.

Both created exhibitions that engage contemporary art's interlocutions with Black Metal. In 2011, Staffan Boije af Gennäs curated with Johan Zetterquist the exhibition "Nordic Darkness"—a title that purposely reverses the art historical term "Nordic light." The idea for the show took shape when they noticed that contemporary Scandinavian art increasingly had, what they would call, darker tones. Amelia Ishmael curated the exhibition "Black Thorns in the White Cube" in 2012, with a reference to certain magical practices, where sharp objects are stricken through other objects to release power. She is also a co-editor of the Black Metal theory journal *Helvete*.

**Amelia** When you say the works had increasingly "darker tones," you are not only referring to darker shades of color?

**Staffan** Yes, these "darker tones"... the *actual* color palettes used in the production of many of the artists' works we followed were becoming darker. This visual change was also connected to a thematic change.

Scandinavian societies were undergoing slow but drastic changes, especially in their self-image. The awareness that the society was undergoing changes did not land as a bomb. It came crawling—changes of interests, social situations, surroundings, and aesthetic appeals. Black Metal, maybe the most clear-cut symptom, originated in the Nordic countries in the 1980s and early 90s. Not so long after this, the dystopic description started to appear in the Scandinavian crime fiction, another major cultural export from these countries. The dark trend in art is not an isolated phenomenon.

In your exhibition, you worked with identifying reference points between the music, the sound of Black Metal, and its expression within visual arts...

**Amelia** Black Metal music and culture leaves a very distinct mark, or stain, in contemporary art, and I think that it can be recognized. But it's not just an aesthetic trend. There's a profound difference between an aesthetic and an experience that is intimately felt. The former is merely a shadow of the latter.

I think that Black Metal is very fluid: its signifiers are not fixed, and it is not necessarily representational. Most importantly, I don't think that everyone should agree on it, all the time. But I do think that it's very possible for viewers to recognize darkness in an artwork. For example, in the two works by Annika von Hausswolff you chose for your exhibition, *Social Abstraction #1* and *#2*: these are a pair of white-

painted boxes or windows, framing white horizontal blinds hanging inside. In the first piece, these blinds are very neatly displayed; yet in the second piece, the blinds are completely disheveled. These works are white on white, yet they are violent. They are rubbed, and torn, and damaged. There is something very dark about this.

Annika von Hausswolff,  
*Social Abstraction*, 2010.  
Courtesy of the artist



**Staffan** Both works were originally part of an exhibition related to the Swedish crime fiction writers Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, that was installed in a police station room in the south of Sweden. In the context of "Nordic Darkness," I saw them as picturing something in the Swedish mentality.

There were elements in the *darker* tendencies we were picking up on that were not altogether new. To cover these, we decided to also include artworks by artists who practiced at the turn of the last century—Carl Fredrik Hill, Theodor Kittelsen, and August Strindberg. Their works had several similarities with the contemporary ones. The painting by Strindberg that we put in the show represents a winter storm at sea. Here, I see a direct expression of the unsheltered *being* I talked about earlier. I also see a relation in the work to how the sublime presents itself in Black Metal—sometimes referred to here as the "maelstrom."

Kittelsen's drawings were related to some artists' choices, but it was really his whole way of life—his decision to pull out of society and live and work in the woods, and his slightly paganistic relation to nature—that inspired many artists, especially Norwegian Black Metal musicians.

**Amelia** Part of the research that I did for my work was based on an acknowledgment that I have very little experience with Scandinavia, and that if I presented research about these cultures it would be difficult not to fetishize them. So, I focused

a lot on American art and culture instead. At first, this might seem like a naive way to do things, because everyone says Black Metal was born in Norway, but what I found posed interesting questions. Pre-Black Metal darkness thrives in America. We have the pioneer who goes into the West, encountering Indians, and throwing himself into the unknown... *maybe* even eating his colleagues to survive the winter. And there's the mountaineer who climbs and lives within the Cascadian, Rocky, and Appalachian Mountains.

**Staffan** Again we are talking about something *dark*, with an allusive reference.

Within Black Metal theory—which is now quite a large and growing academic field—there have been some attempts to describe the notion of the sublime. For example, the Black Metal musician and theorist Hunter Hunt-Hendrix calls this the “Haptic Void,” which he describes as the feeling of both destruction and creativity—the point where these two ends meet. For me, theory has often been as interesting as the actual artwork it describes, a thing of beauty in itself. And I think that this formulation of the “Haptic Void” is a very good description of the sensation that the music can create: a vibrant presence. And, in some of the artworks, I can see this presence coming through.

In a text you wrote in the publication *Helvete*, you described the musical genre Black Metal and its effects on the listener in a very direct way.

**Amelia** The text you mention was published in 2013, within a special section of the first issue of *Helvete* that comprised a portfolio of visual art. I was developing some ideas prompted by the artworks, about how one looks *through* Black Metal, rather than *at* it. This perspective relates directly to the experience I have of listening to Black Metal music, and the idea that it can inspire new modes of looking or experiencing our surroundings.

In this essay, I relate this very physical experience, and I try to breach the experience with the artwork. There's this impression that you're going *through* something rather than just standing a few feet away from it, separated from it. You're experiencing something that has time, and you are living alongside it. There are ideas about psychology tied into these perceptual issues also, related to how one reacts to darkness and the unperceivable world, which is something that I tried to address even with the title of the *Helvete* portfolio: “The night is no longer dead; it has a life of its own.” The idea is that there is a life force within this thing, even if it's not representational, even if you can't see it. You can feel it somehow. And you know that it is alive. Maybe you cannot even hear it breathing, but somehow it communicates directly with your blood flow... it increases your blood flow.

Around that time, I was also introduced to the writings of Philip Tagg, who writes about the semiotics of music. His ideas were a doorway for me. In art history we often look at visual symbols and try to deconstruct them, to figure out what the symbols are and what they might mean; then we try to figure out *how* they make meaning or communicate. And so, Philip Tagg was using a similar technique, but

he is deconstructing sound, how sound might “work” or communicate. He uses the word “anaphones” to describe sonic, kinetic, and tactile references to sound. These anaphones, which can be expressed sonically or visually, are part of what you are calling attention to when you describe the essay's relationship to the experience of listening to sound. Many of the works I selected for the portfolio refer to the tactile anaphones, or texture, of Black Metal; they visually express this sonic texture that I identify with the Black Metal I experience in concerts. What I tried to do with this portfolio was to translate this very physical experience across media. I found artworks that I felt had a similar tone or context to what I found in Black Metal music. They seemed to be coming from a similar place. There's something in the air.

**Staffan** Do you have an example of how you used Tagg's concepts?

**Amelia** One of the ways that I directly used his ideas was in describing the unusual relationship that occurs between the foreground and background of the music and the art. The foreground of Black Metal is very noisy, as is the foreground of the artworks that I decided to work with. Typically, in Western music, the vocals or harmony take the foreground and the drum's blast beats or the guitar's riffs are used to create a texture that falls behind it. But, in the music and art of Black Metal, this structure is frequently reversed; the texture takes the foreground and the harmonies are buried beneath it. Black Metal's texture, or atmosphere, is the first thing encountered, and it must be navigated through, sonically or visually. And this noise, for me, is related to these tactile anaphones, which are acoustic phenomena encountered in a physical and spatial way, the texture of Black Metal. Does that make sense?

**Staffan** At a concert, the music of a band such as Sunn O))) has a very strong *physical presence*—loud sound has a strong physical presence. There is a sculptural relation. If you are standing in the middle of the field of these sound waves, you are slowly broken down as a subject, and you are becoming, more or less, another vibrating piece of the music. I think one can say that you are becoming abjectivized—the border between subject and object disappears. The physical pressure of the sound waves dissolves you. You are no longer a subject listening to the music.

**Amelia** Yes. This reminds me of U.S. artist Banks Violette. There is an idea that he has talked about, in relation to the sculptural installation that he created for the Whitney Biennial in New York, when he collaborated with Snorre Ruch of the Norwegian Black Metal band Thorns. Ruch was commissioned to create a noisy, droning soundtrack for this installation, which Violette described as “an attempt to give snow sound,” and “a kind of landscape painting in sound that evokes the cold, harsh Norwegian terrain.” It seems that he is describing his intention to make sound sculptural, and work in the same kind of way as a landscape artist might do, by tapping into a very specific type of sound, a very particular experience with sound.

**Staffan** When Black Metal broke through as a genre, it came about with guitar riffs developed by the band Bathory, that were later picked up by Mayhem.

This riff, the foundation of early Black Metal, produces a very eerie and cold sound. It grounded the entire visual aesthetic of the musical genre.

**Amelia** And when we look at Kittelsen's work and say that one can hear Black Metal within it, this is a perversion, of course, because this music did not exist then. Electric guitars and amplifiers did not exist. But, there are these qualities in his work that Black Metal also expresses.

**Staffan** He has become an icon for many of the bands. I don't know if it's just because Burzum used Kittelsen's drawings for his album covers, in the early days of Black Metal. Other bands have also picked up on this artist.

**Amelia** This issue comes up in August Strindberg's work too; he was also a contemporary of Kittelsen.

**Staffan** Yeah, Strindberg's work... he hasn't painted that much, there are a few paintings by him, which are very well known in Sweden and quite highly regarded, but they are all depicting the same thing: basically storms during the night, maybe during the winter, at sea. So everything you see is usually this mess of snowflakes and raindrops, gusting through the sky. And I started to take a new interest in his paintings around the same time as I was reading about the "Haptic Void." I think I saw a pretty accurate representation of this concept within Strindberg's paintings.

**Amelia** This notion of making artwork through storms, which you brought up through Strindberg's paintings, also relates to some of the works that were featured in *Helvete*. I'm thinking specifically of Gast Bouschet and Nadine Hilbert's photographs and of Alessandro Keegan's graphite drawings. These each have a dense foreground: you're not able to see so far ahead because the elements and the wind are plummeting your eyes and face, but perhaps you can capture glimpses of a terrain beyond.

**Staffan** There are similarities there too, between the way that the music physically erodes you, and the experience of walking through the storm.

**Amelia** The idea of an artwork that is hung in a very formal atmosphere, a white-walled gallery, but can make you feel that you are drenched, and that there is wind fighting you... this is very dark, and related to the ideas of the music also. Because when you're at a Sunn O))) concert, there's a sensation given to you in the sound waves, in a similar way that your body perceives these visual works as physical impressions. There's a feeling that you are being presented with some sort of threat, or that you are inside of an aggressive situation. And, whether the artists are coming from Scandinavia, America, France, or wherever, there's this idea that you're mediating some kind of darkness, and whether that's personal, political, or psychological, it's there. These artists are each confronting some sort of darkness, in different ways.

**Staffan** Is this darkness only a subjective experience, or does it relate to any political situation in the U.S.?

**Amelia** I find it really interesting when darkness is engaged by individuals

Alessandro Keegan,  
*Untitled 1*, 2008,  
graphite on paper.  
Courtesy of the artist



Gast Bouschet & Nadine  
Hilbert, *Grimsvötn*, 2011,  
photograph.  
Courtesy of the artist



as a way to communicate a critique of political or social issues. This isn't directly Black Metal, but there's this man who was a figure in the music scene of Chicago, named Malachi Ritscher, who immolated himself in 2006 in protest against the Iraq war. An archive-based exhibition, that was put together by Public Collectors as their participation in this year's Whitney Biennial, gave a new visibility to Ritscher and his work. Artist Marc Fischer, from Public Collectors, wrote an essay to accompany the exhibition where he draws attention to the fact that depression can be a reaction to "a serious, politically-influenced reality," which he relates to the extreme increase in suicide rates of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan. He describes: "We should be more open to consider and discuss the impacts that endless war, mass incarceration, epic poverty and impossible levels of debt, systematic and institutionalized racism, gender violence, and the daily brutalities that living in America, and competing for basic human resources and dignity, exert on the psyche of this country's people." These statements are sourced in American experiences, but I want to try to open this idea up, to suggest that this experience illustrates a symptom of a larger social and political issue that people in the U.S. are not talking about. In this way, this is a darkness that is a secret of our nation, which we have even decided to keep from ourselves. Do you find any resonances here?

**Staffan** What you said reminded me of a program on Swedish television, which featured Black Metal bands from the Middle East. These bands used the music as a way to level with the sounds of the wars and their cultural experience; it was a sort of a catharsis. Of course, I am not living in those surroundings, but I think I can relate to it—I think that listening to the music has the same effect on me, because it brings me to a place where I have to confront the chaos. Even if the music is staged, it's parallel to a subjective feeling.

**Amelia** I think that every culture exports darkness in their own ways, and that we can learn a lot about how to relate to each other by communicating through our darkneses.

**Staffan** We have the hidden-away darkness, but there's also the fetishization of darkness.

**Amelia** This is my mantra: make it darker, make it louder!

**Staffan** Another question is why Black Metal has survived as a genre. It seems to be ongoing. One seems to expect that—

**Amelia** —it would die? Haha! At least in Black Metal theory we talk about this a lot... that it should be dead, or that it has died already and been reborn. French artist Elodie Lesourd wrote about this for *Helvete's* first issue. It's post-mortem or "post-modern" now. It just keeps coming back. It won't die.

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