

WHAT IS BLACK IN BLACK METAL? ELUCIDATING THE DARKNESS IN ALBUM COVERS THROUGH PANOFSKY'S PICTURE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article explores the possible underlying connotations within compositions of black metal album covers beyond the meaning of what the used symbols represent. We chose seven black metal album covers and traced the compositional elements in InDesign with lines and areas. These associated compositions along with the original album covers were in turn analyzed within the framework of Panofsky's strata of picture analysis. The findings from this process were discussed against theory on aesthetic experience (John Dewey) and rules as basis for design (Mikkel Tin). We found that the designs on the black metal album covers to a little degree represent the works of a design rebel. On the contrary, the images follow a classic conventional layout.

Visual elements in black metal album covers

"Aesthetics within black metal is stuck; When I make album covers for black metal bands I can just go ahead and use those symbols and that aesthetic, throw in some occult symbols and a goat, then everybody knows what genre it is", a quotation from an interview by an artist and a black metal fan.

Album covers in black metal music, which has its origin in Norway in the 1990s, typically make use of such symbols as the goat, skeletons, and upside down crucifixes, among others. These symbols convey a clear message, so does the darkness and colour black when regarded as a symbol (Anderson, 2010; Mayer & Timberlake, 2014). Research on black metal music album covers and images has explored the vast use of symbols and their cultural meaning, such as death, paganism, Satanism, and so on (Anderson, 2010; Forsberg, 2010; Messner, Jipson, Becker, & Byers, 2007). However, the darkness that often dominates album cover compositions as a dimension of album cover design has received less attention. We therefore found it relevant to explore the black metal album cover compositions with an emphasis on darkness as a compositional element. The aim with such a research approach is primarily to explore possible underlying connotations within the album covers beyond the meaning of symbols used. The research question for this study was: what kind of atmosphere do the compositions of black metal album covers mediate beyond the characteristic symbols?

Atmospheres can be seen as "indeterminate above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience

them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feelings like a haze” (Böhme, 1993, p. 114).

To further explore the connotations disclosed by Panofsky’s analytic framework, we discuss the outcomes of the analysis against John Dewey, who stressed the importance of resistance as part of a whole experience and subsequently real pleasure (Dewey, 1934, p. 46; Shusterman, 2000). The discussion builds on a general conception of the black metal movement ideology, which the interviewees have introduced to us.

Method

The authors have limited prior experience in the specific domain of black metal aesthetics; therefore, it was important to collect insider perspectives on meaning. While some manifestation of values may be accessible to an outsider, the meaning derived from a sign also at least in part resides in a person’s prior experiences, (cf. e.g., Peirce & Hoopes, 1991). We hence conducted interviews to select relevant material, and to elucidate the insights derived by the visual analysis. The empirical data for the study consists of the album covers merged with the interview with an artist’s description of the visual culture in black metal music. To discuss our findings, we performed a post-interview with a graphic designer, who has been designing for black metal bands for many years, to test our conclusive thoughts.

Accordingly, this study is anchored in design research and compositional analysis and builds primarily on methods and theory from this field. Furthermore, the study can be considered a pilot study for a methodical approach to explore intrinsic meanings in design layouts. Possibly, the study can contribute to research on black metal visuals from a design research perspective. As previously introduced, we used Panofsky’s (1970) three primary stages of picture analysis to explore seven different compositions on black metal album.

This research is about the analysis of black metal album covers. In other words, stage sets and other visuals as well as the music is not included in this study. The atmosphere and culture within the music, however, is part of the discussion to some extent.

Tracing

We performed an in-depth interview with an artist who practiced within the theme of black metal, by whose own definition was a “metal head”, as part of our exploration of possible underlying meanings in black metal album covers (Spracklen, Lucas, & Deeks, 2014). Based on our description of the study, the interviewee suggested seven different album covers considered to be of significant importance within the black metal genre for us to analyze. These albums were three by Darkthrone: *Transilvanian Hunger*, *Under a Funeral Moon* and *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*; one by Mayhem: *Demysteriis dom Sathanas*; *Venter på Stormene* by Vemod; *Lawless Darkness* by Watain; and *Nemesis Divina* by Satyricon.

Visual Analysis

To answer to the research question, we transformed the album covers into compositions without symbols. By tracing the cover pictures in InDesign layout software, we could define primary movements and areas in the compo-

sitions. The main movements in the album pictures were described with lines, and the filled areas were defined by establishing the periphery of the area as a filled outline without tonal nuance. The tracing process thus did lead to new configurations, which presumably kept an essence of the prior composition, but without symbols. These new images were in turn analyzed using Panofsky's strata of subject matter or meaning, which he proposed in *Meaning of Visual Arts* (Panofsky, 1970), namely: primary or natural subject matter, secondary or conventional subject matter (iconography): tertiary or intrinsic meaning or content (iconology). We found this method suitable, since it is concerned with the understanding of "subject matter, context, meaning, and cultural significance rather than the study of form and style" (Reddy, 2014). Panofsky's analytical framework of picture analysis represents a typical critical tool for analysis within art history. There are certainly other methods for picture analysis and Panofsky's methods have been criticized not to meet the analysis of comparative art, but the primary idea within Panofsky's framework is widely recognized (Lysen, 2014).

The primary subject matter is concerned with the pure form of the work, which concerns the description of what one can see, such as wolf, house, girl, etcetera. The iconography or subject matter is about how one, for example, understands the pure form of the work within a culture. For people in Europe, the wolf and girl might represent a plot from a fairy tale. As for the iconology or the intrinsic meaning of a work, typically the following questions would include: why is the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood used in this context; what does the artist mean by placing Little Red Riding Hood in such a context in our time? Thus, the iconology is about what the work means.

The atmosphere descriptions based on the traced pictures are finally discussed in light of Mikkel Tin and his 2011 book *Spilleregler og Spillerom: tradisjonens estetikk* (Rules and Play Space: the aesthetics of traditions), as well as his emphasis on creation inspired by rules, and by J. Dewey (Dewey, 1934). This interrogates how the works' meaning influence people's experiences of the composition.

Darkness as a compositional element in Black Metal album covers

Dimensions of darkness and black is widely explored. Derrida argues that experiencing darkness is similar to the experience of blindness, since when in the dark, one cannot meet the eyes of a person that stares at you, a situation that may elicit a feeling of nakedness and vulnerability (Derrida & Louvre, 1993). The contour of a person or object is not clear when seen in the dark. Thus, the black generates a sort of *formlessness*, which often elicits feelings of anxiety due to the uncertainty created by the difficulty of orienting oneself when the known shapes and nuances have disappeared (Bois & Krauss, 1997).

According to artist A. Reinhardt, whose emphasis in recent years of his practice has been within the exploration of the nuances in the black, said that paintings with shades of black "reveal themselves only after an extended period of careful looking and [by] the sustained encounter they demand" ("Ad Reinhardt, Abstract Painting," 2011). Furthermore, he said, "There is a black which is old and a black which is fresh. Lustrous black and dull black, black in sunlight and black in shadow" ("Ad Reinhardt, Abstract Painting," 2011). Darkness does this, according to A. Reinhardt, through his compositions *Abstract Painting*, which demand awareness and concentration by the spectator.

Symbols in Black Metal album covers

Black metal album covers contain numerous symbols (see pictures 1-7). However, as our respondent said, “the symbols of hate of Christianity or something else” are not important. What is central, however, is the anti-culture that these symbols represent. The symbols, our respondent said, “function partly as social markers but even more as social touch points”. Further, black metal refers to nature (Mathias, 2014). The anti-culture is “all about love for nature” as a pantheistic religion in opposition to the expected effective and sensible life that society, wants us to have (David, 2011).

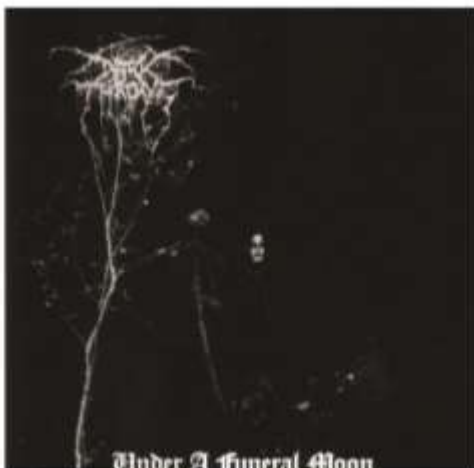
Visual analysis of blackness in black metal covers



Picture 1. *Transilvanian Hunger*, Darkthrone, 1994
Reproduced with permission from Darkthrone



Picture 1a. Tracing of composition by the authors



Picture 2. *Under a Funeral Moon*, Darkthrone, 1993
Reproduced with permission from Darkthrone



Picture 2a. Tracing of composition by the authors



Picture 3. *A Blaze in the Northern Sky*, Darkthrone, 1992
Reproduced with permission from Darkthrone



Picture 3a. Tracing of composition by the authors



Picture 4. *Demystify Don Stribanek*, Mayhem, 1994
Reproduced with permission from Mayhem



Picture 4a. Tracing of composition by the authors



Picture 5. *Hinter på stormene*, by Vemod, 2012
Reproduced with permission from Vemod



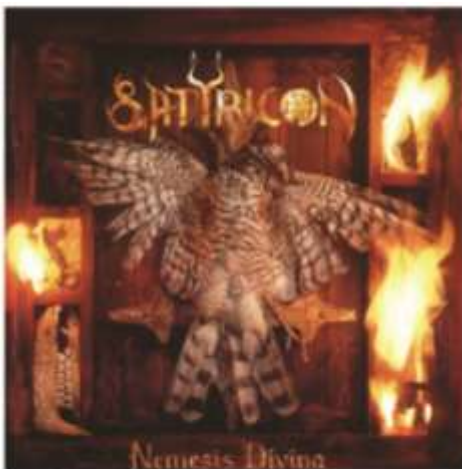
Picture 5a. Tracing of composition by the authors



Picture 6. *Lawless Darkness*, by Watain, 2010
Reproduced with permission from Watain



Picture 6a. Tracing of composition by the authors



Picture 7. *Nemesis Divina*, by Satyricon, 1996
Reproduced with permission from Satyricon



Picture 7a. Tracing of composition by the authors

Discussion: Picture analysis

Table 1: Analysis of album covers by Panofsky's method for picture analysis

Picture 1. <i>Strauchman Blauger</i> , Darkthrone	Picture 2. <i>Under a Funeral Moon</i> , Darkthrone	Picture 3. <i>A Blaze in the Northern Sky</i> , Darkthrone	Picture 4. <i>Demons in dom</i> , <i>Sathmas</i> , by Mayhem Venom	Picture 5. <i>Winter pl storms</i> , by Watain	Picture 6. <i>Lawless Darkness</i> , by Watain	Picture 7. <i>Nemesis Divina</i> by Satyricon
<p>Primary matter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CE - small figure, head tilted backwards, eye socket is black SW candleburn five candles CV title NW organic structure No perspective Spread composition central 80% black <p>Iconography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suffering or angry small figure (increasing) Anti Christ symbols <p>Iconology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Express bodily ecstatic experience possibly elicited by the music Anti culture Darkness (void) more important than perspective 	<p>Primary matter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NW organic structure W - organic vertical line C - small head CE - title No perspective Vertical composition left in picture 92% black <p>Iconography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flailing, lost and/or scared small figure Similar organic structure as picture 1. Figure is not in focus <p>Iconology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disappearance in darkness Darkness (void) more important than perspective 	<p>Primary matter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NW organic structure C - small figure (moving) SE - hand on a pipe or similar No perspective Diagonal composition from NW to SE 93.5 % black <p>Iconography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revelated in dark suburban environment (gutter pipe) Darkness (void) more important than perspective <p>Iconology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-culture/ religious 	<p>Primary matter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CN - symmetrical structure with web like grid and crosses up side down, crossed circles Geometric areas indicating a pictorial church building Central composition SE - hand on a pipe or similar 3 points perspective 68 % black <p>Iconography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In combination with the Logo the church may represent Satanism. <p>Iconology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-culture/ religious 	<p>Primary matter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Symmetrical central structure with four trees CN - Two light/ white horned organic shapes SE - hand on a pipe or similar Horizon and central perspective 68 % dark blue <p>Iconography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The white shapes possibly represent northern light or a sun of both <p>Iconology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connotations towards overwhelming nature, north, night and fiery hell The northern light may represent a gateway 	<p>Primary matter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Symmetrical central composition Periphery of centre three skeletons holding sticks and swords C - vertice shaped black hole Central perspective 30% % black, 30 % dark grey <p>Iconography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gateway to death/ hell <p>Iconology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-culture/ religious, opposed to the gateway to Heaven 	<p>Primary matter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dead bird (raven) Flames or touches Dark brown Composition with lines directed towards the centre 60 % dark brown <p>Iconography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Crossified symbol of freedom Death <p>Iconology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-culture/ religious (blasphemy)
						<p>Legend</p> <p>C Center</p> <p>N North</p> <p>W West</p> <p>S South</p> <p>E East</p>

Composition analysis

The analysis, as detailed in Figure 1, is divided in the strata defined by Panofsky. The albums were chosen by one of the interviewees in relation to their quality and musical importance, not because of their cover designs. The great span of time for the different release dates for these albums does not, perhaps, represent a typical basis to disclose tendencies. As one respondent said, "I stopped buying demos and LPs in 1995, after they became too much alike". Nevertheless as the analysis in Figure 1 shows, there seems to be similarity among these album cover designs, which again represents a visual culture. The primary matter will, to a large degree, consist of formal element descriptions of album covers, while as we move upwards in the hierarchy of the analytic construct, the analysis will be of an interpretive nature.

Primary matter

Primary matter, covers

The analysis shows that darkness is generally an important part in many of the album covers, represented by black or dark colors. Several of the albums are covered with more than 90% black colour. Furthermore, several of the albums contain such organic structures as heads, bodies, skeletons, a dead bird, a church, northern lights, swords and candelabrum, among others.

Primary matter, compositions

The compositions in covers 1a, 2a, 4a, 6a, and 7a are all neatly arranged within the picture frame and do not challenge the format of the quadrat. The compositions in 6a and 7a show that when the massive amount of symbols in the originals (picture 6, 7) are transformed into lines and areas, the visual arrangements appear harmonic by the centered and balanced composition. All of the compositions made by tracing show that they comprise classical and familiar conventions, as many have centric focal- or vanishing-points, and all compositions are either oriented in, about, or run through the center of the album quadrat. Traditional perspectives have been used to represent depth on some of the covers. The rest of the cover albums appear without depth, and therefore the graphical elements appear to be floating. Furthermore, the primary elements in the compositions are triangular, geometric, symmetric and balanced.

Subject matter

Subject matter, iconography, covers

The dim light in the album cover pictures 1a, 2a and 3a do not illuminate the entire shapes in the photography; therefore, the persons and objects in the compositions are fragmented and formless, without contours, and subsequently not separate from the background. According to Bois & Krauss, the effect of such a way of imaging may be unsettling for the spectator (Bois & Krauss, 1997). In addition, such formlessness may represent a way of communicating vulnerability (Derrida & Louvre, 1993). The slightly lit figures in these cover images seem to have been uncovered by a photographer due to a coincidental gleam of light (Bois & Krauss, 1997) which has caused an unintended reflection similar to the one in a cat's eye or in a jewel (Lacan, 2004). The figures in these album covers seem to be hiding or running through the scene, as if they are defenseless and caught in action by the lens.

Thus, the breakdown of the subject matter related to the black in compositions 1a, 2a and 3a connote and acknowledge the atmosphere of vulnerability and formlessness. Assumedly made with the attempt to image a celebration of darkness over light. Light is an accepted value in most societies and perhaps represents the conventional and commercial values in a superfluous life.

Album covers 4, 6 and 7 have clear connotations to religion and Satanism (see Figure 1.). However, the Satanist sphere somewhat vanishes in the traced images 4a, 6a and 7a. The composition remains quite alike in album cover 5 and the traced version 5a, in which both connote nature and natural phenomenon in an overwhelming sense.

Subject matter, iconography, compositions

Nature as a theme is conveyed by formal compositions through the appearance of organic structures (pictures 1a, 2a, 3a, 5a, 6a and 7a). Furthermore, a fantasy theme is mainly supported by the symbols in the album covers and possibly the conservative and classical compositions.

Two symbols are taken further into the iconology stratum of the analysis, since the tracing of these shapes occur figuratively on the traced images. The other symbols used in the remaining album covers will not be commented on in this stratum, first because the nature of this study is oriented around the mediated meaning beyond the symbols and second because the meaning of these symbols are commonly known. The shape in the sky in album cover 5 clearly connotes northern lights, but they are shaped like a mouth or teeth and might represent something extraterrestrial, overwhelming, or evil; and the helix in cover 6 may represent a gateway to hell.

Intrinsic meaning, iconology

One respondent described the core or ideology within black metal music to be “darkness, melancholy and aggressiveness”. In addition, another interviewee pointed out the importance of the anti-culture ideology and interest in nature and fantasy in black metal culture.

The findings described in the primary and subject matter strata of the analysis suggest that the chosen album covers do not represent anti-culture in the view of graphic design, rather, the compositions convey a conservative conventional meaning. The compositions and the role of darkness somewhat articulate a sense of conservatism through their strong connotations to historic structures and symbols. In addition, the compositions created do not challenge the format; they are often centric, symmetric and balanced. The album covers thus do not represent the works of a dissident or somebody who wants to be original. Rather, it seems that the main function of these album covers is for people to affiliate and recognize the genre by the use of symbols.

Our analysis of the subject matter suggests that album covers 1, 2, and 3 represent formlessness and vulnerability, which probably compares to being dark and melancholic, as mentioned in interviews. It is difficult to detect melancholy and aggressiveness, however, in the balanced compositions 1a – 7a. All traced album covers contain darkness to a large degree. The role of darkness or black in the traced compositions, however, does not represent experimentation with primary and subject matter with black as a tool for the expression of meaning.

The extensive use of symbols is another factor that does not challenge aesthetic practice within art and design. According to both respondents and our analysis, black metal album covers (especially after 1995) are built on the basis of adopted rules, which involve the use of elements from the past, fairy tales, fantasy literature and religious works, among others. Thus, it describes a revival and acceptance of historic artwork. Such an acceptance may represent a paradox in a wider sense, namely that the attempt to elicit feelings of an anti-culture fellowship by visual identity, is built on a common set of aesthetic rules. Thus, when a large group of designers adopts the same set of rules, the outcome of their work will possibly represent popular culture rather than anti-culture. Accordingly, one could say that the primary and subject matter within the compositions do not support the disclosed intrinsic meaning.

According to one of our respondents, the black metal culture itself during the beginning of the movement required black metal bands to be “innovative, different and that they should build their own identity”. When he listed the albums, which he found to have such qualities, he mentioned other albums than the ones in this study. Further, the interviewee stated that black metal bands that strive to build their own identity through music and visuals have barely existed after 1995. Since then, he said the black metal bands have more or less adapted to the design rules that have formed throughout the years in black metal culture, an adaptation that has led to a superficial use of symbols “just to signal that they are black metal bands”. In addition, he also mentioned that newer black metal bands seem to “turn the volume to maximum during concerts to signal their black metal affiliation”. He finds, furthermore, that there are nuances within the design of black metal album covers and that our empirical data does not include. Even so, he found our findings that describe the album cover compositions as classic and conservative, to be interesting and novel thoughts. In a way, he was not surprised because of his own conception of the later album covers in black metal, as mentioned above.

Atmospheres

If we compare the above analysis to graffiti art, an activity that also represents anti-culture, we find that compositions from both graffiti and the selected black metal album covers abide to strict rules (Tin, 2011b). Accordingly, the traditions within black metal may represent a paradox similar to the one Tin disclosed in graffiti art. In the “Anarchy and Tradition” chapter of his 2011 book *Spilleregler og spillerom: tradisjonens estetikk*, Tin states that as the graffiti artists: free themselves by their lifestyles and artistic expression, maybe to a more radical degree than ever seen in art history, engage in a clearly defined aesthetic which they respect and pursue with an utmost seriousness” (Tin, 2011c, p. 181(authors translation)).

Further, Tin emphasizes the space for creation, which strict rules of creation facilitates. In his exploration of rules from a maker’s perspective, in his book he proposed that “rules free the artist from responsibility” through limiting personal choices and which further “makes a space for play” that is superior to the space that emerges through an autonomous process” (Tin, 2011a). The rules may thus facilitate a space within black metal culture that serves to strengthen the degree of development of album cover compositions. On the one side, one can say that the black metal culture rules certainly have served as a play space for development. They have in fact engendered a new visual culture. On the other hand, this study suggests that as time goes by, one also needs to change the rules to change practice. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the exis-

tence of several directions of development that we have not seen due to our lack of experience within black metal culture and choice of methods.

The apparent design rules, which contain symbols, violent themes, and macho imaging, help people to recognize black metal albums. These rules partly serve as a negotiable space, but it appears they do not put something into play that motivates creators to explore other solutions within the space of a black metal imaging world (Gadamer, Weinsheimer, & Marshall). Affiliation and recognition seem to be the two main pillars concerning the making of the analyzed album covers. These pillars might be a contributing factor as to why the aesthetic practice within the making of black metal album covers develops slowly, as our respondent pointed out. Recognition, Dewey said, is one of the main reasons for how an aesthetic work can hinder *full* experiences to emerge in the respondent, as the familiarity of an image only leads the thinking towards what already exists (Dewey, 1934). Dewey states that *resistance* as part of an experience can work as an “invitation to reflection” (Dewey, 1934, p. 46) and further lead to “a higher complexity of thinking” (Shusterman, 2000). In a situation influenced by “resistance and conflict, aspects and elements of the self, and the world that is involved in this reciprocal influence, imprint the experience with feelings and ideas in such a way that a conscious intention emerges” (Dewey, 1934, p. 36). Dewey even stated that there is “an element of undergoing, of suffering in its large sense, in every complete experience” (Dewey, 1934, p. 42). By this, Dewey implies that the perceiver must go through processes similar to those of the creator, such as the act of abstracting what is significant for the creation. Thus in order to perceive, a “beholder must create his own experience” (Dewey, 1934, p. 56); otherwise, the perceiver will not hear or see and, the experience will merely be shaped by norms and conventions, rather than by emotional excitations (Dewey, 1934, p. 56). Moreover, recognition represents only “a beginning of an act of perception” (Dewey, 1934, p. 54) and hinders the creation of one’s own experience since “recognition is perception arrested before it has a chance to develop freely” (Dewey, 1934, p. 54). Hence in this context, black metal design rules may serve to hold back the receiver to actively take part in her/his experience. Moreover, to “use those symbols and that aesthetic, throw in some occult symbols and a goat” may serve to establish a visual atmosphere and elicit remembrance, but may also serve as an obstacle for full experiences and following real pleasures, like the one a metal head would expect to experience when listening to black metal music at home, at concerts or through the encounter with black metal album covers.

Another similarity that the black metal and graffiti cultures share is the directness of expression and its relation to the body. The structures in graffiti images have rhythmical bodily movements that are clearly visible and can easily be recognized by a viewer independent of their age, cultural background or aesthetic education (Tin, 2011c). This direct connection to the bodily experience can also be found in the black metal *music* expression that, after all, is the main product in this culture. The emancipating power and attraction of black metal lies perhaps within this dimension – the one in which direct expression has priority over sophistication and controlled atmosphere (found in academic or classical traditions, and as we have also found in album cover compositions). The unfiltered bodily experience possibly represents a more liberated atmosphere than what the visual compositions and symbols express.

Although design rules may serve as an emancipating dimension within design, they may also serve to facilitate uniformity and therefore populist works. Primarily, it seems that these rules, which involve the use of certain symbols and

images, are the basis for the making the atmospheres within these black metal album covers. The compositions disclosed by tracing do not contrast with the easy accessibility of those mediated by symbols. When shutting out the symbols, the compositions are accessible and do not represent resistance for the receiver. One could therefore say that the traced compositions mediate simplicity and popular culture, and to a small degree, support the establishment of specific identities. They rather serve as a link to a well-established design space. Possibly such a visual uniformity will mediate signals that in fact contrast with the music, which may be eccentric and novel in character.

Further research

Due to the few album covers chosen, and the timespan between their releases, it is of course difficult to generalize. However, the study discloses an interesting space for discussion, and it certainly demonstrates our customized method's effectiveness to explore the meaning of the compositional essentials beyond symbols for the project. We suggest a more comprehensive study that builds on this analytic method and discussion as disclosed in this pilot study should continue this research.

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