

# EXTREMITY REFRAMED: EXHUMING DEATH METAL'S ANALOG ORIGINS

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to construct an alternative historical perspective of the extreme metal subgenre known as *death metal*, by re-examining the analog media artifacts and networks that were essential to its global development. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, tape-trading networks, cassettes and fanzines were vital to the death metal scene's perception of itself as an *imagined community*, especially as it was conceived in its original, analog manifestations. By using approaches inspired by medium theory and media-archaeology, the intention is to better understand how analog media was essential to death metal's evolution, as both a scene and sound.

## Introduction

The intention of this paper is to re-examine the "evolution" of extreme metal music through its media, with a particular emphasis on the subgenre of death metal. In this approach, the purpose is to highlight the *analog media artifacts and networks* through which death metal music and texts were initially circulated and given form. Death metal, and by extension associated extreme metal subgenres such as black metal and grindcore, evolved from the 1980s into the early 1990s within intricate, yet haphazard global communication networks, tied together through time and space by the international postal system. Here, tens of thousands of fanzines, rehearsal, demo and mix-tapes, photocopied ads and letters were circulated among networks of musicians and fans, providing the material "guts" for a dispersed international music scene. The focus on media networks and artifacts in this way allows for an alternative historical perspective on extreme metal's evolution, by illuminating the ways through which globally separated musicians and fans coalesced into an "imagined," yet highly integrated underground community, despite the geographic obstacles (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 87; Anderson, 1991). When an international music scene is "imagined" in this sense, and only materially realized through analog media networks, it can be somewhat difficult to spatially complete the idea of a music "scene" in one's imagination. As Matt Harvey (of the band Exhumed) recalls, "you were kind of in a void where your imagination filled in the parameters of the scene," because there was simply no other way to map the dimensions of the global underground aside from the lifelines that linked it together – the fanzines, demo tapes and photocopied advertisements that arrived in one's mailbox (Netherton, 2014, p. 418).

The importance of analog media came to my attention while doing research for a recent oral history project on the death metal underground (Netherton, 2014). In interview after interview, the respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of underground media artifacts and networks to the growth and realization of what was to become the global death metal scene. In this way, media such as recordable cassette-tapes, photocopied advertisements, trade

lists and handmade fanzines were the binding glue that linked marginalized, isolated music scenes across a maze of do-it-yourself (DIY) networks, becoming the material vessels through which the music was interpreted and reinterpreted. While there are several texts that do note the importance of fanzines and tape trading to the history of extreme metal music (Kahn-Harris, 2007; Mudrian, 2004; Ekeroth 2006; Christie 2003; Weinstein, 2000), such underground media remain a largely unexamined and/or assumed aspect of extreme music's international development. Moreover, while it is apparent that death metal represented a new plateau of extremity in metal, simply following the heavy metal family tree through its various incarnations and fragmenting sub-genres is limiting, because such narratives fail to explain how and through what mechanisms death metal so effectively coalesced into a vibrant, globally networked music scene. This is particularly notable because the musicians, bands and fans were in many cases not only internationally isolated from each other, but within their own local scenes as well (Netherton, 2014, pp. 127, 152, 154, 173; Mudrian, 2004 p. 103; Ekeroth, 2006, pp. 96-97). Furthermore, the death metal underground was among the last globally networked music scenes to operate within analog media frameworks during the late 1980s and early 1990s, prior to the mass adoption of the internet and digital media. This makes it an interesting case, because if we reexamine the social networks used by the underground tape-trading community, we can see that in many ways they were the analog precedent of the online bulletin boards, forums and peer-to-peer networks that emerged on the internet during the 1990s. Considering this, there are stories integral to the death metal underground's original formation that can be revealed by looking at the media artifacts and networks through which death metal was initially given its "objective expression" as a new, identifiable sub-genre (Weinstein, 2000, p. 189).

### Theoretical approaches

In this investigation, inspiration is drawn from medium theory, the emerging field of media archaeology, as well as the concept of *paratext*, borrowed from literary theory. Furthermore, "media" are interpreted here as the circulatory *networks and containers* through which dispersed music scenes are reified across space and time. Because media collate music, format, text and container into objects of social meaning and articulation, they can reveal a lot about how music scenes are produced and reproduced across diverse spatio-temporal contexts. In this way, media can be approached "archaeologically" as the material, discursive objects through which "regimes of memory and creative practices" unfold, and where the "past might be suddenly discovered anew" (Parikka, 2012, pp. 2-3). This stems from Foucault's investigations into the archaeology of knowledge, where the "archeological" method "means digging into the background reasons why a certain object, statement, [or] discourse" can "sustain itself in a cultural situation" (Parikka, 2012, p. 6). From this perspective, the late 1980s death metal underground represents an interesting case, because that scene's original analog networks and artifacts represent a (mostly) extinct mode of social and cultural mediation, whose voices and materialities were in many ways evacuated in the general transition from analog to digital media.

Furthermore, the *paratexts* that encased and packaged the DIY media of the early death metal scene were essential to the growth of the scene's aesthetic self-identity. In literary theory, the concept of paratext refers to those paratextual aspects of a book (or any text) that "frame" and "mediate the relations between the text and the reader," for example a book's cover, title, preface, fonts, footnotes, references and so on (Genette, 1997, p. xi). However, the

concept is extended in this analysis to apply to those media artifacts that surround, contain and channel the music; or in other words, the artwork, packaging and aesthetics that shaped the material representation of what was to be interpreted as *death metal music*. The idea is that “paratextuality, when applied to musical formats, reveals the importance of materiality in anchoring the meaning of music,” that in turn “directs and primes the listener to receive the music in certain ways” (Oleksik, 2007, p. 37). In this way, underground media was critical for not only carrying content, but in how such content was interpreted and reinterpreted as artifacts somehow *belonging* to the death metal community. Early death metal (and by extension, black metal and grindcore) media was often characterized by the crude, black and white, hand-drawn covers that adorned the demos, fanzines and photocopied fliers circulating in underground networks. The concept of paratext is therefore useful in describing the tangible relationship fans and musicians had with their media, whether it was the gory, ominous artwork encasing a demo, or the fettered pages of a photocopied fanzine. In this way, the primitiveness of death metal’s paratext was shaped in conjunction with the primitiveness of the music itself.

Most importantly, this paper’s focus on media is intended to situate the death metal underground within the *discourse of social and material activities through which the music was contextualized*, rather than through prevailing narratives that present heavy metal’s “evolution” as a series of unfolding genre-fragmentations (see for example, Dunn, McFayden & Wise, 2006). Certainly, the music itself was the unifying force that drew the metal moths to the flame, however, it was only through its media that the death metal underground could actually reify its collective imagination as a global music scene. It is with this approach then that certain alternative stories can be told about how the death metal underground used media to become a global music *scene-for-itself*, as well as how underground music scenes in general adjusted as prevailing analog media networks were assimilated by the internet.

Lastly, the subject of this analysis is intended to be the late 1980s and early 1990s *death metal underground*, defined as a scattered, yet globally-interconnected collection of music “scenes,” that in many ways shared the media practices found in other “extreme” subgenres of heavy metal (for more on black metal’s relationship with death metal, see Reyes, 2013). Therefore, considering that death metal evolved from a collectivity of local movements in various countries, I use the term “scene” instead of “subculture,” because the cross-cultural complexity of the global death metal underground then (and even more so now) is often reflective of social and musical practices specific to individual countries and localities (see for example Harris, 2000; and Wallach, Berger & Greene, 2011). This approach better accommodates the “spatiality and holism” necessary to comprehending extreme metal music’s global reach (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 21), because the heterogeneity of the death metal underground is not just a byproduct of the music, but a key factor in how the music itself was interpreted and shaped internationally.

### **Analog origins**

By the mid-to-late 1980s, thrash metal – the bastard offspring of heavy metal – was being pushed into increasingly faster, darker and heavier directions. In some ways this was an inevitable response to its mainstream cooptation and saturation, particularly after the major label signing of former underground heroes like Metallica, Megadeth and Anthrax (Christie, 2003, p. 146, 201; Netherton, 2014, pp. 55, 110-111, 185). Within this context, sonic boundaries were

being pushed by small, localized groups of fans and musicians, who through both accident and experimentation were reinterpreting subgenres like thrash, speed metal and hardcore punk, making them more extreme in the process (Mudrian, 2004, pp. 31, 53). It was in these marginal, underground corners that death metal was being invented, mostly by teenagers who were striving for ever-faster tempos, dirtier guitar distortions, and more inhuman-sounding vocals. This desire for sonic "transgression" was often complimented by equally transgressive lyrics and imagery, which focused on the darker and more horrific aspects of life (Kahn-Harris, 2007 pp. 34-36). In doing so, these young bands and fans looked to each other for inspiration and support, and if they were lucky enough and knew the right people, they found out about the network of underground tape-traders, who were exchanging demos on metal's more extreme margins. It was through these trading networks that curious, like-minded fans and musicians bonded, in order to create and circulate the kinds of music they were unable to find through mainstream channels. As former Terrorizer and Napalm Death guitarist Jesse Pintado recollected in 2004:

"After your Metallicas and Slayers came around, trading more obscure music just made it more extreme...because the more extreme stuff was more extreme than stuff you could get in vinyl. Bands like Death and Master, at the time, you couldn't get the records because they *didn't have any records* –it was just flyers and demos. The curiosity of seeking out more crazy stuff drew out our influences" (Mudrian, 2004, p. 60)

It was through these underground trading networks that specific media like the 90-minute, blank cassette-tape carried the first incarnations of death metal's music scene-materiality. By engaging in such DIY distribution practices, musicians and fans were able to share and circulate the music, even as they were creating it. As Shane Embury (Napalm Death) remembers:

"...during the day, I was literally living in front of the tape deck, sometimes up to eight hours a day. I know at one point, from about January of '86 to about August of '86, I must have sent out between 30 and 40 cassettes under the door per week" (Mudrian, 2004, p. 38)

And as Tomas Lindberg (At the Gates) recalls:

"...when you got a fanzine like *Satanic Death* from Japan in your mailbox, it was special; it lasted you a few months. It was a fantastic experience to read about these bands. If you found one that sounded good, you then had to find a way to buy the demo, trade with someone, or look for it on a distro list. So from finding a band name to actually getting the demo, it might take months, and that was fast for us!" (Netherton, 2014, p. 55)

In this way, the production and spread of death metal fanzines was just as important to the scene's development as tape trading. These DIY periodicals were adopted from practices inherited from the punk scene during the late 1970s, intended to be media created by, and for, "the misbegotten" on the margins of mainstream music (Duncombe, 1997, p. 15). By the mid-1980s, DIY production practices were thriving at metal's fringe, and just as thrash and speed metal forged their own underground networks in response to the mainstreaming of heavy metal, the death metal scene was distancing itself from the growing commercialization of thrash. Fanzines were tools in this process, made for the love of the music, and spread through the sharing ethos of trading one's own fanzine for someone else's, a demo tape, a seven-inch single, postage or a no-

minal fee. While the content was not as “ideologically loaded” as the fanzines found in the punk scene (Waksman, 2009, p. 213), death metal still embraced the zine-format as a parallel, material text that could compliment the growing extremity of the music. In this way, fanzines provided fans and musicians with a powerful means of articulation and documentation, whereby the incipient death metal scene could “define itself to itself” and thereby accentuate its distinctiveness as new subgenre of metal (Weinstein, 2000, p. 179).

Figure 1: Slayer fanzine, Norway (1987)



Moreover, fanzines were not just conduits of death metal media, they were also windows into other cultures that gave rise to a shared “sense of community,” no matter where in the world one was situated (Duncombe, 1997, pp. 44, 55-56). When a fanzine arrived in one’s mailbox from a place like Greece, Chile or Japan, it was very much like getting a musical and cultural artifact, all in one. In this way, while the voices of other cultures spoke to each reader through the shared language of the music, those voices were further humanized and personalized through the practice of producing and trading fanzines. Even within a local or regional context, fanzines were the vital link to national music scenes in one’s own backyard, serving as the analog community forums

through which the marginalized met, exchanged ideas and formed bands. As Tomas Lindberg recalls from his position in Gothenburg, Sweden:

“In the end we had built up a great trading community with people from all over the world, and the demos and ‘zines just kept flowing in. It was originally through the ‘zine [network] that I got in touch with Nicke Andersson [Entombed], and through him, the entire Stockholm scene” (Ekeroth, 2006, p. 100)

The intention here is not to romanticize a seemingly lost form of analog media, but to reveal how media like fanzines were so critical to inspiring musicians and fans to pick up instruments and get involved in the scene, as well create their own fanzines and record labels (for more on the Swedish scene specifically, see Ekeroth, 2006, pp. 63-66).

Figure 2: Nihilist: "Only Shreds Remain" demo tape (1988)



In addition to fanzines, the crude artwork adorning the "J-card" inserts of demos, t-shirts and ads can be seen as further examples of death metal music's *paratextuality*. Concerning cassettes, such inserts were essential, because the uniform, (originally) blank tape contained within the plastic case might only feature the banal imprint of whatever company produced them (TDK, for example), if anything at all. Therefore, the cassette is a "black box" medium of sorts, whose contents "cannot be ascertained from its surface" alone, and therefore requires such paratextual identifiers in order to confirm the object's relationship with the music it carries (Symes, 2004, p. 96). Similarly, records, compact discs and especially MP3's are all more or less mundane, utilitarian container-objects, that demand some additional aesthetic confirmation in or-

der to be adopted and merged into the genre-specific categories of the music they carry. Considering this, the cover art and imagery of death metal was conceived in conjunction with the music itself, with the intention of inviting the listener on a kind of "pilgrimage through the looking glass," where the dark and horrific worlds contained within might be accessed (Eisenberg, 2004, p.54). For example, one can not really conceive of a band like Nihilist without also envisioning the hand-drawn artwork that encased their music. Likewise, one can not really imagine Carcass' first two albums without the human/animal gore-collage that graced their covers – covers that in the consciousness of many embodied the music itself (Mudrian, 2004, p. 132). As Scott Hull (Pig Destroyer) explains:

“...the finished piece is not just the music, it's the entire tangible package that you hold, the artwork et cetera. All that contributes to the idea you have in your head about what an album “is.” Take for example Carcass' *Reek of Putrefaction*. It's not just about the songs, right? That album is also very much about the memorable collage and artwork which contributes to its substantial identity. It takes up more space in your soul in a sense, rather than just being ten MP3s in a given category on your iPod.” (Netherton, 2014, p. 461)

Furthermore, the recordable 90-minute cassette tape was perhaps the most important media object in the growth of the death metal scene. By providing the capacity for home and rehearsal recordings to be mailed inexpensively through a durable, compact medium, the cassette tape was ready-made for underground circulation. In this way, the cassette as a *format* appropriately fit the early death metal scene's emerging mystique and anonymity, because the underground bands during the late 1980s could only be known *through the demos themselves*. There was simply no way to just "look them up," so they only really existed in, and through, the cassette container (Netherton, 2014, pp. 443-444). Moreover, by the 1980s, most mainstream metal recordings were adopting the cleaner, "produced" sounds of arena rock, becoming increasingly more "elegant and refined" in the process (Weinstein, 2000, p. 191). Within this context, the death metal underground reveled in its own rawness, whether consciously through detuning and pushing the tempos into faster and more indecipherable realms, or unconsciously because the music was performed by teenagers who in many cases were learning the techniques themselves, even as they were writing the songs. Furthermore, in the early days before death metal recording was perfected by notable engineers like Scott Burns and Colin Richardson, most demos were recorded by traditional rock engineers, who in many cases were also learning themselves how to properly record such extreme sounds (Ekeroth, 124; Netherton, 201). In a way, death metal music was stretching the boundaries of what could even be *humanly played* by the young musicians, who were often challenging themselves "on the spot" to play as extreme as possible. As Jim Morris (of Morrisound Studios) remembers, “they were often playing just beyond their level of competence...they really wanted it to be better than they could [physically] do” (Netherton, 2014, p. 219). In this way, there was perhaps an unconscious desire to sonically “transgress” the boundaries of what was perceived as aurally tame, by pushing the instruments, the performance and the recording into faster and more aggressive categories (Kahn-Harris, 2007, pp. 30-34).

These experiments were rough indeed, because the majority of the first demos recorded and distributed by the first generation death metal bands were rehearsal tapes, recorded on boom boxes and then copied and recopied numerous times (Mudrian, 2004, p. 108; Netherton, 2014, p. 423). It is precisely here

where the analog capabilities of the cassette tape were challenged, to the point that the regressive lack of fidelity became normalized and integrated into the rawness of the music itself. As Rick Rozz (Massacre, ex-Death, ex-Mantas) remembers:

"[In 1984] we were also becoming aware of the global tape-trading underground, so Chuck [Schuldiner] and I would sit there with a dual cassette deck and dub tape after tape of our garage jams that we recorded off of the same box and put them out as rehearsal demos. I still have that box at home, and we used it to tape a number of Mantas practices at Chuck's house in Altamonte Springs [Florida]" (Netherton, 2014, pp. 35-36)

Because it was the only tool available to circulate the music, the cassette therefore had a great effect upon the ways through which the music itself was interpreted. This highlights the power of the cassette as a social-media object, because the natural, analog distortion and decay that supplemented the music as it was disseminated, contributed to the underground network's perception of "what death metal was." Across the global tape-trade-trading network, the young musicians who got ahold of those demos were then inspired to reproduce such newer, darker, and rawer sounds themselves (Netherton, 2014, p. 89; Ekeroth, 2006, p. 90; Mudrian, 2004, pp. 67, 106). In this sense, the "affective intensity" displayed by the audio cassette's "low-definition experience" contributed to the then nascent genre's interpretation of what was musically *heavy* (Sterne, 2012, p. 5). For example, it has been noted that the exchange of those early, primitive demos was very influential in inspiring the rawness of what was eventually to be called the "Stockholm sound." As Dan Swanö (of Edge of Sanity and Unisound Studios) recalls:

"They had a sound there, and when you'd hear a compilation of Swedish bands, the Stockholm bands just sounded different. We realized then that they were listening to old demos and rehearsal tapes of stuff like Autopsy, from tape trading...the dirty rehearsal stuff they were listening to in Stockholm I think gave it a special vibe. There were these bands that had this guitar tone that Nihilist was searching for and then found on those demos and self-recorded tapes. I don't think any big producer in the thrash metal days would have allowed that kind of guitar sound to be recorded" (Netherton, 2014, p. 25)

As Swanö explains, those demo-cassettes captured the rawness of not only the music, but the noise and decay that filtered on and off the magnetically coated plastic tape as it was copied and recopied across tape-trading networks. This again highlights the importance of the cassette as a *format*, because it "denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience, and workings of a medium," which by extension, have a great impact upon how the music is acoustically perceived by the listener (Sterne, 2012, p. 7). Therefore, as those second, third and fourth generation cassettes were circulated globally, they contributed in many ways to how death metal music was interpreted and identified as "death metal."

### **Conclusion: Analog ghosts in the digital machine**

The previous examples were intended to highlight the interconnectivity of death metal music and the analog media networks and artifacts that channeled its global development. In focusing on media, the purpose is to illuminate the discursive power of media objects, in order to reveal the capacities and possibilities that are presented when media are accessed and engaged in a given



historical moment. Considering this, much can be revealed by "archaeologically" digging into the dead, analog frameworks of death metal's past, where an alternative historical perspective offers a re-examination of the "evolutionary" narratives that interpret extreme metal as a fragmenting genre-tree, or as a linear progression of aural and/or aesthetic "heaviness." As such, analog media were important not only as the tools through which the global death metal scene was given form, but also as the material containers and networks through which the music, as well as its paratextual attributes came to be interpreted as *death metal*. Furthermore, analog media represent more than a graveyard of past musical nostalgia and dead formats, because in many ways they were the spiritual and skeletal infrastructure upon which online communities later emerged.

During the 1990s, the growth and penetration of internet-driven "communication capacities" coincided with new categories of social experience, defined by conditions of *immateriality*, *fragmentation* and *acceleration* within increasingly ubiquitous digital networks (van Dijk, 2006, pp. 190-209). The impact of these phenomena effectively upended the death metal scene's analog community infrastructure, causing the scene's participants (along with most of the world) to increasingly move online. The temporal condition of waiting weeks for media and communications via the post was then reconfigured into the more immediate possibilities afforded by online bulletin boards, forums and email. Platforms like the *Internet Underground Music Archive* (1993), as well as independent DIY-webpages (often hosted on early sites like Tripod, Angelfire, or Geocities), allowed global music scenes to "virtually" connect and organize outside of postal tape trading networks. In this context, the global death metal scene was greatly impacted by the loss of a certain *analog mode of experience*, or what (in a limited way) might be called the underground's *structure of feeling* (Williams, 1977). In other words, the digital transition contributed heavily to ending the original scene's authentic, pre-commercialized relations and practices, for better or for worse. For example, as Tony Laureano (ex-Nile, ex-Angelcorpse) states:

"To me, while it's cool that this information is at the tip of your fingers, I think it's taken away from the whole mystique of discovering bands. In the past, you'd read a great review for a demo, and you'd order it via snail mail, and it would normally be weeks before you got the requested recording. In that wait time, you would think about what the recording could possibly sound like, it would raise your expectations, and once you finally got said recording, you would stare at the cover, and read the lyrics and liner notes. You would be immersed in it. Now it's just a click, it's there, you listen, and move on to something else. There's no longer any suspense; no excitement." (Netherton, 2014, 442-443)

And as Ed Warby (Hail of Bullets, Gorefest) notes:

"...to me an MP3 has no value whatsoever, and I can almost understand that young people see music as disposable...the romance of the early days has vanished." (Netherton 2014, pp. 420-421)

If indeed the "romance of the early days" has vanished, this explains why the discourse of authenticity that surrounds the sanctification of the "old school" in extreme metal so closely identifies the music of the time with its social practices and relations. In other words, the prevailing fetishization and nostalgia which surrounds the late-1980's 'golden age' in extreme metal history is heavi-

ly rooted in the romantic notion of an analog *mode of experience*, just as much as it is rooted in the music. Therefore, as long as the past is viewed in this romantic context, death metal's analog ghosts will continue to haunt the cold, digital machinery of its present. Media objects remain powerful conduits in the articulation of meaning, and because of this, death metal simply would not be "death metal" without the analog artifacts and networks through which the music itself was initially materialized.

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