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“Burning the bridges”: escalation
in the pursuit of authenticity

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Abstract

We develop a process-based framework, articulating the escalation of difference between “private” self and “public” display as an alternative trajectory in the pursuit of authenticity to alignment and compromise. A parsimonious model presents an endogenous dynamic of binary choice that generates momentum toward polarization. The model is illustrated in the context of “black” metal – a branch of heavy metal music that appeared in Norway in the early 1990s, notorious for its involvement in criminal activities. Using fanzine data, we construct a narrative of how a process of escalation led to innovation and transgression through self-selection and exclusion. The analysis addresses two related theoretical problems – what motivates actors to challenge normative scripts and “burn the bridges” to social acceptance, and why such challenges may prove more effective in achieving recognition than compromise. Examples from politics, culture and sports reinforce the importance of these problems.

“Authenticity” is an unusual concept. Research tends to depict it as “an overwhelmingly positive trait” (Lehman et al., 2019: 22) and imbue it with a moral quality, as conveying something virtuous (Grauel, 2016). It is recognized that individuals and organizations seek authenticity and place significant value on it when making evaluations (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009; O’Connor et al., 2016; Lehman et al., 2019). However, the desirability and positive charge of authenticity inevitably provoke skepticism as to the “real” motivations attached to it. Authenticity is “fabricated” (Peterson, 1997) when involving self-promotional and manipulative intentions (Elster, 1981; Holt, 2002). Skepticism about the sincerity of an authenticity claim (Kovács et al., 2017) and suspicion that it is socially constructed in pursuit of profit (Peterson, 1997) may lead to a negative social evaluation. Thus, politicians face accusations of “inauthenticity” or “pandering” when trying to broaden their support by embracing others’ positions (Jones, 2016). If highly desirable, the attribution of authenticity remains uncertain and its consequences - contentious. A construct that is inherently positive can be negatively evaluated (Elster, 1981), while a negative act (i.e. lying) can be positively evaluated when viewed as an expression of authenticity (Hahl, et al., 2018).

Such occurrences manifest the ambivalent nature of authenticity, featuring layers of meaning that can generate tension and contradiction in evaluation (Carroll, 2015). A classic source of tension in authenticity is that between the “front” and “back” stage in social action - between the public display of internalized norms and role expectations, and the relatively unconstrained private self (Goffman, 1959). Authenticity is manifested through the effort to stay true to oneself (Baron, 2004; Hahl et al., 2018), but authentic self-expression may irritate others (Aronson, 2004) and exert pressure on actors to be inauthentic (Cha et al., 2019). The theoretical problem is that public life is governed by staged performances of rituals that affirm conformity to values and roles (Goffman, 1959), but the modern individual increasingly desires and values authenticity (Lehman et al., 2019). This is likely to result in the experience of tension between the *promise* of authenticity and the *difficulty* of achieving it (Cha et al., 2019). Trilling (1972) identified this tension in the pursuit of authenticity as fundamental and irresolvable, predisposing social actors to internal struggles, excess and conflict. Overcoming this tension may involve efforts to close the gap between the “front” and “back” stage by denouncing the “theatricality” of public life (Orvell, 2014), as practiced, for example, by populist political formations.

In a review of authenticity research, Cha et al. (2019) recommend the adoption of a process-

based approach to explore key sources of tension in authenticity. Accordingly, we develop a process-based model of the pursuit of authenticity as a sequence of choices between conformity and deviation, between compromise and escalating difference. It is generally expected that the discrepancy between private self and public display is regulated through acts of moderation, by aligning individual goals with the status quo (e.g. Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Haveman & Rao, 1997). Yet, this expectation contradicts empirical cases where discrepancies are not downplayed, but further augmented (Delacour & Leca, 2017) and the declining utility of moderation in a political environment where a strategy of escalation is increasingly adopted by opportunist political candidates (Hahl et al., 2018).

We develop an “endogenous” perspective (Kaufman, 2004), conceptualizing authenticity as a process of differentiation, anchored in the pursuit of purity and mediated through mechanisms of self-selection and exclusion. We illustrate the pursuit of authenticity as a sequence of choices that generate momentum toward escalation in the context of “black” metal – a branch of heavy metal music that appeared in Norway in the early 1990s, elevating extremity to a key principle of identity construction, as manifested in criminal activities. This perspective sheds light on two related, unresolved theoretical problems: on the reasons why actors may opt to “burn the bridges” to social acceptance in pursuing authenticity and on those why burning the bridges may prove a more effective strategy for achieving recognition than moderation (e.g. Hahl et al., 2018).

Theory

A distinctive characteristic of authenticity scholarship is the multiplicity of meanings associated with a concept that embodies a convoluted historical heritage. As Carroll (2015) observes, there are two common, but very different general interpretations of the authenticity of a person or object. The first one indicates that an object fits into a classification for which it has been assigned. In what is defined as “type authenticity” the key evaluative principle is alignment between an object or a person and the criteria for membership in a group or category. Thus, the more one conforms to a prototype, the more “authentic” one is as a category member (Hogg & Terry, 2000). The second meaning contrasts with the first one in embracing misalignment and the recognition of difference between object/person and the criteria for membership (Fine, 2003). A person is regarded as authentic if she is sincere and makes value-based choices rather than merely accepting socially imposed values and actions. This is “moral authenticity” (Carroll, 2015), achieved when an authenticity claim is based on sincere enactment of

“true” morals that may contradict social conventions.

Carroll (2015: 9) observes that current applications of the concept often rely on only one meaning and ignore the other, while others conflate the meanings, resulting in conceptual confusion. To resolve this confusion, we suggest examining authenticity not as a type, but as a *process* (Cha et al., 2019), in agreement with the assumption that understanding social action requires situating it in time, within sequences of related events and decisions. In this “processual” perspective (Abbott, 2016), the pursuit of authenticity is analyzed through a flow of actions, in a series of choices and outcomes that accumulate over time in ways that in turn affect the dispositions of actors. To that end, we retain two key features from Carroll (2015) - the behavioral dichotomy of alignment and misalignment, and the notion that authenticity is revealed in a sequence of individual choices. The specific sequence that we conceptualize is presented on Figure 1. Dark boxes indicate areas in need of theoretical development, while light boxes indicate areas that are, overall, theoretically unproblematic.

Figure 1 About Here

The idea that authenticity constitutes a process is related to Trilling’s (1972) identification of a historical pattern in the appearance of the two types and his insistence that they are not independent, as one emerged in reaction to the other. The anterior type can be illustrated by Louis XIV’s Versailles, where an elaborate system of etiquette regulated social interaction through the attribution of roles that corresponded to formal positions in a hierarchy of noble families. The “true” self of the individual was linked to the “sincere” performance of a public role in a context where boundaries between public and private space were ambiguous. Noble behavior mandated a carefully orchestrated performance, a game of pleasing others and being pleased by them, without seeming to be pleased with oneself, that allowed for no visible manifestation of effort or self-consideration (Hillman, 2006). A social system of this kind is an example of high level of alignment between private self and public display through role conformity (see Figure 1).

However, from the late 18th century the “sincere” role performance started to yield to a new form of self-perception defined in resistance to roles (Trilling, 1972). The concept of “authenticity” emerged from the disintegration of “sincerity”: the latter presupposes a symmetrical relation between self and society, while the former implies a fundamental opposition between them. If sincerity resides within social roles, authenticity captures the irreducibility of the individual to any (combination of)

role(s). Authentic selfhood became more and more understood as emotional honesty and genuineness, in contrast with the sincere fulfillment and interiorization of a social role that remains external to the individual. This role was increasingly perceived as inauthentic in societies where mobility encouraged the adoption of more complex individual identities, based on the movement *between* roles (Simmel, 1955). This concept of authenticity is defined by the tension or misalignment between the public role and inner self (see Figure 1), or the “real” self of one’s true sentiments and the “false” self of social compliance (Winnicott, 1971). For Trilling (1972), this marks the “eternal conflict” of authenticity.

Authenticity is inherently ambivalent, as it is *at the same time* a by-product of civilization and its rejection as superfluous or oppressive (Orvell, 2014). This ambivalence, as encompassing processes of conformity and differentiation, is represented on Figure 1 in a series of behavioral dichotomies (i.e. alignment versus misalignment). It is generally expected that what is internal (values, emotions and thoughts) and external (words and expressions) tend to be aligned (Caza et al., 2018; Harter, 2002). There is strong evidence that this alignment contributes to well-being, life satisfaction and work engagement (Emmerich & Rigotti, 2017). But research also invokes misalignment, as it is recognized that social contexts may discourage actors from expressing their private selves (Cha et al., 2019) and that power imbalances create discrepancies between “public” and “hidden” transcripts of interaction (Scott, 1990). Such situations are associated with indeterminate identification and the experience of tension, making them difficult to sustain in the long run (Ibarra, 2003; Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). We posit two ways in which the misalignment between inner self and public display can be resolved - by reducing (compromise) or increasing (escalation) the differences (see Figure 1).¹ The former has received far more scholarly attention than the latter, as it is the preferred socio-psychological outcome. Compromise refers to the accommodation to reality through self-censoring, which can be either sincere or insincere in nature, as depending on the degree to which the person actually embraces the needed adjustments (Baugh, 1988).

When accommodation is sincere it is theoretically unproblematic, as justified by the desire to maintain social cohesion or improve performance in the workplace. For example, in the political field shrewd candidates are expected to adjust their message to address different groups of voters or draw

¹ Our account is related to Snyder’s (1974) “self-monitoring” theory in emphasizing the fundamental behavioral opposition between assimilation and differentiation, and in treating both as legitimate pathways to authenticity. If Snyder (1974) posits personality as the key predictor, our framework is situational, assuming that actors may compromise in some situations, but escalate in others. Escalation here is not specific to a personality or a genre.

closer to the political center in a manner that comes across as sincere and motivated by common good (Jones, 2016). Likewise, for innovation to be successful, it needs to tone down its distinctiveness and edginess by building bridges to key audiences (Haveman & Rao, 1997; Rao et al., 2003). The classic statement in this regard is the motto of Shakespeare's Globe theatre: *Totus mundus agit histrionem* (“All the world is a playhouse” or “All the world plays the actor”). This has become a catchphrase for the basic observation that play-acting is primordial in social life and that it is in the process of assuming different roles that individuals develop social identities (Goffman, 1959). The imperative of wearing masks is to maintain relationships through the saving of face (Goffman, 1959).

However, the uncertainty as to the real motivations of actors in accommodating to reality is ever present. As Goffman (1959: 17-18) notes, all social interactions are performed to a certain extent, but they run the gamut from more genuine acts to cynical masquerades. The theoretical problem is that for authenticity to be credible, it has to be a by-product of unintentional action and be devoid of elements of play-acting, visible effort or display of self-interest (Elster, 1981; Hahl et al., 2018), lest it be denounced as “fabricated” (Peterson, 1997) or inconsistent (Hahl et al., 2018). People tend to dislike inconsistency between words and action, particularly when perceived as serving an underlying agenda (Aronson, 2004; Cialdini, 2001). This inconsistency is typically manifested in the creation of façades of conformity or false representations (Hewlin, 2003).² This is an important reason why even genuine and sincere efforts of politicians to broaden support may be assessed negatively or entail accusations of “inauthenticity” (Jones, 2016). In this situation, they need to find a way to convince their audiences in the sincerity of their efforts or, alternatively, to escalate differentiation in a way that reinforces their claim for articulating “true” morals (see Figure 1, lower dotted line).

As a mechanism, escalation of difference is implicit in some of the definitions of the concept, such as in Kovács et al. (2017: 86): “an authentic actor or producer is seen as someone who pursues their own thoughtfully considered agenda rather than the usual normatively accepted social script.” It is also present in the original version of the phrase attributed to the Roman author Petronius - *quod fere totus mundus exercet histrionem* (because *almost* all the world plays the actor), later truncated

² A classic example are the former communist societies, characterized by the constant, systematic dissembling by which citizens exhibited public behavior that was misaligned with what they really think. This insincere form of compromise between state ideology and private dissent is memorably articulated in works of fiction, such as Boris Pasternak’s “Doctor Zhivago”, as well as in sociological research (e.g. Kuran, 1995). But the problem is universal in nature, as implied by the Existentialist notion of “bad faith” – one can compromise with society, but if the compromise is in “bad faith”, it fuels estrangement from oneself (Sartre, 1993).

into the Globe Theatre's motto. The recognition that some actors do *not* endorse the theatricality of public life and refuse to "act" on stage provides justification for mobilization efforts that portray public life as ritualized spectacle and falsification of the inner selves of people. Berger (1973: 88) captured this reasoning in his argument that "authenticity is a lonesome business", increasingly pitting individuals against a social order perceived as constraining. Hegel (1988) considered estrangement from society a necessary step for the attainment of a true self, emerging in resistance to normative constraints and in rebellion against the dominant order. In this perspective, the pursuit of authenticity naturally feeds into the emergence of countercultures that portray the social order as oppressive or unrepresentative of a culture or the interests of a group.

Commitment to one's private self in opposition to social order underlies historical processes, such as the Protestant schism in the Catholic Church, provoked by the rejection of dominant clerical precepts and the insistence on a return to an unmediated and more authentic mode of representation of God's presence on Earth. This example illustrates the twofold theoretical significance of escalation - in creating momentum toward polarization, and in adding a layer of complexity to the evaluation of authenticity claims. Martin Luther's rebellion set into motion a binary opposition that propelled the fragmentation of the Western clerical tradition, as it was met with approval by some and denounced as betrayal by others. Radical Protestant groups emerged throughout Europe, in response to perceived corruption both in the Catholic Church and the Protestant movement led by Martin Luther and others. This bifurcation process is an expected consequence of the escalation dynamic depicted on Figure 1.

Over the last decades sociological research has become more accommodating to endogenous accounts of cultural change, articulating the internal workings of processes of social differentiation or subdivision (e.g. Archer, 1988; Lieberman, 2000; Abbott, 2001). The main assumption is that internal mechanisms can generate change independent of external social factors of structural, technological or material nature (Kaufman, 2004; Lieberman, 2000). It is typically expected that conditions of increasing density or intensity of competition motivate the instrumental pursuit of differentiation through the use of cultural dichotomies that split the world into those who are like oneself and everyone else (Abbott, 2001; Lieberman, 2000). A basic anthropological premise is that binary oppositions, such as good-bad, moral-immoral or pure-impure structure our world and self-perception (Douglas, 1984; Lévi-Strauss, 2013). Scholars demonstrate the foundational role of such cultural dichotomies in creating patterns of differentiation in social action, fracturing social networks (Sgourev

& Operti, 2019) or scientific fields (Bourdieu, 1988; Abbott, 2001).

Recognizing that social change can occur through naturally evolving subdivisions, we argue that the pursuit of authenticity can generate momentum toward social confrontation and polarization in an “iterative process of camp differentiation” (Kaufman, 2004: 351) between “us” and “them”, between pure and impure forces, where moral authority is attributed to one side only. The nature of every authenticity claim is exclusionary; labelling an object as authentic implies that other objects in this category are viewed as inauthentic. Similarly, populism is driven by the rejection of the political establishment as inauthentic and the denial of the utility of its key social mechanism - compromise.

Authenticity as a process unfolds in a sequence of steps (choices), such as those presented on Figure 1. These choices are based on value judgments and self-perception, and are moderated by the exclusion of alternative interpretations. The pursuit of authenticity is a method of social control based on the exclusion of what is perceived as impure (Solomon, 2005). It regulates interaction in groups by denoting both how much and how well one is a member (Reilly, 2018). It embodies a set of qualities that members have come to agree represent an exemplar (Vannini & Williams, 2016). A sense of authenticity is created and maintained through mechanisms of exclusion and stigmatization of those deemed as insufficiently committed to collective values (Solomon, 2005; Kuppens & van der Pol, 2014). Authenticity may be better defined by what it is *not* than by what it actually is (Tetzlaff, 1994).

Processes of voluntary and involuntary exclusion regulate struggles over boundaries in the pursuit of authenticity. They do so in a sequence of steps (Figure 1), whereby actors self-select into forms of behavior associated with conformity or escalation. The underlying dynamic is simple: the differences that some embrace, others reject (Fine, 2003). Individual choices aggregate into collective outcomes that feed back into individual choices (Schelling, 1978). An endogenous model assumes reversibility, capturing an ongoing process of (re)assessment of the alignment between private self and public display, and of preference for compromise or escalation in view of that (re)assessment.

The Escalation box on Figure 1 denotes a process of amplification of difference. This is not the familiar process of competitive “differentiation”, by providing an alternative offering to what is conventional that is nevertheless aligned with conventions (e.g., Rao et al., 2003). The mechanism of escalation denotes progressive misalignment between public and private self by contesting these conventions. As Bourdieu (1984: 5) observes, through circular causality of separation breeding separation, cultural production may develop increasing autonomy from social conventions and audience expectations, obeying its own logic of competitive outbidding in pursuit of distinction.

Pertinent to the established concept of “escalating commitment” in social action (Staw, 1976), this mechanism is substantively different from it in not being motivated by sunk costs. It is different as well from the “escalation of conflict”, based on the alignment between role expectations and self-interest (Gould, 2003) but is similar to it in representing an endogenous process of discrimination that compels actors into making choices that define their self-perception and sense of authenticity. While sharing the observation that the suspicion of “fabricated” authenticity motivates the quest of audiences for commercially unspoiled cultural products (Grazian, 2003), we examine a mechanism of escalation among producers, not among members of the audience.

Our substantive emphasis is on the actions of producers (e.g., White, 1992) in the “field of restricted production” (Bourdieu, 1984) of cultural goods, destined for other cultural producers, and not for the public-at-large. The field of restricted production has power to define its own criteria for the production and evaluation of its products. Cultural producers form a closed field of competition for cultural legitimacy, where internal demarcations are irreducible to external factors of economic, political or social differentiation (Bourdieu, 1984: 5).

In our framework external factors are attributed less conceptual weight than internal factors, but studies demonstrate that internal and external factors are typically interrelated (e.g., Isaac, 2009; Obukhova et al., 2014). Even when oriented toward peers in the field of restricted production (Bourdieu, 1984), the actions of cultural producers are intelligible in relation to evaluations by external audiences (Fine, 2003). Escalation complicates the process of evaluation by introducing principles of judgment based on the pursuit of self-realization in defiance of social conventions. These principles dismiss compromise as “pandering” and encourage resistance to a social order viewed as unjust. They influence a wide range of social outcomes, including modes of representation, formation of identities, notions of authorship or evaluation of literary output (Straub, 2014).

This process transpires most clearly in the evaluation of behavior that can be categorized as “authentically immoral”. This category can be interpreted in two ways: as negative, when emphasis is on “immoral”, enacting the traditional association of authenticity with moral qualities (Vannini & Williams, 2016) or positive, when emphasizing “authentic” at the expense of “immoral” (Hahl et al., 2018). Consider the difficulties in the literary field of evaluating the work of authors who externalize an inner self in a way that is “authentically immoral” in defying conventions. The autobiography of Giacomo Casanova or the novels of the Marquis de Sade testify that morally reprehensible behavior

can have popular appeal when recognized as a representation of one's true self. Despite widespread public condemnation, these authors come across as "modern" in refusing to follow the rules of noble behavior by hiding unseemly behavior behind a role.

The interweaving of authenticity and social stigma poses significant evaluation problems, as illustrated by Oscar Wilde's life story. His play "The Importance of Being Earnest" repeatedly mocks Victorian traditions and social customs on marriage and the pursuit of love (Raby, 1997: 169), but its capital sin lies in pursuing a purely aesthetic agenda by refusing to address serious social and political issues (Jackson, 1997: 172), as implied in this review: "*What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle, whether of art or morals, creates its own canons and conventions, and is nothing but an absolutely willful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality?*" (in Robbins, 2005: 6). Wilde was tolerated at first as eccentric, but acceptable, displaying a stand of "insincere compromise" with the social order. He later escalated this stand by espousing a self-centered aesthetic program that denounced conventions as duplicitous and by asserting a stigmatized "private self" during his trial, disrupting the social and gender order (Bastiat, 2010). It is Wilde's refusal to circumvent conventions, as expected of someone of his rank, that explains the severity of the sentence (Adut, 2005). In the next sections, we illustrate how escalation (and its conviction on trial) may rather be rewarded, perceived as a sincere effort to maintain the purity of the authenticity claim.

Data and method

Having identified the theoretical salience of the escalation mechanism, we turned to Norwegian black metal as a prominent and widely recognized case of escalation (Phillipov, 2012; Patterson, 2013). In studies of popular music (e.g. Peterson, 1997), the most underrepresented sector is the "underground"; the lack of visibility, media attention and information on underground concerts or self-made records are important obstacles to its systematic observation. Our preliminary research indicated that the most reliable source of insights into the early Norwegian black metal scene were fanzines, as they were the only means to spread information besides letter writing and tape-trading. They were not run by record labels, but by independent editors. We identified the fanzines in an extensive online search of black metal archives. Most of the files represented scanned images of original fanzines uploaded by black metal fans.³ Our sample includes 66 interviews with Norwegian death/black metal band members that

³ A list with detailed information on the fanzines and interviews is available from the authors upon request.

appeared in underground fanzines in the period 1988 to 1997. A key advantage of using fanzines as a source of information on early black metal is the absence of “hindsight” bias; the interviews of band members at the time were oriented to a small, geographically dispersed peer audience. As there was no expectation of commercial success, the statements were not intended to please, but to differentiate and attract attention to new releases. This makes fanzines suitable for exploring the social dynamic of escalation in an underground peer community.

The underlying methodological premise is that the intertwining of constitutive dynamics of culture, identity and social structure are reflected in discourse (White & Godart, 2007: 1). Forms of discourse set the interpretive contexts for social action, doing “social work” by shaping interaction in networks, and thereby influencing the collective action of people in these networks (Tilly, 2002: 8-9). There are two basic reasons why using discourse to illustrate a theoretical model is appropriate. First, stories conceal efforts to control tensions and moments of turbulence in collective experience, whose overcoming rearranges social relations (White & Godart, 2007: 6). Accordingly, we focus attention on moments of tension and choice in our research context, when concerns of identity are most salient. Second, we examine narratives (or story-lines) as explanations spread over time, in a path or sequence (White & Godart, 2007: 7), similar to the sequences on Figure 1. Narratives are central in collective action by way of mobilization of allies and counteracting of adversaries (Gould, 2003). Derived from archival sources, narratives can be used to corroborate sequences; matching sequences with narratives provides insights into social processes (Waltham-Smith, 2015).

Basic information on church burnings in Norway from 1198 to 2017 was derived from *Reddit* and *Wikipedia*. We collected news press articles from Norwegian sources for the period 1990-1994 from the database *Atekst*. We also collected the text of the court sentences related to black metal band members from the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court in Norway. These documents are publicly accessible in Norway by means of the database *Lovdata*. The primary sources were supplemented by an extensive search of secondary sources in both English and Norwegian, including scholarly articles, popular books and documentaries on black metal. The objective was not to find unknown facts, but to systematize existing knowledge in a way that helps clarify core features of the theoretical framework.

The inductive study proceeded in back-and-forth movement between theory and data (e.g. Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), starting with the theoretical model and using empirical observations to test it and to identify forms and mechanisms of escalation. To bolster the validity of findings, we used

diverse data sources, making sure to triangulate key arguments and facts across the sources and using quotes as illustration. The rest of the paper is structured as follows - after a brief presentation of black metal, we document two observed forms of escalation: innovation and transgression (Figure 1), discussing mechanisms and their implications for scholarship.

Black metal

A notable example of the unpredictability and eclecticism of contemporary culture is “black” metal – an outgrowth of heavy metal music that features by now tens of thousands of bands (Patterson, 2013). Born in the music underground, the resolutely insular black metal⁴ scene vegetated in obscurity before a sudden rise to fame made it synonymous with Norway, drawing fans from all over the world. A subculture that initially embraced obscurity, solitude, and its inherent marginality has reverberated around the world, trickling into the mainstream as Norway’s largest musical export (Beste, 2008).

The origin of black metal can be traced to the birth of heavy metal as a genre, with bands such as Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath. The latter’s self-titled album (1970) is the earliest manifestation of the desire to explore the occult to push the boundaries of rock music with lyrics evoking excess and transgression (Walser, 1993: 9). But it was not until the early 1980s that black metal started to take shape with the “first wave” of bands - Venom (UK), Bathory (Sweden) Hellhammer/Celtic Frost (Switzerland) and Mercyful Fate (Denmark). These bands pushed metal toward harsher territories in both sound and imagery (Patterson, 2013: 5), rallying against the acceptance into mainstream culture by adopting extreme images and lyrical themes that often articulated pagan, anti-Christian messages. Venom’s explicit pronouncements of blasphemy was a key precursor to the Satanic inclinations of later Norwegian bands (Phillipov, 2012).

A defining feature of the first wave was the desire to distance themselves from “human” or “normal” behavior through low-production values and satanic themes (Kahn-Harris, 2007). Striving to make a product that is genuinely hard to like and using it to convey an identity of resistance resonated with a group of Norwegian teenagers, pushing them to reorient their bands from death to black metal in the early 1990s (i.e. Mayhem, Burzum, Emperor, Darkthrone and Immortal). Venom was the recognized source of inspiration for the “second wave” of black metal, which took the raw aesthetic and blasphemous lyrics to unprecedented new heights. Formed by “Euronymous”, “Necrobutcher”

⁴ From here on in the text we will refer to “Norwegian black metal” simply as “black metal”.

and “Mannheim” in 1984, “Mayhem” is the quintessential second-wave band, embodying the “true” spirit of black metal as a form of autonomous cultural expression.

Mayhem deviated from traditional metal both stylistically and ideologically, developing over time a sonic presence that was characterized by stripped down song structures and arrangements, fast tempos and mid-range drone (Taylor, 2010: 3). Band members adopted demonic stage personae (and nicknames), painted their faces with sinister-looking make-up (“corpse paint”), incorporated images of war and violence, donning stage costumes with bullet belts, spikes and chains, and using medieval weaponry as stage props (Phillipov, 2012). A taste for the macabre and the demonic manifested itself in provocative live performances, with the lead singer (nicknamed “Dead”) engaging in acts of self-mutilation and incorporating impaled pig heads on stage. The early Norwegian scene adopted a negative worldview that rejected all notions of pleasure, happiness and positivity (Olson, 2008), while glorifying the forces of Nature and an idealized Viking past. By virtue of its extremity and closed-door approach to outsiders, black metal established itself as the most underground metal genre, seeking credibility by means of musical innovation, low sales and obscurity (Patterson, 2013: 310).

The yearning for authenticity accompanies developments in music or art (e.g. Solomon, 2005), but black metal brought this yearning to new heights, trying to return metal to its roots, away from its more accessible characteristics (Kahn-Harris, 2004). Black metal rejected the casual attire and socially aware themes of other metal genres and the “fake” theatricality of first-wave bands, in favor of more authentic commitment to the music (Phillipov, 2012). What differentiated it from other metal genres is that it took the matters of death and religion seriously.

It is generally agreed that the first wave was characterized by playful theatricality, combining Satanic references with theatrical styles of performance (Patterson, 2013; Philippov, 2012), as expressed by Venom’s singer Cronos: “*I don’t preach Satanism, occult, witchcraft, or anything. Rock and Roll is basically entertainment and that’s as far as it goes.*” (in Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998: 12-14). This illustrates a crucial difference in identity construction between the first and second wave bands, for whom music was not mere entertainment, but an embodiment of personal identities. The latter bands aspired toward a form of music that was genuinely evil, rather than being contrived only for the purposes of performance (Philippov, 2012: 153). They attempted to make metal “real” again by removing its mundanity and theatricality (Kahn-Harris, 2007), rejecting the form of compromise (see Figure 1) that the first-wave bands had concluded with the music industry.

Norwegian black metal is defined by the effort to remove the divide between blasphemous lyrics and genuine belief (Patterson, 2013). The music was intended to communicate that the bands had discarded the insincere identities they associated with other metal genres (Baddeley, 1999: 191-196). The opposition to religion was not a marketing stunt, but an ideological stance - humorless, militant and uncompromising in nature, discarding fun, theatrics, humanity and everyday life. Black metal marked a radical departure from reality in favor of a “*world very dark, depressive, puritanical and intolerant*” (Euronymous, in *Psychopathological zine*, 1991). Borrowing from the imagery and lyrics of the first-wave bands, black metal stripped them of their Halloween function and infused them with sincerity.⁵ The gulf between the two waves was immense (Patterson, 2013), as the second wave escalated the first one via the relentless pursuit of authenticity, expressed as rejection of compromise.⁶

Figure 2 About Here

What gives credence to the mechanism of escalation captured in statements by band members or observations by scholars is the timeline of key events and transgressions in Norwegian black metal, presented on Figure 2. One key event is the suicide of the Mayhem singer “Dead” in 1991, ushering in new extremes through the glorification of suicide as a sincere celebration of death (Patterson, 2013). What followed was a series of criminal acts, including church burning, grave desecration, burglary, assault and murder, bringing about lasting infamy for the black metal genre. Heavily stigmatized by Norwegian society and with several band members receiving prison sentences, black metal continued, nevertheless, to attract fans worldwide, entering the mainstream with bands, such as Cradle of Filth and Dimmu Borgir in the early 2000s.

Table 1 Around Here

Escalation as innovation and transgression

There is consensus among observers that black metal represented a major artistic innovation, evolving

⁵ In the words of Euronymous (Beat Magazine No. 2, 1993): “*Black metal is so extreme that not anyone can get into it...There have always been a lot of cliques in metal and not even the metal society has taken it seriously. When then comes someone who is serious about what they are doing, everyone is shocked. Black metal is meant to be serious, not because others shall take us seriously, but because we are serious. It is talk about religion and we praise the evil and believe blindly in a god creature just like a Christian.*”

⁶ The rejection and escalation are recognized by first wave bands. According to Mantas, a founding member of Venom, “*I’ll admit we used to sneak into the old graveyards and do photo sessions there and all that kind of stuff. But as for wanting to go out and actually destroy the stuff, I mean, that never really crossed our minds. So I think it’s an aspect of it that people have taken, and taken to the extreme.*”. The interview is accessible on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TCxI91IBHA>

as a reaction against the commercialization of heavy metal (e.g. Walser, 1993; Patterson, 2013). What drove the emergence of black metal around 1990 was the increasing disenchantment of band members with death metal's becoming "*commonly available and accepted*" (see [1.7] in Table 1). The growing psychological distance from developments in the metal scene motivated the escalation of the pursuit of authenticity through extreme forms. Bands, such as Mayhem and Darkthrone, explicitly renounced their death metal origins and recordings, and affirmed their rejection of marketability [1.2, 1.6] and "normality" through music that is "*very wrong, hard and aggressive*" [1.10].

The escalation of black metal was brought about by Mayhem's recording "Live in Leipzig" (November 1990), the notorious interview with Mayhem in *Slayer* magazine (early 1991), and Darkthrone's album "A Blaze in the Northern Sky" (August 1991), widely considered as the first *true* black metal album. It projected the pursuit of extremity as a key feature of the new genre, heralding a dramatic musical and aesthetic break from the past. If earlier forms of metal had emphasized clarity and virtuosity, black metal was distorted and cacophonous, exchanging the guitar solos and technical wizardry of traditional metal for a droning wall-of-sound (Walser, 1993). The new sound was a product of aversion to melody and taste for extreme distortion, reflected in fast guitar technique, snarling vocals, "blast beat" drumming, high-paced percussions or chainsaw guitars (Patterson, 2013).

Black metal pursued differentiation not only from other genres, but from the "normality" of the music industry. The incomprehensible vocals, heavily distorted guitars, and extreme tempos make for abrasive, extremely dark music that is difficult to consume and is almost completely impenetrable to the casual listener (Walser, 1993). This form of "sonic terrorism" created a sound-wall and a social boundary around the genre, ensuring that the listener was committed. The bands refused to abide by industry conventions and to make excuses for low production values that signaled a band's sincerity.

The statements by band members in Table 1 attest to the desire to maximize difference [1.3, 1.4] by expressing *ill-full*, *evil* content, and creating a special sound or riff [1.3, 1.8], where "special" is explicitly understood as *brutal*, *extreme* and *intense* [1.1, 1.8]. In this perspective, innovation is the product of escalation through outrageous behavior and scandalous content [1.5, 1.9], which ensures that metal remains independent and underground [1.2]. The pursued alignment between authenticity and musical expression is the distinct feature of "*kvlit*" – a category of ultra-pure black metal music. "Kvltness" is about both the style of the band and the narrative content of the recordings. It is poorly produced, underground, raw, unmediated and resolutely defiant toward religion and society (Kuppens

& van der Pol, 2014). It is quintessentially black and white – both in terms of content and aesthetics.

The defiance was articulated in emphatic fashion in the series of transgressions that came to define black metal (see Figure 2). Words began to be replaced by actions from 1991 (Patterson, 2013) - brutality and violence were no longer confined to the artistic domain, but spilled over into real life. Central figures in the black metal scene sought to prove the seriousness of the music by undertaking criminal acts (Phillipov, 2012) while hangers-on imitated them in attempting to gain acceptance by the core. This resulted in arson attacks on about 30 of Norway's historic wooden stave churches. About 15 black metal scene members were arrested for crimes including arson, grave desecration, burglary, assault and murder. The murder of Euronymous in August 1993 marked the high-water mark for extremism and violence, after which the criminal wave subsided.

The traditional interpretation of the criminal activity is that it was motivated by animosity toward Christianity and a desire to reclaim a pagan heritage (Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998). In this logic, the acts were construed as natural (and inevitable) expressions of the music's blasphemy and anti-Christianity (Phillipov, 2012: 154). But closer reading of interviews with band members [2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.13] suggests that beneath the anti-Christian rhetoric lurked social rebellion against "normality" and the political "system" in Norway that elevates tolerance to a high moral ground and discourages dissenting behavior. The recognition that "*we were doing it for being wrong, we wanted to be against society*" [2.12, 2.11] points to the experience of transgression as emancipating, as an embodiment of individual freedom and rebellion against what is viewed as an oppressive social order (Bataille, 1998). This experience explains the general pattern whereby band members recognized the futility of the criminal acts, but did not disavow them after having purged their prison sentences, emphasizing their contesting and emancipating nature [2.10, 2.13, 2.8].

Black metal simultaneously embraced and rejected aspects of Nordic identity: it reacted to the "political" Nordicism by reclaiming Nordicism as "cultural" heritage. Nordicism as a political brand is grounded in the region's political climate and in perceptions of Nordic countries as "good citizens", "peace loving", "tolerant" and "rational" (Hoad & Whiting, 2017). From this angle, early black metal constituted a reaction to the "oppressive and numbing social democracy, which dominated Norwegian political life" (Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998: 32). This reaction against a political imperative towards social democracy and tolerance was articulated by reactivating pagan, Viking heritage and mythology and reasserting the virtues of individualism and isolation. As Hoad and Whiting (2017) observe, the

geographic isolation of Norwegian black metal bands from the commercial center of heavy metal was used to affirm their otherness and ability to achieve metallic “purity” in detachment from the industry.

Transgressive values or acts allowed black metallers to reject not only modern culture, but all notions of progress and civilization as oppressive in imposing the virtues of tolerance and moderation as principles of social cohabitation. By celebrating pre-modernity and an idealized past, black metal tried to cut itself off from modern culture into a state of isolation experienced as liberating (Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998). This can be observed in frequent references to extremity and brutality [2.3, 2.5] in statements designating the capacity to kill as a measure of authenticity [2.1, 2.5, 2.6], signifying the ultimate form of renouncement of “normal” behavior.

Designating violence as an authenticity measure can trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy when a member justifies the use of violence as confirmation of belonging and/or genuine rebelliousness. The misalignment between the internal and external is typically resolved by the actor adjusting to reality, but here it involved adjusting reality to values that increasingly diverged from normality. The church burnings thus materialized the refusal of compromise and confirmed “sincerity” as a collective virtue. But an identity problem that is difficult to resolve is that aspiring to sincerity and worshipping death at the same time logically leads to the conclusion that sincerity must be manifested in death. Statements extolling brutality [2.3, 2.5] had to be backed up by actions, lest they be rendered “insincere”, thereby encouraging a dynamic of one-upmanship that proved difficult to stop in a small, isolated community [2.7, 2.8]. From this angle, escalation was driven less by an ideological stance than by an endogenous mechanism, whereby statements served as pledges in a process of competition and wherein each actor strived to be more transgressive than the other (Kahn-Harris, 2007).

The sociologist Katrine Fangen describes this process as follows: *“If one sees the scene as having worth, one might go quite far to rise in status and recognition within it. The mechanism that make youths burn churches...is peer pressure. They believe that others expect them to act in such a way. To assert themselves they try to outdo each other. Because the scene is so closed to the outside world, they develop their own rules of behavior* (in Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998: 326-327). The following statement by Ihsahn (Emperor) corroborates the escalation dynamic: *“I think the church burnings were an exaggerated expression of authenticity...No one took [us] seriously for dressing up like we did: teenagers in leather and spikes. But, suddenly, it was for real. We were deeply into all of it and, the worse, the better. It became this kind of cult thing; everything that opposes you just*

*strengthens your position.”*⁷

The process of escalation: exclusion and self-selection

Our analysis of interviews, statements and scholarly accounts attested to two related mechanisms mediating the escalation process - exclusion and self-selection. Escalation is the outcome of parallel processes of exclusion and self-exclusion of dissenters - those with lower tolerance level for violence and extremity. Individual choices are a reflection of self-perceptions of identity and authenticity, but are also instruments for the construction of collective identity and authenticity (Swidler, 2001). The importance of choice is highlighted in [3.3], presenting the authenticity (credibility) of a band member as a product of linked choices on music content and behavior aggregating over time into a sequence.

As statement [3.3] makes clear, the key reference point for underground bands is what can be defined as the “overground” – the commercial sector of the music industry (Patterson, 2013). As Fine (2003) has observed in art, the commercialization of a market segment tends to lead to bifurcation, as the changes that some embrace, others reject, calling it a fraud. One camp views the legitimization of the segment as an attack on the establishment, the other - as an expression of it (Fine, 2003: 159). In a similar dynamic, the perceived commercialization of the metal scene provoked divisions within the metal community. As discussed, black metal crystallized in a visceral stand of opposition to the death metal scene, which gravitated toward the mainstream in the late 1980s. The new, underground scene was constituted through the escalation of brutality in both music content and on-stage performances, with the objective of purification of the audience by weeding out those segments of it that were still attuned to the aesthetic and musical standards of death metal [1.9]. As statements of the self-selection mechanism, [1.5, 3.5] testify that increasing public interest in black metal was perceived as a threat to the authenticity of the underground scene, which could be staved off through extremity, ensuring that only the truly committed stay. This instrumental use of extremity is rational in nature, as it serves the purposes of “purification” (Abbott, 2001) of the scene through self-selection.

Anxiety about authenticity is also identifiable in the reaction of a Darkthrone member to the success of their 1991 album - “*we are selling too many records*” [3.2]. If some chose to tone down their success or ratchet up violence, others departed the genre altogether or embraced the commercial

⁷ Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/sep/02/how-black-metal-grew-up-norway-ulver-enslaved-emperor-ihsahn>

sector, such as Dimmu Borgir. Patterson (2013: 313) discusses how the commercial success of black metal in the mid-1990s led to polarization, as the underground sector became more resolute, defining itself in opposition to that part of the scene that was perceived as having betrayed itself or having lost its authenticity. Mindful of this split and the symbolic value of production choices, some bands chose a basic aesthetic, poor production and limited release of their albums in order to identify with earlier bands that had made this choice out of need (Patterson, 2013). The contestation of authenticity within the black metal community is reflected in the disagreements among fans on its core values (Kuppens & van der Pol, 2014).

Transgressive behavior started to define choices for band members with the suicide of Dead, exploited by Euronymous to promote a more straight-faced exploration of darkness (Patterson, 2013). Connecting the pursuit of authenticity with the celebration and flaunting of death served to push out some members of the scene. The assassination of Euronymous by Count Grishnackh similarly forced scene members to choose sides – pro Euronymous or pro Grishnackh (Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998, p. 133). The transgressions revealed different tolerance levels for acts of extreme nature among both band members [3.4] and fans (Kuppens & van der Pol, 2014). Some on the fringes drifted away, while others persisted, “wanting to commit crimes” to prove they belong [3.5]. A clear articulation of the self-selection mechanism can be found in [3.1] - the transgressions constituted a crossroad; some decided it had gone too far, while others walked on, exploring darkness for real, guided by their idea of the authentic. Along this road, each transgression marked another step away from normality [3.4].

Self-selection was in part a response to the pressure exercised by core members of the scene, who threatened and applied exclusion to control boundaries or maintain distance from the overground. Core members acted as musical and morality police, defining the codes of the scene (clothing, which bands to like or avoid, how to act, whom to interact with and avoid, etc.) Starting from the late 1980s, Euronymous began isolating the Norwegian scene from the international extreme metal community (Olson 2008). The tactics he used to that end – violence, Satanism, self-mutilation, and misanthropy, defined strict social boundaries for the Norwegian black metal scene in the early 1990s, cutting it off from other scenes and subcultures (Kahn-Harris, 2007).

The strong association of black metal with deviant behavior is indicative of very rigid group boundaries (Kuppens & van der Pol, 2014). As the statements in Section [4] attest, constant vigilance was required in policing those who are “true” scene members from the “posers.” The “true” member

was unmistakably authentic (“something you have always been” [4.1]), while those tempted to adopt an identity that is considered trendy, are repeatedly advised to “f**k off” [4.1, 4.2, 4.5, 4.6]. These statements attest to a process of construction of social boundaries based on extreme principles and to the maintenance of the boundaries through social exclusion [4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6]. Exclusion and self-selection contributed jointly to escalation, as those unwilling to escalate were either pushed out or left on their own accord.

Escalation and evaluation

The spectacular manner in which Norwegian black metal escalated and exploded onto the public scene with the revelation of the criminal activities had twofold consequences. Unsurprisingly, the ensuing moral panic in Norwegian society led to the stigmatization of the genre that is still felt nowadays. Families compelled boys to stop playing or listening to black metal, band members were subjected to physical violence and social pressure, as attested in [5.1]. But the reverse side was even more remarkable - the ample media coverage put black metal on the map, giving it momentum and bringing greater attention to the recordings of black metal bands (Patterson, 2013: 180).

To get a measure of the sudden prominence of black metal, we made use of anecdotal data on record sales from online sources. A search by the keyword "black metal" in the Norwegian database “Atekst” returned 239 articles for the period 1992 to 1995, featuring only *one* article in 1992, 101 in 1993 and 137 in 1994. Record sales follow the same pattern. It is accepted that by early 1993 album sales of black metal remain very low. Then the sales of the bands directly involved in transgressions embark on a steep upward curve, with Burzum selling 20 000 copies per album, passing to 50 000 by 1997. By the same year Immortal had sold more than 100 000 copies in total. Sales reached the next level with the globalization of the genre in the 2000s. In 2001, Mayhem’s album sales surpassed 80 000 copies worldwide. In 2002, Satyricon ended up 4th on the Norwegian sales charts. By 2003 Dimmu Borgir had sold more than 1 million copies of their albums worldwide.

What makes the popularity of black metal sociologically meaningful is the suggestion that it happened not *despite* its stigmatization, but *because of* it, as the opprobrious public image served to confirm the authenticity of a genre whose endorsement of normative violations (see [2]) matched its actions. If recognized that controversy can extend the life of ephemeral musical moments (Thornton, 1995: 122), Norwegian black metal testifies that evidence of “real” acts of transgression can be even

more powerful in ensuring longevity (Phillipov, 2012: 152). The social evaluation of transgression as authentically “living out” the content of the music was critical in the meaning attributed to the black metal genre (Phillipov, 2012: 153), the enduring interest in it and the commercialization of the genre. It appears paradoxical that the recognition of the sincerity of the underground is what facilitated its transition overground. A key component in this process was that transgressions were not perceived as theatrically staged, as expected of more mundane music genres (e.g. Peterson, 1997). The violence of the acts dispelled that possibility, opening the way to commercialization of what was never intended to be commercialized. This led to the disenchantment of some band members, who refused to ride the commercial wave [5.4].

The transgressions brought publicity and cachet to the bands [5.3, 5.5, 5.6] and were critical in the rise and viability of the black metal industry (Beste, 2008). There is agreement among observers that the crimes brought the genre into the limelight and “*contributed as much, and maybe even more, to its appeal*” (Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998: xiii) than the music or their stage performances. The bands attracted a level of public interest disproportionate to their ‘objective’ significance in the lore of international heavy metal (Phillipov, 2012: 155). This level is unattainable for humdrum musical genres (Kahn-Harris, 2007).

This development reinforces the evidence that a normative violation recognized as sincere may be more effective in earning recognition than more traditional approaches (Hahl et al., 2018). The substantive role of the combination of transgression and authenticity, stigmatization and celebration [5.2] is in complicating evaluations by providing justification to an actor in escalating, expecting that authenticity would be publicly recognized and rewarded. A recent study of the black metal fanbase testifies to ambivalence in the social evaluation of transgression. Kuppens and van der Pol (2014) find that extremity provokes polarization - *half* of the respondents declare that it is important for black metal musicians to have an extreme personality or to behave in an extreme way. The most notable finding is that close to 30% attach importance to the crimes as manifestation of authenticity, attesting that transgression can serve as a legitimizing device, when interpreted by parts of the audience as a sign of sincere norm contestation. This interpretation helps explain how a fringe genre enacting a set of unpopular values can have outsize influence on popular culture.

Discussion and generalizability

The paper articulates a process-based framework, where the escalation of difference is an alternative trajectory in the pursuit of authenticity to conformity and compromise. Escalation denotes refusal of compromise as a way of reducing the gap between private self and public display. The analysis echoes Trilling's (1972) observation that the pursuit of authenticity is prone to excess, as a strenuous moral experience that facilitates social conflict.

The analysis of early Norwegian black metal illustrates the process whereby the pursuit of authenticity generates momentum toward polarization in iterative differentiation between "purity" and "impurity". Focusing on the field of restricted production (Bourdieu, 1984), it reinforces the increasing attention to endogenous factors of differentiation in sociological research (e.g. Kaufman, 2004). The data reveal that the endogenous dynamic was triggered by the commercialization of heavy metal, as it encouraged dissenters to pursue innovation and differentiation in the underground with almost no commercial potential. This is another manifestation of the documented interaction between exogenous and endogenous factors in social action (e.g. Isaac, 2009; Obukhova et al., 2014). An exogenous event may provoke increasing misalignment between private self and public display, creating an opposition of "us" and "them" that drives endogenously social action (Archer, 1988). Using qualitative data, we documented the emergence of this binary opposition through forces of self-selection and exclusion.

Members of the early black metal scene rejected alignment with the mainstream by adopting market-oriented values or through (in)sincere compromise of the kind pursued by first-wave bands in the early 1980s (Figure 1). The second wave of black metal was unprecedented in music history with the critical role attributed to escalation as the principle of construction of identities. We highlighted two forms of escalation – as innovation in music and criminal behavior. What started with the pursuit of distinct sound and style in defiance of conventions spilled over into real life, motivating a wave of transgressions. This wave was not ideologically motivated, but resulted from the aggregation of small steps, embracing (or rejecting) transgressive content. A process of purification through the exclusion and self-exclusion of actors with lower tolerance for extremity reinforced a brutal, oppositional stand.

The genre's connection to crime has contributed to the endurance of what may otherwise have been a transitory moment in music history (Phillipov, 2012). Sales began increasing in the aftermath of the crimes, record companies started signing bands and within a decade, the genre boasted millions of albums sold. Paradoxically, the anti-commercial stance facilitated commercialization; in a context

of pervasive suspicion of fabricated authenticity (Grazian, 2003) the crimes offered proof of the sincere nature of black metal, untainted by commercialism. “Extremity” was read by parts of the audience as “authenticity” in a value judgement applied by listeners to discern if the music remains committed to its own premises and is not a mere projection (Hoad & Whiting, 2017).

The described process has important theoretical implications. First, in helping explain the motivation for actors to question or challenge the normative scripts that guide the judgment of merit or value, and second, in elucidating why the challenge may be successful. A key characteristic of the modern individual is her willingness to defy moral judgment by denouncing the hypocrisy of public rituals in pursuit of emancipation of a repressed self (Hegel, 1988; Trilling, 1972). This contestation is typically framed as motivated by the pursuit of economic advantage or of public attention, along the lines of “controversy sells” (e.g. Peterson, 1997; Fine, 2003). Thus, it is expected that any contestation in pursuit of authenticity is self-serving and “fabricated” to appeal to audiences (e.g. Peterson, 1997).

These narratives do not apply well to the featured escalation dynamic. Critically, almost all transgressions occurred in the “underground” period, when Norwegian black metal was invisible to the public at large. The police failed to identify a link between the transgressions and the black metal scene; such appeared incidentally, due to the indiscretions of a single person. There is much to suggest that the perpetrators never intended the transgressions to become public knowledge and were not driven by increasing visibility or albums sales, when almost no band had a record deal (Moynihan & Söderlind, 1998; Patterson, 2013). A resolutely anti-commercial sentiment permeates the fanzines we consulted, such as in Euronymous’ statements that black metal “*hasn’t got anything to do with music business, it should stay independent, and live a life outside the system.*”⁸ and “*if we ever become a trend band (which is very unlikely to happen), then I’ll stop playing*”.⁹ Ihsahn of Emperor resumes the attitude: “*We didn’t have any ambitions, we didn’t try to fit in or make products that would be available in a mainstream form*”.¹⁰

The featured escalation mechanism, based on the refusal of compromise as accommodation to social conventions, allows to better comprehend the reasons why actors may prefer to “burn the bridges to acceptability” rather than pursue compromise (Hahl et al., 2018). Our analysis supports these authors’ contention that “burning the bridges” can be more effective than traditional approaches

⁸ Euronymous interview in “Thanatography”, May, 1990.

⁹ Euronymous interview in “Slayer” Magazine # 8, Feb/March, 1991.

¹⁰ In “1991: the year that black metal blew up the world” by Chris Chantler, “Metal Hammer”, July 20, 2017.

when attributed moral authority by way of an authenticity claim.¹¹ But the underlying mechanism is different. Hahl et al. (2018) discuss a situation when an actor is attributed authenticity because her transgressions are interpreted as championing the interests of the voters. Here the configuration is of an insincere actor pretending to be a sincere representative, while we bring attention to an actor who sincerely rebels against what is viewed as insincere in nature. Her transgressions may be condoned or even rewarded by members of the audience when perceived as a manifestation of consistency - when actions match articulated values, even if transgressive in nature. Escalating pursuit of authenticity in defiance of normative scripts can be endorsed when interpreted as sincere embodiment of alternative values or because of an assessment of the normative scripts as too inconsistent or “theatrical”, making them contestable. The functional aspects of social theatre make it tolerable to actors (Goffman, 1959), but there is always a possibility that the theater may be denounced as mere “masquerade”, provoking an inversion of evaluation principles in favor of what is perceived as *sincere* contestation.

This inversion can be observed in a range of domains, including politics, culture and sports. Consider politicians who escalate in manipulating the truth, without suffering backlash by voters that interpret these actions as a mark of sincere conviction rather than self-serving hypocrisy (Hahl et al., 2018). The serial prevarications and unsuccessful attempt of Prime Minister Boris Johnson to suspend the British Parliament in 2019 embodied a strategy of escalation, predicated on the belief that defiance would be interpreted by voters as a sign of authentic commitment to Brexit, thereby compensating for the growing resentment by opponents. His electoral success validated escalation. Acts of escalation increase uncertainty in social evaluation by undermining the moral grounds on which violations will be customarily sanctioned.

The importance of this uncertainty is in providing motivation for opportunistic actors to adopt escalation and refuse compromise as the established method for realigning the internal and external in social life. A pertinent example comes from recent historical research on the Third Reich (Boyd, 2017) revealing the surprising degree to which the ascendance of the Nazis was accompanied (and aided) by the pervasive expectation of moderation, even among opponents to the Nazis. Many were convinced that the government was on the brink of dropping its anti-Semitic crusade (pp. 118-119) and that what they witnessed with anxiety “*was bound to come... and that it is best perhaps that the*

¹¹ The traditional strategy (i.e. sincere playing of a public role) would typically be more effective... until it is not (when the role playing is unmasked as theatrical performance). For theatre to be effective, it must be “invisible”.

Hitler fire run its course” (p. 106). The pernicious consequence was that the expectation of moderation - among both supporters and opponents, facilitated the escalation of Nazi discourse and actions by detracting from the gravity of statements targeting the Jewish population and announcing precise commitments. The public expectation that the escalation would eventually relent into a more traditional political theatre failed to recognize that the pursuit of authenticity is prone to extremity, especially in conditions when the strategy of moderation is increasingly equated with inauthenticity and the pursuit of self-interest. In such conditions, the principles of sincerity and consistency may prevail over those associated with the traditional pursuit of authenticity through role conformity and/or moderation (Hahl et al., 2018).¹²

Similar conclusions are reached in another context featuring contentious forms of pursuit of authenticity – football fandom. Davis (2015) defines a continuum of fandom, from the casual fan to hardcore fans, associated with violence. Working-class fans are traditionally considered as the most “authentic”, reflecting the working-class roots of the game (Taylor, 1971; Critcher, 1979). Similar to what was observed in black metal, the commercialization of football from the early 1960s resulted in progressive exclusion of hardcore fans, and increasing misalignment between the working-class fans and the corporate-driven policies that flourished in the 1990s (Giulianotti, 2002). As sociologists note, football-related violence articulated the contestation of a transformation that took the “people’s game” away from its roots, by sanitizing it and by turning it into a product (Giulianotti, 2002; Davis, 2015).

Studies define football hooliganism as an authentic representation of a male, working-class identity, using violence as a liberating force (Mayer, 2014). That a violent form of social behavior can be experienced as authentic and liberating in defying conventions is one explanation for the paradox that efforts to root out football-related violence by publicly stigmatizing it have proved only partially successful¹³, having brought higher visibility and media attention to violence-plagued clubs that are nevertheless recognized by the public as authentic. An example is Millwall FC, located in the former

¹² It is disheartening to observe in hindsight the extent to which the Nazis did what they had actually stated they would and how the perceived “sincerity” of Hitler aided his rise in a political context that was widely perceived as “corrupt”. Boyd (2017: 218) gives the telling example of a former German communist in the mid-1930s who stated that: “[Hitler] at least is a sincere man, he is the only one”. Hitler often emphasized his authenticity in speeches (i.e. “*Deep inside, I have remained exactly the same as I had been before [becoming chancellor]*”). One cannot underestimate the fact that part of the popular appeal of the Nazis was due to the alignment between their discourse and escalating political action, and their steadfast rejection of compromise, which had been by then largely discredited as political machination.

¹³ In fact, police figures from the UK show that the number of matches at which hooliganism — ranging from throwing coins to fighting — occurred, rose from 727 in the 2012-13 season to 1,128 in the 2017-18 season.

docklands of London (see Robson, 2000). The results of a poll¹⁴ indicate that the club is the 89th most popular in the UK (% positive opinion), but the 24th most famous (% have heard of). This attests that the club tends to be viewed negatively by the public, but is also widely known in the UK and abroad. The stigmatization of the club for crowd violence is simultaneously tempered by the recognition of its refusal to adopt the normative codes associated with the commercialization of football (Robson, 2000).

The analysis reinforces the call for more attention to the sources of tension and contradiction in authenticity (Cha et al., 2019), with a particular focus on the tensions and interdependence between conformity and escalation. These were presented as alternative strategies (Figure 1) that co-exist in social situations. For example, Sgourev (2013) describes the bifurcation of Cubism into “conformist” and “escalating” factions: one pursuing alignment with conventions, the other pursuing contrast with commercially successful genres. Confronted with public ridicule at first, escalation was increasingly interpreted as a sign of authenticity. But it is possible that actors may alternate between escalation and conformity, depending on strategic considerations or audience expectations. More attention is needed to the reasons for the adoption of each strategy and the extent to which the expectations of audiences have an impact on this decision.

We pursued a parsimonious behavioral model that lends itself to application in a wide range of contexts. A key advantage of parsimony is in allowing to capture complex social dynamics through relatively simple decision trees of the kind featured on Figure 1. We recognize that the parsimony of the model can be revised to include relevant factors, such as identity and status. Considerations of identity are essential in relational processes and social differentiation (White, 1992; White & Godart, 2007). Our model assumes that actors adopt lines of action based on who they think they are (Swidler, 2001), so that the decision to compromise or escalate reflects individual and collective identities (Fine, 2003). But it is possible that sensemaking proceeds in the opposite direction, if band members looked to the actions to which they are committing in order to understand who they are (see Weick, 1995). In this logic, collective identity emerges from the (re)interpretation of individual decisions on escalation and compromise.

One can also attribute a more pronounced role to social status in the described process. The

¹⁴ Available on https://yougov.co.uk/topics/sport/explore/sports_team/Millwall_F_C

position in a status hierarchy moderates choices in the pursuit of authenticity (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009). It is reasonable to expect that escalation for those in the “core” is more likely to be motivated internally, by the pursuit of alignment between beliefs and action, while for those on the “periphery”, motivation is more likely to be “extrinsic” in nature, fueled by the desire to win approval by the core. Another option is to state that the “core” contributes to escalation by way of social exclusion, while the “periphery” affects the intensity of escalation through self-selection, as implied in our narrative. These arguments can be tested by collecting relational data and by reconstructing social networks in early Norwegian black metal. This would enable the creation of “status” and “centrality” measures that can then be applied in the analysis of discourse or attrition. These analyses would help identify the social structure of the black metal scene, and will contribute to understanding the motivation to escalate or leave.

Our analysis encourages a process-based approach to authenticity and more active scholarly engagement with mechanisms of escalation in diverse social contexts. The 1998 arson attacks in Vail (Colorado) by members of a radical ecological movement or the assault on the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, provoked by the escalating political contestation by President Trump, testify to the combustible nature of the mix of collective action and pursuit of authenticity, observed in our context. We defined escalation as a “normal” occurrence - an endogenous dynamic based on the pursuit of difference that is not strategically pursued and has simultaneously positive and negative aspects, complicating social evaluations. In conditions of increasing polarization, it is incumbent on scholars to better comprehend the motivations of actors to “burn the bridges” that maintain institutional stability.

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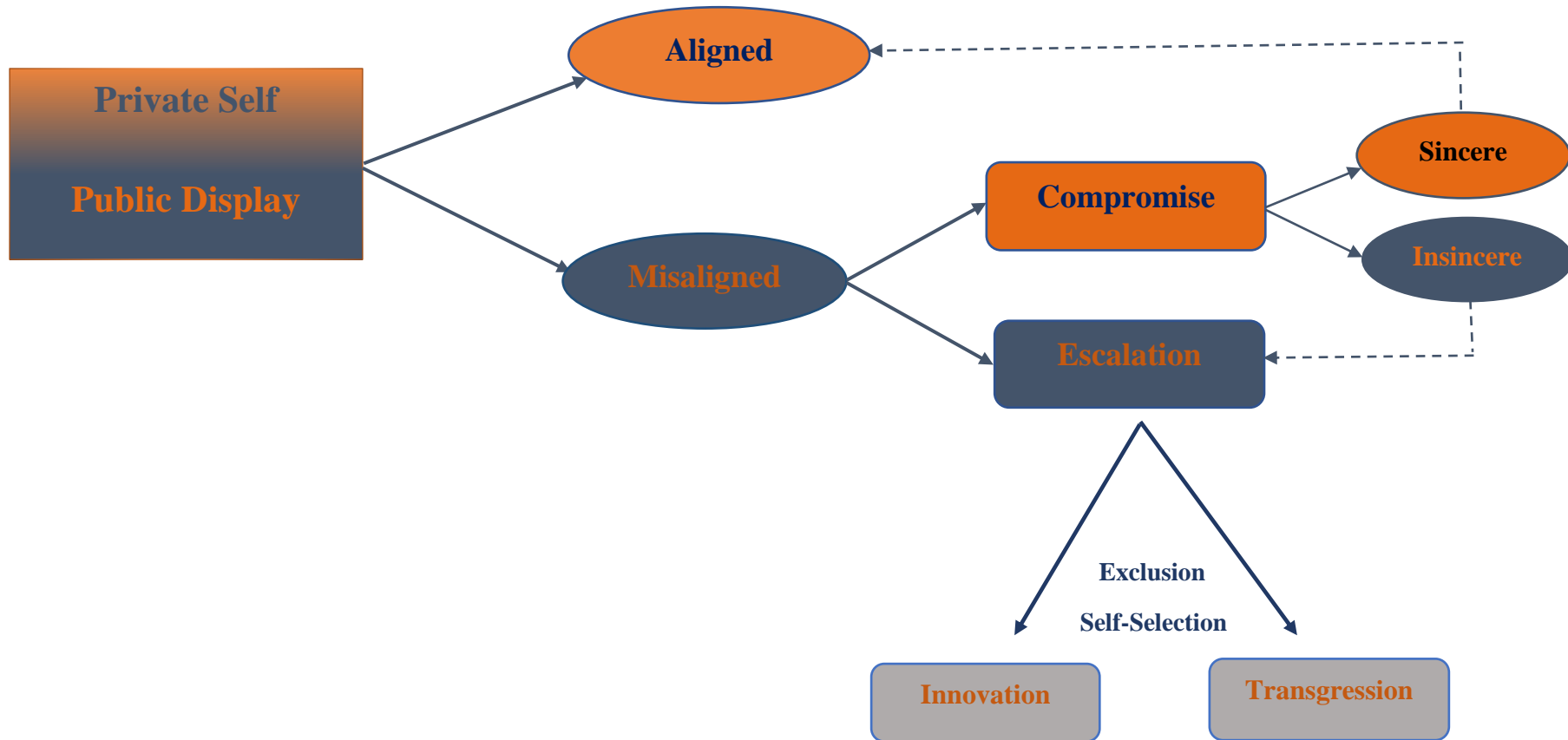
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Figure 1. Conceptual Framework in the Analysis of Authenticity as Process



Legend: - - - - Possible development

Orange areas – Theoretically Unproblematic, **Blue** areas – Theoretically Problematic.

Grey areas – Forms and Moderators of Escalation Observed in the Research Context.

Figure 2. Key Events and Transgressions in Early Norwegian Black Metal, 1988-1994

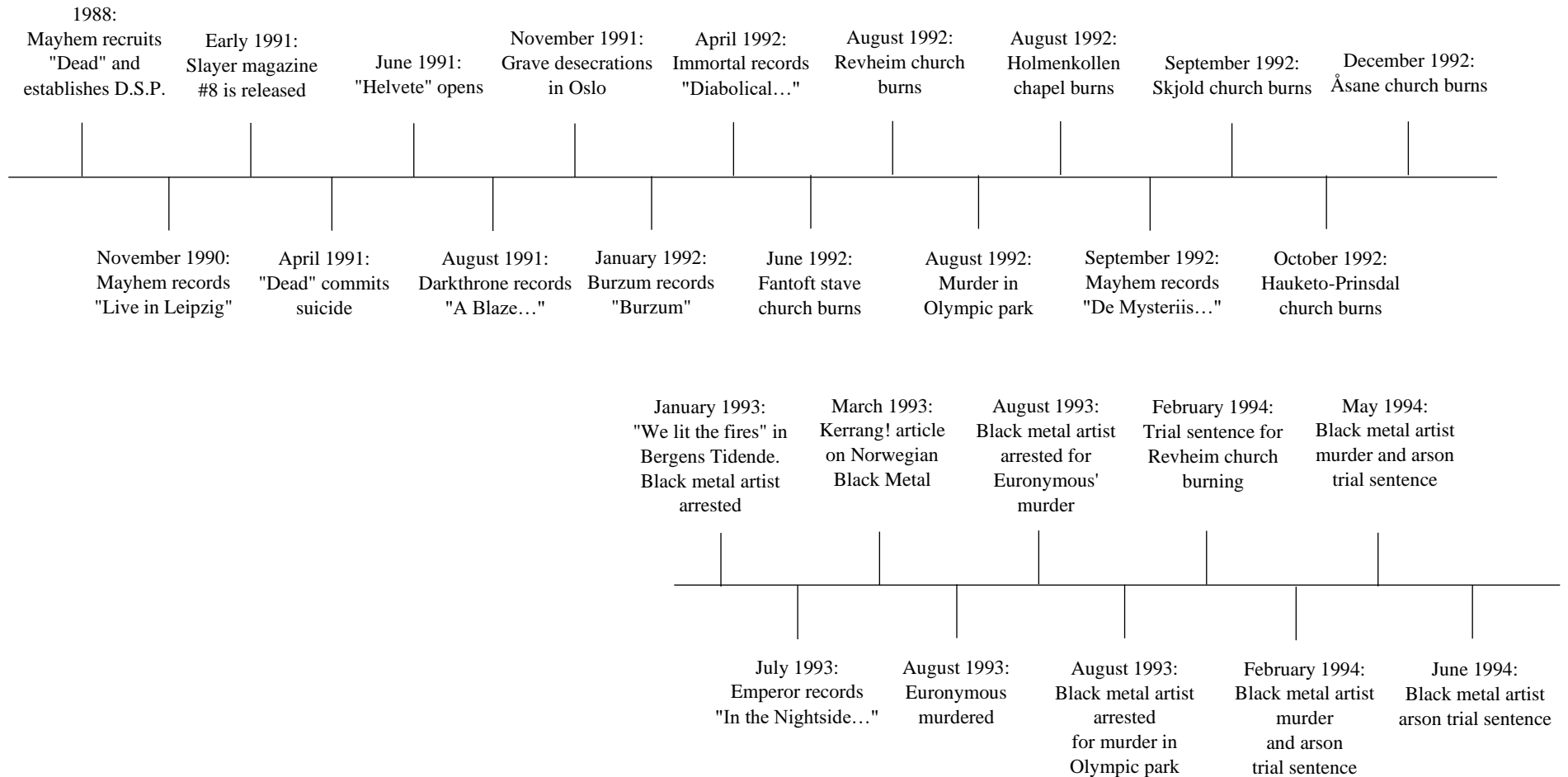


Table 1. Illustrative Quotes

Escalation as Innovation (1)

- 1.1.** “Our new songs are much more extreme, brutal and intense grinding than before” *Euronymous in Morbid Magazine # 8, 1988*
- 1.2.** “I think death metal hasn’t got anything to do with music business, it should stay independent, and live a life outside the system.” *Euronymous in Thanatography, May, 1990*
- 1.3.** “These shall not sound like anything else and not be bounded to the moment of now. What I mean with that is that we first have to forget of how all other bands sound like and not to be bounded to any time to avoid trends and to find originality.” *Dead in Battery # 5, p. 10, 1990*
- 1.4.** “Once there was something illful that ordinary wimps feared and never understood. Something none had heard anything like of ever before.” *Dead in Battery # 5, p. 12, 1990*
- 1.5.** Before we began to play there was a crowd of about 300 in there, but in the second song "Necro Lust" we began to throw around pig heads. Only 50 were left, I liked that!... We wanna scare those who shouldn't be at our concerts, and they will have to escape through the emergency exit... If someone doesn't like blood and rotten flesh thrown in their face they can F**K OFF, and that's exactly what they do.” *Dead interview from 1990 in Slayer # 10, Spring 1995*
- 1.6.** “I don't want to make any mainstream music, so each riff must be something special, and then it takes very long time to make the music.” *Euronymous in Slayer Mag # 8, Feb/March 1991*
- 1.7.** “I think the main problem is that Death Metal is now commonly available and accepted... Real Death Metal should be something normal people are afraid of, not something mothers can listen to... I refuse to have anything with to do with all the mainstream trendies in the scene today.” *Euronymous in Slayer # 8, Feb/March 1991*
- 1.8.** “It's important to get a totally special sound like the first albums of Sepultura, Bathory, Sodom, Destrucion, Possessed, Carcass etc. had. It sounds much more brutal that way.” *Same as above*
- 1.9.** “The scene must also be out of reach for normal idiots, because I think it only should be for extreme people. If someone thinks this is stupid and that the scene should be openminded, have various attitudes etc....then he is one of those I don't want to see at our gigs.” *Same as above*
- 1.10** “We had journalists who visited us in the rehearsal and that confirmed that this was something that was completely different and very wrong and hard and aggressive.” *Manheim in Patterson (2013:130)*

Escalation as Transgression (2)

- 2.1.** “It's a big trend today to look totally normal with these goddam jogging suits and sing about "important matters", and call it Death Metal. These people have betrayed the scene. Death Metal is for brutal people who are capable of killing.” *Euronymous in Slayer # 8, Feb/March 1991*
- 2.2.** “It’s time to say f**k off to the system.” *Euronymous in Orcustus Mag, p.37, 1992*
- 2.3.** “There is nothing that is too raw, disgusting or morbid.” *Euronymous in Close-up Magazine, 1992*
- 2.4.** “Everyone is so f***in’ society conscious, be kind to animals, take care of the world. Aaarrrghh, I hate it! What the hell has this got to do with death(metal)?”...*Faust in Daemonium Aeturnus Zine # 2, 1992*
- 2.5.** “There is NOTHING which is too sick, evil or perverted.” *Euronymous in Kill Yourself! Mag # 2, Aug 1993.* “I have no problem with killing someone in cold blood. Especially if I can get away with it.” *Same as above*
- 2.6.** “It’s always great when someone dies – it doesn’t matter who.” *Euronymous in TSV # 15, p. 7, 1993*

2.7. “I’ve found out over the years that those powers are very dangerous and they can get out of control...It very rapidly got out of hand and into more criminal stuff.” *Hellhammer in Sounds of Death Magazine, 1993*

2.8. “We’d take our lyrics and try to live them as much as possible, which didn’t end well. Once you got into that whole downward spiral of being crazy and extreme, it was bound to dissolve. It was like a cult; one person would spur everyone on and it became this loud, screeching feedback effect where it was bound to end in insanity.” *Mortiis in 1991: the year that black metal blew up the world By Chris Chantler, Metal Hammer, July 20, 2017*

2.9. “I thought that was very cool. Because that was such an extreme act that we still had a long way to exceed in Kristiansand. So he received a high star, not only among us, but of course among many others in the scene.” *Tchort (Green Carnation, Emperor).*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uX7QTV_Zvpo

2.10 “I have no regrets for what I did. Concerning my present view on church-burning. I still stand by the concept of it, but whether or not it should continue is another issue. We have proven our point a long time ago, and there is no point to prove it further on..... it was done by a strong group of anti-christians youth, who went to the most extreme and shocked the sheep-like society with a strong symbolic act.” *Samoth interviewed by Faust, 1996*

2.11. “Here, in Norway, the constitution is based on Christian values. Everything, the government, school system...Everything that was extreme, was good. Everything that could upset a Christian was good. Behind it was rebellion...[Black metal] was more in opposition to people in power... Of course we used Christianity as an enemy in the expression, but if you lived in Norway you would understand why...” *Manheim in Patterson (2013:131)*

2.12. “[Norway] was very religious. Everything that was fun was not allowed. Alcohol, fireworks, pornography, shotguns. Everything. We started collecting illegal films the Norwegian government had banned like *The Evil Dead* and *Bad Taste*. We were just into everything that was illegal, against society... But we were doing it for being wrong! We wanted to be against society...” *Necrobutcher in Vice Magazine*

2.13. “I view my arson as an extreme act towards the church and society. That was the intention.” *Samoth in Moynihan and Soderlind (2003: 100)*

Escalation Through Self-Selection (3)

3.1. “When you go deeper into it, some people realize that this has gone way too far. And that’s where the roads go different ways. Some people are prepared to step into the unknown and explore the dark for real.” *Jon Nödtveidt – Dissection, Sweden.*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzAzHOv92FQ>

3.2. “The point is, we’re just selling too many records.” *Nocturno Culto in Rock Hard, April 1993.* “I think it’s okay for churches to be burnt.” *Same as above*

3.3. “I feel like it’s OK that bands have become mainstream as it’s opened up new markets for us. When you are in a band you have to make thousands of choices. You can make all good choices or a lot of bad choices like a band like *Cradle of Filth*, it’s not like you did one choice that was bad or good, it’s thousands of decisions that result in a band with high sales and no credibility, or low sales and high credibility. Now choose, people.” *Fenriz in Patterson (2013:319)*

3.4. “I didn’t care much about the value of human life. Nothing was too extreme. That there were burned churches and people were killed, I didn’t react at all...I have very much respect for extreme things. Things that are extreme are fascinating. It was one step further away from normal daily life.” *Ihsahn in Moynihan and Soderlind (2003: 99)*

3.5. “When we saw – in 1992 – that all the failures from the death metal scene all of a sudden wanted to play black metal instead, making black metal the new trend, we did everything we could to make black metal too extreme for everybody else. By doing so we imagined that we could scare large groups of posers away from black metal. So, we used imagery and a language so extreme no sensible human beings out there would in theory want anything to do with us. This worked fine, of course, only we didn’t realize that there are so many insanely stupid human beings out there who still wanted to be “evil” and wanted to commit crimes to prove it to us, just to be accepted into our select group. Every time that we saw that others still “liked” us and wanted to become our friends, we had to step up the madness, so to speak, and go even further to alienate ourselves from them.” *Grishnackh in Patterson (2013:164-165)*

Escalation Through Exclusion (4)

4.1. “But beware the true death metal bands from the false one; to be a black metal freak is not something you suddenly become, it’s something you have always been.... So all the bands who suddenly find out that they must become death metal, should fuck off.” *Euronymous in Thanatography, May, 1990*

4.2. “The scene is dead. I’d just like to save the rest of it and create a new one with only brutal people. Everyone else – f**k off.” *Euronymous in Slayer # 8, Feb/March 1991*

4.3. “So to begin with, we will sell everything that falls under “metal”, including heavy and so on, this will get us started and as time goes by we will remove title after title, and in that way we will work our way towards the evil goal.” *Letter from Euronymous post-Dead suicide, Helvete, 1991*

4.4. “To isolate is what we must do to make black metal pure! If you want to stop an eventual black metal trend; stop writing a zine and isolate!....Stay dark and occult. We have fired members of our band.” *Fenriz in Daemonium Aeturnis Zine # 1, 1991*

4.5. “I’m talking about following a way of life here, and all other can just fuck off.” *Euronymous in Psycopathological zine, Late 1991 or 1992*

4.6. “Normal idiots should stay the fuck away from this record. DON’T BUY IT!” *Euronymous in Close-up Magazine, 1992*

Escalation and Evaluation (5)

5.1. “My oldest brother-in-law lost two jobs just for knowing me...We were attacked. So many of us were attacked. I remember on my way home I was attacked by five people who beat the shit out of me, and nobody really cared. And this was prior to a lot of that stuff happening; this was just for wearing those clothes.” *Ihsahn in Kerrang Magazine.*
<https://www.kerrang.com/features/ihsahn-a-black-metal-artist-allowing-someone-to-tell-them-what-to-do-nobody-wants-that/>

5.2. “The church fires didn’t awaken more than a huge media hysteria and even stronger prejudice among the common people, which in the end was quite negative for us. It also led to a black metal hype, based upon the media who are well-known for sensationalizing everything.” *Samoth in Moynihan and Soderlind (2003: 100)*

5.3. “The effect (of Euronymous’ death) is that a lot more people were attracted to black metal because it was in the newspapers...and they thought it was cool. There were so many new bands that started in 1993.” *Metalion in Moynihan and Soderlind (2003: 114)*

5.4. “I don’t find it weird that Dimmu Borgir are so successful, what is weird is that Dimmu Borgir can actually pass as black metal and then people believe it.” *Fenriz in Patterson (2013: 319)*

5.5. “I believe all the things that happened in Norway gave the whole black metal scene a lot of publicity and Emperor, being one of the front bands, also got its share of promotion.” *Ihsahn interviewed by Faust, 1996*

5.6. “I think the history of it draws people in. The murder and all the mystique around it.” *Kenneth, owner of Neseblod Records, in Norwegian American*
