Blacker than Death: Recollecting the “Black Turn” in Metal Aesthetics

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Abstract
This essay illuminates the construction of a newer, blacker, and heavier recollection of metal’s aesthetic potential. By analyzing recordings and popular press articles, and reading these through the historical and theoretical observations of academic metal studies, I argue that the precondition of 1990s black metal was the exhaustion of death metal aesthetics coinciding with the emergence of a more international metal scene. In the 90s, death metal—once undisputedly the heaviest of all metals—had become unspectacular, too familiar, and as a result less heavy. Innovating a sound heavier than death entailed a subcultural reorientation towards recordings forgotten under death metal’s hegemonic moment. In retracing black metal’s sonic origins, one finds that one of the most remarkable things about its success was that black metal had previously been the sound of amateurism, incompetence, and failure. The following essay examines how such an aesthetic turn takes place.

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