\*\*\*Draft: Please Cited Published Version\*\*\*

**Brutal Truth: Modern(ist) Aesthetics and Death Metal**

Benjamin W. McCraw

University of South Carolina Upstate

[mccrawb@uscupstate.edu](mailto:mccrawb@uscupstate.edu)

Abstract:

Here, I explore a modernist aesthetics of death metal. First, I briefly describe a few themes that characterize some modern art, without any claim that they are necessary, sufficient, or exhaustive. The goal is to obtain a set of themes that might be set against similar themes characteristic of death metal. This is the task in the second half of the paper. In particular, I argue that (some) modernist art and death metal share themes centered on transgressively breaking with the past, pursue their conception of the truth, eliminate elements in their art form to purity them, and attack the art/non-art or music/non-music distinction. I contend that centering on death metal vocals reflects these themes. Death metal growls, like some modernist art, transgresses on past vocal traditions, tells us important truths, eliminates traditional concepts/techniques of signing, and undermines the singing/noise distinction.

I need to stay alive

To shape the archetype

Define the undefined

A demiurge at war

Breaking laws and painting outside the frame

I mark old grounds with my new trace

Forever disobey

Pissing on the score that cages my dare

I forge the soundtrack of your decay

--Fleshgod Apocalypse, *Pissing on the Score*

They shout at us, “Your literature will not be beautiful! We will no longer have verbal symphonies, lulling harmonies, soothing cadences!” Let that much be clear! And thank goodness! We, on the other hand, will use all the *brutal sounds*, all the *expressive cries of the violent life that surrounds us*. We will courageously be that which is “ugly” in literature, *murdering solemnity* wherever it is found. Come off it! You can drop that air of high and mighty priests when I’m talking! You must spit on the Altar of Art every day! We are entering the boundless domains of free intuition. After free verse, finally words-in-freedom! (Marinetti quoted in Eco 2007, 370; emphasis added)

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s words, exhorting the advent of “futurist literature”, are as brutal and violent as the art which they prophesize. When one considers the aggression in Marinetti’s manifesto, one might hear a certain resonance with another aggressive, widely recognized genre: death metal. In this paper, I’ll show that this resonance is not coincidental. I shall argue that many key maneuvers, themes, commitments, etc. of modernist art find substantive connection in death metal. This paper, in other words, will explore a modernist aesthetics of death metal. (Or, perhaps, it’s the other way around: a death metal aesthetics of modernist art.)

What might result from this aesthetic exploration? Why might it matter? Robert Kraut (2005) asks “why does jazz matter to aesthetic theory?” One could ask a similar question of our task: why do death metal aesthetics matter (to modernist art or *vice versa*)? Kraut’s epigraph—from Robin George Collingwood—is instructive: “[t]he aesthetician, if I understand his business aright, is not concerned with dateless realities lodged in some metaphysical heaven, but with the facts of his own place and time” (quoted in Kraut 2005, 3). For many, death metal is part of their place and time. Thus, Collingwood calls for death metal to be open to aesthetic examination. Further, Richard Shusterman (1991) takes aesthetics to task for the “denigration of popular art or mass culture” (203). In similar fashion, we might object that a violent, brutal genre like death metal might be neglected by aestheticians. What’s more, Shusterman suggests that those who may denigrate the serious aesthetic analysis of “mass culture” aren’t quite so benign: “[t]he delegitimating critique of popular art, though typically pursued under the banner of safeguarding our aesthetic satisfaction, thus represents an ascetic renunciation, one of many forms that intellectuals since Plato have employed to subordinate the unruly power and appeal of the aesthetic” (1991, 203). Shuster takes to task many traditionally-minded aestheticians’ attempt at subordination by sketching an aesthetics of funk. Here, we might attempt the same maneuver for death metal.

As we’ll soon see in sections 1.1 and 2.1, many modernist artists and death metal musicians transgress what they take to be received, traditional structures and norms (in art and music). With Shusterman’s words, we might think of this paper as attempting the same maneuver against any of these traditional-minded, subordinating aesthetic views. An aesthetics of funk and an aesthetics of death metal challenge Marinetti’s “high and mighty priests”. A task like the one pursued here won’t thereby merely be *about* a modernist or death metal aesthetic: it will *enact* a modernist/death metal aesthetic (by breaking with the same traditional aesthetics that Shusterman calls out). This result occurs by combining Collingwood’s call for aesthetics to meet us where and when we are with Shusterman’s legitimizing task in taking popular art seriously as an object of aesthetic analysis. Taking death metal seriously as a legitimate target of aesthetic investigation, as we’re doing here, performs the same crucial role that Collingwood advises and Shusterman thinks necessary to resist the subordinating danger of certain traditional aesthetic prejudices. Comparing modernist aesthetics and death metal can contribute to the broader project of examining the aesthetics of popular arts in a wide range of forms, including its “unruly power” that some may aim to subordinate.

Let me be clear: I’m not claiming that death metal is alone in this attempt to transgress. In my view, one could plausibly say the same for thrash metal’s rise as out-extreming the popular glam/hair metal of the 80s or the received metal tradition typified by earlier genre defining bands like Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, etc. As thrash, for instance, moved to go *faster* than these genres, one might see death metal as trying to go *more brutal* or *heavier* than thrash. And, as Ian Reyes (2013) has argued, other genres like black metal come about by attempting to out-extreme death metal. Though I am focused, in this paper, on death metal’s connection to some central modernist themes, there’s no reason to think that death metal musicians alone have a transgressive aim. Insofar as black metal stems from death metal, it will also inherit a concern for the same modernist themes that I’ve argued hold for death metal. So we can expect an aesthetics of death metal to be prior to black metal.

Though there is increasing academic work on metal in general and death metal more specifically, there remains an absence of philosophical works on death metal. Taking death metal seriously has significant inroads in social science (see, e.g. Purcell 2003), popular media studies (see, e.g., Phillipov 2012) and musicology (see, e.g. Wallmark (2018), Berger (1999), Harrell (1994), Yavuz (2017), and Hillier (2018)). Yet death metal has had little incursion in (philosophical) aesthetics. There are a few philosophical works in aesthetics on heavy metal (e.g. Gracyk (2016), Miller (2022), and Hawley (2023)) but none of them analyze *death* metal. Thus, engaging death metal and (philosophical) aesthetics, as is the focus of this paper, intersects two topics that have relatively few published connections. We see academic interest in death metal in the works above and, in aesthetics, a long standing, abiding philosophical field. The current paper shows that they can engage with each other. Hopefully, this contribution can help open up a point of intersection for two areas of research that are ripe for more work.

Let me make one thing I am *not* claiming clear from the very beginning. I don’t claim that anydeath metal musician makes any music intentionallyinformed by modernist art. (I’m sure that at least someonehas at some point in nearly four decades of death metal, but that’s not something I’ll officially endorse. The technical death metal band, Behold the Arctopus, for example, claims to be influenced by Schoenberg. Instead, I think that characteristic features of death metal do in fact substantively intersect with many important modernist themes even if no one intends for this intersection to occur.

§ 1: Modern Art

Here, I will not attempt to give any analysis or discussion of any of the historical trends within modernist art. That is, my aim is explicitly ahistorical. The goal, in this section, is to give a list of very general and defeasible trends or, better, themes that can help us reflect on some modernist art. My point is to make some of the broad, general features of some modern themes clearer so that we can see how they connect to death metal. Here are the themes:

1. Novelty/Transgression/Breaking-with-the-Past/Rebellion
2. Pursue/display/reveal the truth (even if ugly)
3. Reductionism/Eliminativism
4. Attack/dissolve the art/non-art distinction

I’ll take each in turn and (very) briefly clarify what each means, insofar as it gives one insight into some of the aims or themes of (some) modernist art and give some support for it.

*1.1 Transgression*

Modernist art’s association with novelty, originality, breaking with or rebelling against traditional art themes, etc. probably marks out the most obvious and distinctive theme.[[1]](#footnote-2) For David Cottington, modern art and the avant-garde “are almost interchangeable: ‘modern art’ is, by definition, ‘avant-garde’ in its qualities, aspirations, and associations, while what ‘the avantgarde’ makes is, necessarily, ‘modern art’” (2005, 3; emphasis in the original omitted). The ‘avant-garde’ connotes that which is new, original, and revolutionary.[[2]](#footnote-3) Applying this general notion to modernist art, we can see in modernist/avant-garde “art practices whose self-conscious *transgressions of prevailing assumptions* of what was aesthetically, morally, or politically acceptable” with these transgressions central to how many modernist/avant-garde artists see their project (Cottington 2005, 5-6; emphasis added). Modernist artists shaped their “art into a weapon for critiquing the dominant visual codes of modern capitalist society” (Cottington 2005, 23). J. P. Hodin sees the “spirit” of modern art in what results from the modernist rejection of the traditional, received art traditions, themes, culture, etc.

The real break came with *Cubism*, the definition of which in a nutshell is the determination to *abandon* the Renaissance tradition entirely and try to conceive a *new idea* of representation, composition and construction, a *completely novel way* of organizing the plane surface inside a picture frame or, in sculpture, the *revolutionizing* of the traditional way of conceiving what is the sculptural. (1961, 178; emphases added)

Here, we have the notions of novelty combined with and informing the motivation to revolutionize or decisively break with traditional art categories. Similarly, Roxie Davis Mack notes that modernist art is “a source of the unprecedented, the underivative, the iconoclastic, the entirely new” (1994, 343). In other places, Hodin’s language for this break is much stronger: “[the] criterion of modernity lies in the *violent rejection* of the tradition of European art, i.e., the tenets of Greek classical humanist art from the fifth century B.C. onwards, its continuation and variation in Roman art, its Renaissance in Italy” (1967, 181; emphasis added). This “violent” artistic revolution results in “the destruction of the European roots of our art tradition” (1967, 182). One point about modernist art, which will help us connect our discussion here to death metal later, bears emphasis: modernist art isn’t just a rejection of the tradition. This is true of *any* original or novel approach, theory, or genre of art. On the views we’ve discussed, the modernist rejection of tradition takes on a “violent” or “transgressive” tone in both content and form. One can break with tradition without doing so “violently” or “transgressively”; it’s these *ways in which modernism breaks with tradition*—i.e. its transgressive function—that will be important to our later discussion of death metal.

*1.2 Truth*

A second important aim of modernist art is to purse the truth—at least the truth as the artist conceives of it. For the discussion here, we can think of this theme in two compatible variants: art forms stay *true to themselves*, and second, art must tell important *truths about the world*, even if the truth is ugly, absurd, or even brutal. And, what’s more, if form must follow content, as I explain below, then the artwork *itself* must be truthful, even if it means challenging traditional aesthetic forms in that medium. Thus, on the first variant, telling the truth means the form of the art must conform to (and only to) the essence of that art form. And, on the second variant, if the truth the artwork aims to tell is ugly, absurd, or brutal, then the form of the art itself must be ugly, absurd, or brutal.

Turning to the first variation of the truth theme, we can see where some modernist artists aim to tell the truth about the essence of their particular medium. According to Clement Greenberg,

[r]ealistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment—were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly. (Greenberg 1982, 6)

Gordon Graham draws a lesson about modernist painting similar to Greenberg’s: “Cubism in painting abandoned the great techniques of perspective, foreshortening and modelling in an effort not only to depart completely from representational art (in a way that Impressionism had only partially done), but to reveal the essential illusion that underlies it—the illusion that three dimensions can be reduced to two” (2005, 186). On this view, traditional art aims at realism to the point of illusion—it presents itself as though it were some object other than the two-dimensional, painted canvas. Yet, modern art wears its being art—i.e. a painting—on its face. There’s no illusion, just the truth about what it is. The form of the painting, the technique, etc. all reinforce the truth that it is a *painting*. Similarly one might see in Marcel Duchamp’s readymades a push towards truth in art. A readymade is an object, “mass produced and commercially available” that is put on display as art which “invite[s] a radical reevalution of art” (Judovitz 2010, xv) insofar as the *art*work simply *is* a common artifact typically produced for non-aesthetic use. Examples of Duchamp’s readymades include a urinal (*Fountain*), a bottle rack (*Bottle Rack*), and a snow shovel (*In Advance of the Broken Arm*). Why might one take an ordinary artifact as an art work?

By displaying *actual objects*, rather than *representations of objects*, Duchamp is undermining the mimetic impulses associated with conventional painting. The task of painting to represent the world is now literalized in the presentation of actual objects, whose prosaic and anartistic character challenge our very understanding of the meaning of art as a representational system. (Judovitz 2002, 32; emphasis added).

Readymades present the literal, non-representational truth about the art object: they are simply a urinal, bottle rack, etc.

But this push for truth isn’t just about the artwork/form itself. Some art aims to tell the ugly truth about the world and not just about the art(world) itself. We can see this, for instance, in the Theatre of the Absurd.

The theatre of the absurd … has been called the theatricalization of existentialism. No [character](https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199574193.001.0001/acref-9780199574193-e-739) discusses the philosophy; characters exist within it and embody it. Absurd things happen and they know not why. They desire to escape but know they cannot. They sometimes talk of death but it is usually denied them. They exist in a perpetual state of meaninglessness. […] The unsettling form used in absurdist drama is a reflection and symptom of a society which has lost value and meaning. Stories cannot be told within traditional or recognizable forms; a play's action is in the image or the word; character motivations are, at best, opaque; there is no dramatic conflict. The world of the absurd has lost the unifying factors of logic, reason, and rationality—those qualities so admired in the French tradition deriving from Descartes—which is why the stage cannot maintain the qualities of [realism](https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199574193.001.0001/acref-9780199574193-e-3271). (Singleton 2010, 3)

So, modernist dramatists, too, pursue the(ir) truth, but the truth accented here is not just confined to drama—the truth is about the world.[[3]](#footnote-4) If the world and/or one’s life is absurd, unintelligible, or “unsettling”, then some artists take their art to tell those truths, being brutally honest. What we see in this variant on the truth theme is that art must pursue and show the truth even if, in the case of absurdism, the truth is less than optimistic. Obviously, one may disagree with the absurdist about the senselessness of life (i.e. that the truth they aim to present is *really true*), but the point remains that this art *takes itself* to be in the truth-telling game no matter if we find the truth appealing or disgusting. If the truth is ugly, then art might become ugly. If the truth is absurd, then art might need to become absurd is well. If the truth is brutal, then art will tell the brutal truth.

*1.3 Reductionism*

One way to think about the first variation on the truth theme—i.e. that it must tell the truth of that medium’s essence—can help us transition to the next theme: the reductionism/eliminativism in some modernist art. For Greenberg—the famous modernist art critic—“[t]he essence of modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” (1982, 5). Leaving Greenberg’s Kantian spin on the aim(s) of modernism aside, we see that, on this view, each artistic discipline will use its *characteristic* methods to “entrench” itself more firmly in that discipline. What, more exactly, does this mean?

What had to be exhibited and made explicit was that which was unique and irreducible not only in art in general, but also in *each particular art*. Each art had to determine, through the *operations particular to itself*, the effects peculiar and *exclusive* to itself. By doing this each art would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of this area all the more secure. (Greenberg 1982, 5; emphasis added)

Some modernist artists, thus, take their artistic task to find what’s particular or exclusive to it to find out what’s irreducible about it. How can that be done?

It quickly emerged that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was *unique to the nature of its medium*. The task of self-criticism became to *eliminate* from the effects of each art and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered ‘*pure*’ and in its *‘purity’* find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. (Greenberg 1982, 5-6; emphasis added)

The modern artist must eliminate from their discipline whatever is not unique to it—i.e. whatever might belong to another artistic discipline. By eliminating whatever is not characteristic of, say, painting, the modernist painter can purify painting and, connecting this with the previous theme, tell the truth about what painting is. Because “[f]latness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition painting shared with no other art,…Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else…[w]hat it has abandoned in principle is the representation of the kind of space that recognizable, three-dimensional objects can inhabit” (Greenberg 1982, 6). This is Greenberg’s interpretation of how modern painting led, on one track, to becoming abstract. Artists, in varying ways (and perhaps for varying motives), eliminated various elements of painting that were not unique to it. The appearance of three-dimensionality, for instance, is shared by sculpture. For example: Mondrian’s grid-like paintings help point to the lack of three-dimensionality captured by some modernist art. Representation, crucially, is not unique to painting and may be eliminated. The ideal of representation can be rejected in one way by presenting an object or event but in a way that varies considerably with the kinds of imitation typically found in traditional art. Here, we might place Picasso’s Cubism. Or one might avoid representing any object whatsoever. Touchstones for this approach might be Malevich’s *Black Square*, Rothko’s blocks of color, or Pollock’s paint splatter. Or, to imagine a third way, one might take the rejection of representation to require a movement towards painting that is more literal. Lichtenstein’s *Brushstroke* (series) looks, quite literally, like what it is—a brushstroke. Painting is, speaking strictly and *truthfully*, paint on canvas. So, for some modern artists, the artwork should eliminate whatever it is *not* (*qua* painting) to be clear about what it is (=paint on canvas).

*1.4 Art and Non-Art*

Our final theme centers on the modernist dissolution or problematizing of the distinction between art and non-art objects. Richard Hertz (1978) describes this as an “axiom” of modern art: “[It] is a well-known fact that many contemporary artists make no distinction between art and non-art” (237). For Hertz, this axiom can have a “conservative” and a “radical” interpretation. With the former, there is a distinction between art and non-art, but it’s only relative to a particular theory—there is no theory-less perspective to judge whether some object is art or non-art (237-238). On the more radical interpretation, the axiom states that there is, in fact, no distinction between the art object and the non-art object at all (238). Hertz takes the dissolution of the art/non-art distinction as “the logical outcome of theorizing about art in the twentieth century” (242). Graham connects the transgressive theme of modernist art with the current one:

some of the art described as avant-garde has set out to be revolutionary by throwing doubt on this very boundary, the art/non-art distinction itself. It has set out to question the very idea of ‘art’ as something set apart from ordinary life and experience. Its intention in doing so is to break the dominance of a ‘canon’ of masterpieces, whether in literature, music or the visual arts. The rejection, destruction even, of the canonical in art challenges the authority of the art establishment, part of whose self-understanding is the ability and the right to determine what is and is not artistically valuable. (2005, 187)

Hodin, as well, sees the modernist destruction of the art/non-art distinction as a reflection of its revolutionary aims: “[w]e live in a time in which the non-art quality of art has been solemnly stressed (Dadaism, Surrealism) and anti-art has been proclaimed; when all notions of traditional technique, of composition, of the concept of the work of art and its function have been shaken” (1967, 185). Modern art is characteristically liberal about what can be conceived as art. Graham cites, naturally, Duchamp’s readymades but also the (non-)music of John Cage and Warhol’s film *Sleep*, which “consisted of nothing other than a real-time film of a man asleep for six hours” (2005, 188). Many take Duchamp’s *Fountain*, for instance, as a decisive point that art can be something one can quite literally urinate on. (Here one calls to mind the song, “Pissing on the Score”, by the symphonic death metal band, Fleshgod Apocalypse.) Once this move is made, it’s hard to see how one can draw a principled line privileging certain types of objects as putative artworks while leaving others without any possibility of being made into art (in whatever way one construes how the “making into art” process might work).

*1.5 Interconnecting the Themes*

Before we can move on, in the next section, to seeing how death metal substantively intersects these themes, we can do a bit more to see how they may cohere. Taking our first theme as central—i.e. the novel, revolutionary, or transgressive aim of modern art—we might be able to see how the rest might hang together. One way that modern art can (and did) transgress some of the traditional aesthetic categories is to dissolve the art/non-art categories into each other. Similarly, by eliminating each unessential element of an art’s discipline, we end up with art that eschews any of the realistic, representational, and, in some cases, *beautiful* aims characteristic of the traditional art that many modernists reject. For the traditional picture, the possibility of *ugly* art is a contradiction in terms, since art is by its very nature beautiful.[[4]](#footnote-5) But art which eliminates features not essential to it tells the truth about what it is, even if this truth isn’t beautiful (or perhaps even ugly).

These interconnections lead to one final point that can help segue into the next section (on death metal). If the forgoing discussion is correct, we can offer an answer to David E. W. Fenner’s question, “Why was there so much ugly art in the twentieth century”?[[5]](#footnote-6) Again, take as central the modernist theme of transgression/rebellion. For Matthew Kieran, this art is “essentially negative in a deep sense” (1997, 393). On Kieran’s view, modernist art, like Duchamp’s mass produced, commercial readymades “make sense” only as an “attempt to refute the presumption that good art must manifest an essential property or transcendent value” (392-393). The “sense” of some modernist art, then, can only occur in the context of a classical tradition that it transgresses or revolutionizes. Modernist art, *qua* transgressive, makes “sense” as nonsense *relative to the classical “sense”* it attacks. So, if some modernist art looks like “nonsense”, it’s nonsense only in light of its transgression on the “sense” of the traditional conception of art that modernism characteristically rejects/attacks. What’s important in Kieran’s account for *our* purposes is how this point leads to a way to explain the “ugliness” of modern art. Given the transgressive function of modern art and the traditional conception’s aesthetic prizing of beauty, “features such as ugliness and incoherence may possess intrinsic aesthetic value” due to their “parasitic”, transgressive function (Kieran 1997, 393). Some of the other themes discussed reinforce this answer. If some modernist art aims to eliminate all of the non-essential features of its medium, it’s easy to see how, for instance, abstract art, reduced to bare geometry or unadorned paint on canvas, might be “ugly”, relative to the “beauty” of traditional representationalist or realist art. Further, if some art works destroy the art/non-art distinction, then decidedly un-beautiful objects, at least on the traditional conception, (e.g. a urinal, Brillo boxes, etc.) can be ugly *to make good on the dissolution of the art/non-art divide*. Finally, some truths may be “ugly”. Graham describes the Theater of the Absurd’s dramatic form as reflecting the nonsense of life: if one takes life to be absurd, ugly, or even brutal, then we should expect one’s art to manifest that absurdity, ugliness, and brutality in both form and content. It’s helpful to note here that the truths that some modern artists want to tell occur in the context of the Age of Anxiety, two world wars, genocides, economic collapse, etc. In that context, it’s no surprise that some people take it to be deeply true that life is absurd, ugly, or brutal—even if we may disagree with their assessment. Our themes can explain Fenner’s question along various lines. Ugly art can be seen to stem from some modern artists’ themes in making art. Such art may be ugly, but, for some artists, we might need ugly art to tell the brutal truth.

§ 2: Death Metal and Modern Art Themes

We find similar ugliness in death metal. Consider the following descriptions of death metal by musicians central to the advent and development of the genre:

Chuck Schuldiner (Death) “My main goal was to bash out the most brutal riffs ever with the most brutal guitar sound ever”. (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 61)

David Vincent (Morbid Angel, Vltimas) “The music was really brutal—everything that we did, the approach to everything that we did in life was with that same brutality”. (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 80)

Tomi Koivusaari (Abhorrence, Amorphis) “We were trying to find the most brutal and dirty guitar sound…”. (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 124)

Jeff Walker (Carcass) *Reek of Putrefaction* “just sounded so shitty to us. But that’s part of the attraction—because it just sounds so raw.” (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 143)

Dan Lilker (Brutal Truth) Death metal “has to be something that’s ugly”. (quoted in Wallmark 2018, 73)

King Fowley (Deceased) Death “metal ain’t meant to be pretty”. (quoted in Purcell 2003, 188)

What many early death metal musicians find attractive and, perhaps, even definitive of the genre is a sound that is brutal, dirty, raw, ugly, or even *shitty*. Thus, we might ask Fenner’s question of death metal: why was/is it so ugly?

*2.1 Transgression*

As with “ugly” modernist art, we can approach the answer to this question via a theme of transgression. In both the academic discussion of death metal *and* self-description by death metal artists, themes of transgression, revolt, resistance, etc. are overwhelmingly central.

Metal fans “define extreme metal against a mainstream”. (Allett 2012, 166)

“*transgression* and *taboos* are an inherent part of the territorial motifs featuring in [extreme metal] and both describe (non-)verbal behaviours that go beyond—or rather: challenge—what people are supposed to do or find appropriate”. (Kirner-Ludwig & Wohlfarth 2018, 405)

“…heavy metal oscillates between the opportunity to be not just a space for musical innovation but also holds promise in maintaining a critical and resistant stance as a form of popular culture”. (Scott 2016, 20)

“extreme metal represents a certain kind of aestheticization of transgression”. (Unger 2016, 40)

Death metal “traffics in transgressive risk and violence…”. (Wallmark 2018, 69)

“because death metal represents such a radical departure from the mainstream of popular music, and from the genres that have typically been the focus of popular music studies, a different understanding of musical meaning and pleasure is needed”. (Phillipov 2012, 53)

“death metal’s vocal style” leads to a “radical reorientation of listening”. (Phillipov 2012, 54)

Metal’s transgressive function and potential is well documented and often emphasized as characteristic of the genre. Against what, exactly, do death metal musicians take their music to transgress and how might that transgression help us understand how or why death metal is ugly (brutal, shitty, etc.)? The first answer is easily noted in many of the citations above: death metal musicians work to transgress what they take to be “mainstream” or “popular culture/music”. Yet this answer doesn’t go far enough. It’s plausible to think that the transgressing of mainstream or pop culture characterizes *any* version of metal (not just death metal) and other genres completely outside of heavy metal altogether (e.g. hip-hop, ‘outlaw’ country, etc.). Two points help us go further: first, as with any genre, death metal doesn’t arise in a vacuum. It stems from heavy metal bands or artists that, while not *death* metal, helped influence and spur its growth. Second, note the superlatives in the quotes above: those musicians wanted to produce what they see as the *most* brutal sounds. Here’s the picture that arises: death metal musicians, especially in the early stages, see influences of brutality, extremity, and so on in other music but *want to go further* in their extremity for what they perceive as the apex of transgression.. Consider Kam Lee, member of groundbreaking death metal bands Death and Massacre, on the original impetus towards more extreme (eventual *death*) metal:

I liked [Mercyful] Fate, but I never liked the high-pitched vocal stuff. But one day Frederick [DeLillo, later named “Rick Rozz”] came to be and said “I got this band you’ve gotta listen to. It’s like Motorhead, but *even more extreme*.” And he happened to bring in *Black Metal* from Venom, and that sealed it for me. I was like, “Yes, we can do music like this.” (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 58; emphasis added)

Possessed who, along with Death, lay claim to originate death metal, have a similar start. Their vocalist, Jeff Becerra, recalls that “Mike Torroa [Possessed guitarist] said, ‘Try to be like Cronos from Venom and try to be like Slayer’s Tom Araya.’ He said ‘Just go *rrrooaarr*!’ So I pretty much just yelled my guts out. The first time I ever sang, it sounded too heavy” (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 62). The two founders of death metal, Death and Possessed, accordingly saw themselves as following a line taken by earlier metal bands (namely Venom and Slayer) but extending it—making their music *more* of what those earlier bands were doing. Bands like Venom and Slayer aren’t death metal bands, but they certainly transgressed against the sound, content, image, atmosphere, etc. of pop culture and music. So, what we see with death metal is a *furthering* or *extending* of that transgression: it transgresses the mainstream by transgressing it *even more* than their fore-bands. Early death metal musicians seem to think that the earlier or ante-death metal bands don’t follow through on their transgressive potential: it takes *death* metal to reject pop culture to its fullest extent. Even the name of the genre—“death metal”—reflects the desire to out-extreme earlier bands. Although the first use of the term as a genre is debated, Possessed’s Becerra claims to have baptized the genre:

I came up with that during an English class in high school. I figured speed metal and black metal were already taken…so I said ‘death metal’ because that word wasn’t associated with Venom or anybody else. It wasn’t even redefining it. We were playing this music and we were trying to be the heaviest thing on the face of the planet. We just wanted to piss people off and send everybody home. And that can’t be, like, flower metal. (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 62-63)

This claim combines much of our discussion so far: death metal is transgressive (it pisses people off), it’s meant to be more extreme than its influences (the heav*iest* thing on the planet), and it claims to be something novel or original (a new name for a new genre). The drive to transgress and innovate—themes we’ve highlighted above with modernist art—pushes death metal towards new extremes of brutality and heaviness. Pop music is catchy, melodic, polished, and aims for musical beauty. The most extreme transgression of that sort of music will, thereby, be non-melodic, raw, brutal, and perhaps even ugly. “Pretty” death metal, on this view, would fail to transgress. It would lack the brutality, heft, and extremity necessary to revolt against pop culture. If there’s to be death metal at all, then it must be ugly—even *brutally ugly*.

We must note a complication here. I’ve spoken of death metal’s ugliness *tout court*. Yet some find ugliness (either in general or in death metal particularly) aesthetically pleasing.[[6]](#footnote-7) Many death metal fans need not really consider even the most brutal death metal as ugly. Death metal may be brutally “sublime” (Smialek 2015, 149-154).[[7]](#footnote-8) What’s important, for us, is not whether death metal really is ugly in any objective sense. Instead, it matters that it’s ugly relative to traditional/popular standards. Recall from 1.5’s discussion of Kiernan’s claim that modern art’s “ugliness and incoherence” is “nonsense” only relative to the “sense” of the classical art that it aims to transgress. An ugliness, relative to the perceived beauty of traditional/popular music, is part of the essential core of death metal’s central transgressive function.

What we shall examine is how the transgressive function of death metal vocals, in particular, provide substantial connections with the modernist themes discussed above.[[8]](#footnote-9) Many death metal musicians take growling or harsh vocals as characteristic of death metal in general.[[9]](#footnote-10) Zachary Wallmark goes so far as to claim that the death growl is a “shibboleth” of the genre (2018, 73). I have little doubt that one can make the case paralleling modernist art and death metal including more than just the vocals but, due to their centrality in the genre and for space’s sake, they shall be the main focus of what follows.

*2.2 Reductionism*

Above, we connected the transgressive and reductionist/eliminitivist elements of modernist art: some modernist artworks transgress against traditional aesthetic categories or judgments by eliminating those elements. Death metal vocals—growls—can be interpreted reductionistically as well: “Typically, extreme metal vocals *transgress* ideas of melody, timbre, and technique traditionally valued as the hallmark of good singing” (Unger 2016, 18; emphasis added) and “the death metal voice can be characterized as possessing a *non-representational* power that resists conventional evaluative and critical approaches to popular music” (Phillipov 2012, 54; emphasis added). Note that Phillipov sets the non-representative function of death metal vocals against *conventional* standards. Those competent in the genre’s various stylistic norms, sounds, and codes might easily and often understand the lyrics. But, by reference to traditional melodic music, such vocals will be (to varying degrees) unintelligible. And this is often one of the main complaints that non-death metal fans tend to lay against the genre. Growling, rather than singing, eliminates many of the traditional hallmarks of ‘good’ music: melody, intelligibility, etc. Yet it doesn’t eliminate everything. Though the non-death metal fan might construe the vocals as something like a mere scream, growling requires technique, if it’s to be done well and safely.[[10]](#footnote-11) This point, too, echoes modernist art. Many central modernist artworks might appear as if produced without any technique, yet this isn’t the case. Similarly, death growls sound like “just screaming” absent any technique or skill. Yet this isn’t the case, either. Eckers et al. (2009) characterize the growling of death metal as “supraglottal laryngeal constriction”—i.e. the constriction of structures in the throat *above* the voice box or vocal cords. To growl, one uses the false rather than the true vocal cords. Using the traditional technique to sing melodious musical notes via one’s true vocal cords is eliminated from death metal growls. The death growl technique *is a technique*, but it diverges sharply form the way we normal sing using the true vocal cords. In death growls, “pitch becomes indeterminate—rendering melodies impossible….” (Wallmark 2018, 73), and they lack the musical notes characteristic of traditional singing. Instead, we can “conceptualize the range of [death growls’] tonal options in three categories: highs, mids, and lows” (Wallmark 2018, 73-74). Accordingly, the traditional markers and categories of melody, note-based singing are eliminated. And note that new ones are introduced: melody isn’t merely eliminated but replaced by novel criteria—the highs, mids, and lows transgress and eliminate (as I’ve argued) but also provide new genre-centered markers and criteria. Thus, death meal vocals don’t simply eliminate traditional musical standards and techniques—they replace them with death metal-distinctive norms and techniques (via the transgression we’ve discussed). If one associates “singing” with musical notes or melody, then death metal vocals eliminate singing itself, in a way.

Moreover, this reductionist element of death metal growls is sometimes intentional. Two of the most extreme—least intelligible, guttural, gurgling, inhuman—vocalists in the genre, John Tardy[[11]](#footnote-12) of Obituary and Antti Boman[[12]](#footnote-13) of Demilich, are explicit that they are *not* trying to “sing” lyrics, convey content, etc.

Tardy:

At the time, I really wasn’t interested in writing lyrics. I just liked making sounds that went along with the music. So, the low, growling vocals weren’t planned, they just happened. There were so many vocal parts on *Slowly We Rot* that went from a couple of real words to a jumbled mess of screams and growls that I couldn’t have written the lyrics out if I wanted to.” (quoted in Wiederhorn & Turman 2014, 471-472)

If Tardy, who is the vocalist and lyricist, couldn’t tell you *his own lyrics*, then one might find, here, a kind of Barthes-ian “death of the lyricist”.

Boman:

I didn’t try to achieve those [extreme] vocals…I wanted to sound like Martin van Drunen [of Pestilence and Asphyx] or L-G Petrov [of Entombed], and failed. So it was pure accident. I just tried to push some sound out, did it the wrong way, and got something you might call ‘vocals.’ Then, after a while, I got my voice stronger and decided it was good enough. (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 128)

Consider Tardy’s and Boman’s descriptions of their vocals: they are *something you might call vocals* or a *jumbled mess of sounds* without any actual lyrical content. These vocals, thereby, are entirely unlike using notes and melody to sing words that an audience might (easily) understand—at least, an audience using traditional, popular criteria. So, we see that, from the vocalists’ perspective, growling is not like trying to sing and failing or trying to sing differently but, rather, growling is about producing sounds independent of singing any notes. Tardy takes the elimination of lyrics to the extreme: “I won’t hesitate to make up a sound *instead of an actual word* if that is what it takes to make a song feel right. To me it is the sound of my voice that is what it is all about and not the meaning of what I’m saying” (quoted in Wallmark 2018, 73; emphasis added). Not only is the death growl an attempt to eliminate melody and note-driven singing but, at its extreme, it eliminates any non-noise content at all.

*2.3 Vocals and Non-Vocals*

We can extend this point, connecting elimination with death metal vocals, to another theme of modern art: collapsing the distinction between art and non-art. By making vocals mere “sounds” instead of melodiously sung notes, there’s no line between the *kinds* of sounds that may be vocals in a song and the *kinds* of sounds outside the range of putative vocals. Natalie J. Purcell (2003, 11) and Zachary Wallmark (2018, 73) both describe death metal growls as “beast-like”. Taking this at face value, *any* sound could, theoretically, constitute death metal vocals. Though this may seem far-fetched, we have examples of it. Certain subgenres of metal, most notably deathcore, tend to utilize vocals that sound very similar to pigs. “Pig squeal” has become an informal technical term for vocals that mimic the “breee”, “oink”, and squeal sounds we associate more with a farm than a song.[[13]](#footnote-14) But these sounds are common in certain subgenres. Taking “pig squeal” vocals a bit further, some death metal bands actually have non-human animals as vocalists. Examples include: birds (Hatebeak[[14]](#footnote-15), Dangerous Pigeons[[15]](#footnote-16)), dogs (Caninus[[16]](#footnote-17), Pugtopsy[[17]](#footnote-18)), crickets (Insect Grinder[[18]](#footnote-19)), guinea pigs (Böar Glüe), and boars (Valentin the Mad’s “Boar Metal” song[[19]](#footnote-20)). Perhaps, as a limiting case, there are even *inanimate objects* as“vocalists”—e.g. a coffee grinder (Grinder[[20]](#footnote-21)). Though much of this music, especially those employing non-human animals or inanimate objects as “vocalists”, should be taken as parody, these sorts of bands are still enjoyed by death metal enthusiasts. And it’s still the case that many human vocalists really do sound very inhuman. [[21]](#footnote-22)

I suggest we can see this as comparable to the dissolution of the art/non-art divide: for these bands, there is no distinction between “vocals” and the natural sounds made by human or non-human animals. Again, we can see this theme connected with the reductionist/eliminativist theme: if we eliminate so much of what’s typical about melodious singing, we end up with just sounds that don’t, essentially, differ from noises that we don’t typically take to be “singing” (e.g. pig squeals, boar grunts, and dog barks). Following this line, we can see how one might interpret the push towards death metal growls as a way to transgress, reductively, any substantial distinction between “vocals” or “singing” and “non-vocal” sound or noise. We find in death growls “human language…transmogrified into formless noise” (Wallmark 2018, 75). Lester Bangs, the influential music critic who’s one of the few claimants to first using “heavy metal” to name the genre, states that

[a]s its detractors have always claimed, heavy-metal rock is nothing more than noise; it is not music, its distortion—and that is precisely why its adherents find it so appealing. Of all contemporary rock, it is the genre most closely identified with violence and aggression, rapine and carnage. Heavy metal orchestrates technological nihilism (quoted in Weinstein 2000, 2).

Aside from the last line of this quote probably being one of the most ‘metal’ descriptions of metal ever, Bangs accents the same point we’re establishing here: with metal—especially *death* metal—the line between music and noise is very hard to see, extremely blurred, or destroyed altogether, depending on which bands you care to reference. By any reasonable assessment, Bangs’ claims do not reflect many people’s—especially metal fans—assessment of the (meta-)genre of metal. Yet, these words are indicative of a widely held (and uttered) view from a traditional perspective which metal aims to transgress: namely, that metal isn’t *really* music but rather just noise. (With this point one might call to mind Dark Tranquillity’s “The Science of Noise”.) A fan of pop music, here reflected in Bang’s take, may not distinguish between metal and noise. Here, we have the inverse of Philip Tagg’s (2013, 179-182) codal incompetency: a competency to recognize *as music* what others cannot.[[22]](#footnote-23) It’s helpful to recall Hertz’ (1978) “conservative” interpretation of modernist art’s art/non-art distinction from 1.4: there is a distinction between art and non-art, but it’s only relative to a theory. Here, we might say that death metal growls *are* vocals—but only relative to a theory of aesthetics particular to death metal. It would be plausible, then, that only those versed in that theory (i.e. death metal fans, connoisseurs, etc.) would have the codal competence to recognize the vocal/noise distinction. So, though death metal vocals aren’t really noise to those with codal competency, this competence requires a significant disruption of traditional standards of “correct” or “proper” singing in line with our art/non-art theme. If we take death growls as music (*pace* metal’s detractors), then it’s not clear what could differentiate music from non-music noise. If vocals can sound like a pig squeal or, in some cases, *be* a pig squeal, then the traditional, popular music/non-music divide is dissolved just as we see above with modernist art’s attack of the classical art/non-art distinction.

*2.4 Verum in Musica*

But why might one attack the music/non-music distinction? Aside from the fact that some might (and do) genuinely enjoy brutal sounding vocals, we can appeal to another theme from our earlier discussion: the motive to tell, uncover, or display the *truth*.

Let us note two nuances to the truth-telling function. First, we construe this function as an ideal. Death metal may not succeed in telling us truths—either about their art(form) or the world. Yet, this failure underlies the *aim* of telling these truths. Thus, we must not see this criterion satisfied only by successful, accurate truth-telling but as an ideal to which one’s art strives. Second, as mentioned at the outset in §1.2, the truth told is that which the artist/musician perceives.

The modernist painter can ask: ‘what is (a) painting?’ and answer ‘paint on canvas’. Eliminating the attempt to represent beauty, we find the truth of painting—it’s just paint on canvas. A painting of a smoking pipe is not a pipe; it’s paint on canvas (of a pipe). Similarly, the vocalist can ask: ‘what is singing?’ and answer ‘making sound by pushing air out of your throat’. This is the unadorned, raw truth about singing. As with many instances of modernist painting, for instance, death growls tell us the truth about vocals: it’s sound produced by air coming out of one’s throat. It sounds like *that*—it doesn’t sound like anything that it’s not. This is the truth of singing: the brutal truth.

What other truth(s) might death metal be able to tell? Consider Ozzy Osbourne’s comments on his original impetus for the sound, atmosphere, and content of Black Sabbath:

When I was a kid, I was hungry. I had my ass hanging out of my pants. I hated the fucking world. When I heard the silly fucking words, “If you go to San Francisco, be sure to wear a flower in your hair” I wanted to fucking strangle John Phillips [of the Mamas & the Papas]. I was sitting in the industrial town of Birmingham, England. My father was dying of asbestos from industrial pollution and I was an angry young punk. (quoted in Wiederhorn and Turman 2013, 30)

In the beginning, we decided to write scary music *because we didn’t really think life was all roses*. So we decided to make horror music. (quoted in Wiederhorn and Turman 2013, 39; emphasis added)

Obviously, neither Ozzy Osborne nor Black Sabbath are fixtures in death metal, but they set a crucial precedent for metal on the whole (and out of which death metal evolved). Yet, we can easily find evidence of a concern for truth-telling in death metal specifically. There are claims that death metal musicians take to be true about *us*:

In Carcass’s material, the dead human body becomes a theater for disgusting and perverse entertainment. There is a certain irony in the lyrics of bands like Carcass, for they describe absurdly revolting ideas in the most *medically appropriate terminology*. (Purcell 2005, 44; emphases added)

Jason Netherton (Dying Fetus, Misery Index): This extreme form of music (as compared to moderate, more commercially acceptable forms of music) reflects my personal belief that extremist innovation is what ultimately forwards history, meaning change comes from the fringes of society. In this case the music and the subculture to which it is connected reflect very much my understanding and view of how truth and alternative viewpoints are given birth. Basically Death Metal’s sound and dark worldview is concomitant with my own extremist view of society, and what it will take to change this society for the better. (quoted in Purcell 2005, 158)

Trey Azagthoth (Morbid Angel) And you wanna have some kind of message, some kind of thing where as far as the intended meaning is. I always wanted that to be about the real magic of life and the idea of spiritualism. (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 71)

Glen Benton (Deicide) I grew up with the understanding that I was evil and that everyone else was good, so I went with it. (quoted in Mudrian 2016, 80)

And there are those truths about the world outside of us to which some death metal musicians speak:

Nefarious (Macabre) We just write about guys who do [immoral, violent] stuff. We don’t go out and kill people. We’re just warning people kind of. Read our lyrics and you’ll know what’s actually out there. Protect your children. (quoted in Purcell 2005, 128)

Kyle Severn (Incantation) I think the violence in music and films is just a reflection of violence in everyday life. (quoted in Purcell 2005, 142)

Jeremy Wagner (Broken Hope) Some of the lyrics I write for Broken Hope are over-the-top in violent imagery, horror, and explicit sexual content. That said, here’s the scary part: many of my lyrical ideas come from real life. Songs like “Bag of Parts”, “Coprophagia”, “Decimated Genitalia”, “Preacher of Sodomy”, “Penis Envy”, and more were all drawn from actual events that happened in the news and in some highly respected medical journals. Society is much more horrifying and strange than any fiction I could dream up. (quoted in Wiederhorn & Turman 2013, 475)

As with modernist art, much of death metal aims to tell what it takes as the truth. Carcass tell us that we’re meat. Glen Benton tells us that he’s evil. Incantation tells us that we are surrounded by violence. Death metal, by the musical standards unique to it, is well-placed to tell us (show us?) these brutal truths.

Metal musicians, from the very outset, told their truths about the world via their music. As with modernist art’s cultural location around world wars, economic collapse, etc., the truth lived by many metal musicians doesn’t reflect the beauty one finds in much popular music. Just as Ozzy Osborne found the music of the 60s blind to the truth(s) he saw and lived, death metal can tell truths about a world that contains a large amount of ugliness and brutality. If one sees ugliness in the world, telling the truth about it requires making ugly music. When the truth one lives, sees, or aims to tell is brutal, then the music telling that truth must be brutal as well. Filter this point through our specific focus on death metal vocals. They are ugly, brutal, etc. and, thus, are well placed to communicate, *via their sonic qualities themselves*, the brutal truth.

§ 3: Conclusion

With the main thrust of our analysis completed, we can gesture to where our discussion can take it moving forward. One way to pursue the project (begun) here would be to focus on connecting the transgressive function of metal and the concerns with legitimization and power derived from our examination of Shusterman. Both modernist artists and death metal musicians see themselves as transgressing a tradition against which they set themselves. Insofar as death metal identifies itself as anti-mainstream, a full(er) aesthetics of death metal interrogates the concept of the ‘mainstream’ as a process or activity (e.g. Toynbee 2002, 150) or an ideal target *qua* ideology (e.g. Thornton 1996, Chapter 3) rather than a concrete thing to be resisted. A more complete inquiry, which arises from the present work, will very plausibly look into the cultural conditions around which modernist art and death metal split from and transgressed against their respective mass-cultural traditions within art and music mythologized by the notion of “the mainstream”. While a full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, it represents an important and fruitful direction for future research.

A second extension of the shared centrality of transgression in modernist art and death metal lies outside of the ahistorical themes that (B)-(D) in §1 pick out. One might analyze modernist art and death metal’s transgressive function in light of cultural-historical factors. With gender, for instance, both modernist art and death metal have strong sexist currents, feminizing the traditional/mainstream that they transgress. We can look at Andreas Huyssen (1986, Ch. 3) for modernism’s view of traditional culture as feminine and Purcell (2003, Ch. 18) for an analysis of death metal’s gore/pornography “tradition”. Another facet for more cultural/historical focus is race. Purcell (2005, 105-106) accents the whiteness of death metal. Marianne DeKoven (1992) asks: “why has modernism been canonized in the American academy as male?” The answer: “[f]or the same reasons that it has also been canonized as white…” (680). Thus, “[i]t fell to the victorious New Critics, with the cooperation of the pieces of modernism itself indisputably in harmony with their project, to inscribe modernism in academia, the canon, and literary history as the retrograde phenomenon—sexist, *racist*, elitist, fascist, even ‘royalist’—that has become so easy to condemn” (DeKoven 1992, 682; emphasis added). While further discussion of these issues, as well as many others (e.g. classism, sexuality, etc.) are undoubtedly interesting, important, and necessary for a complete discussion of modernist and death metal intersection(s), they, too, are also beyond the scope of this single paper’s aims. But, by taking an aesthetics of death metal seriously, in light of modernism especially, I hope this work can open avenues for these other crucial analyses in future works.

Third, a fuller analysis of death metal and modernism might go beyond the vocals. A fuller analysis of death metal and modernism will go beyond the vocals. Other aspects of death metal, plausibly, fit with our themes from §1. For example, the immoralism/atheism/satanism typical of much death metal lyrics, imagery, and iconography can be seen to transgress or break with the past (A) and pursue what its practitioners take to be the truth (B). The graphic album art—which often presents all too real violence—might attack the distinction between art/non-art (D). Also relevant is that, for many fans, death metal is closer to a lifestyle than a mere hobby or enjoyment. Undoubtedly, there is more to death metal than its vocals and more to its modernist themes than growling, which this article has chosen as a discussion point. I hope that this work further enables others to take death metal seriously, especially with respect to philosophical aesthetics.[[23]](#footnote-24)

Finally, one might extend the results here beyond the realms of death metal. As mentioned in the introduction, many black metal musicians respond to death metal and, in part, to what many of them perceive as death metal’s failure to transgress fully. Thus, an extension of the current discussion to black metal seems particularly apt for future work.

In our preceding discussion, we’ve seen how some prominent themes in modernist art can substantially intersect with death metal—especially the vocals. If we note the theme that seems particularly central to both—transgression or rejection of traditional approaches—then we can note that the overlap may not be coincidental or even expected. For modernist art, I suggested that the central theme of transgression helps lead into and/or explain the themes of elimination/reduction, dissolving the art/non-art divide, and truth-telling. Thus, if some other art field takes something like transgression as central, it shouldn’t be surprising that we find the other themes in that field as well. And this is just what we find, I’ve argued, in death metal. Some of the themes in death metal’s unique space require some alternation to the way we see them in modernist art, but we can explain the overlap by noting that, for both modernist art and death metal, the prized function is to transgress, revolutionize, or reject the received traditional categories or values of earlier art/music. Thus, I want to argue that the parallels I’ve tried to explore here should be expected, and making these connections isn’t arbitrary. To transgress against that which is beautiful or harmonious—in art or in popular music—the result will be ugly. Such (modernist) art and (death metal) music will tell us the ugly, brutal truth.

**References**

Allett, N. (2012). The Extreme Metal ‘Connoisseur.’ *Popular Music History,* 6, 166-181.

Berger, H. M. (1999). Death Metal Tonality and the Act of Listening. *Popular Music*, 18(2), 161-178.

Carroll, N. (1990). *The Philosophy of Horor, or Paradoxes of the Heart*. London: Routledge.

Childs, P. (2000). *Modernism*. New York: Routledge.

Cottington, D. (2005). *Modern Art: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

DeKoven, M. (1992). The Politics of Modernist Form. *New Literary History*, 23(3), 675-690.

Eckers, C.; Hütz, D.; Kob, M.; Murphy, P.; Houben, D.; and Lehnert, B. (2009). Voice Production in Death Metal Singers. In NAG/DAGA International Conference on Acoustics (pp. 1747-1750). Rotterdam.

Eco, U. (Ed.) (2007). *On Ugliness*. New York: Rizzoli.

Fenner, D. E. W. (2005). Why Was There So Much Ugly Art in the Twentieth Century? *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 39(2), 13-26.

Gracyk, T. (2016). Heavy Metal: Genre? Style? Subculture? *Philosophy Compass*, 11(12), 775-785.

Graham, G. (2005). *Philosophy of the Arts: An Introduction to Aesthetics*. New York: Routledge.

Greenberg, C. (1982). Modernist Painting. In F. Frascina and C. Harrison (Eds.) *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (pp. 5-10). New York: Harper and Row.

Harrell, J. (1994). The Poetics of Destruction: Death Metal Rock. *Popular Music and Society*, 18(1), 91-103.

Hawley, W. M. (2023). Metal Music and the Aesthetics of Representation. *The European Legacy*, 28(7), 742-757.

Herbst, J and Mynett, M. (2023). Lorna Shore’s ‘To the Hellfire’: A Study in Heaviness. *Metal Music Studies*, 9(2), 189-213.

Hertz, R. (1978). Philosophical Foundations of Modern Art. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 18(3), 237-248.

Hillier, B. (2018). The Aesthetic-Sonic Shift of Melodic Death Metal. *Metal Music Studies*, 4(1), 5-23.

Hodin, J. P. (1961). The Spirit of Modern Art. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1(3), 174-184.

Hodin, J. P. (1967). The Aesthetics of Modern Art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 26(2), 181-186.

Huyssen, A. (1986). *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Judovitz, D. (2002). Postponing the Future: Marcel Duchamp and the Avant-Garde. In J. Swearingen and J. Cutting-Gray (Eds.), *Extreme Beauty: Aesthetics, Politics, Death* (pp. 29-39). New York: The Athlone Press.

Judovitz, D. (2010). *Drawing on Art: Duchamp and Company*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kahn-Harris, K. (2007). *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*. New York: Berg.

Kieran, M. (1997). Aesthetic Value: Beauty, Ugliness and Incoherence. *Philosophy*, 72(281), 383-399.

Kirner-Ludwig, M. and Wohlfarth, F. (2018). METALinguistics: Face-Threatening Taboos, Conceptual Offensiveness and Discursive Transgression in Extreme Metal. *Metal Music Studies*, 4(3), 403-432.

Kraut, R. (2005). Why does Jazz Matter to Aesthetic Theory? *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63(1), 3-15.

Mack, R. D. (1994). Modernist Art Criticism: Hegemony and Decline. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52(3), 341-348.

Miller, J. (2022). What Makes Heavy Metal ‘Heavy’’? *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 80(1), 70-82.

Mudrian, A. (2016). *Choosing Death: The Improbable History of Death Metal & Grindcore*. New York: Bazillion Points Books.

Phillipov, M. (2012). *Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Purcell, N. J. (2003). *Death Metal Music: The Passion and Politics of a Subculture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers.

Raphael, D. D. (1960). *The Paradox of Tragedy*. London: Routledge.

Reyes, I. (2013). Blacker than Death: Recollecting the “Black Turn” in Metal Aesthetics. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 25(2), 240-257.

Scott, N. (2016). Heavy Metal as Resistance. In B. G. Walter, G. Riches, D. Snell, and B. Bardine (Eds.), *Heavy Metal Music Studies and Popular Culture* (pp. 19-35). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shusterman, R. (1991). Form and Funk: The Aesthetic Challenge of Popular Art. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 31(3), 203-213.

Singleton, B. (2010). Absurd, Theatre of the. In D. Kennedy (Ed.) *The Companion to Theatre and Performance* (pp. 2-3). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smialek, E. T. (2015). “Genre and Expression in Extreme Metal Music, ca. 1990-2015.” PhD Thesis, McGill University.

Tagg, P. (2013). *Music’s Meaning: A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos*. New York: The Mass Media Music Scholar’s Press.

Tatarkiewicz, W. (1971). What is Art? The Problem of Definition Today. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 11(2), 134-153.

Thornton, S. (1996) *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Toynbee, J. (2002). Mainstreaming: From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks. In D. Hesmondhalgh & K. Negus (Eds.) *Popular Music Studies* (pp. 149-163). London: Hodder Arnold.

Unger, M. P. (2016). *Sound, Symbol, Sociality: The Aesthetic Experience of Extreme Metal Music*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wallmark, Z. (2018). The Sound of Evil. In R. Fink, M. Latour, and Z. Wallmark (Eds.), *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music* (pp. 65-87). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weinstein, D. (2000). *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*. Boston: Da Capo Press.

Wiederhorn, J. and Turman, K. (2014). *Louder than Hell: The Definitive Oral History of Metal*. New York: It Books.

Yavuz, M. (2017). “Delightfully Depressing”: Death/Doom Metal Music World and the Emotional Response of the Fan. *Metal Music Studies*, 3(2), 201-218.

1. Gordon Graham (2005, 184-7) certainly sees the “break with tradition” as the hallmark of modernist art. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See, e.g. Peter Childs: More generally, ‘modern’ has been frequently used to refer to the avant-garde […] It is this sense of the avant-garde, radical, progressive or even revolutionary side to the modern which was the catalyst for the coinage ‘Modernism’… (2000, 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. We can find the same idea in Graham: “the Theatre of the Absurd abandoned plot and dialogue in favour of meaningless repetition and pointless action with the intention of making the shapeless, non-narrative nature of actual lives apparent on stage. It would thereby expose (its proponents imagined) the extent to which traditional theatre misleads by imposing narrative form on the necessarily formless, and turning lives into ‘life stories’” (2005, 186). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See Wladyslaw Tartarkiewicz’s characterization of the traditional conception of art as “production of beauty” (1971, 137). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. I don’t intend my discussion to imply that Fenner’s answer is false. On Fenner’s account, the answer “may be that the tradition of showing beauty to be a highly or purely subjective phenomenon renders beauty apparently less valuable than if it were objective in character, and so we have, in the twentieth century, a move away from the production in art of beauty to that which is simply ‘artistic’ or ‘artistically important’”; which can explain the production of “ugly” rather than beautiful art (2005, 13). It’s quite possible (and, in my view, *plausible*) that the move to make “ugly” art has more than one explanation, so that the question will have multiple consistent, interlocking answers. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Perhaps, in such cases, there is a parallel to the much-discussed paradoxes of tragedy (see Raphael 1960) and horror (see Carroll 1990, Chapter 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. My thanks to anonymous referee for both pressing this point and the reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. For a few (biased) examples of growling in death metal, see (hear?): Cannibal Corpse’s “Hammer Smashed Face”; Suffocation’s “Effigy of the Forgotten”; Mortician’s “Necrocannibal”; Psycroptic’s “The Colour of Sleep”; and Cerebal Bore’s “Open Casket Priapism”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See, e.g. the following comments from death metal musicians: “I would say in the beginning of death metal, it was the unpronounced growling vocals” Paul Ryan (Origin); “To me, it was always the vocals. If it has the vocals and the aggressive music there to some extent, it’s definitely metal” Jason Netherton (Misery Index, Dying Fetus); “…the telltale sign of death metal is the vocals” Bill Zebub (The Grimoire) (all quoted in Purcell 2003, 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. “The death growl sounds as if the singer is about to tear his larynx but is actually a precisely controlled vocal technique that requires training and practice” (Wallmark 2018, 77). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. See, e.g., Obituary’s “Immoral Visions” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See, e.g., Demilich’s “When the Sun Drank the Weight of Water” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Deathcore bands like Job for a Cowboy and Despised Icon are good touchstones for examples of ‘pig squeal’ vocals. See, e.g., Job for a Cowboy’s “Knee Deep”; Despised Icon’s “Furtive Monologue”; and (especially the last thirty seconds of) Lorna Shore’s “To the Hellfire”. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See, e.g. “Pecked Up for Barbeque” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See, e.g. “Pigeon Wing” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See, e.g. “No Dogs, No Masters” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. See, e.g. “Milk Bone of Christ” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. See, e.g. “Cold Mountains of Peru” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. “Boar Metal” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. See, e.g. “Maxwells House of Horrors” off Grinder’s *The Black EP*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. See those mentioned above—the pig vocals of Lorna Shore’s Will Ramos “broke the internet”, so to speak, when “To the Hellfire” came out in 2021. Herbst and Mynett (2023) describe Ramos’ vocals between 05:44—05:50 as “*inhuman*-sounding guttural noise” (199; emphases added). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. I thank an anonymous referee for this reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Thanks anonymous referee for suggesting these three paths that the project I’ve started here might be extended or continued. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)