

To Fight or to Flee?
Escapism in Sanguine Glacialis' *Maladaptive Daydreaming*

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ABSTRACT

Extreme metal music affords safe and routinized ways to deal with our own fears and anxieties in alternative forms of escapism. However, extreme (death) metal music has been frequently depicted as apolitical, anti-subjective, violent, and aggressive, a tendency that contributes to the marginalization of both the musicians and the audience, refusing death metal music's introspective potential. If death metal's escapism affords ways to confront inner traumas, it hasn't been studied as a key feature of the genre. Although escapism evokes avoidant, irresponsible, and selfish behaviors, it has been recently considered as a human impulse to triumph over frustrations, fears, and anxieties. In death metal music, this way of coping is manifested through feelings of transgression and abjection. In this thesis, I investigate how escapism works in death metal band Sanguine Glacialis's album *Maladaptive Daydreaming* (2023) —an approach favored by the band's ethos of introspection and engagement with the trope of escapism in previous albums. Drawing from previous extreme metal and horror pictures studies along with English fiction literature's treatments of escapism, I focus my analysis on *Maladaptive Daydreaming's* three escapist characteristics: its stance towards and against society, its depiction of an alternative reality, and its introspective quality through emotional connections. With this analysis, my goal is to elaborate an analytic framework of escapism to explore broader death metal music, in the hope to contribute to the demarginalizing of the genre.

Résumé

La musique métal extrême offre, à l'aide de formes alternatives d'évasion, des manières saines et coutumières permettant de confronter ses propres peurs et anxiétés. Cependant, la musique (death) métal extrême a fréquemment été décrite comme apolitique, anti-subjective, violente, et agressive, une tendance qui contribue à la marginalisation de ses musiciens et de leur audience, refusant au death métal tout potentiel introspectif. Si l'évasion dans le death métal offre des moyens pour confronter ses traumas, elle n'a pas été étudiée en tant que caractéristique essentielle du genre. Bien que l'évasion évoque des comportements évasifs, irresponsables et égoïstes, elle a récemment été considérée comme une pulsion humaine pour triompher de ses frustrations, peurs, et anxiétés. Dans la musique death métal, cette façon de faire face à ses insécurités se manifeste usuellement à travers des sentiments transgressifs et abjectes. Dans ce mémoire de maîtrise, j'examine comment l'évasion se manifeste dans l'album *Maladaptive Daydreaming* (2023) du groupe de death métal Sanguine Glacialis — une approche favorisée par la nature introspective du groupe et son traitement du trope de l'évasion dans de précédents albums. En m'appuyant sur des théories académiques de la musique métal extrême et des films d'horreurs ainsi que sur la relation entre l'évasion et la littérature de fiction anglaise, je concentrerai mon analyse sur trois caractéristiques d'évasion figurant au sein de l'album *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, soit sa position envers et contre la société, sa description d'une réalité alternative et sa qualité introspective à l'aide de connexions émotionnelles. Avec cette analyse, mon objectif est d'élaborer un cadre analytique pour étudier la musique death métal principalement à l'aide du thème de l'évasion, dans l'espoir de contribuer à la démarginalisation du genre.

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^GGeneviève Boulais and Mathieu Gatien will inevitably agree on the all-encompassing nature of the Tom Collins.

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² In compliance with the regulations of ethical research at McGill University, this thesis was completed according to ethics approval under project REB #23-04-202.

CHAPTER 1

Literature Reviews, Extreme Metal Fundamentals, and Escapism in the 20th Century.

Who has never thought to escape, if only for a brief moment? To escape from never-ending work hours, from schoolwork, from an overbearing boss, from a controlling parent? Who has never felt the need for a vacation, a break, a pause from a constraining routine? We all need at one time or another to escape daily life, to liberate ourselves from everyday constraints. There are a hundred ways to escape: some visit another country, province, or region, in search of fresh air and new experiences. Others go shopping, try a new hobby, or renew a familiar one. Some, like many of my friends, escape through a book, a movie, a video game, or quality time with loved ones. Others, like me, escape through extreme metal music. The constant is that we never escape for long, we always need to come back to our life. Thus, escapism also bears a negative implication –an inability to face the real world.³ Behaviors are escapist when they keep an individual from facing their responsibilities. Entertainment is escapist when it tries to pass itself off as reality. But we can all argue that we need to escape; that is, to free ourselves from our constraints.

The purpose of this study is to explore how escapism works in extreme metal music, so as to better understand how extreme metal music may allow its participants to liberate themselves momentarily from society's constraints. This study is also my first attempt at theorizing escapism as an analytical framework to understand metal music, and hopefully broader music genres in the future. Another aim for this study, and for further publications, is to argue for a more favorable understanding of escapism as an element of human nature. To do so, this study focuses on a

³ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Escapism* (John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 23.

particular death metal album by Montreal death metal band Sanguine Glacialis. I draw on the academic literature on extreme metal, escapism, and horror movies, as well as research in psychotherapy to understand how escapism unfolds in *Maladaptive Daydreaming* (2023).

The album's concept is centered around an escape into a fictional universe born within the mind of someone suffering from maladaptive daydreaming, a form of excessive and unwanted daydreaming.⁴ *Maladaptive daydreaming* features explicit escapist tropes such as dreaming, fictional realities, and the constraints of everyday life, from which emerge frustrations, anxieties, and fears.

Given Sanguine Glacialis' preceding works and their involvement with introspective themes and mythological metaphors, their output allows for a new way to understand and analyze death metal music as they push against the genre's musical boundaries. Their work often features instruments from classical and other folkloric music and explores different music genres, while maintaining death metal's musical parameters as a core element. This also invites a more intersectional approach in which horror movie studies are employed to develop a better understanding of *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s complex relationship with the death metal genre. Above all, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* favors an introspective understanding, which is what I hope an escapism studies approach will provide.

Literature Review: Heavy Metal and Extreme Metal

To understand what extreme metal music is, this study relies on three main works that each provide an updated and in-depth scholarly perspective on the genre. Since my focus is on extreme metal's relationship with society, these works were selected based on their inclusion of extreme metal music in discussions of introspection and social implications. First, in *Extreme Metal: Music and*

⁴ Eli Somer, Liora Somer, and Daniela S. Jopp, "Parallel lives: A phenomenological study of the lived experience of maladaptive daydreaming," in *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, Vol. 17 Issue 5, 2016, p. 561.

Culture on the Edge (2007), Keith Kahn-Harris focuses on the different scenes within extreme metal music and its relationship with its participants and non-participants.⁵ One of Kahn-Harris' most significant contributions to this study and extreme metal studies more generally is his theorization of transgression as a key extreme metal ethos. In Chapter 2, "The Scene and Transgression," Kahn-Harris theorizes transgression in regard to death metal as lying behind cultural boundaries of what is accepted. His discussion of Julia Kristeva's theorization of the abject situates what lies behind these boundaries and justifies the need to transgress them.⁶ He provides an in-depth analysis of extreme metal's musical and discursive parameters in relationship to transgression, against which *Maladaptive Daydreaming's* own musical and discursive elements will be compared. Second, Robert Walser's famous book *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (1993) presents one of the first cultural and musical analyses of heavy metal music.⁷ His comprehension of the genre as a vector of identity and an outlet for frustrations contributed to demarginalizing heavy metal and its participants. He understands heavy metal as analogous to horror movies and uses slasher picture theories posed by the latter's critics to explore heavy metal's introspective qualities. Walser's intersectional approach favors a more positive perspective on heavy metal music and argues that it participates in social conflicts rather than avoiding them. Third, Michelle Phillipov's book *Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits* (2012) provides an in-depth analysis of death metal's music and themes in section 2 of the book.⁸ Chapter 5, "Death Metal and the Reorientation of Listening" explains how death metal participants reorient their listening in order to make sense of the music's intense musical

⁵ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge* (Berg, 2007).

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁷ Robert Walser, *Running with the devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music* (Wesleyan University Press, 2014)

⁸ Michelle Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: Analysis at the limits* (Lexington Books, 2012).

parameters.⁹ She offers a comprehensive musical analysis of the screamed voice in death metal and discusses connotations of noise, arguing that death metal's aesthetic is one of shock. Chapter 6, "The Pleasures of Horror," builds on Walser's previous analysis of heavy metal through horror movies theories in order to provide an extensive analysis of different pleasurable experiences for death metal listeners. Her discussion of pleasure disrupts death metal critics' usual pejorative discourse on the genre as being only concerned with negative feelings.¹⁰

This thesis will expand on death metal's relationship with horror movie critical theories but will focus on a contemporary band rather than on genre-defining bands from the '80s and '90s. This implies that certain critical ideas regarding possible interpretation and reception of death metal music will be challenged and discussed so as to provide an up-to-date study of the genre. Moreover, this study will propose escapism as a framework for analysis of death metal, offering a new critical approach to extreme metal music. Last, this study will contribute to the demarginalization of the genre, arguing for a newfound ethos of introspection and musical exploration as foregrounded by the band Sanguine Glacialis in their album *Maladaptive Daydreaming*.

Literature Review: Emotional Responses to Extreme Metal Music

It is widely accepted in studies on heavy metal and, later, extreme metal music that the genre allows its participants to confront their frustrations. Robert Walser, in *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (1993), explained that heavy metal's themes allowed its participants to explore "everything that hegemonic society doesn't want to acknowledge, the dark side of daylight." The genre's musical treatment of these themes allows

⁹ Ibid, 140-62.

¹⁰ Ibid, 163-85.

participants to make sense of their own situation, of life's contradictions and unmet promises.¹¹ In *Musical Responses to Oppression and Alienation: Blues, Spiritual, Secular Trash, and Christian Trash Metal Music* (1995), Charles M. Brown argues that in trash metal, a subgenre of heavy metal, participants are trying to respond to feelings of alienation and oppression. They are forced to deal with authority figures such as parents, school, teachers, and bosses from the context of their subordinate positions. Heavy and trash metal allow a form of "cathartic musical experience whereby youth transcend their frustrations with a social system on which they exert little or no control."¹² For Natalie J. Purcell, death metal's horror and brutality are a way for young male teenagers to deal with insecurities regarding their masculinity. In *Death Metal Music: The Passion and Politics of a Subculture* (2003), Purcell suggests that "horror provides the perfect vehicle for the young angry teen to work out his fears and still uphold his image of toughness, masculinity, and invincibility."¹³

Listening to heavy metal and participating in the scene provide a form of liberation from the imposed constraints of society. Extreme metal participants seek relief from such social pressure in the extreme and the transgressive. Since its beginning, death metal has been all about dealing with constraining social norms.

I. Origins of death metal

Death metal originated in the mid 1980s in the United States as a subgenre of heavy metal, directly emerging from trash metal. Heavy metal's first pioneers in the late '60s were rock bands Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, and Black Sabbath, who shared an interest in fantastic and mythological

¹¹ Walser, *Running with the devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music*, pp. 161–162.

¹² Charles M. Brown, "Musical response to oppression and alienation: Blues, spiritual, secular trash, and Christian trash metal music," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 8 Issue 3 (1995), p. 446.

¹³ Natalie J. Purcell, *Death metal music: The passion and politics of a subculture* (McFarland, 2003), p. 266.

worlds.¹⁴ Driven by their energetic instrumental performances, they are considered the first wave of heavy metal, which pioneered metal music's fascination with the occult and the transgressive. With the second wave of heavy metal in the late '70s came bands like Poison, Iron Maiden, and Def Leppard that contributed to the distinctiveness of heavy metal, from which many new subgenres emerged during the early '90s.¹⁵ In *Heavy Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* (2007), Keith Kahn-Harris explains that this fragmentation initially resulted in two directions, one more mainstream "pop" and "glam," led by the band Poison, and another, "fundamentalist," from which emerged "thrash" and "speed metal."¹⁶ Death metal emerged from this fundamentalist branch of heavy metal, pioneered by bands like Death and Possessed out of trash metal. At the time of their release, Metallica's *Kill 'Em All* (1983) and Slayer's *Show No Mercy* (1989) were landmark trash metal albums characterized by "speed, aggression, and an austere seriousness."¹⁷ According to Kahn-Harris, "vocals became less and less intelligible, song writing became more complex, and guitar riffs sounded increasingly austere and 'dark.'"¹⁸ Bands Death and Possessed amped up trash metal's musical pursuit of extremity, turning the knob up to eleven.¹⁹ They were quickly followed by Cannibal Corpse, one of death metal's genre-defining bands, that featured growled vocals, complicated guitar parts, few solos, extremely fast tempos, extensive use of gory imagery, and lyrics dealing with themes such as violence, war, and the occult.²⁰

¹⁴ Kristopher F.B. Fletcher, "The Metal Age: The use of classics in heavy metal music," *Society for Classical Studies*, Vol. 12 Issue 1, p. 1.

¹⁵ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge* (Berg, 2007), p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Metallica, *Kill 'Em All*, (Megaforce Records, 1983), Accessed August 13, 2023; Slayer, *Show No Mercy*, (Metal Blade Records, 1983), Accessed August 13, 2023; *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Turning the knob up to eleven means to exploit something to its limits or exceeding them. It is an idiom from popular culture coming from Rob Reiner's movie *This is Spinal Tap* (1984). In the movie, rock guitarist Nigel Tufnel demonstrates that one of his guitar amplifiers has knobs marked from one to eleven, rather than the usual one to ten, arguing that such amplifier is louder. While this has no influence regarding the maximum volume of the amplifier, this joke targets the stereotype of rock guitarists' misunderstanding of the underlying principles of their gear.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

i. Transgression

The audience's need for facing inner traumas by experiencing transgression, gore, and the macabre grew stronger as death metal emerged to answer this need. The genre's ethos of sonic and discursive extremity favored an audience who needed a form of musical outlet to deal with frustrations and insecurities induced by society. Death metal musically embodied the transgressive in order to allow its participants to experience what society tries to hide and repress. Transgression unfolds in various ways: in the music, the lyrics, the themes, the participant's discourse within the scene, the clothes, and the overall imagery. It also unfolds in the way death metal deals with themes that are usually seen as "bad." For example, death metal music is often characterized as a disruptive and unpleasant noise; however, it reclaims its definition of noise and uses it to evoke chaos, while maintaining control over its musical elements. Chaos is so well represented because death metal musicians know how to suggest it.

Death metal suggests a certain form of othering by situating itself and its participants at the limit of certain social and cultural boundaries. Michelle Phillipov explains that "death metal's transgressions are mostly performed not for a conservative mainstream that is shocked and scandalized by the genre's musical and lyrical conventions, but for other death metal fans and musicians," suggesting that death metal participants situate themselves outside of the mainstream discourse, at the margin of society.²¹

But what exactly are these transgressions? Where do these boundaries come from? Kahn-Harris explains that transgression implies a "sense of testing and crossing boundaries and limits."²² These boundaries and limits are set by society and are constructed from formalized and non-formalized norms. What lies within these boundaries is what is commonly thought of as good,

²¹ Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: Analysis at the limits*, p. 173.

²² Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*, p. 29.

healthy, beneficial, and acceptable. Usually, elements that do not transgress such boundaries are seen as necessary for an ideal society to function. Anything that interacts with or transgresses these boundaries is usually looked upon as being disruptive. From this emerge binary oppositions such as good/bad, pure/impure, moral/immoral, and clean/unclean. The “ideal” society is structured by these binary oppositions, which can be seen as a site of constant desire to transgress as well as protecting them.²³

Death metal’s music embodies the transgressive by having at its core sonority judged harsh and unpleasant. It reappropriates the characterization of “noise” and pushes it to its limits. Regarding its themes, death metal engages with anything related to death, anguish, fear, and “carnality”: the destruction of the body. The lyrics of Cannibal Corpse’s song “Edible Autopsy” are a striking example of death metal’s relationship with transgression:²⁴

Guts and blood, bones are broken as they eat your pancreas
Human liver, for the dinner, or maybe soup with eyes
Cause of death still unknown, gnawing meat from your bones
Bone Saw binding in your skull, brains are oozing a human stump
Needles injected, through your eyes, pulling off flesh, skinned alive, live, live.

Here transgression lies in the graphic and gory depiction of bodily destruction, but also in the fact that there is still an element of humanity in “eating meat for dinner.” This violence is consciously executed and is born neither from passion nor rage. It is methodically executed. The lyrics display an act of sheer violence forced into a civilized and functional setting. There is a sharp contrast between the supposed rage needed to destroy a fellow human’s body and the seemingly calm and mundane “carnality” of the action, questioning how much cruelty one human may tolerate while remaining sane. The vocalist growls these lyrics with great intensity, supported by a sonically saturated instrumental. At its core, death metal aim to engage musically and lyrically

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Cannibal Corpse, “Edible Autopsy” (Metal Blade Records, Inc. 1990). Accessed June 10, 2023.

with what lies beyond the boundaries, on the dark side of society's binary oppositions.

ii. The abject

What lies behind these limits is famously theorized by Julia Kristeva as the abject. In *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), the abject is formulated as that which is disgusting, terrifying, and threatening.²⁵ The abject separates humans from what is not human, what is exterior to humanity. If a human's first contact with abjection occurs when they are separated from the mother at birth, they are usually displaced elsewhere, on vile bodily fluids to the striking disgust experienced when the tongue touches the small layer of fat floating on hot milk.²⁶ Initially, before it is rationally displaced, the abject is a physical and visceral experience. If the abject can be displaced, this suggests that it is culturally and socially constructed. Thus, dominant groups may identify it in their discourses and values, situating it behind social boundaries in order to conceal it. History shows that dominant groups have displaced the abject upon animals, Jews, and women.²⁷ The abject frightens, disgusts, makes uncomfortable, and threatens order. The abject might be everything that we are not, but at the same time everything we are or will become. For example, Cannibal Corpse's "Edible Autopsy" pictures the abject as the destruction of the body, losing all sorts of fluids and internal parts in an act simultaneously violent and methodical.²⁸ The interior of our own body becomes the abject, as it is usually concealed and hidden. If self-control over the body is emphasized, then being in contact with escaping fluids, intestines, and other body parts may be intolerable.²⁹

Death metal can be seen as a ritual which allows a form of emotional contact with the abject,

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 1–31.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

²⁷ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*, p. 29.

²⁸ Cannibal Corpse, "Edible Autopsy" (Metal Blade Records, Inc. 1990). Accessed June 10, 2023.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 30.

often displaced onto society itself. Death metal music may thus become a way to free oneself from society's constraints. It revels in the abject while positioning society as good and acceptable as its own abject. For death metal participants, the abject fascinates and is deeply alluring, as "disgust always bears the imprint of desire."³⁰ For Kahn-Harris, "abject is a key theme in extreme metal" that must be mastered and dominated. Historically, fear of/and attraction to the abject have been identified as a crucial theme in rock music. In heavy metal, dark fantasies about the abject are "an attempt to deal with contemporary anxieties in complex, coded ways."³¹ In extreme metal music, those fantasies are far more sinister and include themes such as satanism, suicide, death, and bodily destruction. Death metal music embodies common conceptions of the abject as to provide a counter-discourse dealing in opposites. In the binary opposition between sound and noise, it willingly embodies noise as its sonic identity. In the binary opposition between life and death, death metal embodies the latter in order to offer a new perspective on spirituality, opposed to hegemonic religious discourses.

iii. Musical parameters

Death metal's instrumentation traditionally consists of lead vocals, one or two electric guitars, an electric bass, and drums. Previously discussed death metal band Cannibal Corpse employs this instrumentation.³² It is worth mentioning that this instrumental structure is not exclusive to death metal, as most rock, hard rock, and metal bands share the same structure. However, over time the genre evolved to feature new instruments such as synths, strings, samples, and undistorted vocals, also known as "clean vocals." This led to a prolific fragmentation of the death metal music genre. For some participants, the use of symphonic instruments and musical elements resists death

³⁰ Peter Stallybrass and Allan White, *The politics and poetics of transgression* (Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 161.

³¹ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*, p. 35.

³² Cannibal Corpse, "Cannibal Corpse" <http://www.cannibalcorpse.net/>. Accessed August 13, 2023.

metal's labeling. For others, such music would be called "progressive" or "symphonic death metal." Eric Smialek justifies this need amongst metal participants to distinguish and label subgenres according to their musical parameters as a prized display of connoisseurship.³³ However, there are constant factors that make death metal "death metal." Quoting Michelle Phillipov, death metal music "is characterized by an aesthetic of sonic extremity that disrupts the patterns of musical narrative typically thought to make music comprehensible and pleasurable."³⁴

Looking at the guitar, one of its key features in death metal is that it is almost always distorted. According to Robert Walser, distorted guitar "functions as a sign of extreme power and intense expression by overflowing its channels and materializing the exceptional effort that produces it."³⁵ Tuned lower than the standard tuning, guitars sound way heavier but less clear than in heavy metal music.³⁶ Guitarists favor techniques that generate a lot of harmonics, such as power chords (a fifth interval widely used in overall rock music), palm mute (resting the palm hand on the bridge of the guitar to muffle the sound, which allows the guitarist to pick the strings harder), and tremolo picking (picking a note either in 16th or 32nd notes). All these techniques contribute to a "wall" of guitar noise. Modes such as Phrygian, Phrygian dominant, and Locrian are mostly used as musical signifiers of "darkness," as the presence of a major chord built on the flat-second scale degree conveys a certain austerity.³⁷ The tritone, present in the Locrian mode, is often used, along with the diminished scale. These harmonic settings allow musicians to explore "'darker' modes that have long been associated with danger and evil."³⁸

Songs are structured by a succession of "riffs," melodic and rhythmic motifs played or

³³ Eric Smialek, "Genre and expression in extreme metal music, ca. 1990–2015," PhD dissertation, 2016, p. 35.

³⁴ Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: Analysis at the limits*, p. 154.

³⁵ Walser, *Running with the devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music*, p. 42.

³⁶ Standard tuning for guitars is E₂–A₂–D₃–G₃–B₃–E₄.

³⁷ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*, p. 31.

³⁸ Ibid.

highlighted by the entire band. Riffs are one of the pillars of modern guitar practice and are central to almost every guitar-based music genre. What characterizes death metal's riffs is how they construct songs as a succession of different moods, following each other without musical preparation. The effect is almost like a series of paintings, an impression reinforced by the descriptive nature of the lyrics. A single death metal song features a wide range of moods and settings, resisting mainstream pop's linear song construction articulated around the verse/chorus structure. Kahn-Harris explains that to some, death metal may seem to create a sense of progression in which "themes may be introduced once and never recapitulated."³⁹ Live performances don't feature any improvisation, as bands strictly follow what has been previously recorded. They function as displays of technical mastery to convince the audience that the recorded musical material is performed live authentically.

The bass guitar usually doubles the riffs played by the guitar an octave lower, offering a wider and heavier texture to the extremely distorted and sharp sound of the guitar. The bass is in the same tuning as the guitars but may feature five to eight stringed instruments (as opposed to the conventional four-string bass), allowing the bass player a wider range in pitch than their guitarist counterparts. The bass player usually uses one instrument while guitarists may use one or two different guitars, depending on the musical requirement of the songs and tunings.⁴⁰

Drums often play "intricate patterns using double-bass drums and generally make more use of the whole kit," which often features more cymbals and tom than the classic rock drum kit.⁴¹ The main feature is the use of the double bass drum, formed either of two separate bass drums or two pedals fixed to one bass drum. Double bass drums usually play in 8th, 16th, or 32nd notes, often

³⁹ Ibid, p. 33.

⁴⁰ For example, one song might require a 7 strings guitar while another one a 6 strings guitar with a tremolo bar. Having a specific guitar for songs is common to other guitar-based music genres.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 32.

compared to the tremolo technique on guitar. The double bass drum is way heavier and highlights the guitars' riffs which, along with the bass guitar, make the sound extremely wide and heavy. Blast beats are another well-known death metal drum technique. Coined by death metal band Napalm Death's drummer Mick Harris, these consist of an acute-time alternation of snare and cymbals (often the ride) and bass drum, often played in 16th or 32nd note values. Death metal songs' tempo usually ranges between 150 and 250 beats per minute which, along with its extremely fast instrumental techniques, makes its musical elements unfold at breakneck speed. With this sense of heightened speed comes a feeling of lack of musical space.⁴² Sonic space is "saturated," from which emerges a sense of linearity or stasis that "disrupts customary expectations of musical structure."⁴³

The vocal in death metal is overdriven, screamed, "using the membranous folds above the vocal cords to exert pressure on the larynx to produce a deep, guttural growl that is virtually unused outside extreme metal music."⁴⁴ When correctly done, there is no risk of injury. Death metal singers are labeled as "vocalists" since they mostly do screamed vocals as opposed to sung or undistorted vocals. The voice is treated in ways that "generally make lyrics impossible to decipher without the aid of a lyric sheet," and appear as almost pitchless.⁴⁵ Phillipov positions death metal vocals in opposition to "mainstream" musical conventions, where the voice is "typically the aural and emotional focus of the music [...] carrying the melody of the song, and is thought to represent the individual personality of the singer and offers a stable point of identification for audiences."⁴⁶

Death metal's treatment of its musical elements is one of sonic intensity and extremity.

⁴² Phillipov, *Death metal music criticism: Analysis at the limits*, p. 155.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 142.

⁴⁵ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*, p. 32.

⁴⁶ Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: Analysis at the limits*, p. 143.

Participants experience transgression both in lyrical and musical content. Such liberating experiences are possible because death metal aficionados reinterpret and revalue sounds “initially heard as unpleasant” and consider them as sources of “pleasure and enjoyment.”⁴⁷ This reappropriation of noise allows participants to understand inharmonious or dissonant music as “music” rather than as harsh or unpleasant. In pushing the sonic boundaries further, death metal participants reimagine noise as being a source of enjoyment. Thus, in death metal music, there is not only the obvious aggressiveness, anger, and violence, but also enjoyment and pleasure that can lead to many positive emotions. Not only darker emotions can be conveyed, evoked, suggested, and performed through well-mastered techniques, but also genuine positive emotions that can lead to states of peace, well-being, and calm. What is commonly seen as disturbing can also be experienced as soothing by those who willingly reorient their listening.

II. Literature Review: Horror movie theories and commonalities with death and extreme metal

Death metal offers its participants a way to deal with their frustrations by embodying darker and more extreme emotions and impulses, both musically and lyrically. The genre aims its discourse towards hidden or forbidden elements of hegemonic society and invites its participants to explore these elements that lie behind social and cultural boundaries. However, death metal is not the only art form trying to fulfill the audience’s need for transgression, gore, and the macabre. In the early ’70s, horror pictures such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *The Exorcist* (1973) introduced new ways to simultaneously explore transgressive themes and repressed emotions and passions.⁴⁸ The notion that death metal shares many common features with horror cinema is certainly not

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Tobe Hooper, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, (Vortex; Bryanston Distributing Company, 1974); William Friedkin, *The Exorcist*, (Hoya Productions; Warner Bros. Pictures, 1973).

surprising. Death metal music and horror movies share a fascination for the extreme, the transgressive, and graphic representations — whether visual or musical — of scenes of intense violence. Thus, looking at horror movie theories regarding how they approach and treat transgressive elements provides many surprising insights into death metal’s similar treatment of the abject.

For Cynthia Freeland, in *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (2018), horror movies are “about the very picturing of evil,” represented by foregrounded monstrous entities such as actual monsters (*Nosferatu*, 1922), violent humans (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 1974), anthropomorphic creatures (*Alien*, 1979), unforgiving nature (*Jaws*, 1975), or manifestations of the devil (*The Exorcist*, 1973).⁴⁹ Such evil figures and tropes simultaneously frighten and fascinate. In *The Aesthetic of Fright*, Morris Dickstein explains that the horror movie’s main objective is to play with our fears.⁵⁰ For him, horror movies’ power may reside in its capacity to both show and conceal our fears, forcing us to confront them in our minds while they unfold on screen. In their depiction of evil and shared fears, horror movies act as a particular kind of mirror held up to society’s struggles and issues.⁵¹ They are inevitably social and cultural. Dickstein correlates horror cinema’s surge of popularity in America in the ’70s with not always visible currents of disquiet, taking Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) as a reflection of “a post-Vietnam sense of impotence and futility before a vast array of insoluble problems, from

⁴⁹ Cynthia Freeland, *The naked and the undead: Evil and the appeal of horror* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), p. 275; Friedrich.W. Murnau, *Nosferatu*, (Prana Film; Film Arts Guild, 1922); Tobe Hooper, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, (Vortex; Bryanston Distributing Company, 1974); Ridley Scott, *Alien*, (20th Century Fox, Brandywine Productions; 20th Century Fox, 1979); Steven Spielberg, *Jaws*, (Zanuck/Brown Company, Universal Pictures; Universal Pictures, 1975); William Friedkin, *The Exorcist*, (Hoya Productions; Warner Bros. Pictures, 1973).

⁵⁰ Morris Dickstein, “The aesthetics of fright,” in *Plank of reason: Essays on the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Scarecrow Press, 1984), p. 65.

⁵¹ Ibid.

inflation, jobs, and urban crime to America's deteriorating world position."⁵² The movie "emphasizes a whole technology and economy of death," which in reality characterized the last phase of the war in Vietnam. In *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1990), Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan link horror movies' fascination with the occult to capitalism in an underdeveloped democratic context. For them, horror movies directly address the dysfunctions of capitalism and crises of political and economic confidences provoked by a corrupt leadership.⁵³

Horror movies' relationship with society offers many insights into how death metal's ethos of extremity and transgression may allow participants to liberate themselves from social and cultural constraints. Horror movie theories offer a relevant framework to understand how escapism unfolds in death metal music, since both art forms invite their participants to explore emotions and behaviors that should be hidden or repressed. Extreme metal has been characterized as "escapist" but mostly in a pejorative way. In *Primal Roots: Ancestry and Race in Extreme Music Discourses*, Irina-Maria Manea explains that the far-right politicized group National Socialist Black Metal's obsession with myths of European pure race may be called "escapism."⁵⁴ National Socialist Black Metal's discourse is one of a hierarchy of races, not only trying to "evade recent history, but also to wipe it out."⁵⁵

This use of the term "escapism" is radically different than what was suggested at the beginning of this thesis. There is a big difference between the use of "escapism" to describe someone who watches too much television and a far-right group's desire to rewrite European history in favor of

⁵² Dickstein, "The aesthetics of fright," p. 66.

⁵³ Doug Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The politics and ideology of contemporary Hollywood film* (Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 170.

⁵⁴ Irina-Maria Manea, "Primal roots: Ancestry and race in extreme music discourse" (University of Bucharest), Academia.edu, p. 191.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

a particular race. This contrast highlights how the term “escapism” has been used to describe anyone who refuses to face reality, no matter the context and how disappointing it is. However, as will be argued, escapism can also be the reason why we engage with various forms of entertainment and aspire for a better existence. Escapism is a core element of fiction literature and, moreover, a widely shared attitude towards life at the heart of human nature. If the aim of this study is to use escapism as a way to understand how death metal music may allow its participants to liberate themselves from their constraints, it needs first to tackle escapism’s original usages and understand why it still holds pejorative connotations.

III. Original usages of escapism

The term escapism first appeared in the 1933 *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* and quickly became a pejorative term, notably used by literary critic John Crowe Ransom in *Psychology of Defeat*.⁵⁶ In “Escapism” from *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds* (2018), Lars Konzack explains that Ransom “described his contemporaries as an escapist people blinded by progressivism and industrial power,” portraying escapism as a “combination of illusionism, anesthetic, and pathological infantilism.”⁵⁷ From Ransom’s work, escapism came to describe someone who seeks diversion from reality. Ransom’s student Cleanth Brooks wrote that sentimentality, vulnerability to irony, and escapism were Romanticism’s three main characteristics.⁵⁸ Robert B. Hellman, another of Ransom’s disciples, categorized the hippy counterculture as escapist.⁵⁹ Writers Montague Summers and James Wechsler both viewed escapism as describing the act of retreating into alternate fantastic realities, make-believe, and

⁵⁶ Lars Konzack, “Escapism,” in *The Routledge companion to imaginary worlds*, ed. Mark Wolf (Routledge, 2018), p. 246.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 247.

⁵⁹ Robert B. Hellman, “Escape and escapism varieties of literary experience,” *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 83 Issue 3, 1975, pp. 439–58.

“romantic escapism.”⁶⁰

Sigmund Freud’s work on the mental condition he called the “infantile state” had a great influence on later discussions about escapism.⁶¹ Even though Freud never used the term “escapism,” it quickly became associated with the “infantile state,” “suffered by someone who indulges in their own dreams of power and control rather than understanding the realities of adulthood.”⁶² Whoever suffers from the infantile state seeks refuge in their own “fantasies,” which in the work of Freudian literary critics became a way to talk about fiction literature. Thus, an escapist came to mean someone who regresses to childhood and indulges in their own dreams of power and control, refusing to deal with reality. Childhood, fiction, fantasy, and escape became associated, which contributed to the widespread pejorative connotations of “escapism.” From this emerged a general criticism of any form of fictional expression featuring fantastic elements. Fiction literature became the battleground for escapism.

i. Tolkien’s two types of escape: Towards a framework for escapism

Escapism and fiction literature’s first defenders were science fiction writer Olaf Stapledon and fantasy writer J. R. R. Tolkien. Following Ransom’s pejorative of the term, Freudian discourses on escapism came to disparage fiction literature due to the presence of fantastic or imaginary elements.⁶³ Stapledon took a stand against such criticism in an essay called *Escapism in Literature* (1939), in which he distinguishes four categories of fiction literature: Creation, Propaganda, Release, and Escapism.⁶⁴

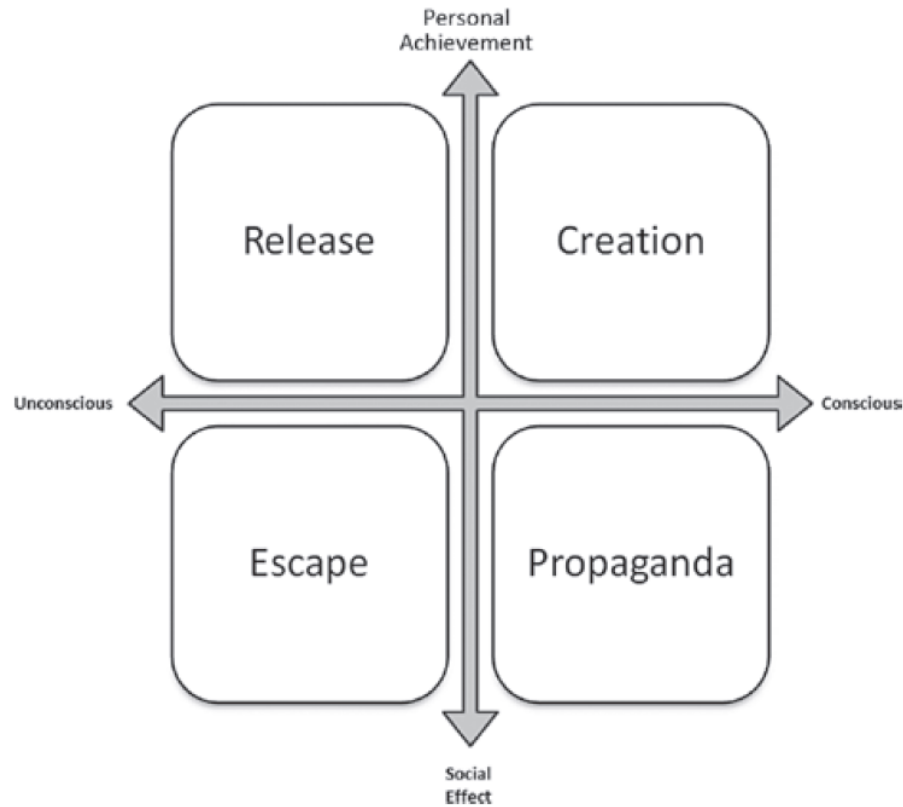
⁶⁰ Konzack, “Escapism,” p. 247.

⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, *The psychology of love* (Penguin Books, 2007), quoted in Lars Konzack, “Escapism,” in *The Routledge companion to imaginary worlds*, ed. Mark Wolf (Routledge, 2018), p. 246.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Konzack, “Escapism,” p. 248.

⁶⁴ Olaf Stapledon, “Escape in literature,” *Scrutiny*. 1939.



Olaf Stapledon's four types of literature in Lars Konack "Escapism."⁶⁵

Stapledon's categories are organized around opposite polarities: Personal achievement vs. Social effect and Unconscious engagement vs. Conscious engagement. Stapledon is still hostile towards escapism, but on the grounds that escape literature lacks creativity; its goal being to confound the reader into a more appealing alternative reality. In this way, escape literature must be realistic in order to mimic reality and thus keep the reader from the real world. It is unconscious because the reader becomes unaware that they are engaging in fiction and imagines that what they read is in fact reality. Escape literature, like propaganda literature, aims for a social effect as it is concerned with changing people's views in a particular direction. Propaganda literature distinguishes itself from escape literature when its social effect is viewed as positive and beneficial

⁶⁵ Konzack, "Escapism," p. 251.

to society and humanity, which also makes it a type of literature instead of just propaganda.⁶⁶ Creation literature is opposed to escape literature because it features a carefully constructed fictional universe into which the reader consciously enters, “[helping] the reader to face up to reality and cope with it successfully.”⁶⁷ Last, release literature rather than focusing on creating an entirely distinct fictional world—placing it towards the unconscious pole—instead offers a form of catharsis through the “release of pent-up forces that leads to change in emotion, resulting in replenishment and renewal.”⁶⁸

The conscious/unconscious and personal/social polarities are ever-present in discussions about escapism since it unfolds in relationship with the self and society. Escapism is often seen as synonymous with fleeing. Tolkien’s theorization of escapism takes up the same poles but articulates them differently, positioning escapism not as a form of surrender before hardship but as an impulse or attitude towards it, after which fight or flight ensues. In *On Fairy-stories* (1947) Tolkien theorizes two types of escape: the escape of the prisoner and the flight of the deserter.⁶⁹ In *Escapism* (2018), Konzack identifies the former type as “legitimate” and the latter as “illegitimate.”⁷⁰ These types of escape are theorized through metaphors. Illegitimate escape is represented by the character of the deserter who, in the face of their responsibilities towards adversity, flees from them and indulges in their own dreams of power and control, refusing to see reality as needing to be faced. Looking at illegitimate escape through Stapledon’s poles, the escapist changes their views regarding reality and plunges into a seemingly real alternative reality without adversity, responsibilities, or hardship. The illegitimate escape represents a fleeing

⁶⁶ Konzack, “Escapism,” p. 251.

⁶⁷ Stapledon, “Escape in literature,” p. 298.

⁶⁸ Konzack, “Escapism” p. 251.

⁶⁹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-stories: Expanded edition with commentary and notes*, ed. Verlyn Flieger & Douglas A. Anderson (Harper Collins, 2008), pp. 13, 69, 162.

⁷⁰ Konzack, “Escapism,” p. 251.

attitude. On the other hand, legitimate escape is represented by the character of the prisoner who escapes from their cell, a metaphor of adversity and hardship, and explores the outside world, is curious about it, learns about it, and returns with insights.⁷¹ The legitimate escapist is consciously engaging with the outside world and from it achieves personal betterment. This type of escape closely resembles utopian literature, except that the end goal is not social betterment but personal achievement.

Other writer critics such as C. S. Lewis and Ursula K. Le Guin have suggested two different types of escapism: responsible and irresponsible. This dichotomy is inspired by Stapledon's and Tolkien's models, where responsible escape features fictional worlds different than reality in which escape is sought while constantly being aware that such worlds are not real, while irresponsible escape features a fictional world that mimics reality and is to be substituted for it. However, the pejorative connotations of "illegitimate" and "irresponsible" must be addressed, as they may contribute to marginalization of forms of escapism. For the purposes of this study, they will both be addressed as "fleeing escapism," while responsible and legitimate escapism will be addressed as "fighting escapism." Fighting and fleeing escapism are not the only types of escapism, but they do summarize initial theorizations from Stapledon, Tolkien, Lewis, and Le Guin. They heavily focus on the reader's, or in our case the listener's, relationship with fictional universes.

ii. Literature review on escapism: In defense of escapism

Contemporary critics have also tried to approach escapism in a different and more favorable light. Konzack's *Escapism* (2018) suggests that seeing escapism—in the form of creative fantasy—as “a diversion from reality is becoming an increasingly anachronistic approach.”⁷² Konzack's

⁷¹ Konzack, “Escapism,” p. 252.

⁷² Ibid, p. 253.

historical review of the many discussions about escapism provides many insights as to why it is still considered a pejorative term. Konzack's argument is that "fantastic literature creates a free space from which one can gain a new perspective," with fantastic worlds enabling us to reconsider the real one. Just like horror movies, fiction literature allows its participants to take a step back from reality, observe it, understand it, and reconsider it from a new perspective. In both cases, participants escape into fictional universes to return to reality more equipped to deal with it. From Konzack, we can begin to elaborate a framework for escapism that features an alternative world, as opposed to reality, which allows its participants to better understand reality and themselves before facing it again.

Greg Sharzer also approaches escapism more favorably. Published in 2021, *Late Escapism and Contemporary Neoliberalism: Alienation, Work, and Utopia* (2021) considers escapism as "the desire to leave one's physical or emotional circumstances for an ideal alternative" and as a way to understand and analyze contemporary society's struggles and crisis.⁷³ For Sharzer, escapism is not an actual escape, a fleeing attitude or refusal to face reality, but an expression of a desire for change "[getting] its power from the feeling of immobility."⁷⁴ The feeling of immobility can be seen as being unsatisfied with one's psychological, social, or economic situation. Immobility may unfold as the incapacity to deal with personal frustrations, thus leading to a feeling of stasis as opposed to progress. Sharzer's first chapter title, "What is escapism?" explores the struggles and the crisis induced by neoliberalism: how escapism is necessary for society to coerce its participants into specific capitalist behaviors such as incurring debt—a form of monetary escape—and how it is also needed by its participants to deal with the stresses of being coerced. In Sharzer's view, the

⁷³ Greg Sharzer, *Late escapism and contemporary neoliberalism: Alienation, work and utopia* (Routledge, 2021), p. i.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 122.

modern world suffers from nostalgia for a canceled future that was to have directly followed WWII, a future made up of all the social and economic benefits that neoliberalism promised but which never became fully available. In order to have access to housing and healthcare, debt became a way of “buying into this dream” by “putting down an imaginary down payment on freedom from insecurity and constraints.”⁷⁵ Sharzer argues that debt “functions as a form of escapism, putting off difficult decisions into the future, in the hopes that finances will improve, or at least not implode.”⁷⁶ His argument is that escapism provides a new way of understanding social conflicts that reinforces escapism’s relationship with society. Where it was formerly an attitude adopted by a reader towards fiction literature, escapism is now an integral feature of society. In contemporary parlance, escapism became a way to cope with our fears and insecurities.

Humanist geographer and writer Yi-Fu Tuan published in 1998 a book simply entitled *Escapism* (1998). In this book, Tuan sees escapism as part of humanity’s fundamental nature and explores how it has unfolded in human behaviors.⁷⁷ Tuan’s work might be one of the most optimistic works on escapism yet, arguing that it is at the heart of the human desire to liberate oneself from constraints. As a geographer, Tuan argues that he is predisposed to view escapism through the culture/nature duality, where culture is framed as an escape from nature both in geographic and philosophical terms.⁷⁸ He identifies humanity’s desire to escape from unforgiving nature but suggests that nature also allows humans to escape from the stability and immobility of the city, the locus of culture. Additionally, he identifies humanity’s desire to escape through culture from its animal nature, represented in the body, but reminds us that humans still need to connect

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 4.

⁷⁷ Tuan, *Escapism*, pp. 7–11.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 8.

with their body and satisfy its impulses.⁷⁹ Tuan's work features many dualities (nature/culture, body/mind, I/us) and argues that escape is a way sought from each pole of these dualities towards the other. Tuan's elaboration of escapism is built on opposites, reminiscent of escapist fiction's role in featuring a fictional universe opposed to reality. However, Tuan's escapism faced much criticism regarding what Sharzer notes as a "lack of thorough investigation regarding the social and historical conditions driving escapism."⁸⁰

iii. Escapism and hope

All three writers present escapism as an attitude towards constraints and a desire to reach a better state. Escapism may be seen as an impulse, a reflex, a key feature, and integral part of human experience, in a similar way that philosopher Ernst Bloch theorized "hope." Bloch positions hope as a "feeling that suits us better," in opposition to the emotion of fear, being a more definite state of anxiety. This anxiety comes from humanity's confusion when facing questions such as "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What are we waiting for? What awaits us?"⁸¹ Hope triumphs over fear as its work is in love with success rather than failure. Thus, the emotion of hope allows one to long for success, for accomplishment, for victory, and for confronting fear, anxiety, and confusion. Bloch's questions are truly existential, as not having the answers inevitably leads to fear. Bloch suggests that triumphing over this confusion is a question of "learning hope." In Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, he theorizes hope as:

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Sharzer, *Late escapism and contemporary neoliberalism: Alienation, work and utopia*, p. xiii.

⁸¹ Ibid.

superior to fear, neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out for itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know early enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong.⁸²

Escapism may function in the same way, as it also tackles anxieties and fears. However, these anxieties are not the same as those theorized by Bloch, which comes from humanity's constant rediscovery of itself. Here, escapism may be seen as an attitude that allows humanity to tackle anxieties and fear driven by society. There may be an impulse of escapism in hope. However, what is being addressed here is mostly escapism towards society and reality to better cope with it. Escapism is inherent to hope, and hope is inherent to escapism. If hope is inherent to human experience and necessary for humanity's existence, then so is escapism.

IV. Focus of the study: Back to extreme metal

Analyzing discussions about both extreme metal music and escapism brings forth many similarities, yet few scholars have looked at extreme metal music from the perspective of escapism. In this study, my aim is to develop escapism as a framework to study extreme metal music. My understanding of escapism in relationship to extreme metal unfolds in three ways, which are all encompassed in death metal band Sanguine Glacialis's album *Maladaptive Daydreaming*. First, escapism unfolds in relationship with society. Constraints emerge in everyday life from struggles between the self and its social, cultural, and physical environment. To escape requires an acknowledgement of these struggles and of the need to liberate oneself from these struggles. In *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, these struggles are acknowledged through contact with the abject as

⁸² Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (MIT Press, 1986), p. 3.

theorized by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Much like horror movies, the album offers a safe way to explore the abject and engage with symbolic representations of societal constraints. Since the album is an artifact of music, escapism from hegemonic culture is developed by musical means, in transgressive sonic extremity that explores the forbidden boundaries of death metal music itself. Second, escapism unfolds in the depiction of an alternative reality in which escape is sought. This alternative reality, as usually described in escapist works, brings reality's dysfunctional elements into focus. Each song can be seen as a meditation, a tableau, or a number depicting these very dysfunctional elements. Escapism features two types of reaction, a fleeing escape and a fighting stance, which are both embodied in aspects of the album. Third, escape aims for self-betterment, through an introspective understanding of our darker emotions. In *Maladaptive Daydreaming* these emotions are embodied by different personas, performed vocally by lead vocalist Maude Théberge. Through emotional connections with personas, darker impulses may be able to return without disrupting conscious functioning, in the same way that horror movies accomplish.

These three ways of developing an escapist framework are not exclusive to the album and may apply to other extreme metal albums. This study is a first attempt to understand extreme metal music through the sense of escapism. Looking at *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, it is possible to see escapism unfolding as an alternative reality in reaction and opposition to society, in which a better version of the self is attainable through darker emotions and repressed impulses.

CHAPTER 2

Discussion of Maladaptive Daydreaming

This chapter will focus on contemporary death metal band Sanguine Glacialis' album *Maladaptive Daydreaming*.⁸³ The album was released on streaming platforms on August 18, 2023, followed by a live album launch show September 1, 2023, at Le Petit Campus in Montréal. Sanguine Glacialis distinguish themselves from other death metal bands by their compositional approach to music. Their songs are always structured around central death metal elements discussed in chapter 1, but they favor a more introspective approach. First, each member is given space to bring their own musical influences into the compositional process, resulting in a blend of various musical genres that are often strangers to death metal such as jazz, blues, and classical music. Songs also feature lyrics in French, English, and sometimes Latin, standing out from the genre's almost exclusive use of English. Lead vocalist Maude Théberge both sings and screams, which again marks a departure from death metal's usual treatment of the voice. Second, Sanguine Glacialis' introspective approach unfolds in the lyric themes. As the principal lyricist, Théberge usually approaches lyrics from a personal standpoint, writing in metaphors.⁸⁴ For example, Sanguine Glacialis' last album, *Hadopelagic* (2018), was articulated around the mythical figure of the kraken as representing dark and violent impulses returning to the surface of the ocean as a metaphor for human consciousness.⁸⁵ Instead of focusing on methodical and graphic depictions of bodily mutilations, Sanguine Glacialis usually focuses on mental illnesses, depression, and anxiety.

⁸³ Sanguine Glacialis, *Maladaptive Daydreaming*. (2023).

⁸⁴ "Sanguine Glacialis – 'I think the trick is to accept yourself the way you are.'" [thecoronersreportmag.com <https://www.thecoronersreportmag.com/post/sanguine-glacialis-i-think-the-trick-is-to-accept-yourself-the-way-you-are?fbclid=IwAR2Naj-zFtkEiNTE69gLWaNzXwTbnhG4RaJmwY_ZbKhV9iJDLrAP7QYhb8E>](https://www.thecoronersreportmag.com/post/sanguine-glacialis-i-think-the-trick-is-to-accept-yourself-the-way-you-are?fbclid=IwAR2Naj-zFtkEiNTE69gLWaNzXwTbnhG4RaJmwY_ZbKhV9iJDLrAP7QYhb8E)

⁸⁵ Sanguine Glacialis, *Hadopelagic*, *Sanguine* (2018).

There are immediate similarities between Sanguine Glacialis' ethos in introspection and how escapism has been theorized by critics such as Tolkien, Konzack, Sharzer, and Tuan.⁸⁶ The band's work, as an art form like other fictional cultural work, focuses on personal experiences, fears, and insecurities. Sanguine Glacialis's lyrics and music provide a way to cope with these fears for both the band members and their listeners. This introspective nature is echoed by their music, a metaphorical escape from death metal's parameters, which may be constraining for some participants who want to explore different aspects of musical extremity. In *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, Sanguine Glacialis embodies this quality and explores the specific theme of escapism, which figures as the album's main narrative. Exploring how escapism unfolds in *Maladaptive Daydreaming* might provide new ways to understand how it may unfold in other contemporary death metal bands who don't engage as explicitly with escapism. Before discussing the album, it might, however, be worth considering how music functions as a form of escapism.

The Musical Escape

Music might be understood as a locus for escapism. First, the act of listening to an album can be a momentary escape from reality. Focusing our attention on music and dedicating our hearing sense to it may allow for a complete aural sensory escape. Second, music's sonic nature may function as an alternative world where listeners connect to different emotions and feelings as embodied in the music. Parameters such as melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, tone, and pitch, amongst others, are organized in various ways to construct an intelligible sonic material, operating as the spatial dimension of music. Since music is a sonic event that unfolds forwards in time, its sonic parameters

⁸⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-stories: Expanded edition with commentary and notes*, ed. Verlyn Flieger & Douglas A. Anderson (Harper Collins, 2008); Lars Konzack, "Escapism," in *The Routledge companion to imaginary world*, ed. Mark Wolf (Routledge, 2018); Greg Sharzer, *Late escapism and contemporary escapism: Alienation, work and utopia* (Routledge, 2021); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Escapism* (John Hopkins University Press, 1998).

can be seen as a spatiotemporal dimension: an alternative world. This alternative world becomes the event during which this sonic universe exists. It is distinct from reality.

Such alternative realities are also an event in the life of the listener because they take up and focus the hearing sense. When listening to music, the hearing sense is almost entirely dedicated to another spatiotemporal dimension. This alternative world sonically displays a distinct, suggestive reality which is still humanly perceptible through hearing. In the case where the human voice is part of the music, this alternative reality acquires a human guide which accompanies the listener. However, it is not the vocalist themselves, but their musical persona(s) that accompanies the listener. Through the voice, concrete human emotions and experiences may be shared with the listener. The voice acts as an emotional guide. In that way, music can be seen as a form of escape since it offers a sensory and emotional escape from reality. But how does escapism unfold in specific musical contents? How can we look at music through escapism? Ultimately, what does it tell us about our relationship with music and with ourselves?

Looking at *Maladaptive Daydreaming* through the lens of escapism might help us answer these questions, as the album's engagement with escapism as its narrative makes it stand out from other contemporary death metal albums. What is most fascinating about *Maladaptive Daydreaming* is how its narrative suggests a form of musical escapism. The album's musical content exists in both reality and fiction. The music becomes conscious of its own escapist dimension, metaphorically breaking the fourth wall by bringing the external listener into its space. In this analysis, the album features two different listeners: the internal, as part of the diegesis, and the external, who listens to the album.

Escape in the Narrative

As previously mentioned in this chapter, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* presents escapism as the central theme of its narrative. It features a protagonist, whom I identify as the internal listener, and who escapes in spite of themselves into their own dreams of power and control. This protagonist is escaping from a dysfunctional and constraining society. In the album, human nature is potentially destructive and the root cause of society's structural crisis. Thus, the protagonist seeks an escape from both humanity and society. The album is conceptual: the songs refer to one another and to the overall thematic of the album: escaping from reality in a dreamlike fictional world. The narrative thus structures the album and its listening experience. On this level, the album is a whole entity to be listened to in its entirety. The last words to be heard, featured at the end of the album's final track, "Résignation," are "maladaptive daydreaming."⁸⁷ The album also features an instrumental interlude titled "Rêveries Obsessives," a possible French translation for maladaptive daydreaming.⁸⁸ These occurrences of the album's title help to reinforce the idea of a thread that goes through the entire album, even in songs where the theme might be ambiguous.

The first song of the album, "Welcome," sets the tone as to how the narrative will unfold. It features the interactions of different personas with each other.⁸⁹ These personas take on different forms, represented by different parameters of the voice: vocal techniques, intensity, pronouns, and language used which will be described in detail in Section 3, The listener's emotional connections. The internal listener, the main protagonist of the album, is welcomed into a world populated by many voices and musical personas. The world into which the protagonist is introduced is referred to as "our" world by the welcoming voices. The internal listener is more forced than invited into a

⁸⁷ Sanguine Glacialis, "Resignation" (2023).

⁸⁸ Sanguine Glacialis, "Rêveries Obsessives" (2023).

⁸⁹ Sanguine Glacialis, "Welcome" (2023).

world where they must engage with dreams and fictions, as represented by the lyrics “escaping reality, to wrap oneself in fictitious echoes fabricated in vain.”⁹⁰ If initially the internal listener is conscious of their situation, gradually they become less aware of the dreamlike quality of this alternative world.

“Welcome” is one of the most explicitly expressed songs in the album, featuring a clear display of the forces, themes, relationships, and characters which will contribute to the album’s narrative. Topics include solitude, pandemics, social crisis, coercion, war, alcohol, mental illness, mental distress, closure, and death. These are experienced either by the internal listener or by other musical personas present in the music, described at length in the album’s often metaphorical lyrics.

“Welcome” also blurs the frontier between reality and fiction, suggesting that the internal listener enters the album’s fictional universe by hearing screamed voices, performed by the band members. External listeners hear these voices just as the internal listener does, giving the song “Welcome” introductory qualities for the external listener. In this manner, the album seems to be aware of its fictional nature, as if the fictional world in which the internal listener is about to enter is the album itself. This philosophical—and broadly metaphysical—aspect reinforces the idea that music may function as a form of musical escape. “Welcome” features a dialogue between the welcoming personas, identified in the lyrics by the pronoun “us,” and the internal listener, identified by the pronoun, “I.” The lyric excerpt below introduces the welcoming persona in full capitals, with the internal listener asking questions.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

STAY — Where
 WITH—am I?
 US — What am I doing here?
 STAND — What
 WITH—is
 US—this place?
 HERE — Who
 FOR—are you?
 YOU — Do you even exist?
 WE—I
 LOVE — Don't
 YOU—know you!⁹¹

Rather than unfolding in a series of questions and answers, this dialogue is structured by the two personas speaking at the same time. If the internal listener can acknowledge their environment and interlocutor, the “welcoming” personas seem highly unreceptive. The interrogative quality of the lyrics performed by the internal listener is in direct contrast to the authoritative quality of the welcoming personas’, whose lyrics address both internal and external listeners who are equally new to the fictional world they’re plunged into, trying to make sense of what they’re hearing and discovering.

If in the first song the voices seem to be real, their nature is brought into question by the songs “Malevolent Creativity” and “Paracusia,” both of which engage with the topic of mental illnesses.⁹² These songs, along with the album’s title *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, question the nature of the fictional world, ultimately suggesting that it exists entirely in the mind of the internal listener. The album’s narrative might be an unconscious dreaming state endured by the internal listener, in which they escape a diminished reality. It is thus suggested that the internal listener suffers from maladaptive daydreaming.

Maladaptive daydreaming is a mental health condition, defined by Eli Somer as an “extensive

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Sanguine Glacialis, “Malevolent Creativity” (2023); Sanguine Glacialis, “Paracusia” (2023).

fantasy activity that replaces human interaction and/ or interferes with academic, interpersonal, or vocational functioning.”⁹³ It is an “excessive form of unwanted daydreaming that produces a rewarding experience based on fantasy of a parallel reality.”⁹⁴ In “Maladaptive Daydreaming: a Qualitative Inquiry,” published in 2002 in *The Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, Somer interviewed participants who suffer from extensive daydreaming to understand “what constitutes pathological elaborate or abnormally extensive daydreaming?”⁹⁵ The study’s six participants were in treatment for “sequelae of neglect-and-trauma-related child experiences,” socially isolated and struggling with occupational functioning.⁹⁶ Somer identified two main functions of maladaptive daydreaming. The first is “disengagement from stress and pain by mood enhancement and wish-fulfillment fantasies,” and the second is “companionship, intimacy, and soothing,” in which themes of violence, idealized selfhood, power and control, captivity and escape, and sexual arousal unfold, providing a retreat from “the threats associated with the real world” that is rewarded by both the “negative reinforcement associated with the removal of the aversive stimulus” and the satisfying emotions experienced in positive daydreaming.⁹⁷ In 2011, an empirical study on the subject by Jayne Biegelsen and Cynthia Schupak reported that 90 of its participants revealed that they had aspirational self-oriented daydreams. More significantly, they reported no childhood traumas.⁹⁸ In the following years, maladaptive daydreaming became viral on the internet, with hundreds of maladaptive daydreamers reaching out to Somer to participate in further studies on

⁹³ Eli Somer, “Maladaptive daydreaming: A qualitative inquiry,” in *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, Vol. 32 Issue 2 (Fall 2002), p. 199.

⁹⁴ Eli Somer, Liora Somer, and Daniela S. Jopp, “Parallel lives: A phenomenological study of the lived experience of maladaptive daydreaming,” *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, Vol. 17 Issue 5, 2016, p. 561.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 562.

⁹⁷ Somer, “Maladaptive daydreaming: A qualitative inquiry,” pp. 203, 210.

⁹⁸ Jayne Biegelsen and Cynthia Schupak, “Compulsive fantasy: Proposed evidence of an under-reported syndrome through a systematic study of 90 self-identified non-normative fantasizers,” in *Consciousness and Cognition*, Vol. 20 Issue 4 (2011). Mentioned in Somer, Somer, and Jopp, “Parallel lives: A phenomenological study of the lived experience of maladaptive daydreaming,” p. 562.

the condition.⁹⁹

Returning to the album, it can be seen as a form of sonic maladaptive daydreaming, a kind of “phobic behavior reflecting the avoidant alternative” or a fight-or-flight situation.¹⁰⁰ Coupled with the sonic nature of the music, this avoidant behavior metaphorically separates the external listener from reality and social interaction. *Maladaptive Daydreaming* can be seen as a form of introspective escapism coupled with extensive daydreaming and dissociative psychopathology. However, the topic of mental illness is just one of many featured in the album. If the narrative’s clear avoidant quality refers to the previously discussed fleeing escapism, there are nonetheless other ways in which escapism unfolds in the album. *Maladaptive Daydreaming*’s first escapist quality is its stance against society. Just like death metal music and horror movies, the album situates itself at the edge of cultural boundaries.¹⁰¹ However, the ways in which the album adopts this oppositional attitude are far from usual and looking at these ways through what we already know of escapism might offer significant insights.

I. Escape from society, through society

Maladaptive Daydreaming’s fictional universe unfolds as a critique of contemporary society, particularly in the songs “Immuration,” “Inadaptation,” “Burst in flames,” and “Resilience.”¹⁰² Instead of describing a single place representing all that could be better, the album depicts, through a great deal of lyrical and musical intensity, the sheer ugliness of reality. The lyrics are less about graphic depiction of violent scenes than about everyday struggles from a human perspective. Lyrics from the song “Immuration” give a general idea how the album views confinement and

⁹⁹ Somer, Somer and Jopp, “Parallel lives: A phenomenological study of the lived experience of maladaptive daydreaming,” p. 563.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ This is a play on words on the title of Keith Kahn-Harris’s book *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge* (Berg, 2010).

¹⁰² Sanguine Glacialis, “Immuration,” “Inadaptation,” “Burst in flames,” “Resilience” (2023).

solitude:

“Isolated in depression
Cloistered with alienation
Interned by humanity
Fatal immigration.”¹⁰³

With its recurrent mentions of solitude, coercion, anxiety, and infection, this song can be understood as a discussion of the impact on the mental health of the recent pandemic and the hardships of confinement. This possible reading is also how Sanguine Glacialis’ vocalist and lyricist Maude Théberge understood her own song. In her interview for *thecoronersreportmag.com*, Théberge states that writing in metaphors suggests different meanings for (external) listeners. Moreover, she “absolutely [loves] hearing about the different interpretations people give to [her] words.”¹⁰⁴ From this, we understand that Théberge encourages the external listeners to cultivate their own understandings of her lyrics and to relate to her work in their own ways. “Immuration” takes no particular political stand against the recent health crisis, focusing instead on the human experiences of the pandemic and on the extreme solitude resulting from confinement amid a global climate of fear. However, the song goes beyond this recent health crisis, extrapolating feelings of solitude rooted in anxiety and in the hatred of others. Here, solitude is experienced not only physically but also mentally, as represented in the lyrics, “Confined in our own mind, locked in others’ hatred.”¹⁰⁵ Solitude is a refuge from such hatred, but one where hatred can grow exponentially. “Immuration” features the complex relationship we have with ourselves and others in times of great—and this case mandatory—solitude.

The themes of the song “Burst in flames” are war and humanity’s destruction. The song

¹⁰³ Sanguine Glacialis, “Immuration”; Translation from French by the author, “Isolé dans la dépression; Cloîtré avec l’aliénation; Interné par l’humanité; l’immuration fatale.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Translation from French by the author, “Confiné dans son propre esprit; enfermé dans la haine des autres.”

features blast beats, tremolo guitar riffs, and a rapid tempo, making it one of the closest songs to classic death metal's musical parameters. However, the song also features Th  berge's powerful operatic singing, a musical element foreign to classic death metal music. The narrator of the song uses the pronoun "we," representing humanity's last look on its burning world:

We are powerless, shattered in the dirt
 We are staring at this world
 Watching it burst into flames
 We watch this world burst into flames
 They burst into flames.¹⁰⁶

This destruction comes not from external factors but from humanity's own destructive nature. Humanity is responsible for the destruction of our world, as described in the lyrics "humanity is doomed, we condemned an entire world," and later "we are in a cage, made of our own rage." Thus, in *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, escapism does not unfold in the depiction of a better-looking world from which we seek personal and social betterment. On the contrary, escapism here works through the depiction of society's ugly, forbidden, and rotten side. At the center of this discourse is humanity's destructive and hateful nature. Personal frustrations and social struggles are to be revolved not through a vision of a better life, but through a difficult but necessary acknowledgement of their existence. Viewing death metal music and horror movies as manifestations of social crisis, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* explicitly deals with these crises: not only does it discuss society's struggles, but it also focuses on humanity's particular experiences of them. It plunges headfirst into the ugly, the forbidden, and the destructive in a deep introspective dive. These disruptive and dysfunctional elements are in part what Julia Kristeva theorized as the abject in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), discussed in chapter 1.¹⁰⁷ However,

¹⁰⁶ Sanguine Glacialis, "Burst in flames" (2023).

¹⁰⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 1–31.

Maladaptive Daydreaming deals with the abject in slightly different ways than broader death metal music.

i. The abject in *Maladaptive Daydreaming*

Maladaptive Daydreaming provides a form of ritual in which the listener may come into metaphorical contact with the abject. This contact primarily occurs through the concrete elaboration of previously mentioned abject themes such as violence, destruction, pain, suffering, and humanity's destructive nature, foregrounded in most of the album's songs. Engaging with what is considered abject allows participants to understand and explore possible causes of their anxieties and frustrations. Closure is found by focusing on the abject directly, bringing it to the surface and acknowledging it.¹⁰⁸ From this introspective relationship with the abject, participants may seek escape from society as they engage with what Robert Walser formulated as the "other"—everything that hegemonic society doesn't want us to acknowledge.¹⁰⁹ Just like death metal music, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* displaces the abject onto society. However, the album uses death metal's ritualistic nature to discuss less commonly explored abject themes of mental illness and distress. These themes are unusual in death metal, which usually focuses instead on graphic displays of extreme violence. Also, the album's engagement with avoidance refers to fleeing escapism and more broadly to initial pejorative connotations of escapism. The internal listener indulges in their own dreams of power and control, an avoidant and individualistic escape which is experienced similarly to Freud's infantile state.¹¹⁰ This theme of mental condition reinforces *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s discourse of avoidance, and this avoiding stance is in part why

¹⁰⁸ This refers to Sanguine Glacialis's last album *Hadopelagic*'s metaphor on the kraken surfacing from the abyssal depths, representing darker impulses returning in great displays of disruptive power.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Walser, *Running with the devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music* (Wesleyan University Press, 2014), pp. 161–162.

¹¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The psychology of love* (Penguin Books, 2007), quoted in Lars Konzack, "Escapism," in *The Routledge companion to imaginary worlds*, ed. Mark Wolf (Routledge, 2018), p. 246.

escapism has been considered bad. Avoidant behaviors towards society have historically been and still are considered as abject due to their solipsistic nature. Avoidance is experienced against one's will and rewarded through negative reinforcement by a removal of aversive stimulus.¹¹¹ The condition of maladaptive daydreaming is indeed an excessive form of unwanted and extensive daydreaming.¹¹²

Consequently, the album's discussion of maladaptive daydreaming as an unwanted phobic reaction, as illustrated by the dialogue in "Welcome," superimposes a behavioral form of abjection on an already obvious discourse of abject themes. Throughout the album, fleeing escapist behavior becomes symbolic of a necessary response to society's dysfunctional environment. Since societal dysfunction is caused by humanity's destructive nature, it is our own selves that we seek to escape. In this way, the abject is also displaced onto human nature. *Maladaptive Daydreaming* thus becomes a ritual which allows us to come into contact with our own abject selves: our darkest impulses.

So, the album simultaneously targets abject themes and abject behaviors. The metaphorically daydreaming nature of the album propels the external listener into an abject and avoidant stance, forcing them to acknowledge society's abject elements. The album's ethos is thus displaced onto the simple act of listening to it. Moreover, instead of the destruction of the body—a recurrent theme in death metal—the album focuses on the destruction of the mind. Songs such as "Malevolent Creativity," "Inadaptation," "Immuration," and "Paracusia" all address a form of mental destruction, mostly occurring in various interactions between the album's personas and always involving the internal listener.¹¹³ Through these discursive interactions, mental integrity is

¹¹¹ Somer, "Maladaptive daydreaming: A qualitative inquiry," p. 210.

¹¹² Somer, Somer, and Jopp, "Parallel lives: A phenomenological study of the lived experience of maladaptive daydreaming," p. 562.

¹¹³ Sanguine Glacialis, "Malevolent Creativity," "Inadaptation," "Paracusia" (2023).

challenged by power relationships of excessive abuse between the album's personas and the internal listener. The latter is continuously forced to abandon everyday reality for the sake of the fictional world, driven increasingly mad by the personas' voices. Lyrics from "Ars Moriendi" discuss these relationships:

Dying is a significant artistic design
 There is a right way to inflict fatality
 A shattered mind produces a damaged soul
 Follow the guide to thrive for your own demise
 Your own demise.¹¹⁴

"Ars Moriendi" discusses death, invoking two linked Latin texts after which the song is titled. Dating from about 1415 and 1450, both texts act as a guide to "die well" according to then-contemporary Christian precept. The song's treatment of death is as the only and ultimate truth, forming humanity's sole common experience and nature. Death is represented as the ultimate relief for mental afflictions such as anxiety as well as bodily ones. The song presents anxiety as socially induced: "Panic and anxiety are a mythical delusion forged by fear of losing control, an ability to perceive, blinded by treachery and corruption."¹¹⁵ Death allows to liberate oneself from this affliction. It is still viewed as the destruction of the body through lyrics such as "Return the substance you were allowed to smear."¹¹⁶ However, death holds a double meaning, also suggesting the dissolution of sanity, and is considered a transitional event in which the internal listener entirely abandons reality for the fictional world. When the internal listener says: "Please redeem me from this world," it is unclear which world they are talking about.¹¹⁷ Is death the only way for the internal listener to liberate themselves from maladaptive daydreaming, or is it how they can fully indulge in their obsessive dreams?

¹¹⁴ Sanguine Glacialis, "Ars Moriendi" (2023).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

The album also engages with the abject in musical ways by borrowing musical ideas and instruments from other genres. For example, “Resilience” starts with a melody sung in unison by band members, Th  berge’s voice louder than the others’, and simultaneously played by a clarinet.¹¹⁸ This section is heavily syncopated and draws from klezmer music elements such as the use of the clarinet and ornamented melodic lines along with syncopated rhythms. It occurs at the beginning and end of the song, contrasting with the more “death metal” sections in between. Such occurrences of contrasting musical elements or sections may be considered as abject from a traditional death metal point of view. As previously discussed, death metal music—like most music genres—has defined musical parameters. In death metal music, they allow its participants to develop a set of expectations as to how music may be experienced, which contributes to death metal aficionados’ reorientation of listening. Death metal’s aesthetic is one of shock, but participants come to reorient their listening towards a more pleasurable experience. This inevitably suggests a set of relatively fixed stylistic boundaries. Following this idea, what lies behind these boundaries is exterior to death metal and may be considered as abject in the sense that they are foreign to death metal’s stylistic nature. This version of abject in the form of “foreign” musical elements may be regarded by participants as “too much,” “bad,” or “shit,” to be avoided at all costs. As mentioned in chapter 1, there is a prized display of connoisseurship amongst extreme metal fans.¹¹⁹ Participants are expected to demonstrate the ability to identify what can be considered death metal through its musical parameters. *Maladaptive Daydreaming*’s music defies those expectations by providing musical elements that are exterior and consequently abject to death metal music.

While the album engages with the abject just as death metal music does, it does so in a

¹¹⁸ Sanguine Glacialis, “Resilience” (2023).

¹¹⁹ Eric Smialek, “Genre and expression in extreme metal music, ca. 1990–2015,” PhD dissertation (2016), p. 35.

completely different way, providing multiple levels of reading on how the abject can be explored and suggesting a more highly introspective exploration of common death metal themes by placing escapism at the center of its discourse. Playing with topics of mental illness, avoidance, social crisis and death, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* justifies escapism as a necessary and almost natural reaction to a dysfunctional reality.

ii. Grab your popcorn: *Maladaptive Daydreaming* and horror movies

The notion that *Maladaptive Daydreaming* discusses social and societal crisis has been mostly through an extensive analysis of its lyric and narrative content. Much like horror movies, *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s engagement with humanity's destructive nature is a product of social and cultural struggles. In its dark depictions of society, the album participates in death metal's function of representing transgressive elements in metaphorical and musical ways. As has been suggested, looking at *Maladaptive Daydreaming* through the lens of horror movie theories might provide fresh insight articulated around the escapist need of liberation.

In chapter 1, we argued that horror movies are inevitably social in their displays of graphic scenes of extreme violence and anguish. In *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1990), Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan argue that horror movies are one of several kinds of cultural representations of the fears, insecurities, and anxieties that emerge in times of crisis.¹²⁰ Both the themes and the images offer safe and routinized ways for the audience to deal with these. They may also offer a "nihilistic vision of a world without hope or remedy," possibly allowing the audience to accept reality as it is.¹²¹ This type of representation is closer to *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s depiction of a rotten and sick world. For Morris Dickstein,

¹²⁰ Doug Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The politics and ideology of contemporary Hollywood film* (Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 168.

¹²¹ Ibid.

horror films allow us to neutralize the anxieties born from a deceiving society, having a cathartic and purgative effect, draining off unknown feelings and fears.¹²² He compares horror movies to myths and fables, giving “form and dimension to the unknown, making it more human, more comprehensible.”¹²³ Both death metal and horror cinema offer ways for their audiences to liberate themselves from a dysfunctional society that nevertheless keeps promising the good life. In this sense, they both share one of escapism’s most important characteristics: liberation from constraints. For Robert Walser, “both heavy metal and the horror film address the insecurities of this tumultuous era. Both provide ways of producing meaning in an irrational society; both explore explanations for seemingly incomprehensible phenomena.”¹²⁴ Shared tropes of darkness, despair, violence, and death are a means to cope with such irrationality in society.

Death metal’s relationship with society is similar to that of horror cinema. It mostly deals with society’s struggles in symbolic ways through an aesthetic of shock and of indulgence in transgressive elements. Opposition to society is in the basic nature of death metal rather than its explicit discourse. Death metal rarely explicitly addresses the social struggles from which it emerges, often seen as metaphorical and cultural manifestations of society’s fears and anxieties. Both genres offer an outlet for built-up personal frustrations, but rarely conduct explicit discourses about day-to-day struggles and social crisis.

Consequently, *Maladaptive Daydreaming*’s relationship with society is much closer to horror movies’ representations of social crisis than death metal’s concerns. First, like horror movies, the album explores a series of social and personal crises. In contemporary society, evil may arise from humanity’s destructive nature, often personified by an evil protagonist like Michael Myers in John

¹²² Morris Dickstein, “The aesthetics of fright,” in *Plank of reason: Essays on the horror film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Scarecrow Press, 1984), p. 69.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Walser, *Running with the devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music*, p. 161.

Carpenter's 1978 genre-defining slasher picture *Halloween*. Picturing evil offers the opportunity to clearly identify constraints that society forces upon its citizens. It also justifies the need to free oneself from these constraints. Second, picturing evil in *Maladaptive Daydreaming* unfolds through the lyrics' focus on dark themes as well as their musical embodiment. Lyric and musical representations may function as an outlet for the listener's repressed fears, but also for the members of Sanguine Glacialis when performing the album. Per Dickstein, these representations offer safe, routinized ways to experience and play with these dark themes, in the same way that children make up games about the very things that terrify them.¹²⁵ In this manner, participants may come to understand their fears and possibly confront them, and may reach a better understanding of themselves, which is in part what escapism offers. *Maladaptive Daydreaming's* similarities with horror movies foreground its ethos of escapism. The album's particular stance towards society makes it more introspective and also more relevant for understanding how death metal music more generally can hold a political discourse. What results from this comparison is a form of demarginalizing in death metal music, making it possible for the genre to offer its participant not only symbolic but explicit avenues for escapism.

iii. Musical transgressions and genre-bending

Having analyzed *Maladaptive Daydreaming's* discursive elements in relation to society, the abject, and horror movies, we now focus on the metaphorical power of its music. While the album's lyric elements are much closer to horror cinema's treatment of fears and anxieties, its music retains the same symbolic and metaphorical power as death metal. That said, the band pushes its musical boundaries further, arguably constituting an actual escape from the death metal genre.

On their band camp website, Sanguine Glacialis briefly describe their music as keeping a

¹²⁵ Dickstein, "The aesthetics of fright," p. 69.

“strong melodic death metal accent,” while experimenting with jazz, classical, folkloric, and Latin music, amongst other musical genres.¹²⁶ Labels for *Maladaptive Daydreaming* include “melodic black metal,” “prog metal,” “avant-garde metal,” “jazz metal,” and “goth metal.” These descriptions highlight the album’s primary musical purpose: a deep dive into the band’s plural musical identity. *Maladaptive Daydreaming*’s musical core is comparable to death metal music’s defining elements. The band features a main vocalist, two guitarists, an electric bassist, and a drummer. Electric guitars are distorted and tuned lower than standard guitar tuning. Drums feature a double bass drum and different cymbals, including a ride mostly used for blast beats. *Maladaptive Daydreaming*’s aesthetic is one of great sonic intensity, similar to traditional death metal music. Lead vocalist Maude Théberge displays a mastery of various screaming techniques. There is always at least one passage in each song where the band plays according to death metal’s traditional musical parameters. In these sections, distorted guitars usually play tremolo riffs in a modal chord progression, often moving a step or a step and a half lower, while the drums play blast beats in rhythmic unison in 16th notes at a tempo of around 170 bpm. “Malevolent Creativity” is one of the songs in which most sections are structured according to the death metal genre. It features heavily distorted guitar whose various tremolo riffs dominate the song.¹²⁷ Music with such minimal note values played at such speed creates an effect of stasis due to a form of sonic saturation: each note or sound occurs so fast that it is almost impossible to focus clearly on individual elements. Simultaneous blast beats and tremolo guitar riffs offer the voice a solid sonic ground on which to unfold at a slower pace, often in 4th or 8th notes, with words screamed on downbeats. All instruments play with great energy, and both sound effects and instrumental

¹²⁶ Sanguine Glacialis, “Sanguine Glacialis.” Band Camp.
<https://sanguineglacialis.bandcamp.com/album/maladaptive-daydreaming>. Accessed August 13, 2023.

¹²⁷ Sanguine Glacialis, “Malevolent Creativity” (2023).

techniques convey a form of musical aggressivity. In this sense *Maladaptive Daydreaming* remains at its core a death metal album. These death metal sections occur in every song and may function as familiar landmarks for the external listener as the album's musical direction shifts towards other music genres such as folk or classical. The album's musical coherence depends on these sections. Just like in death metal music, they are sonic manifestations of transgressive elements like noise, chaos, and violence. Just as mentioned in chapter 1, this form of musical transgression allows the external listener to deal with their frustrations by vicariously experiencing aggressive and violent emotions embodied in the music. Again, this can be read as a form of escapism.

Maladaptive Daydreaming suggests a first level of escapism by providing its participants with a form of sonic ritual to contact and connect with darker and forbidden elements in society. This first-level escapism has already been discussed by writers such as Robert Walser, Keith Kahn-Harris, and Michelle Phillipov and also more generally in chapter 1.¹²⁸ However, the album suggests a second level of escapism by featuring musical elements and sections foreign to the death metal genre. This kind of section has been briefly mentioned in Section 1.3, The abject, but would benefit from further explication and analysis of specific musical examples.

One of *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s most unusual aspects is its featuring of various instruments from a symphonic or folkloric background, including the saxophone, clarinet, cello, and acoustic piano. Vocalist Maude Théberge also plays violin and keyboard, simulating symphonic instrumentation with digital patches and plug-ins. This instrumentation breaks death metal's traditional five-piece formation and offers other musical textures and timbres than those of heavily distorted guitars and saturated drums. The presence of these new instruments may, however, shock or offend the death metal aficionado. As previously discussed, death metal

¹²⁸ Walser, *Running with the devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music*, Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*, Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: Analysis at the limits*.

participants have clear expectations about what to expect when listening to death metal. Given that death metal is mostly appreciated by reorientation of listening in order to find its music pleasurable, participants expect a specific instrumentation to accomplish this. Consequently, instruments from outside of death metal's genre boundaries may be considered as transgressive by its participants. For some, hearing a saxophone or violin solo right after a distorted guitar riff might be a similar experience to listening to nails on a chalkboard. However, the unusual presence of these instruments in a death metal album directly echoes the band's ethos of introspection.

In a recent interview with *thecoronersreportmag.com*, when discussing “how does one [sic] be ‘seen’ in the darkness around them,” Théberge explains that “[she thinks] the trick is to accept yourself the way you are. It makes the darkness around less intimidating.”¹²⁹ She also mentions that the band “composes what [they] think sounds good without trying to respect a style,” suggesting that the compositional process is inclusive. Band members come from various backgrounds such as jazz, classical, pop, and metal, each bringing their own diverse musical tastes to the music. The end result is a musically contrastive yet coherent death metal album in which different musical genres coexist. Unusual instruments like violin and saxophone are not forced onto a death metal instrumental made of distorted guitar and alternating bass drums; they are featured in specific musical instances that borrow elements from genre more commonly associated with the instruments, for example the clarinet with the klezmer music at the beginning of “Resilience.”¹³⁰ A song's structure may follow death metal's contrasting moods, but in *Maladaptive Daydreaming* these contrasts are heightened as songs feature sections of different music genres; for example, the meter switch from duple to triple meter in the middle section of

¹²⁹ “Sanguine Glacialis – ‘I think the trick is to accept yourself the way you are.’”

¹³⁰ Sanguine Glacialis, “Resilience” (2023).

“Welcome.”¹³¹ The guitar is no longer distorted but now accompanies the keyboard in syncopated rhythmic figures, while the drums adopt a style much closer to jazz. Over this contrasting section is played a jazzy saxophone solo. Another notable example is the klezmer section at the beginning of “Resilience” where the clarinet, played in unison with the voice, immediately strikes the ear due to its distinct, warm tone. These contrasting genre-bending sections embody the album’s transgressive nature. *Maladaptive Daydreaming* takes a stand against standard death metal’s genre parameters, creating a kind of musical transgression towards death metal’s own stylistic boundaries.

The biggest shift from death metal’s expectations is the treatment of the voice. As discussed, in death metal music, the voice is usually always screamed, with various screaming techniques utilized. There is little concern with making the voice intelligible, and in fact death metal aficionados may reorient their listening by discerning lyrics even though screamed or growled. But for most external listeners the screamed lyrics in death metal are unintelligible. *Maladaptive daydreaming* stands apart in that Théberge both sings and screams; she is able to sing in an operatic style but also in more of a ‘rock’ vein. She has a wide vocal range and makes extensive use of her powerful soprano voice, and has mastered a wide range of scream techniques, from low-register growls—known as “cookie monster voice”—to high-pitched “fry” screams.¹³² She alternates between singing and screaming through each song, and often overdubs her voice to simulate a choral ensemble. The treatment of her voice brings new levels of sonic intensity, since most death metal participants’ ears are accustomed to the cryptic and extreme sonic nature of the scream. Screaming may signify darker emotions such as anger, fear, and hate, but may also connote power, control, strength, and aggressivity. These emotions may be experienced by the external listener as

¹³¹ Sanguine Glacialis, “Welcome” (2023).

¹³² Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: Analysis at the limits*, p. 144.

they emotionally connect with the screaming voice. Reintroducing the sung voice brings the music's intensity to a new level, as it may sound alien and disruptive to external listeners accustomed to exclusively screamed voice. Just as unusual instruments are featured in clearly contrasting musical sections, Théberge sings in moments where death metal's expectations would require her to scream. Because operatic singing allows the voice to display similar connotations of power and control to the screamed voice, Théberge is able to match an insanely intense instrumental. Contrast in this case occurs not between sections but within a section, while at the same time Théberge's production of her singing voice evokes connotations of power, control, and violence. Thus, the external listener may be overwhelmed by the emotional power of the sung voice as well as its phonologocentric quality.¹³³ In other words, the voice makes too much emotional sense. Compared to death metal, Théberge's sung voice shares the same transgressive nature as the saxophone, violin, and clarinet. The presence of these unusual musical elements alongside the use of sung voice echoes the band's introspective ethos, allowing its members to liberate themselves from the constraints and expectations of death metal music.

II. The realm of destruction: Escapism through alternative spaces

In the chapter 1, we discussed how Lars Konzack argues for a more favorable approach to fiction literature.¹³⁴ Because it featured fantastical elements in a fictional universe, a few literary critics in the first half of the twentieth century dismissed fiction literature as infantile, selfish, and avoidant; all these judgments falling under the term "escapist." Following J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis's theorizations of a more favorable definition of escapism in fiction literature, Konzack argues that alternative spaces featured in such literature allow a form of metaphysical

¹³³ Ibid., p. 142.

¹³⁴ Konzack, "Escapism," pp. 246–255.

escape in which participants may encounter liberating experiences.¹³⁵ Through fiction literature's alternative worlds, participants simultaneously explore two worlds, the one they leave behind and the one they are entering, because fictional worlds are created and structured in relation to reality. They feature elements from the real world to which the reader can relate, metaphors, and allegories, but also fantastic elements drawn from various mythologies and folklores. For example, Middle Earth in J. R. R. Tolkien's universe is distinct from reality because it is set in a fantastic medieval setting in which different anthroponomic races—elves, dwarfs, orcs, goblins, wizards, and so on—interact with humans.¹³⁶ These relationships may be seen as metaphorical representations of major human themes. In Tolkien's world, elegant and immortal elves are a metaphor for peace, purity, and harmony with nature while the hideous and violent orcs are a metaphor for war, technology, and dominance over nature. This world can be seen as a metaphorical critique of humankind's excessive involvement with technology, which only brings war and destruction—Tolkien's direct response to World War I in which he fought.

Following this idea, some alternative worlds depicted in fiction literature may allow the reader to acknowledge dysfunctional elements in the real world. Due to their fantastic nature, these literatures constantly suggest new or better ways to reconsider our relationship with ourselves, with others, and the world around us. This usually functions by representing a fictional world for the reader to compare with the real one. Therefore, escape in these alternative worlds implies an understanding of the real world and what it is lacking.

The question is, how can this apply to music, and more specifically to *Maladaptive Daydreaming*? How can we use fiction literature's utopian aspects to better understand how the

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Middle Earth is the name of the imaginary land in which most of the events in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books and *The Hobbit* are set.

album, and the broader death metal genre, can be escapist? One way would be to look directly at utopianism through its genre-defining work *Utopia*. Published in Latin in 1516 and later in English in 1551, Sir Thomas More's novel depicts the fictional island of Utopia whose inhabitants live peacefully and in harmony.¹³⁷ In Utopia, wealth is equally distributed, social order is maintained, and injustices are avoided. More's idealized view of society takes its roots in Plato's *Republic*, in which wealth is likewise equally distributed, resulting in social order.¹³⁸ According to Fatima Vieira, *Utopia*'s narrative structure came to define the literary genre of utopianism. It "pictures the journey by sea, land, or air of a man or woman to an unknown place (an island, a country, or a continent); once there, the utopian traveler is usually offered a guided tour of the society, and given an explanation of its social, political, economic and religious organization; this journey typically implies the return of the utopian traveler to his or her own country, in order to be able to take back the message that there are alternative and better ways of organizing society."¹³⁹ However, few utopian works have focused on the actual betterment of society, leaving that aspect unexplored. Over the years, utopianism has also become a hopeful attitude towards the possibility of social betterment, and one that shares similar features with escapism. The common theme of utopian and fiction literature seems to be their depiction of idealized alternative worlds into which readers plunge themselves to encounter liberating experiences, thereby dealing with frustrations caused by society.

Consequently, the alternative world suggested in *Maladaptive Daydreaming* can be seen as a similar fictional world. The internal listener is welcomed into an unknown world in which they are

¹³⁷ Sir Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516), in Latin. Published in English in 1551.

¹³⁸ Plato, *The Republic: Second Edition with new Introduction*, trans. Desmond Lee (London; Penguin Classics, 2007).

¹³⁹ Fátima Vieira, "The concept of utopia," in *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*, edited by Gregory Claeys, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 5.

able to develop an explicit understanding of the deficiencies and struggles of reality. The album focuses on the journey rather than the transformation, and features guides in the form of vocal personas who accompany the internal and external listener through the fictional world. Where fiction literature has chapters that depict this alternative universe, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* has songs. Thus, looking at the songs as windows through which we encounter the album's fictional world may reveal how escapism specifically unfolds in death metal music. Meditations, tableaux, and numbers are three possible avenues for understanding how songs in *Maladaptive Daydreaming* function, each focusing on a different quality, including introspection, representation, and acknowledgement.

i. Merely songs? Meditations, tableaux, and numbers

Viewing songs as meditations focuses on their introspective quality, particularly the internal and external listeners' acknowledgement of their relationships to themselves and with the real and fictional worlds around them. This use of the term "meditation" comes from Keith Kahn-Harris's understanding of Robert Walser's analysis of the lyrics to Ozzy Osbourne's song "Suicide Solution."¹⁴⁰

Wine is fine, but whiskey's quicker
 Suicide is slow with liquor
 Take a bottle, drown your sorrows
 Then it floods away tomorrows, away tomorrows

 Where to hide, Suicide is the only way out
 Don't you know what it's really about?¹⁴¹

On a primary level, that song's lyrics link suicide with a solution to one's problems, but Walser suggests that Osbourne rather provides a reflection on life through affects of despair and futility.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*, p. 35; referring to Walser, *Running with the devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music*, p. 148.

¹⁴¹ Ozzy Osbourne, "Suicide Solution," (Jet Records. 1980 (UK)) 1981 (US). Accessed June 10, 2023.

¹⁴² Walser, *Running with the devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music*, p. 148.

The song engages with suicide in an introspective way, talking about it from the point of view of someone in complete distress. The meditational nature of the song arises from its clear engagement with the theme of suicide and its embodiment in the music. Walser reminds us that to talk about something is different than promoting it.

In *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, dark themes are treated in a similar way. Lyrics in both “Ars Moriendi” and “Resignation” deal with a form of abandon, through death and madness respectively.¹⁴³ For example, the recurring lyrics in “Ars Moriendi”: “your death is the relief of your prosperity; forsake this vessel you impaired in despair” occur right after the words “Ars Moriendi” are screamed, with low register growls on “Ars” and high register screams on “-di,” over a two-measure guitars-and-drums riff, with blast beats on every second measure. The keyboard offers a clear harmonic descending chord progression articulated around a descending harmonic minor arpeggio, highlighted by tremolo guitar work. The keyboard plug-in simulates a grand ensemble, borrowed from classical music instrumentation and suggesting symphonic metal elements. There is a feeling of immense power and inevitable fatality coming from the musical setting. Death is represented as the one inevitable truth that governs every human’s existence—the one thing that is inescapable. The grandiose musical setting mirrors death’s inevitability. Moreover, given the dialogic nature of the album this song can be seen as an attempt by different personas to corrupt the internal listener perhaps to consider suicide, but mostly to worship death and accept it with open arms when it comes.

In “Résignation,” the lyrics “I abandoned my life; I discarded my conscience; I accepted my madness; I embraced my torment.” echo Théberge’s stance on accepting who you are, but nonetheless conveys a more fatalist message.¹⁴⁴ “Résignation” is the album’s last song and acts as

¹⁴³ Sanguine Glacialis, “Ars Moriendi,” “Resignation” (2023).

¹⁴⁴ Sanguine Glacialis, “Résignation” (2023).

a conclusive statement, giving the lyrics' theme of acceptance a connotation of failure in the face of adversity. The lyrics are sung over a reasonably stable instrumental in duple meter. The drums part has steady 16th notes on the double bass drums with a cymbal on each down beat. The instrumental setting has no need to display great deal of energy or intensity. The end is coming, steadily and surely. The lyric "Let the dark have control over your mind; Forget who you were; Free the space for delusion" invites the internal listener to abandon who they are to be replaced by a delusional self. In both songs, the musical setting embodies the lyric content, allowing the external listener to fully embrace the narrative and its introspective themes.

The album's lyrics are often metaphorical and left open to interpretation. Consequently, the listener must engage with their own personal experiences in order to make sense of the lyrics. Asked about the honest but subtle quality of the lyrics, Théberge explains that she "write[s] about subjects and emotions that [she] experienced in some way and transform[s] them into stories."¹⁴⁵ Lyric content comes from human experiences, and through them the listeners may encounter emotions conveyed by Théberge in a similar "cathartic and therapeutic experience."¹⁴⁶ The songs of *Maladaptive Daydreaming* allow the listener to engage with major human themes personally and emotionally, in the same way that Robert Walser explains how heavy metal fans value heavy metal music "because it deals with issues that are of great importance but are too often swept under the rug."¹⁴⁷ Viewing songs as meditations allow for a more introspective reading, inviting us to understand the song as a therapeutic experience for both the performer and the external listener by focusing on the escapist's ethos of introspection coupled with a desire for liberating experiences. These meditative experiences allow the external listener to focus on themselves, rather than

¹⁴⁵ "Sanguine Glacialis – 'I think the trick is to accept yourself the way you are.'"

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Walser, *Running with the devil: Power, gender, and madness in heavy metal music*, p. 150.

engaging with the exterior world.

Another way to look at *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s songs is to see them as different tableaux within a larger exhibition, as a metaphor for songs in an album. Given their acutely representational nature, they can be seen as metaphorical paintings of all the wrongs in society and of humankind's dark nature. One of the most important processes in utopian or fiction literature is the explicit depiction of the alternative world. In this metaphor, tableaux focus our analysis on the representational nature of alternative worlds as visual and/or sonic representations of fictional universes. This metaphorical way of considering death metal songs is adapted from Michelle Phillipov in *Death Metal and Music Criticism: Analysis at the Limits* (2012). For Phillipov, death metal music is "known for its graphic tableaux of death, murder, and mutilation."¹⁴⁸ Aesthetic and affective forms of transgressive representations offer death metal fans "experiences of intensity more like those of graphic horror film viewers."¹⁴⁹ Her use of the word "tableau" focuses on the representational aspect of death metal lyrics, often explicitly descriptive and using extensive vocabulary to precisely depict an act of violence such as mutilation or murder. Cannibal Corpse's "Edible Autopsy" is a good example of this kind of penetrating lyric description:

Guts and blood, bones are broken as they eat your pancreas.
Human liver, for the dinner, or maybe soup with eyes
Bone saw binding in your skull, brains are oozing a human stump.
Needles injected, through your eyes, pulling off flesh, skinned alive, live, live."¹⁵⁰

Maladaptive Daydreaming uses death metal's ethos of transgressive and graphic representations to depict a dysfunctional society in an explicit way. Each song can be seen as a tableau painted musically by the band. Musical elements function as analogs of colors, shapes, lines, objects, or landscapes, while the voice gives form to characters. Songs-as-tableaux echo the

¹⁴⁸ Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: analysis at the limits*, p. 169.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 167.

¹⁵⁰ Cannibal Corpse. "Edible Autopsy". (Metal Blade Records, Inc. 1990). Accessed June 10, 2023.

album's cover artwork, featuring a young woman in a white chemise as part of a painted tableau representing a road made of colorful flowers leading to a distant tower on an island.



Sanguine Glacialis, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* (2023). Album front cover.

The artwork's protagonist might be the internal listener, in the act of painting a colorful tableau representing the alternative reality she is about to enter, as suggested by the road unfolding before her feet. The tableau offers a dramatic contrast of colors with the dark, austere, moldy room behind the woman, which can be seen as a metaphor of reality. Looking closely at the left arm of the painter, we can see pigments of red suggesting blood; these are also visible on the brush in her right hand and applied to the painting, dripping down the canvas. The album artwork suggests an intricate relationship between the artist and her painting, which is made almost out of her own blood, changing color and texture to represent the painter's own imaginary world. This tableau can be read in various ways. It may represent, first, the internal listener indulging in their own dreams of power and control through maladaptive daydreaming; second, the internal listener's apprehension of inevitable death giving way to their own fantasies; or, third, Théberge's own

particular relationship with the album. The common theme in all these readings is the relationship between the painter and their work. The painting is a product of the very flesh and soul of the artist, suggesting that this fictional universe exists only in their mind, as evoked by the title of the album.

In other words, the representational power of the songs on *Maladaptive Daydreaming* allows them to be seen as tableaux, focusing on the verbal and musical depictions of the album's fictional universe. Each tableau focuses on one of the album's central themes, such as war, solitude, mental illness, death, and failure. Each song is made distinctive by its contrasting musical elements, while all together constitute a dark and austere exposition. Applying this reading to death metal music more generally, *Maladaptive Daydreaming's* album artwork provides a more in-depth understanding of tableaux in death metal. Coupling this reading with meditations and numbers also provides a more complete approach than seeing death metal songs simply as graphic descriptions of violent gestures.

While meditations and tableaux are concepts proposed by extreme metal scholars, numbers come from horror movie theories. Again, in theorizing a framework for escapism in music, borrowing from similar art form theories may be a good way to broaden scholarly perspectives on death metal. In this way, songs may be understood as moments of extreme musical violence, theorized here as "numbers." Their escapist quality may be less explicit than meditations and tableaux, and they can be seen as a combination of the two. However, transposing numbers to death metal may bring an updated way as to how evil is pictured in death metal songs.

The term "number" in this context is borrowed from Cynthia Freeland's theorization of horror movies. She uses the term to stand for "sequences of heightened spectacle or emotions."¹⁵¹ Numbers are sequences of varying length that break up the narrative. Their function is to provide

¹⁵¹ Cynthia Freeland, *The naked and the undead: Evil and the appeal of horror* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), p. 275.

the audience with a depiction of evil.¹⁵² In horror movies, numbers usually feature the movie's antagonist committing an act of extreme graphic violence against one of the protagonists. They occur at various moments, disrupting the narrative and keeping the protagonist from saving themselves, which often marks the end of the movie. Numbers are moments of failure for the protagonists in which most of them die at the hands of the antagonist. They give the audience information about the movie's specific evil, its desires, and emotions. They allow the audience to learn the "laws" followed by the evil figure in order to classify and make sense of it.¹⁵³ This provides the audience with an understanding of the evil, its motivations, and its nature.

As distinct moments that break the movie narrative, numbers are similar to a death metal song's intervening musical moods of extreme sonic violence. Both are moments of extreme intensity that contrast with their medium's narrative structure. Looking at *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s songs from the perspective of numbers, however, they mostly share numbers' function of providing the audience with a clear understanding of evil. Songs are windows, moments of voyeurism where the external listener comes into safe contact with evil. Contrary to traditional death metal's picturing of evil, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* focuses extensively on the ills and struggles of society. In horror movies, numbers may allow the audience to understand why the antagonist's actions are violent and evil, while also telling the audience how the violence will be performed. In *Halloween*, Michael Myers kills with a knife, but wears a mask on his face—he's human but has suffered severe childhood trauma, thus hiding them and himself.¹⁵⁴ In *Jaws*, the shark hides in water and attacks by surprise, its dragging jaw filled with razor-sharp teeth—it is simply an animal, a

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Freeland, *The naked and the undead: Evil and the appeal of horror*, p. 256.

¹⁵⁴ John Carpenter, *Halloween*, (Compass International Pictures, Falcon International Productions; Compass International Pictures, Aquarius Releasing, 1978).

manifestation of nature's mercilessness.¹⁵⁵ In *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, society burns because of humankind—we are the architects of our own demise. In this case, songs-as-numbers provide the external listener with a clear understanding of why society is dysfunctional and how these dysfunctions affect its citizens. They allow the audience to demystify evil to better come to terms with it, to understand it, and even to sympathize with it. *Maladaptive Daydreaming's* songs-as-numbers force us to acknowledge that humanity is the very evil depicted in the album.

These three avenues may be theorized as how *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, and possibly death metal music more generally, depicts an escapist alternative world. Each of them offers a specific way to address the album's fictional world. And since songs are the main gateway for this fictional universe, it is relevant to consider them under different perspectives. But what of the act of escaping in itself? While fictional and utopian literatures feature detailed descriptions of an imaginary world, they also focus on the visitor who discovers this world. How does *Maladaptive Daydreaming's* type of escape unfold in the album?

ii. Types of escapism

The album features the two types of escapism theorized in chapter 1, drawn from Stapledon, Tolkien, Lewis, Le Guin, and Konzack.¹⁵⁶ “Fighting escapism” encompasses Tolkien's metaphor of the escape of the prisoner (labeled as legitimate escapism by Konzack) and Lewis's responsible escape. On the other hand, “fleeing escapism” encompasses Tolkien's metaphor of the flight of the deserter (labeled as illegitimate escapism by Konzack) and Lewis's irresponsible escape. These two poles are important for the elaboration of a framework from escapism in music as they focus on the participant's relationship with the specific fictional universe. In a musical setting, fighting

¹⁵⁵ Steven Spielberg, *Jaws*, (Zanuck/Brown Company, Universal Pictures; Universal Pictures, 1975).

¹⁵⁶ Lars Konzack, “Escapism,” in *The Routledge companion to imaginary worlds*, ed. Mark Wolf, (Routledge, 2018), pp. 246–255.

and fleeing escapism focus on the reception of songs, how participants are invited to escaped reality, metaphorically and phenomenologically.

ii. a. Fleeing escapism

In *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, fleeing escapism is experienced by the internal listener. The album starts with a welcoming statement from welcoming personas. These personas are made up of different voices, but their existence is put in doubt by the album's mental illness trope. They may be aural hallucinations or vocal manifestations of the internal listener's own dreams of power and control. In the album, there are two distinct moments where the trope of aural hallucinations appears. The first is in the song "Malevolent Creativity" which can be seen as a discussion on delirium or as a diegetic depiction of the alternative reality suggested by the album, created in the internal listener's mind.¹⁵⁷ Lyrics such as "provocative imagination; grotesque chimeral; surge" suggest the dreamlike or nightmarish quality of the alternative world surging into the mind of the internal listener.¹⁵⁸ Earlier in the song, the lyrics "prolific; schizophrenic production; polymorphic worsening" suggest that this prolific fiction holding up multiple shapes is a production of a sick and delirious mind.¹⁵⁹

This situation can be seen as fleeing escapism, since the internal listener plunges themselves unconsciously into a fictional but seemingly real world. They don't want to acknowledge fiction and instead force themselves to see this world as real. However, the mental illness trope hinders us from reading the song's meaning in this way. The listener's fleeing and avoidant state is induced by an ill mind. The trope of mental illness rekindles the extensive, unwanted state of daydreaming suffered by maladaptive daydreamers. This refusal is represented in the previously discussed song

¹⁵⁷ Sanguine Glacialis, "Malevolent Creativity" (2023).

¹⁵⁸ Translation from French by author, "Imagination provocatrice; Grotesque chimère."

¹⁵⁹ Translation from French by author, "Prolifique; Fabrication schizophrénique; Aggravation polymorphe."

“Welcome” in which the internal listener states: “I know this is wrong; I’m not staying here anymore.”¹⁶⁰ The listener is forced against their will into this reality, in which they’ll gradually lose the sense of who they are, as represented in the lyrics of “Resignation”: “I abandoned my life; I accepted my madness.”

The other moment at which the trope of aural hallucinations appears is in the song titled “Paracusia”—another word for auditory hallucinations. The lyrics at this moment are:

It’s a perpetual, unlimited torment
 Sharing the thoughts of a disconnected fragment
 Choir of antagonism, hatred, discord
 Harsh cacophony of incongruity
 Voices in disharmony argue, screeching noises
 Flooding my head, destroying my hope
 Until all that’s left of me is a hysteric, schizophrenic maniac.¹⁶¹

In this recurring statement, we can see clear identifications of aural hallucinations in the form of voices flooding the internal listener’s ears. There is a clear lack of control in which the internal listener is in the grip of a surge of powerful voices. Words such as “choir of antagonism,” “harsh cacophony,” “voices in disharmony,” and “screeching noises” all reinforce the idea of the hearing sense being saturated, almost invaded and violated. If such qualifications may be applied to death metal music by non-participants, here it is the human discourse that holds such destructive qualities. This moment highlights the relationship music holds with the hearing sense, through which the alternative world is encountered. Both the internal and external listeners have access to the fictional world through hearing. On this reading, the entire album is an aural hallucination.

And as if it is not already delicate to talk about genuine fleeing escapism, the album’s artwork continues to complexify the internal listener’s relationship with the fictional universe. In the same interview mentioned earlier, Théberge explains that the front and back album covers are

¹⁶⁰ Sanguine Glacialis, “Welcome” (2023).

¹⁶¹ Sanguine Glacialis, “Paracusia” (2023).

a visual representation of the lyrics. On the front cover, the painter sees beauty in the form of a painting of and/or a gate towards the fictional reality, but on the back cover the painter lies bloody on the floor. As Théberge explains, “on the back cover you realize she saw this [fictional world] in her head only, as she’s on the floor covered in blood in reality. Her view of reality was completely different than what she was actually doing.”¹⁶² Taking the painter as the internal protagonist, this suggests that they suffer from a maladaptive daydreaming state that prevents them discerning what is real.



Sanguine Glacialis, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* (2023). Front and back album cover.

Maladaptive Dreaming's treatment of the internal listener may suggest fleeing escapism as a necessary bodily and mental response to dysfunctional society. It is a normal avoidant behavior in the face of forces of adversity that completely obliterate anyone's capacity to cope with them rationally. Of course, the trope of mental illness can be related to death metal's ethos of transgressive themes. As discussed in Section 1.1, The abject, mental illness can be considered as

¹⁶² Sanguine Glacialis, "Sanguine Glacialis." Band Camp.

an abject theme. However, Sanguine Glacialis attempts to demarginalize people suffering from maladaptive daydreaming and mental conditions more broadly. *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s involvement with mental illness may not be meant as foregrounding transgressive topics so much as contributing to discussions on mental health.

ii. b. Fighting escapism

If the internal listener escapes through a complex relationship with fleeing escapism, then the external listener—the person listening to the album (might be participating in fighting escapism. The album features songs that each focus on a different dysfunctional or transgressive aspect of the human experience. These songs allow the external listener to consciously take a step back from reality and consider it through metaphorical windows song form. The album's involvement with transgressive themes and musical elements allows the external listener to address emotions of power, control, and violence, but also of grief and sorrow, often hidden or repressed. In the album, these emotions often arise through lyric depictions of societal crisis, but also in musical moments of great sonic extremity where tremolo riffs, distorted guitars, blast beats, and powerful singing and screaming turn the intensity up to eleven. However, other musical moments articulate around different music genres allow the external listener to experience other emotions such as comfort, surprise, shock, or disgust. Just as in Lewis's theorization of the responsible escapist—here the fighting escapist—the external listener has a desire to explore what is kept from them, what lies beyond, what has been swept under the rug. Following Tolkien's metaphor of the escape of the prisoner, the external listener has a desire for change, recalling Greg Sharzer's definition of escapism.¹⁶³ When the external listener plays the album, they willingly engage with its sonic

¹⁶³ Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-stories: Expanded edition with commentary and notes*, pp. 13, 69, 162; Sharzer, *Late escapism and contemporary escapism: Alienation, work and utopia*, p. 122.

fictional universe while remaining conscious of it as an artifact of music, an album composed, recorded, and performed by real people. They engage with its transgressive themes and music in relation to society, but also through the medium of the death metal genre due to *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s complex musical identity. Thus, the external listener may be able to deal with their fears and anxieties while also developing new forms of musical appreciation and knowledge. They may also be able to understand society's dysfunctions rationally and find their place within or outside of it. In this manner, the external listener actively seeks personal achievement and catharsis, making them a fighting escapist.

Thus, it is arguable that *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s fictional universe can be understood as similar to those, like the island of Utopia, featured in fiction literature. It shares the same escapist power, allowing participants a momentary escape from reality into an alternative world. All such works feature an extensive depiction of their fictional world, whether through written chapters or performed songs. They also feature a protagonist who engages with that fictional universe, as well as a reader or listener who also engages with it on a metaphorical level. They all share an ethos of escapism, providing their participants with new introspective ways to deal with their frustrations, anxieties, and fears. There is, however, one last avenue that has not yet been explored when discussing *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s escapism, something almost exclusive to music: an emotional connection to the human voice.

III. The listener's emotional connections

Death metal music's emotional potential has already been discussed numerous times in this study. The lyric content deals with dark tropes, allowing participants to address important and often avoided themes. Death metal's extreme music conveys emotions of power, aggressivity, and violence, and proves to be an outlet for such emotions. However, in *Maladaptive Daydreaming*,

the most emotionally potent element is without doubt vocalist Maude Th  berge’s voice. As previously discussed, Th  berge displays great vocal mastery, singing and screaming in both low and high registers, using a wide variety of vocal techniques, and expressing a wide range of emotions. When asked about the impressive range of her vocal techniques, she explains that the voice, which she considers as another instrument just like the violin, has a strong narrative power. She writes vocal parts as she would for any other melodic instrument.¹⁶⁴ That said, vocals are at the heart of *Maladaptive Daydreaming* and form one of its most important emotional vectors. Performing them allows Th  berge to express a form of emotional release—a therapeutic and cathartic experience.¹⁶⁵ While the technical aspects of her voice make for an intensely pleasurable experience have been explored in section 1.1, The abject and 1.3m Musical transgressions and genre-bending, we haven’t yet focused on the raw emotional power her voice holds.

According to Michelle Phillipov, in mainstream musical settings the voice is “typically the aural and emotional focus of the music [...] carrying the melody of the song and is thought to represent the individual personality of the singer and offers a stable point of identification for audiences.”¹⁶⁶ For Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, the voice is an authentic reflection of the lives of the artists and the audience.¹⁶⁷ It has a phonologocentric quality through which “audiences are thought to see their own attributes, emotions, and experiences reflected, and hence use music to engage with, and protest against, the material realities of their life.”¹⁶⁸ For Sean Cubitt, identification with the singing voice is essential for understanding and making sense of a song.¹⁶⁹ This identification works through the voice’s representational power, and many popular genres

¹⁶⁴ “Sanguine Glacialis – ‘I think the trick is to accept yourself the way you are.’” thecoronersreportmag.com

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: Analysis at the limits*, p. 142.

¹⁶⁷ Jeremy Gilbert and Evan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance music and the politics of sound* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 57.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Sean Cubitt, “‘Maybelline’: Meaning and the listening subject,” *Popular Music*, vol. 4 (1984), pp. 207–24.

rely on a “phonologocentric structuring of the singing voice” whereby the audience needs to “identify with the voice and feel as if the singer is speaking directly to [them],” thus reinforcing the need for such a phonologocentric structuring as a means of stabilizing and focusing listening.¹⁷⁰

Following these ideas, a song’s emotional meaning can only be understood through identification with the voice. This also suggests that songs which lack an identifiable sung voice also lack the ability to provide emotional meaning and identification to the listener. Phillipov argues that the screamed voice prevents emotional identification with the vocalist. Rather, screamed vocals invite the external listener to explore an aesthetic of shock in which “the materiality of the voice and its obliteration of recognizable language are offered as sources of sonic affect.”¹⁷¹

However, what would follow if the external listener identified with the voice in death metal? Phillipov suggest that “if the death metal voice is seen as a site for identification, then the listener is offered identification only with sounds that are aggressive, relentless, and often, unvarying.”¹⁷² In a sense, this is exactly what death metal participants ask for. Identifying with the screamed voice may allow the external listener to get in touch with emotions of aggression, anger, and violence, as already discussed. The screamed voice does have representational powers not inherent to its phonologocentric quality. No matter how the vocalist performs dark emotions, what reaches the external listener’s ears are sonic manifestations of these extreme emotions that normalize them. Getting into contact with these emotions may be one of the reasons why the external listener seeks a form of emotional connection in the first place. Death metal vocals are a kind of sonic rebellion through which the external listener liberates themselves from the societal norms preventing them

¹⁷⁰ Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: Analysis at the limits*, p. 146.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

from letting these emotions out. The intensity with which these dark emotions manifest through the scream is directly proportional to the internal pressure that builds up when kept inside.

In *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, external listeners may emotionally connect to the main vocalist through the scream but can also do so through the sung voice, making Th  berge's vocal representational powers more complex. One of the main ways in which Th  berge provides the listener with an emotional connection is through the presence of various vocal personas, unfolding in various vocal techniques and languages.

i. The guides: Personas in *Maladaptive Daydreaming*

In her interview given to *thecoronersreportmag.com*, Th  berge explains that through different vocal techniques such as growling or soprano operatic singing, she is able to interpret different characters from the album's narrative.¹⁷³ Nonetheless, vocal portrayals of characters are far more complex than suggested by the screaming/singing divide alone. Looking at the lyric content, there are multiple characters all interacting with each other and in part distinguishable through the usage of pronouns such as "I," "you," "we," "our," and "us." *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s narrative is told from the point of view of a narrator, either inside or outside the diegesis. In songs such as "Welcome," "Resilience," and "Resignation," lyrics take the form of a dialogue between characters represented by different pronouns. In "Welcome," the dialogue is obvious:

Stay—Where;
With—am;
Us—I.¹⁷⁴

The dialogue occurs in alternation, clearly outlined by the different pronouns and the oppositional nature of the dialogue. In "Resignation," the dialogue is organized into two

¹⁷³ "Sanguine Glacialis – 'I think the trick is to accept yourself the way you are.'" *thecoronersreportmag.com*

¹⁷⁴ Sanguine Glacialis, "Welcome" (2023).

paragraphs:

[...]
 I accepted my madness;
 I embraced my torment.
 [...]
 Welcome this reality;
 Believe this perplexity.
 [...]

The first one is obviously in the voice of one of the characters; the second could either be the same character resigning themselves or another character trying to convince them to do so.

Maladaptive Daydreaming's lyric context outlines a set of characters interacting textually. However, the vocal identities of these characters complicate the narrative. For this reason, viewing the album's characters as "personas" may be more appropriate when musical identities are primarily constructed from vocal elements such as vocal technique, register, intensity, and language.

According to Philip Auslander, when a musician plays music, they perform their own identities as musicians before performing the music itself. They convey a musical persona expressed through the music they perform. While Auslander is mostly concerned with visual representations of performing musicians, he still argues that it "seems reasonable to analyze musical performances as a series of performances of identity."¹⁷⁵ Thus, even when a musician performs without any visual representations, the listener still receives a sonic representation of the musician's musical persona. For Allan F. Moore, when a singer performs, they inevitably assume a persona clearly distinct from their own identity.¹⁷⁶ This persona allows the singer to lend their voice to a song's character, becoming in a way its avatar. For Moore, the singer's persona is an "artificial

¹⁷⁵ Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," in *TDR*, Vol. 50 Issue 01 (2006), p. 191.

¹⁷⁶ Allan F. Moore, *Song means: Analyzing and interpreting recorded popular song* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 181.

construction that may, or may not, be identical with the persona (lity) of the singer,” through which the listener is able to understand the singer’s subjective experiences.¹⁷⁷

Personas allow the singer to communicate clear emotional content. This inevitably requires the listener’s participation since, as Auslander explains, the elaboration of the persona depends on a set of expectations shared by the performer and the listener.¹⁷⁸ We can thus see the act of listening as a form of performance, for which the listener adopts an implicit, diegetic yet silent persona—that of the external listener. This is one other way in which *Maladaptive Daydreaming*’s external listener participates in the album’s narrative. From their listening as a performative act, they may emotionally interact with the album’s other personas who, as we shall discuss next, may act as emotional guides similar to utopian literature’s guiding figures.

ii. Emotional connections

In *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, vocal personas embody a wide variety of dark, powerful emotions through different vocal techniques, vocalists, and languages. Théberge is not the only voice heard on the album; for instance, guitarist Jonathan Fontaine can be heard in “Welcome.” In the dialogic section previously analyzed, the lyrics “stay with us; stand with us” are screamed by Fontaine.¹⁷⁹ It is quite difficult to identify Fontaine’s screams, but there is a contrast in timbre between Théberge’s screams and Fontaine’s from which we understand that two personas are interacting. The only way to identify clearly who is screaming is by seeing the band perform the song. At other moments, the whole band sings and screams altogether, from which a persona emerges made up of multiple voices. These choral moments clue the external listener in as to which persona identifies with the pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our.”

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 179.

¹⁷⁸ Auslander, “Musical Personae,” p. 106.

¹⁷⁹ Sanguine Glacialis, “Welcome”

The album features a mix of lyrics in French or English, which adds to the plurality of personas in *Maladaptive Daydreaming*. Lyrics in both French and English may be screamed or sung. Such shifts of vocal technique and language defeat any expectation on the external listener's part of one language being screamed and the other sung. Assuming the external listener only understands either French or English, the bilingual lyric content is rendered unintelligible in the unknown language. If the listener has access to a lyric sheet, they should be able to understand the lyric content clearly, with the exception of a possible unknown language. Coupled of the seemingly unintelligible quality of the screamed voice, in *Maladaptive Daydreaming* external listeners may at first have a hard time understanding the lyrics. What emerges for the external listener instead is thus an immediate emotional connection with the album's vocal personas.

The external listener's emotional connection is constantly challenged as persona are followed by each other in contrasting musical sections. The musical accompaniment contributes to amplifying the vocal signification, as argued by Moore who theorizes different relationships between personas and their musical environment: inert, quiescent, active, interventionist, and oppositional.¹⁸⁰ In *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, the relationship between the personas and the accompaniment can be seen as active since it "supports the position of the persona."¹⁸¹ In cases like "Malevolent Creativity," the screamed vocal persona articulates emotions of power, control, brutality, and anger while the accompaniment is constituted of distorted guitars playing tremolo riffs and drums playing blast beats.¹⁸² This relationship occurs when the album's musical treatment is similar to traditional death metal music. However, the presence of contrasting musical elements borrowed from other genres often makes the relationship between the personas and the

¹⁸⁰ Moore, *Song Means: Analyzing and interpreting recorded popular song*, p. 189-191

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Sanguine Glacialis, "Malevolent Creativity"

accompaniment interventionist, going “further than what is specified in the lyrics by amplifying what it signifies.”¹⁸³ The klezmer folkloric music section at the beginning of “Resilience” is a great example of an interventionist accompaniment.¹⁸⁴ Lyrics about singing, dancing, laughing, crying, and drinking to forget our past are amplified by an instrumental of syncopated guitars and drums along with an ornamented melodic clarinet line. While the band sings in unison with the clarinet, Théberge’s voice is mixed louder to compete with the singular timbre of the clarinet. The end result is a moment of intense joy and sheer madness.

In this manner, the different vocal personas allow the external listener to experience different emotions through the representational power of the voice. The various vocal personas along with their specific musical identities emphasize an emotional connection without relying on an intelligible discourse. What remains is a raw display of emotions for the external listener to connect and identify with, allowing them to get in touch with often repressed emotions and impulses.

iii. Return of the repressed

The term “return of the repressed” was coined by Freud in his elaboration of the human psyche. The repressed represents humanity’s primitive instincts sublimated or directed towards a higher goal. Repressing these primitive instincts in the unconscious allows for a more civilized and functional self.¹⁸⁵ The return is the process in which these instincts surge back into consciousness and reappear in behaviors. If for Freud the return of the repressed mostly consisted in the sexual impulses constantly threatening to return and disrupt conscious functioning, it became a recurrent topic in horror movie theories, especially in film critic Robin Wood’s work. Due to their transgressive elements, Wood understood horror movies as a symbolic return of the repressed

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Sanguine Glacialis, “Resilience”

¹⁸⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953), p. 74.

dealing with anxieties that emerge from a certain era, social crisis, or given historical moment.¹⁸⁶ Horror movies' themes symbolically address societally induced fears and anxieties and provide their participants with a form of ritual in which they may come into contact with repressed elements without their conscious functioning being disrupted.

Maladaptive Daydreaming can be theorized in the same way. Given all that has been discussed about the album's relationship with society, it too can be seen as a symbolic form of return of the repressed. However, the album does something rarely encountered in horror movies: it forges an emotional connection with evil. Moreover, it does so through the representational power of the voice. The album's personas are in part raw manifestations of repressed emotions. And since there is no immediate visual support, these emotions are suggested indirectly, amplifying their representational power.

Suggestion is highly important in horror movies, as explained by *Halloween's* (1978) director John Carpenter. In order to maintain the audience's attention and emotional participation during the screening, "don't show the meat when the knife goes in, don't cut to the blood going everywhere [...]. If you suggest it, [the audience] will do it right up in here, in their heads."¹⁸⁷ The audience engages with their own interpretation of what happened, becoming emotionally including in the process. They use their own imaginations to picture the scenes in their head. When the screening is over, what remains in the participant's minds are the scenes they imagined and completed.

Following this idea, *Maladaptive Daydreaming's* raw emotional material is suggested to the

¹⁸⁶ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (Columbia University Press, 1986). Quoted in David Church, "Return of the repressed: Notes on the American horror film (1991–2006)", in *Off Screen*, Vol 10 Issue 10 (2006) https://offscreen.com/view/return_of_the_repressed. Accessed August 13, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ Todd McCarthy, "Trick and treat: John Carpenter Interviewed by Todd McCarthy", *Film Comment*, Vol 16 No. 1 (January–February 1980), p. 23. Quoted in Dickstein, "The aesthetics of fright," p. 77.

external listener, who uses their own imagination to make sense of it. This aural connection makes a safe return of repressed fears and anxieties in the mind of the external listener possible, which is another way in which escapism may be experienced. The album's emotional power is increased as the external listener is drawn to emotionally engage themselves in order to identify with the various personas. Moreover, this creates a relationship between the vocalist and the external listener, through which external listeners may explore the many personas' experiences and understand them through their own experiences. Personas in *Maladaptive Daydreaming* not only contribute to the narrative, they are also guides for the external listener to explore their repressed emotions, providing them with a potentially cathartic experience similar to Théberge's own.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have sought to establish a preliminary framework for the analysis of death metal music through the concept of escapism. I focused my analysis on a specific death metal album, Sanguine Glacialis's *Maladaptive Daydreaming*, which substantially exhibits escapist qualities and themes: in particular, it features a protagonist (internal listener) escaping from a doomed reality into a fictional universe ultimately created by their own mind. The aim was to analyze the album by focusing on the ways it explicitly, metaphorically, and symbolically suggests escapism. This required a preliminary understanding of escapism and how it works in other art forms such as utopian and fiction literature. In order to expand on death metal's potential for an emotional escape, I looked at similarities between *Maladaptive daydreaming* and horror movies, drawing on Michelle Phillipov's work.¹⁸⁸ This allowed me to elaborate a framework distinct from previous death metal studies surveyed in this thesis. The broader goal of my thesis is to use this intersectional framework to understand escapism in other death metal albums, and ideally to expand it to other music genres that do not engage with transgressive and abject themes as death metal does.

My first claim is that escapism unfolds in the album's stance towards and against society and reality. The songs' lyric content focuses on the lacks and ills of contemporary society and suggests that humanity is solely responsible for society's dysfunctions. The album's treatment of the abject in many ways resembles horror movies' treatment of abject themes of violence, death, evil, and fatality. *Maladaptive Daydreaming* considerably addresses these themes in relation to society, whereas death metal music more generally embodies them symbolically. The album's

¹⁸⁸ Michelle Phillipov, *Death metal and music criticism: Analysis at the limits* (Lexington Books, 2012), pp. 162–186.

stance towards society also manifests in its transgressive musical content, following Keith Kahn-Harris's work.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, the album's musical content also transgresses the death metal genre's boundaries, making *Maladaptive Daydreaming* a musical escape from the genre's structuring musical parameters.

My second claim is that escapism unfolds in the album's depiction of a fictional universe, which also acts as an alternative reality. Comparing *Maladaptive Daydreaming* with utopian literature suggests that its songs are distinct windows through which a fictional universe may be explored and understood. Understanding them as either meditation, tableaux, and numbers (in Cynthia Freeland's sense) brings up three different readings of introspection, representation, and acknowledgement.¹⁹⁰ These readings offer three different perspectives on escapism for the external listener. Referencing escapism studies, I suggest that these songs offer a type of fighting escapism in which escapists confront their anxieties and frustrations, as well as a type of fleeing escapism in which escapists avoid their anxieties. *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s engagement with mental health issues complexifies how these two types of escapism can be experienced, suggesting that they are necessary reactions to an over-constraining reality.

My third and final claim is that escapism unfolds in the emotional connections shared between the album's vocal personas and both internal and external listeners. Lead vocalist Maude Th  berge's treatment of her voice and use of various vocal techniques along with a mix of French and English lyrics allows the external listener to experience a wide range of emotions and to identify emotionally with the album's musical personas. Moreover, the embodiment of darker,

¹⁸⁹ Keith Kahn-Harris, *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge* (Berg, 2007).

¹⁹⁰ Cynthia Freeland, *The naked and the undead: Evil and the appeal of horror* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018)

disruptive emotions by Th  berge's voice allows the external listener to experience them safely, providing a way for the listener to make sense of their own repressed emotions.

Not all my analysis of *Maladaptive Daydreaming* can be applied to other death metal albums. Because I chose the album for its explicit engagement with a range of escapist tropes, I deliberately favored an analysis through the lens of escapism. For example, *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s musical structure is essentially exclusive to Sanguine Glacialis's ethos of musical exploration. Therefore, its introspective and escapist reading can be applied only with difficulty to other death metal albums that don't feature contrasting musical sections of this kind. In the same way, even though there are other death metal albums that feature sung rather than screamed voice, such as Fallujah's *Empyrean* (2022) and The Faceless' *Autotheism* (2012), *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s overall treatment of the voice is unique to Sanguine Glacialis. Moreover, the album's clear engagement with social crisis and contemporary struggles makes it more engaged on a political level.

To better apply my analysis to other death metal albums, a phenomenological approach must be considered to focus on the act of listening and make it more inclusive. However, fighting escapism, fleeing escapism, songs as meditations, tableaux, numbers, and the representational power of the voice are exactly the parameters of the framework for escapism in music I intended to elaborate and wish to expand upon in future. This framework focuses on both creation and reception and on music's emotional and introspective powers, situating music as a form of escape into a fictional universe, inevitably linking it to an act of liberating oneself from one's constraints.

Rather than seeing escapism as a deliberately avoidant behavior with connotations of failure and refusal, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* by Sanguine Glacialis argues for escapism as a much more engaged and introspectively *active* process. True, the album invites its listeners to

escape momentarily from society through a narrative centered on the actual act of escaping from a reality full of frustrations and anxieties. This idea of escapism is explicitly communicated by the lyrics, along with the album's artwork, although musical elements such as the vocals and contrasting sections also suggest escapism metaphorically. That said, this album provides us with a complex introspective discourse on how to cope with an unforgiving reality, dealing with themes of mental illness and repressed disruptive emotions. The need to escape is thus the mind's immediate and necessary response in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Maladaptive daydreaming invites the listener to connect emotionally with its musical and discursive elements, breaking the fourth wall as its lyric content may be addressed to both the album's diegetic protagonist—the internal listener—and the conventional or external listener. Therefore, rather than escaping only through a rational understanding of the depiction of a fictional universe, the external listener escapes through an instinctive emotional identification with the album's vocal personas. This makes *Maladaptive Daydreaming*'s escape more potent than fiction literature's suggested escape into fictional universes, even though it relies on utopian and fiction literature's structural elements to create its fictional universe. Because of the emotional connections the album offers through the representational power of the voice, its escape may be experienced emotionally and thus more personal and intimate. In a broader way, this escape takes hold of the external listener's hearing sense by which the album is rationally and physically experienced. The album's specific emotional escape shares many similarities with the kind of escapism horror movies provide. Both forms of escape are articulated around literal or metaphorical depictions of society's dysfunctional elements, similar symbolic manifestations of fears and anxieties induced by social crisis. The album's critical stance towards (dis)order is embodied in both its music and lyrics, featuring transgressive musical elements either common or

foreign to the death metal genre. The album's involvement with the abject allows its listeners to confront their darker emotions and repressed fears. They are invited to face their darker side, and to accept "who they really are."¹⁹¹

Thus, *Maladaptive Daydreaming* introduces escapism not as a means of avoiding reality but as a better way to face it. The momentary escape it offers allows listeners to develop an introspective understanding of who they are and what their place in the real world might be. Where escapism has in the past been read as a state of mindlessness, *Maladaptive Daydreaming's* escapism is instead an active state of mindfulness. From this escape, listeners may emerge triumphant over their fears, anxieties, frustrations, or insecurities. The outcome of this study is thus an updated perspective on how escapism unfolds in death metal music as a fighting stance. Moreover, this may suggest that other music genres over a broader range share a similar form of escapism. Considering music's listening perspectives as forms of either fighting or fleeing escapism may yield insights into how and why listening to music may be seen as a kind of momentary escape. Also, similar readings of songs as meditations, tableaux, and numbers may explore how a song—or any other musical format—may be understood as a fictional musical universe into which the listener enters. Ultimately, seeing escapism as a natural and human impulse suggests that it is pervasive throughout Western music, in as-yet uncharted ways.

¹⁹¹ "Sanguine Glacialis – 'I think the trick is to accept yourself the way you are.'" thecoronersreportmag.com <https://www.thecoronersreportmag.com/post/sanguine-glacialis-i-think-the-trick-is-to-accept-yourself-the-way-you-are?fbclid=IwAR2Naj-zFtkEiNTE69gLWaNzXwTbnhG4RaJmwY_ZbKhV9iJDLrAP7QYhb8E>

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