

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Williams, Dominic (2020) Embodying the Auschwitz Sonderkommando in Extreme Metal. *Metal Music Studies*, 6 (3). pp. 319-336. ISSN 2052-3998

Published by: Intellect

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1386/mms\\_00021\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/mms_00021_1) <[https://doi.org/10.1386/mms\\_00021\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/mms_00021_1)>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/44008/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE



**UniversityLibrary**

## **Embodying the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* in Extreme Metal**

**Dominic Williams**

### **Abstract**

Prompted by the Meads of Asphodel album *Sonderkommando* (2013), this article considers ways in which the Auschwitz Sonderkommando (SK) figure in extreme metal. While there are not many metal songs about the SK, they feature far more in metal lyrics than in almost all other music genres. Attracted by obscure and difficult parts of history, metal bands draw on their practices to ‘embody’ the SK: not simply representing them, but feeling and acting out their plight to excess. The article examines a number of these practices: difficult to decipher vocals, the use of global Englishes, and a bookish attraction to the arcane and the bizarre. It argues that metal’s embrace of intense feeling in the lyrics and vocal and musical styles can be interpreted as an exploration of embodiment and materiality, allowing a consideration of mediation, the matter through which the SK might be felt and understood. Representations of the Sonderkommando in metal, then, do not merely form an eccentric example of holocaust memory at work, but take on central issues of holocaust representation.

**Keywords:** Sonderkommando, Holocaust, metal, embodiment, Meads of Asphodel

When the Meads of Asphodel released their album *Sonderkommando* in 2013, many reviews began by explaining its title: the name given to the group of prisoners forced to work in the crematoria of Auschwitz (e.g. Apothecary 2013; Goat 2013). The need for such a gloss indicates that reviewers expected their readers not to know who the Sonderkommando (SK) were, and so hardly saw them as a common subject of metal lyrics. This article will make no attempt to prove the reviewers wrong. However, other metal bands than the Meads have addressed the troubling topic of the SK in their songs, making metal one of the few musical genres that have dared to do so at all. In this article I will consider why that might be so, before examining the approaches taken by bands to representing, or what I will call embodying, the Sonderkommando. Metal’s attraction to topics of war and death and non-

moral stance about them is often seen as a way of evoking intense feelings, with the topics themselves either incidental in that process or being mined for a rather dubious sadistic pleasure (although see Williams 2019c). I will argue, however, that embracing intense feeling in the kinds of lyrics and in the vocal and musical styles used by metal bands can be interpreted as an exploration of bodily and material processes, allowing a consideration of mediation, the matter through which the SK might be felt and understood. Representations of the Sonderkommando in metal, then, do not merely form an eccentric example of Holocaust memory at work, but take on central issues of Holocaust representation.

### ***The Sonderkommando***

The Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* (German: ‘special squad’) were slave labourers in the camp’s gas chambers and crematoria, forced to process and dispose of the bodies of those who were murdered. Often branded as collaborators by other prisoners, the Sonderkommando were also able to record what they saw and experienced in photographs smuggled outside and writings buried within the grounds of the camp. Moreover, it was amongst this group that one of the most celebrated acts of resistance took place within Birkenau, the revolt of 7 October 1944 (Chare and Williams 2016a). As witnesses from the heart of Auschwitz’s system of mass murder, who on the one hand had to take some part in it and on the other rose up against it, the SK have inspired an uneasy fascination for some time. While they seem to have been a difficult subject for historians to discuss (Stone 2013; Lawson 2017),<sup>1</sup> rather more has been made of them in art, film and literature. At times this has been done even in the high modernist forms of Holocaust memory that regard the event as (in some sense) unrepresentable. Filip Müller, one member of the Sonderkommando, for example, is a central figure in Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* (1985), which eschews chronology and overarching narrative, makes no use of archive footage and relies on moments ‘incarnated’ retrospectively

by its witnesses (Chare and Williams 2019: 219-247). There is also, however, a broader history of representations of the Sonderkommando (Williams 2019a). That history starts as early as the 1940s and 1950s in the unequivocal celebration of them as resisters in the Eastern bloc or the uneasy sense of them as collaborators in the post-war West. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, novels such as Martin Amis's *Zone of Interest* (2014), films such as *Son of Saul* (2015, see Chare and Williams 2016b), and even poems have tackled the subject of the SK directly. This has also been attempted by less culturally consecrated media: comics (*Magneto: Testament*, 2008), would-be computer games (the aborted *Wolfenstein* mod *Sonderkommando Revolt*, 2011), and metal (see discography). Precisely because this has been a little-known and less-understood topic in the Holocaust, it seems to have appealed to the taste prevalent in metal for the obscure and arcane.

I would suggest that metal bands have also been attracted by what to many have been the SK's ethical difficulties. In perhaps the most famous characterization of them, the essay 'The Grey Zone', Primo Levi presents the Sonderkommando as people whom it is impossible to judge. Instead, they give rise to 'convulsed [or convulsive] questions' (*domande convulse*) (Levi 1986: 41, 1989: 41), questions which seem to be felt in the body as much as intellectually. For Levi, this characterization is a way of describing disgust or distress at the plight of the Sonderkommando, bound up with the problem of even imagining their lives (Williams 2019b). I will explore this idea in a different way, in the possibility of bodily responses to the SK permitting engagement with instead of rejection of this difficult group, and perhaps even allowing some ethical purchase on them.

Here I am following up on the idea sketched out by Michelle Philippov (2006), who, at the end of her essay 'None So Vile: Towards an Ethics of Death Metal' postulates:

an ethics appropriate to extreme metal practice and experience may approach anti-reflexivity as something to be thought with, not something that needs to be changed in order to accommodate a pre-existing evaluative agenda. (83)

I want to try to think with what Philippov calls ‘anti-reflexivity’ (more strictly ‘reflexive anti-reflexivity’). This term has been used by Keith Kahn-Harris (2007) to characterize the practice in the metal scene of not judging or subjecting oneself or others to critique or scrutiny, enabling the scene to serve as a zone in which violations of morality can be explored and sometimes played with. Refusal to judge may not entirely characterize correctly the way that metal deals with acts such as mass killing. The possibility that such acts are valued precisely because they are intense, extreme experiences, which bands represent with what might be called a degree of relish, does of course present problems. These are not, either, responses that it is easy to imagine survivors of the Sonderkommando themselves appreciating. However, while acknowledging the problems of such responses I also want to engage with what seem to me to be their possibilities.

### **(Anti-)Reflexive Embodiment**

Although both Kahn-Harris and Philippov characterize ‘reflexive anti-reflexivity’ as resistant to ethical discussion, as it is primarily a way to enable and value intensity of feeling, I would argue that it is in fact in line with some (broadly post-structuralist) discussions of ethics. Anthony Giddens (Kahn-Harris’s (2004, 2007) main source for the concept of reflexivity) notes that bodily reflexivity is ‘a way of cohering the self as an integrated whole’ (Giddens 1991: 78). Anti-reflexivity, therefore, (albeit deployed in a ‘reflexive’, relatively self-aware way) provides a way to experience the body without having to unify it as a self.

Judith Butler (2001) argues that such a lack of unity has ethical import:

Suspending the demand for self-identity, or, more particularly, for complete coherence, seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence that demands we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same.  
(27)

Renouncing a bounded self, and finding other ways to conceive of one's body than by 'reflecting' (on) it are also key to Margrit Shildrick's (2002) discussion of how encounters with 'monsters' might require ethics to take different forms. Shildrick uses the loaded term 'monster' in relation to people who have different experiences of embodiment, partly to evoke the voyeuristic framing of one such encounter: the 'freak show'. Without simply affirming them, she still wants to investigate how these kinds of interest in difference might be worth thinking with at points, not simply thinking against.

The monstrous, Shildrick argues, 'is neither reflective of the "proper" subject nor reflected in itself' (107). Rather than a mirroring relationship of reflection which is figured in terms of sight and reassures the subject of its wholeness and autonomy, Shildrick suggests that encounters with the 'monstrous' might prompt us to 'reconfigure the (ethical) relation between self and other, not in terms of a reflective interval, but as a moment of contiguity where the boundaries are necessarily blurred' (107-108). This is what she calls 'embodying the monster', drawing on phenomenology to describe these encounters in physical terms.<sup>2</sup>

The specific kinds of difference Shildrick explores are not central to metal's interests – although see Metallica's 'One' (1988). But metal does have a strong attraction to what might be called moral monsters (Scott 2007, 2016), groups or people who lie outside morality: sometimes 'monstrous' in a straightforward sense such as serial killers (Connole and Shipley 2015), but in other cases moral outcasts, from Black Sabbath's unspeaking, world-destroying 'Iron Man' to the chaos-warriors identified by Ronald Bogue (2004) as the preferred avatars of extreme metallists. The Sonderkommando could be called a group that was harmed, degraded and tainted morally, and who experienced this in bodily ways: often describing themselves as 'automata' or robots (Chare and Williams 2016a). Metal offers ways for listeners and performers to experience themselves in purely bodily terms (Overell 2014; Riches 2016). The SK were also physically present in what might be called the engine

room of the Auschwitz death factory, encountering horror close-up, face to face. This is the kind of level at which metal finds it easiest to operate (Kahn-Harris this issue). In this, it is no different from the demands of many other media, from comics to a film such as *Shoah*, which focuses on the personal experience of men forced to work in the gas chambers. As I have argued previously (Williams 2019a), some of the greatest problems of imagining the Holocaust are inherent to considerations of the Sonderkommando, which makes them not only a challenge to representation, but also a way to personalize the Holocaust's traumatic nature.

The extremity of metal could be described as a kind of wallowing – eagerly plunging into the most difficult parts of history and human behaviour in order to sit within them without reflecting upon them. There is no desire to stand back and think through what led to this set of events, nor any tendency to contemplate the ethics of how this might be represented, explained, or passed on to others. Metal seems to want to be right in the middle of the action, to present immediacy, to simply feel what is happening. For metal bands responding to the Holocaust, the Sonderkommando offer precisely that opportunity.

This kind of response, and calling it 'embodiment', in a Holocaust Studies context, perhaps inevitably conjure up the word that Claude Lanzmann used to conceptualize his way of pushing survivors to relive their experiences in something like traumatic flashbacks: 'incarnation'. Even in Lanzmann's account (2012), this process involves some artifice,<sup>3</sup> but Dominick LaCapra (1997) has characterized it as being a performative form of 'acting out' bound up with Lanzmann's desire to identify with the victims. LaCapra is mostly sceptical of this approach, although he also ponders whether 'incarnation' may in fact offer a basis for working through the past.<sup>4</sup> This seems to me to speak to some of the ways Shildrick considers it worth thinking with (not just against) feelings of 'horror and fascination' at spectacles of

the monstrous (2002: 132; see also 73). And so both Shildrick and LaCapra inform the way that I see embodiment at work in metal songs about the SK.

Embodiment is a way of acknowledging the visceral nature of encounters with the Sonderkommando, as well as of acting them out in a way that might be questionable. In the moments at which I have identified its occurrence in metal, embodiment does involve an element of theatricality, but that seems to me to be precisely bound up with a forgoing of reflexivity, and lack of self-regulation (although within regulated bounds). Rather than investing in considerations of appropriacy, metal ‘acts out’, but to such excess that it produces a kind of opacity, which can be read as actually bringing to the fore the distance between listeners and the SK, and the medium through which and by which the SK have come to be known. Singing in an intense form allows words of songs to function both as bearers of meaning and as unintelligible sounds. Writing lyrics in an international English that is not overly concerned with linguistic ‘rules’ offers other ways to deal with difficulties of communication than simply dwelling on misunderstanding. The taste for the obscure and eclectic that attracts bands to the story of the SK also leads them to push the boundaries of what metal can be.

### **Immediate Mediation and Unintelligible Lyrics: The Obscene, ‘Sonderkommando’**

I will focus first on a little-known song by a little-known and short-lived band, Durham’s The Obscene, the opening song to whose only full-length album, *Architects of Deliverance*, is entitled ‘Sonderkommando’ (2013). Choosing this song is evidence partly that the topic is obscure even within metal, but I have also based it on the fact that I have been unable to obtain the written lyrics, and so my listening to the words of the song is based purely on what I am able to hear.<sup>5</sup> Given that The Obscene’s vocals are primarily delivered in a death growl, the majority of them are difficult for me to make out. Inevitably, what I can



hear is not the same as that heard by others; I listen to death metal occasionally, but would not describe myself as a fan. Habits of listening to this kind of singing are likely to make it more comprehensible – so how much one hears also stands for where one is positioned with respect to the subculture. However, the topic is one that I am familiar with, so I am more attuned to some of the words being spoken. Nonetheless, all that stated, it seems to me that this is an experience that speaks to that of many listeners to this music.<sup>6</sup>

The song is sung by two voices, one a traditional death growl and the other higher-pitched. I shall refer to them by the horror or fantasy movie associations that they carry for me: the former sounding demonic, the latter more like a goblin. The demon-voice is less well articulated, with vowels much more prominent and consonants often hard to make out. The demon-voice sings two lines, each of twelve syllables. The voice is ‘inhumanly’ deep, but seems to be enunciating words, that have the tum-ti-tum cadence of chanting (like a playground, not some ritual), rather than speaking. The vowels are prominent enough to recognise that there is a rhyme (or at least assonance) in /eɪ/. For the next two lines (also dodecasyllabic) it is joined by the goblin-voice, higher-pitched and croaky, more recognisably human, and articulating somewhat more identifiable emotions: glee, relish, perhaps? The rhyme seems to be the same, another four lines ending /eɪ/.

At the beginning of the final line of this verse, I think I can hear the words ‘walk into a shower room’, perhaps followed by ‘no one’, although how many other listeners would hear this is debatable. Far more audible is the line delivered as the tempo slows, the speed helping to make it more comprehensible. Together the two sing: ‘One more face in a world of faceless death’, unnaturally stressing ‘a’ for the rhythm, doubling the horror-soundtrack melody of the guitar. The words of another two lines of the same melody and rhythm are obscure to me.

The chorus comprises what appear to be two lines of nine and then eleven syllables which are delivered twice by the goblin-voice, or something like it, but higher pitched, sounding more frenzied, before a more-or-less clean voice screams out ‘Sonderkommando’ four times, interspersed by the goblin’s cries of what might be epithets – a number of the phrases seem to end with ‘ers’, perhaps nouns describing people – one sounds like ‘poisoners’ to me. This section is reprised wholesale.

The demon voice returns to chant out an anaphoric set of phrases over clicky double-bass drums and doomy guitar riffs, ending with what I recognise as the names of death camps and sites of killing: Auschwitz, Sobibór, Bełżec, Chełmno (pronounced as if they were English words). Perhaps the words introducing each of these place names are ‘slaves to’? The goblin-voice joins in to say the names of the camps, but only the first time around. Another section uses demon-voice only, with descending guitar figures where it chants three syllables, one syllable, three, then two, rhyming in /ɔ:/. The song then returns to its chorus, only performed once this time.

I come to this as someone who has tried to reconstruct the words of members of the SK who wrote their manuscripts in Auschwitz-Birkenau. I am predisposed to try to make sense of incomprehensible material, therefore, and work from a fairly extensive knowledge of the subject matter. Nonetheless, my experience of trying to decipher these words seems to me to have wider significance. As I hear it, articulated sense emerges at points out of something that always comes across as language, not noise or just screaming or growling, but operating at different levels of ‘humanness’: i.e. ability to articulate emotions. Even parts that are not comprehensible are readable to some degree: recognisable as different voices, with different qualities. I think I also see an intentional quality in what *is* being made audible: that the words ‘one more face in a faceless world of death’ are intended to be audible, to mirror the

idea of someone becoming recognisable, only to be swamped by the environment designed to bring their life to an end.

The demon-voice gives less of an impression of 'having' a face. Without emotions, it does not provoke imaginings of facial expressions. It stands for facelessness, then, a sound that comes from the throat, and is not really (or not in the usual way), articulated in the mouth. Indeed, Tsai et al. (2010) suggest that growls signify abdominal muscular strength (and thus spine stability, so therefore a stronger, more threatening physique). Moving from less legible (less 'facial', so in some sense, perhaps, less human) to more legible seems to be the pattern that the song plays out. Just as the first few lines are not decodable (to me, anyway), moving to moments of intelligibility, so the less intelligible voice is joined (made more precise) by the more intelligible one.

That suggests that the incomprehensibility of speech/song (while a resource that is used at all times in the songs) is being drawn upon as a strategy of representing the incomprehensibility of this situation, even if only because that manner of singing happens to lie to hand (or within the larynx), as it were. The fact that the first few lines make no sense to me strikes me as less about me attuning my ear to the singing than about the design of the song: what was incomprehensible starts to centre on recognisable language more and more until it focuses on 'Sonderkommando'.

The sound world that is evoked here is one I have chosen to read as drawing on horror movie conventions: in both the vocal styles used and some of the melodies used. While that might suggest an irresponsible turning of history into horror for the purposes of gaining illegitimate thrills, pushing it to excess means that the content is not available for listeners simply to comprehend. The voice embodies in a far from subtle way the idea of the Holocaust as hell, but in doing so it mediates that experience to a point where for the most part it is

blurred beyond recognition. Attempting to achieve a kind of bodily closeness, to impinge upon the experience of another, actually creates a certain kind of distance too.

Parallels could be drawn between the imagery of hell and that used by members of the Sonderkommando themselves.<sup>7</sup> But I also see one between the veiling and revealing of semantic content which goes on in this song and that suffered by some of the SK's manuscripts. Zalman Lewental, for example, wrote an urgent, desperate account of the uprising of the Sonderkommando of 7 October 1944. Burying it in the ground, he left it to undergo a process of damage that rendered much of it hard to read. Nicholas Chare suggests that these moments of opacity in the manuscripts actually allow the possibility of empathy: 'The stains and dirt form [...] openings for the imagination, imperatives to imagine.' (2013: 56). The gaps, Chare argues, precisely through their lack of immediacy, force a recognition that the reader is not the same as the writer with whom the reader is 'identifying' (52-53). Rather than seeing the enormity of the experience that the SK tried to convey making it unimaginable or unrepresentable, Chare suggests that attending to the difficulty of reading their words in the material form that they take allows us to think through the distance between us and their writers, as something that not just separates, but also connects us.

I see The Obscene's song, too, as offering a kind of opacity. It has been arrived at (with a similar element of contingency perhaps) in the set of musical practices that a particular subculture uses. Embodying the 'hellish' nature of the Sonderkommando's experience also mediates it, holds it at a certain distance.

### **Translingual Sonderkommando: Requiem, Buried Alive, Kragens**

Even where the lyrics are far more audible, or available in some kind of textual form, they do not necessarily render themselves easily assimilable by a listener or reader. In general, lyrics are mishearable, but they are also open to simply not being the focus of the listener's

attention (Ali and Peynircioğlu 2006; Voice and Whiteley 2019). As an international phenomenon, metal also involves frequent use of English as a lingua franca. All of these factors cause the lyrics to function in different ways from a historical representation of the Sonderkommando.

In ‘Sonderkommando 12’ (2006) by the Swiss death metal band Requiem, it might be possible to read moral condemnation in the lyrics by attributing some of the word choices to a semantic field of business and work (‘selling’, ‘hired’, ‘earned’).

They lead them into certain death  
Selling their people to the SS  
Hired by the masters in black  
Cleansing with gas to the last breath  
[...]  
A little more food is what they earned  
Before themselves got killed and burned

The phrase ‘cleansing with gas’ seems very disturbing, but it can quite plausibly be read as a reference to a song of twenty years earlier: Slayer’s ‘Angel of Death’ (1986). This might be a use of English that stems from the internationalisation of metal: Jeff Hanneman’s lyrics describe ‘showers that cleanse you of your life’. What Hanneman used as an ironic metaphor may have become simply standard usage in this context.

Buried Alive (1999) also seem morally condemnatory of the SK:

Sonderkommandos  
Jewish killing Jewish  
Sonderkommandos  
Killing to live  
Seeing horror things steal, rape  
Exterminate all to please the SS beasts  
Knowing that in the end they  
Would also die

However, it is not, I think, being deliberately obtuse to say that it is far from clear what the Sonderkommando are being accused of. And that fits with the overall sense if

bewilderment that the singer expresses – the song ends with the vocalist bellowing out ‘Why?’, before repeatedly shouting the word ‘Sonderkommando’.

The French band Kragens have a song ‘Sonderkommandos Defy’ at the end of their album *Seeds of Pain* (2005). In a performance in which the vocalist Renaud Espeche runs through a gamut of metal vocal styles, he delivers a set of lyrics that are clearly not concerned with meeting normative standards of English.

Ashes mixed to dust  
As the gas is killing them  
We have to be the dirty witnesses to their crimes...

Chapter of horror  
In a damned book  
Thrown to fire  
Contemplating our suicide  
Put into inhuman degradation

The meaning here is clear enough unless someone wanted wilfully to misunderstand it, but it is expressed in terms that take no care to prevent misunderstanding. There is no effort made to sequence events or distinguish victims (‘them’) and perpetrators (‘their’) with any precision. The chorus (and song) ends: ‘walking around the living dead’. Here this seems to me to be less clear, but I think is likely to be intended to mean that the SK were the living dead. Espeche’s delivery often makes the ‘mistakes’ less obvious – endings of words are less crisply enunciated than main part of them. Combined with the eccentric morphological changes, this means that the base forms of words are left much more prominent, with relationships between words slightly less easy to work out.

I cite these examples not to point out the linguistic inadequacies of the writers, but to try to get some sense of how these lyrics are supposed to function. The first point is that the writers are interested in communicating in the lingua franca of rock music (although metal does allow room for writing in other languages). The second is that they do not appear to have been particularly concerned about meeting ‘native speaker’ standards of language.

Instead, international metal bands can be described as carrying out a form of translingual practice. Suresh Canagarajah (2013) employs this term in his consideration of how English is spoken globally. Rather than dividing international uses of English between a norm-setting centre of ‘native speakers’ and a subordinate periphery, Canagarajah argues that language needs to be seen as one semiotic resource used among others, deployed in encounters in which norms are always open to contestation, and in which success needs to be measured by more than just adhering to an abstract model of grammatical accuracy. Linguistic invention, misunderstanding, signalling failure to understand and letting misunderstandings ride do not have to signal language breaking down, but can all have positive outcomes as opportunities for a shared construction of meaning (e.g. 99–100, 139).

The concept of Global Englishes with which Canagarajah works has been applied to hip-hop (Pennycock 2003), but it is entirely pertinent to international metal bands too. The temptation is to read their lyrics through a model of linguistic deficiency, a failure to meet English norms. But they clearly do meet norms both of general rock and pop lyric writing (which often evokes rather than describes, and is often built out of phrases whose connections are not spelt out) and of metal lyrics too, in which more attention is given to more esoteric, often polysyllabic, vocabulary than to syntactic or morphological precision. The language of the lyrics emerges from the community of practice which is metal (cp. Canagarajah 2013: 30–31). Listeners do not want to have some precise diagrammatic depiction of what happened, but rather to have it evoked in terms that resonate with (or come up against) the music, not there to be parsed, but rather to be experienced. The words take on their meaning by being transmitted through a particular medium, and embodied and enacted in a specific milieu.

This can be true of lyrics even when they are written down (cp. Canagarajah 2013: 130). The words of ‘Sonderkommandos Defy’ are not available to be searched and annotated on the internet, but are only readable as they appear in the album’s CD booklet.<sup>8</sup> In this

second form there are printed in a way that makes few concessions to legibility: all in capitals in a rather ornate typeface, over a background of superimposed images of band shots and something like vegetation, framed by images of barbed wire in the corners. Each page of the CD booklet has two songs on it printed in two columns, justified mostly centrally, but on the back page in line with the page edges. The titles of the songs are given prominence by being written down the left and right sides of the page, vertically. The words are entangled with each other: sometimes spacing between them is not very clear, and two lines of ‘Sonderkommandos Defy’ cross the gap between columns and enter into the space of the other song. The words are also entangled with the images, including some that seem quite strongly associated (to the point of cliché) with the Holocaust. The lyrics are therefore not available to be deciphered on a quick scan. They can either be vaguely registered as part of the imagery on which they are overlaid, or they require a good degree of effort, some prolonged scrutiny, in order to disentangle them from those images (which might also involve inspecting the imagery with some care).

The non-standard English, therefore, does not encourage listeners to make their own sense of the lyrics (that too would be to treat them as deficient), but rather to draw upon other elements of the music and presentation. This requires different modes of inhabiting one’s body from the one deployed when reading a literary text: singing or moving along to them, letting them play in the background while doing something else, or even focusing intently on what is on the CD booklet in order to decipher it. None of these is a mode by which one is simply decoding meaning. All require an engagement with the medium, the grain of what is written.

This too could be described as a form of opacity, not because it encourages (dwelling on) misunderstanding, but because it causes an embrace of materiality and embodiment. That too is not at odds with the ways that the Sonderkommando needed to communicate and bear



witness. Testifying in multiple languages, sometimes their ‘mother tongues’, sometimes others, they used whatever other semiotic resources were available to them: gesture (Chare 2015), pictures (Chare and Williams 2019), and impersonation (Davies 2018).

### **Bookishness: The Meads of Asphodel, *Sonderkommando***

Kragens’ song ‘Sonderkommandos Defy’ appears to include some research based on Gideon Greif’s interviews with the SK (Greif 2005). Jared Secord describes such a way of working as ‘bookishness’: the ‘process of trying to find new and unfamiliar arcane subject matter worthy of exploration’ through reading ‘broadly and eclectically’ (Secord 2020: 156). This approach, invested in unearthing hidden histories and repressed stories, often leads to metal bands embracing alternative histories, from the relatively harmless revisions of Egypt used by Nile (Olabarria 2020) to the pernicious attraction to Holocaust denial (Langebach and Schulz this issue).

The Meads of Asphodel too demonstrate a ‘bookishness’ in their approach to the subject matter. Taking up the anti-Christian strand of much black metal, lyricist and vocalist Metatron has delved into the history of religion to endorse the Sumerian origin of the Garden of Eden in ‘Kharsag’ (as claimed by the amateur cuneiformist Christian O’Brien) (*The Excommunication of Christ*, 2001), and to ‘reveal’ that Jesus was nailed to a tree rather than a cross (*The Murder of Jesus the Jew*, 2010). Accompanying this latter album is a voluminous codex summarizing all the research that he undertook (Metatron 2011). While this text does not simply reproduce the hatred for Judaism and Jews expressed in much of black metal’s anti-Christianity (Kahn-Harris 2011), there is something disconcerting to much of the research, which rejects the consensus of popular understandings of history while making strange judgements on the credibility of sources and seeming to be untroubled by possible

right-wing associations of some of it.<sup>9</sup> Some of this problem is also true of the codex that came with *Sonderkommando* (Metatron 2013), which seem to speak to the denier in himself (after visiting Auschwitz any doubts have been laid to rest (1)) and to potential deniers out there (even if what the deniers say is true, that is still a ghastly crime against humanity (4)).

It is fair nonetheless to see *Sonderkommando* as a serious attempt to understand and think through the Holocaust, even if not quite in the focused form that Metatron has claimed for it. He declares that the whole album considers the Holocaust from the point of view of the *Sonderkommando* (Grim Tower 2014). It might be better to say that the *Sonderkommando* provide the frame, with songs from their point of view coming first and last in the album, while in between the point of view shifts between a number of different positions, including something like the Jewish people ('Sins of the Pharaohs'), and the perpetrators (e.g. 'Children of the Sunwheel Banner'). In its attempt to deal with the Holocaust in general, it also includes songs about the so-called euthanasia program ('Aktion T4') and the mass shootings carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen* ('Silent Ghosts of Babi Yar').

The album does not come across as a coherent project, and this is true not only in terms of research and lyrics, but also in the approach to composition: 'a bizarre mix of black metal, progressive rock and all kinds of other stuff' (Kahn-Harris 2013). In addition to the orchestral and electronic instruments used by a wide range of classic black metal bands such as Emperor and even Mayhem, they have followed a fairly well-worn path (trodden by such bands as Arcturus and Sigh) of including numerous musical styles alongside black metal.

A kind of ramshackle bricolage is at play then in both the thought that has gone into the lyrics and approach to musical styles. Words, ideas and music feel like costumes that are tried on, rather than being chosen for their essential 'rightness'. The album's bedroom theatricality includes a pastiche of the witches scene from *Macbeth*, or a recording of Metatron playing at being Death spliced with his son sobbing, playing a dead Jewish child.

There is certainly no adherence to what Gillian Rose (1996) has called ‘Holocaust piety’ (see also Boswell 2012), but rather an aesthetic of excess, evident even in the title of the penultimate song: ‘The Mussulmans Wander Through the Infernal Whirling Fires Amongst Silent Shadows to be Fed Into the Thirsting Jaws of a Godless Death Machine to Cough Up Their Souls to the Nazi Moloch Who Sits Within a Ring of Smoking Infant Skulls’.

In this song, the repeated word *Sonderkommando* occurs at the beginning, but it also features as the chorus, over which a harmonica plays (courtesy of Bruce Hamilton, a guest musician). This use of an instrument hardly ever seen in metal since Black Sabbath’s ‘The Wizard’ (1970) marks a return to the blues, the music that heavy metal repudiated in order to be heavy metal (Kahn-Harris 2004). That this African American musical form appears in black metal, the whitest of white music, is significant.<sup>10</sup> Aside from the unusualness of this blend, it resonates with a number of other points in the album: the references to Moses in ‘Sins of the Pharaohs’, which also call up images of African-American spirituals and anti-slavery songs, and the train’s whistle in ‘Last Train to Eden’ (which uses an American-sounding train whistle rather than anything British). Imitating a train is a role often given to the harmonica in the blues, but as well as conjuring up different kinds of machinery, it can also stand for inarticulate suffering (Licht 1980; Liu-Rosenbaum 2012). Here it seems to do both, suggesting some kind of emotional pain behind the repeated semi-meaningless name (meaningless to English speakers, but also, as a Nazi euphemism, meaningless in German too) that it plays over.

What I am seeing as the bookishness of the Meads, therefore, takes more forms than simply a preparedness to do research. It involves an attraction to esotericism and eclecticism, and to the bizarre, without a need for rigour or consistency. Indeed, the approach might be called (to reverse Kahn-Harris’s terms) ‘anti-reflexive reflexivity’: it clearly is a form of self-examination, into which has been poured what I would see as a great deal of effort (rather

than the care Kahn-Harris sees in it in his paper this issue) but the means by which this is carried out are not examined, at least not consistently. Claims might be said to be based as much on gut feelings as on any normative forms of evidence. The result of this approach is difficult to make coherent sense of, but that seems to be part of the point. It permits the coexistence of a range of styles and modes of representation that have completely different connotations, down to the point where it imbues an 'exterior' descriptor (the word 'Sonderkommando') with a kind of interiority, lacing linguistic obscurantism with a physical expression of pain.

This mixture of the fantastical, the ridiculous and the genuinely eerie and upsetting (at least in my listening) is not, in fact, so different from the ways that the Sonderkommando have been thought about and represented from the very beginning. Understanding of the SK was hampered by their limited contact with other prisoners, low rate of survival and unwillingness to talk about their experiences. What circulated about them instead were extreme stories of excess, loss of humanity, even among the stories of eyewitnesses.<sup>11</sup> Just as with the difficulties of understanding caused by physical damage to manuscripts and working across languages, these legends obscure but also, potentially, provide ways into understanding the SK. The painter David Olère, who survived the Sonderkommando, for example, did not rest content with the drawings in which he sketched out the workings of the crematoria immediately after the war, but went on to produce fantastical paintings that pile up juxtaposed hellish imagery in a way that might well be given the sort of title that the Meads use for 'The Mussulmans Wander...' (Klarsfeld 1989; BBC 2017; Chare and Williams 2019).

**Sonderkommando. Sonderkommando. Sonderkommando.**

In this article I have discussed ways in which representation of the Sonderkommando has been put under pressure not so much by the nature of their experience, but rather the process of transmission that followed after it: burying manuscripts, working between languages and being figures of legend even to their fellow prisoners. Metal bands and their representations of the SK can be read as embodying these issues: embodying in the sense that they are inherent in their musical and writing practices, but also in the sense of acting them out, embracing the difficulties rather than simply attempting to overcome them.

As we have seen recurrently, one way that metal bands do this is by simply repeating the word 'Sonderkommando' as their chorus. The word itself seems to have an attraction. It 'fits' with the logic of these metal songs: incomprehensible, internationally recognizable, esoteric. But it undoes these songs' logic too. In styles where intelligibility is not always important, it is nonetheless left distinguishable and understandable. It is used as part of an international English, but it remains unintegrated into English. And at the end of the Meads of Asphodels' album, mixed together with musical styles that evoke un-metal, inarticulate suffering and machinery, it pushes the song into a recognizable language of pain. None of these paradoxes is any different from the place that the Sonderkommando have often had in Holocaust memory and representation: a troubling unassimilable presence. And as with much of that way of thinking, there is little room available for a more reflexive and reflective consideration of the men of the Sonderkommando's lives, neither before nor, for that matter, during their time in Auschwitz. Very few of the songs, for example, provide any consideration of the Sonderkommando's Jewishness, which informed the experiences and knowledges through which they tried to understand their camp existence.<sup>12</sup>

But of course, that understanding had its limits, and there are some aspects of these songs' approaches, more specific to metal, that address those limits in potentially valuable ways. As I have argued throughout this essay, features of metal (unintelligibility, specific

internationalized use of language, bookishness, and in all cases a willingness to go to excess) are ways of dealing with this difficult to conceptualize group that are worth engaging with, and perhaps even providing a lesson to be learnt. Alongside establishing the facts, and attempting to disentangle the meanings of the SK's biographies and histories, the meaninglessness imposed on them is important to recognize too, embodied in these bands' recourse to repeating a meaningless name:

Sonderkommando. Sonderkommando. Sonderkommando.

## **Bibliography**

- Ali, S. Omar and Peynircioğlu Zehra F. (2006), 'Songs and emotions: Are lyrics and melodies equal partners?', *Psychology of Music*, 34:4, pp. 511–534.
- Bacon, Yehuda (1996), Interview with Yehuda Bacon, *USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive*, 26983, 26 December.
- BBC (2017), 'In pictures: Olère art depicts Auschwitz horrors', 15 September, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-41283370>. Accessed 2 July 2020.
- Bogue, Ronald (2004), 'Violence in Three Shades of Metal: Death, Doom and Black', in I. Buchanan and M. Swiboda (eds), *Deleuze and Music*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 95–117.
- Boswell, Matthew (2012), *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music and Film*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Butler, Judith (2001), 'Giving an Account of Oneself', *Diacritics*, 31:4, pp. 22–40.
- Cangarajah, Suresh (2013), *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*, London: Routledge.
- Chare, Nicholas (2013), 'On the Problem of Empathy: Attending to Gaps in the Scrolls of Auschwitz', in N. Chare and D. Williams (eds), *Representing Auschwitz: At the Margin of Testimony*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 33–57.
- (2015), 'Gesture in Shoah', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 19:1, pp. 30–42.
- Chare, Nicholas, and Williams, Dominic (2016a), *Matters of Testimony: Interpreting the Scrolls of Auschwitz*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

- (2016b), ‘Questions of Filiation: From the Scrolls of Auschwitz to *Son of Saul*’, *Mémoires en jeu / Memories at Stake* 2, pp. 63–72.
- (2019), *The Auschwitz Sonderkommando: Testimonies, Histories, Representations*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Connole, Edia, and Shipley, Gary J. (eds) (2015), *Serial Killing: A Philosophical Anthology*, n.p.: Schism.
- Davies, Peter (2018), ‘What Can We Learn from Trial Testimony? Filip Müller’s Sonderkommando Testimony to the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial?’, *Telling, Describing, Representing Extermination: The Auschwitz Sonderkommando, Their Testimony and Their Legacy*, Centre Marc Bloch, Berlin, 12 April 2018.
- Djurslev, Christian Thue (2015), ‘The Metal King: Alexander the Great in Heavy Metal Music’, *Metal Music Studies* 1:1, pp. 127–141.
- Eldson, P. (2015) ‘Embodied Listening and the Music of Sigur Rós’, *Popular Musicology Online* 2. <http://www.popular-musicology-online.com/>. Accessed 29 June 2020.
- Friedler, Eric, Siebert, Barbara and Kilian, Andreas (2005), *Zeugen aus der Todeszone: Das jüdische Sonderkommando in Auschwitz*, Munich: Deutsches Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Giddens, Anthony (1991), *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Greif, Gideon (2005), *We Wept without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (trans. N. Greenwood), New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Grim Tower, The (2014), ‘Interview with The Metatron of The Meads of Asphodel’, *The Grim Tower*, 9 May, <http://thegrimtower.com/interview-with-the-metatron-of-the-meads-of-asphodel/>. Accessed 1 July 2020.
- Kahn-Harris, Keith (2004), ‘The “Failure” of Youth Culture: Reflexivity, Music and Politics in the Black Metal Scene’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7:1, pp. 95–111.
- (2007), *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Oxford and New York: Berg.
- (2010) ‘How Diverse Should Metal Be? The Case of Jewish Metal, Overt and Covert Jewishness’, in N. Scott and I. Von Helden (eds), *The Metal Void: First Gatherings*, Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, pp. 110–119.
- (2011), ‘“You are from Israel and that is enough to hate you forever”: Racism, Globalism, and Play within the Global Extreme Music Scene’, in J. Wallach, H. Berger and P. Greene (eds), *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music around the World*, Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 200–222.

- (2013), ‘Miscellaneous Metal Jewish Meshuggas’, *Metaljew*, 13 August, <http://www.kahn-harris.org/miscellaneous-metal-jewish-meshuggas/>. Accessed 2 July 2020.
- Kelly, Kim (2016), ‘The Real Story Behind the Spiritual Black Metal Blues of Zeal and Ardor’s “Devil Is Fine”’, *Vice*, 7 July, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_ca/article/6wqynb/zeal-and-ardor-interview](https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/6wqynb/zeal-and-ardor-interview). Accessed 2 July 2020.
- Klarsfeld, Serge (1989), *David Olère: The Eyes of a Witness* New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation.
- LaCapra, Dominick (1994), *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- (1997), ‘Lanzmann’s “Shoah”: “Here There Is No Why”’, *Critical Inquiry*, 23:2, pp. 231–269.
- Lanzmann, Claude (2012), *The Patagonian Hare* (trans. F. Wynne), London: Atlantic.
- Lawson, Tom (2017), ‘History Writing and the Sonderkommando’, *European Association for Holocaust Studies Conference*, Kraków, 15 November.
- Levi, Primo (1986), *I sommersi e i salvati*. Turin: Einaudi.
- (1989), *The Drowned and the Saved* (trans. R. Rosenthal), London: Abacus.
- Licht, Michael S. (1980), ‘Harmonica Magic: Virtuoso Display in American Folk Music’, *Ethnomusicology*, 24:2, pp. 211–221.
- Liu-Rosenbaum, Aaron (2012), ‘The Meaning in The Mix: Tracing A Sonic Narrative in “When The Levee Breaks”’, *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, 7, <https://www.arpjournal.com/asarpwp/the-meaning-in-the-mix-tracing-a-sonic-narrative-in-when-the-levee-breaks/>. Accessed 2 July 2020.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1945), *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard.
- (1962), *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. C. Smith), London and New York: Routledge.
- Metatron (2011), *The Murder of Jesus the Jew* [‘codex’], <https://metatronhq.com/codex/>. Accessed 29 June 2020.
- (2013), *Sonderkommando* [‘codex’], <https://metatronhq.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/sonderkommando.pdf>. Accessed 29 June 2020.
- Müller, Filip *Auschwitz Inferno: Testimony of a Sonderkommando* (trans. S. Flatauer), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.



- Nyiszli, Miklós (2013) [1947], *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* (trans. T. Kremer and R. Seaver), London: Penguin.
- Olabarria, Leire (2020), "'When the Land was Milk and Honey and the Magic was Strong and True": Edward Said, Ancient Egypt, and Heavy Metal', in K. Fletcher and O. Umurhan (eds) *Classical Antiquity in Heavy Metal Music*, London: Bloomsbury Classic, pp. 173–200.
- Overell, Rosemary (2014), *Affective Intensities in Extreme Music Scenes: Cases from Australia and Japan*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pennycook, Alistair (2003), 'Global Englishes, Rip Slyme, and performativity', *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7:4, pp. 513–533.
- Phillipov, Michelle (2006), "'None So Vile"? Towards an Ethics of Death Metal', *Southern Review*, 38:2, pp. 74–84.
- Riches, Gabby (2016), 'Use Your Mind?: Embodiments of Protest, Transgression, and Grotesque Realism in British Grindcore' in A. Brown, K. Spracklen, K. Kahn-Harris and N. Scott (eds), *Global Metal Music and Culture: Current Directions in Metal Studies*, New York: Routledge, Ebook.
- Rose, Gillian (1996), *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scott, Niall (2007), 'God Hates Us All: Kant, Radical Evil and the Diabolical Monstrous Human in Heavy Metal', in Scott (ed.), *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 201–212.
- (2016), 'The monstrous male and myths of masculinity in heavy metal', in F. Heesch and N. Scott (eds) *Heavy Metal, Gender and Sexuality: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, London and New York, Routledge, pp. 121–130.
- Secord, Jared (2020), 'Occult and Pulp Visions of Greece and Rome in Heavy Metal', in K. Fletcher and O. Umurhan (eds) *Classical Antiquity in Heavy Metal Music*, London: Bloomsbury Classic, pp. 155–172.
- Shildrick, Margrit (2002), *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, London: Sage.
- Spracklen, Karl (2009), *The Meaning and Purpose of Leisure: Habermas at the End of Modernity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stengel, Katharina (2012), *Hermann Langbein: Ein Auschwitz-Überlebender in den erinnerungspolitischen Konflikten der Nachkriegszeit*, Frankfurt: Campus Verlag.

- Stone, Dan (2013), 'The Harmony of Barbarism: Locating the "Scrolls of Auschwitz" in Holocaust Historiography', in N. Chare and D. Williams (eds), *Representing Auschwitz: At the Margins of Testimony*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 11–32.
- Tsai Chen-Gia, Wang Li-Ching, Wang Shwu-Fen, Shau Yio-Wha, Hsiao Tzu-Yu and Auhagen, Wolfgang (2010), 'Aggressiveness of the Growl-Like Timbre: Acoustic Characteristics, Musical Implications, and Biomechanical Mechanisms', *Music Perception*, 27:3, pp. 209–221.
- Voice, Matthew and Whiteley, Sara (2019), "'Y'all don't wanna hear me, you just wanna dance": A cognitive approach to listener attention in OutKast's "Hey Ya!"' *Language and Literature*, 28:1, pp. 7–22.
- Williams, Dominic (2019a), 'Figuring the Grey Zone: The Auschwitz Sonderkommando in Contemporary Culture', *Holocaust Studies* 25:1–2, pp. 141–157.
- (2019b), 'What makes the Grey Zone Grey?: Blurring Factual and Moral Judgements of the *Sonderkommando*', in N. Chare and D. Williams (eds) *Testimonies of Resistance: Representations of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando*. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 69–88.
- (2019c), "'Feel the knife pierce you intensely": Slayer's "Angel of Death" – Metal Affects or Holocaust Representation?' *Genealogy* 3.4: 61.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3040061>.
- Zenerian, E. (2018) "'Doing-listening" with Deranged's *Struck by a Murderous Siege*: An auto-ethnography of death metal vinyl consumption.' *Metal Music Studies* 4:1, pp. 115-130.
- Żywulska, Krystyna (2004) [1946], *I Survived Auschwitz* (trans. K. Cenkalska, L. Czerski and S. Callahan), Warsaw: tCHu, 2004, pp. 250-252.

## Discography

- Black Sabbath (1970), 'The Wizard', *Paranoid*, streaming, London: Vertigo.
- Brume d'Automne (2012), 'Rouge souvenir d'antan', *Brume d'Automne*, streaming, Montreal: Sepulchral.
- Buried Alive (1999), 'Sonderkommandos', *Spoils of War*, mp3, n.p.: Grade.
- Commando (2008), 'Sonderkommando', *Sudden Invasion*, streaming, Ciudad de Mérida, Mexico: Grenade, 2008.
- Glorior Belli (2009), 'In Every Grief-Stricken Blues', *Meet Us at the Southern Sign*, streaming, Wallingford: Candlelight.

Gwar (1994), 'Sonderkommando', [sometimes listed as 'SunderKommando'] *This Toilet Earth*, streaming, Agoura Hills, CA: Metal Blade.

Kragens (2005), 'Sonderkommandos Defy', *Seeds of Pain*, CD, Madrid: Locomotive.

Lebensgefahr (2015) 'Dränage', *Inuti – där mörkret alltid finns*, EP, Independent.

The Meads of Asphodel (2013), *Sonderkommando*, mp3, Wallingford: Candlelight.

The Obscene (2013), 'Sonderkommando', *Architects of Deliverance*, mp3, North Shields: UKEM.

Requiem (2006), 'Sonderkommando 12', *Government Denies Knowledge*, mp3, Abstatt: Massacre.

Sigh (1997), 'Hail Horror Hail', *Hail Horror Hail*, streaming, Beijing: Mort.

Vedonist (2008), 'Sonderkommando', *The World of Reversed Decalogue*, CD, Sheridan, WY: Metalbolic.

Zeal and Ardor (2016), *Devil is Fine*, streaming, Arnhem: Reflections.

---

Thanks to Tom Lawson, Hannah Pollin-Galay and the two anonymous reviewers for their careful readings of and useful comments on this article. The article has developed from work jointly undertaken with Nicholas Chare on the Sonderkommando and the Scrolls of Auschwitz. Thanks to him for all our discussions on these topics over these past years.

<sup>1</sup> The exceptions are usually books of interviews by people from a journalistic background (Friedler et al. 2005; Greif 2005).

<sup>2</sup> In an intriguing overlap between phenomenology and considerations of (anti-)reflexivity, Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the structure by which all experience of others as subjects has to take place, and which is grounded in one's bodily existence in the world, as having the same form as 'a reflection open to the unreflective, the reflective assumption of the unreflective [*une réflexion ouverte sur l'irréfléchi, la reprise réflexive de l'irréfléchi*]' (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 413, 1962: 419).

<sup>3</sup> Most famously, Abraham Bomba is filmed re-enacting his job cutting women's hair in Treblinka in a men's barber shop in Tel Aviv (see LaCapra 1997; Chare and Williams 2019).

<sup>4</sup> LaCapra draws the distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through' from psychoanalysis, citing definitions of 'acting out' as 'reliv[ing] in the present with a sensation of immediacy', and 'working through' as 'bringing [unconscious formations] into relation with the subject's personality as a whole' (Laplanche and Pontalis, cited in LaCapra 1994: 208–209). It is clear, then, that 'working through' is much the more reflexive mode. To this definition of acting out, LaCapra adds 'certain modes of performativity, inconsolable melancholy, and the sublime' (209), mostly aesthetic categories that inform my characterization of acting out as 'theatrical'.

<sup>5</sup> I contacted the record label, but they had mislaid the original album artwork including lyric sheets. The lyrics do not appear on such websites as darklyrics.com or metal-archives.com.

<sup>6</sup> I offer this not really as an auto-ethnography of listening such as that of Zenerian (2018) as I came to the song as someone researching representations of the Sonderkommando rather than as someone who is part of the scene (although the distinction between the two here is not always clear and scholarship is of course a suitable subject for auto-ethnography). But Zenerian's approach of paying close attention to the way in which he listens certainly overlaps with some of what I tried here.

---

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Zalman Gradowski described himself as a ‘watchman at the gates of hell’ (Chare and Williams 2016a: 66). The UK edition of Filip Müller’s book is entitled *Auschwitz Inferno* (1979).

<sup>8</sup> The album was only released as a CD: [https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Kragens/Seeds\\_of\\_Pain/88601](https://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Kragens/Seeds_of_Pain/88601); <https://www.discogs.com/Kragens-Seeds-Of-Pain/master/634876>.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the Meads’ original label, Supernal, was owned by a far-right blogger and activist and also included NSBM bands (Spracklen 2009: 127).

<sup>10</sup> It is true that it has always (or from very early on) been a feature of black metal that it should incorporate other kinds of music, and that has even included the blues. This is perhaps most obviously the case with the Meads’ one-time labelmates Glorior Belli (2009), but it is also identifiable in the rock sound of Sigh’s ‘Hail Horror Hail’ (1997), for example. Zeal and Ardor’s melding of blast beats with Satanist field hollers on *Devil is Fine* (2016) seems to have come directly in response to a racist/race-baiting joke on reddit based on the perceived incompatibility of black metal and blues (Kelly 2016). I am not aware of any of these bands using a harmonica, however. Those black metal bands that have done so (e.g. Brume d’Automne 2012; Lebensgefahr 2015) are by no means blues-like.

<sup>11</sup> A handful of examples will suffice. Krystyna Żywulska, a prisoner in the women’s camp at Birkenau, relates how she encountered a member of the SK and was surprised that he had any thoughts or feelings (Żywulska 2004: 250–252). Miklós Nyiszli (2013), a Jewish doctor forced to work for Josef Mengele and tend to the Sonderkommando gives accounts of the SK living in luxury which bear little resemblance to the testimony of survivors. Yehuda Bacon (1996), who interacted with some of them as a teenager in Birkenau, recalled them as ‘not anymore in the category of normal human beings’ (Tape 8, 26:09). The publication of Bacon’s recollections of lurid stories about (or perhaps told to him by) the SK almost led to a lawsuit against the publisher (Stengel 2012: 558n254).

<sup>12</sup> See the interviews in Greif 2005 and the readings of the SK’s writings in Chare and Williams 2016. Keith Kahn-Harris (2010) argues that metal is chary about dealing with Jews and Jewishness. See also Jon Stratton and Itay Jackson’s articles in this issue for the difficulties that metallists have in addressing these subjects.