FROSTBITE ON MY FEET
REPRESENTATIONS OF WALKING IN BLACK METAL VISUAL CULTURE

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INCIPIT/WALKING

Walking can be understood as a transitional practice whereby a person steps into, and through, a complex set of spatial and cognitive relationships. An example of such a theory of walking can be seen in the act of stepping through the doorway of a Gothic Cathedral (Notre Dame, for instance). Entering the westwork has long held physical and religious significance for Catholic devotees, symbolising one’s departure from a world in which a conceived God is incomprehensible and indeterminable (a transcendental space) into a space of communion with that God (an immanental space). Each step into the vast and ornate interior space of the nave, and beyond, comprises a transitional ritual that puts the walker in dialogue with the sacred.

Consider also the Situationist International (SI)’s attempts to explore the many possibilities for interaction with city spaces through psychogeographic research (research questioning how the built environment influences how people think, act, and feel). Taking inspiration from the early modern flâneur, Guy Debord, Michel de Certeau, and other SI members would wander around Paris (and other cities) indulging their scopophilic fancies
and treating the Parisian arrondisements as sites for creative, unstructured play. Privileging the “mobilized gaze,” their dérives framed a negotiation with predominant, materialistic, and middle-class values.¹ In this example, walking embodies a transition through unfixed spatial subjectivities, within which the body could become “a veritable depot for departure and return.”²

The significance of walking reaches beyond the kinesiological concerns of placing one foot in front of the other, of repeatedly shifting the weight of the body. Walking and thinking are intimately entwined. It is significant to a broader complex of cultural dynamics, but it often lacks recognition—like a quiet achiever who moves about under the radar. We can attribute this to walking’s inherent repetition, for it is so commonplace in everyday life that it barely rates a mention; to contemplate every step would be exhausting and unnecessarily time consuming. Walking takes place, of course, but we forget about it in order to concentrate on other thoughts (e.g., of our destination and its associated tasks). Something as conceivably banal and monotonous as walking slips freely beneath the grounds of critical thought. In an abyss beneath cognisance—beyond illumination—walking endures.

In the context of Black Metal music’s visual culture, walking might appear to be a rather irrelevant topic. Why? Black Metal is famous for its Neo-Baroque theatricality, allusions to Satanism and Paganism, corpse paint, images of burning churches, and death—things that present a challenge to the comforting familiarities of everyday life.
Listening to Black Metal music, we might imagine Odin waging wars, we do not imagine him taking a stroll down to the market. Walking seems to be too ordinary a part of the human condition—far too conventional to compete with Black Metal’s provocative melodramas.

Truncated by the public’s engagement with the spectacle of Black Metal, the less exotic practice of walking nonetheless remains an important practice within the genre. Its significance can be seen in two recent documentaries on Black Metal: Vice Broadcasting System (VBS)’s *True Norwegian Black Metal* and Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell’s *Until the Light Takes Us.* In the first instance, Gaahl (the documentary’s leading figure and the former frontman of Gorgoroth) insists that the film crew join him on a long trek into the Norwegian tundra. The hike draws our attention to the meaningfulness of the journey and speaks to the aura of solitude and endurance, of a confrontation with the unknown and human potential. Gaahl enforces: “I become what never fails, following the footsteps behind me.” In *Until the Light Takes Us*, slow-motion footage of Darkthrone’s Fenriz walking along a snowy forest path seems to evoke similar notions of the shadows of former selves seeking an obscured locus of self-authenticity. Both examples illustrate the capacity of walking to communicate a deeply planted Black Metal aesthetic. Thus, by way of walking—this atypical object of analysis—we find a new and unexpected entry point from which to explore the Black Metal landscape.

But there is more to it than this. Given that walking is a shared experience, we may capitalise on its commonality to consider how Black Metal might offer new meaning to our own (i.e., the listener’s) walking. By using Black Metal to re-think an often taken-for-granted activity and to think critically about what is typically, uncritically, and automatically perceived, we have an opportunity to defamiliarise walking. By defamiliarising walking, our attention may be drawn to its capacity as a creative practice that is culturally and personally meaningful. In this sense, Black Metal theory enables us to see walking in a new light or, for that matter, a new shade.

In order to delimit this turn in the discussion, I draw from a personal case study that articulates my own day-to-day experience of walking while listening to Black Metal music. Today, digital media fosters a curious tension between Black Metal walking and walking in everyday life. I have often found myself listening to Burzum’s *Dunkelheit*, Gorgoroth’s *Carving a Giant*, or Mayhem’s *A Wise Birthgiver* while making my way down a bustling, city street in Melbourne, Australia and sensed a disjuncture, a rupture, between two divergent contexts: that of the unforgiving Nordic landscape that the songs, fuelled by Black Metal images, shape in my imagination, and my own material reality in a built environment punctuated by concrete pathways and pedestrian crossings. Both Tim Ingold’s discussion of the difference “between walking on the ground, in the landscapes of ‘real life,’ and
walking in the imagination, as in reading, writing, painting or listening to music” and Rey Chow’s ideas on the Walkman offer theoretical context for the approach to Black Metal discussed in this essay. In *Lines: A Brief History*, Ingold posits the act of walking as a kind of procession that finds him (at the outset of his book) linking walking to “weaving, observing, singing, storytelling, drawing and writing.” Ingold’s “anthropology of the line” draws our attention to the line’s capacities as a “thread” and “trace” that exists as multidirectional “transforms of one another” (2). He traces modern societies’ notion that “straightness has come to epitomize not only rational thought and disputation but also the values of civility and moral rectitude” to the Renaissance, where it was adopted from the Euclidean geometry of more than two millennia before (Euclid posited the properly linear line “as a connection between points that has length but no breadth”). Ingold’s personal search for lines in his everyday life found them “in exercise books, floorboards, brick walls and pavements.” He explains how the idea of the line belies its complexity as a lived experience and that along which autobiography leaks, seeps, and bleeds (4).

Alterity, we are told, is non-linear. The other side of this coin, however, is to assume that life is lived authentically on the spot, in places rather than along paths. Yet how could there be places, I wondered, if people did not come and go? Life on the spot surely cannot yield an experience of place, of being somewhere. To be a place, every somewhere must lie on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere. Life is lived, I reasoned, along paths, not just in places, and paths are lines of a sort. It is along paths, too, that people grow into a knowledge of the world around them, and describe this world in the stories they tell. (2)

Beyond the positivism of modern analytical thought, and cognisant of the “doubt and confusion” (and reflexivity) of late modernity, Ingold notes that the “lines that once went straight to the point have become fragmented, and the task of life is once more to find a way through the cracks” (4). As a process throughout which a line is grown, such as when one writes or draws, walking is not simply a point-to-point interpretation of the world, or the division of the map of everyday life into points. Instead it can be understood as a means by which we might get “around” to a “place.” Perhaps this will be regarded as a place of authenticity, reached in the course of a meandering that inscribes itself onto the surface of the world and upon the surface of the mind as a train/trail of thought. Ingold says that although “we are drawn to certain topics, and meander around them . . . by the time we reach them they seem to have disappeared—like a hill we climb that no longer looks like a hill once we have reached the top” (3).
Walking is also transitional in its capacity to transform how the body reads a space. But how might we make sense of that body? Remaining with Ingold for now, it is useful to outline the distinction he makes between “navigating” and “wayfaring” (16). The navigator traces a “complete representation of the territory” by way of which a journey may be “pre-planned.” In contrast, the wayfarer’s journey reconstructs, and thus reinscribes, the “itinerary as one goes along. Only upon reaching his destination, in this case, can the traveller truly be said to have found his way” (16). For wayfarers, journeying across a terrain (Ingold’s examples are of Antiquity and the Middle Ages) entails reading

a set of signposts, direction markers or stepping stones that enabled them to find their way within the landscape of memory. For this finding of the way—this guided, flowing movement from place to place—medieval readers had a special term, *ductus*. (92–93)

*Ductus* (from the Latin “leading”) is used to denote the flow of the journey of reading and writing. This denotation can be reasonably extended to include the flow and open-endedness of walking as a transitional practice that takes process through material and cognitive space.

Ingold’s way of relating “writing” to “walking” resonates with this essay as a space in which the flow of the former proceeds towards a view of the latter (and by the time I reach the end, what I expect to find might not be there at all). By sharing his search for lines in his everyday life, he uses his own experience as a valid source of data when seeking a way forward—and along the way, so shall I. Drawing from a personal case study helps to inform a nuanced understanding of the collision of Black Metal and walking in everyday life—what I playfully call “blackened walking”—in an experimental way that I hope will foster further discussion on this topic. As a Black Metal enthusiast living in a technologically advanced society—a very noisy culture—I often listen to Black Metal on my mp3 player while I walk. In this sense, Rey Chow’s analysis of the cultural politics of portable music offers theoretical context for this part of the discussion with a flow on effect onto the others.

Chow’s focus is not on Black Metal, but on Chinese Rock music. Nevertheless, given that “Chinese music raises many issues similar to those of rock and roll in the West,” her insights lend themselves to Black Metal—one of Rock music’s most extreme subgenres. Particularly useful is Chow’s reading of portable music, which reminds us, says Simon During, that “the power of the miniature is not only dependent on its cultural-political context. It belongs to technology and the body as well—here, to a particular conjunction between the two, enabled and made concrete by the Walkman” (462). Whereas Ingold
offers a framework for thinking through walking as line-making in the built environment, Chow articulates “the equipment of modern nomadism” (474). She explains that portable music players support a composite mode of listening that involves multiple entries and exits, multiple turnings-on and turnings-off. If music is a kind of storage place for the emotions generated by cultural conflicts and struggles, then we can, with the new listening technology, talk about the production of such conflicts and struggles on the human body at the press of a button. In the age of the Walkman . . . the emotions have become portable. (474)

I am reminded of the SI’s improvised meanderings, but just as much we may detect a relationship between Ingold’s and Chow’s insights. Chow’s point that the portable music device “offers a means of self-production in an age when any emphasis on individualist positions amounts to a scandal” begs the question of whether listening to music, while walking, speaks closer to navigation or wayfaring (475). Are there conditions under which it might speak to both? We may note that “self-production” implies autonomy and lends itself to the DIY aesthetic, which Black Metal has long held in high esteem. It also sets up the act of walking as a physical and emotional re-inscription. In this performativity of the walking creative self, scope exists for the navigation of pre-tested and pre-planned components: the repeated song, the familiarity of streets. Wearing a band t-shirt might add to the “autism of the Walkman listener [that] irritates onlookers precisely because the onlookers find themselves reduced to the activity of looking alone” due to “hideness” of sound that headphones afford the listener (475–476). Autism, as a context of impaired social interaction, is here constructed by the listening body—the listener actively derives pleasure from the portable, mechanical apparatus. This apparatus (a structure of virtual files that is highly controllable: volume, time limits, custom equaliser settings) offers technological support for portable, structured emotions, and affords some degree of respite from the emotional proximity to the collective, the hustle and bustle of city chaos, that can overstimulate the senses. To walk is to imply a stand—“I am not there, not where you collect me.’ . . . a ‘silent’ sabotage of the technology of collectivization with its own instruments” (475). It is as if portable music is part of a coping strategy, whereby the listening body may embrace the soundscape of nomadism in and throughout a highly rationalised public space such as a city or a suburb—the material reality under which the listener’s body has been disciplined. Thus, we might imagine the contingent body listening to songs about the liberated body and following this Other (an alternative solution for living in the world) into the myth, and the mist, of the quest for the self. We come full circle, returning to SI thought in noticing that this sabotage without sound, but which is
publicly announced visually, détournes the walking body as a means to enlivening its life-political powers.

**TO WALK THE INFERNAL FIELDS**

[W]e must recognise in the power of the imagination the creative impulse of life itself in continually bringing forth the forms we encounter, whether in art, through reading, writing or painting, or in nature, through walking in the landscape. (23)

Given that Black Metal theory is an attempt “to develop a theoretical framework on the basis of black metal itself,” there is good reason to consider the prominent position that the role of walking occupies in the context of Black Metal visual culture. But what does thinking about walking mean for the music listener, i.e. the Black Metal fan who is also a part of this picture? It is a question that I have asked myself while walking down the city streets of Melbourne—a space geographical and climatically incongruent with many of the mental images evoked by the sounds in my headphones. To what extent does my use of Norwegian Black Metal music, as an artificial soundtrack for the material reality through which I walk, foster a kind of “blackened walking”? Can I speak of such a thing in Australia, a country in which mythologies of walking mostly entail long hikes through the bush beneath the searing summer heat? After all, it is not the threat of frostbite on my feet that I would face while walking through the Aussie bush, but ants’ nests—not the headiness of altitude to contend with, but rather poisonous snakes and spiders.

Despite some assertions made within the Black Metal community against advanced capitalism, it is thanks to a technologically driven consumer culture that I am able to walk down a Melbourne street at 1am (or at any time, for that matter) listening to Mayhem’s “A Wise Birthgiver” (Ordo ad Chao) on my mp3 player. Heading home after a (so-called) Black Metal gig in Melbourne, walking along the footpath at a pace fast enough to counteract the cold, the music reminds me of the scenes of Gaahl on the mountain or Fenriz’s slowed down forest walk. I hear their conflicts with the modern world, but am grateful for the digital device this world has afforded me. Without my mp3 player, I could not carry the sound of trebly, fast-picked guitars with me wherever I go and bring to mind imagines of the shivering hands of musicians, playing and recording music in the icy tundra, as I step onto a tram or train during the morning commute.

These days, my experience of extreme music is much different than when I first became a fan. I remember being fifteen-years old—a time of emotional and intellectual transition, fuelled mostly by raging hormones—bored with Metallica and with Iron
Maiden’s vibrantly coloured cover artwork. I remember returning home one day, sitting down on the beige lounge-room carpet of the family home, and playing Morbid Angel’s *Alters of Madness* LP for the very first time. Not only because the sounds I heard diverged from what I had taken to be culturally acceptable, the music spoke to me about self-authenticity. What I heard was self-empowerment, a proxy voice for my own sense of self-creative potential, and my own dialogue with the past and with future possibilities. This kind of substitution is so common in music fandom that it verges on sociological cliché. Regardless, it has evolved two-fold: 1) in terms of the bands which have, like those before them, taken up high rotation on my music players, and 2) in terms of the music-playing technology itself becoming smaller, lighter, cheaper, and more portable.

Twenty years ago, I was listening to extreme music, learning the lyrics, and responding emotionally and intellectually to its various levels of creative content within the four walls of my parents’ home. I knew nothing of capitalism or of how it continuously framed my everyday experience. Today, I am able to take Black Metal with me into the broader social sphere and, with it, a more informed understanding of my cultural surroundings. I can use it as a soundtrack to monotonous daily tasks—from doing the dishes to Trelldom (*Til Minne . . .*), to quick-stepping down an escalator in an underground train station with *Forces of Satan Storms* surging through my mind. I am surely not the only one, for despite any allusions to individual empowerment that I might draw from this experience, it is, even if challenged by geography, one that is shared.

It is in these moments that I sense a rupture in time and space, a tension between mental images (the Norwegian landscape) and a material reality (a city environment) that informs the meaning I make of my actions. It is in this convergence that the blackening of walking becomes conceivable; portable music enables this experience. In “Listening Otherwise, Music Miniaturized: A Different Type of Question About Revolution,” Rey Chow draws attention to the communicative and transformative power of the Walkman:

> We do not return to real individual or private emotions when we use the Walkman: rather the Walkman’s artificiality makes us aware of the impending presence of the collective, which summons us with the infallibility of the sleepwalker. At the same time, what the Walkman provides is the possibility of a barrier, a blockage between ‘me’ and the world, so that, as in moments of undisturbed sleep, I can disappear as a listener playing music. The Walkman allows me, in other words, to be missing—to be a missing part of history, to which I say: “I am not there, not where you collect me.” (475)

Chow tells me that by walking down the street listening to Gorgoroth (for example) I go “missing,” figuratively speaking, by way of taking a cognitive retreat from the very
collective that I physically move amongst. Chow is not speaking of any specific genre of music, but by considering the theory in relation to Black Metal, I am bringing to light a greater coincidence: the notion of “disappearance” and “missing” in history speaks to Black Metal’s cultural conflict with a long-dominant Christian culture, and of the lengths to which the genre’s “inner circles” have gone to negotiate this conflict. Portable music is said to foster a blockage between self and society and, in this withdrawal from conventional forces, it renders such a walker almost shadowlike. We may remember Rolston’s insight regarding the necessity of distance for individualisation, and think of corpse paint as being uncannily illustrative.

But, if it is too dramatic to speak of the dead among the living (albeit in keeping with Black Metal theatricality), we can at least consider the way that a railroad switch moves rails laterally from one position to another; this blockage redirects the walker to a new spatial possibility and a renewed social relationship. Chow’s use of the dream metaphor is also interesting, when thinking about the blackening of walking in everyday life, given the daydream’s reputation for indulging the self in mind-wandering. But whether the landscape of the mind should be distinguished from the real world, and thus how we might understand their convergence, is an issue that Tim Ingold has investigated.

To summarise, Ingold asks about the difference “between walking on the ground, in the landscapes of ‘real life’, and walking in the imagination, as in reading, writing, painting or listening to music” (15). He discusses four examples: the monastic practices of early medieval Europe; the painting tradition of the Yolngu, an indigenous Australian people; the writings of Wassily Kandinsky; and a treatise by the 10th-century Chinese landscape painter Ching Hao. In each instance, Ingold finds appreciation for convergence between pictures in the mind and materiality—pointing to a significant overlap between “the terrains of the imagination and of ‘real life’” (23). The medieval monastic practitioners, for instance, “regarded themselves as wayfarers, travelling in their minds from place to place, and composing their thoughts as they went along by drawing on, or ‘pulling in,’ ideas lodged in places previously visited.” Reading through Hao’s Notes on Brush-work, Ingold observes how

the mental and the material, or the terrains of the imagination and the physical environment, run into one another to the extent of being barely distinguishable. They are like countries whose borders are thrown wide open to two-way traffic which, in passing from one country to the other, has to cross no ontological barrier. Such free passage is an offence to modern thought . . . . (17)

This is valuable for our purposes, given that modern thought (in view of Vikernes’s,
Gaahl’s, and Fenriz’s comments) is an offence to the roots of Norwegian Black Metal. The mental images that the music evokes, its triggering of memories, may also be recognised as “outward, sensible forms that give shape to the inner generative impulse that is life itself.”

As one such form, a shared worldly shape, walking is a vehicle for an existential impulse, sometimes also a motivating anxiety. The borderlessness of cognitive terrain and physical reality permit not the conflation, per se, but a kind of collaboration of one with the other. In terms of my own experience as a Black Metal listener, this has been the coupling of a conceivably empowered, assertive, and proactive body of thoughts and meanings with my own decision-making processes.

**OF ICE AND MOVEMENT . . .**

There is something intriguing about the image of black-clad figures moving through a predominantly Lutheran, picture-postcard Norway. Peter Beste’s photograph of Einar “Kvitrafn” Selvik, standing in a cobbled Bergen street, captures the moment when an elderly lady sees him, and his stare at the camera includes us in this tension. At the centre of this triangulation of space, bracketed by the human subjects, is distance itself. Kvitrafn’s shirtless torso (covered only by his long, straight, blonde hair) is seen in profile while his face is turned leftward towards the camera. His posture implies that Beste’s request to take a photograph might have interrupted Kvitrafn’s passage through the village towards an unseen destination. The dynamism between the self and the culture that is expressed here reminds me of Holmes Rolston’s idea that

there is a relative solitude that is essential for personal integration—a separateness complementary to human community, its polar opposite. Nature does not define humans in order that they may be cultured, but neither can humans depend upon society to make us human. Each must finish himself. As an eminently political animal, man has the curious capacity to individualize personal worth. But distance is essential for this individualization. So, paradoxically, unless one can come by a lakeside such as this, and let physical distance loosen the hold of society upon him, he cannot find space and sanity within which to establish and maintain the boundaries of the self. Without such spaces there is no togetherness—merely fusion and homogeneity. Alone we cannot be human. Yet we cannot be human until we are alone.

The necessity of solitude provides a doorway into the relationship between thinking and walking—one that we can step through to discuss representations of walking in Black Metal visual culture. It is here, at the lakeside (perhaps similar to the icy stream in
Espedal), that we might bump into Gaahl and, if we are a film crew, may agree to follow him up through the snow-blown mountains on a walk to remember.

In full costume, Gaahl comes across as a formidable übermensch, quite at home with distance from common folk. We only need to take a look at his corpse-painted face and bodily adornment in the video clip for Gorgoroth’s “Carving a Giant” to sense the intensity of his stage character. But, it is in True Norwegian Black Metal that we see him walking and can gain an insight on the practice itself. From this, we may build thoughts around how this resilience might translate across time and space, digested by the senses of fans across the world, despite the potential disjuncture that exists between diverse cultural and geographical circumstances. We will walk through walking (as it is seen in this documentary), and like Nietzsche in the Schwarzwald, make some notes along the way.

The image of the solitary male trudging through a snowy forest, synonymous with Black Metal, connotes the individualist’s journey, the solitary and contemplative passage through the extreme natural environment. Understandably, when the VBS film crew (including Peter Beste) arrives at Gaahl’s home in Espedal, Norway they are somewhat nervous about what is going to happen. There is a fear of the unknown confronted, at some times more pressingly than others, by the extra efforts that isolation imposes on bodily functions. As the co-producer Rob Semmer explains:

... no telephone, no nothing. ... His brother was the only one who had plumbing in the house, and his brother lived about a mile up the road. So every time I needed to take a shit or anything, I had to walk, literally, in ankle high mud, because it had been raining for seventy-two days straight. 14

Initially in this documentary, Gaahl talks about the importance of self-reliance, of following not a universal God but the “God within yourself, because that’s the only true God.” 15 The “footstep” metaphor gives focus to Gaahl’s abstract thoughts, and we begin to detect the significance of walking even before witnessing that act itself; the representation of walking is already under construction and speaking the language of Black Metal. As Gaahl continues, commenting on the presence of God in nature and nature’s growth, we see the first scenes of his back as the camera follows him walking forward through the forest.

The rushing rivers, the forest (dense with trees and mist), and a vast mountainous skyline repeatedly set the context for this adventure. Waiting for a break in the hazardous weather, the film crew spends three days with Gaahl, after which they agree to follow him to a place that he considered to hold great importance. However, they are unprepared and follow him, as co-producer Ivar Berglin recalls, “blindly into the wilderness. Only three of
us had jackets, only two of us had boots, and none of us had any idea where he’d take us.”

Gaahl explains the route they’ll need to take, warning: “It’s quite a long journey.” “We’ll see how long we make it,” Berglin replies. They set off from the valley towards a snow-capped mountain in the distance. They set off, ill-prepared in many ways; Semmer, for example, has only plastic bags tied around his feet to stop the water from getting beyond his shoes. Gorgoroth’s “Sign of an Open Eye” provides a suitable soundtrack: “There is a god in man, and in nature.”

As the crew treks with Gaahl through the shrubbery, experiencing difficulty recognising the pathways that Gaahl had taken before his incarceration, his previous conversation continues as a voice-over. He explains that he has “no interest in getting a flock of sheep that’s just following me . . . then I would be just as bad as society is, so fear is necessary to separate the ones that’s [sic] willing to be led or the one who choose to lead himself.” It can be said that, by using fear to create distance between himself and others, Gaahl exposes his vulnerability. Still, seeing Gaahl ahead of the group, with their exhaustion becoming increasingly apparent, provides a more convincing visual cue. The shots of the white wilderness would be completely at home on any Black Metal album cover. The crew carve a track through the thick snow where, high up in the mountains, the air is thin. As we watch Semmer, he seems to be suffering the most and is losing his patience. Struggling to breathe, he stops walking and starts to panic. Semmer’s reflection upon this experience is telling of what many perhaps expect of Black Metal and how an interesting cognitive space opens up when a figurehead of the genre challenges these expectations, just by walking, and how we might have formerly thought of the activity:

And at this point I just, fucking, went into a panic, and I was just like, you know, this is fucking stupid. I don’t know . . . you won’t even really tell us where you’re bringing us, or why you’re bringing us, or what this is about. . . . At a point I was just like, I don’t care what the fuck is at the top of the mountain, you know what I mean? . . . It makes no difference to me. We’re gonna [sic] jeopardise this whole entire project for some stupid fucking nature walk. This is about heavy metal, you know? This is about a band. This isn’t Field and Stream magazine.

Gaahl has led the film crew into the middle of nowhere—an arctic tundra—where even the film camera is threatening to fail. We are told that they have arrived at a home built long ago by Gaahl’s grandparents, who had had no choice but to carry each piece of building material with them from the valley, past the tree line, to the mountain’s top. To the unsuspecting, this insight is enough to evoke a mental image of Sisyphus—a king from Greek myth who was condemned by the Gods “to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight.” However, such an image
comes under false pretences, for Gaahl has since made clear that this was not the home of his grandparents after all, but rather a hunting cabin.\textsuperscript{21} While the story makes for a powerful dialogue with time, this dialogue is misinformed. Nevertheless, even as the illusion disappears, Sisyphus remains. For, whatever the destination, whatever its meaning, the ardour of the journey exists and that is meaningful enough. As Camus says, “[t]he struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.”\textsuperscript{22} The journey is filled with itself, not relying on life-transcending mythology for accessing a greater, more unique or authentic, sphere of meaning.

Gaahl’s voice returns: “The superman, and the ideal, will always conquer, or always rise above no matter what. But you cannot put down your sword, because then, then you lose.”\textsuperscript{23} Again, the shared experience known as walking is cloaked in individualism. The journey is empowered with a grand rhetoric of transcendence—more than simply a sense of achievement, or satisfactory exhaustion that might follow one’s small-stepping triumph over a challenging natural world. I am reminded of the oil painting Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer (The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog) (1818), by the German artist Caspar David Friedrich, where the solitary walker, having finally reached the summit of the tall mountain, peers out into the mist-filled distance of his homeland, engaged in a form of Kantian self-reflection in which the human condition is the object of deep contemplation.\textsuperscript{24} The “physical” gives way to the “mythical,” but remains a vital anchor.

Friedrich’s painting has been used in the romantic depiction of Friedrich Nietzsche. Engaging with the outdoors, for Nietzsche, was a celebration of the gift of life. He would have liked to tend more often to his garden, if it hadn’t been for his constant stomach problems often confining him to his home. Nevertheless, when the weather and his health permitted, it was Nietzsche the walker who worked in an aphoristic writing style, preferring to jot down short bursts of thought. Perhaps his revelations about the übermensch (the superman) occurred to him as his legs moved, as his blood increased the speed of its circulation, and as his brain released enough endorphins to increase his alertness, further fueling his train of thought: “Only those thoughts that come by walking have any value.”\textsuperscript{25}

Nietzsche was not alone in praising the practice of walking. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (382-322 BCE) made a habit of walking while giving lectures, and his disciples are known collectively as the Peripatetic School (from “peripatetic,” meaning itinerant, traveling, wandering, nomadic, migrant). The Peripatetic School provides a precedent for Nietzsche as well as for Heidegger, whose solitary treks through Schwarzwald (the Black Forest, southeast Germany) were similar to Nietzsche’s in the way that walking took place for thinking. Gaahl takes part in a philosophical and physical legacy dating back 2,000
years—well before Christianity established itself in Viking Norway, approximately one millennium ago.

In Gaahl’s case, as the journey progresses, the benefit of a clearly visible pathway diminishes. It is a trail under erasure by the falling snow (echoing the transformation of forest paths during Gaahl’s incarceration). The passage of time ensures some degree of corrosion—comparable to the way that centuries of human traffic have worn away the names of those entombed beneath the floor of Westminster Abbey in London (in particular, visitors can happen upon a nameless 9th-century slab worn smooth by countless passing footprints). On the Norwegian mountain, walking remains; the footprints made by walking identify the path in retrospect when it comes time to finding one’s own way back home.

This tension is present, I think, in the idiosyncratic and rather paradoxical proverb that Gaahl articulates elsewhere in the documentary: “I become what never fails, following the footsteps behind me.” The twist in the tail of this phrase disorientates, but in doing so it also manages to express a location, as if the spinning itself, though vertiginous, could not help but imply the proximity of an organising centre—one that offers, at least, a place on which to fall and rest. For what I think he means is that, especially when the passage of time has meant the erasure of a trail—like the German fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel,” in which Hansel leaves a trail of breadcrumbs so that he and Gretel may find their way back home—the ability to see where you have come from is part of caring for the self. It plays into the idea that knowing (even feeling) history enriches one’s experience of the present and the future. It marks a survival strategy, a sense of certainty, in the face of multiplicity. Such a dialogue with time is fed, only in part, by insecurity, an existential anxiety—of course, the trail left by Hansel was consumed by hungry birds. Gaahl, in presenting himself as being in communion with the natural landscape, works to pre-empt this kind of vulnerability. In fact, to the extent that the trek draws attention to the physical limitations of the film crew, Gaahl’s apparent resilience, by contrast, consolidates itself within the greater spectacle.

Using music as a catalyst for change is one thing, and sharing the drive behind it is another. There is a stark difference between “talking the talk” and “walking the walk.” At the top of the mountain, in the thin atmospheres of the vast and seemingly uninhabitable tundra, with far fewer words than steps, Gaahl is nevertheless in dialogue with time by way of the persistence of nature. As Anthony Giddens (drawing from Janette Rainwater) writes, such a state of dialogue pertains to the autobiography as

a corrective intervention into the past, not merely a chronicle of elapsed events

... Reconstruction of the past goes along with anticipation of the likely life
trajectory of the future . . . a process of self-questioning about how the individual handles the time of her lifespan . . . Holding a dialogue with time means identifying stressful events (actual events in the past and possible ones to be faced in the future) and coming to terms with their implications. 27

Gaahl’s creative output seems to be an expression of his autobiography, framed by the Norwegian landscape: “Nature is a great influence for what Norwegian Black Metal is; it is . . . and that’s probably the reason why it’s created in these areas.” 28 Of course “walking the talk” necessitates taking the listener/viewer/interviewer beyond the easily accessible facade of Black Metal’s theatricality, and into its day-to-day social behaviour. It is here that we encounter the past of an other, unknown, almost anachronistic—but, all the same, intrinsic—emotional and intellectual process.

At the end of the True Norwegian Black Metal documentary, one of the interviewers asks a question concerning whether Gaahl felt lonely, and what it was like to be a lone wolf. Gaahl responds by accusing the interviewer of asking the wrong questions, of “not focussing on what’s being told.” He then commences a blank stare that lasts over two-and-a-half minutes. At first this response seemed rather dissociative to me, and I began to wonder where Gaahl’s mind had wandered. Was it back into the forest, where the river flows between the trees? Was Gaahl somehow drawing strength, or sanctuary, from the essential solitude of which Rolston spoke—that separateness—as a way of indulging his complementarity, and simultaneously oppositional, relationship to human community? Was he exploring the kind of distance that is essential for the individualisation of personal worth? Having watched these silent minutes over and over again, I believe that Gaahl remains fully cognisant. Occasional signs of recognition in his eyes suggest that he’s making the most out of a captive audience, keeping full attention upon himself. There is a sense of distance here too, but this seems to have less to do with seeking emancipation from others than in manipulating them, wherein proximity is vital.

It seems that Gaahl’s invitation to take us for a walk into nature was always going to be the kind of reflexive walk that would inevitably led back to Gaahl and his relationship to the world. He points us in the direction of ideas and places that are beyond walking but, all the same, walking provides something of a carrier, a visual vehicle, for our exploration of these things. 29 It provides us with a material reference point by which to explore a space of Black Metal thinking.

EN ÅS I DYPE SKOGEN (A HILL IN DEEP FOREST)20

There is reason to suggest that what we are being shown, though manifest as the act of walking, is the telos of self-authenticity, where the goal affords orientation to a single
individual amid multiple and potentially conflicting alternative positions. In the late modern era, the challenge of multiplicity is often experienced visually: optic nerves are overstimulated with different versions of similar prompts to buy more, consume more, and to believe that this will lead to happiness. The push to measure self-worth through consumer goods comes at a cost—something that is evident in Until the Light Takes Us. In this documentary, the subject of modern consumer society is one of which Varg Vikernes says:

It’s very hard to recognize the truth when you are bombarded by lies all the time, every minute of the day. You have to go to sleep, and even in the sleep, because you dream of the impressions you have during the day. You know, you’re bombarded by commercials and completely senseless information every single day. If you turn on the TV, you’re bombarded; if you turn your head in some direction you see some sign, some commercial, read magazines, newspapers, senseless information. The news are themselves products being sold. Everything is meaningless. . . . The truth is of course to be found, but in a sea of lies it’s just impossible to find it unless you know how to look, where to look, and when to look, and, of course, it’s not possible to just get up in the morning and say “Okay. I’m going to find the truth this day,” and go find it. You have to try and fail, and eventually you will weed out all the lies and you end up with something at least similar to the truth. 31

Vikernes’s point here denotes a quest for personal meaning, and it is conceptually tied to Baudrillard’s notion of hyper-reality—a cultural condition driven by mass reproduction where the proliferation of advertising imagery seems to have been emptied of all its meaning (de-symbolised, like when a single word is repeated over and over again). For someone who is overwhelmed by the relentless circulation of commercials and their complicit ideas, the search for meaning can become increasingly urgent. As Giddens points out,

[p]ersonal meaningless—the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer—becomes a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity. We should understand this phenomenon in terms of a repression of moral questions which day-to-day life poses, but which are denied answers. 32

The dialogue with time is not simply about nostalgia for what has gone, but a blatant awareness that time is now running out, and a subsequent urgency to achieve some sense of resolution. As time marches on, the need, the responsibility, to make life meaningful is a matter of ongoing revision and renewal. It is a reflexive project that, via a critical
engagement with society’s norms and expectations, “generates programmes of actualisation and mastery . . . [but] they lack moral meaning. ‘Authenticity’ becomes both a pre-eminent value and a framework for self-actualisation, but represents a morally stunted process.”33 It is interesting then, in Vikernes’s subsequent words, that he uses a walking metaphor as a means to structure a self-affirming thought:

The truth is hidden on the grass, under some rocks, in a hidden trail, a forgotten trail in the forest and when you try to find the trail you will stumble. You will get some branches in your face. You’ll make mistakes before you finally find it. 34

Here, once again, walking is invested with the import of a critical cultural practice.

In Vikernes’s terms, this practice seems to use the notion of walking as a means to forging a pathway through self-awareness. He views truth as having been hidden from sight, behind or beyond the clutter of modern life, presumably by the socialising agencies of Norway’s long-established Christian culture. Given that figurative language in general is a function of abstract thinking in everyday use, this choice of metaphor is interesting in the context of Vikernes’s incarceration in a maximum security prison in Trondheim, Norway. During this time, his incarceration imposed a clear and immediate restriction to his ability to walk very far at all. With steel bars and surveillance cameras demarking Vikernes’s physical space, his cognitive space was exercised; he had the chance to read books that he
would not otherwise have had the time to digest. Is the truth of which he speaks protected by or hidden within this historical undergrowth? Whatever the answer may be, Vikernes’s “imagined walking”—his anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois thinking—works to clear a space in which he might find himself.

In *Until the Light Takes Us*, the act of walking also carries the theme of self-authenticity as it pertains to Gylve “Fenriz” Nagell. Very early on in this documentary, we see the back of Fenriz as he walks through an Oslo street at night. The scenery is in stark contrast to that which framed Gaahl in *True Norwegian Black Metal* but, once again, the viewer is in tow—following a Black Metal leader through the built environment. During this scene, Fenriz speaks of his own musical path and his consequential loss of contact with Vikernes’s political path. The walking metaphor is already at work, focusing our cognisance of Black Metal history.

But, it is the footage of a black-clad Fenriz walking across snow and between trees (later seen in slow motion for special atmospheric effect) that gives the viewer a sense of identity and meaning that endures through time and space in the face of adversity. We don’t actually see this particular footage of Fenriz until we are past the twenty-one minute mark, by which time the documentary’s numerous interviews have established some headway into the early days of the Black Metal scene. By this point Olve “Abbat” Eikemo and Harald “Demonaz” Nævdal from Immortal, Jan Axel “Hellhammer” Blomberg from Mayhem, and Vikernes have all shared memories from the period when Dead committed suicide. Transporting us back to the present, our attention is now on Fenriz, who can be seen alone making his way through the snow. We watch him first moving across the fixed-frame from left to right, and then the shot shifts to another fixed-frame where he walks in the direction of the viewer, watching his own footsteps. This footage of Fenriz walking marks a transitional point in the documentary narrative, and creates a visual bridge between memories of Dead and Vikernes’s comments on the desire to destroy the Americanisation of his community. Of course, footage of walking, as a cinematic device, is not unique to Black Metal. Nevertheless, it is an important part of the construction and communication of a Black Metal historical narrative. For this reason, the representation of walking becomes intrinsic to how we consume that information.

Following these scenes of Fenriz’s solitary walking through the snow, we are back on foot as we follow him through the streets of Oslo at night. We follow him in and out of a shop before arriving with him at a make-shift secondhand goods market. Here, he recounts buying an old tapedeck, for 50 Norwegian krone, to use for recording riffs and rehearsals: “Fucking sweet!” We then see him standing in front of a white background, announcing: “I refuse to stand court-martialed for making this whole underground movement into a trend thing. If it’s anyone, it’s not us, but I guess most people would say that.” The tension
between walking, standing, and refusing to stand rounds off the first third of the documentary and focuses our path through the genre.

With the documentary’s aim to communicate the historical, ideological, and aesthetic contexts of the Norwegian Black Metal scene, it is barely surprising that the narrative includes glimpses of a militaristic march through the streets, comprising men and boys in uniform carrying rifles and Norwegian flags, followed shortly after by women wearing traditional dress, walking together, and carrying candles. Although unidentified, this is most likely footage of Syttende Mai (Norwegian Constitution Day, May 17). The annual event expresses national identity and Norwegian heritage, and in this context it reinforces the tension articulated by Vikernes, Fenriz, and Ulver’s Kristoffer “Garm” Rygg that exists between Norwegian and Christian cultures.

Walking en masse has long had political force. The mobilized community remains central to the visual presence of various movements as a way of giving voice to values, beliefs, and ideas. Human rights, women’s liberation, and gay rights are among many cultural issues that have motivated walking in many cities around the world. In protest marches, such as the March on Washington on August 28, 1963 (organised by the American Civil Rights Movement in opposition to racially motivated employment discrimination in the defense sector) or the anti-war rallies that took place in over 600 towns and cities around the world (from Baghdad to Chicago, across the weekend of February 15-16, 2003) walking has become a signifier for community—and, by virtues of this, personal—empowerment. Oxfam Australia’s Walk Against Want (a 40-year-old event that has raised over $10 million for long-term development work in 28 countries) aims to combat poverty and injustice. The National Walk for Values events (organised by the Sathya Sai Organization of Australia and Papua New Guinea) took place on Saturday, April 12, 2008 in Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide, and Perth) aimed not to raise funds, but as a gesture of commitment to Love, Peace, Truth, Right Conduct, and Non-violence. The Gay Pride parades that take place each year in cities around the world provide more examples of the power of walking as a communicative act. When made in view of a crowd, a tribute to Norwegian heritage can proceed as a festival—socialized. In contrast though, it would appear that Vikernes was more interested in creating a spectacle.

The Fantoft Stave Church arson, on June 6, 1992, was seen by many in the Black Metal community as a symbolic reclamation of pagan land that had been appropriated by Christian culture. It was intended, as Vikernes says of the crime for which he would soon after be charged, “to give people a shock—to make them open their eyes.”

Even in the context of Black Metal’s controversial history—overshadowed by violent, counter-cultural activities—walking persists in a way similar to how soldiers are said to be “marching off to war.” Original newsreel footage taken in the aftermath of the Fantoft Stave Church arson
re-used in *Until the Light Takes Us* includes a moment when a forensic detective crouches beside a gravestone, looking to be collecting a piece of evidence believed to have been left behind by the arsonist only a few hours before; it is a single shoeprint. For better or worse, the Fantoft fire was closely linked to the Black Metal community, and this connection is not contested here (I believe that its relationship to Satanism is clearly flawed, not its relationship to Black Metal). We do not witness the role of walking in this instance, but we do have the evidence.

In the final scenes of *Until the Light Takes Us*, directors Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell return us to the scene of Fenriz walking through the snow between the trees, only now this footage is in slow motion. By showing us the act of walking in slow motion, we are invited to consider it in greater depth, to pay closer attention to this commonplace and thus often overlooked practice. Defamiliarization “makes things ‘strange’ to make them truly visible.”37 By slowing this activity down, we have the opportunity to see beyond its banal familiarity; the increased difficulty this editing choice makes to our observation invites us to consider it in a different way. What we find is the way that the act of walking provides a loose refrain for the Black Metal narrative. We are not just looking at walking, of course—the many details, sounds, and other images included in both of the documentaries I’ve discussed all contribute to the overall representation—but what we have for Black Metal visual culture, in terms of walking in particular, is something like a path of concentration
around which that greater story is woven. It is a powerful cinematic device, for sure. While it is not exclusive to these films, this does not mean it’s any less vital in getting a message across.

ACROSS THE VACUUM\textsuperscript{38}

Given my attention to the philosophical and material interactions of thinking and walking, entailing readings of two documentary films, it is fitting to take into account Astra Taylor’s documentary film \textit{Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers} when formulating some conclusive remarks.\textsuperscript{39} This documentary (also available as a book) comprises eight dialogues, in each of which one of eight philosophers brings philosophical ideas to the streets of everyday life. The last dialogue, a conversation between Judith Butler and her friend Sunaura Taylor, takes place during a stroll through San Francisco’s Mission District. Here, Butler asks what happens when a person walks in the world—the role that its capacities might play in how we feel in, and respond to, our environment. What it means for an able-bodied person will differ from what it means for Taylor, a woman born with arthrogryposis, who cannot walk but continues, as do her friends, she says, to use the word “walk” when communicating that she is about to go and do this activity—hardly surprising given that the word ”walk” comes from the Old English word \textit{wealcan} (which means ”to roll”).\textsuperscript{40}

I was also struck by the resonance between the conservation between Butler and Taylor, and Ingold’s aforementioned distinction between the navigator and the wayfarer. Taylor credits an increase in the public presence of disabled people to the public sphere’s increased accessibility: “people have learned how to interact with them [disabled people] and are used to them in a certain way and, so, the physical access actually leads to a social access and acceptance.” Butler responds, “It must be nice not to always have to be the pioneer; the very first one . . . having to explain: ‘Yes I do,’ you know, speak and think and talk and move . . .”\textsuperscript{41} She implies the relief of the navigator who, with access to established pathways, is saved from the physical and emotional hardships required of the wayfarer.

If walking entails posture, self-expression, and choice—all potentially as part of a stance—what might walking mean in the context of physical disability? After all, both Gaahl and Fenriz are clearly able-bodied. To see black-clad male figures maneuvering a wheelchair through the snow would say something very different; I imagine it would be a task of incredible difficulty, and perhaps bring them far closer to Sisyphus. Butler says that

nobody takes a walk without there being a technique of walking. Nobody goes for a walk without there being something that supports that walk—outside of
ourselves. . . . and that maybe we have a false idea that the able-bodied person is somehow radically self-sufficient.42

For Taylor, the myth of self-sufficiency is evident when, because of her physical impairment, something so taken for granted in the modern world as walking into a coffee shop and buying a coffee becomes a platform for demonstrating personal ability and choice. Taylor says, “In a way it’s a political protest for me to go in and order a coffee and demand help simply because, in my opinion, help is something that we all need.”43 By extension, Taylor’s assertiveness is important as she enters the shop as a representative of disabled bodies and of how they are publicly perceived. There is a stark contrast between Taylor’s mode of entering into capitalism as a disabled person demanding assistance and that of Gaahl and Fenriz (who, at least on the surface, both ‘have’ able bodies), who use their walking bodies as social resistance (my thoughts trace also, further back, to Peter Beste’s photograph of Einar “Kvitrafn” Selvik in Bergen).

“What Can a Body Do?” Butler asks, flagging Gilles Deleuze’s essay that, by the very nature of this question, goes beyond the traditional approaches to the body that include the Cartesian mind/body split, questions of the ideal form, and so on. In Butler’s view, the question of what a body can do serves to isolate “a set of capacities, a set of instrumentalities or actions, and we are, kind of, assemblages of those things,” and moves us away from ideas about essences, or “shoulds,” to those of the body. To demonstrate how walking stands as a signifier of other possibilities Butler recounts a male, of around 18 years, in Maine who walked “with a very distinct swish [of his hips]—a very feminine walk.” On his way to school one day he was attacked by three of his classmates and thrown over a bridge, which killed him. She is right to ask how a person’s gait could engender the drive in others to commit murder. “A walk can be a dangerous thing,” she says, if this is what a body can do.

Not only does Butler’s challenge to “essences” of the body unsettle any claim to its viability as a signifier for authenticity, her conversation with Taylor nurtures a greater sense of how privileged Gaahl’s and Fenriz’s solitary walks indeed are. With this we both arrive and return. We return to the original question of what might be meant by the term “blackened walking,” but do so having arrived at the summit of Ingold’s metaphorical hill, for while walking and thinking are still intimately entwined, walking now comes to mind as something quite peculiar—other than itself. At a distance, we can consider how the filmic representations of Gaahl and Fenriz, as key Black Metal productions, somehow contribute to the myth of the able body as a pre-requisite to life-political power, positing walking as the predominant catalyst for existential reward. If a concept of walking benefits from extending beyond a normalised body, so too must the meaningfulness of blackened
ambulation take physical difference into account (in a way that might further problematise the visible that “irritates onlookers,” in Chow’s terms).

In this case, “blackened walking” is seen to be less about the activity of walking itself and more about the circumstances under which one can move through space—walking not just for the sake of exercise, pleasure, or getting to the shops on time. With the modern world (invested in trains, planes, and automobiles), the slow, simplicity of a walk (Walking? How pedestrian!) seems to have lost some of its value. However, walking is capable of bringing one’s focus back to a fundamental question of what a body physically needs to do in order to transition through, and therefore go on, in the world. Perhaps mourning the forgetting of the existential significance of walking, “blackened walking” pays respects to walking as the chance to explore self-determination and a readiness for the unknown.

NOTES

All video stills throughout essay are screenshots from Until the Light Takes Us, dirs. Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell, DVD (New York City: Variance Films, 2009). Images courtesy of Audrey Ewell ©2008–2009.

1 Anne Friedberg, Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 68.
2 Anne Friedberg, Window Shopping, 110.
3 True Norwegian Black Metal, prods. Peter Beste, Rob Semmer, Ivar Berglin, and Mike Washlesky, DVD (New York: VBS TV, 2007); Until the Light Takes Us, dirs. Aaron Aites and Audrey Ewell, DVD (New York City: Variance Films, 2009).
4 Viktor Shklovsky coined the term “defamiliarisation” [ostranenie] in his essay “Art as Device” (1917), using it as a literary device to distinguish between poetic and practical speech. In addressing the function of art, Shklovsky explained how defamiliarisation works against the “over-automatization” that fosters formulaic cultural activity. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in Literary Theory: An Anthology, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1998), 16.
6 Tim Ingold, Lines: A Brief History (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1. Subsequent references to this text are made parenthetically, by page number.
8 Darkthrone, Under a Funeral Moon, CD (Peaceville Records; Music for Nations, 1993).
10 Gorgoroth, Twilight of the Idols (In Conspiracy with Satan), CD (Nuclear Blast, 2003).
14. True Norwegian Black Metal.
15. True Norwegian Black Metal.
16. True Norwegian Black Metal.
17. True Norwegian Black Metal.
19. True Norwegian Black Metal.
23. True Norwegian Black Metal.
26. True Norwegian Black Metal.
29. The cover artwork of Trelldom’s Til Minne . . . (2007), which features a photograph showing the band members walking up a snowy hill, also utilises this representational convention.
31. Until the Light Takes Us.
34. Until the Light Takes Us.
35. Until the Light Takes Us.
36. Until the Light Takes Us.
41. Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers.
42. Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers.
43. Examined Life: Excursions with Contemporary Thinkers.