

# “Like a Half-Crushed Worm” Affliction, Negative Capability, and Apophatic Aesthetics in the Work of Nuclear Death

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Article abstract

*This paper turns to Arizona-based band Nuclear Death (1985-2000) as a case of apophatic aesthetics in extreme metal. Amador Vega’s “apophatic aesthetics” offers a framework for theorizing formlessness as preamble to form’s emergence. Emergent forms of “love” and “justice” in Nuclear Death’s work are discussed in reference to Michele Toscan’s biographical sketch of the band. Invoking the concepts of affliction and negative capability, and their respective elaboration by philosopher-mystic Simone Weil and psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, I argue Nuclear Death do not praise or curse God, but dwell in God’s absence, suffering a state of affliction that leaves the listener “struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm.” Bion’s negative capability and Weil’s emphasis on self-annihilation are cast as ascending and descending views of desire, and together accent different aspects of Nuclear Death’s first two albums, *Bride of Insect* (1990) and *Carrion for Worm* (1991). Lastly, I suggest that Nuclear Death invite a tragicomic response to the absurdity of affliction, which contrasts with the solemnity found in Weil’s and Bion’s works.*

## « Like a Half-Crushed Worm »

### Affliction, Negative Capability, and Apophatic Aesthetics in the Work of Nuclear Death

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Formed in 1985 by guitarist and classically trained singer, Laura («Lori») Bravo, Nuclear Death are one of the more disturbing and titillating creations of twentieth century music. Combining Bravo's inimitably brutal vocals, experimental deathgrind<sup>1</sup> songs, and often colorful abstract paintings; Phil Hampson's hauntingly bizarre lyrics, idiosyncratic guitar style, and misanthropically perverse drawings; and Joel Whitfield's — and later, Steve Cowan's — almost fusion-esque, incredibly fast drumming, Nuclear Death's sound and overall aesthetic remains distinctive for its surrealistic extremity, setting them apart from most if not all of their contemporaries. Spawned from the Arizona desert, a barren and empty place that mirrors the godless, atomized landscape of their lyrical and visual imaginary, Nuclear Death do not reject religious themes in their work, nor do they embrace them wholeheartedly. Indeed, Nuclear Death would diverge from many of the strictures established by their contemporaries insofar as the world they painted is not one of praising Satan or cursing God, but one in which God is absent and the human is undifferentiated from detritus, animals, and insects in a transgressive and unsettlingly childlike dystopia.

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1. Deathgrind is a combination of death metal and grindcore.

Rather than ordered (deific) or disordered (deicidal), Nuclear Death's world is awash in orderlessness (godless), which makes them particularly relevant to apophatic thought. This lack rather than inversion of order is evident in the detached, cinematic, and virtually affectless first-person narration in Nuclear Death's lyrics, the majority of which are Hampson's, who comments: « Since I can remember, I have always had constant visions or images going on in my mind — always weird, always strange — like short films that are set to eerie films » (Hampson 2016). Hampson's description gestures to the cinematic quality of dissociative fantasy, or a kind of daydreaming in which *associative links* between self and world, self and object, object and affect, thought and action, are fissured, and mentation becomes a series of « shorts ». In this *mise-en-scene*, there cannot be any God or self that is active, any agent to perform a curse or consecration; « constant visions » or events *just happen* without a self or authorial presence to sequentially register the happening. Subsumed by lyrical, musical, and visual chaos, there are only passive, detached subjects, who like the listener<sup>2</sup> are tasked with waiting in an atemporal and indescribable abjection, cinematically suspended in what Simone Weil writes of as *malheur*, or affliction.

In the interest of linking Nuclear Death's dissociative aesthetic with apophatic thought, I turn to the concepts of affliction and negative capability, and their respective elaboration in the works of philosopher-mystic Simone Weil and psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion. Affliction and negative capability signal a passivity and detachment which also undergirds Nuclear Death's work, and Nuclear Death introduce an always bizarre, sometimes mournful, and sometimes comic element to the solemnity of Bion's and Weil's ideas. At times, Weil and Bion uncannily resonate with each other, as they are committed to a series of shared discursive traditions, not least of which is Plato's theory of forms, which holds that it is only in absence, and in the falling away of phenomena, that Form is revealed. Bion's ideas are also indebted to poet John Keats, who first defined negative capability as that which enables one to be in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after the fact and reason » (Keats in Bion, Attention 1983, 125). If one can weather the mystery of not knowing, claims Bion, « out of the darkness and formlessness something evolves » (Bion 1967, 1). Nuclear Death is afflicted with such darkness and formlessness, and it is

2. Listener is used as a catch-all term for the recipient of Nuclear Death's work in both its aural and visual dimensions.

negative capability that allows the « exquisite anguish » (Weil 1986, 72) of their performance to be borne in the listener. Without such « tolerance for frustration » (Bion 1962, 307), Nuclear Death's aural, lyrical, and visual affliction remains virtually unthinkable, resisting any analytic consideration. Even if it becomes « listenable » or « thinkable », however, its form remains slippery, easily falling away in an absurd and comical Bataillean twist<sup>3</sup>.

When an interviewer asks « what's so attractive about sickness », Hampson responds, « it's so fascinating... He He He!! » If there is solemnity to sickness, which there is for Weil and Bion, it slips away in Hampson's laugh — « He He He » — albeit incompletely. Amador Vega's concept of apophatic aesthetics (Vega 2009) offers a useful framework for understanding such slippery forms. For Vega, since the advent of animism in the West, aesthetic experience has been caught in a bind of transcendence and immanence, wherein the viewer hopes to discover the sacred hidden in the profane or vice versa. Primacy has been given to representations of the divine, be they tragic or comic, anthropocentric or otherwise, rather than the « hermeneutics of mystery » provoked by the aesthetic encounter. This encounter is ascetic, meaning that it involves *askesis*, contemplation, or the negative capability and waiting that Bion and Weil describe. Vega is keen to note that such *askesis* « does not negate the necessarily perceptive nature of sensitivity; rather, it develops an entire sensuality that arises from the self-containment of the aesthetic moment, with the sole attention giving greater sensitivity to what emerges or appears » (Vega 2009, 9; my translation). Such an approach reorients the listener to emergent forms rather than forms already there, forms that are neither present nor absent, but that are emergent in an always unfolding, numinous aesthetic moment of « constant visions », to use Hampson's locution.

On the surface, Nuclear Death might seem to be nothing more than the typical death metal fare, exploiting well-tread themes of debasement and transgression, and issuing a horrifying soundtrack to an excessively perverse psychological thriller. In the following discussion, however, the generic tropes of death and black metal fall away as less typical forms of

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3. In Bataille's work, horror and laughter, the tragic and the comic, are equally likely responses to one's encounter with *informe* or formlessness, the latter also corresponding to Bataille's theory of abjection. On laughter, see 1986 issue of *October* devoted to Bataille.

«love» and «justice» emerge. Contrary to colloquial understandings of «love» and «justice», however, these forms take on decisively absurd and sometimes comical significance in *Nuclear Death*, which only underscores the challenge such forms pose to the novice listener — a listener for whom the music and lyrics are, by many accounts, unlistenable. In this sense, *Nuclear Death* performs what Weil refers to as the «inaudible cry» of affliction. Turning to one of their biographers, Michele «Mick» Toscan, and to lyrics and artwork from their first two records, *Bride of Insect* and *Carrion for Worm*, I hear the inaudible cry in *Nuclear Death* through an apophatic-aesthetic encounter which, in Weil's words, «leaves one struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm» (Weil 1973, 120).

### 1. Section I: Psychoanalytic Mysticism, or the Caregiver as God

The choice of psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic for exploring the mystical in *Nuclear Death* might strike the reader as odd. Tempering a psychoanalytic reading with the philosophy of Simone Weil might only seem to complicate matters. Apophatic aesthetics allows us to link across genres — metal, psychoanalysis, philosophy, religion — to the extent that they all engage «a hermeneutics of mystery». Such a hermeneutics carries with questions without answering them, refusing to separate the religious and the secular, while also refusing their sublation. Weil's religiosity and Bion's psychoanalytic secularism can thereby co-exist, albeit irreducibly, due to the shared discursive traditions in which both these thinkers are situated. Similarly, a nascent mysticism at the heart of *Nuclear Death* need not exclude the virulent atheism and blasphemy of their aesthetic. «I always referred to myself as a Catholic Satanist», comments Bravo, «it's an oxymoron. I'm totally spiritual but I've always been interested in things that are dark» (Bravo 2011). Thus, the methodological aim of this paper is not to uncover some redemptive justice in *Nuclear Death* through a paranoid or reparative reading (Sedgwick 2002)<sup>4</sup>, but to offer an *oxymoronic* or

4. «Paranoid» refers to a «hermeneutics of suspicion» wherein the truth always lay behind the object and it is the critic's task to paranoidly uncover it. Paranoid readings *subtract* or extract truth. «Reparative» refers to the *addition* of multiple perspectives in an interest of repairing a paranoid reading's partiality. It might be thought of as a «hermeneutics of wholeness». «Associative» refers to the method (negative capability) by which reparative links are (or are not) made. It might be thought of as a «hermeneutics of mystery» that underpins reparative (and paranoid) reading. The first two categories roughly follow Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive posi-

*associative reading* that *links* opposites, specifically in the sometimes comical absurdity that characterizes Nuclear Death's work<sup>5</sup>. Inspired by clinical technique for working with trauma (as well as Bataille's heterology), an associative reading links dissociated elements in a hitherto fragmented text or narrative, such that identities of victim and perpetrator, saint and sinner, sacred and profane commingle in a line of all-too-human experience. Like apophatic aesthetics, associative reading emphasizes the emergence or *finding* of dissociated objects (Winnicott 1953), rather than the pre-determined revelation of objects which are already associated and therefore more easily found.

While associative reading is a psychoanalytically-inspired methodology, it is not stereotypically Freudian. Freudian structural theory concentrates on defense and the lifting of repression, and Freud's theory of religion is a case in which such structural heuristics are applied. For Freud (1927), religion defends against the subject's basic helplessness in a world indifferent to human need. God's righteousness guarantees that such need will be met in the afterlife, which accounts for religion's tyrannizing grip on the psyche. Freud thereby posits religion as an omnipotent defense against the castrating, crushing reality of human frailty. Object relations psychoanalysts<sup>6</sup>, however, understand omnipotent phantasy as a developmental achievement that is part and parcel of creativity (Winnicott) and unconscious communication (Bion). In other words, whereas Freud had a more paranoid tendency to want to uncover religion's defensiveness by viewing it as a regression and denial of reality soldered to the pleasure principle, later psychoanalysts read religion more generously by underscor-

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tions, while the « associative » category is more inspired by Bion, who developed Klein's thought in pathbreaking ways.

5. Discussed below, one of Nuclear Death's biographers, Michele 'Mick' Toscan, illustrates this methodology — or rather, sensibility — of association. As Toscan's piece shows, association does not paranoidly or reparatively claim to know the truth of its object, but tarries with the object's unknowability and formlessness, practicing negative capability, in an effort to make links between the object's ephemeral attributes, and in turn potentiating its emergent forms.
6. Object relations is a school of psychoanalysis that focuses on an individual's relationship to both internal and external « objects ». Such « objects » are most commonly thought of as parental or familial imagoes as the counterpart to real external figures within a family, but might more broadly be construed as internal relationships to one's conscious and unconscious mentation, which would mean that affects, sense-perceptions, and environments of various kinds might also constitute object relations. Sometimes I use the word « objects » to refer to textual or aesthetic objects, but context of the sentence should signal my intended meaning.

ing its potential to facilitate psychic development. These later psychoanalysts postulate not only a need for the child-patient to project the fantasy of an all-powerful, deific other into the parent-analyst, but for the parent-analyst to receive this projection without returning it prematurely, as might Freud via an interpretation of the patient's omnipotent « defense ». Many patients do not enter psychotherapy or psychoanalysis with the conviction that God-like, protective parents do indeed exist, for so often this was not their lived experience. From a Winnicottian perspective, good enough parentage is tantamount to the illusion of a caring « God » or analyst. Pace Lacan, this is why Winnicottian « illusion » is not imaginary in a defensive manner, but is a developmental necessity if the Real as a void and radical separation from the Other is to be encounterable. With good enough parentage, in other words, the Real is not *only* disintegrating, or an abyss from which no one returns.

What Winnicott offers is a way of going from Real to everyday reality. According to Winnicottian logic, one cannot even theorize the Real, much less attempt to represent it, if one had not experienced good enough care of some kind. Simultaneously, good enough care cannot be provided without some acquaintance with the Real that this care is meant to forestall. Looming at the edges of care and (non)human kinship, this everydayness of the Real is part of what constitutes Nuclear Death's absurd, tragicomic quality. In the song, « The Corpse Tree », the biblical Tree of Life is transfigured into a « corpse » under which children without feet, some of them dead, languish until the tree and the children are all « consumed » by « darkness » (Nuclear Death, ACGE). The song eschatologically concludes with the narrator « wishing for the return of the corpse tree », the tree here figuring as Christ on a wooden cross. While waiting for Christ-the-corpse-tree's return, half-dead children consume and copulate with nonhuman animals, drinking their blood and their milk. Images of care and nourishment (milk) commingle with consumption and copulation. The detachment of the narration conveys a drab, bloated, and seemingly non-ecstatic absurdity to this excess. One can find an inverse resonance with Weilian excess in such narration. While Weil asserts that affliction defies linguistic representation, she often uses metonymy and metaphor to convey affliction to her readers. Weil likens the afflicted to a « half-crushed worm » (1973, 120) and a « bloody rag on the teeth of a cogwheel » (1986, 70). Affliction is a « sort of horror » (cite), a « mutilation or leprosy » (1986, 71), a « device for pulverizing the soul » (1986, 70). It is a condition that combines physical

suffering, psycho-spiritual torment, and social degradation, deforming the individual to become nonhuman (Irwin 2002, 96). Weil courted affliction unto the end, her desire for emptiness inexhaustible, her eventual death ruled a suicide by starvation. While Bion emphasizes an extinction of desire and the sensuous as a prerequisite for intuiting 'O' or the ineffable, Weil's desire remains excessively corporeal, rending body and soul, and reducing the self to an impersonality wholly obedient to the absence of divine order. Like Nuclear Death's corpse-tree children, the Weilian self is consumed by darkness in its exigent desire for God-as-nothingness, which is to say its desire for God as the uncreatable absence undergirding all creation. In a prayer quoted by Bok (2006), such exigence is made unnervingly clear:

That I may be unable to will any bodily movement, or even any attempt at movement, like a total paralytic [...] That I may be unable to make the slightest connection between my thoughts, like one of those total idiots who not only cannot count or read but has never even learned to speak [...] May all this be stripped away from me, devoured by God, transformed into Christ's substance, and given for food to afflicted men whose body and soul lack every kind of nourishment [...] Father [...] rend this body and soul from me [...] and let nothing remain of me, forever, except this rending itself, or else nothingness. (Bok 2006, 256)

Paralytics, idiots, a body rent and devoured: Weil's language summons the abjection so central to Nuclear Death's vision. Nothing remains but the rending in Hampson's lyrics, Bravo's delivery, and Nuclear Death's gut wrenching aural assault. The coherence of subject and object, human and animal, rhythm and meter, is undermined at every turn; dedifferentiation abounds, everything consumed by an insatiable void. Musically, guitars and drums do not follow any synchronic pattern; Bravo's shrieks mimic Hampson's atonal guitars; and Whitfield batters away in a barrage of percussion. Lyrically, vaginas have teeth and men have vaginas with fingers and tongues protruding from them; nuns have penises emerging out of slit throats; and all the while, children play with insects and dead animals in a radioactive garbage pile cast against the twilight of an ever blackening sun. Nuclear Death epitomizes the absurdity and repugnance of affliction, which makes thinking about their work difficult. This difficulty is one of affliction's most crippling effects. In Weil's words, « thought finds affliction as repugnant to think about as living flesh finds death repugnant » (Weil in Blanchot 1993, 120-121). Nuclear Death's repugnance challenges the listener to think, to wait, to bear the anguish of a



world in which «salvation is lost, death is god» (Nuclear Death, 2013b). Their world is one in which «your “god” will abandon you», a world «with only empty shadows on the ground, not one sign of life to be found» (Nuclear Death, 2016b). Weil might appear to be a strange choice of interlocutor given the aim of understanding Nuclear Death’s vehement atheism, but Weil’s Christianity, dubbed extreme (Irwin 2002) and exigent (Blanchot 1993), espouses an apophysis that readily lends itself to thinking *with* rather than *against* Nuclear Death’s acephalic orderlessness.

Not only is there a thematic resonance, but the glaring absence of *living* parent-child relations in Nuclear Death’s lyrics mirrors what could be thought of as the metapsychological underpinnings of affliction as a mystical-psychological state. Beginning with Freud, psychoanalysts have long identified God with maternal and paternal imagoes. Metaphorically, God’s perfect absence — the object of apophysis — is not far behind the absence of internal parents. The point in entertaining such metaphor is not to psychologize religious or mystical experience, for that would reduce Weil’s mysticism to a disavowal or sublimation of self-neglect. While such reductionism might *uncover* an «answer» to why one arrives at a state of affliction — e.g. Weil neglects herself because her parents neglected her — associating God with parental, internal objects might elucidate how affliction *unfolds* as a metapsychological process. The language of internal objects is taken from object relations theory and amongst object relations theorists, it is arguably in the work of one of Melanie Klein’s students, W.R. Bion, that the linking of mysticism and object relations is most prevalent.

Bion’s metapsychology is indebted to the mystical writings of St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart, and draws heavily from various philosophical sources. Like Weil, Bion investigates the function of absence in the formation of subjectivity, but as a psychoanalyst, Bion is interested in how absence spurs psychoanalytic process and psychological development more broadly. For Bion, early separations from parental objects foment annihilation anxieties which can lead to «nameless dread» (Bion 1987). This dread might be thought of as a deluge of affect that essentially fragments the infant’s developing mind, thus engendering something like Hampson’s cinematic, «constant visions», albeit with an unnamable terror underpinning those visions’ production. According to her «Spiritual Autobiography», Weil’s first experience of affliction, (a nameless dread of its own), only arrives after separating from her parents and entering a state of solitude in which she becomes vulnerable to a kind of spiritual dismem-

berment: «I had been taken by my parents to Portugal, and while there I left them to go alone to a little village. I was, as it were, in pieces, soul and body. That contact with affliction had killed my youth [...]» (Weil 1973, 66). This contact with affliction was Weil's first because, as she explains, it was total not partial.<sup>7</sup> Total affliction, in which absent parents are tantamount to God's absent presence, might also be seen as background to the world of Nuclear Death:

sitting in a circle  
 Beneath the corpse tree [...]  
 Our parents dried remains hanging above us [...] (Nuclear Death, 2016a)

## 2. Section II: Affliction, Negative Capability, and Desiring in the Void

A resounding detachment echoes throughout the narration of Nuclear Death's lyrics. The narrator sits and waits «beneath the corpse tree», stationed in the confounding presence of dead and decaying parents. Their affectless narration is like that of a child who just witnessed a horrifying scene. Such narration typifies the majority of their lyrics. Like dissociation, detachment perhaps highlights a human capacity to survive the unimaginable. For Weil, detachment is «the extinction of desire [...] or desire for the absolute good» (Weil 1999, 13). It is «to desire in the void [...] to detach our desire from all good things and to wait» (Weil 1999, 13)<sup>8</sup>. Detachment extinguishes desire, relegating it to the void; but this extinction serves a desire for «the absolute good». Due to the absolute's (or

7. Total affliction is beyond biology and individual psychology, and is instead situated in a relational context. As such, it relies on a form of intersubjectivity, which for the purposes of this paper will be understood, following Bataille, as communication that passes «from subject to subject through a sensible, emotional contact» (Bataille 1991, 242). The connection between Bataille and Weil has received much scholarly attention and it seems one area of intersection between the two thinkers orbits the question of mystical or impersonal intersubjectivity. Bataille's theory of communication and Weil's concept of affliction both obtain an ineffable quality that paradoxically rests on self-annihilation. Thus, intersubjectivity is herein understood as an affective communication between subjects without selves, which distinguishes it from more Hegelian notions of intersubjectivity which rely on a recognition of I-ness in the other.

8. I consider Weil's «desiring in the void» to be an iteration of «the impossible», which is a theme shared by Bataille, Lacan, and many other post-war French thinkers inspired by medieval mysticism. See Bruce Holsinger's *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory*. (add reference to end list)

God's) unknowability, «the absolute good» can only be desired as a negative or «desired in the void», which means it is a non-instrumental desire; it is not a desire for «good things» but for an absolutely good «no-thing». Crucially, Weil wonders how one can go on desiring in the void without denying its rending effects, but the Weilian subject is committed to risking such denial through an ethical imperative to «detach from all good things and to wait».

The «void» that Nuclear Death paints is a grey, desolate, God-forsaken landscape, where incest, bestiality, and zoophilia reign. Desire is never attached to any particular object, but polymorphously travels from one thing to the next. Nuclear Death are devoid of «good things», which is one reason it is so difficult to attend to their visual, lyrical, and aural imaginary. But such attention is precisely what is required of the listener: to desire in the void, or to desire form even when acceding to its impossibility:

Go beyond what is wrong  
 To an abomination  
 Or normal morality  
 To what the brain cannot perceive.  
 Go beneath the world to where there's movement in the dark [...]  
 (Nuclear Death 2013a)

Hampson invites the listener to attend to something abominable and imperceptible, something beyond «what is wrong» that is nevertheless confused with normal morality («or normal morality»). Such attention can only be excessive or dizzying, necessarily effacing the self that would persist in its desire for form or «movement in the dark». Weil writes, «attention alone — that attention which is so full that the “I” disappears — is what is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call “I” of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived» (Weil 1999, 118). And in Bion, the analyst must deprive himself of memory and desire, and instead «focus his attention on O, the unknown and unknowable» (Bion 1983, 27). In a Cartesian move, Bion treats attention as a form of faith in the face of radical doubt. Faith in attention is what allows Bion to wait patiently in a state of not knowing until form — or what he calls a «selected fact» (Bion 1962) — appears<sup>9</sup>. According to Blanchot's read-

9. «The selected fact is the name of an emotional experience, the emotional experience of a sense of discovery of coherence; its significance is therefore epistemological and the relationship of the selected facts must not be assumed to be logical» (Bion 1962,

ing, however, Weil rejects faith « with horror » (Blanchot 1993, 110). While Bion has faith in the ascension from not knowing, a faith that form will indeed reveal itself, Weil refuses any such consolation, descending further into an absence that undoes the self in a process she calls decreation<sup>10</sup>. Weil loves God so fervently that she is willing to become indifferent to his absence, bringing her much closer to the credo of an atheist than that of a faithful believer.

To develop his understanding of attention, Bion finds an analogue to Keats's negative capability by turning to one of Freud's (1916) letters to Wilhelm Fliess. Freud writes, « I have to blind myself artificially in order to focus all the light on one dark spot, renouncing cohesion, harmony, rhetoric and everything which you call symbolic [...] » Through artificial blinding (or negative capability) the analyst is thought to intuit the unconscious<sup>11</sup> of the patient, transforming O (the ineffable) to K (knowledge), formlessness to form, thereby symbolizing the patient's hitherto ineffable experience<sup>12</sup>. Bion refers to this artificial blinding as a « piercing shaft of darkness » (Bion 1970) that illuminates the darkest spots of the patient's unconscious. In « Bride of Insect », Nuclear Death invokes an artificial blinding/negative capability of their own, inviting to listener to encounter « what the brain cannot perceive ». This ultimately results in the confusion of insects with incest, humans with animals, and a young daughter/young mother of insects with an insect-father's bride.

Go into a room that is dark  
 To an abomination  
 That's lying in a shadowed corner

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72-73). Bion warns that it can be catastrophic for the patient to become aware of the selected fact.

10. Decreation is a concept that is implicit in much of this paper even though it is not discussed as such. It refers to a « deifugal force » through which humanity separates itself from God as an « imaginary divinity ». Decreation therefore follows from an absence that is revealed as God's « imaginary divinity » is stripped away (Weil 1999).
11. The unconscious in Bion is different from that of Freud. Freud's is a repressed unconscious, while Bion's unconscious is unrepressed or dissociated. Repression relies on the censorship of an idea and/or affect unacceptable to conscious, but in Bion's model the idea and/or affect has not yet been formed — it is an unsymbolized fragment, a fragment that remains unthinkable and therefore unrepressable. Form emerging from formlessness is therefore a matter of articulating ideas suitable for repression, which accords with Bion's ascending or negative view of desire.
12. Technically, this would be proto-experience, as symbolization necessarily precedes any conception of the experiencing subject (Bion 1962).

A young child has just given birth.  
 And from her vagina: a vicious trail  
 Which leads to movement in the black beneath her bed  
 And that's where you find her sac  
 And from her sac her flat-bodied children crawl [...]  
 The father caresses his daughter's vagina  
 He finds movement between her lips —  
 His bastard children of his bride of insect  
 And the insects taste their father's flesh [...] (Nuclear Death 2013a)

Such lyrics easily lead to recoil, thwarting attention and impairing associative links. Their absurdity, however, also betrays a comical side to which a less (or more) perturbed response might be laughter. Incest draws attention to the «abomination» in the narrative, signifying a traumatic field in which violence is dissociated from a yearning for justice that appears quietly, if not inaudibly, in the final verse of the song: the «vicious trail» of insect children «taste their father's flesh,» which the listener is more likely to view as a continuation of a perverse scenario, rather than a sign of retribution exacted against the father for his incestuous crime. To hear such justice is not so much to uncover it, thereby condemning what might be seen as Hampson's glorification of sexual abuse, but to associate justice with crime after it had been sundered in Hampson's representation of a world bereft of law.

Initially, the viewer of Hampson's artwork will be drawn to figures in the foreground, as they are grotesque, deranged, and violently mutated, defying taxonomic classification. Nuclear Death's first LP, *Bride of Insect*, is a tale of transspecies incest in which the good father is absent and an incestuous insect-father stands in as his daughter's groom. The daughter gives birth to «flat bodied» infants who are depicted on the album cover as children with distended bellies, a physiological sign of malnourishment and often of proximity to death. A spider with a skull-face frames the picture as a perverse nativity scene is set within the spider's web (Toscan 2013); «Mary» is holding an infant zombie-child and it is unclear if she is eating, cleaning, or penetrating it with her tongue. Despite (or because of) such horror and confusion, there are children at play in an aimless, morbid fashion: one sits in a swing, looking morose, while the other two stare vacantly with hollow eyes, one wielding a knife and the other extracting his own intestines. What makes the artwork ever more discomfiting is its childlike quality and the way in which it performs the sequelae of traumatic shock; for it is as if an adult's nightmare were introjected by a child

who was then tasked with rendering the nightmare in a drawing. While this nightmarish foreground easily eclipses the colorless, two-dimensional grey background, it is the background's absence of color that reminds the viewer that such artwork emanates from a void where nothing seems to matter, where no *logos* is organizing Hampson's absurd creation.

Refusing to simply invert order — eg. inverting the cross — Nuclear Death wallow in orderlessness, such that order is not upended, but is absent. Oppositions inherent to the negotiations of difference are neutralized in orderlessness. Beyond good and evil, orderlessness therefore gives way to the banality of conflict as an enduring metapsychological and psychopolitical state<sup>13</sup>. While Nuclear Death do not explicitly espouse any political views, their orderlessness refracts a war-torn twentieth century, fascist misreadings of Nietzschean thought, and the Cold War threat of nuclear devastation, the Arizona desert they inhabit being ground zero for nuclear arsenals. To the extent that Nuclear Death's lyrical and visual imaginary is inextricable from the material place they inhabit, what appears to be a barren Arizona-desert is, then, a place with its own orderless, absurd ecology. Reading associatively requires immersion into this ecology's absent order. Bion uses the infant-mother relationship to demonstrate how the ability to weather absence depends on a « capacity for tolerance of frustration » (Bion 1962):

The model I propose is that of an infant whose expectation of a breast is mated with a realization of no-breast available for satisfaction. This mating is experienced as a no-breast, or « absent » breast inside. The next step depends on the infant's capacity for frustration: in particular it depends on whether the decision is to evade frustration or to modify it [...] If the capacity for toleration of frustration is sufficient the « no-breast » inside becomes a thought and an apparatus for « thinking » it develops. (Bion 1962, 112)<sup>14</sup>

The infant who meets with an absent or no-breast inside feels hunger, which Bion understands to be the physiological expression of what is essentially an emotional state of emptiness. This emptiness is the root of frustration in Bion's infant, much like the anguished distance from God is

13. This recalls Bataille's famous, especially Nietzschean declaration, « I myself am WAR » (Bataille 1985).

14. In Kleinian fashion, the breast is synonymous with the parental (part) object (and « object » refers to both an intrapsychic and external figure).

the basis for affliction in Weil's apophatic theology<sup>15</sup>. While Bion considers the extent to which endogenous factors affect an infant's capacity for frustration, he also understands the importance of a «well-balanced» caregiver if the infant is able to tolerate frustration and the anxiety of «annihilation.» The caregiver metabolizes the infant's intolerable affect, which in turn enables the infant to tolerate frustration. Metabolization might take the most mundane forms of infant-caregiver contact; the infant suffers pangs of hunger and the mother sings softly, thereby transforming the infant's pre-conceptual terror of being empty into the concept that emptiness is ephemeral in the presence of a soothing object. In an absurd twist, the mother's song constitutes a *feeding*, sating the child's hunger for containment of its annihilation anxiety and developing the infant's capacity to sate itself. Bion notes that for the infant the slightest need for food or warmth has the potential to swell into an annihilating «fear of dying» (Bion 1962, 116). Without language the infant can only project its need into the mother by crying or fussing, but «if the projection is not accepted by the mother» — that is, if the mother refuses to metaphorically «feed» the child, ignoring or screaming at them instead of «singing» — warns Bion, then the infant «reintrojects not a fear of dying made tolerable, but a nameless dread» (Bion 1962, 116).

Weil seems to go further than Bion on this point. While Bion suggests that one can avert nameless dread via the ascending process of metabolization (or «alpha-function») — essentially symbolizing the infant's terror in a song — Weil views such mortal terror as an inevitable and necessary affliction. According to Weil, «the only way to truth is through one's own annihilation; through dwelling a long time in a state of extreme and total humiliation» (Weil 1986, 69). Etymologically, Weil's choice of the term humiliation gestures to the earthliness of affliction and its residence in the body. Her visceral metaphor only reinforces the link between materiality and her own brand of mysticism. For Weil, affliction is not an anxiety that can be managed by the intervention of an understanding (m)other. In Blanchot's words, «the afflicted are ridiculous, inspiring distaste and

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15. Weil distinguishes between distance and separation, suggesting that the latter is an expression of «the Love that is God himself» (Weil 1973, 127). While separation is painful, it allows for God's perfect absence in states of extreme affliction. God's (perfectly present) absence is Love, as it traverses the abyss between the materiality of flesh and immateriality of the divine.

scorn. They are for others the horror they are for themselves » (Blanchot as quoted in Mazzoni 1996, 208)<sup>16</sup>.

### 3. Section III: Descending Desire and Toscan's Negative Capability

The afflicted Weilian subject dwells in a state of total humiliation, descending from selfhood to an impersonality that disrupts the Trinitarian concept of the person. For Weil, the person is made in the image of Christ, but this image obscures the absence and impersonality of God, which is where the Weilian subject directs her attention. Weil casts affliction's descent as a process of deepening one's relationship to an impersonal world through bearing the world's necessary impingements on a vulnerable body. The Weilian body might be thought of as base material (Bataille 1985), a body that cannot be ontologically recuperated by language, and can only be « said away » endlessly, as in the etymology of apophasis. In this way Weil's desire is taken to an atelic, inarticulate limit — « desiring in the void » — rather than « said away » as a necessary step in Bion's metabolic chain of transformation (« alpha-function »)<sup>17</sup>.

Materiality in Hampson's lyrics manifests in series of transgressions and a chaos of body parts and fluids, amounting to a mattering of bizarre subjects that bear no semblance to persons or to the morality Weil ascribes to the discourse of personhood. Nuclear Death's descent into amorphous mattering lyrically, visually, and sonically apparently militates against the ascent into meaning that Bion's metabolization would seem to promote. Weil cautions that the truth of affliction is silent and speechless, which means attempts to harness it through language often fail. Like Bion's distinction between the fear of dying and a nameless dread, Weil distinguishes « simple suffering » (1986, 70) and affliction, with the latter escaping symbolic representation. Such escape is due to an inability to hear the afflicted's « always inaudible » cry, a cry that does not assert human rights over and against suffering, but speaks from a « being where being is with-

16. Blanchot's words harken back to *fin-de-seicle* descriptions of hysterics as ridiculous, distasteful, uncontainable subjects *par excellence*. Blanchot's observation implicates gender as an important axis through which the difference between Bion and Weil's apophasis might be understood, but such considerations unfortunately exceed the scope of this paper. For elaboration on the relationships between hysteria, gender, and mysticism, see Mazzoni (1996).

17. To be sure, for Bion one must forego desire to meet the void. Desire encourages the imposition of form to formlessness, interfering with negative capability.



out end » (Blanchot 1993, 120). This is a cry that beseeches the other with the question, « why am I being hurt? » To hear such a cry, Weil notes, « is to annihilate oneself » in identification with the afflicted (1986, 71). But what constitutes a successful passage through such annihilation?

On this point, Weil writes, « if one does not seek to evade the exquisite anguish [...] then desire is gradually transformed into love; and one begins to acquire the faculty of pure and disinterested attention » (1986, 72). While close to Bion's tolerance for frustration, Weil's non-evasion of anguish entails a persistence of desire that Bion admonishes the analyst to avoid. Negative capability is understood by Bion as the abdication of memory and desire, but for Weil, « the soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself » (Weil 1973, 121). Love is like a prayer, an act of detachment and recitation, one not necessarily dissimilar from the narration in Nuclear Death's lyrics. Rather than an emotional state, however, love here refers to a direction, a meditative aim or desire that allows the subject to bear the anguish of affliction. This brings Weil close to *jouissance* and the Lacanian maxim « *ne pas céder sur son désir*<sup>18</sup> » (Badiou 2001), thus contrasting Bion's abdication of desire and Weil's exigency, the latter being a position from which the Weilian subject seeks no salvation.

In « Bride of Insect, » Nuclear Death invites the listener into an abominable darkness beyond « normal morality » and out of this, a form of justice emerges as the insects consume the incestuous father's flesh. Such justice is different from a morality based on the rights of the person. It is not that a child should not be harmed; « it is neither his person, nor the human personality in him, which is sacred, » writes Weil, « it is he. The whole of him » (Weil 1986, 50). Harm is inevitable in an afflicted world where the subject is no different from a « half-crushed worm, » but such harm is not necessarily committed out of malice toward the other, which is perhaps why Toscan (2013) notes the curious absence of anger and aggression in Nuclear Death's lyrics. Like a worm, the Weilian subject has no rights. Persons with particular identities can claim rights, but such declaration is based on a notion of personality, an « I-ness ». If the person is

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18. Badiou's translator renders this maxim as « do not give up on your desire ». Badiou associates the maxim with the « ethic of a truth »: « Do all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you » (Badiou 2001, 47). Badiou's perseverance in the interruption is potentially cognate to Weil's desiring in the void, just as Lacan's ethics shares similarities with Weil's.

what is sacred, Weil avers, then the other can be defiled with impunity; for in this case, it is simply the personality, the «I», that is protected, not the impersonal otherness Weil identifies with soul. However, if it is the soul that is sacred and not the personality, and if the sacred is therefore understood to be impersonal, then the other as a whole is rendered inviolate. Insofar as personality is the red herring and not the inaudible cry of a Weilian ethics, otherness might also be extended to the nonhuman *tout court*. Harm that befalls the other can then be understood as the impersonal workings of the world, an impersonality that includes the violence of nature, rather than a violence of self to other that divinizes the personality and elevates the so-often dubious morality of human rights.

Weil's justice stamps out personality, even with force. Hampson's lyrics twistedly perform Weilian justice insofar as the personality or identity of a mother, father, or child is nixed, and the impersonality of actors take center stage. When such impersonality leads to bestiality, incest, and self-degradations of all kinds, it is difficult to discern any justice, but that is precisely because Nuclear Death's justice resides in a refusal to accord personal designations (mother, father, child) the moral status that they are given in everyday life. Every personality is marred so as to become indistinct amongst a species of infinite and impersonal mutations, together comprising an orderless ecology. Reading Hampson's lyrics, one would be hard pressed to discern the love that is so central to the practice of Weil's mysticism. It is far easier to dismiss Nuclear Death's disturbed puerility than wait and wallow in «disturbed puerility» as an apophatic aesthetic. In his introduction to their 2013 discography, Michele «Mick» Toscan, founder of the zine and record label *Nuclear Abominations*, acknowledged the seeming impossibility of writing about Nuclear Death, stating, «the works of this band defy any description [...] words just escape me [...] I gave up so many times, thinking that only the music, the lyrics, the artwork combined could give justice to a band that set a new standard that nobody was ever able to follow» (Toscan 2013, 1). Thrust into a kind of negative capability, Toscan is speechless and unable to conceive of Nuclear Death due to the extremity of their corpus. As Toscan continues to write, however, his associations grow.

Weil links justice with truth, love and beauty, descriptors that seem grossly anathema to Nuclear Death's project, but Toscan's commentary suggests otherwise. Sensitive to the «inaudible cry» in Nuclear Death, Toscan observes, «the feverish writing flows in a totally unique way, the songs are candid tales of beauty as seen by a bizarre, deranged, loving mind.

You can perceive the morbid affection and purity of the hand writing of these tales of horror » (Toscan 2013, 1). Toscan is able to bear Nuclear Death's aural and visual cacophony until his eyes adjust, and « candid tales of beauty as seen by a bizarre, deranged, loving mind » emerge. Appreciating Nuclear Death's apophatic aesthetic, his associative reading links aesthetic and affective responses that are so easily dissociated by most listeners. In a recent reissue of their third record, Bravo states: « I have ONE word to sum up all that encapsulates the All Creatures Great and Eaten Album [...] LOVE! » (Bravo 2018). And in a 2013 interview, she comments: « Love is absolute! » These are aspects of Nuclear Death's work that are indeed quite inaudible; for what most hear or see is probably the « bizarre, » the « deranged, » and the « tales of horror, » but not « beauty » or « affection, » much less « love ». Toscan is therefore an exception.

## Conclusion

Toscan identifies a wasteland in Nuclear Death, likening it to the Arizona desert they came from, but as he waits patiently, oxymoronic forms sprout from this seeming desert of formlessness. Toscan perspicaciously underscores the narrative qualities in Nuclear Death's music, lyrics, and artwork which, according to Lori Bravo, were like an opportunity to « take horror film soundtracks and meld them with stories » (Bravo 2011). Recalling Hampson's « constant visions [...] set to eerie music, » Bravo's comment speaks to the impossibility of Nuclear Death's project: how does one narrate horror if horror impairs one's capacity for narration? How does one speak from a place of shock when there is no intervening other (Bion) or even any faith (Weil) to facilitate the narration? Nuclear Death implicitly question the solemnity of Bion and Weil by adding a comic element to the ineffable, albeit one that retains a melancholia even while engendering laughter, the « He He He ». Turning to the visual in Nuclear Death, Toscan highlights Hampson's flat, grey, bidimensional artwork, noting its lack of any realistic effect, but he perhaps underestimates Nuclear Death's tragicomic imbrication of the horrifying and the laughable, especially on *Carrion for Worm*. On the album's cover, a demoralized young man buries his face in one arm, while the other is outstretched, his hand fondling the innards of his dead, animal-looking sister who he molested. The sister serves as carrion to the album's protagonist, « Worm », a « repulsively small » insect-human-animal hybrid turned sideshow freak. Reviled by all who see him, Worm goes underground, burrowing himself in a cemetery,

only to arise « from a hole » on occasion. No one believes the young man that Worm exists, so when the sister's stomach is « mangled, » everyone thinks the young man is culpable.

No one believes me  
 They think after intercourse  
 With my little sister  
 I mangled her stomach  
 They're partly right  
 I did have sex with my little sister  
 But it was worm who ate his way  
 Out of her stomach...  
 [...] and now he's gone [...] (Nuclear Death, 2013c)

The young man's narrative is reported from a state of detachment wherein loss, terror and violence, not to mention pleasure, are dissociated from the crimes of incest and murder. Such narration gives the feel of a criminal-*cum*-saint who obeys the sanctified orderlessness of an afflicted world. The absurdity of the lyrics might prompt feelings of laughter and confusion, but the listener might also feel something like shame, disgust, and pleasure, affects that burrow underground much like Worm — until, that is, Worm eviscerates the boy's sister and, etymologically speaking, the boy in turn; for while evisceration refers to the removal of internal organs, it was historically used in a figurative sense to denote the revelation of one's deepest secrets. Only upon the sister's evisceration, then, is the brother's secretive crime revealed. Through a reversal, the boy/brother identifies with a common experience of incest victims: « no one believes me ». Justice is thereby done.

Some listeners might struggle with the confusion Nuclear Death inspire, as very few artists invite a comparable immersion into such a mind-bending world. Other listeners might revel in Nuclear Death's absurdity, with any horror they experience being neutralized by laughter. Associative reading links these seemingly disparate states. Nuclear Death « go beyond normal morality to an abomination, » which is also what is required in the mystic's engagement with affliction. Bion and Weil offer complementary yet divergent notions of how such an engagement might unfold. In the case of Nuclear Death, detachment and negative capability are two such notions. To hear the dissociated and inaudible dimensions of Nuclear Death's work entails tolerance for Weil's anguish and Bion's frustration. However, it might also entail a laughter which Bion's and Weil's solemnity fails to grasp. Without the capacity to endure such varied affects,

Nuclear Death remain little more than perverse, puerile, surrealistic noise. If one can have Toscan's patience, tarrying with Nuclear Death's shorn tapestry of music and imagery, forms of love and justice *may* come into view. But with the openness of apophatic aesthetics — an openness to Nuclear Death's ineffable horror — Hampson's laughter, his «He He He», is just as likely to emerge.

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## Résumé

Cet article porte sur le groupe Nuclear Death (1985-2000), basé en Arizona, en tant qu'exemple d'esthétique apophasique dans le métal extrême. L'« esthétique apophasique » d'Amador Vega offre un cadre pour théoriser l'absence de forme comme préambule à l'émergence de la forme. Les formes émergentes d'« amour » et de « justice » dans l'œuvre de Nuclear Death sont étudiées en référence à l'esquisse biographique du groupe de Michele Toscan. En convoquant les concepts d'affliction et de capacité négative, ainsi que leur conception chez la philosophe et mystique Simone Weil et le psychanalyste Wilfred Bion, j'avance que Nuclear Death ne loue ni ne mau-

dit Dieu, mais se situe plutôt dans l'absence de Dieu, souffrant d'un état d'affliction qui laisse l'auditeur « se débattre au sol comme un ver à demi écrasé ». La capacité négative de Bion et l'emphase de Weil sur l'auto-annihilation se rejoignent comme deux visions ascendantes et descendantes du désir, qui soulignent ensemble des aspects différents des deux premiers albums de Nuclear Death: *Bride of Insect* (1990) et *Carrion for Worm* (1991). Finalement, je suggère que Nuclear Death invite une réponse tragico-mique à l'absurdité de l'affliction, qui contraste avec la solennité que l'on trouve dans l'œuvre de Weil et de Bion.

### Abstract

*This paper turns to Arizona-based band Nuclear Death (1985-2000) as a case of apophatic aesthetics in extreme metal. Amador Vega's « apophatic aesthetics » offers a framework for theorizing formlessness as preamble to form's emergence. Emergent forms of « love » and « justice » in Nuclear Death's work are discussed in reference to Michele Toscan's biographical sketch of the band. Invoking the concepts of affliction and negative capability, and their respective elaboration by philosopher-mystic Simone Weil and psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, I argue Nuclear Death do not praise or curse God, but dwell in God's absence, suffering a state of affliction that leaves the listener « struggling on the ground like a half-crushed worm. » Bion's negative capability and Weil's emphasis on self-annihilation are cast as ascending and descending views of desire, and together accent different aspects of Nuclear Death's first two albums, *Bride of Insect* (1990) and *Carrion for Worm* (1991). Lastly, I suggest that Nuclear Death invite a tragicomic response to the absurdity of affliction, which contrasts with the solemnity found in Weil's and Bion's works.*