IF MAYHEM VOCALIST Pelle “Dead” Ohlin had been influential in life, then so was he in death, and many active participants have commented that his premature death provided a turning point for the Norwegian scene, which from then on moved toward even greater extremity. Black metal was now becoming a matter of life and death—or at least was being portrayed as such by Euronymous. Far from grieving, Euronymous appeared to be actively capitalizing on Dead’s death, something that disgusted Necrobutcher, the only member who traveled to Sweden for the funeral.

Infamously, Euronymous considered eating parts of Dead’s brain, but claimed that he changed his mind due to its condition. As he stated in *The Sepulchral Voice* zine, “I have never tried human flesh. We were going to try it when Dead died but he had been lying a little too long.” Instead he and Hellhammer fashioned fragments of Dead’s skull into necklaces, with further pieces sent to other friends and contacts of the band, including Morgan of Marduk and Christophe “Masmiseim” Mermod of Samael. More controversially, the pair developed the images of Dead’s body that had been taken by Euronymous, who openly planned to use these for Mayhem artwork.

“I must add that it was interesting to be able to study (half) a human brain and rigor mortis,” he explained in one letter. “The pictures will be used on the Mayhem album.”

“I think the way people took it was absolutely wrong,” recalls Metalion. “No one really had an idea what was going on, so it was hard for people to deal with this in a proper way. [There was] a lot of stupid stuff, like Euronymous and Hellhammer wearing those necklaces of his brain. I think that people put on a tough mask and really went with the black metal lifestyle.”
“It’s like the whole black metal scene was traumatized with Mayhem and Dead and all that,” considers Snorre Ruch, the pioneering founder of Stigma Diabolicum/Thorns who also became the second guitarist in Mayhem. “There were a lot of unfortunate things happening to a group of people who were already on the sideline. Øystein was a key figure in the scene [and] he handled it by sending skull fragments to his friends. I received a skull fragment with a letter saying, ‘Now Dead has gone home,’ writing it like it’s something positive, something to take advantage of and he was trying to sell the story to the tabloid press, it was really dragging him down I think.”

The disrespect Euronymous showed toward Dead proved to be the final straw for Necrobutcher, who cut all ties with the guitarist.
“First of all I grieved like hell ’cos I loved the guy, he was my brother, one of my best friends. But the reaction from Øystein was not treating him like a friend, but as a piece of shit. He wanted to portray him as a crap idiot motherfucker. Didn’t want to go to the funeral, wanted to exploit the photos, all shit like that, so we were very divided in that way. Dead wasn’t just a fucking idiot, he was a really good friend, a really good guy, a lot of people loved him, so it devastated a lot of people. Pelle’s brother called me recently for the first time—he had plucked up the courage to call me eighteen years later—and the whole family is still completely traumatized.”

Euronymous arguably did represent Dead in a particularly cynical and callous manner, treating his death as a sort of statement of intent against the rest of the metal scene, and one that appeared to fit in and promote Euronymous’ own ideals. He even told The Sepulchral Voice, “When Dead blew his brains off it was the greatest act of promotion he ever did for us… It’s always great when someone dies—it doesn’t matter who.”

“We have declared WAR,” he also told Orcustus zine. “Dead died because the trend people have destroyed everything from the old black metal/death metal scene, today ‘death’ metal is something normal, accepted and FUNNY (argh) and we HATE it. It used to be spikes, chains, leather and black clothes, and this was the only thing Dead lived for as he hated this world and everything which lives on it.”

“I’m not into this business for FUN, so of course I wasn’t scared,” he explained to Kill Yourself the following year, supposedly only a week before his own death. “It’s not every day you get the chance to see and touch the real corpse. And it’s important to learn one thing when you are dealing with the dark side: There is NOTHING which is too sick, evil or perverted… Dead wanted to make evil music for evil people, but the only people he saw were walking around in jogging suits, caps, baseball shoes, and being into peace and love. He hated them so much, and saw no longer any reason to waste his time on them.”

For his part, Necrobutcher explained to Euronymous that he didn’t wish to communicate with him as long as he was planning to use the photos of Dead’s corpse. In fact, these photos were never used on any official artwork, but did appear on the notorious live bootleg Dawn of the Black Hearts, released originally in limited-edition vinyl by Columbian label Warmaster Records—a label owned by the now-deceased Mauricio “Bull Metal” Montoya, drummer of Columbian death metallers Masacre and a contact of Euronymous’.

The fact that Necrobutcher was gone merely seems to have accelerated Euronymous’ process of reinvention. In seeking to redefine himself, he also began to lay down his philosophy and beliefs about what metal—and black metal—should be, a move that, thanks to his influence, allowed him to both redefine and relaunch the black metal movement and the so-called second wave. This was new: in the eighties Mayhem had not claimed the black metal tag, and nor had Euronymous, who actually described the band as “brutal, extreme death metal” in an interview with a South American contact.

“Black metal was something Venom came up with so we couldn’t steal that,” explains
Necrobutcher, “we just called our music ‘aggressive metal,’ ‘brutal metal,’ ‘total death music,’ words like that. The only band who could legitimately say they played black metal were Venom.”

“There was no black metal scene in 1991 when Darkthrone and Burzum revolted against the death metal trend and did something else instead,” Burzum’s Varg Vikernes explained to me in an interview for Metal Hammer in 2010. “Euronymous called it black metal, because he—unlike me—was a Venom fan and they had used that as an album title, and that name has been used ever since.”

“Soon as all the Mayhems and Burzums started coming out, I was like, ‘Yeah this is fucking great, another load of young mad kids,’” recalls Venom frontman Conrad “Cronos” Lant. “It was off-the-wall, dirty, nasty, out-of-tune, out-of-time, exactly where we were coming from. [But] I just kept thinking, ‘Why have these guys not come up with their own title for something they created themselves?’ I don’t believe they sound like Venom—they were influenced by Venom, but I was influenced by Bowie and Jethro Tull and I don’t sound like them—so I just thought those guys should take more credit for what they’ve done. It’s great to hear you’ve influenced someone’s career, especially if they’re doing well, but at the same time I thought they could have had a title like ‘Norse Metal’ or something, that would have given them the respect I think they deserved for creating their own style.

“I think those bands are very unique and amazing, heavy as fuck, [but] when some of the Norwegian bands called themselves black metal I thought, ‘Well, you’re not.’ Because for us it was sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll, Satanism, and it was death metal, power metal, thrash metal; all these qualities make black metal. What I don’t hear in any of these bands is songs like ‘Teacher’s Pet’ or ‘Poison’ or ‘Buried Alive,’ it’s having that diversity within the style that makes it black metal. In my opinion that’s what I created when I called something black metal, it’s because it has all those other styles in it. When I hear a death metal band calling themselves black metal I feel like, well, that’s death metal, it’s all one speed more or less, where’s the tongue-in-cheek that we had?”

As Conrad points out, Venom had used plenty of other phrases—perhaps most notably power metal, a term which has a very different meaning these days—but the eighties were a time when extreme metal subcategories weren’t as well developed. In the early nineties, however, thrash and death metal had broken into the rock and metal mainstream (a fact highlighted by the rise of bands such as Sepultura and Morbid Angel and major label Columbia’s brief love affair with Earache Records), and many in the scene longed for the darker, more obscure vibe of the eighties.

What Euronymous arguably did was help resurrect the term “black metal” before bringing it into wider use, using his own ideals to redefine it, taking qualities selectively from eighties bands he admired while adding a few of his own. The most notable of these was a level of seriousness certainly not present in the early bands; he would famously claim in Kerrang! magazine (along with a certain Count Grishnackh of Burzum) that although he was aware that Venom and Bathory were not practicing Satanists, he “chose to believe otherwise.”
Today the term “black metal” is frequently used to describe extreme metal with certain musical characteristics: high-paced percussion, high-pitched “screamed” vocals, fast tremolo picking on the guitars, an emphasis on atmosphere and feeling, and an unholy aesthetic. Indeed, this is the definition many black metal musicians seem most comfortable with and it’s one used (if only for the sake of clarity) at times in this book. Likewise, “death metal” is now generally used to describe bands that emphasize brutality or technicality above atmosphere and use deeper “growling” vocals and frequent riff changes.

For Euronymous however, “black metal” described bands celebrating “real” Satanism (and by this he meant a genuine theistic approach, literal devil worship, as opposed to the approach of organizations such as the Church of Satan), while death metal meant “real” death worship, the actual musical characteristics of the metal played by either party being wholly irrelevant.

“There exist no death metal bands today,” he claimed in Orcustus magazine. “There are only a handful of (mostly great) bands (in case someone hasn’t got it right—black metal has nothing to do with the music itself, both Blasphemy and Merciful Fate are black metal, it’s the LYRICS, and they must be SATANIC. If not, it is NOT black metal) and what we choose to call LIFE METAL bands. Take a band like Therion. Their music is quite OK, it’s actually one of the best Swedish bands (even though that doesn’t say much), but their lyrics STINK. They are about society and pollution, what the fuck has that got to do with DEATH? If a band cultivates and worships death, then it’s death metal, no matter what KIND of metal it is. If a band cultivates and worships Satan, it’s black metal. And by saying ‘cultivating death,’ I don’t think about thinking it’s funny, or being into gore. I’m thinking about being able to KILL just because they HATE LIFE. It’s people who enjoy to see wars because a lot of people get killed. How many bands think that way?”

Contrary to popular opinion, Euronymous was not against death metal per se—indeed he praised certain bands such as Carcass in interviews—but was opposed to what he considered to be “false death metal” or “life metal,” which he characterized as the increasingly acceptable face of the genre. All the same, despite his own definitions it cannot be coincidence that the impressive collective of bands appearing in Norway at this time (including such well-regarded names as Burzum, Immortal, Darkthrone, Emperor, Enslaved, Hades, Gorgoroth, Satyricon, Arcturus, Carpathian Forest, and Mysticum) all utilized certain musical traits now associated with black metal.

Furthermore, many of these bands had converted to the black metal cause after previously playing in death metal acts, albeit often ones with an atmospheric edge. Immortal and Hades, for example, had formed from the ashes of the bands Old Funeral and Amputation, Burzum also sprang from Old Funeral, Enslaved from Phobia, Emperor from Embirionic and Thou Shalt Suffer, while Mortem contained future members of Mayhem, Arcturus, and Stigma Diabolicum/Thorns. Perhaps most notably, Darkthrone underwent a dramatic transformation from a successful technical death metal band to a full-blown black metal outfit. As it turned
out. Euronymous didn’t consider many of the bands that surrounded him to be black metal at all, even some bands that today are seen to epitomize the genre, such as Immortal. Again Euronymous emphasized lyrics and intent over musical characteristics and appearance.

“Firstly Immortal is NOT a black metal band, as they are not Satanists,” he told Or-I-custus zine. “And this is something they say themselves. They are into the atmospheres and moods concerning Satanism. Their new look is just a way for them to go deeper into what they have always been into… And further, those who have cared to read the lyrics of Darkthrone’s Soulside Journey will know that they are the same Satanic lyrics, which means that Soulside Journey IS a black metal album.”

Mayhem’s lyrics of the time were certainly Satanic in nature, though Necrobutcher casts some doubt as to whether this was reflected in the member’s lifestyles.

“That was to provoke,” he states. “People misunderstood, they looked into our thing and made their own assumptions that we are Satanists and in that period of time when people asked us about that we said, ‘Sure.’ We just said yes to everything just because people are stupid enough to ask this sort of thing and we were just laughing. No, I don’t think [Euronymous] ‘believed.’ I think he loved to talk about it but since he was not a religious person I don’t think—or I know—that he was not. It was more like that was a bad thing, an evil thing in many people’s eyes, and he was a supporter of bad things.”

While Euronymous often presented black metal as merely a medium to manipulate, commenting that young musicians should become Satanic terrorists rather than form yet more new bands, there’s no doubt that music was in fact his first love. Indeed, though he stated that Enslaved and Immortal should not be considered black metal because they veered away from Satanic subject matter, he nonetheless provided both with advice and support. After all, he was still a great fan of artists as diverse as Kraftwerk and Kiss and even admitted in Slayer zine, “I love Satanic bands, but I don’t care if they sing about eating carrots, if the music is great.” going on to state that he would even sign bands who wore “light clothes and jogging suits” if he admired their music.

“I never felt like there was pressure to conform,” recalls Mortiis (Håvard Ellefsen), then bassist of Emperor. “Euro didn’t dictate the sound, he was definitely a music fan at heart and could appreciate a lot of music for what it was, black metal or not. He released Merciless, they weren’t black metal, and was planning releases with Masacre from Colombia, which was death metal.”

Through such leadership, Euronymous quickly built a sense of unity, one that increased in mid-’91, when (with the help of a number of others, most prominently Stian “Occultus” Johansen of early Norwegian black metal acts Perdition Hearse and Abhorrent/Thyabhorrent) he opened a record store in Oslo. Named Helvete, the Norwegian word for hell, its primary role in many ways was as a focal point for the scene, providing a place to sleep for various young participants (including Vikernes) as well as a setting for the somewhat unhinged parties of the period.
“They were black metal parties, you know,” recalls Mortiis. “The mood was okay, some people would be ass-drunk, others would sort of sulk in corners, everyone wanted to live up to something I suppose. I remember I drove a map needle into my arm until the bone stopped it and I heard Euro once drove a spike into his forehead. I also remember that I broke a beer bottle over my own head during one of those parties. A guy once came in waving a gun—he might have been a member of Abhorrent/Thyabhorrent—all kinds of shit could happen.”

“Obviously we had some crazy ideas about this and that… some stupid or weird ideas about humanity,” says Enslaved’s Grutle Kjellson. “But generally we had beers and we laughed… we didn’t sit there like this,” he frowns and crosses his arms, “all the time.”

“For a little while I moved into the basement together with Varg [of Burzum],” recalls Tomas “Samoth” Haugen of Emperor. “It was a shithole of a basement and I can’t believe we chose to take residence there looking back at it. We hardly stayed there though. It was very dark and gloomy… and moldy. I really dived deep into the darkness during that time of my life. There were a lot of parties in the shop with a lot of crazy shit going on. The shop wasn’t very organized looking back at it. Sometimes it was total chaos. It was more run by idealism rather than good business sense. But it became a good meeting ground for people.
who shared interest in this music and the lifestyle that came with it back then. And it had an atmosphere. It was very different compared to how things are today. There were no ‘black metal catalogue fans’ back then. It was total underground and there was a more genuine feeling amongst the bands and people involved.”

“The shop was a meeting ground for people socially and a place to pick up albums and get insights,” concurs Kristoffer “Garm” Rygg of Ulver. “You can’t really underestimate the influence of Helvete and Euronymous in the formative days of black metal in Norway.”

“It was also fairly cheap,” recalls Silenoz of Dimmu Borgir. “He didn’t overprice the CDs and I doubt that he made any money from it really. He was all about getting this extreme underground stuff to the kids.”

It’s often imagined that the store was mainly selling black metal records, but at the time there simply weren’t enough of such items in existence to keep a store afloat, and Helvete stocked a great deal of material by bands that Euronymous himself had voiced a distaste for, such as Deicide and Napalm Death. While these helped pay the rent, the store nonetheless was geared toward attracting and nurturing underground metal fans, and was suitably decorated, the black walls adorned with inverted crucifixes, weapons, and records, though in some cases the latter had to be provided—and sold—by the regular customers themselves.

“In Norway in the eighties it was dead scene-wise, and suddenly there was a shop fifteen minutes away from my work,” reveals Darkthrone’s Fenriz, a regular at the store. “Finally I could see and meet fellow maniacs. I was also one of the guys who donated vinyl so the shelves would look filled… I donated sixty vinyl and that would be mainly boring thrash metal stuff.”

“Whoever was there worked behind the counter at some point,” explains Enslaved’s Grutle of the shop’s communal atmosphere. “I mean I sold records myself.”

“In the beginning it was hardly anything,” Metalion remembers. “There was like a used section with a bunch of vinyls, nothing else. But people would go there to hang out, drink, smoke, whatever… Guys from Darkthrone were always there and Emperor… The socializing was the most important. We used to live in the basement of the store, and as you know the Inferno festival is now organizing tourist trips there… Oh well…”

“They had a horrible selection,” laughs Apollyon, then of Lamented Souls and later a member of Aura Noir and Dødheimsgard. “They didn’t really have any distribution. I remember when the first black metal thing came out, the A Blaze in the Northern Sky album [by Darkthrone]. Helvete didn’t get it. They didn’t have the connections [with distributors]… it wasn’t like a proper shop. There was another shop called Hot Records, and I was there the day it came out… one of these [Helvete] ‘hangarounds’ came into the shop when I was there and when the owner turned his back, or was on the phone or something, he just nicked all the Ablaze albums and ran down to Helvete!” He laughs. “Obviously [the owner] just went to Helvete with the police and retrieved them… that was the kind of things these silly ‘hangarounds’ would do.”
The shop did indeed attract a lot of new fans, many of whom looked up to Euronymous. Respect undoubtedly crossed over into idolization for some who, having not known him in earlier, less “evil” times, had something of a one-sided impression. With his old friends Manheim and Necrobutcher gone, Euronymous was able to preach an increasingly extreme and rigid manifesto and present himself as he wished to be seen, free of the constraints older contacts might have placed on him.

“There would be many kids, and I think Euronymous loved it too,” recalls Apollyon, “lots of followers who would do anything for him. There were lots of bands and guys who brought their lunchboxes just to sit there all day and be with Euronymous.”

Says Necrobutcher, “When I was out of the picture nobody knew who he was. So he could put on this fake thing. Put on this robe, paint his face white and say stuff that had no truth in it.”

Manheim agrees: “When you are close with people that have been living with you for many years and know what you really are, you just can’t try to be something you are not—”

Necrobutcher interjects: “—’cos your mates would immediately pick up on it and say, ‘What the fuck are you saying?’”

“Right,” says Manheim, “you will be exposed. But at the time when Euronymous was very extreme we still had a lot of contact. He could call me. We were talking about music, and all kinds of things, he was normal. The day after he could give you a call and he’d have friends over at Helvete and he’d be talking about burning churches like a different person. He’d be playing a role and he could do that, as there was nobody to correct him.”

“He was trying to convince himself and people around him that he was purest evil and Satanic and all that shit,” says Snorre Ruch. “I don’t know how many people fell for it, but the media liked it.”

Outwardly, and most noticeably in interviews, Euronymous continued to propagate an extremely evil image, becoming increasingly cold and heartless in his statements.

“I have no friends, just the guys I’m allied with, if my girlfriend dies I won’t cry, I will misuse the corpse,” he told Norwegian publication Beat. When asked about the humorous elements within Deathcrush, he explained, “That was then. Now we mean partying is bad. It’s better to sit and cut yourself, than to go out and have fun… It’s many years since I managed to feel love. This is just the way it is. This is a main concept.”

Despite such comments, Euronymous wasn’t at all the type to sit at home cutting himself or living out an emotionless, friendless existence, even if his comments appear, sadly, to have inspired some fans to behave this way. The regular parties and frequent socializing inherent to the movement alone suggest that the slogan of his label Deathlike Silence Productions (“No Mosh, No Core, No Trend, No Fun”) was at least twenty-five percent inaccurate. In fact, most who met him report that Euronymous was a generally social and friendly individual, an enthusiastic music fan who loved to talk about his passion and enjoyed dealing with others. He certainly had a lot of friends, to whom he reportedly acted with generosity and kindness.
One example was Grutle Kjellson and Ivar Bjørnson, founders of Enslaved, whom he not only signed to his label Deathlike Silence but also mentored in their early years. Despite the fact that their interests openly lay with the traditional Nordic Gods rather than Satanism, both men say that Euronymous was only ever supportive and never attempted to preach any Satanic ideas to them.

Grutle Kjellson says: “We told him about our concept and he said, ‘Yeah, someone should do that, that’s cool, to preserve the culture. I’m not into those things, but go ahead.’”

Adds Ivar Bjørnson, “The thing we spent the most time talking about was musical theory. When he came to visit our hometown—which is a key moment in Enslaved history—he brought his guitar. We had been listening so much to [Mayhem’s] De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas tapes, the rough mixes without vocals. He had his guitar, and I had my guitar, and I could just ask him, ‘How do you do that riff?’ and he would explain it. He would give me a call and tell me that him and the guy from Thorns [Snorre Ruch] had developed this theory on how to record, it was just about sharing that stuff. My guitar style is still seventy or eighty percent those moments, you know, being fourteen years old.”

In this way Euronymous helped out many younger bands in the scene, especially Enslaved and Emperor, both of whom he personally recommended to Candlelight Records, the label that issued the split record of the two bands. Interestingly, even before meeting Emperor,
he’d offered thoughts and advice to guitarist Samoth and bassist Mortiis, just two of many individuals communicating with him by mail at the time.

“I first got in contact with him by writing to him,” Samoth recalls. “I sent him the Embryonic demo, and he gave us some honest feedback. He didn’t like it all that much, but pointed out good things too, and gave info on Mayhem, upcoming gigs, bands to check out and so on.”

For those of us who never met Euronymous, it’s very hard to pin down who he was as a human being, perhaps because he was so keen to deny his humanity and was increasingly consumed by the black metal personality he presented to the world, as a now-infamous quote in Orcustus zine underlines:

“I don’t think people should respect each other. I don’t want to see trend people respecting me, I want them to HATE and FEAR. If people don’t accept our ideas as their own, they can fuck off because then they belong to a musical scene which has NOTHING to do with ours. They could just as well be Madonna fans. There is an ABYSS between us and the rest…. The HC [hardcore] pigs have correctly made themselves guardians of morality, but we must kick them in the face and become guardians of anti-morality.”

Even Manheim, who knew him better than most, finds it hard to separate Euronymous from the character he created.

“There was cynicism in it,” he ponders thoughtfully, “how he handled the death of Pelle, that was really shocking, ‘cos up to that point things were just image and philosophical discussions. That was probably the breaking point, where we understood that he wasn’t handling this very well. Øystein never changed to me, but the image took more and more space, how far he was willing to take the image was expanding. We had an intellectual discussion once about how far you could take something, and how fun it was to take it far and he found joy in exploiting that. How far can you push people? How far can you push yourself? So in that context that was a part of him. But I’m convinced that the image Euronymous was building up was not Øystein. I don’t think it was real, but I think he might have thought he would go into that level of cynicism.

“But he was a kind person, he did care about people around him. [But he also believed] that to really explore the extreme, you had to live the extreme and that’s where he departed from other people. Artists will say, ‘We must go into the extreme to see how people will react to it,’ but to live the extreme, that’s something different and he wanted to do that. He talked about sex and said the evil thing to do is to have anal sex. You shouldn’t have regular, normal, natural sex, you should have anal, so he was very strict, he wanted to explore that, to be this kind of person. So, is this the image, or the personality? I would guess if you spoke to scholarly people they would say it was the image, a role you were playing. But of course it mirrors some of you, because you are not able to live it if you could not mirror some of it.”

“Euronymous was probably the most extreme guy I ever met,” says Grutle, “he hated Nazism, ‘cos he thought communism was much worse. He watched weird movies, he was
very misanthropic, but still, he was one of the most friendly people I ever met.”

“What he was advocating very strongly was seriousness in the music,” adds Ivar, “and I think that explains the contradiction with how he was when people met him, to how he was in the media. I think he believed in it on some level, but I think it’s possible to want the world to burn and see everything stop, and then go home and wish the best for yourself, your family, your kids. I think it’s possible to have those two thoughts in your head at the same time. A lot of writers are fascinated with the ‘double life,’ a lot of writers write very extreme books and the thoughts the main characters have, these thoughts have to come from somewhere. Are you a homicidal maniac or sexual deviant yourself? A lot of people claim that everyone has these secret double lives to some extent and I think the only difference in the black metal scene was that these people chose to vocalize that double life.”

A photo of the Helvete store, depicting some of the items (many donated by friends and comrades) that decorated the walls. The dagger on the right was given to Hellhammer by his grandfather when he was eight. Photo courtesy of Samoth, who lived at the shop for a time.