Visualising and Visceralising:

The Rise and Fall of Death Metal

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Critical Data Studies, Elective

Curating Data

Characters: 4.630

Introduction & Context

This project explored the cultural and emotional trajectory of Death Metal from its emergence in the 1980s to its decline and transformation in the 2010s. Two complementary analyses were produced: a data-driven exploration and an artistic interpretation.

The analytical phase used metrics such as the number of bands, average album ratings, band activity and review counts to trace popularity over time. The visualizations revealed a distinct rapid growth from the late 1980s, a creative and critical peak around 2008, and a gradual decline afterward.

The second analysis translated this data into a visceralisation: a sound-intensity visualization which transformed numerical data into a sensory narrative, capturing the rise, saturation, and fading resonance of the genre.
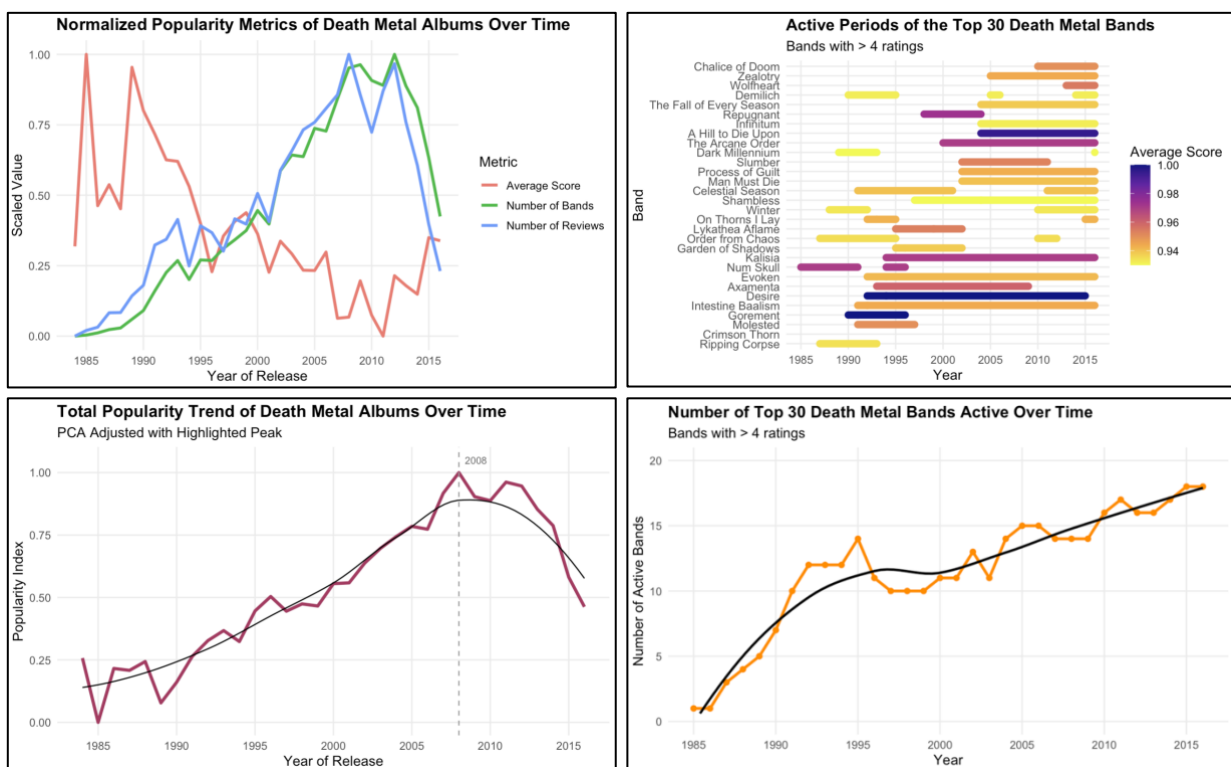
Motivations & Perspective

The motivation behind this project was to understand not just when Death Metal rose and fell, but how it felt to witness its evolution. Data alone could not capture the emotional texture of this movement its ferocity, community and eventual quieting.

The perspective represented is both analytical and empathetic: that of an observer who values the rigor of data yet recognizes the human and artistic layers beneath it. The analysis speaks from the view of a cultural listener, someone aware that music history is shaped not only by statistics but by sound, memory, and intensity. The intent was to balance critical observation with emotional resonance, allowing the visuals to serve as both research and tribute.
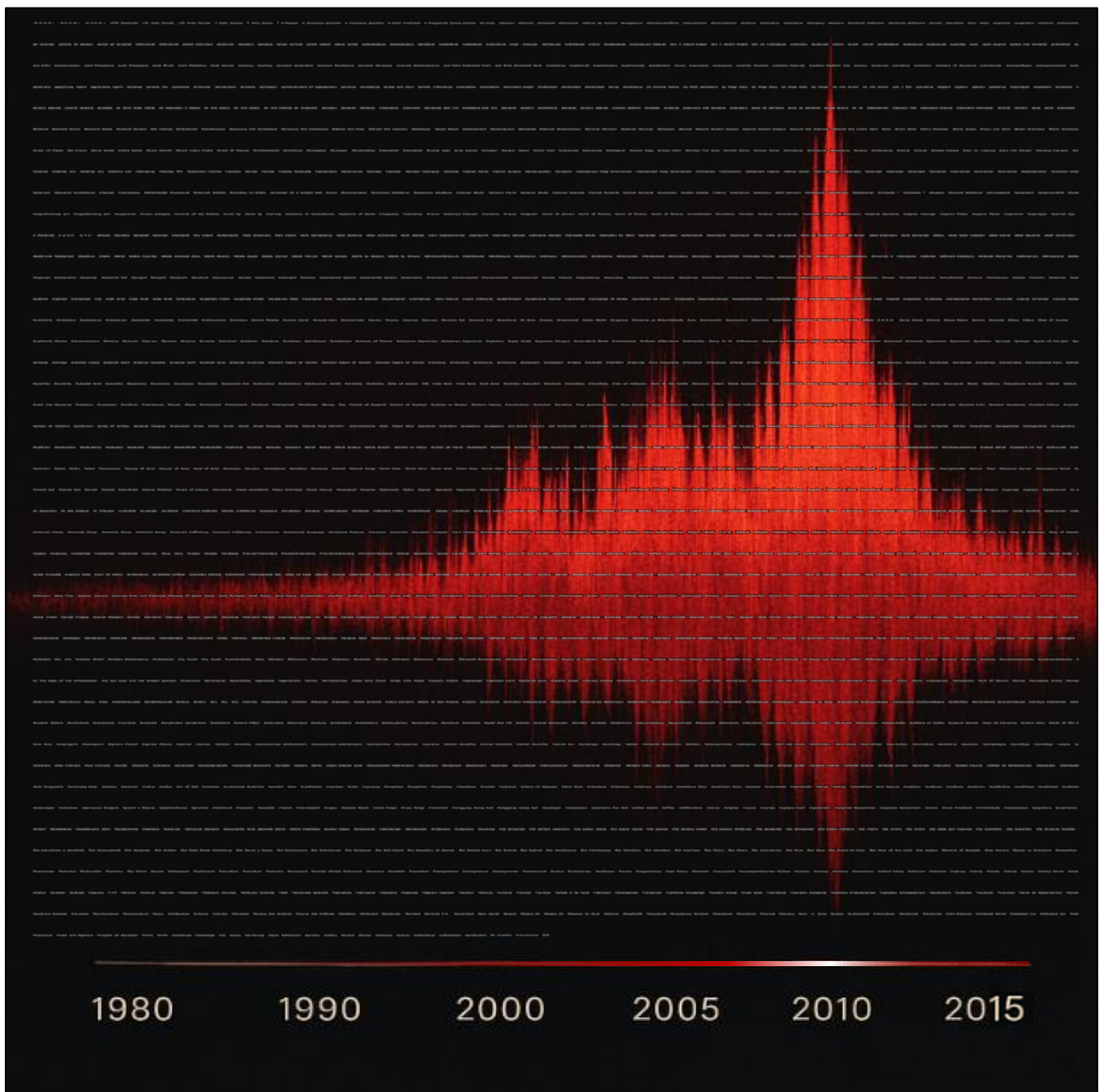
Visual Material & Design Choices

The dataset used for this analysis was sourced from Kaggle's 'Death Metal' Dataset, originally compiled by extracting band and album information from the Metal Archives between 1985 and November 2016. It includes detailed metadata such as album titles, release years, countries, active periods, and genre classifications for bands associated with death metal.

This dataset provides a structured foundation for exploring trends in band activity, stylistic evolution, and popularity within the genre. The following visualisations and design choices were developed to effectively communicate these insights.

Image 1*: Top-left graph – The normalized popularity metrics of Death Metal albums over time containing the average score of the album, the number of bands that year and the number of reviews left on albums that year. Top-right – The periods of activity of the top 30 Death Metal bands which have more than 4 ratings, colour scaled by intensity of average score. Bottom-left – The total popularity trend of Death Metal albums over time PCA adjusted containing a smoothed regression curve and showing the peak in 2008. Bottom-right – The total number of top 30 metal bands on a year-by-year basis containing a smoothed regression curve.*

The graphs present a logical chronology of the increase in bands and reviews, the decline in average scores and the eventual plateau of activity. These visuals were clear, precise, and comparative, enabling insight into how popularity functions like a wave: building, cresting and receding.

Image 2: *'The Scream Fades' – An expression on the rise and fall of Death Metal using waveform intensity.*

In contrast, the artistic visualization was designed to evoke rather than explain. The visceralised expression of the transformed data into a waveform of sound intensity over time is both a graph and a requiem.

Colour, texture, and light were key metaphors: red signified vitality and violence; darkness represented cultural fading. The 1,915 faded band names in the background are a homage to those that finished their journeys in chronological order. Together, these design choices guided emotional engagement inviting viewers to feel the data rather than just interpret it.

Reflection & Interpretation

The combination of analytical and artistic approaches revealed that the "rise and fall" of death metal is not a simple decline but a transformation of energy. Quantitative data showed a peak and downturn, yet the art suggested that the genre's essence persists, reshaped into new subcultures and events.

The process highlighted how design choices frame perception. The clean charts emphasize order and pattern, suggesting inevitability; the artistic visuals introduce an ambiguity, emotion and space for mourning or appreciation of what was. Each mode reveals something the other suppresses: numbers obscure feeling, while art distorts precision.

Ultimately, the project demonstrates that data visualization is not neutral and it carries perspective, tone and power. By merging factual analysis with visceral imagery, the work captures Death Metal's cultural rhythm: a movement that screamed, burned and now echoes softly enduring beyond its apparent decline.

Bibliography

Death Metal. (n.d.). Retrieved 6 November 2025, from

       https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/zhangjuefei/death-metal