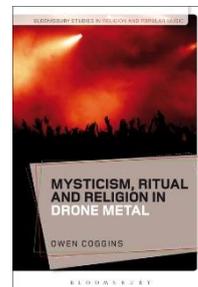


BOOK REVIEW

Mysticism, ritual and religion in drone metal (Coggins)

Reviewed by Tia DeNora

University of Exeter, UK



Title: Mysticism, ritual and religion in drone metal **Author:** Owen Coggins **Publication year:** 2018 **Publisher:** Bloomsbury Academic
Pages: 224 **ISBN:** 9781350025103

REVIEWER BIOGRAPHY

Tia DeNora FBA is Professor of Sociology of Music and Director of Research in the Department of Sociology/Philosophy at the University of Exeter. [T.DeNora@exeter.ac.uk]

Publication history:

Submitted 7 May 2019
Accepted 15 May 2019
First published 24 Nov 2019

Music invites talk – the realm of Guided Imagery and Music has shown us this repeatedly (Bonde, 2007). And sometimes music instigates new talk, new world views. Music *instigates* when its materiality speaks to the body to offer sonic bases; not only new sensations, but new imaginings, and with those new imaginings, new words and hence new worlds. In this thoughtful, careful, and highly original study of the quasi-religious rituals associated with drone metal production and reception, Owen Coggins shows us how the repetition, monotony and distortions of Drone are appropriated in ways that come to undergird mystic stances, constructions, and alternate ways of sense making in the world. And if the task, for the researcher, involves tracing “the production of [...] discourse in drone metal culture” (p. 2), “[t]he challenge”, Coggins writes, involves:

how to name and draw boundaries around a group of sounds that is loosely connected and whose audience is fragmented and dispersed is closely related to the challenge of reported indescribability, of how to name sounds which are unusual or difficult to talk about in language that works for other music (p. 69).

To approach the seemingly ineffable features of what we might speak of as ‘implicit culture’, that is the tacit or ‘felt’ features of meaning and practice that we live and which operate without, or sometimes in spite of, our overt awareness, Coggins employed an exemplary and very thorough mix of methods (ethnography and auto-ethnography of concerts and festivals – more than 100 events across the UK but also in the Netherlands and Belgium – short, online surveys with 430 responses, and 74 interviews). Coggins aimed to explore listeners’ experiences of Drone and how their communications of those experiences can be seen to illuminate music’s role in religious life in modern societies.

The book's chapters follow a logical structure. Chapter 1 introduces the topic, while Chapter 2 reviews discussions of mysticism and religion in relation to heavy metal. Chapter 3 reviews the history of the genre, and Chapter 4 considers how the music evokes descriptions of imaginative spaces, times and states of bodily consciousness. It connects perhaps most closely to the practices associated with music and guided imagery. Coggins explores how drone metal's rhetoric – which evokes departure, traversal and movement across imaginative landscapes. The experience of Drone thus involves, as Coggins puts it, "a vast range of imagined spatial, temporal and bodily conscious elsewhere" (p. 114). Chapter 5 examines amplification and distortion and how they are linked to bodily experiences of loud, low and sustained vibration – the physical qualities of sound – and describes representational connotations and their impact upon the listening experience. Chapter 6 considers extreme responses. The final chapter reviews and sums up.

Beyond the sum of its parts, three interrelated themes emerge, amply illustrated and pursued throughout this volume. The first theme is concerned with amateur (in Hennion's [2014] sense of the *lover* of music) classification of musical genres, in particular how people speak about musical genres that operate outside of highly familiar boundaries and conventions. Coggins describes how, in describing Drone as 'unusual', listeners search in innovative ways for appropriate comparators. This innovation draws of course on the listening experience, and upon the sonic affordances that any music offers. It produces understanding – of what Drone is 'like' or 'not like,' and therefore its genre (p. 79). And, of course, to compare one thing (music) with another (anything) is to rearrange cultural furniture, to 'redecorate' so as potentially to invite change in social use, social roles, and custom (DeNora, 2013). Through these mediations, music has power and by placing the spotlight on this genre work, Coggins shows us how music gets into action.

The second theme concerns Drone's role as a kind of boundary object (Star & Greisemer, 1989). Its very strangeness, its testing of listeners' endurance through monotony and difference, through volume and through unconventional sonic intensity, offers special resources for shared yet multiple and varied experience. When music stands outside of the familiar or the routine, its liminality and elicitation of novel imaginings can accommodate potentially divergent realities. As a place for 'holding' and 'keeping together' disparate world views, Drone also offers, one might suggest, a resource for the tolerance of multiple meanings in action. Coggins describes how the 'same' music reminded one research respondent of Arabic prayer, a pilgrimage to Mecca and Islamic countries, reminded another of Christian prayer meetings, and reminded another of yoga, Gregorian chant, and travel. The 'sacred canopy' offered by strange music is broad, and it invites eclecticism and shelter to diverse groups who can share their quasi-religious devotions to the music.

The third theme takes on the theme of modern religious experience directly, and it is here that Coggins' study highlights the value of music-led investigations (in this case of cultural practice and belief). Coggins describes how the musical experience elicits discourses that constantly defer, that resist reduction, that shift towards and away from being lodged in metaphor. This unsettling in turn reflects back onto the music in ways that produce a constantly changing, 'real' yet ephemeral experience that eludes, indeed, is antithetical to identification – a form of sacred 'elsewhere,' but one in which embodied consciousness is heightened in the here-and-now of Drone listening, and thus in the devotion to the 'genre' that listening inculcates. In this manner, Drone offers its listeners a kind of

prosthetic technology of perception, as Coggins explains through reference to the auto-ethnographic component of his study:

My own experience [...] involved a heightened consciousness of my body in heavily vibrating space. I had the strong impression that while standing in the loud, low droning noise I had a more accurate perception of the extension, limits and density of my body in comparison to my own everyday projections of self and body. [...] it also seemed that I was experiencing a consciousness of bodily reality that was not common in ordinary life but in an important way felt more real (p. 110)

We are, in other words, capable of being drawn in to the recalibrations and new inscriptions that Drone – or any ‘different’ set of sonic parameters – affords. We become, or are re-made, in and through our deferred and re-adjusted perceptions and stances. We perform the social ritual in and through these adjustments, which lifts us on to a different and, for all practical purposes, shared social plane. Surely this is what Durkheim (2001 [1912]) described in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*? Coggins’ concern with the materiality of sound, the connection between sound and embodied consciousness, and the realm of ‘strange’ or marginal sounds that afford sounding out new or different orientations, has deeply enriched our understanding of spirituality, consciousness studies, embodied knowledge and – in so far as music can be understood to offer but reconcile competing interpretations – tolerance and peace-keeping. Coggins’ book demonstrates once again that music helps in everyday life (Ansdell, 2014), and that it is good to think with.

REFERENCES

- Ansdell, G. (2014). *How music helps in music therapy and everyday life*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Bonde, L. O. (2007). Music as metaphor and analogy: A literature essay. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 16(1), 73-81.
- DeNora, T. (2013). *Music asylums: Music and wellbeing in everyday life*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Durkheim, E. (2001 [1912]). *The elementary forms of religious life* (Translated by C. Cosman). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hennion, A. (2014). *The passion for music: A sociology of mediation* (Translated by M. Rigaud). London: Routledge.
- Star, S. L., & Griesemer, J. R. (1989). Institutional ecology, ‘translations’ and boundary objects: Amateurs and professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39. *Social Studies of Science*, 19(3), 387-420.