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Reviews

Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal by Owen Coggins. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 224 pp. £73.44 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-350-02510-3.

As western societies lose touch with their religious heritage, its influence on popular culture often becomes confused and incoherent. In response, research on religion and popular music has sometimes fallen into over-interpretation; for example, seeing the rave or rock concert as a kind of church or ritual. Similarly, 'mysticism' is, at times, treated as a kind of shorthand for any kind of transcendent musical experience.

In his ground-breaking new book, Owen Coggins has found a way of analysing mysticism and the religious in a way that refuses easy banalities and looks directly at the ambiguities of the musical talk he studies. His subject is drone metal, a relatively recent offshoot of heavy metal, whose performers include acts such as Sunn0))), Om and Bong. He describes the genre as follows:

Drone metal music is characterized sonically by extremes of repetition, extension, lowness, slowness, amplification and distortion within but radically pushing the boundaries and conventions of the wider heavy metal tradition. (3)

As Coggins argues, whereas metal has traditionally foregrounded the distorted electric guitar, drone metal foregrounds the amplifier. Indeed, the Japanese band Boris once titled an album 'Amplifier Worship.' This is a genre that values heaviness in a literal, material sense, venerating vinyl and scorning the digital.

In his ethnographic work on the drone metal scene, Coggins found many examples of the experience this music provides being described as 'mystical'.

However, he takes issue with traditions in religious studies that essentialise mystical experience and treat it as somehow separate from discourse. Instead, he summarises his approach as follows:

Popular music mysticism can be heard in ongoing, creative chains of communication, interpretation and response to an existing tradition of intertextual practice and performance. Dissolving a traditional and unhelpful dichotomy in scholarly approaches to mysticism, musical sounds can be heard as simultaneously 'text' and 'experience'. (16)

Coggins's approach allows him not just to analyse drone metal talk as an integral part of the experience of drone metal music, but also to penetrate the often-contradictory nature of the discourse. While drone metal seems monumental and impenetrable, jokes, humour and memes simultaneously lighten its weight and engage with its substance and boundaries. While drone metal acts frequently invoke ancient mystical traditions, they do so playfully and with little regard to theological traditions. As Coggins reports with regard to one of the genre's canonical texts:

The interpretation and reception of Sleep's Jerusalem/Dopesmoker (1996, 2003) is serious and reverential, while simultaneously jocular, almost derisive. As one interviewee put it, 'it takes its not being serious very seriously'. The lyrical theme of a caravan of stoner priests in hybrid Star Wars/Old Testament landscapes and language is described as silly, though the same recording is described by the same listeners as the holy grail of drone metal and as a sacred text. (73)

Coggins identifies repeated 'struggles with language' in talk about drone metal. Invoking the extraordinary and the ineffable in experience is also a common feature of mystical discourse too. Drone metal is therefore mystical insofar as it shares a fascination with otherness, distant 'elsewheres' and altered states with other mystical traditions.

At the same time, the relationship between the mystical and drone metal is one that avoids the more dogmatic notions of the religious. Informed by Michel de Certeau's work on the communicative nature of mystical experience, Coggins develops the concept of 'listening as if' to understand the ways in which drone metal fans listen as if one were religious, as if the music was a mystic ritual, while still sustaining a 'conceptual ambiguity' that ensures 'escaping commitment to any dogma or institutions, or even to stable and definitive statements or propositions about the music.' (85)

It is this intriguing concept that makes *Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal* required reading for anyone interested not just in contemporary popular music, but also in contemporary mysticism and religiosity. On finishing this book I wondered if perhaps 'listening as if' is a practice shared more widely in more overtly religious fields. In the post-enlightenment west, might the search for mystical experience always be aware of its own constructedness? Might religious practice today always be practice experienced 'as if' it were religious? Or maybe it always has been? Coggins's findings on the ambiguities of the experience of drone metal raise productive questions about the uncertain, performative nature of religion as a whole.

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