Podcast Transcript

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Drone Metal Mysticism

Podcast with **Owen Coggins** (16 April 2018).

Interviewed by **David G. Robertson.**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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David Robertson (**DR**): *I'm here in Sunny Milton Keynes for the Open University's Contemporary Religion in Historical Perspective Conference where I'm lucky enough to be joined, today, by Owen Coggins, who is an Honorary Associate of the Religious Studies Department here.*

Owen Coggins (**OC**): Hello

DR: *Welcome to the Religious Studies Project. We've been talking about this interview for quite some time. But we've finally managed to get it organised – luckily, just as your book comes out! Let's start, then with drone metal. What is it that we're talking about here?*

OC: OK. I guess I often describe it as an extreme form of heavy metal that's characterised by extremes of repetition; distortion; extension; tracks that go on for thirty minutes or forty-five minutes – I went to a concert that was three hours long - and feedback and other kinds of sonic characteristics. But it's also characterised in the sort of discourse that surrounds it that's produced by musicians but also by audiences – lots of talk about mysticism and ritual and religious experience and transcendence and so on. And so that was the starting point for me wanting to investigate it for my PhD research.

DR: *Now this isn't the first kind of study we've had of religious imagery . . . . Well let's start with metal, particularly. There's a long history of fairly obvious religious imagery . . .*

OC: Yes, and so I think from Black Sabbath – who are often understood as the originary starting point of heavy metal – and you've obviously got kind-of crucifixes and press photos taken in graveyards, and accusations about Satanism and various kind of imagined occult practices. And I think that a real interest in the power of religion and its symbols – and perhaps new or sometimes oppositional repositioning of that kind of symbolism, images and languages and even sounds – has, I think, been a

really important part of metal from its beginnings. I think, perhaps what seems to me to be slightly different about this particular form – certainly in the way that academics have approached it – is that religion in metal has often been kind-of approached through the lens of Christianity and metal, whether that's Christian heavy metal itself, or a discourse of anti-Christian sentiment in metal – burning down churches in Norwegian black metal, and so on – and more recently, sort-of more focus on various other sections of Satanism and paganism in metal. But it's often kind-of approached in terms of a religious tradition and metal, whereas what I was really interested in is the sort of bricolage and sometimes kind-of orientalist appropriation and redeployment of a really vast range of different kinds of religious symbols and sounds, in this particular form of music.

DR: *Now the use of religious imagery in metal, particularly – it's a very deliberately transgressive kind of discourse. Although obviously it varies how serious they are. That's not entirely what we find with drone, is it?*

OC: I think the issue of seriousness is quite an interesting one. And I think humour in metal is often misunderstood as perhaps one optional counterpoint to seriousness. And so I think that's an interesting way to look at these things. Because, in some ways, there are things which are done very, very seriously which are at the same time completely ludicrous and absurd. And one example is the classic 1996 record by Sleep which has two alternate titles: "Jerusalem" – which references these ideas of the Holy land, pilgrimage – and also "Dopesmoker". So "Dopesmoker" and "Jerusalem" are two alternative titles for this one single, hour-long dirge classic of stoner metal riffs. And it's often kind-of referenced by listeners in terms of the lyrics being simultaneously ultra-serious and completely ridiculous at the same time. And I think, that is an interesting way to think about how some of these symbols might be mobilised and ideas might be responded to, which in the book I talk a little bit about and the idea of "listening as if ". And I think, in some ways, drone metal allows . . . in the ways that audiences talk about it, are going to concerts or listening to recordings as if they are ritual, as if they are mystical, as if they are somehow related in an ambivalent way to religion. And that kind of language sometimes shifts around. So the record I mentioned is often described – even in the space of a short 500 word review for example – as like a pilgrimage, or as a pilgrimage, as a sonic pilgrimage, as sounding like the music that pilgrims might listen to at the end of the pilgrimage. And so I think this kind of ambivalence that I talk about as "listening as if" it's ritualist, allows people to explore and investigate a kind of imagined religiosity without having to necessarily commit to certain kind of identity statements or dogmas or beliefs. And I think that's part of where the power lies. And I think that also is part of the real value of music in this kind of exploration. Because it affords a sort of imaginative space for people to sort-of explore that.

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DR: *And that's something that's not unique to music, of course. That kind of mode is familiar in other forms of art that have got . . . there are visual artists and painters who specifically design their work to be experienced in these kind of contexts. You made a nice distinction in the book about different modes of engaging with . . . Certain kinds of music are engaged with in a different way and I think you'd distinguish like your pop and rock, the mainstream musical forms, that there's a different register of engagement with it.*

OC: Yes, I think that was really . . . I mean, I don't really want to make big claims about the specialness of drone metal against other forms of music. But this was really responding to the ways that my research participants talked about it. And there was often a very . . . listeners often made a very strong distinction between drone metal and other forms of music. And often even drone metal and other forms of metal. Just in . . . partly because of the sort-of abstract nature of this very droning dirge-like music and the practicalities, such as how long the tracks last. The real interest in vinyl as kind-of recreating a separate space and time in which to listen. Often people preferred to listen on vinyl rather than digital formats because it created a certain kind of special space and time through which to listen. And I think that really spoke to the construction of ideas about ritual and mysticism: that there was a deliberate attempt to separate drone metal in space and time, but also conceptually as something kind-of set apart. And obviously, there's an implied construction of the sacred in there.

DR: *Yes, that notion of specialness is something that I've actually come across in a few places. And it's quite interesting when you . . . even for students talking about the study of religion – they want it to be something a bit set apart. Even the discourse itself is something separate. Yes, I like that you mentioned the material culture, and there's a number of interesting intersections here. I mean the vinyl aspect of it is one we've already talked about, but there's also, you know, a particular aesthetic that goes along with particularly drone metal. But we also have material culture in terms of sensory experience.*

OC: Yes, and I think, firstly, it was great to speak to people about this certainly quite extreme form of music, and read thousands of reviews and things, just because of the creative and unusual ways that people talked about it. And that was one of the ways that came up a lot was people talking about going to concerts and the air becoming solid, or having a real, physical bodily experience of the sound. And so I thought material culture was actually a really helpful way to think about that. Because it was almost like sound becoming physically mobilised for people, or them kind of engaging with sound in a very physical way. And I think that was an interesting way to think also about mysticism in terms of the ways that people kind-of use, or interpret, or operate on a particular kind of tradition – in this case

heavy metal, I suppose, as well as the surrounding discourses about transcendental experience and mysticism and so on – that it was almost a kind of a way to experience sound as sound, or what sound itself sounds like, or what sound itself "feels" like, as some participants put it. Which, I think, connects up to other aspects of the aesthetic in other quite interesting ways, such as the interest with black letter or Fraktur typography, like the sort of gothic script that's familiar in a lot of metal cultures as well as drone metal. And what I loved about that was it's a real visual manifestation of the distortion and amplification of a sign that's so important in the sonic characteristics of the music.

DR: *I found that really interesting: the idea of the sort-of fetishisation of amplification. That is noticeably different than most other forms, even mainstream rock and metal where there's much more concern on the drum kit or the guitars, rather than in drone where it's the amplification particularly. And what I found interesting, having been a rock musician, was that when you started talking about this, I was thinking, "Well the first stage of amplification you need in rock is that you have to be louder than the drums. Because you have to play the drums loud to make them sound good! So there's a level of amplification you need, to get your guitar to there, for your band to sound like a rock band, right? But in drone, that bit becomes the bit that's of interest. And you go up a whole other level, so that it's the amplification itself that becomes the act. It's no longer something that you're doing in order to get to point A, it becomes point A itself.*

OC: Yes, I think I've suggested that this is the first or, at least, the only musical culture that I know of where the most important musical instrument, broadly conceived, is the amplifier rather than the guitar or, as you say, anything else that's being amplified. Although, interestingly, there is a real focus on amplification and speakers in dub reggae and certain forms of electronic dance music, which I also discuss. Because those forms of music have also attracted really quite sort-of prevalent discourses of religious experience and mysticism. But yes, definitely, the amplification . . . sort-of amplification of amplification is the thing that's really at issue. And I think that's an interesting way to think about that is that it's about an interrogation of transmission itself. And amplifying kind-of symbols themselves in order to kind of investigate what their possibilities are rather than, for example, to kind-of communicate particular kinds of musical semantics or structures.

DG: *Yes, you mentioned dance music- I immediately pictured the front of "3am Eternal", by The KLF, where it's an altar and the sides of the altar are huge amplifiers. Of course The KLF were enormously influenced by situationist theory and the kind of post-hippy, kind-of early cybernetic idealism – you know, Tim Leary and those people. And they were very sort-of consciously creating a temporary autonomous zone. But they were using a lot of religious imagery in doing it. Even the idea of time, you*

*know – so it's 3am, but it's 3am **eternal**. They have a lot of these similar kind-of languages.*

OC: And I think that the idea of drone itself is very much about . . . or it affords ways of talking about time which kind-of do similar things. They're physically and bodily experienced in a particular moment, but they open out onto those kind-of ideas about archaic experience and forms of social organisation. And so, in one of the chapters of the book I talk about those: the ways that audiences talk about drone metal being kind of about elsewhere, and drone metal being given access to these elsewheres. People discuss being transported to outer space or to kind-of imagined empty deserts and so on. And I think that's a really powerful and important way that people respond to it. Not to say that there's anything inherently connected in the music, but just that those are conventional ways of talking about the music which have sprung up around it, which seem to have a certain validity for people who are communicating about their engagement in this music.

DR*: Nonetheless, I found that really interesting. And we really are thinking about utopias – in the original sense of the word – of nowhere, of places that are idealisations or imagined spaces, in some sense, that there's almost an attempt to achieve through these kind of trancian and drone ideas.*

OC: Yes, and I think in dub, and psy-trance, and in drone metal which, as I said, there are different kinds of utopias. And I think you can also, working backwards from there, think about the reasons why there's such a strong impulse to try and construct these utopias in a very kind of temporary way – just over the course of half an hour recording, or an hour or so of a live concert. So, for example, for dub, in terms of a black Atlantic diaspora wanting to kind-of construct certain ideas about an Afro-centric religion, for example. And I think, perhaps, for drone metal it's interesting to speculate about what the construction of utopias might say about the social situation of audiences . . . as a response to alienation and disenchantment.

DR: *And interestingly as well, almost pre-modern – despite the fetishisation of technology. There's a lot of wildernesses and distant places. It's almost away from modernity.*

OC: Yes, there was an interesting example when one of the best-known drone metal bands, Sunn O))), performed at the Royal Festival Hall a couple of years ago. The support act was a group from Russia called Phurpa who've supported Sunn O))) on a number of occasions, who style themselves as supporting authentic Bon Tibetan traditional chanting. And so when you see these two things juxtaposed, the Tibetan Bon ritual – where there's bowls of incense and figures in black robes doing vocal chanting – and then you go out and have your glass of wine at the break time and then you go back and there's a very similar performance with the Sunn O))) band members in their black robes . . .

. But it's a very kind-of consciously up-dated version of this, with these extremes of amplification, but sonically quite a similar palette, I suppose, they're working with. And I think that's a very deliberate association that they're trying to make with a certain kind of imagined archaic ritual.

DR: *Let me give you a deliberately provocative question. So we've got a kind-of sense of sacredness or specialness, or temporary autonomous zone – however we want to put it – and we have quasi-religious musical forms: which comes first? You know, in which direction is the movement? Or is it mutually reinforced?*

OC: Yes, I think it's a good question and it's one that I've tried very hard to skip!

DR: (Laughs) I said it was deliberately provocative.

OC: But in order to skip it, to focus instead on trying to . . . . Put it this way, there was a lot of claims about – in my interviews and in reviews about this sort of music – that drone metal really does hark back to ancient – in quotes – "tribal religious forms", and so on. And I think this is kind-of deliberately played-on by some musicians. And it's certainly picked-up-on by parts of the audience. But my interest wasn't so much kind-of proving or disproving whether this really, genuinely had ancient connections to these kind of religions. And in the same way that the group performing the Tibetan ritual music that I mentioned – I'm not so interested in the historical accuracy of their early music production. What's more interesting to me is how those ideas are mobilised, and why people find them important, and to draw on that. And I think, in part, it's to make an authority claim. Or to recognise and, after the fact, legitimate something that they felt was quite a powerful engagement. And then, in order to kind of situate that for themselves and the listening community, to sort of connect it to these older imagined forms.

DR: *Tell us, then, about how this relates to mysticism – and this is a large part of the book, obviously. I mean, I presume we're building from the kind-of idea that this is music which is deliberately experienced rather than passively heard?*

OC: Yes. So, following on from what we've been discussing, there's also quite a strong discourse of perennialism that you find in Aldous Huxley and so on, in the way that people talk about it – that it's accessing this kind-of universal underlying form of religious experience. Now that, to me . . . there are some troubling consequences of that idea, that just erases all specific differences. And there are some issues with a kind of orientalist grabbing of bits and pieces from all religions and kind of presenting them as if they were referring to a similar thing. So, for me, what was really valuable in trying to

understand these kind of discourses of mysticism and ritual – given that so many people who are coming from different kind of backgrounds and so on are using words that are notoriously difficult to pin down, such as "it was a spiritual experience", or "this music is mystical" in some way – for me, it was really valuable to look to the work of Michel de Certeau. He both kind-of provides a really valuable way to look at the uses that audiences make of texts in popular culture, and also his work on mysticism. And so this approach to mysticism: instead of trying to look behind the texts for this unitive experience, which the scholar imagines is the same behind all of these instantiations, Michel de Certeau, by contrast, wants to look at the texts which are designated mystical and then identify certain procedures, or gestures, or operations on an inherited language that take place in these texts. So, for me, that was really valuable – for a start because it kind of resolves, or displaces, a kind of division between text and experience which has been quite influential – and quite problematically so, in my view – in the 20th century study of mysticism, where mystical experiences are "ineffable", they're "indescribable" and then you have texts which sort-of fail nobly to describe them. So the problem with that is that the experience that's suggested as being the same – there's not really any evidence for that. And then the actual kinds of differences in texts are just attributed to the cultural differences in which these same experiences take place. Michel de Certeau, by contrast, allows us to look at the particular mechanics and moves and gestures that take place in these texts. So, for example, talking about how a language of the body emerges in the mystical texts – or texts designated mystical in the 16th or 17th centuries – how they're interested in the materiality of signifiers. And how mystics are seen by themselves as ultra-orthodox, but by outsiders as heretical in some way, for their treatment of their inherited tradition. And so I think there was a number of these kind-of gestures that de Certeau identified in mystical texts, that I also observed in not only the ways that audiences spoke about their engagement with drone metal, but also in the sound itself. So we had similar . . . in the ways that people talked about going to concerts, you find these very similar and familiar gestures of talking about mysticism and ritual. But I also thought it was quite a good description of what drone metal does to the tradition of heavy metal. So it, for example, takes on lots of signifiers from Black Sabbath but kind-of over-extends them, and pushes them to their breaking point. So, for example, the Sleep album I mentioned earlier was described memorably by Julian Cope in a review, as if a bunch of California teenagers had found Black Sabbath's first four albums in the desert and started a religion, based on it.

DR: I love that, yes.

OC: And so you can see that just even in the sound. It's almost like taking a Black Sabbath song and extending it for an hour – sort-of almost pushing it to its limits. And I think this almost fits with de Certeau's idea of mysticism as an operation, or a performance, in a text which does something to an

inherited tradition.

DR: *So using drone metal, then, are you using it . . . . You're not so much using it as an example of mysticism, but as an example of how the language of mysticism is operated. Am I understanding . . ?*

OC: Yes.

DR: *And does that have ramifications for other . . . like, more widely for how we talk and think about mysticism?*

OC: Yes, I think so. I think that it helps to avoid some of the pitfalls of mysticism which it has – as we've described before – about conjuring this sort-of fiction of an essentialist, universalist experience, which actually relies on particular ideas about subjectivity which are rooted in a Western academic episteme, I suppose. And I think that's particularly important in our contemporary political moment where we hear references to the 20th century study of mysticism growingly in political discourse. So, for example, Steve Bannon and Richard Spencer making mention of Julius Evola. And that's a very, very problematic imagination or depiction or mobilisation of ideas about mysticism: Evola kind-of wanting to forward – as he described it – "a racism of body souls and spirit", and his sort-of involvement in the school of Fascist mysticism. So I think these ideas can certainly be taken in some very troubling ways. And I think, at root, they're often based on a kind of essentialism and universalism which can be found in relatively benign forms in ideas of Huxley and Eliade and others. But I think de Certeau gives a much more both ethically and epistemologically-grounded way of approaching mysticism. In addition to saying, "If we look at the mechanics of what happens in the texts which are called mystical, then that's actually a much more empirically-based way to look at mysticism than kind-of imagining these kind-of supposedly pure visionary experiences."

DR: *Great. So what's next for you? Where do you take this next?*

OC: Good question. I'm really interested in – as I start to talk about in the final chapter – how this kind-of relates to anthropological ideas about ritual, and how that might be connected to ideas about the connection between music and various forms of social structure and imagining social structure. So Jacques Attali's ideas about noise, for example, which I think, given that this form of music is very much about distortion and feedback and noise, I think there's maybe some interesting connections that can be made with ideas; Mary Douglas, for example, about the importance of dirt and the positioning of those things in ritual. I'm also really interested in wading into debates about heavy metal and mental health. And it's often been associated with delinquency, both in popular media moral panics, as well as

a certain kind of academic literature.

DR: *Except, in fact, heavy metal fans are statistically happier and healthier than the norm, I believe – according to a recent survey!*

OC: Yes, well I think you've got to take all of these things with a pinch of salt. I think that's perhaps why it's so interesting. Because I think the debate is so polarised. But I'd actually kind-of want to make room for the fact that maybe some kinds of music can be good for you, and other kinds of music can be bad for you, and maybe the debate's a bit more nuanced and complex than some of these polemic positions have suggested.

DR: *We love nuance, here at the Religious Studies Project, so thank you for taking part!*

OC: Thanks for inviting me. It's been very interesting.

DR: And before we go, I just want to remind the listener to rock hard, rock heavy and rock lobster!

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