

DOOM VALUES: DECELERATION PROMOTING A PHILOSOPHY OF PROGRESSION THROUGH OPPOSITES

Niall Scott and Tom O'Boyle

* University of Central Lancashire, UK

** Independent scholar / music journalist, UK

Abstract

In this paper we aim to show that the subgenre of doom metal presents an overhaul of heavy metal's values whilst simultaneously asserting them. Doom metal presents metal in opposition. Oregon's Yob have critiqued heavy metal's tradition of courting negativity, presenting leanings towards the positive, that is, negativity as a positive aspect of human predicament. Where blast beats and guitar solos accelerate, doom decelerates to the point of timelessness and immediacy, even reconnecting to the grounded down-tuned roots of heavy metal's origins. Doom opens up aural channels receptive to the social and cultural value of slowing down, an immediacy not attained by acceleration and speed achieving simultaneity, but rather deceleration and the move to inertia anticipating immediacy. The values of inertia are more attuned with weighty heaviness; Doom provides space for the ponderous, measured and reflective life in metal. Doom is at metal's margins, where counter to Jean Baudrillard's insistence that the acceleration of culture directs one towards stasis and disappearance, the slowing down and deceleration in doom and drone leads to reflective stasis and affirmation.

Metal in opposition: asserting values of metal's manifold positivity

Drone and doom metal have received scant attention in academic writing despite the style and lyrical content appearing ripe for analysis and critique, especially with regard to philosophy and theology. The association with metal and philosophical and mystical reflection has begun to find a path in metal studies, notably in the speculative field of black metal theory (Masciandaro, 2011; Wilson, 2014; Scott, 2014). Roland Bogue's work on doom death and back metal (Bogue, 2013) and recently in Aliza Shvarts and Owen Coggins's 2014 work on drone metal. Coggins has looked at drone metal and meditation and aims to encourage the treatment of the music as mystical text, both in its use in the citation and recitation of mystical text (Coggins 2014) but also as a space where language as expressing the unsayable is used against itself in the music, in line with Michel de Certeau's exploration of manners of speaking in mystical text (Coggins, 2013). The subgenre doom metal is identified originally with the early work of Black Sabbath who we will briefly return to later in this essay, and the bands St. Vitus and Candlemass (Bogue, 2013, p.99-100). Described as "the essence of doom is slow crushing riffs, long epic songs and a general atmosphere of bleakness and despair" (Sargon, 2004) doom is identified with expressions of negativity and pessimism. However this negativity is one of our targets of criticism in this paper, notably in the work of Yob, who provide the possibility an alternative perspective. Drone metal is arguably a development of doom metal, typified by long deep, resonant droning sounds built around minimalist compositions frequently lacking vocals and drums,

where the pulsating repetition of down tuned strummed chords using reverb and feedback offers its rhythmic foundation. Coggins has defined it is: “an extreme form of contemporary metal, regarded by many listeners and musicians as a radical distillation of metal’s sonic foundations in extended, down tuned, distorted droning noise.” (Coggins, 2014)

The defining features of doom and drone metal go deep into metal’s values more generally. It may be odd to try to speak of any recognizable values in heavy metal music, and scholarship has in the past number of years found it notoriously difficult to define the genre in terms of specific qualities, be they normative or aesthetic. Especially with regard to the music, the moment one alights on a characteristic sound or quality one can offer an alternative example that is just as much part of the metal canon. In this sense metal has become a tool for expression of a multitude of soundscapes. Doom and its less melodic and more minimalist half sibling, drone metal, offer such alternatives. Where thrash and speed metal are known for their speed, in virtuosic guitar shredding and frenzied physicality, the musical styles found in both drone and doom metal open a contrasting meditative space, where the music is slow, grave, low pitched and deeply resonant. Strummed, sustained guitar chords speak of a minimalism finding its crescendo in the work of the band Sunno))). Aliza Shvarts (2014) writing specifically on drone metal and Sunno))) has attempted to define it as a quality, “an ethic, a lived embodied practice of an aesthetic concern” (Shvarts, 2014, p. 203).

In this paper we seek to present some brief openings for the philosophical contemplation of doom and drone’s positive values, a turn opened up by Yob’s doom metal, notably in the manner in which they stand apart from much of the psychological negativity and despair found in the sub genre. First we argue that Yob, in present a sonic double negation as affirmation in their work (as well as some other examples in the drone/doom tradition of metal music). This then secondly opens up the opportunity to counter Baudrillard’s view of technology aiding in the acceleration of culture. The acceleration of culture through technology (including music) is a phenomenon that Baudrillard argues is to culture’s detriment. We will maintain that the negative affirmation in doom and drone counters the destructive stasis of acceleration. To assert this, we explore Theodor Adorno’s view on the dissociation of time in modern classical music and Jacques Attali’s view on noise. These provide a way of aiding the listener in exploring the metaphysical features of Yob as well as the doom and drone metal bands Sunno))), Om and Sleep that come from a slowing down, a rhythmic deceleration enabling a reflection on a tenseless auditory experience. The thoughts expressed here are preliminary reflections intended to explore the manifold opportunities to be explored in further research in the subgenres of doom and drone metal.

Yob’s most recent work *Clearing a path to Ascend*, their 7th album, sees them continue to stand apart from doom metal. They infuse “fathomless depths of intuitively grooving heft with an introspective questioning search for spiritual transcendence”(O’Boyle, 2014). The album opens with Alan Watt’s inviting voice nudging the listener: “time to wake up”. Interviewing Yob’s front man, Mike Scheidt, he says of Watts that his teachings are central to understanding Yob’s position in doom and their and their music: “For his deep wisdom, amazing breadth of knowledge and undeniable sense of humour; he was one-of-a-kind”. (O’Boyle, 2014)

Ben Ratliff further describes the album as a warming up and a warming down. In its reflective mood, Allan Watts on the album is lecturing and referring to

the Tibetan idea of awareness: Rigpa. The theme of awareness and philosophically reflective aspect of Yob's work is articulated by Ratliff:

YOB... likes slow tempos but doesn't necessarily need them; it puts more emphasis on technical flourishes and stays a bit more within the minor-key, semi-operatic and philosophical traditions of doom metal," (Ratliff, 2014)

If one were to attempt to articulate a sense of the aesthetic values expressed in metal, one could assume that at the top of the list we would find virtuosic speed exemplified in for example the blastbeat drumming in extreme metal or the guitar solo. In addition one might refer to the qualities of negativity, misanthropy, depressive solitude and so on in much of doom metal, as its name suggests. The sounds of doom we have heard all before- they have a history in metal that goes back to Sabbath and even arguably the Beatles (consider their 1968 song 'I Want You (She's so Heavy). However doom metal disrupts and dismembers this history, deconstructing the sounds of metal dismantling them in its distilled form to music's closest association to noise. The purest form of this has been drone music, where rather than the signifiers of rhythm and melody, the characteristics of volume, texture and soundscape become more significant in describing the music. Indeed noise is predominant rather than music in this work with a pinnacle of drone being the challenging minimalism generated by Sunno)))

Shvart's fascinating and creative work on Sunno))) relates drone to Socratic midwifery, with the music acting as a maieutic form of inquiry, aligning the music with birthing, bearing, reproduction and delivery. As a method of philosophical inquiry, where the subgenre positions itself as interrogating the meaning of metal itself, Shvarts describes this form of metal as *bearing*, with allusions to reproductive labour as well as weightiness (Shvarts, 2014 p. 205-206). Rather than delivering something new though, she argues that it diabolically brings something back (Shvarts, 2014 p206). What is brought back is metal's origin- the thing that makes metal what it is. This approach then, positions the music as deeply philosophical insofar as it is a music form that interrogates its own origins, not in a historical, but in a conceptual manner giving birth to its original idea. As such, Shvarts defines Sunno)))'s work as mimetic and reproductive (a point we will turn to below), reproducing what is metal about metal itself, to the point where drone and doom imitate the metal in metal music generally. (Shvarts, 2014, p.204)

Double negation as positivity

Nicola Masciandaro's early definition of Black Metal Theory provides us with a turn that is useful in understanding the path cleared by Yob where downward tunes allow for an ascent. Masciandaro gives us a quadruple negation: "Not black metal, not theory, not not black metal, not not theory" (Masciandaro, 2011). This uses negation to assert an affirmation. In musical terms this is expressed in the downward slide in bass tones and guttural descents that are followed by ascents, scaling upwards. These sonic movements head downwards and end up having an elevating effect. Thus the title of Yob's most recent release speaks to these intentions: Clearing a path to ascend. We can imagine the music analogously engaged in a deep uprooting and cutting away at the undergrowth, providing a clearing and opening a view beyond the darkness of the briar thickets. We can assert that the down tuned tones have an equivalence to negation - a sonic negation - not a negation that leads to silence but a negation that goes below. The double negation in these sonic descents is

captured in Julian Cope's review of Om's release 'Variations on a Theme', referring to doom and drone metal's origins in Black Sabbath: "The low low highs of master of reality's into the void" (Cope, J. 2012 p.496).

The double low leading to high is the musical equivalent of a double negation leading to affirmation. The mystical quality of the double negation as affirmation is found in the apophatic language tradition of Christian mysticism. Here, the negation is understood in positive terms, in the double negation and deployment of paradox. Examples concerning this are those such as the paradoxical idea of *willing nothing*, or the New Testament account of the blinding of St Paul so that he can see God; removing sight so that one can see. As the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart wrote concerning St Paul's conversion experience: "In this enveloping illumination he was thrown to the ground and his eyes were opened for him so that with his eyes open he saw all things as nothing. And when he saw all things as nothing, he saw God" (Meister Eckhart, 1986, Sermon 71). The downward throwing of St Paul to the ground paired with the blinding light, a double negation, leads to an elevation; an affirmation of insight into the nature of the divine, an insight into origins. These negations turn out to be affirmative. In William James' terms we might speak of it as "a higher kind of affirmation." (James, W. [1971]1952). Even beyond metal, drone exerts this paradoxical relationship, as Joanna Demers writes on the electronic drone loops of Celer, the "power of paring the very low with the very high", related to Thomas Korner's compositional evocation of the slow movement of the glacier (Demers, 2013).

Alain Badiou in his 2007 UCLA lecture on Passolini claimed that negation is always part of creativity, that both novelty and creativity are paradoxical expressions of negation. He divides negation into two, claiming that negation has a positive part (subtraction) and a negative part (destruction). In the political sphere he maintains both are required and that negation sits between destruction and subtraction in both artistic and political output. Of course Badiou is thinking of destruction in terms of a revolutionary overhaul- in the context of music he cites Schoenberg's destruction of the tonal system in favour of a dodecaphonic musical system. In the case of Yob alternatively, certain musical traditions are maintained and it is their precursors in doom and drone metal that have already performed the negation that allows for Yob's doom metal explore its negation as affirmation. This is true for the music as well as some of the lyrical content, for example in *Clearing a Path to Ascend's* 'Nothing to Win', the phrase negative "nothing to win" is repeated twice followed by the poetic affirmation: "Unshackle my illusions/And bleed them out/Like flesh out of its skin/Ragged and Raw/Where images end/ And living begins." (Scheidt, 2014).

Jacques Attali's work on noise maintains a position that can aid us in forwarding the affirmative feature of negation in the context of music and the work of Yob as well as other drone and doom metal. Instead of *composition*, drone and doom have ploughed a furrow in metal of *decomposition* and crisis. This is not just limited to these forms of metal and exist in further experimental forms, for example in the radical musical and philosophical challenges presented to us in the evolution of black metal, where the total noise is equivalent to a total silence. Between Black metal doom and drone, there is a pairing. Where we can associate the destructive negation with the goals of black metal, we can associate the affirmative negation in doom and drone metal. In combination these movements in metal, both black, doom and drone are the most affirmative in that they bring metal music to a point of crisis, what Attali calls the catastrophe point. These forms of metal still show and celebrate their sonic ori-

gins as Cope recognizes in Sabbath's *Master of Reality*, but they do not repeat these origins, rather they reproduce them as Shvarts has pointed out above; they are re-represented. To repeat a music form with reference only to its origins with no thought concerning creativity is to ally oneself with the mere material reproduction of the form. This is more akin to what defines pop music and its adherence to material consumerism. Attali regarding the repetition of music, correctly points out that this repetition creates disorder as nothing but an imperfect replication is produced and is furthermore thus nothing new. This is as true for recorded music being replayed as well as certain kinds of repetition of musical styles where a form is copied rather than built upon. Not just common to pop music, it is also part of metal music's culture, even in some doom metal, where it succumbs to the demands of the popular. One could for example cite Orchid's 2013 *The Mouths of Madness* as not simply a tribute to Black Sabbath, but almost a replication of Black Sabbath's early work with some acquired doom metal insertions of Electric Wizard's tunes. Yob however are recognized as both creatively progressive and humble to their origins:

"Given the almost intangible sense of 'otherness' to their music, an atmosphere that somehow elevates the music beyond the ponderous power and effortless immediacy of the riffs, it is hard not to be drawn to investigating the more progressive elements of the band's sound. Rather than the genre tag for a bunch of artists rehashing the sounds of the Seventies, Yob are among the few who seem to truly fit the definition in terms of genuine innovation within their field, yet it is with humility that Scheidt responds to such opinions. "We do incorporate some elements that are maybe not heard often in doom, but we don't entertain the notion that we are progressing the style, outside of our own band progression. We are writing what moves us, and that's pretty much it." (O' Boyle, 2014)

Using Attali's language we can claim that the network of codes and values explored by metal music "can be destroyed by noises that attack and transform it" (Attali, 2007 p. 33) He continues holding: "Although the new order is not contained in the structure of the old, it is nonetheless not a product of chance. It is created by the substitution of new differences for old differences. For despite the death it contains, noise carries order within itself; it carries new information." (Attali, 2007 p. 33) The opportunity that Sleep and Sunno))) have opened up in drone through the use of noise in a destructive and subtraction form allow for Yob's ascension. In this way, the affirmation in Yob's music treats the creative development of doom and drone metal as the clearing pathway, not just as meditative practice and text, as Coggin's work affirms, but also as metal's musical and philosophical evolution.

Acceleration towards the static

Now this rhythmic slowing down and negation runs counter to Baudrillard's concern regarding the (mis)use of technology and the reproduction and acceleration of culture, eventually leading everything to disappear into a void. Instead of accelerating to a static state, doom and its temporal evolution to drone metal slow down to a different kind of stasis, one that is qualitatively different from the worry that Baudrillard expresses. By way of explanation, Baudrillard (1995) cites Arthur C Clarke's fable of the Tibetan monk's devotion to transcribing the 99 billion names of God. Once they achieve this task, the world will be finished and the end inaugurated. Boredom ensues in the endless task of searching for the names of God and it becomes too much to bear, so they pass the onerous task over to the facilities at IBM, who using their computing power

rapidly accelerate the discovery of all the names of God. But as they do they are initially unaware when they go home after work that one by one all the stars in the night sky vanish. As the names of God are uncovered in computer (virtual) time, the world ends in real time. Baudrillard sees this fable as illustrative of technology accelerating humanity to the abolition of time- to a state of pure stasis, “towards a pure and simple disappearance.” (Baudrillard, p. 102). Baudrillard refers specifically to music in with regard to this disappearance- music technology that allows for high fidelity output music that is expurgated of all noise. “disappearance of the music by excess of fidelity, by the promiscuity of the music and its absolute technical model.” (ibid, p.104)

However, rather than accelerating, doom and drone’s disruption uses technology to return to noise by slowing down; a deceleration. This deceleration is not only a movement towards the static but towards a realization of immediacy; a stasis of a different quality arrived at through acceleration. Deceleration allows for a contemplative space to be opened up, hence the focus on self-reflection and awareness in the music form as explored in Coggin’s work on drone and Shvart’s earlier cited description of drone metal’s capacity to interrogate itself and bring back something that was, rather than it being an entirely novel creation. With this in mind, it is interesting that much of this subgenre of metal’s music is made available on analogue LP recordings; a return to vinyl, for example Throne records who aim only promote and sell doom recordings on vinyl with one of their main signings Japan’s Corrupted As the website announced: “Most of the announced CD releases have been discarded in friendly agreement with the bands, due to the very few distributors, stores and labels selling compact disc format nowadays. Throne used to be a vinyl-only label back in 2008, and it seems I’ll continue alongside that path for most of the upcoming releases.” (<http://thronerecords.wordpress.com/category/www-thronerecs-com/>) The stasis that is reached, described by Bogue as ‘a curious stasis “that pervades the ubiquitous high speed motifs.” (Bogue, 2004 p.103) Reinforcing the affirmative paradox in its temporal structure where he continues his observation specifically regarding death metal, but this is also relevant to doom and drone, that it is like a plateau of intense constant energy, with its own mood.... Full of motion but going nowhere in particular...” (Bogue, 2004, p.103)

Timelessness

Noise as the disruption of order gives way to a new order, but paradoxically as Shvarts has asserted regarding drone metal, a mimetic bringing back rather than a novel creation. Doom and drone in its slowing down to the anticipation of a static state allows for reflection. Each hum, sound beat and strum give space for reflection and meditation. There is a sequence: sound –reflection- and sound. However in this sequence although in one sense it is temporally ordered, one has a sonic experience coming close to an eternal present, the plateau that Bogue refers to above, especially where the drone dominates over and above rhythm. “With the beacons of rhythm and tonality largely absent, ideas of texture and volume become necessarily significant.” (Bland, 2013)

This experience of listening, which fundamentally escapes a verbal analysis or description further resonates with Adorno’s argument concerning modern music’s dissociation with time. The dissociation of musical progression with time he claims is the foundation of “all great music since Bach” (Adorno, 2007 p.136.) Here he speaks of Stravinsky’s eradication of time, made possible by rhythmic tricks. Likewise in Yob’s work in *Clearing a Path to Ascend* we hear regressive features of metal’s rhythmic compositional history, but also the ti-

melessness brought on by Sunno))) and Sleep's drone metal. Metal is brought back, and reintroduced to itself in an affirmation asserted through a sonic interrogation of what metal is. This is analogous to that which Adorno associates with Stravinsky's experience based on Impressionist art movement. Furthermore, Adorno refers to a feature in Debussy's work that is also common to the drone and doom metal listening experience- the initial naïve anticipation for the next movement, the waiting for in expected frustration of next temporal sign given to us by an addiction to a certain kind of habit formed musical structure. "Throughout anyone of his [Debussy's] the naïve ear listens tensely, asking 'whether it is coming'; everything appears to be a prelude, the overture to musical fulfillment, to the organic resolution of the *Abgesang* [sic]- which however never arrives." Adorno, p. 136) Instead, in listening to Yob's *Clearing a Path to Ascend*, we are challenged not to anticipate, not to accelerate forward in thought but simply reflect, meditatively on the possibility of being awake in the present: Time to Wake Up! This inertia and heaviness clearing a space for thought, an emergence from a frenetic cave like slumber, is an invitation made available by the music itself- a form of listening that leads to philosophical reflection.

Yob's Mike Scheidt attests to this (O'Boyle 2014), and claims he uses music to be the best person he can possibly be- striving to ascend but realizing ones own shortcomings. Thus Yob's doom metal in its very (de) composition provides an other-worldly space to contemplate and escape the frantic destruction encountered day to day in a world dictated by acceleration and speed. It's low - low highs enabling a progression through embracing the sonic opposites: depth leading to ascension, negation leading to affirmation.

Bibliography

- Adorno, T. (2007) *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, Continuum: London
- Attali, J. (2011) *Noise, The Political Economy of Music*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.
- Badiou, A. (2007) Destruction Negation Subtraction – on Pier Paolo Pasolini UCLA lecture, <http://www.lacan.com/badpas.htm>
- Baudrillard, J. (1995) The Virtual Illusion: Or the Automatic Writing of the World *Theory Culture and Society* Vol.12, pp. 97-107.
- Bogue, R. (2004) Violence in Three Shades of Metal: Death, Doom and Black, M. Buchanan and M. Swiboba, *Deleuze and Music*, Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, pp. 95-117.
- Bergson, H. (1971) *Time and Free Will*, Unwin press: New York.
- Bland, B. (2013) Music vs Noise 01 Why Drone is Music's Ultimate Artform <http://echoesanddust.com/2013/03/music-vs-noise-01-why-drone-is-musics-ultimate-art-form/sunn-o/> accessed 29/12/14
- Coggins, O. (2013) Mountains of Silence Drone Metal Recordings as Mystical Texts, *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 2 (4)
- Coggins, O. (2014) Citation and Recitation in Mystical Scholarship and Om's Drone Metal, *Diskus The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 16(1)pp.30-48
- Cope, J. (2012) *Copendium*, Faber: New York.
- Demers, J. (2013) Ambient Drone and Apocalypse, *Current Musicology*, No 95, Spring, pp. 103-112
- Masciandaro, N. (2011) Hideous Gnosis, open press: New York.
- Meister Eckhardt, (1986) Sermon 71 in: B. McGinn(ed), *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher* Paulist Press: New York.
- O'Boyle, T. (2014) Time to Wake Up, Iron Fist Magazine, Issue 12 Oct/Nov, pp.84-85
- Orchid (2013) The Mouths of Madness, Nuclear Blast recordings.
- Ratcliffe, B. (2014) New Music from Earth, Yob and Jeezy http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/02/arts/music/new-music-from-earth-yob-and-jeezy.html?_r=0 Accessed 01/12/2014
- Sargon the Terrible, (2004) Genres, <http://www.metalcrypt.com/genres.php#doom>
- Scott, N. (2014) seasons in the Abyss: Heavy Metal as Liturgy *Diskus The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 16.1 pp. 12-29
- Shvarts, A. (2014) Troubled Air: The Drone and Doom of Reproduction in Sunno)))'s Metal Maieutic, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24(2-3) pp.203-219.
- Wilson, S. (2014) *Melachology*, London: Zero Books
- Yob (2014) *Clearing a Path to Ascend*, Neurot Recordings.