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SOUNDS OF THE UNDERGROUND: A CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND AESTHETIC MAPPING OF UNDERGROUND AND FRINGE MUSIC, STEPHEN GRAHAM (2016)

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To a metal fan time travelling from the 1970s, it would seem barely believable how far metal's tendrils now extend. Aside from the demographic and generic diversity of today's metal culture, this once critically reviled form has now penetrated the most rarified aesthetic citadels. It is commonplace now to find metal acts exploring the farthest reaches of musical experimentation and receiving praise from critics and audiences who eschew anything that smacks of commonplace musical forms. Publications such as *The Wire* and *Pitchfork* see no contradiction between the most elevated forms of musical discernment and coverage of metal (albeit highly selective coverage of metal). This extension of metal's territory poses challenges to those who seek to understand metal's scenic context. Metal's scenic infrastructure is for the most part, while definitely not insulated from the rest of the music industry, quasi-autonomous, with its own traditions and idiosyncrasies that mark it out as a separate space. Of course, at the more commercial end, metal has long interpenetrated the wider music industry. Now, metal interpenetrates a much more diffuse – and much less understood – scenic space. Stephen Graham, in his important new book, understands that space as the 'underground', a term also in common use in punk, metal itself and other scenes, but used in a particular way here to describe: '[...] noncommercial forms of music making that exist in a kind of loosely integrated cultural space on the fringes and outside mainstream

pop and classical genres' (vii). More specifically, he points to the following as examples of the underground:

[...] noise artists such as Werewolf Jerusalem, the New Blockaders, Prurient, Hijokaidan, SPK, and Ramleh [...] more or less obscure black metal artists such as Lord Foul, Leviathan, Wolok, and Xasthur [...] improvisers such as Okkyung Lee, Maggie Nicols, Annette Krebs, and Axel Dörner. (4)

Graham makes the case for considering these diverse musical forms together:

The shared radical aesthetics and cultural marginality of these musics places them into some kind of continuum, notwithstanding important subcultural genre differences between them; extreme metal has its own scene economies when placed against, say, improv, as noise does likewise. But these don't cancel out the many cultural, aesthetic, and political interrelations we can see across these musics. We've long had words, however imperfect, to describe classical and popular and traditional musics. But my argument here is that we need a new term to supplement these monolithic categories in order to describe (and, yes, effectively institutionalize) the activity that falls between their cracks. (ibid.)

This idea of the underground as a conglomeration of musics that 'fall between the cracks' of better known and better-established genres is an intriguing one. In the case of extreme metal, we only have to consider the suspicion of 'hipster metal' in some metal scenes to understand that the most experimental forms of metal may sometimes find a warmer reception in music scenes devoted to experimentation rather than to metal.

Graham's study is an exemplary one, which deserves to be read by anyone who aspires to undertake a 'holistic' (my term) study of a music scene. His research is impressively thorough, combining detailed case studies of labels, festivals and other forms of scenic infrastructure, together with a similarly close study of the lives of musicians and other scenic personnel (the attention paid to how musicians make money, or do not make money, is especially welcome). The 'music itself' is certainly not neglected, and Graham displays considerable facility in finding a language that can describe such tricky forms as noise and drone (his analysis of Sunn O)))'s 'Aghartha' is a particular highlight).

Graham's chapter on extreme metal, which focuses on black metal and drone, is no less detailed and knowledgeable than his analysis of improvisational musics, noise and other forms. He grapples with situating extreme metal simultaneously within the underground and within the wider metal context:

This extreme metal music has to be understood as an enigmatic (global) scenic singularity whose members comprise something like a 'neotribe' (equating to 'a certain ambience, a state of mind'), a singularity that nevertheless connects to and is even subsumed more generally by the global underground. In its resistance and obscurity this metal music must be considered to be of that underground, even as it sunders

community and unity in its music and behavior. In this way, the music provides a critique of global forms of capitalist production in a manner to be expected of underground music but also embodies the radical individualism that is the engine of that very globalism. (218)

He goes on to argue:

In these ways the extreme metal scene is of the underground, while also commercially and aesthetically sitting closer to its fringes (although many black metal acts entertain miniscule audiences throughout their careers), verging on popular music forms as it does. Yet as I've said, it is also set apart from it as a neotribal singularity. (221)

This seems to be an acceptably subtle formulation. On the other hand, Graham does not seem to fully appreciate the intimate connection between the more experimental forms of extreme metal and the more 'commercial' forms. While he offers a fine analysis of the work of Xasthur, he does not really seem to want to embrace the fact that Xasthur and Cradle of Filth (to give one example) are both part of a network of interrelationships that mean that neither can sever themselves from each other, however much they perhaps might like to.

As I have argued elsewhere, it is precisely that interrelationship between the more avant-garde and more populist versions of metal that is so pregnant with possibilities. Noise and other underground genres that Graham discusses are almost completely severed from the wider global musical culture. There are few paths in and few paths out. In contrast, metal seems to allow for a more complex relationship between the popular and the experimental; in doing so, allowing for the possibility that the avant-garde may resist the splendid isolation it often finds itself in other artistic genres.

A fuller engagement with the wider metal scene might also have forced Graham to confront other issues that are largely missing from his study. Although he discusses in some detail the complex politics of the underground as it applies to wider social forces, he does not engage that much in the internal politics of the scene. There is little in *Sounds of the Underground* of forms of subcultural capital and distinction, nor on how gender and race work intra-scenically. This is in contrast to much of the scholarly work on metal studies that, since its inception, has grappled intensively with the often-problematic forms of power and capital that are reproduced within metal scenes. Of course, in metal, one almost has no option but to do so, given how far metal's politics often jar with the critical orientation of most metal scholars. The underground might seem to provide a much better 'fit' between its own preoccupations and those of critically minded scholars (if for no other reason than that it is full of practitioners who are well-versed in critical theory), but that does not mean that its internal politics do not deserve close scrutiny.

Such caveats aside, this is a fine work of scholarship, impeccably researched and written. The importance of the underground in metal can only increase as metal's restless creativity continues to spread wider, making Graham's map of this territory an essential guide to one of metal's futures.