

The Invocation at Tilburg: Mysticism, Implicit Religion and Gravetemple's Drone Metal

by Owen Coggins

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On 18th April 2013, an extremely slow, loud and noisy “drone metal” band Gravetemple perform at the Roadburn heavy metal and psychedelic rock festival in Tilburg in the Netherlands. After forty-five minutes of gradually intensifying, largely improvised droning noise, the band reach the end of their set. Guitarist Stephen O'Malley conjures distorted chords, controlled by a bank of effects pedals; vocalist Attila Csihar, famous for his time as singer for notorious and controversial black metal band Mayhem, ritualistically intones invented syllables that echo monastic chants; experimental musician Oren Ambarchi extracts strange sounds from his own looped guitar before moving to a drumkit to propel a scattered, urgent rhythm. Momentum overtaking him, a drumstick slips from Ambarchi's hand, he breaks free of the drum kit, grabs for a beater, turns, and smashes the gong at the centre of the stage. For two long seconds the all-encompassing rumble that has amassed throughout the performance drones on with a kind of relentless inertia, still without a sonic acknowledgement of the visual climax. Finally, the pulsating wave from the heavily amplified gong reverberates through the corporate body of the audience, felt in physical vibration more than heard as sound. The musicians leave the stage, their abandoned instruments still expelling squalling sounds which gradually begin to dissipate. Listeners breathe out, perhaps open their eyes, raise their heads, shift their feet and awaken enough to clap and shout appreciation, before turning to friends or strangers, reaching for phrases and gestures, often in a vocabulary of ritual, mysticism and transcendence, which might become touchstones for recollection and communication of their individual and shared experience.

2.1 Introduction: Implicit Religion, Experience and Mysticism

This paper emerges from a study of a short European tour by drone metal band Gravetemple in April 2013, part of my doctoral research into the uses of religious, spiritual or mystical sounds, words, symbols, images and practices, by listeners and musicians in drone metal music, an extreme and marginal (though influential) subgenre of contemporary heavy metal. An engagement with an Implicit Religion framework seems appropriate, given the

commitments, integrating foci and concern with extensive effects that are clearly discernible in drone metal's practices, while frequent appeals to the (symbolic, visual, sonic and verbal) language of religious experience and mysticism, for some listeners, strongly associate drone metal with some kind of religiosity.

In introducing the idea of implicit religion, Edward Bailey touches upon the colloquial uses of religious terminology to describe everyday experiences or practices: reading newspapers "religiously," for example (2012:203). Similarly, while wishing to leave room for the ambiguities and varied contexts of everyday speech, and acknowledging that an implicit religion perspective allows for diverse, non-unified beliefs and practices (Walters 2013:1), I take seriously the religious associations of the vocabulary (symbolic, sonic, visual as well as verbal) used in drone metal discourse. In contrast with Bailey's pub and suburb (1997; 1998), the symbols and language of spirituality, mysticism, and religious experience are commonly and coherently used and understood in drone metal's discourse and culture, as well as in other music cultures that have been theorised in relation to implicit religion (electronic dance music raves, in Gauthier 2005; the music and stardom of Prince, in Till 2010; Straight Edge Punk, in Stewart 2012). Despite frequent uses of a vocabulary associated with religion, like the pub and suburb and Gauthier's raves, drone metal is not described as "a religion" by participants, contrasting with Straight Edge punk as described by Stewart, which uses religion-derived symbols and iconography in a related way but also includes the performance of stating 'punk rock is my religion' (Stewart 2012:267).

An issue with implicit religion is its starting point in a somewhat ambiguous idea of "experience" (of 'secular mysticism' (Bailey 1998:4), in 'transcendent experience' (1998:7), in 'a brief experience of ecstasy' (1998:24), and so on). The term "experience" can mask problematic assumptions about universal subjectivity, a difficulty which underpins much other scholarship on mysticism and religious experience, on both sides of the perennialist-constructivist debates (see, for example, the long-running discussions in the edited volumes Katz 1978;1983;1992). Attempts are made in the study of mysticism, and in scholarship on implicit religion, to avoid such reliance on experience by including real and lasting effects (e.g. James 1902, Huxley 1945), or, in IR terms, 'intensive concern with extensive effects' (Bailey 1998:23, Gauthier 2005:250). Yet in discussing how the value of an "experience" is integrated into life, the category itself is unchallenged.

Cogniscent of both Joan Scott's critique of how such a universal, pre-theoretical category of "experience" can deny differently constituted subjectivities (J. Scott 1991), and Richard Sharf's attention to its implications for studying religious experience (Sharf 1995), I

also draw upon the work of Michel de Certeau on mysticism. Certeau acknowledges with Scott the everyday ubiquity of the idea of experience, and does not deny that experiences take place (1992:15). Certeau does, however, avoid problematic essentialism of “experience” by turning to texts and practices (respectively, in religious history’s lost events read in reconstructed documentary traces (1988, 1996); and the consumption of popular culture texts read as another kind of production (1984)): relevant, therefore, for this enquiry into religiosity and drone metal’s texts and practices. Further, Certeau is deeply concerned with the mystical, in both explicit and implicitly religious forms (St. Teresa, Labadie and John of the Cross; but also Hieronymus Bosch, psychoanalysis and 20th Century poetry (1992)), reading the mystical as a manner of speaking which, simultaneously orthodox and heretical, is firmly grounded in a particular mode of communication while performatively highlighting its limitations and interrogating its foundations.

Against a history of mysticism conceived as unitary experience imperfectly rendered in texts, mysticism in drone metal can be understood in experience of texts. Such texts include recorded sound and surrounding imagery; performance practices and the noise of concerts; previews, reviews and other material produced around events and recordings; and in written, read, spoken and heard discourse: all texts which refer back to an existing tradition of drone metal texts, while constituting the background for new experiences of texts to emerge. While avoiding debates about perennialism, this approach also allows for a conception of implicit religion that does not rely on problematic understandings of experience, yet still addresses the language that participants ordinarily use about mysticism, spirituality, and indeed, religious experience. Beyond this, a comparison with another kind of event portrayed by Certeau, allows consideration of the interplay of explicitly religious language and implicitly religious practice. Like the pub and the church, such a contrast will confront ways in which these events, and the compilations of texts that are produced around them, are ‘in some ways identical, and in other ways, mirror-like, reflecting [...] in reverse’ (Bailey 1997:169). I will introduce Certeau’s *The Possession at Loudon* (1996), a text which collects texts about an instance of “religious experience,” a demonic manifestation of socio-religious tensions which is interpreted, directed, and finally reproduced, as a touring performance of secular authority. Then I will turn to the parallels and inversions in my own arrangement of texts surrounding Gravetemple’s secular touring performance, in which emerge invocations of mystical experience and religious symbols, words and sounds.

3.1 Events, Documents and Writing History

In *The Possession*, a historical work about an incident of demonic possession and the consequent burning of a sorcerer-priest in 17th Century France, Certeau uses his own framing of the lost event to elucidate his historiographical methodology, the book serving as an experimental demonstration of his more theoretical work, *The Writing of History* (1988). By arranging and re-presenting a collection of texts relating to the incident, Certeau reminds historians and anthropologists to examine the contingent institutional and contextual circumstances that determine their own paths through archives and documents; itineraries which constitute the histories that they write. Rather than obscuring his own position as editor, selector and director, or claiming to provide a “complete” dossier, Certeau instead presents a kind of theatrical production, which explores how the possession itself became a theatre for certain contemporary struggles, and which also brings the reader behind the scenes of Certeau’s own staging of history.

For Certeau, the demonic outbreak of possession provides a point of rupture around which new social relations crystallized, as competing interpretative schema are anxiously proposed in order to contain and explain the disorder. The possessed women’s voices and bodies create and mark a crisis, around which exorcists, confessors, doctors and apothecaries, jurists and statesmen negotiate the language of a transition in which the fragmented power of the church becomes subservient to that of the state. Subsequently, when the contest is resolved (the new authorities having determined, defined and controlled the meaning of the possession) order is restored. The possession then becomes a spectacle, a repeated performance of the new epistemological order played out for curious onlookers, exaggerated to impress visiting nobles, and eventually taken on tour.

Gravetemple make extended, abstract noise which emerges from the powerful, heavily amplified and distorted guitar and bass tones of heavy metal, and is part of a loose genre known as (amongst other names) drone metal. The band performed five shows on their European tour of April 2013; two at Café Oto, a small venue in north London, one each in Belgium and Paris, and finally, on the opening day of the Roadburn heavy metal and psychedelic rock festival in Tilburg, Netherlands. I attended three of the five performances, in London and Tilburg, conducting participant observation fieldwork and speaking to audience members about their expectations and experiences. I constructed a short online survey about the performance, to which I posted links in event webpages. The survey asked about demographics and merchandise, and included one more qualitative question, “Please describe your experience of the Gravetemple performance.” I collected 29 survey responses, and seven

people left contact details, from which four interviews were conducted (three in person and one via email). A fifth interview was conducted via Skype with a Roadburn attendee who contacted me via Facebook. Before and after the concerts I monitored online promotional materials, event pages, video clips, comments, reviews and forum discussions.

Here, I'll attempt to follow Certeau's example in tracing my own methodological path through the documents, phrases and images that circulate around Gravetemple's drone metal. While the experience of drone metal sound is often described by listeners as indescribable (frequently before launching into elaborate description), or in other ways reminiscent of the "mystical experiences" that are the subject of scholarship from James to Huxley and beyond, I focus on descriptions as communications, rather than attempting to grasp "experience" itself. I hope to show how expectations, experiences, and reports of drone metal are produced within a framework of material, textual, symbolic or sonic integrating foci: concert posters, promotional writings, observations, reviews, video clips, online comments, merchandise, and of course, live and recorded sound. Again following Certeau, I reproduce many of these sources extensively here, not so as to lend an illusory completeness to this interpretation, but to highlight the position of each piece in a network of documentation, suggesting the possibilities of other paths that other analyses might have taken. I have left all cited texts as they originally appear regarding spelling and any italicized, bold, underlined, or capitalised words.

3.2 Previews and Promotional Texts: Integrating Foci as Background to Experience

In the weeks leading up to the tour, two key texts appeared online which advertised, anticipated, and framed the reception of the live performances: a short promotional text, and a poster image. The information in the text and image contributed to expectation around the concerts, particularly when the only other information sources available were variations of the same text on other websites. Different variations of text and image appeared, on the website of the band's tour agent Odyssey Bookings (which may have been where they originated); on a preview page for the Roadburn festival; on event pages for the London shows on websites such as Last.fm and Facebook; on websites for ticket sales, music and event listings; and in other virtual places where potential attendees might have sought or stumbled upon information about live music. One iteration is reproduced in full below:

Gravetemple is the name given to the line-up of Attila Csihar, Stephen O'Malley and Oren Ambarchi. The trio formed in United States in the summer of 2006 to perform a

series of live shows in Israel, while Israel was engaged in the 2006 Lebanon War. In Summer 2008 the trio reformed together with Australian drummer Matt “Skitz” Sanders for a short European tour. This band is not to be confused with the Burial Chamber Trio which consists of a similar line-up but with Greg Anderson instead of Stephen O’Malley. Gravetemple released *The Holy Down* in 2007 through Southern Lord Records; *Ambient/Ruin* in 2008 and *Le Vampire de Paris* in 2009 were Self-released. In late 2009 the original trio reconvened for a special one-off concert at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts. April 2013 marks the first set of live action since that period, and a new chapter in the ongoing system of the related network. GRAVETEMPLE clearly adapted the aspects more abstract and experimental related to SUNN O))) and has continued from that point, with continued ongoing focus on metaphysical construction of free music and will.

Gravetemple is a sacred metaphor & psychedelic spiritual abstraction. They combine metal instrumentation with feedback, drones and minimalist composition. Expect a disorientating mix of lighting and sonic power, and an unforgettable physiological experience, communicated via a wall of amplification (Last.fm 2013a).

The text performs three main functions. Firstly, it situates Gravetemple in relation to connected musical projects with common personnel (SunnO))) and Burial Chamber Trio), and sets out who is and isn’t in the band. Secondly, it establishes a directory of Gravetemple texts, in listing previously released recordings, and previous tours, with locations, dates and record labels cited. Finally, departing from these established and establishing facts, it turns to a kind of description which functions both as advertisement and template for the projected experience. Many sites did not reproduce the shorter paragraph, despite its more explicit (if cryptic) descriptive preview of the sound and performances. Other sites retained just the first line, ‘Gravetemple is a sacred metaphor & psychedelic spiritual abstraction,’ sometimes in quotation marks but without attribution. The sentence also appears, similarly obscurely, in tiny writing on the album cover of the rereleased *Ambient/Ruin* vinyl and CD albums (2013a) that were on sale at the concerts. The full text, in English, appears for the shows in London as well as the internationally-focused festival in the Netherlands.

For the Paris performance, at the Sonic Protest festival, the following text (in French) appeared on the website for the event. Visually scanning, rather than reading the full text, reveals the same functions as the English paragraph, with bold and italic text retained from the original:

Gravetemple regroupe **Stephen O’Malley** (*Sunn O*)), *Burning Witch, KTL, Khanate...*), **Attila Csihar** (*Sunn O*)), *Mayhem*), et le guitariste expérimental **Oren Ambarchi** lui aussi membre régulier de *Sunn O*)). Ces trois fortes personnalités des musiques expérimentales qui évoluent aux frontières du métal, explorent des matières abstraites et intenses et créent ainsi une version improvisée de l’ambient doom. Leur univers sombre et obscur est recouvert d’ondes électriques effrayantes. Le drone mortuaire engendré par les déflagrations de guitares ténébreuses laisse apparaître le chant inquiétant du chanteur de black metal **Attila Csihar**, tout droit

sorti d'une décharge d'outre-tombe.

Le trio s'est formé en 2006 à l'occasion d'une tournée en Israël, le pays étant alors engagé dans la guerre du Liban. Prolifique chef de file des musiques drone-doom, **Stephen O'Malley** est réputé pour des performances vécues comme des moments de soulèvement, où la narration extrêmement lente et les volumes élevés déclenchent l'écoute du corps tout entier. Outre ses nombreuses collaborations, pour la plupart des musiciens outsiders (*Keiji Haino, Merzbow...*), il compose également pour les spectacles de la chorégraphie / metteur en scène *Gisèle Vienne (Kindertotenlieder (2007), This is How You Will Disappear (2010), Eternelle Idole (2009))*.

Attila Csihar, officiant également sous le pseudonyme de *Void*, est un chanteur hongrois de black metal. Il est connu pour sa participation à *Tormentor* de 1987 à 1991, puis au groupe norvégien *Mayhem* en 1993 sur l'album mythique *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas*, et de 2004 à aujourd'hui avec l'album *Ordo Ad Chao*. Sur scène, selon les performances, il campe des personnages tous aussi étranges les uns que les autres. Ses techniques vocales uniques lui ont valu des collaborations avec *Current 93, Jarboe* ou *Emperor*. Il a également participé (en tant qu'acteur) à une adaptation théâtrale anglaise du mythe de Dracula aux côtés du poète sonore et improvisateur *Phil Minton*. Étonnant, non ?

Oren Ambarchi est un expérimentateur vivant à Sydney, en Australie. Guitariste de formation, il est aussi à l'aise dans l'interprétation de structures fragiles et aérées dignes d'*Alvin Lucier* ou *Morton Feldman* [sic] que dans la production de sons immersifs qui lui ont valu d'être un invité régulier de *Sunn O)))*. Multi-instrumentiste, il a collaboré avec *Fennesz, Otomo Yoshihide, Pimmon, Keiji Haino, John Zorn, Rizili, Voice Crack, Jim O'Rourke, Keith Rowe, Phill Niblock, Dave Grohl, Gunter Müller, Evan Parker, Z'ev, Toshimaru Nakamura, Peter Rehberg* ou *Merzbow*. C'est la première apparition du trio sur scène depuis 2009. (Sonic Protest 2013).

The whole text is an exegesis of the proper name “Gravetemple,” which starts the paragraph. The key constitutive elements are the names of the three musicians, Stephen O'Malley, Attila Csihar and Oren Ambarchi, collected together in bold text at the beginning, then repeated with a fuller elaboration on each name. Each musician is situated in a constellation (marked in italics and with anchoring dates) of experimental musicians, important recordings, and even theatre productions and choreographers with whom the individuals have collaborated. These reference points, together with genre coordinates (named in English: ambient doom, drone, drone-doom, black metal) locate and legitimate the artistic credentials of the musicians, and, by extension, the festival, the curators and the audience (of the paragraph and of the festival), while also incorporating each into Gravetemple's history. This positioning of the performers' names amongst so many other names, dates and genres on the page also served the practical purpose of highlighting this particular webpage and event, for anyone searching the internet for any combination of these terms.

Both English and French paragraphs included a version of the sentence about the band's formation: ‘The trio formed in United States in the summer of 2006 to perform a series of live shows in Israel, while Israel was engaged in the 2006 Lebanon War’ (Last.fm

2013a) and ‘Le trio s’est formé en 2006 à l’occasion d’une tournée en Israël, le pays étant alors engagé dans la guerre du Liban’ (Sonic Protest 2013). The foregrounding of the Israel-Lebanon conflict may be intended simply to provide a partial explanation for the band’s genesis, and may function rhetorically to associate a sense of drama and danger with the band’s music as a founding myth. One London audience member had clearly assimilated this narrative: ‘Although [Gravetemple’s 2007 album] *The Holy Down* was a lot darker, I think, that had like more of a war vibe going on, because of course they were in Israel.’ Conversely, Roadburn attendee and Israel resident Daniel Arom suggested the connection might be a more generalized mythologizing of Israel as sacred site/holy land, as is evident elsewhere in drone metal (see Coggins 2013:26-7). As these responses show, certain foci may draw diverse responses and interpretations, with varying degrees of religiosity implied. While consistent with a tendency for implicit religion to have looser structures of belief and behaviour, it is important to note that some listeners see no such spirituality, mysticism or religiosity in their actions and participation, and might deny strongly such associations.

Elsewhere, a further element of Gravetemple’s textual presentation was reproduced by another Roadburn attendee, who integrates into his written description part of the abstract phrase from the vinyl album cover and promotional paragraph:

You described the performance as ‘mind-blowing.’ Could you explain a bit more what you meant by that?

This whole gig was like a dark ceremony. I mean Attila Csihar was standing behind an altar of noise mixing tools and doing his low, weird, dark voice “experiments” like a high priest. In an addition the drone sound of Stephan [sic] O’Malley and Oren Ambarchi, which were very loud and slow, captured the listener to a slow journey of on metaphysical construction of free music and will. What more can you expect from a show! So the output was mind-blowing!

The poster image was designed by Costin Chioreanu, respected designer of metal album art and posters, and in-house artist for the Roadburn 2013 festival. The poster is an adaptation of an engraving in Athanasius Kircher’s 1676 book *Sphinx Mystagoga*, suggested by Stephen O’Malley as a starting point for Chioreanu. A copy of the Kircher engraving (rather than the Chioreanu design) with the event details superimposed, was used as the poster image on a Sonic Protest event webpage (Last.fm 2013c), and on the booking agent’s website (Odyssey Booking 2013). The Chioreanu design appeared on the Roadburn official website (Roadburn 2013), while both designs were posted on Stephen O’Malley’s blog/record label site *Ideologic Organ* (O’Malley 2012).

[Figure 1 near here]

Figure 1. From left to right: Athanasius Kircher engraving, c1676; Costin Chioreanu “The Sound of Stones” Gravetemple Roadburn poster; Sonic Protest promotional image using the Kircher image reversed.

The image extends the evocative if esoteric atmosphere, linking directly the band’s name with the sarcophagus and pyramids: literal “grave-temples.” One interviewee attested enthusiastically to the congruence of image and concert, describing both as evoking ‘monolithic landscapes and a kind of a-religious mysticism,’ while the large stone suspended in the air reminded him of a particular track by SunnO))), which both suggested ‘entrance into some sort of inner world’. Another interviewee agreed that the image ‘matches the sound perfect[ly], because the person in front worships something unknown.’

These interlinked texts, proper names and images form a network in which drone metal is understood, but also through which drone metal experience is constituted for listeners. Modes of communication, particularly online, have been noted as integrating foci in music cultures, along with ways of dressing and bodily expression (Stewart 2012, 2014; Till 2010:151), and musical sound itself (Gauthier 2005:243). Despite my presentation here of foci that set a scene prior to one particular series of events, these foci are always both “before” and “after,” in that they must refer to previous events and texts if they are to be understood in a common idiom, and they prepare a field into which any new texts and events emerge.

3.3 Situating Gravetemple

Any event occurs within this kind of field, where a context is formed for reception and interpretation. In much of the contextual field specifically relating to Gravetemple (recordings, performances, and responses to them, all under the sign of that proper name), tropes are employed which hint towards religion or occultism, such as album titles *The Holy Down* (2007) and *Le Vampire de Paris* (2009), and an image of an altar-like construction as background to the band’s Facebook page (Gravetemple 2013b).

[Figure 2 near here]

Figure 2. Gravetemple “altar,” featuring album cover design for The Holy Down (2007) in the centre, used as background to the band’s Facebook page.

Related sounds, images and texts form a constellation of points, which then affect the way musical experience is understood. On music website Last.fm, users click to add “tags” to band names to describe their style of music. These tags make explicit the functions of genre names, enabling viewers to navigate to other similarly-tagged music. For Gravetemple, the list of tags was as follows (original spellings retained):

ambient, american, atilla, attila csihar, avant-garde, avant-garde or experimental, black metal, csihar, csihar attila, dark ambient, doom, doom metal, drone, drone ambient, drone doom, drone doom metal, drone metal, experimental, heavy drone, improv, jew metal, latenight, minimal, minimalism, music I want to try, music to go insane to, noise, noiseambient, ntbc, oren ambarchi physical, relaxing, ritual ambient, seen live, sludge, sludge metal, southern lord, special, stephen omalley, subbass, sweet to listen, under 2000 listeners, usa, want to listen to (Last.fm 2013b).

Site visitors use tags to situate and describe a band’s sound, to categorize and organize their own musical tastes, and to signpost aspects of the band’s sound considered important. The most commonly attached tags are established genre labels and hybrid subgenres (drone, doom, ambient, noise, noiseambient, drone doom metal, drone ambient). As in the promotional paragraphs, the musicians’ names also appear as categories relevant to users, as does the name of their record label (Southern Lord). Other tags are more subjective, focusing on experienced, expected or projected responses: ‘physical’, ‘relaxing’, ‘want to listen to’, ‘latenight’, ‘music I want to try’, and ‘music to go insane to’.

The tag ‘jew metal’ has been used 128 times in total across the Last.fm site, compared with over 6,000 uses of ‘drone metal, and over 120,000 uses for the wider category of ‘drone’). Israeli metal bands such as Orphaned Land and Melechesh have been tagged ‘jew metal’, but so too have Norwegian black metal band Burzum (the project of the notoriously anti-Semitic Varg Vikernes) and self-proclaimed National Socialist Black Metal band Gestapo SS (who have, in turn, had the tag ‘terrible idiots’ also ascribed to them). The tag has even been attached to pop musicians Justin Bieber and Madonna. This indicates different uses for the same tags, including, presumably, racist listeners marking supposed “Jewishness” in metal music; contrastingly, listeners wishing to ridicule anti-Semitism or bands known to be racist; and perhaps internet “trolls” who intend merely to provoke or disrupt. These different uses of the same tag highlight the various ways in which music is categorized and discussed by groups of listeners with different priorities and values. Deliberately contrary uses of genre names in tags and in other online discussions is characteristic of extreme metal, where listeners seek to claim their own “extremeness” through downplaying or mocking the extreme status of others.

More broadly, the “jew metal” tag, as perhaps with “music to go insane to” is part of a wider extreme music milieu, in which extremity is sought primarily in sound, but also in imagery, rhetoric, performance practices and political ideology. In some fringes of black metal and noise music (though not, so far, in drone metal), this can extend to an aestheticized fascination with and redeployment of imagery connected with, variously, violent crimes, torture, sexual abuse, Nazism, white supremacy and esoteric fascism. Far-right politics are not the only extreme political persuasion represented (see for example the anti-humanity deep ecology position taken by many black metal musicians; also the bands featured on the Red and Anarchist Black Metal blog. However, these latter commitments are normally more or less explicitly stated, whereas fascist iconography is often displayed with deliberate or disingenuous ambiguity. Among most extreme metal listeners, all are dismissed and ridiculed for the same reason as evangelical Christian metal: placing ideology above music. Perhaps extreme metal here departs from the requisite commitments of implicit religion leading to action or behaviour: the primary integrating focus, musical sound, is held to be end, means and effect in itself.

3.4 Absence/Presence; the Event

About the live performance events themselves, I could attempt to describe shrieking chords and rasping vocals, with formulaic or deliberately incongruous adjectives, or by naming better-known music with similar sonic characteristics. I might try to explain my own affective experience of the sound, but in attempting this immediately after the performance, I was left with the same few faltering words exchanged by others I talked with or overheard: “intense,” “overwhelming,” “too much.” It would be possible to describe how people stood with heads bowed, or completely still, or nodding to completely different rhythms as others. Or how arms and legs were gradually uncrossed throughout performances, or how at one point I looked behind me and saw a row of people with heads in hands, pained expressions, frowns and closed eyes, or hands clasped together in gestures reminiscent of prayer. In comments beneath Youtube videos for this and similar performances, listeners write about remembering being present, about wishing that they had attended, or about hoping to attend similar events in the future. Watching a video clip or listening to a “live” recording is regarded as a distant index of the event, rather than a close facsimile or replay of participation: the metaphysical mythology of presence is perpetuated. In any case, any description merely circumscribes the physical moment of experiencing sound, and instead

joins the reviews, comments and descriptions as one more text in circulation, related to other texts and records, contributing to an aftermath, a ‘history of the history’ (Certeau 1996: 7) that remains, accumulates or disperses in the absence of the lost event.

As the Roadburn performance finished, I turned to the people standing next to me to ask what they thought. The first response, “Awful... awful... amazing!’ was interesting, since my initial impression was that a coincidence of opposites was drawn upon to express the experience, though perhaps my interlocutor intended “awesome” rather than awful. Secondly, this highlighted my lack of ability to predict, from body language or other clues, how the performance had been received by others in the audience. Then, in comparing, relating and reconstituting our experiences, we spontaneously mimed an exaggeratedly physical response to the final gong, calling upon gesture rather than words to more immediately evoke recent feeling. Speaking to other audience members later during the festival, most struggled with language, with “intense” (after a pause) being the initial response of almost every person. Again, comparisons with seeing the band SunnO))) and other drone metal performances were relied upon to contextualize the event, reminiscent of the promotional texts which similarly positioned Gravetemple by referencing other musical projects.

3.5 Aftermath, Transformation of Documents

After the performances, the paragraphs and poster images disappeared from many websites, having served their purpose in advertising or promoting the events. The image in a sense became material: a digital image advertising the concert gave way to physical copies for sale at the concerts, on a t-shirt and in two poster versions at Roadburn. These items, and the vinyl and CD recordings, were purchased and taken home, stored, used, and displayed as lasting physical markers of participation in the ephemeral community of the event, in a process reminiscent of souvenirs of religious pilgrimage. Three weeks after the festival, on his *Heavy Portrayals* music blog, Daniel Arom posted a photo of the poster newly installed on his bedroom wall, an online public confirmation of the semi-private material commemoration of his attendance at Roadburn and the Gravetemple show. The posting provoked a short discussion with other Roadburn attendees about decisions to purchase posters and the difficulties of getting them home unscathed (Arom 2013). During a video-call interview, in response to a question about the poster, Daniel turned the camera to show it on the wall next to other music posters and an Escher image.

[Figure 3 near here]

Figure 3. Photograph of Gravetemple poster on Roadburn attendee's wall, posted on their music blog with caption 'New Roadburn poster'.

For another interviewee, the physical image manifested participation in a self-consciously 'underground' community of drone metal, expressed through displaying the poster in his personal space ('framed and takes pride of place in my bedroom') and in his public display of the t-shirt in related but different extreme music scenes (wearing the t-shirt to 'a grind-core or a stoner rock show,' rather than another drone performance) in order to 'support the underground.' A section of our written interview shows aspects of the communal construction of experience before and after the performance:

Who did you watch the performance with? Did you talk about it before/ after?

I watched the performance with my girlfriend and two fellows. One of my fellows is new to all kinds of drone music, so we had to explain him this whole game before the gig starts. After the Gravetemple gig he was totally blown away and he bought a shirt and a poster. I guess he is infected to drone right now.

Purchasing, and the expected performance of displaying, a shirt and poster are closely linked to a new and overwhelming response, where affective power and implicit conversion is emphasized with the metaphor of 'infection.' The respondent's focus on embodied visual and sonic forms of communication and participation subtly redirects my question from 'talk' towards these more important modalities. In encouraging and initiating others into the music, and in the performance of material connection and memory through material culture, a commitment and also an ongoing concern with extensive effects can be discerned, where listeners continue to represent their participation in the Gravetemple event while consciously working to perpetuate a scene or subculture which will feature similar events, for themselves and others.

[Figure 4 near here]

Figure 4. Image of Gravetemple shirt, as sold at each concert.

3.6 Responses to the Event: Comment and Interpretation

The day after each performance, footage filmed by attendees on mobile devices were uploaded to video sharing website Youtube.com. According to Youtube statistics available with each video, the majority of viewings took place within one month of each performance,

400 in this period for the Roadburn show. The videos elicited a few short comments, many from attendees of that particular performance or another on the same tour. In comments the word ‘awesome’ appeared several times, and extremes of language (including hints of religious vocabulary) were used in responses to the clips. ‘Slowest experience of my life. Mind = Blown!’ commented one viewer, likely referring to experiencing the gig itself, remembered in watching the video. The user who posted the video, also apparently in attendance as the recorder of the footage, responded ‘ZENN!’ (Maphcase 2013). Some attendees at least, then, come to the online video and indicate their own participation in the transient communal moment of the past event by participating in the more lasting public online discussion space connected to the video.

Similar uses of language appeared in the two online reviews of the Café Oto concerts. One piece about the first night’s performance touched upon the same difficulties of description, calling attention to the intensity of the performance and drawing extensively on religious references (Fontenoy 2013). Phrases such as ‘choral waves,’ a ‘monastic mood’ and a ‘funereal pace’ linked sound and ritual with a general religiosity, an atmosphere enhanced by use of high-register words with religious or theological overtones: ‘vocal threnody,’ culminating in an ‘eschatological conclusion’ and ‘apotheosis’ (Fontenoy 2013). The reviewer, hearing a ‘slow decay and rebirth,’ made further references to death in addition to ‘funereal’ and ‘threnody,’ adding a sense of ultimate seriousness to the description, while hinting at restorative powers of religion within the intense sound (Fontenoy 2013). This is extended in the phrase ‘Om Mane Padme Doom,’ linking the Buddhist mantra Om Mane Padme Hum with the slow, ominous metal genre of Doom (Fontenoy 2013). Another reviewer wrote:

The signs that Gravetemple have been planning to be as loud as Oto will allow are apparent from the sound check, which apparently drew complaints from the theatre next door and has the windows rattling as the punters queue outside. Despite this, there’s a great contrast between their two sets, with the first being ear-shattering whilst the other is more nuanced and ultimately nothing short of triumphant. On the first night, Attila Csihar kicks off proceeding by rasping ominously into his microphone (I can’t make out the words, and he tells me afterwards that he mixes languages and even his own invented words) whilst Ambarchi and O’Malley sit impassively with their guitars on their laps. Csihar’s vocalisations are typically dramatic, enhanced by effects that stretch and loop his voice until it becomes a sinister one-man Gregorian choir. When Ambarchi and O’Malley join the fray, they immediately kick into feedback-heavy, sustained doom metal notes at full volume, instantly evoking SUNN O)))’s cavernous take on metal tropes.

[...] With a more subtle approach than the previous night, Gravetemple display the full range of their talents, enhancing how open-minded the trio is, and how they use metal archetypes as a mere launching pad to explore more diverse sonic realms. They slowly

twist and re-build a piece that increasingly takes on epic proportions, culminating in a mantra-like finale where O'Malley's righteous guitar playing and Csihar's incomparable vocal turns fly ever-upwards, propelled by another bout of octopus-like drum thrashes from Ambarchi, this time properly amplified to transform the sound into an almost psychedelic workout. It's all brought to a thrilling close when Ambarchi pounds on a gigantic gong, leaving O'Malley's dying notes and Csihar's final invectives to be drowned out by the audience's rapturous applause. This showcase at times risked falling into self-indulgence but, guided by these three stalwarts, ended on a note that touched on transcendence (Burnett 2013).

Isolating the adjectives highlights the descriptive priorities of the review text. Loudness is unsurprisingly emphasized ('loud,' 'rattling,' 'ear-shattering,' 'deafening,' 'thundering'), though tempered with words that emphasize subtlety ('nuanced,' 'brittle,' 'subtle,' 'oblique,' 'minimal'). Also striking is the number of words that relate to space ('cavernous,' 'imposing,' 'expansive,' 'gigantic,' 'epic'), particularly considering the small size of the actual venue and the lack of personal space inside, due to the sell-out crowd. Again, a variety of religious-themed descriptors are used ('Gregorian,' 'mantra-like,' 'rapturous,' in addition to the final word of the review 'transcendence'), as are several other terms that hint at the limits of experience ('saturated,' 'monomaniacal,' 'psychedelic,' 'alien,' 'thrilling,' 'incomparable'). Another review also narrates a testing of limits:

The gig was sold out, and as we stood outside in the evening rain, taking in the deafening sound check, we made bets on whether Café Oto would be able to maintain its license after the show. Additional speakers had been stacked up so high behind the band that the interior was almost unrecognizable. So loud was the group's collective output that the windows rattled uncontrollably in their panes. We spied one of the ladies at the bar chalking up a sign underneath the cocktail menu: EARPLUGS. 50P. (Birkut 2013).

In one short paragraph, the reviewer suggests challenges to the limits of the capacity of the venue, challenges to legal limits because of volume, challenges to recognition confounded by the excess of speakers, and to the physical limits of the windows and physiological limits of ears. In concluding, the reviewer balances rock and metal music's inherent tension: a tradition (thus conservative, repetitive, a continuation) of transgression (necessarily radical, disruptive, or iconoclastic: see Kahn-Harris 2007 regarding the dialectic between transgressive and mundane subcultural capital):

So it seems the exploration of volume tolerance isn't so fresh after all — it was very much a part of the gigs my dad had gone to as a youngster. But technology, low ceilings, and a seeming desire to break a record for noise complaints had pushed those boundaries further than either of us had ever experienced. (Birkut 2013).

Contrastingly, many reviews of the Roadburn festival give Gravetemple a cursory sentence, or else ignore the performance altogether. From one 4,000-word review of the four-

day festival, the experience of listening to Gravetemple is described as follows: ‘3 piece band with two guitars (tuned very low) and a guy doing some spoken word stuff in Latin (?) and making some sounds at times. We were all very patient and not much was happening’ (Scott “Roadburn” 2013). This division between indifferent and enthusiastic listeners was matched in the survey responses. Six responses were negative: ‘I can only damn them with faint praise’ starts one, while one respondent offers the single-word summary, ‘indifferent.’ Other reports are effusive in praise, using phrases such as ‘blew me away’ and ‘mindblowing,’ as well as references to hypnosis and to spiritual, ritual and mystical experience. This split can be understood with respect to commitment and integrating foci, in that for some listeners their commitment around particular integrating foci may have related to slightly different subgenres or groups performing at the festival.

Two responses were even more extreme, the abrupt ‘IT WAS SIMILAR TO DEATH’ comprising the whole of one response, while the other featured a long narrative of travel difficulties, tiredness, toothache, a combination of pain medication and recreational drugs, nausea, ‘respiration and meditation,’ and fear of involuntary urination, culminating in a physically gruelling yet superlatively ‘resonant’ ordeal. In many respondents’ descriptions the experience is again contextualized in relation to the musicians’ other projects (‘As with Sunn O))), it was quite a mystical experience, although less loud and intense’) or genres (‘drone and ambient and all that weird shit’). One interviewee attributed a new appreciation for drone metal to the Roadburn performance, for him a significant life event, and one which resonated with epiphany stories in other interviews about sudden understandings of the depth of drone metal.

4.1 Conclusion and Afterthoughts: Writing as Reflexive Methodology

So, what might be suggested by reading and writing drone metal events in relation to Implicit Religion, and in conjunction with Certeau’s *Possession*? The language of esoteric religion, the occult, and mystical texts, are interests shared by both Certeau and drone metal musicians and listeners, as subject matter, ways of describing experiences and even as templates for their own commitments, integrating foci and extensive effects. But beyond these general confluences, a closer relation might be unearthed between the two events and their histories. Certeau’s theatre presents a history of the possession as a dramatic manifestation of social anxieties within explicit and institutional religion: an ‘outbreak’ in which ‘the nocturnal erupt[ed] into broad daylight’ (Certeau 1996:1). In the Gravetemple

shows, there seems to be something like the reverse, where, in an ostensibly secular touring performance, something of a crisis or question is summoned, that is situated as being implicitly and ambiguously religious. Through the invocation of these sounds, images and symbols, an experience is marked as ritualistic, spiritual, ceremonial, transcendent, meditative, and mystical.

Certeau writes of the climax of the possession in the burning of the sorcerer priest: ‘this death escapes history’ (1996:171). History fails to capture such events, just as singular “experiences” cannot be grasped; but refracted representations can instead be deciphered in its documentary traces. Never explicitly religious, despite appropriations of a mystical vocabulary, drone metal offers “experience,” which, while always embedded in the integrating foci of sound itself, and within an ongoing construction of an intertextual network, is an engagement around which listeners significantly orient their lives.

A vital aspect of this mystical tradition, then, is its open-ended, conscious and unconscious, yet always active, reconfiguration of drone metal for its constituent participants. During one interview with a Roadburn attendee, my recording device malfunctioned, requiring me to take extensive notes, write them up, and send the notes back to the interviewee to check them. A section of the reassembled transcript illustrates the developing and participatory nature of drone metal music, unfolding beyond the end of the music:

What were your expectations of the Gravetemple performance?

The tension was building up through the course of the performance, the sound got more uneasy, it didn’t really resolve.

No resolution? Even with the gong at the end? I felt that the gong was a kind of resolution...

Well you had the gong but the music didn’t really stop there. The listener was left with deciding what to make of it. With [drone metal bands] Nadja and Earth, you know what to expect. The gong basically said: Now it’s up to you.

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