



RITUAL SACRIFICE IN THE MUSIC AND NOISE OF A METAL FESTIVAL

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The sacred is that prodigious effervescence of life that, for the sake of duration, the order of things holds in check, and that this holding changes into a breaking loose, that is, into violence. (Bataille, 1989: 52)

Roadburn is an annual music festival that since 1999 has taken place over four days in April in Tilburg in the southern Netherlands. Featuring various styles of heavy music, the focus (appropriately for this publication) is the riff, especially its amplified and distorted iterations. In 2019, several venues were used: in the *013* venue a 3000-capacity main stage and smaller *Green Room*; a converted warehouse complex incorporating the large *Koepelhal* stage, tiny *Hall of Fame* venue, and a skatepark hosting impromptu shows; and, in its last year as a Roadburn stage, the former church hall *Het Patronaat* complete with vaulted roof and windows depicting saints in stained glass. Around 100 bands played, the organisers highly respected by festivalgoers for curating eclectic, exciting line-ups featuring a rare combination of extreme metal, noise, psychedelic and experimental music. Four thousand attendees travelled from Europe and beyond

with accommodation in Tilburg booked out months in advance and many festival-goers camping in a field on the outskirts of the town. Attending Roadburn is something of an economic privilege, tickets costing around €200 and other expenses incurred; the festival clearly operating under commercial logics. Yet, following Bataillean attitudes to riotous, sacred expenditure, participants acknowledge that money is part of the sacrificial mechanics of the event, but maintain that the communal, ritualised, festive noise is not fully reducible to consumer capitalism.

The music is noisy, as is the festival's rambunctious atmosphere and disruption of participants' mundane routines. References to ritual abound: bands feature skulls and incense on stage; musicians enact ceremonial movements; audience members are immersed in festive conviviality and intense listening; images on shirts depict abstract meditations on violence. Attendees, the objects they display, the practices they repeat and the spaces they traverse are constructed as a ritual, festive world evoking violence and noise.



Photograph 1. Skulls and amplifiers on stage before Turia's set.

Influential anthropologists of religion have theorised ritual as foundationally important to the structure of society, and involving forms of violence. Mary Douglas finds violence in the imposition of linguistic and conceptual categories which in turn construct conceptions of dirt or noise as transgressing those structures, therefore bearing dangerous, magical power that must be ritually controlled (Douglas, 1966). Victor Turner, following Arnold van Gennep, understands ritual as a tripartite process: separation from a mundane world; initiation or transformation into a sacred *communitas*; and reintegration into society having gained power, knowledge or status. Violence is necessary for drastic removal from ordinary life, and in the trials of the liminal realm (van Gennep 1960, Turner 1969). René Girard's depiction of ritual features a complex mechanism involving an economy of violence, as scapegoats are loaded with the antagonisms of a group and violently expelled or executed before their deification for having absolved that community of a more general violence (Girard 1977).

Adorno suggests that vestiges of sacrificial ritual survive in opera, and that audience applause 'may be the direct descendant of ancient, long-forgotten ritual sacrifices' (1992: 65), the sound even evoking sacrificial flames when heard over radio (1992: 77). Despite their uncharacteristically ahistoricism, Adorno's suggestions connect violence with social-musical rituals. Jacques Attali considers this relationship further: 'Noise is a weapon and music, primordially, is the formation, domestication and ritualization of that weapon as a simulacrum of ritual murder' (1985: 24). Attali transposes Girard's scapegoat mechanism into the abstract, temporal art of music in which figures of order (and therefore models of social organization) can be represented and experimented upon. Violence is committed upon the scapegoat victim, rescuing the community from the violence of asocial chaos: represented in sound, the chaos of noise is violently channelled into music. Noise and chaos are therefore subjectively, socially and discursively constructed and defined, and in the political economy of noise, violence appears in shifting guises.

Separation

Ritual implies separating from ordinary life in entering sacred space, participating in a period of liminal communality and powerful experience, and subsequently reintegrating into the world; a model consecrated by repetition (van Gennep 1960, Turner 1969). Roger Caillois doubts the survival of such festivals, premodern community-wide ‘paroxysms’ replaced by isolated relaxation in the modern individual’s vacation (2018: 405).

Contemporary festivals are no longer celebrations of unified small-scale societies, but gatherings of individuals drawn together in elective community, here centred upon music. With a friend I take four trains to Tilburg, idly looking out for any travellers displaying metal insignia that might indicate a shared destination. This alertness for other participants-to-be already marks difference from vacation, the temporarily-real annual festival constituted as much by participants as by bands, stages and locations. At Tilburg train station and around the town, flags display festival artwork, which most attendees will have seen online, but only now become materially manifest as markers of the festival space. The short avenue of bars and cafes near the *013* venue is jokingly named ‘Weirdo Canyon’ by attendees who drink and laugh amidst locals who sometimes appear bemused at the temporary influx. The nickname is marked on the programme map and also lends its name to the daily zine “Weirdo Canyon Dispatch,” celebrating the alterity of its denizens in their festivities. People mention the effort needed to detach from immersion in festive noise in order to remember to eat. Separated from home and work, basic bodily rhythms of eating, sleeping, even urinating are all reconfigured or even forgotten, in following the noise and riffs, the highest priority of the festival.





Photograph 2. Remnants of excess at the campsite.

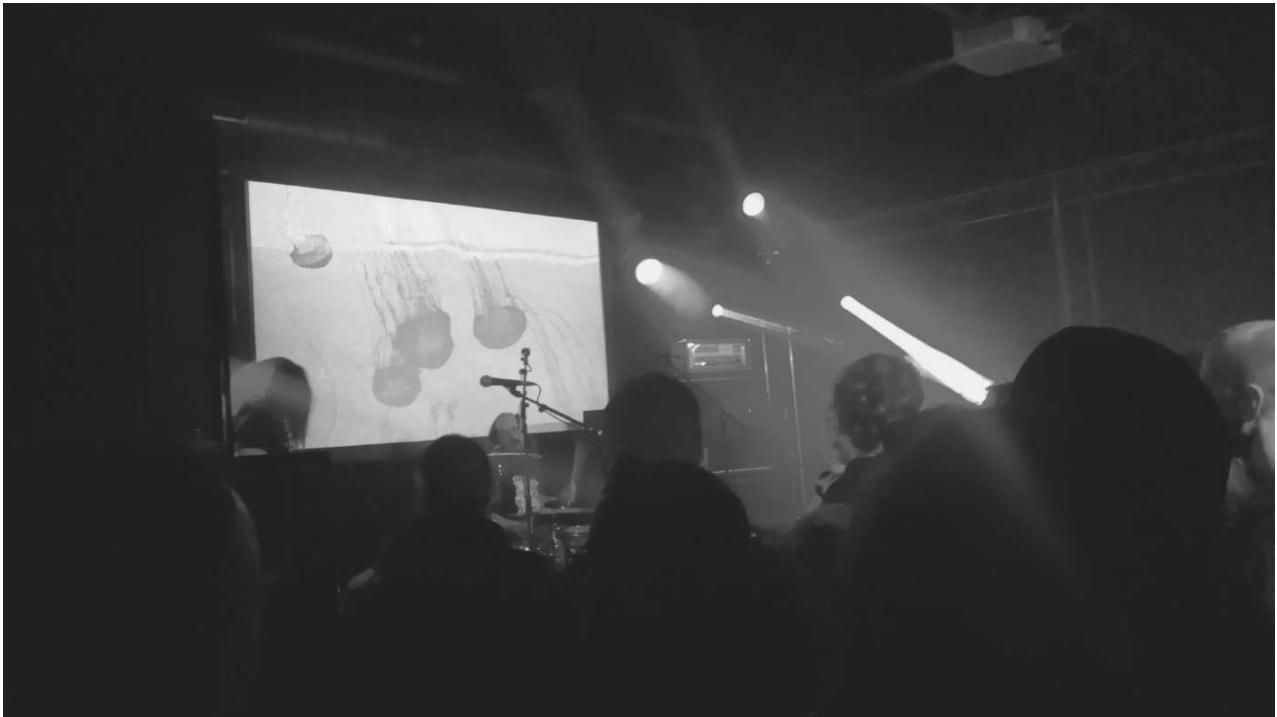
In the programme booklet, an introduction by the organising team describes the event as ‘a transformative space, place and time,’ which takes place on ‘Planet Roadburn’ yet is also a ‘journey,’ trip and arrival combined. Foreshadowing the third stage of classical ritual, they write, ‘If the positive vibes of Roadburn can be taken away, back into “the real world” then even better’. The supposed reality of the external world is framed in scare quotes, highlighting its relativity: at home, the festival is a strange world set apart from the normal; here, attendees repeat that it is the festival which feels more real. Walking with a fellow reveller back to the campsite late one night in viciously cold temperatures, he predicts he will be cryogenically frozen, to be thawed and reanimated only at the next edition of the festival. A repetition as well as a separation, a re-emergence into an elliptically returning sacred space.

A theatre of distorted bodies

Attendees become altered through various abstract kinds of violence. Sounds themselves, especially from guitars, are distorted and amplified, then enthusiastically absorbed by listeners' bodies. Listeners approvingly use terms of brutality and pain in noise music as 'abstract superlatives that relate the force and magnitude of its effects on their own bodies' (Novak 2013: 47), and similarly in extreme metal's approving rhetoric of violent excess speaks (however haltingly) of desired intensity from musical experience (Kahn-Harris 2007: 52-3). At the end of a relentless black metal set by Turia, a guitar is left leaning on an amplifier, screeching feedback noise. Bandmembers stand unmoving, as do the crowd, exhilarated by the set and now communing in noise, the wild sounds now unbound even by human movement or control, eventually faltering and prompting longlasting applause.

The first band I see is sludge-doom duo Bismuth. I've heard them live several times so I know that the riffs that instantiate separation from the ordinary will be crushingly slow, fearsomely heavy and abysmally loud. Deep reverberations fill the room from the as-yet-minimally-distorted bass guitar, though amps, pedals and drums promise a more physically potent noise to come. Underwater scenes projected behind the band resonate with the droning, lapping, sombre waves of sound, thick layers of heavy air settling slowly like sediment. After a slow build, finally a crashing dam-break in sound is summoned by drums and the furious flood power of distorted amplification. I remember the title of this piece 'The Slow Dying of the Great Barrier Reef' just as the massive riff drops, and the projected film of subaquatic life cuts to a nuclear mushroom-cloud and the dynamiting of a forest mountainside. The scale of these slow-motion-filmed tragedies of human violence to natural environments is underscored with rushing, wretched, ice-shelf-collapsing riffs in the music.

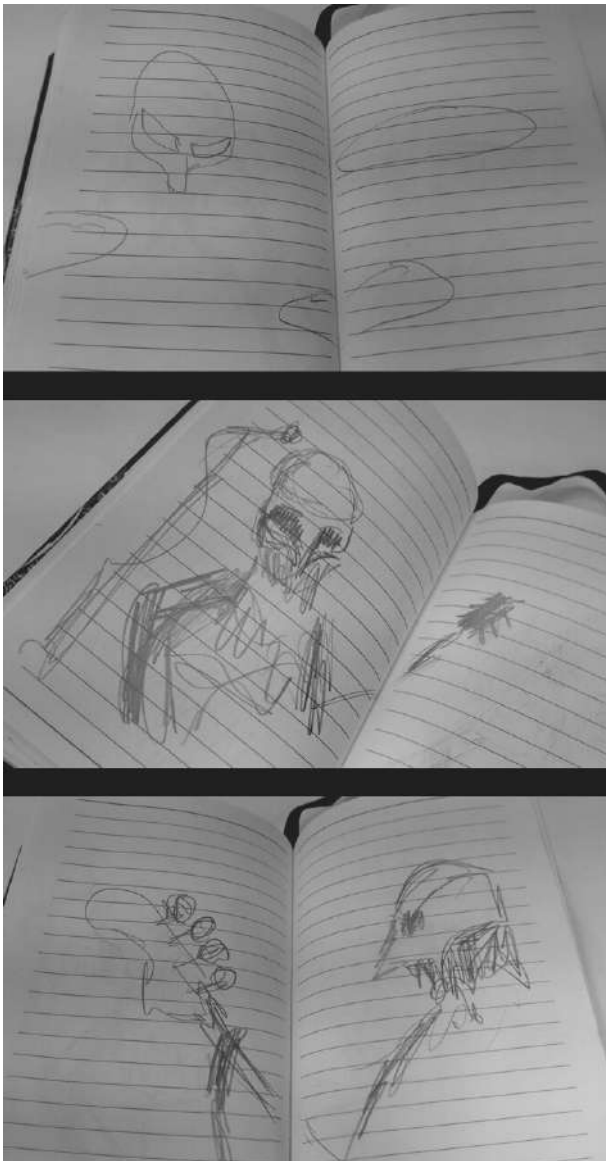




Photograph 3. Jellyfish on screen behind Bismuth on stage.

Later, I hear that in a set I missed, forest fires were projected behind *Lingua Ignota*'s electronic noise and vocal evocations of violence. While these juxtapositions involve clear ecological protest, they conjure more ambiguous complexities than simply equating heavily amplified distortion with environmental violence. Abstract sonic violence rages at ecological damage even while representing it, just as much metal music rails against (post)industrial modernity using sounds that are inseparable from it, those definitively modern tools of electrical instruments and amplification. Ambivalent testaments of industrial violence have been fundamental to metal from its origins, when Tony Iommi's steel-factory-damaged fingertips required loosening his guitar strings, leading to Black Sabbath's signature down-tuned and doomy sound.

Other distortions: the bandmembers of experimental metal band *Laster* play in black clothing and strange bone-coloured masks, floating plague doctor heads or bird-alien skulls which theatrically depict the musicians as weird, other-than-human sources for sonic strangeness. In the corny, carnival performance of 'Satanic doo-wop' by *Twin Temple*, a tall smartly-dressed guitarist plays tightly controlled Chuck Berry riffs and middle-eight licks as if entranced, his spellbound zombie persona an uncanny aspect of an otherwise over-the-top stage show.



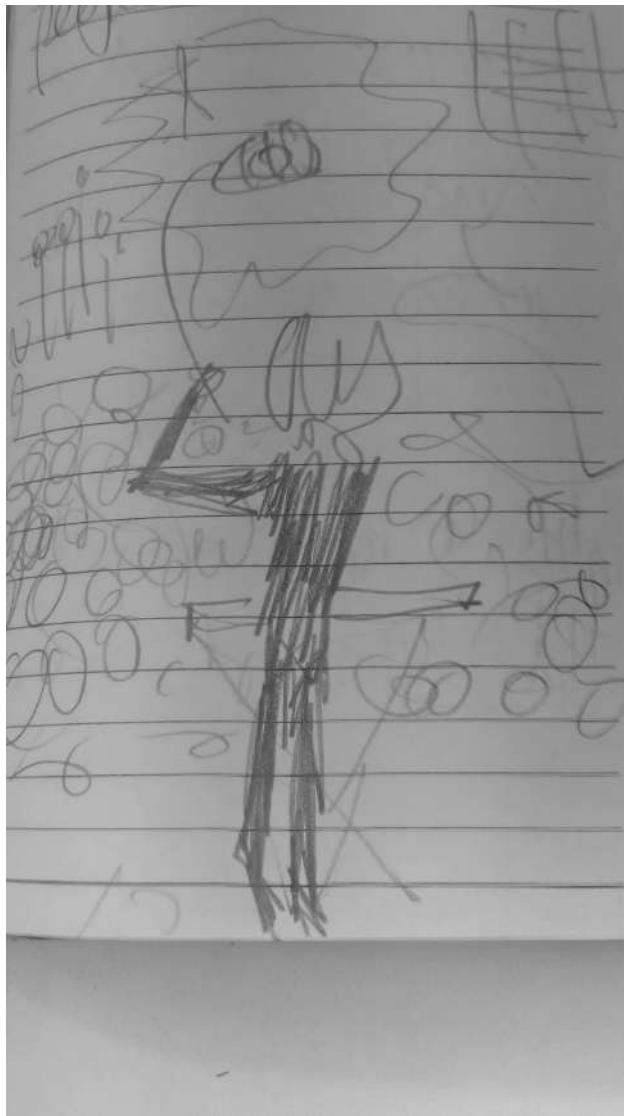
Photograph 4. Sketches of masked Laster bandmembers.

Several Dutch musicians collaborate on the long, varied 'Maalstrom' piece which includes pummelling distorted metal, harsh noise, and clanging electronic beats, each style represented at the festival but striking in combination. In a section of harsh noise, one listener turned round to shush others for talking too loudly: making a noise to interrupt the noise of others who were interrupting the noise performed. Michel Serres observes that such strange relations are characteristic of noise, disruptive and unstable as signal and interruption shift places (2007).

Access to the ritual space of the festival is gained by exchanging tickets for wristbands, differentiating those with access to the key festival spaces. Within the festival, an ethos of community is commonly mentioned, though in some instances the extent and terms of inclusivity are contested. One festival-goer on social media reported homophobic harassment; groping was also mentioned in comments on this post.

The initial commenter stated that they had considered Roadburn safer than other events, and respondents, offering messages of support, were infuriated that this had happened at 'their' festival. Such instances, however rare, are important cautions against depicting the festival space as a utopia removed from the struggles of the outside world. Commenters troubled by the reports referred to the band Vile Creature's onstage statement at the festival, in support of people marginalised because of gender and sexual identities. Rage at this kind of violence also fuelled Dutch band Gold's performance, whose singer Milena Eva coldly dissected misogynistic rhetoric in songs such as 'Why Aren't You Laughing?'

Another piece which confronted abuse, betrayal and gendered violence was the skatepark performance by Lingua Ignota, solo musician Kristin Hayter using a mic, laptop, pedals and three metal-encased lightbulbs surrounded by a tight circle of listeners in the darkened space. The set started with a recording of a woman complaining of never having received a fair trial. Meanwhile, Hayter stalked the circle, singing and swinging the lamps, in circles, over her shoulder, out like a lantern, or against herself as if in flagellation. The Dolly Parton track 'Jolene' received a piercing rendition, and another song repeated the savagely delivered line 'LIFE IS CRUEL TIME HEALS NOTHING'. The set was powerfully harrowing, with several audience-members in tears throughout.



Photograph 5. Sketch of Lingua Ignota with lightbulb and crowd.



Photograph 6. Attendees queue to get into Patronaat, Sint-Jozefkirk in the background.

The spectacular 19th Century neogothic Sint-Jozefkirk church looms over the festival site, with the Patronaat stage located in an outbuilding (often itself described as a church by attendees). Such architecture has obvious ritual associations from Christianity, a religious tradition historically treated with scorn and fascination in metal. The performance of extreme metal in this space therefore affords a sense of sacrilege or inversion of (imagined) intended purpose. The icon of the burning church glares over the black metal subgenre in particular, after notorious arsons associated with the 1990s Norwegian scene. Icelandic black metal band Naðra performed in Patronaat in 2017, later releasing a live recording of that set. The CD case featured a woodcut-style image of a burning church, as if equating the symbolic transgression of playing black metal in a church hall with actually setting it alight. Such violent symbols are recognised and referenced, repeated and ritualised, sustaining a certain ambivalence between appreciating an apparently appropriate atmosphere for ritualised performances, and revelling in its imaginary destruction. At the train station in Tilburg on Monday morning, checking news on my phone is part of reintegration into the world beyond the festival: everywhere online are images of Notre Dame on fire, providing a stark reflection on art, religion, iconoclasm and loss. It is not long before black metal recordings appear with images of the burning cathedral on their sleeves.



Photograph 7. Naðra live album, recorded in church building at Roadburn, with artwork depicting a burning church.

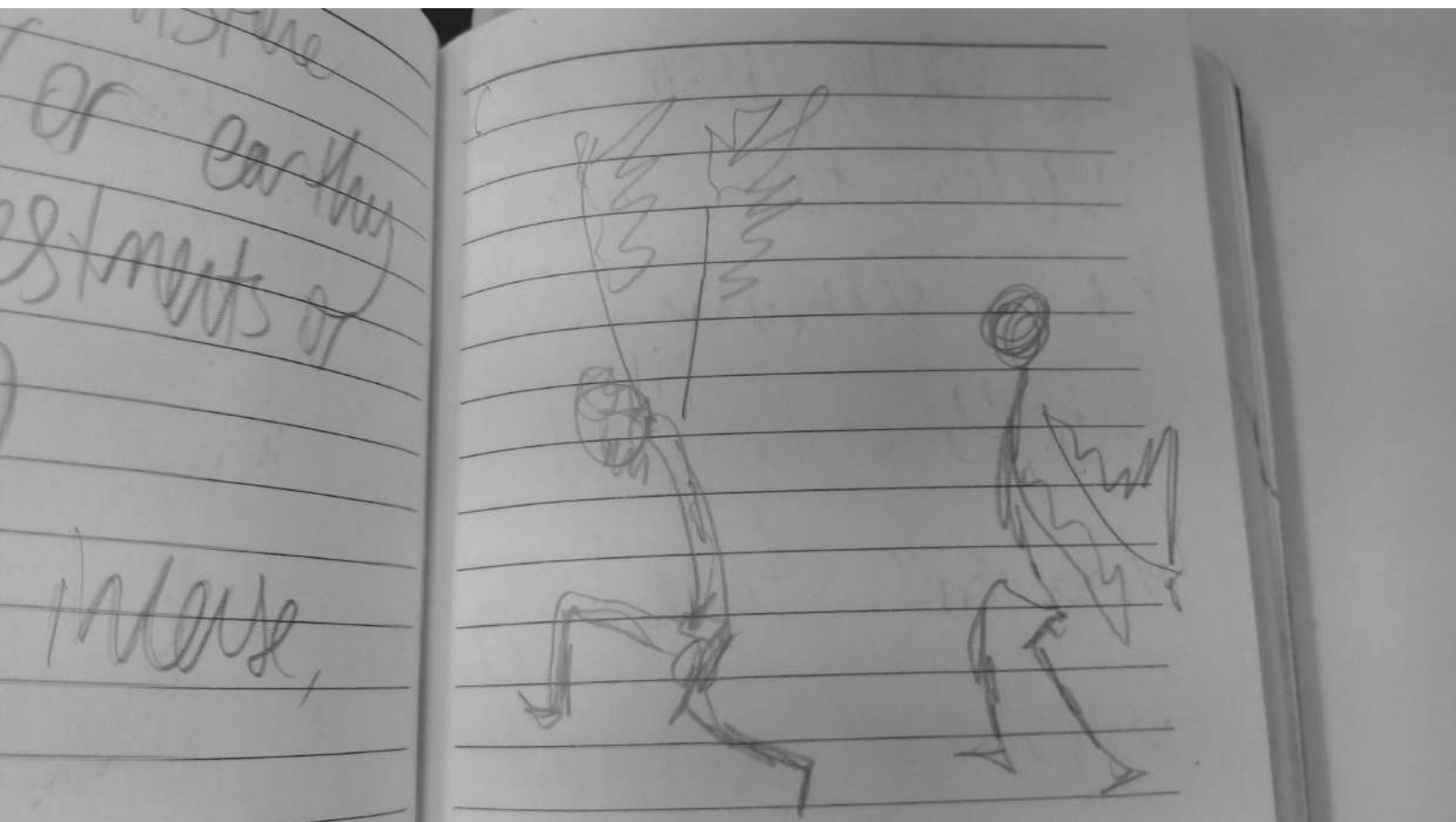
Repetition and initiation

The most overt rituals I witness at the festival appear in quite different sets at the *Patronaat* venue. New band Twin Temple sound like Amy Winehouse singing 50s rock'n'roll songs about sex, death and Satan with a sharp-tongued feminist slant. Several festivalgoers left quickly, shaking their heads at the theatrically kitsch Satanic Americana, but a genially inebriated crowd stayed to enjoy the sassy lyrics and pop hooks. Taking cues from 1960s occult rock originators Coven, Twin Temple included a 'satanic initiation' recording on their album, reprised here towards the end of the set. They seek an initiate for baptism, and a volunteer, John, is welcomed onstage to be blindfolded and his hands bound by the deadpan guitarist. The singer leads the audience in a call-and-response: 'Hail Satan... HAIL SATAN! Hail... John! HAIL JOHN!' With a long dagger and an ostentatious flourish the guitarist cuts the binding ribbon, John is ushered away and the band end their set with their album's lead single 'The Devil Didn't Make Me Do It'.

Photograph 8. Twin Temple on stage.



Reclusive black metal band Fauna perform a similar ritual on the same stage the following day. A hushed aura greets the band who have not performed in Europe for many years, as they play their most recent yet still six-year-old album *Avifauna* in full. Long brooding passages of acoustic guitar and birdsong are interspersed with dramatically melancholic black metal. Somewhat surprisingly, the acoustic pieces are pre-recorded, leaving the bandmembers, clad in ragged orange robes, to perform ritualised patterns of movement: lighting incense, passing around bowls, even flapping with feathered arms slowly across the stage. Late in the set, an audience-member is summoned on stage through wordless gestures: hands are bound, eyes covered, and then ties are dramatically cut away. Then a musician daubs red paste on the foreheads of fans in the front row. When the performance finishes, I go to the bathroom, and see three men at three sinks washing blood-coloured smears off their faces; watching *Lingua Ignota* next, I recognise another attendee by his stained forehead, a bodily marker of temporary ritual transformation.



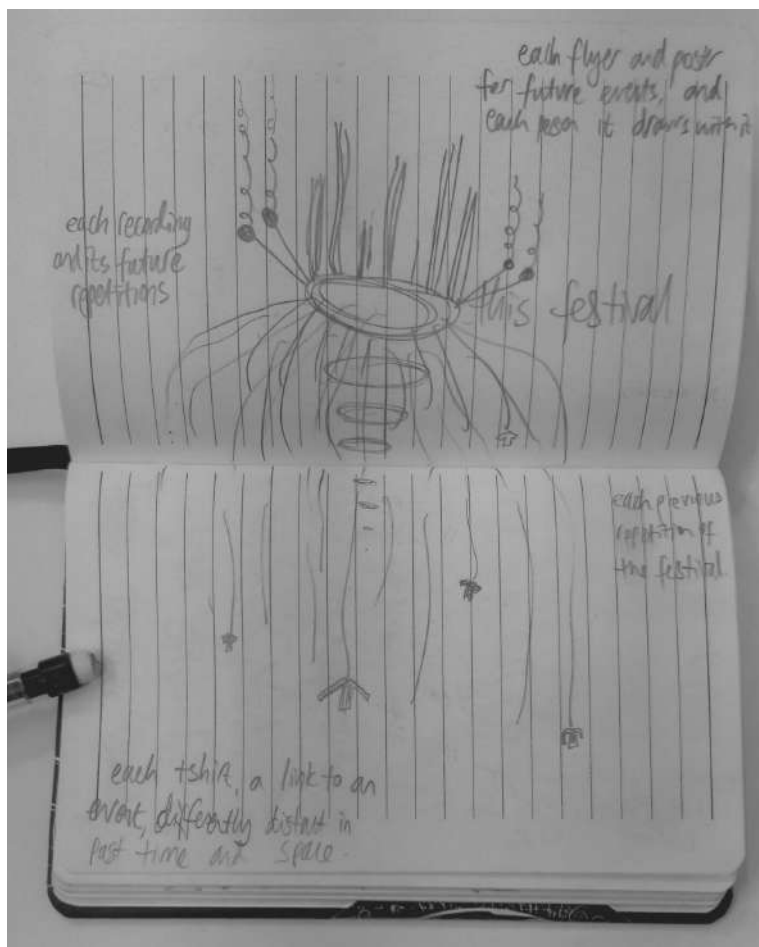
Photograph 9. Sketch of Fauna musician's ritual gestures.

For Twin Temple, the live version of the ritual repeats the recorded material, and is repeated by the band each night on tour, and by listeners in advance in their repeated spinning of CDs, records and tapes. In this their first tour, as well as 'initiating' an audience member, they are also subtly initiating themselves into the established metal and Roadburn community. Fauna perform an album that many in the crowd (myself included) have listened to many times before, but few have ever seen the band live: initiation and repetition combine. At both sets, in a sense, repetition precedes initiation. Explicitly referencing festival, Gilles Deleuze overturns linear ideas of difference and repetition: 'This is the apparent paradox of festivals: they repeat an "unrepeatable." They do not add a second and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the "nth" power' (1994: 52).

Other bands make more oblique references to ritual and sacrifice. I overhear Treha Sektori's atmospheric drones described as 'ritualistic.' Black metal band L'Acephale are named after Georges Bataille's secret society, and a projection of the famous headless man glances off the drummer's jagged broken cymbal (or symbol?). Repetitions and initiations echo through the festival, highlighting cyclical relationships between recordings and performances. Things happen again but for the first time. Recordings are released at the festival, of performances from previous years, some of which were sets reprising prior album releases. A 2019 release by the band Yob is a recording of a 2012 live set, which was a playthrough of their 2005 studio album. The title *The Unreal Never Lived, Live at Roadburn* hints at such cycles, never having lived and being live joined in unreality. Other recordings are purchased by listeners who will repeat their live experience by listening at home; at each live set audience members reenlive their past experience of recordings.

Interconnected circles of listening

Each live performance at the festival is surrounded by thousands of future and past repetitions of music recordings in the lives of each participant, preceding and echoing after their festive attendance, on revolving records, spinning CDs, or the turning wheels of cassette tapes. The festival can be (part) imagined as a bewildering complex of intersecting circling repetitions of ritual listening. Fans who have listened to these riffs over and over finally hear them played by the musicians in front of them. New listeners seek out recordings and spin them into the future. Audience members who have seen this or that band before cycle again through these same riffs surrounded by other listeners, each of whom is surrounded by their own spiralling cloud of past and future repetitions of listening. Some instances may be represented in tour shirts, patches and tattoos, visual tokens of the less visible effects of repeated listening on bodies, recognised and celebrated by others who have felt the same inscriptions.



Photograph 10. Sketch of imagined networks of past and future instances of listening surrounding the festival.

Ecstasy and escape

Yet even if this hypercomplex imaginary network of circles could be fully grasped, in every single repetition of a recording that every person had listened to, each of those instances of listening connecting to every other instance for every other person who had heard that recording, and even if connections could be conceptualised between every gig that every person in every crowd had been to with any other, and the circulation of all material objects of musical cultures and their relations to all those people could be depicted... then this would not represent the festival. The maintenance of community for the dispersed and diverse riff devotees is one effect and purpose of the festival. But the power that drives these intense events, that makes these moments worth commemorating and mythologising, is something less tangible or representable. The festival requires, demands, creates, sacrality fired by ecstasy and intoxication, which escapes definition beyond the ritual boundaries of the festival.



Photograph 11a. Notebook with stickers; stickers collected this year for future display.



Photograph 11b. Notebook with stickers; stickers collected this year for future display.

Things are missed by each participant, inevitably given that five stages run simultaneously. I missed watching Sleep play their second set in order to guarantee witnessing the first ever performance of Nusquama, whose debut tape I had been feverishly replaying in recent weeks. Two reviewers in the daily zine highlight what they didn't see, worrying that they missed something special. But wild excess is the mark of the festival, and no careful plan could ever ensure a logical progression through the schedule that would win maximum musical enjoyment. Festival always escapes total capture. The event's transcendence of merely personal experience is underlined by the impossibility of any individual encountering the whole of the festival. The festival is the excessive, enlivening and chaotic totality of everyone's different path through the circumscribed space and time.

And even for each person, some parts are lost, to intoxication, tiredness and sleep, even to sheer excitement transporting experience outside language or memory. Lost to laughter, at the anarchic absurdity of Malokarpatan's lurid, caped performance, for example, but more often laughter between music. Lost to absorption in powerful sound, in meditative or riotous crowds entranced in harsh screeching noise, pummeling repetitive riffs, buzz-picked agitated stasis, or austere ritual drones. Lost even in conversations in seven languages, intoxicated, all about those sounds, while you stare into the fire.

The riff

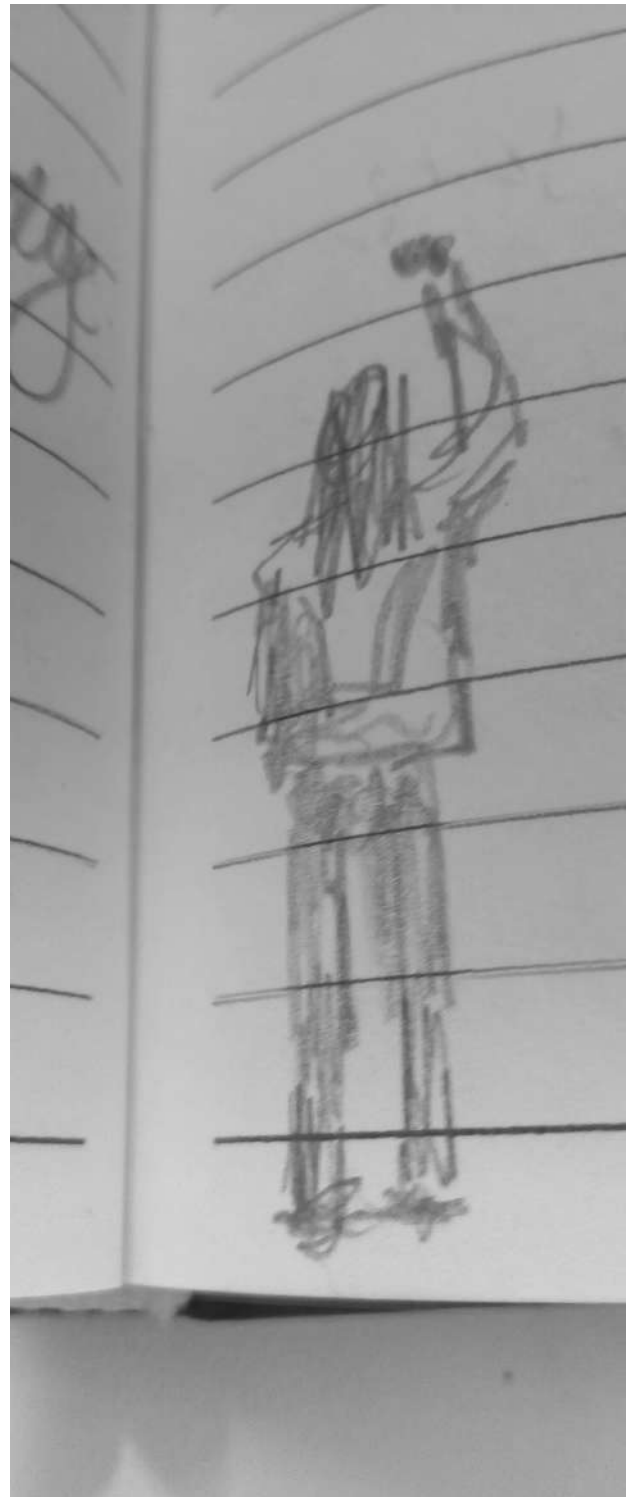
At the heart of these abstract, ambivalent, transformative manifestations of violence, the ritual mechanism of the festival itself is the repetition of the riff. Even harsh noise or drone performances are arguably concerned with riffs, by refusing them in chaos or drawing them out in extreme slowness. Thinking about festival, ritual, violence, noise, in some sets I scribble notes or sketches, in others there is no space in the dark crush, in others I can't think for immersion in noise. Sleep play the main stage on Saturday night, the first of two performances, this one centred on their 1994 album *Holy Mountain*. For me though their crowning achievement is the absurd, sacred monolith of an album *Dopesmoker/Jerusalem*, an hour-long dirge released in various versions as if fragmentary testaments to something too enormous to capture in a single recording. Many Roadburn-related bands might be superlative in their commitment to droning, to industrial heaviness, to amplification or feedback or distortion, but there are few bands to match Sleep's devotion to the riff. The band leave the stage after having completed their *Holy Mountain* set, the enormous screen backdrop goes blank, and I wonder if they've finished.



Photograph 12. Sleep play *Dopesmoker*.

For a split second the *Dopesmoker* artwork flicks up, prompting a massive cheer from the vast crowd. The band return and launch into this intoxicating hymn to pilgrimage and intoxication. The sound is thick and heavy, and I am conscious of feeling exactly centred in my own body, as if its real physical extension and my ordinary (inaccurate) projected self are forced into conjunction by extremes of amplified vibration and riff repetition, this mind-body-unity assisted by the music's prior inscription into myself through repeated spinning of records (or perhaps, my inscription into this music's repetitions?).

Immersed in the music I have no thought of analysis or writing, but suddenly a formula drops into my mind connecting noise, distortion, drones, replications, and ritual returns: A riff is disruption (in equilibrium), resolved by repetition. In ritual festival participation and in the noisy music around which festival is organised, difference from the ordinary is established, in repeated instantiation becoming ritual reinvigoration of the sacred, difference reintegrated into renewal of order.



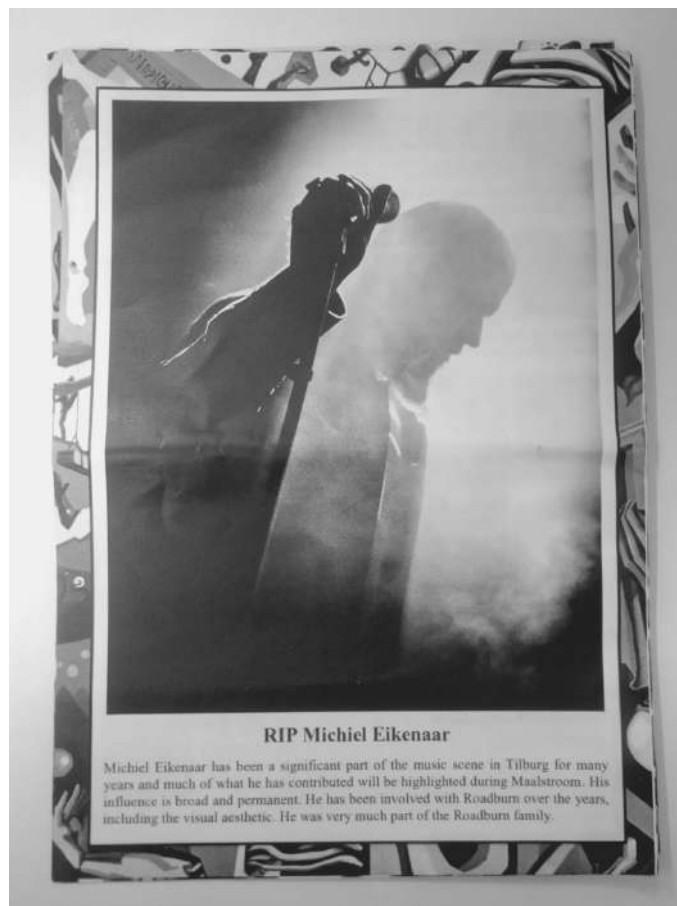
Photograph 14. Self-portrait during Sleep.

Ritual sacrifice

Gestures and practices are consciously, collectively ritualised as participatory constructions of the sacred through separation and sublimation into the festive society, into carnivalesque upendings and ecstatic abandonments. However, warnings echo from Attali and Adorno: throughout the festival I wonder about violence and loss in the name of the sacred, the dark, threatening commitments implied by sacrifice.

Metal represents itself as fearlessly confronting mortality, rooted in exploring iconographies of death. Among the circulations of representations, a real impact: the death of Michiel Eikenaar, a musician who contributed much to black metal in the Netherlands, and who for me is bound up in experience of this festival. He died of cancer on the Friday of the festival weekend, and I, like many, discover this through an announcement in the Weirdo Canyon zine. One of his bands, Dodecahedron, played on Saturday night, but more

striking for me was his other band Nihill and their first ever live performance at my first experience of this festival in 2013. This memory resonates particularly in the last set I hear this year, a Dutch



Photograph 14. 'Weirdo Canyon Dispatch' zine announces the death of Michiel Eikenaar.

band Nusquama playing black metal, guitarist's foot on the stage monitors just as I remember Eikenaar's posture on this same stage on the final day six years ago. Reflecting on this is not to glorify death nor speciously imply some 'sacrifice' of health for metal, but simply to acknowledge the reality of death at the festival. Beyond conviviality and intoxication, the festival is a site where seriousness and commitment are memorialised where their importance is collectively recognised.

Trivial in comparison, but sacrifice arises too in physical, temporal and economic forms for each person: their time, money and energy expended in festive excess, standing, waiting, drinking, staying up late and, for campers, enduring bitter cold. This temporary sacrifice traces a broader sacrifice, of time and intensity poured into these musical cultures over years. The seriousness of death is at the extreme end of this chain of evocations and channelings of violence and noise. Eikenaar is mourned and celebrated through witnessing how his music was a channel, a meditation on darkness and struggle, and a turning towards death, an acceptance of its reality. In an online posting, Eikenaar's bandmate Vince Koreman marks respect for the man and his family before announcing that an album they were working on will never be completed, that 'those recordings will join him in the great beyond', the missive ending with the words 'Burn the candle, raise the chalice, wield the scythe.' Congruent with other depictions in this culture of noise and metal, Nihil's music foreshadows death in its ritual engagement with darkness, its skulls and funereal iconography, and its raging noise, an uncomprehending gaze at the supposed order of life and a meditation on the chaos of annihilation.



Photograph 15. Nusquama live at Roadburn.

But the festival evades any clear logic of sacrifice. Instead, a mosaic of instances of repetition connect violence, noise and ritual in sound, imagination and social practice. The dizzying imaginary network of all the repetitions of all the riffs in all the instances of listening for all the participants in all their separate worlds is only a vague model of the festival's intricate intersecting flows of abstract violence and sacrifice between levels of representation and manifestation. Each person may attempt conscious management of their participation in such mechanisms, but in the festival at large all is absorbed into an elusive, joyously opaque totality.

Alongside some tapes and stickers, the most personally resonant material thing I take away from this year's festival is a small image of a laughing skull, imprinted sketchily in purple ink on a piece of waste cardboard (appropriately, given the rites of intoxication here, a scrap from a box of painkillers). Not at the official show of music-related prints, it is strewn among promo flyers, presumably intended like them to be randomly picked up and dispersed. The image fits the metal aesthetic of skeletons and death, but unlike the flyers that encourage future listening (as well as monetary exchange), this image links to no website nor social media page, refers to no discernible band, album, label or event. This skull appears as a gesture of expenditure, an image of death and laughter reverberating out of the random chaos of the festival's effervescent social and material repetitions and circulations. An artistic impression repeating the aesthetics of a marginal culture. A gift freely given, a strange token gladly collected. A gleeful screeching representation of initiatory death. A sacrifice.



Owen Coggins researches ritual and mysticism in audience cultures, especially in relation to extreme music. His doctoral project studied drone metal and a subsequent book, *Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) won the 2019 IASPM Book Prize. He recently worked as a Researcher for a music therapy charity, and co-runs the drone record label and registered environmental charity Oaken Palace. Owen continues to investigate extreme music as a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in Politics at Brunel University London.

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