



# REVIEW | Sounds of the Underground: A Cultural, Political, and Aesthetic Mapping of Underground and Fringe Music

*Stephen Graham*

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Like notions such as “indie”, “popular” or “experimental”, “underground” is a constantly evolving concept that can bear different meanings and be used as a marker of style, ideology, or success. Musicologist Stephen Graham employs it to refer to a “loosely integrated cultural space [that exists] on the fringes and outside mainstream pop and classical genres” (vii), which he aims to define and map here. Developed from his PhD research at Goldsmiths College (University of London), Graham explores the major cultural, aesthetic and political characteristics of noise, extreme metal and improvisation, which he considers as the main styles of underground music. The subject is approached with the proposition that even if all underground artists share “some core sense of aesthetic and political innovation and radicalism” (5), a sense of resistance is not necessarily intentional. Indeed, Graham uses multiple case studies throughout the book to demonstrate the varying points of view that artists have towards funding or activism.

Case studies are, incidentally, the flesh of the book. It is important to underline that, unlike Paul Hegarty’s engagement with noise music in *Noise/Music: A*

*History* (2007), Graham's main object of interest is not sound in itself, but the existence of an underground and fringe music scene as different from mainstream or high culture. His argument is thereby rooted in the day-to-day activities of musicians, a strategy that creates a level of redundancy and leans towards a concrete rather than a philosophical reading. The purpose here is to open a discussion about the underground, to provide categories and to find connecting points between its different styles; many doors are opened but still merit further investigation.

*Sounds of the Underground* is divided into three interconnected parts that overlap: defining the underground; outlining its members' general cultural; and political views; as well as delving deeper into the history and aesthetics of the noise and extreme metal scene. The author approaches the relationships between music and politics through Georgina Born's (2012) framework, namely that,

[m]usic and politics multiply mediate each other. They do this through the association or alliance of musical events or musicians with politics, through lyrical representation of ideas, through the social relations of performance, through musical institutions, and through the politics of compositional and musical idioms. (53)

To understand their political views, Graham discusses key issues of funding, political engagement and getting paid to play with his participants, and dissects how festivals and venues (No Fun Fest, Arika, Colour Out of Space, Café Oto) operate in Scotland, England and USA. This research demonstrates that no one point of view regarding politics can summarize the underground, whilst establishing that all participants adhere to an ideal of circumnavigation. Those who use tools from corporations (Facebook, Twitter) or from the state (public funds) believe that they are hijacking them "for what they see as positive political or cultural ends" (59).

Graham extensively explains how underground and fringes scenes function on a day-to-day basis (distribution, networks, earnings), demonstrating the dynamics of underground scenes and providing examples of cases where they fringe either onto high-art institutions or the commercial marketplace. Due to the quantity, these cases studies are at times redundant, but they also offer Stephen Graham the material necessary to expand on theoretical development. A short chronicle of the experiences of presenter and label head Jonny Mugwump in Manchester and London scenes enables him to address the relative importance of web and face-to-face networking, and to reflect on the economies of underground scenes. Graham suggests that underground scenes can offer a "localized alternative to capitalism" (59) while circumnavigating real-subsumption because of their small sizes, but that they cannot escape it completely. Interestingly, he also claims that healthy capitalist societies are necessary for underground scenes to subsist, and compares interviews he did with Paul Hegarty in 2010 and 2013 to show how the recent recessions have had a negative impact on Ireland's underground scene.

The third part of the book offers an opportunity to imagine noise and extreme metal as a "reconfiguration of the sensible", musically and conceptually. Graham argues that these styles, particularly drone metal, "configures music cognition as percept-affect (to use a Deleuze-Guattarian term), highlighting listeners' own

affects and bodily presence in the world and the world's (in the form of the drone and the space of audition) resonance in the listeners' own bodies" (223). Drawing on a fair amount of musical analysis, Graham explains that underground music pushes volume, register and time to their limits, shifting notion of musical complexity from figuration to density. He suggests that adding a seventh category to Walter Everett's (2004) model would help giving a better understanding of extreme metal's tonality. Discussing how the lo-fi quality of these music can express unpredictability and uncertainty, he introduces the concepts of "performative everyday" and "accidental audition", underling that these processes can also be highly pleasurable. He calls this dimension of sonic perception "comfort noise" (216).

Graham also considers that underground music creates what he names an "aesthetic counter-magic", namely musical practices that encourage listeners to imagine new ways to see the world. Indeed, he suggests that noise can be thought of as a potential or as a breaking point leading to development, and extreme metal as a new dreaming of existing social orders. Black metal would nevertheless bear a contradiction in trying to substitute the authority of mainstream society by the authority of Satan, nature or destruction, and its members should be read as a neo-tribe because of their shared moral-political sensibility and encyclopaedic tendencies.

This ambitious overview of how underground scenes are connected aesthetically, culturally and politically is unquestionably a great contribution to the field. Graham's three key aesthetic concepts (performative everyday, accidental audition and comfort noise) constitute a useful framework for the analysis of underground and fringe music, and based on Graham's consideration of music scenes, one with the necessary flexibility – "the map is not the territory. Many other maps are possible, just as many other underground territories are possible" (7).

However, that said, an in-depth analysis of improvisation, such as those undertaken here for noise and extreme metal, would certainly have been relevant to the discussion. A lot of interesting reflections are also left pending. For example, Graham uses musical analysis to undermine power electronics' political ambiguity, arguing that in no way their apparent celebration of right-wing imagery could be sincere. He states that Whitehouse's track "Buchenwald" "is simply too uncanny, too spectral, to be interpreted in anything other than ambiguous and confused terms" (199), and that the utilisation of echo and other electronic processes of distancing (mingled with processes of amplification) in Rockwell's sampling of a neo-Nazi's speech prevents the listener from identifying with it. This is a very interesting argument that remains undeveloped, and is not sufficiently unconvincing.

The question of whether the underground is still a relevant category in the digital age provides a here as yet untapped area of discussion, in addition to the well-documented reading of noise as a rejection of musical conventions. Even if Graham did not want to expand on these subjects, a short review of the literature would have been welcome in relation to the current discussion.

University of Michigan Press' *Tracking Pop* series is destined for music scholars as well as general readers, and Graham's book seem to float in the centre in term

of theoretical development. Those who are already familiar with underground music might be tempted to skip some parts of the book and scholars might be interested to read Graham's doctoral thesis (Graham 2012), where his theoretical framework is comprehensive. However, it is a very pertinent contribution to the study of popular music that should also serve as a springboard for further research into other stylistic and geographically located underground scenes.

## References

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