

## ISOLATION, INDIVIDUALISED LISTENING & DOOM METAL

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**A**s a musicologist and amateur musician, I am often asked about my musical tastes. My most standard response, but by no means false, is that I can appreciate a wide range of musical cultures and understand or learn something from them. With some impatience at my generic and somewhat professional answer, some people go further, asking me what I listen to when I choose what to hear, what I listen to privately, or what kind of concerts I like to attend. My answer for years, if not decades, is as simple as it is disconcerting: doom metal. Don't get me wrong. In different listening situations with other people, I can enjoy various type of music. However, when it comes to my individual sphere, the answer remains unchanged.

But I am not here, of course, to tell you about my musical tastes or my fascination with Doom Metal, which could easily be explained as some kind of special interest, ending the discussion here. Yet I suspect this individualised, isolated listening reveals something “more” about the genre's aesthetic experiences. In this sense, reflecting on my own personal experience serves as a methodological entry point to explore some specific listening phenomena that take place within Doom Metal. In this presentation I address, therefore, broader reflections on listening, Doom Metal, and its aesthetic corollaries like isolation and melancholy, situating them within academic discourse on this subgenre and extreme metal at large.

This paper emerges from ongoing ethnographic research on Doom Metal that I have been conducting since last Autumn. As expected, this presentation also draws on the autoethnographic reflections of my own experience listening to Doom, as well as elements of retrospective autoethnography — namely, the ethnographic considerations on my own experiences as a Doom Metal fan before this research.

[→] In the following, I briefly outline an operational definition of Doom Metal, then I explore some of the peculiarities proposed by the literature on listening to the subgenre, and finally, I address the problem of isolation and listening in Doom Metal.

[→] Before proceeding, I must express my deep gratitude to the Department of Culture of the City of Vienna, which funded six months of fieldwork in the city, and to the Executive Committee of IASPM for awarding me a travel grant without which I could not be here today.

## About Doom Metal

[♫ Audio example: Mortajas – “Las palabras del silencio”, 0’43” – 1’25”]

*Me sientes en la brisa / en la soledad de la oscuridad  
Tras tus ojos existe soledad / un susurro nos encontrará*

*You feel me in the breeze / in the loneliness of the dark  
Behind your eyes dwells solitude / a whisper will find us*

[→] Doom Metal consists of various sub-subgenres such as Funeral Doom, Drone, Stoner Doom, Traditional Doom, Epic Doom, or Doom/Death, which engage in dialogue with one another as well as with other styles of metal and music in general such as the case of genres such as Gothic Metal, Sludge, or Depressive Black Metal; however, they all share more or less some common aesthetic and sonic characteristics. Scholars highlight the widespread use of concepts in Doom Metal such as depression, melancholy, suffering, hopelessness, monotony, isolation, and solitude. Alongside this, researchers also point out the persistence of ideas such as mysticism, epicness, romanticism, beauty, contemplation, spiritual connection, calm, completeness, and joy. This apparent paradox actually constitutes an important part of the internal dialectic of Doom Metal both in its productive and receptive moments.

[→] Certainly, the aforementioned feelings and ideas dialogue with the sonic characteristics of Doom Metal, which include low-pitched tones, wailing vocals, growls, repetition, long song structures, tempi changes, and, above all, slowness.

[→] In broad terms, Doom is recognised as one of the four main subgenres of extreme metal along with Death, Black, and Thrash.<sup>1</sup> However, metal fans often gloss over it and scholars actually understudy it. Selim Yavuz addresses the lack of academic research especially in comparison to other subgenres of extreme metal, which have received comparatively more attention from scholars. Furthermore, Yavuz notes that Doom Metal gets no more than three or four generic sentences even in relevant anthologies on extreme metal.<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, aesthetic features such as the slowness differ from the technicality, precision, and speed characteristic of other subgenres of extreme metal. All this grants Doom Metal an **ambivalent** status within the broad metal discourse.

## Listening to Doom Metal

[→] While each Doom Metal sub-subgenre naturally presents distinct listening possibilities, several common points can be discussed concerning the notions of

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<sup>1</sup>Hillier, ‘Considering Genre in Metal Music’; Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal*, 2–5.

<sup>2</sup>Yavuz, ‘The Barghest o’ Whitby’, 2–3 und 12–16. See also Mendelyte, ‘The Still, Sad Music of Humanity’, 469–70.

personal experience, the idea of the listening as a sonic journey, and the demands of listening.

[→] In a 2000 study, Gabriela Sauciuc explores this latter idea specifically in relation to Gothic-Doom Metal and the listening difficulty posed by the extended duration of its songs, which typically last between 6 and 9 minutes, with several examples exceeding 20 minutes.<sup>3</sup> In other sub-subgenres such as Funeral Doom or Drone, this issue is taken to extremes. This demand is framed in terms of available time on the one hand, but also in terms of physical endurance and effort on the other. Yury Arkadin, editor of the Funeral Doom specialised magazine *Ethere*, argues that the genre is difficult as it demands active participation, attention, and effort.<sup>4</sup>

[→] A second element is the personal experience and the feeling of fulfilment surrounding Doom Metal listening. As mentioned earlier, Doom Metal presents an interesting internal dialectic around apparently aporetic categories such as sadness and joy. Selim Yavuz, in his study focused on Doom-Death and fans' emotional responses, has addressed this issue. The author suggests that this genre systematically appeals to the “darker” spectrum of human emotions, but that, during the listening experience, fans highlight their encounters using concepts such as authenticity, spiritual connection, adaptation, calm, completeness, hope, liberation, and joy.<sup>5</sup> Here it is also relevant to note that, as suggested by the literature and my field observations, these affective phenomena are experienced rather in an individual than a collective manner. I will return to this point later

[→] A third aspect refers to the metaphor of Doom Metal as a sonic journey. Here, I refer not only to the actual travel involved in attending a festival or concert elsewhere but also to the listening experience itself understood as a journey in its own right. Considering particularly Drone Metal, Owen Coggins explores how the indescribable experience of listening to repeated sounds over long periods of time is framed in terms of mystical discourse and as a pilgrimage that ritually alters the perception of time, space, and body.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Gavin Hurley notes that Funeral Doom audiences sometimes enter trance-like states or in limbo, from which they then ‘come back to reality’ after the gig.<sup>7</sup> As can be seen, the listening experience of Doom Metal, understood as a sonic journey, is characterized by spiritual references. To these, one might add the aforementioned physical effort of listening, which can be interpreted now in terms of secularised sacrifice, also considering the high noise levels at concerts which, without proper protection, lead to hearing damage.

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<sup>3</sup>Sauciuc, ‘Doom-Gothic Metal’.

<sup>4</sup>Arkadin, ‘Intro...’

<sup>5</sup>Yavuz, ‘Delightfully Depressing’; Yavuz, ‘The Barghest o’ Whitby’.

<sup>6</sup>Coggins, ‘Transforming Detail into Myth’; Coggins, *Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal*; Coggins, ‘Dirty, Soothing, Secret Magic’.

<sup>7</sup>Hurley, ‘Funeral doom metal as the rhetoric of contemplation’.

Some of you may already be thinking about the concept of liminality at this point – that spatial and temporal transition which separates individuals from everyday social space and suspends ordinary life rhythms.<sup>8</sup> Pilgrimage and travel are, of course, among those quintessential liminal moments, and the same with the idea of the sacrificial effort involved in listening to Doom, as Coggins has suggested.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, I would also propose that the personal experience itself, particularly isolated listening within Doom Metal, constitutes a liminal passage. Here, the individual steps outside their everyday routine virtually suspending their status to self-isolate within an experience framed as both fulfilling and individualised.

### **Isolation and Individualised Listening**

[→] Numerous scholars have shown how community building and a sense of belonging constitute core elements of metal scenes. However, two extreme metal subgenres, Black and Doom metal, tend toward the opposite: the pursuit of isolation and non-belonging. In the case of Black Metal, while nihilistic individualism plays a significant role in the subgenre, this coexists with nationalist imaginaries or identity constructs centred on borealism and paganism.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in her study on Black Metal and urban space, Francesca Stevens proposed the concept ‘privatised listening’ to describe the listener’s intense pleasure when travelling through the city, as it enables the user to block out the external environment both sonically and mentally. Also relevant in this context is that participants of Steven’s study perceive the listening as a individual and personal activity.<sup>11</sup> Although Stevens focuses on headphone culture and urban walks, the concept of privatised listening is valuable here and can be extended to multiple strategies observed in the quest for isolated Doom Metal listening. Thus, I employ the broader term individualised listening, as it may take place also in settings with more people like concerts while retaining this pursuit of solitude.

Individualised listening in Doom Metal manifests across various listening modes, spaces, and temporalities within Doom Metal – albeit with exceptions. I outline a non-exhaustive typology of Doom Metal listening practices using as the main axis the type of social interaction (shared or isolated), which is cross-cut with other relevant categories observed in the fieldwork. As I will explore, individualised listening predominates here.

#### [→] Non-exhaustive typology of listening in Doom Metal with the category of social interaction as a cross-cutting axis

- = Dominant pattern
- = Possible but less frequent combination

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<sup>8</sup>Turner, *El proceso ritual [The Ritual Process]*; Coggins, ‘Ritual Sacrifice’.

<sup>9</sup>Coggins, ‘Ritual Sacrifice’. See also Coggins, ‘Transforming Detail into Myth’; Coggins, *Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal*; Coggins, ‘Dirty, Soothing, Secret Magic’.

<sup>10</sup>Coggins, ‘Distortion, restriction and instability’; Hagen, ‘The Music of the North’.

<sup>11</sup>Stevens, ‘Blackened audiotopia’, 164.

Category	Shared listening ○	Isolated Listening ●
Setting	Public place ○	Public place ●
	Private place	Private place ●
Experiential context	Everyday life ○	Everyday life ●
	Non-mundane ●?	Non-mundane ●
Mobility	In transit	In transit ●
	Static ●	Static ●
Physical „response“	Movement ○	Movement ●
	Stillness ●	Stillness ●
Attention	Attention ○	Attention ●
	Inattention	Inattention ●
Posture towards environment	Split	Split ●
	Blend ○	Blend ●

[→] The possible combinations are theoretically more than a hundred with some combinations such as the following:

Isolated + Private + Everyday life + Static + Stillness + Inattention/Attention + Blend: Listener lying in their room following their daily routine of listening to the album *Watching from a distance* by Warning in order to fall asleep, which is blended with the sound of rain outside.

Of course, we will not now analyse all possible combinations, but some of the most relevant combinations between categories that I have observed in Doom Scenes and in my own experience. It is important to emphasise that none of these combinations of seven categories is necessarily the privileged mode of listening in Doom Metal. However, any of these categories when combined with isolated listening is observed as a dominant pattern in doom listening, but not when combined with shared listening.

### *Social interaction + setting + other categories*

#### *Public place*

[→] I begin with the intersection between setting and social interaction. Jonathan Sterne has already noted that even public spaces become more and more private. To illustrate this, he refers to concerts where audiences, once noisy and unruly, gradually became silent and individually contemplating the music. This quieting, he argues, has the effect of atomising the audience into individual listeners.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Doom Metal, however, this kind of individualisation of listening does not seem to stem from a social norm based on respecting other people’s “right” to enjoy the performance without being disturbed by noisy fellow audience members. Rather, it appears to be a matter of intentional pursuit. It is worth recalling that in other subgenres of extreme metal, audiences tend to be quite loud and physically expressive. In this sense, individualised listening in Doom Metal is, above all, an aesthetic choice that operates

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<sup>12</sup>Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 161.

within a liminal space and temporality. I want to emphasise its deliberate nature: this isolation is not primarily the result of external social norms but rather an aesthetic pursuit by listeners themselves.

Thus, forms of shared listening in public settings are relatively uncommon within Doom Metal. What typically occurs, even in concerts — which are, by definition, public settings — is a form of isolated listening. By this I mean that audience members rarely engage with one another in mosh pits, nor do they tend to chat before, during, or after the gig, save for a few exceptions. One of my informants, who works at a metal venue in Vienna, notes that as a staff member, he finds Doom Metal shows particularly convenient to manage because the audience tends to leave immediately after the performance, without staying to socialise. This contrasts markedly, affirms my informant, with what happens at events featuring other subgenres of extreme metal. Of course, this is a culturally specific observation related to the Viennese scene, but it clearly points to a broader tendency.

Of course, isolated listening in public spaces such as shared offices, libraries or public transport is also widespread, especially nowadays when noise cancelling technologies can provide more effective isolation from the social and acoustic environment therefore a more effective aesthetic search for isolation.

#### *Private place*

Private settings, on the other hand, do not necessarily imply isolated listening. As Marta García Quiñones points out, the fragmentation of audiences does not automatically entail that listening becomes solitary or isolated.<sup>13</sup> For instance, a gathering of friends coming together to listen to records in a living room, or a family road trip where everyone shares the experience of listening, even if different approaches within that oblique continuum of attentive listening. They're engaging with the same recordings, and sometimes even singing along. Again, Doom Metal has also something to oppose here. These kinds of private shared listening are extremely rare in Doom Metal. One of my interviewees, Yiannis Filippaios—a musician involved in Doom bands such as Shattered Hope and Decembrance—describes his own private listening practices as fundamentally solitary. In his words: “Doom [...] is something that I enjoy alone. I think you can't conceive it with company. Motörhead, Slayer, and Metallica [are] for company, not Thergothon...”.

#### *Social interaction + experiential context + others* [saltable si estoy apurado de tiempo]

[→] Regarding experiential context – that is, the dichotomy between everyday life and the non-mundane, or if preferred, ritual moments – it is noteworthy that in Doom Metal, isolated listening facilitates a seamless transition between the mundane and the ritual. Precisely during these instances of individualised listening within the everyday, liminal transitions occur that call into question the everyday life itself, as I suggested

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<sup>13</sup>García, *La música más allá del cerebro*, 127.

earlier. In this sense, individualised listening functions as a liminal passage that can suspend the rhythms of daily routine while paradoxically remaining embedded within that very routine. This may be understood, fundamentally, as a ritualised everyday act, traversing both sides of the dichotomy.<sup>14</sup>

### *Social interaction + attention + others*

[→] Finally, I would like to briefly address attentive and inattentive listening in Doom Metal. As previously noted, scene participants advocate for a demanding mode of listening particularly isolated and that require effort and, to some extent, sacrifice. Yet we must also consider the possibility of isolated yet inattentive listening, or at least a fluid oscillation between these modes. Field observations reveal no instances of Doom Metal as background music in shared contexts, barring rare exceptions at a niche metal bar where doom tracks played extremely sporadically. Remember that Doom – even within metal – remains an ambivalent and scarcely popular genre, albeit recognised. Similarly, I have never encountered Doom during family or friend car trips.

However, certain isolated listening practices like sleep induction demonstrate fluctuating attention states, floating between immersion and distraction – as exemplified earlier with Warning's album. Not without irony, many non-fans deem the subgenre "tedious and soporific". Here, doom's monotony and slowness prove being functional: they facilitate the desired lulling effect while allowing seamless shifts between attentiveness and inattention.

### **Conclusions**

[→] As illustrated in this presentation, the pursuit of isolation holds a central role in Doom Metal's listening experience. While motivations vary among listeners, I propose that this individualised listening works in three main ways: First, as a non-normative engagement with one's own affectivity. Second, as an aesthetic delimitation against the world and the routine, and in this sense as a liminal passage even within everyday life. And third, as a transformative form for understanding and experiencing one's own temporality, where Doom's stretched and monotonous structures reshape the perception of time itself.

As you may guess, this research is still a work-in-progress with significant speculative elements. Among the biggest methodological challenges is precisely accessing ethnographic data on these individualized listening practices – given their private nature. While certainly feasible, such research requires some "methodological patience" and conveys naturally a particular temporality for the research itself.

[→] Thank you for your attention. I appreciate any questions or comments you may have.

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<sup>14</sup>See Catherine Bell.

**Non-exhaustive typology of listening in Doom Metal with the category of social interaction as a cross-cutting axis → with examples**

Category	Shared listening ○	Isolated Listening ●
Setting	Public place ○ Online listening parties, bars, gigs, festivals, workshop/construction work	Public place ● Gigs, festivals, bars, public transport (train, bus, flight) using headphones walking (headphones), library/office (headphones), park
	Private place Listening meetings at home, road family trip	Private place ● Home (room, shower, kitchen etc.), car, non-populated areas, at work/study
Experiential context	Everyday life ○ Gigs*, drinking/eating, working, cleaning	Everyday life ● Gigs*, drinking/eating, transportation, working/studying, cooking, cleaning
	Non-mundane ●? Gigs*, festivals, listening parties	Non-mundane ● Gigs*, festivals, sporadic home listening 'rituals', personal getaway to the forest, 'trips' within the concert
Mobility	In transit Road family trip, group trip to a festival, walking entrance to a festival	In transit ● Walking, train, etc.
	Static ● At a gig or festival, listening parties, etc.	Static ● At home, at gigs or festivals
Physical „response“	Movement ○ Moshpits, headbanging*	Movement ● Headbanging, air guitar playing, swaying, finger tapping
	Stillness ● 'Contemplation'	Stillness ● 'Contemplation', altered states of consciousness, controlled breathing
Attention	Attention ○ Collective immersion at gig, group analysis and discussion at meeting or bar	Attention ● Personal immersion at concert, transporting, structural listening, writing notes, sonic journey, falling asleep*
	Inattention ○ Background music at parties, bar, workshop	Inattention ● Background music at office or bar, falling asleep*
Posture towards environment	Split	Split ● At festivals and gigs, transportation (especially with noise cancelling headphones), working, walking, etc...
	Blend ○ At festivals and gigs, bars, listening at parks blended with bird sounds	Blend ● Personal getaway to the forest, walking, listening at home blended with climatic sounds or imaginaries (rain, etc.), listening at a church blending the architecture, etc.

● = Dominant pattern

○ = Possible but less frequent combination