*Monolithic Undertow: In Search of Sonic Oblivion*, Harry Sword (2021), London: White Rabbit, 455pp, ISBN: 9781474615235, h/bk £20 (1)

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*Monolithic Undertow* is a fantastic wide-ranging and tangential exploration of drone that starts in the underground Hypogeum in Malta and ends up in dancefloor delirium, having visited The Velvet Underground, contemporary classical, ambient and krautrock en route.

Actually, it's the first two-thirds of the book which is brilliant, as I goes on to lose its way, as Sword somehow crams every type of music he likes into the drone category. Part of the problem is a lack of definition to begin with: Sword prefers to start his book in a ‘dazed half-hypnotised state’, the result of three days of doom metal and major dope indulgence. Whilst it’s amusing, it already suggests the author isn’t thinking straight and the doom/drone ambiguity and similar genre/sound blurrings is something that reoccurs throughout the book. Is the modal centre of improvised freakout jazz a drone, or just the root the music touches base with? Is repetitive techno or metal drone? How often is experiment and freeform (kraut)rock or (post)punk drone music? Or is it just to do with sustain, duration, echo and complexity, or the effect of music on a listener? Or is it because Harry Sword says so?

But let’s go back to the beginning. In the underground echo chamber of Malta’s Hypogeum (which I’ve been fortunate enough to visit) Sword explores some of the themes he will return to: a sense of spirituality or ritual, complex sustain, reverb, decay and echo, and music as catalyst for changing your state of mind. All good clear stuff, well-argued and exampled, as are other chapters on the music of La Monte Young and Tony Conrad, their links to and influence on The Velvet Underground, Indian ragas and other musical forms, the Master Musicians of Joujouka, free jazz, and sideways/onwards into Ladbroke Grove and Hawkwind, Germany and several krautrock bands.

So far, all well and good. Sword makes a strong case about Hawkwind’s electronic drones and experiment having been overlooked in favour of the amphetamine-fuelled space-rock they are renowned for; and in a similar fashion Can, Faust, Ash Ra Tempel and others certainly underpin *some* of their work with drones. I’m a big fan of Sonic Youth and a lot of No Wave music, too, and can see that early Sonic Youth’s radical tunings and use of noise and drone mark them out for inclusion in this book; with a bit of belligerent shoehorning. Rhys Chatham and Glenn Branca too. Further down the line Eno and other ambient music often utilise drone, but it’s also around here in the book's chronology that I start to worry about where Guest’s book is going.

I can’t honestly see how Black Sabbath or Swans can be classified as drone, nor Iggy Pop and the Stooges, let alone the likes of Black Flag and Flipper. This isn’t about my musical taste, nor about genre: Earth (whose music I like) and Sunn 0]]] (which I don’t), for instance, both fit in to the drone category well, and Sword is coherent and informed about them. But minimal hardcore? Sludge metal? I’m unconvinced, as I am by the way Sword ignores the likes of Seefeel or Stars of the Lid, along with the plethora of ambient music that foregrounds drone, let alone whole swathes of contemporary classical music (John Luther Adams anyone?), in favour of the sonic hell of The Bug's sampled hip-hop and the synthesizer occult experiments of Coil. Eno’s long-form ambient music, probably most appropriate and useful to a discussion about drone, is ignored in favour of his work with Cluster, *Music for Airports* and the endlessly-retold story of how Eno invented ambient music laid in bed post car-accident. Sword even suggests that grunge possessed a ‘sludgy, dronal, detuned tone’, something I’m sure that most adherents to the movement’s recycled 60s and 70s rock riffs would be surprised to hear, but also raising the serious question of whether something can be classified as drone because of the music's 'tone'.

Ultimately it's the lack of definition of drone that lets the book down and allows Sword to wander aimlessly through music he loves rather than follow through on the book's majority of focussed and lively chapters. The book is also let down by a partial referencing system and a lack of bibliography; both would have been extremely useful, and it's somewhat disingenuous to not thoroughly acknowledge each and every source. However, Sword doesn't claim his work is academic in nature, it's very much personal and experiential, which is, it has to be said, part of its charm.

The closing chapter offers up a quick name check for contemporary artists such as Gazelle Twin and Richard Skelton (both of whom deserve longer sections on their work), a brief visit to the hauntological worlds of Ghost Box and Mordant Music, an elegy for Andrew Weatherall, and a bunch of vague claims for drone: '[it] allows you to take *control* of time', 'the ultimate folk music', 'fundamentally subversive' and the closing 'It exists outside of us, an aural expression of a universal hum we can only hope to fleetingly channel.'

I'm not sure about much of that, although a more formal exploration of how drone can disorientate our perceptions, including that of time, would have been interesting. Sword asks 'do we play the drone or does it play us?' and I want to come down firmly on the side of us playing it. I guess I'm more interested in how drones are constructed and made, used and listened to, not the idea of 'sonic oblivion' or associated lifestyle choices, which seem to be about something else entirely other than music.

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Footnote:

(1) An earlier version of this review  first appeared online in *International Times*, April 2021.

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