(Un)Popular avant gardes: Underground popular music and the avant garde

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Abstract

Popular music, curiously, is frequently anything but. Certain of its musicians prefer the pursuit of coarse aesthetic goals to a concession to the mainstream marketplace. Comprising a worldwide underground of production, this musical (*pace* Ellen Willis) 'elitist anti-elitism' currently takes in genres as disparate as (for example) grindcore, hypnagogic pop, and noise-Improv. Underground popular music lets the new digitised-technological scope inform its artistic sensibilities of sonic innovation and cross-genre activity. Its aesthetic tone usually pivots on sublime modes, with surface abrasion and syntactic destabilization, in many subtle formations across the field, being the primary expressive currencies.

The musical avant garde is usually identified with the modernism of Boulez et al. Yet a clear conception of what a musical avant garde might look like, let alone a theory that adequately describes the implosion of centricity that took place in the sixties, is lacking. The spectral distribution of musical styles in the contemporary era means firstly that the very notion of the avant garde has become disarticulated to the extent that musical avant gardes are now multiple, and secondly that some of those avant gardes incorporate consensual aesthetic modes and pivot on populist engines of thought. I adverted to such music in my opening paragraph.

My paper will seek to elucidate this notion of a transformed spectrum of multiple musical avant gardes, paying particular attention to the historicity of the concept of the avant garde, and then to its exemplification in one such multiple, the (un)popular avant garde. To that end I will expand upon in what an underground culture might be seen to exist. I will develop an account of the institutional and stylistic inclinations proper to such underground music. I will conclude by exploring the tensions presented by the seemingly paradoxical concept of a *popular* avant garde, noting its political implications along the way.

CV

Stephem Graham: I completed a BMus at University College Dublin in 2006, gaining a first class honours. I then undertook a Master of Music degree at King's College London, graduating in 2007. I began writing for the website *Musical Criticism* in early 2008, graduating to the positions of Concerts Editor later that year. In September 2008 I commenced doctoral research at Goldsmiths with supervisors Keith Potter and Keith Negus, focusing on liminal zones of activity within contemporary 'underground' music, and looking at aesthetic and cultural issues that arise in the classification and activity of this music. I have presented papers on my topic in conferences in Ireland and the UK, and since March 2009 I have been writing articles for the Irish publication the Journal of Music. I currently lecture part time on the Broadway Musical at King's College London.