

(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 centrality 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.

I am going to talk about underground popular music, particularly in its role as an index of what I am describing as a popular avant garde. I will provide an introduction to the field of underground music, summarising its history, its aesthetics, and its practitioners. The question guiding my paper concerns the proposed yoking together of the concept of the avant garde with underground music. Namely, I ask in what meaningful way can we consider underground music to articulate, rehabilitate, even repurpose, the notion of the avant garde?

The modern declension of the term 'avant garde' invariably renders it as a degenerated and dehistoricised slogan, a logo, a hook which signifies in ten easy letters fuzzy impressions of experimentation, radicalism, and fractiousness. 'Avant garde' as a descriptor has become iconic; little is known of its etymology or theoretical underpinning beyond its loose denotation of, as I have said, comparative radicalism. An example: British newspaper *The Guardian* carried a review on April 15, 2010 of the rock musician Paul Weller's new album *Wake Up The Nation* in which the reviewer, head Guardian pop writer Alexis Petridis, employs the term twice¹. The implication carried enough weight for the sub-editor to use it once again in the standfirst. Each employment of the term is non-specific and not a little incongruous, Paul Weller making music that falls comfortably within the mainstream.

¹The dad-rock king's discontent with modern life should come as no surprise. But what is shocking – and thrilling – is that his avant-garde phase continues apace, according to Alexis Petridis.

²Perhaps 2008's remarkable, turbulent, chaotic *22 Dreams* was merely a temporary blip, a clearing of the avant-garde pipes before a return to what came before it, when his albums resembled the kind of TV dramas you get at 8pm on a Sunday – cosily undemanding, so predictable you could set your watch by them.

'You could find antecedents for Wake Up the Nation's spikier moments in the avant-garde end of the Jam's output'.ⁱⁱ

These examples are symptomatic of the theoretical fuzziness that has developed around the concept of the avant garde. My contention is that despite this fuzziness, it is nevertheless possible to develop a meaningful contemporary theory of the avant garde that draws on canonical theoretical texts, but that applies to non-canonical, decentred repertoires of music. In order to do this, I will build a brief portfolio of theories of the avant garde, before moving on to a discussion of underground music that is framed by those theories.

Theorising the avant garde

It is possible to discern something of a dominant narrative in the literature on the avant garde. In his famous 1939 essay 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', Clement Greenberg states that 'in turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience, the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft'. Also; 'Content is dissolved into form...art for art's sake appears, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like the plague'.ⁱⁱⁱ This making new of language and turning of form into content—and the associated intensification of art's autonomy from life, with which it now presents a discontinuity—can be perceived in embryonic form in the preoccupation with musical grammar in the late works of Beethoven, just as it can more extensively in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, which as Greenberg suggests proposes 'the reduction of experience to expression, for the sake of expression'.^{iv} Such a conception frequently underpins theories of the avant garde.

Even more basic to the field, however, is its desire to embody and express modernity, newness. Eric Hobsbawm describes the twentieth century avant gardes as movements whose grounding principle was that 'relations between art and society had changed fundamentally, that the old ways of looking at the world were inadequate and new ways must be found'.^v A remarkable triangulation of those factors of innovation, autonomy, and the dissolution of content into form can be found in the music of the postwar composers Pierre Boulez and Karl Heinz Stockhausen, which music has come to represent, as the rubric of this conference would have it, 'the post-1950 internationalisation of early 20th-century modernist ideas'. The music of these men, like that of peers such as Bruno Maderna and Luc Ferrari, exemplifies for some the notion of the avant garde in music. In these contexts, the notions of the avant garde and of modernism are subsumed under the same project of innovation, of making things new, of pushing things forward.

Indeed the equating of modernism with the avant garde is a habit we find throughout the Anglo-American literary tradition. This tendency leads to a muddying of the theoretical waters.^{vi} Some perceptive commentators have however attempted to draw distinctions between the avant garde and the wider cultural trend in which the avant gardes flourished and with which they are often seen as interchangeable: modernism. In doing so they have furnished us with a clearer conception of the avant garde as a distinct qualitative marker, one which we can carry forward into our discussion of underground music. In *Theory of the Avant Garde*, Peter Bürger argues that the criteria commonly asserted for the avant garde could in fact just as easily apply to romantic art; 'In Aestheticism...apartness from the praxis of life, which had always been the condition that characterized the way art functioned in bourgeois society, now becomes its content'.^{vii} In attempting to indicate something of the historical uniqueness of the avant garde movements of the 1920s (and, by implication, their consequents), Bürger provides us with a radical reconceptualisation of the avant garde. Jochen Schulte-Sasse underscores the critical idea of Bürger's book in his foreword to the 1984 edition:

'For Bürger...the development of the avant garde has nothing to do with a critical consciousness about language; it is not a continuation of tendencies already present in Aestheticism. Rather for him the turning point from Aestheticism to the avant garde is determined by the extent to which art comprehended the mode in which it functioned in bourgeois society, its comprehension of its own social status. The historical avant garde of the twenties was the first movement in art history that turned against the institution 'art' and the mode in which autonomy functions. In this it differed from all previous art movements, whose mode of existence was determined precisely by an acceptance of autonomy'.^{viii}

Avant Garde art, then, for Bürger at least, can be seen as an attempt to lead culture directly back to social praxis. It does this not merely through the byways of homology and allegory (where autonomous art provides a semblance of society), as theorised by Adorno, but through a materialistic aesthetics that is rooted causally and spiritually within the social sphere, and is orientated towards an alteration of the institutional commerce of art.

Alain Badiou takes a slightly different approach in arguing for a similar socially-anchored aesthetics of the avant garde in his 2006 *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. Badiou sets up three schemata which he believes characterise the link between art and philosophy, calling them the didactic, the romantic, and the classical.^{ix} In the didactic schema, which Badiou relates to the Marxism of Brecht, art is incapable of truth; it represents merely 'the charm of a semblance of truth'. The romantic schema is opposed to the didactic, and holds that *only* art is capable of truth. The classical schema, according to Badiou, represents a 'peace treaty of sorts between the (other) two', holding that art is not capable of truth, but rather conveys verisimilitude, a therapeutic (as opposed to revelatory or cognitive) likeness of the truth that produces catharses. Badiou links the classical schema to psychoanalysis.^x He then argues that the twentieth century's avant gardes, 'from Dadaism to Situationism',

'were nothing but the desperate and unstable search for a mediating schema, for a didactic-romantic schema. The avant gardes were didactic in their desire to put an end to art, in their condemnation of its alienated and inauthentic character. But they were also romantic in their conviction that art should be reborn immediately as absolute...as its own immediately legible truth'.^{xi}

Badiou's 'mediating schema' points back to Bürger's identification of the socially-directed desires of the avant garde, but adds an internal tension that corresponds closely to the avant garde's inherent contradiction, namely, its desire to destroy art through the medium of art (*cf.* Tristan Tzara's 1918 Dada Manifesto; 'there is great, destructive, negative work to be done, to sweep, to clean'^{xii}). In fact for Badiou this tension predicts the avant garde's failure. Its various movements were so caught up, according to Badiou, with pursuing both schema that they never placed what he calls a 'lasting seal' on either of them.^{xiii}

What is important to note, for present purposes, is that between Greenberg, Bürger, and Badiou we now have a vision of the avant garde as being concerned with originality and preoccupied with formal innovation. These aspirations are seen to conflict with the socially rooted, politicised aesthetics that separates avant garde modernist movements from purely modernist ones. Under this regime, it becomes questionable whether it is fair to include Boulez, for instance, under the avant garde rubric (though Nono would surely qualify). As I will argue, however, this more differentiated conception of the avant garde provides us with a useful theory to begin an analysis of the field of underground music, which field both plays with and advances traditional avant garde practice through the repurposing of artistic languages and strategies from mass culture on the one hand, and the esoteric domain of notated music on the other. It is not that I want to limit the *quality* of the notion of the avant garde; it would be foolhardy to deny that the term simply signifies radicalism for many (though radicalism properly understood, at a remove from Paul Weller, must surely be insisted

upon), or that this signification is without value. It is rather that I want to expand the concept to highlight some important correlations between underground music and the avant garde movements of the twenties, whilst at the same time holding on to what is generally considered as being appropriate to the concept.

Underground popular music

Defining 'the underground' in the sense of the term signifying a particular musical subculture is a tricky business. Frank Zappa tried: 'The mainstream comes to you, but you have to go to the underground'.^{xiv} This definition uses the model of consumption to delineate in what the notion of a cultural underground might exist. In the sixties, seventies and eighties, the fact of having to *go to* the underground was more clear cut. Since the advent of digital technology and the web, however, such a relation has become confused. Culture has become flat, and porous. The surface modality of choice now defines cultural engagement. For Simon Reynolds, 'the web has extinguished the idea of a true underground; it's too easy for anybody to find out anything now'.^{xv}

I want to argue that, in fact, musical undergrounds persist in the twenty-first century. The descriptor 'underground' connotes a sense of concealment, even of contraband, and this sense is not dispelled by the fact that underground cultures are now notionally open to all. For it is in the incredulity towards the underground—the distinct willingness of the general public to either turn away or ignore its existence in the first place—that it gets its particular illicit charge, not out of some farcical public inability to locate it.

But for what reason do people turn away, or remain oblivious? Underground music exists at the fringes of mainstream culture. Its contexts and its strategies sometimes cross with those of popular music, which is why it is helpful to include the modifier 'popular' in the heading, but its ambitions lie elsewhere. The international scene of underground music which I am addressing is discernible in, amongst others, contemporary improvisers, noise musicians, and drone artists such as John Butcher, Sun Araw, and Eleh. Abrasive, coarse, noisy, abstruse, ambitious, impenetrable, all of these adjectives are proper to a description of the style. Dense and extended formal strategies, an absence of pulse or the use of aperiodic rhythms, chromatic modal or polytonal structures, spectral attention to sonority and tone, reliance on improvisation as strategic determinant, droning reductions of pulse and motion to near-stasis, all these features figure prominently.

However, and this is crucial, these motifs are used in voluptuous, even intoxicated ways, ways that strike at the inherited seriousness of intent of jagged postwar sensibilities with all the fun and irreverence of a drunk actor happily reciting Beckett.

The aesthetic tone of underground music usually pivots on sublime and fragmentary modes, with surface abrasion and syntactic destabilization, in many subtle formations across the field, being the primary expressive currencies. The music, however, is non-notated. Moreover, it makes use of forms, instruments, tone colours, and modes of presentation and distribution that are more commonly associated with 'popular' fields of musical production, albeit turned inward to guerrilla networks of praxis here. These artists rarely trouble the mainstream public or critical consciousness. They are unpopular musicians working under the sign of a false god, if under a sign at all. The spirit of their music, in its form as much as its reception, is one of esoteric, uncompromising experimentation that is yet driven by certain populist engines. We are dealing here with liminal music, a sort of unpopular popular music, that falls outside the broad critical categories that marble culture into islanded paradigms.

Preoccupation with form-as-content is prevalent in underground music, alongside a concerted dedication to innovation. Yet as with Dadaism, Situationism, and other avant garde movements, underground musicians such as Eddie Prevost and Mattin insist on the social rooting of their practice, whether it be in the communal, inclusive improvising workshops Prevost runs in London, or the political rallying and socialist proselytising evident throughout Mattin's work. Popular culture is also an important source of material both to be subverted and celebrated. Hypnagogic pop, for example, opens up a dialogue on the very question of continuity with life, in a similar way that the Dada movement used readymades and other found objects, and framed them in such a way as to motivate a flickering between art and life.

Dadaism represented a peculiarly egalitarian aesthetics that yet sought out radicalism in form and message. Underground music does similar things. In the case of hypnagogic pop, it is quotes from 1980s children's shows, outmoded but populist technologies such as the VCR and the tape, day-glo colours and peculiarly nostalgic vocal samples from old pop songs that ground the art in the everyday. The warped, deliquescent noise sensibility within which these objects become detoured provides the avant garde spirit. Detritus of spectral reminiscences become looped, subjected to noise and FX, dubbed into some sort of real virtuality. Sometimes the result is fragmented, expansive – see James Ferraro's *KFC City 3099* for such. Sometimes it is focused, yet endless – cf. Oneohtrix Point Never's 'Nobody Here', where a four bar loop from 'Lady In Red' overwhelms in repetition, attaining a sort of cosmic pentecostalism. The resources, the bombast, of eighties production techniques and blustery sensibilities are redreamed in hypnagogic pop for a new, shimmering fragility, a curious joy. Our world becomes estranged in the textural flicker of the music, yet it does not turn to the grotesque, rather to a sort of pathetic bliss, a melancholy utopia, though 'utopia' glosses over the political charge of many of the tracks, this music representing a provocative revisioning of previously affirmative, conservatively driven emotional and social sonic landscapes.

Other genres such as Chillwave and Hauntology similarly repurpose popular culture for new, provocative ends. The fuzzed, dissolving textural phantasmagoria and the neon poetry lyrics of the British band Broadcast, for example, represents a glorious musical staging of the tragedy of memory which postmodernism brings about.^{xvi} Broadcast's masterpiece, *Tender Buttons*, looks back through a never-eighties to the pathos-filled psychedelia of the sixties band the United States of America and of post-Pet Sounds Brian Wilson, in a similar way to hypnagogic pop utilising eighties materials for its own sublime ends.

So, now we have a vision of underground activity as being shaped by postmodern temporal and stylistic eclecticism, and being indebted to a sort of populism that yet seeks to abjure the popular. It remains to define more clearly a *theoretical* space for the underground, a space that draws on the arguments laid out around the avant garde, but that is also informed by the idiosyncratic forms of underground theory itself.

How can we theorise a third space, an interzone, proper to a popular avant garde? Ellen Willis provided us with a framework purely proper to a conceptualisation of underground music in her eponymous article on talismanic underground figures the Velvet Underground:

'The Velvets were the first important rock-n-roll artists who had no real chance of attracting a mass audience. This was paradoxical. Rock-n-roll was a mass art whose direct, immediate appeal to basic emotions subverted class and emotional distinctions and whose formal canons all embodied the perception that mass art was not only possible but satisfying in new and liberating ways'.^{xvii}

Shoring up her anticipation of the underground nexus, which like the Velvets did orientates around a generic contradiction, Willis goes on:

'Insofar as it incorporates the elite, formalist values of the avant-garde, the very idea of a Rock-n-roll art rests on a contradiction. Like pop art...it was anti-art made by anti-elite elitists'.^{xviii}

Willis' coinage of the term 'anti-elite elitists' is particularly illuminating in this context. Much underground music positions itself resolutely outside the academy, all the while its harsh sonics gnaw and upbraid the ears as forcefully as Wolfgang Mitterer or Mark Andre's music do from inside those hallowed walls. Popular culture is used and rejected - the uniforms and image is employed, but in shadowy, hidden rooms, away from the prying eyes of culture.

The underground interzone spectrally exists, spread across old theoretical, economic and cultural categories of high and low. The unruly, intoxicated, reality changing energies of the music demands theory that likewise flits between allegiances, using material from popular culture, 'high' academic philosophy, classical philosophy, and elsewhere. This type, like underground music itself, represents a sort of popular avant gardism where mass culture is mined for material and inspiration, being both rejected as object to surpass and welcomed as stimulating muse, but where an avant garde sensibility adopted from the Dadaists—egalitarian, yet destructive, challenging—places much of the work beyond the ken of the general public. The degree of discontinuity with life this popular avant gardism presents varies across its spectrum. Hypnagogic pop, as I have suggested, problematises the very question of continuity with life as basic material for art.

Another approach to the theorisation of underground music, similar in variety to the first, is to look at it in institutional terms. It exists outside—or just beside—both the institutes of high art and academic music (concert halls, universities), *and* those of popular music (gig venues, the charts). Its theory, likewise, bubbles underneath the surface of the mainstream. I would like to describe the underground as a 'para-state', intermediate, spectral, and fractured across categories. A correspondence can be drawn between underground music and the third space of blogging (and its related literary forms such as the underground publishers Zero Books), the motility, broadness, and democratising nature of whose theory-networks help us understand the place in which underground music exists; between the cracks. Speaking about Zero Books and about the blogging networks of which he is so central a part, Mark Fisher suggests that their purpose is to harvest theoretical work unheeded by the mainstream media. It is

'about establishing a para-space between theory and popular culture, between cyber-space and the university...serious writing doesn't have to be opaque and incomprehensible, and popular writing doesn't have to be facile'.^{xix}

This notion and location of a 'para-space' is utilised by many in the field—the noise musician Mattin's open source *Noise and Capitalism* book is a case-in-point—and it maps directly onto the liminal spaces in which underground music operates. Often audience-funded and musician or volunteer ran, basement spaces, specialist concert venues and small rooms in larger venues house underground activity. Independently owned and run publications like FACT, The Wire, Rock-A-Rolla, Dusted, and countless blogs provide its critical firmament. DIY labels and small-run CD-R and digital releases furnish its dissemination. The space in which underground music exists and is written about chimes compellingly with the conflicted stylistic space through which the music pulsates and grows.

Conclusions

How does the notion of the *avant garde*, as opposed to, say, the postmodern or the experimental, provide us with a meaningful theoretical underpinning for underground music? Without being limiting or proscriptive, I would suggest that there are three main senses in which it is productive to think of the field of underground music as a sort of popular *avant garde*. In his lengthy foreword to the aforementioned *Theory of the Avant Garde*, Jochen Schulte-Sasse proposes that there are two major philosophical and historical modes of the *avant garde*. The first proceeds from an opposition between closure and deconstruction, representation and life, and can be associated with Breton, Adorno, and Derrida, amongst others. The second concerns the insight that official discourse, particularly that of mass mediated societies, tends to expropriate individual languages for the purpose of domination. Associating it with Walter Benjamin and Brecht (whose Badiouian didacticism reveals the same tendency), Schulte-Sasse proposes that this second mode 'juxtaposes the state of expropriation with a utopian state, in which dominated social groups reappropriate language, allowing it once again to become a medium for expressing the needs and material, concrete experiences of individuals and groups'.^{xx} Underground music can be productively associated with this second mode. By using material from popular culture in new contexts and to new ends, its musicians counterbalance mainstream musical discourse, questioning its prejudices and its assumptions, whilst at the same time providing a forum of participation for those who feel excluded by that mainstream discourse.

The second sense in which I think the association of underground music with the *avant garde* is useful is in the former's basic radicalism. As I have pointed out, the notion of the *avant garde* stands, at bottom, for an effort to radically make things new. Underground musicians are at the vanguard of musical sensibility, alongside the best popular and classical practitioners, pushing musical aesthetics to the limit of possibility. Yet as I have likewise pointed out, social praxis remains vitally important to the underground field, both as active, felt element in live contexts, and in the sense of the revolutionary institutional commerce that takes place in the underground distribution networks of theory and music (where new models of cultural consumption are constantly being tested). Even if this music is not truly popular, its populist leanings and its comparatively widespread dissemination ensure that the socio-political leanings it adopts from previous *avant garde* movements have the chance to effect perceptible change. This is the third sense in which it is helpful to think of the field of underground music in *avant garde* terms.

Other theoretical conceptions of underground music are possible, and indeed probable. For now however I believe it is beneficial to think of the music in the ways I have suggested, placing it as they do in a broad historical context, and alerting us as they do likewise to its radical political and aesthetic tendencies, and its liminal position between dominant cultural categories of high and low. Appending the term 'popular' to both 'avant garde' and 'underground music' is in some ways a provocation. But I would argue that the term's peculiar charge nevertheless precisely advertises both the shifting connotations of the modern *avant garde* that are captured so evocatively in the underground domain (where the tensions Badiou underlines that come with the desire to destroy are not so important), and alert us likewise to the fundamental basis of underground music as a derivation, a detouring, of popular culture.

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- ⁱ Alex Petridis, 'Wake up the Nation', *The Guardian*, April 15, 2010, Arts section.
- ⁱⁱ *ibid.*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', in *Art and Culture*, (London: Beacon Press, 1989), 5-6.
- ^{iv} *ibid.*, 7.
- ^v Eric Hobsbawm, *Behind the Times: The Decline and Fall of the Twentieth-Century Avant Gardes*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 7-8.
- ^{vi} For evidence of such connotations: Howe, Poggioli, Weightman.
- ^{vii} Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1964), 48.
- ^{viii} Schulte-Sasse in *ibid.*, xiv.
- ^{ix} Alain Badiou, 'Art and Philosophy' in *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. trans Alberto Toscano. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005), 2-3.
- ^x *ibid.*, 2-5.
- ^{xi} *ibid.*, 7-8.
- ^{xii} Tristan Tzara, 'Dadaism', <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/English104/tzara.html>, (accessed 3-5-2010).
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- ^{xvi} Frederic Jameson, 'The Antinomies of Postmodernity', in *The Cultural Turn: selected writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, (London, Verso, 1998), 50-72.
- ^{xvii} Ellen Willis, 'Velvet Underground', in *Beginning To See the Light*. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 113.
- ^{xviii} *ibid.*, p. 114
- ^{xix} Mark Fisher and Rowan Wilson, 'Interview', Ready Steady Book, <http://www.readysteadybook.com/Article.aspx?page=markfisher>, (accessed 3-3-2010).
- ^{xx} Schulte-Sasse in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1964), xv-xvi.