**The Mobility of "Difficulty": Moving Past Reductive Rhetoric When Categorizing the Musical Avant-Garde**

**A convoluted abstraction of "difficult" music: *Roman Candle***

Definitions of the musical avant-garde typically emerge when analyzing how a project's aesthetic and technical qualities intersect with its reception – a reception that is commonly considered "irreconcilably antagonistic" to "popular music" (Atton). Where mainstream music prioritizes broad accessibility and marketability over experimental elements, the notion that "popularity" is "an index of failure" for avant-garde art (Atton) reinforces a widely-used binary for the categorization of music. Being that experimental music is characterized by both the innovation of musical concepts and an element of difficulty in their execution, in employing the binary framework above it would be most reasonable to regard it as "avant-garde"; however, this presents a problematic oversimplification. In an effort to highlight this, I seek to identify fallacies in this "irreconcilabl[e]" binary by tracking the development of experimental projects over their lifetimes: often, albums that *were* regarded as subversive and difficult have undergone remasters and since been embraced by mainstream audiences, challenging any rigid definition of the avant-garde as we know it. How can an album suddenly become marketable if it was originally regarded as "nonconforming to critical expectations" and consisting of "incomprehensible musical structures" (Atton)?

Elizabeth Newton enters this discourse to address the adjacent question of "what makes music difficult?", using the reception of the Elliott Smith's *Roman Candle* before and after its 2010 remaster as a case study. Under the umbrella of experimental music, difficult music presents deliberate challenges to the listener in its resistance to typical modes of musical

creation. *Roman Candle* was considered a difficult, "[un]listenable" album upon its release due to its distinct, abrasive sound that can mainly be attributed to Smith's recording equipment – a "home-studio four-track" – taken with his "close-mic" technique (Newton). However, critics believed that Smith was "too good" and "too talented" (Newton) to be confined to the lo-fi format in which the album was made and pushed for a remaster after Smith's death. In the making of this remaster, Newton points out that the "difficult" sounds of Smith's work (sounds of "audible breathing", a "tape hiss", and "fingers sliding along guitar strings") were edited out to produce a polished sound that, in the record label's opinion, "honored the voice of Smith" while making the album more "listenable" (Newton). As a result, in the remastering of certain lo-fi albums, we are exposed to what record labels perceive as unmarketable attributes of experimental music when they round the corner to commercial success.

However, I don't agree that *Roman Candle* was ever "[un]listenable"; in fact, I believe that this reinforces the same reductive rhetoric as the abovementioned binary framework of the avant-garde. Instead, the misalignment between the original 1995 release and the 2010 remaster demonstrates not a hard divide between the avant-garde and the mainstream, but the ability for the album to exist in two distinct aesthetic paradigms: one which is compatible with Smith's intentions and one which is compatible with the mainstream. However, in distinction to Newton's claim, I would argue that *both cases were marketable* albeit occupying different social contexts, and that traits of "marketability" and "listenability" can evolve situationally without becoming their "irreconcilable" opposites (i.e. unmarketable, unlistenable). We can acknowledge that distinct trade-offs must occur in order to alter the social context of an album but we ought not to pass them off as features that render the music "unlistenable." Thus, in an attempt to challenge the simplistic binary of "unprofitable avant-garde" versus "profitable mainstream", I

will examine how difficult albums obtain broader appeal, focusing specifically on the role of hardware as a tangible measure of these transitions.

**Hardware limitations as a way to both categorize and explore an artist's intentions**

Hardware is a convenient way to simultaneously consider an artist's intentions and the context in which their project was produced; that is, a musician might have intended to do A but could only deliver B because they did not have the proper equipment. It is true that an understanding of the artist's vision is far more inherent to the original, intimate audiences the works were intended for. Nonetheless, it can be extracted by larger audiences using the following techniques:

1) Refactoring B to align with A.

2) Taking time to extract A through the analysis or contextualization of B.

I will explore two albums that satisfy the above criteria, one of which being a continuation of our previous discussion of Elliott Smith's *Roman Candle* and the other being *Computer Controlled Acoustic Instruments pt2* by Richard D. James (more famously known as Aphex Twin). When studying what happens when sounds of hardware are either removed from the experience entirely (1) or contextualized through active listening practices (2), we seek to expose instances where "avant-garde" albums are scalable to the mainstream, ultimately challenging us to reconsider how avant-garde music is defined.

In the case of Elliott Smith, the success of *Roman Candle* was far from anticipated. In fact, "the solo recording career of Smith began with such low expectations that nearly half the songs on his 1994 album *Roman Candle* don't have proper names" (Apple Music). As mentioned earlier, Smith's restrictions from recording equipment resulted in a lo-fi sound that was deemed

unlistenable by mainstream critics. However, this does not mean it was unlistenable for everyone; in fact, "the lo-fi aberrations of Smith's original release of *Roman Candle* are understood by fans to be significant aspects of the texts" (Newton). Therefore, we can acknowledge that the hardware with which the album was recorded curated a challenging sound, but it was a sound that resonated with a distinctive audience. The next step is to ask ourselves the question of what changed to allow the album to enter the mainstream, allowing us to extract the factors needed for this shift to occur. Luckily, we can identify the common denominator quickly as we already have the answer thanks to Newton's case study: any unadorned, non-musical sounds from Smith's hardware were identified as vestigial noise by the engineers (i.e. tape hiss) and were cut from the remaster. This pivotal exchange recognizes that the polished standards of the mainstream dismiss the sonic presence of hardware while confirming that a re-handling of experimental music to meet these standards allows for its traversal into popular domains. In other words, these differences are *not irreconcilable*, but rather malleable in nature.

As for Aphex Twin, it is important to note that his distinct electronic productions were consistently considered to be pushing the envelope and *Computer Controlled Acoustic Instruments pt2* does not fall short of this notion. His take on electronica was considered "avant-garde" and "acutely alien to our idea of musical normality" (Bland), and though occupying a very different space than Smith, the reception of his music is quite similar in the sense that addressing its hardware (though I must preface that this case is conceptual rather than literal) is essential to an appreciation of the work. In contrasting the album's reviews from different critics, it begins to emerge how impactful certain contexts can be on a listener's engagement.

It is known by long-standing followers of Aphex Twin that he configures his own instruments in order to create his unique sound. In the case of *Computer Controlled Acoustic Instruments pt2*, "the instrument is used to its full capacity as a prepared sonic tool" with tracks such as "Diskhat1" and "Piano Un1 Arpej" (Bland). Without this context, the album renders as noisy and obscure: one critic goes as far as to say it is "unlistenably irritating – take diskhat1, which is like a steampunk viscount prancing around and poking you in the ribs" (Beaumont-Thomas). This critic (almost belligerently) takes issue with "Diskhat1", the same track that others consider a hallmark of Aphex Twin's ability to manipulate hardware like never done before. Allow me to pause and make the distinction that this is not just a commonplace case of critics disagreeing; I raise the argument to examine when and why these disagreements are occurring. Therefore, it is interesting to note that the critic who perceived the album as "highly listenable" (antonymic to "unlistenably irritating") claimed that that "the greatest pleasure comes in knowing where it came from and how it came to be" and that the album "is a release for established fans" (Richardson). It is thus fair to conclude that *Computer Controlled Acoustic Instruments pt2* receives more mainstream approval in instances where deliberate context is given to the unique and exhaustive efforts of Aphex Twin.

This is not to say that neither of these albums can be classified as avant-garde or experimental; instead, it prompts us to reflect on the mobility of the avant-garde in its interactions with the mainstream in order to push back against the narrative that these paradigms are "irreconcilably antagonistic" (Atton). Having established a fluidity between avant-garde and mainstream paradigms, it is evident that we must reconsider Newton's binary categorization of music. However, this prompts us to go one step further: what is there to make of the avant-garde

now when we can no longer classify it as anything and everything that is *not* mainstream? What reveals itself in its understated mobility?

**Mobility as a means to explore the two-tiered framework of the avant-garde**

I aim to make sense of this phenomenon by demonstrating the existence of a three-tiered framework for categorizing music within its broader avant-garde classification: commercial music, which is designed to appeal to a broader, mainstream market; aesthetically difficult music, which uses its challenges to forge intimate bonds with its audience; and truly difficult music, which resists connection entirely through serving an entirely intrinsic purpose. In its initial release, *Roman Candle* firmly occupied the second tier, offering an intimacy that, while deemed "uncomfortable" by critics (Newton), resonated deeply with its intended listeners.

This framework builds upon Chris Atton's two-tiered definition of the avant-garde introduced in "Listening to 'Difficult Albums': Specialist Music Fans and the Popular Avant-Garde". Included is one strain that upholds an ideology of "separatism and prestige" and another that focuses on "embracing aesthetics" that are "mobile" – that is, though avant garde music can be difficult at first, with sufficient effort from the listener, "cultural capital" can be deployed (Atton). The latter strain reinforces the existence of the "aesthetically difficult" paradigm and offers an explanation for our above findings: as long as a project can interact with an audience in a way that allows for a refactoring or recontextualization of the work, it is free to enter the mainstream as capital. Until then, it is confined to the smaller, more intimate audiences for which it was intended, curating aesthetic value in its difficulty.

While I agree with this two-tiered framework, I disagree with "separatism and prestige" being the forefront characteristics of the immoble strain because I believe that prestige is able to

generate its own form of dialogue, even if it is negative. In other words, even if people have qualms with a so-called elitist musical project, the act of rejection or resistance is still engagement. Yes, this sentiment of prestige might make the project difficult; but, as shown above, difficult music maintains a deliberate effort to resonate with a specific audience and its reach can be scaled accordingly.

As a result, I modify Atton's definition of the avant-garde: I believe that there are still two tiers, where one reflects the intention to resonate with an audience, however big or small, ("aesthetically difficult") and the other serves an entirely intrinsic purpose leaving no space to forge a connection or make a commentary. This strain is subsequently resistant to mobility and it is very important to make a distinction between this and its avant-garde counterpart to fortify the discussion of what is truly antagonistic with the mainstream and what is not. To evidence the existence of this immoble strain in conjunction with its counterparts, I will analyze Slint's iconic *Spiderland* as it moves from its original release to its 2010 remaster.

### *Spiderland*: where the three paradigms intersect

"As was famously said about the Velvet Underground, it seemed that whoever heard Spiderland started a band" (Tennent 6). To say *Spiderland* is an ambitious and trailblazing project would be an understatement. Known for its gritty synergy of musical dissonance and ambiguous spoken word, the album carved out a name for itself in the history of experimental rock. Like our previous case studies, the album's relationship with recording technology appears to hold significance. Due to the "jam box" that the album was recorded on, the original release of *Spiderland* was "stripped down"; however, this raised no issues with the bandmates who allegedly "liked that unadorned sound so much" (Tennent 83). Therefore, the difficulty of the

album was both acknowledged and accepted as an integral part of its aesthetic. This firmly positions the album in the aesthetically difficult paradigm – with one caveat.

The final track of the album's original release is titled "Utica Quarry, Nighttime" and consists only of a presumably single-take recording of the outdoors: we hear crickets chirping, leaves rustling, and the occasional hoot of an owl. It goes on like this for an exhaustive sixteen minutes. Whereas the rest of the album, albeit "fucking weird" in the eyes of critics (Thomspon), maintains elements of musicality and motif, "Utica Quarry, Nighttime" is an anomaly. The issue is, even if one were to employ an abovementioned listening practice with this track, they would fall short of moving it out of the avant-garde paradigm. Allow me to demonstrate this. To begin, it is quite obvious that refactoring the track would be useless; if we took the *Roman Candle* approach and removed anything that would be considered vestigial by mainstream standards, we would eliminate the entire body of "Utica Quarry, Nighttime" as it is composed entirely of noise. So we consider our second option: perhaps a recontextualization would be more promising. Unsurprisingly, a bit of research on Slint's origin tells us that Utica Quarry does in fact hold meaning – just not the kind we are looking for.

It turns out that Utica Quarry is not only a real place, but a nostalgic site for the members of Slint: "for the album cover the four boys and their longtime friend Will Oldham traveled across the Ohio River into Utica, Indiana, to a hidden quarry they knew and liked to swim in" (Tennent 127). The important takeaway is that although the track serves a purpose, it appears to be entirely intrinsic. That is, *even with deliberate context*, we begin to suspect that audiences are unable to resonate with Utica Quarry in the same way the group can.

Our speculations are confirmed in an examination of how the album shifted from its original release to its 2014 remaster. The album's length grew from seven tracks to a

cumbersome twenty. Added were basement tapes, riff tapes, vocal demos, outtakes, and "in progress" (essentially incomplete) renditions of their original counterparts. This in itself could be a pushback against Newton's binary as it demonstrates the profitability of a messy, unfinished sound solely due to its ability to connect with a niche audience. However, we do not just want to look at what was added to the album, but what was removed. We discover that despite multiple versions of each track being added to the album (demonstrating that length was not a concern), "Utica Quarry, Nighttime" was cut from the remaster.

Being that the purpose of a remaster is to explore the capital potential of a project, we find from applying our three-tiered framework what is truly unmarketable after all: whereas Newton's binary classification would have considered unpolished (and even unfinished) tracks like demos to be unmarketable, songs like "Utica Quarry, Nighttime" expose what it really means to have no flexibility in regards to mainstream success. In approaching this shortfall through an adjustment to Atton's two-tiered framework of the avant-garde, what remains is a productive solution that calls for a distinction between aesthetically difficult music and truly difficult music by factoring variables like mobility and intention into the analysis of a project. This provides a far more deliberate critique of traditional definitions of the avant-garde (like Newton's) as it does not just identify exceptions to the binary model, but offers a detailed mechanism to categorize them. Music has the power to send academic discourse down countless avenues as so much of its interpretation is concerned with individual perception. In an effort to form an argument about music, it is true that we often have to use reductive language. However, it is important to be acute in the process; it appears that academic discovery can be made in examining cases where nuance was addressed with simplicity.

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