

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS AVANT-GARDE POP MUSIC?

Freshman Seminar Proposal

Christopher W. White

Overview: This course focuses on the inherent paradox within so-called avant-garde popular music. On one hand, popular music by its very nature is widely consumed and appeals to a large audience. But on the other hand, there have always existed avant-garde strains in popular music that set themselves apart from mainstream culture, often making social critiques of the very institutions that create them. This class will balance two streams of analysis: the socio-cultural and the musical. Half of our class meetings will be devoted to issues surrounding the production and consumption of avant-garde pop music, and we will work together to read contemporary musicologists while also tackling classic authors such as Freud, Bourdieu, Adorno, and Benjamin. The remainder of our meetings will focus on close readings of pop-musical texts, including both the lyrics and musical materials. We will discuss the varying goals held by avant-garde popular artists, ask how the music sets itself apart from “sellout” artists, and consider how this music pushes social boundaries while still retaining a wide appeal. We will investigate different ways that popular music has tried to identify with the avant-garde, including music that challenges us acoustically (e.g., grunge, punk, metal), music that presents politically incendiary texts (e.g., Cornelius Cardew, Rage Against the Machine, Flavor Flav), and music that pushes society’s norms of sexuality (e.g., New Orleans Jazz, Madonna, Pet Shop Boys). Overall, we will consider whether this music actually succeeds in its goal of cultural criticism, or if avant-garde popular music is simply a hopeless oxymoron.

In this course, you will learn to:

- Analyze the socio-cultural situation surrounding pop/rock music and its consumption in contemporary United States society.
- Analyze the musical content (the “notes themselves”) and lyrics of pop/rock songs.
- Write clearly and critically about this music, connecting cultural and social topics to your analysis of the musical content.
- Foster clear, organized and intentional writing skills.
- Engage difficult texts and learn to analyze, compare, and contrast complicated cultural theories.

Assignments will include:

- 20-30 pages of reading per week
- Short response papers every other week (2 full double-spaced pages) in which you respond to some aspect of the past two weeks’ reading or listening assignments. These essays will be workshopped in small groups of your peers, and you will hand in final drafts on alternate weeks.
- A midterm analytical essay (5-7 double-spaced pages) comprising close readings that mix cultural and musical analysis. There will be two drafts, first edited by me, and then by an editing partner.
- A final research project and presentation that mixes cultural/meta-theoretical and repertoire-based investigation. (An example might be “Sexuality and Madonna’s Music Videos,” or “The Avant-Garde and the Beach Boys.”) You will present your preliminary research to the class, and you will turn in a paper of at least 5,000 words. We will workshop these papers in one-on-one sessions.

Selected Readings By Topic (some will be required, others will be supplementary):

Cultural Critique and Analysis of the Avant-Guard:

- 1) Theodor Adorno, 1941 "On Popular Music." in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, pp. 301–14.
- 2) Walter Benjamin. 1961. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations: Selected Writings*.
- 3) Pierre Bourdieu, 1983. "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," pp. 29-73.
- 4) Peter Bürger. 1974. "Theory of the Avante-Garde"
- 5) Cornelius Cardew, "Stockhausen Serves Imperialism"
- 6) Adam Krims, 2000. *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Selections.
- 7) John Shepherd, 1991. "The Analysis of Popular Music: Class, Generation and Ethnicity," in *Music as Social Text*, pp. 128–51.

How Music Expresses Ideas:

- 1) Carl Dahlhaus. 1983, orig 1977. *Foundations of Music History*, selections on the semi-autonomy of music.
- 2) Nicholas Cook. 2001. "Theorizing Musical Meaning," *Music Theory Spectrum* 23, pp. 170-95.
- 3) Christopher White. "Music-Video Analysis, Music-Video Analysis, Music-Video Analysis." Unpublished Essay.

Analyzing Edgy Music's Notes:

- 1) Nicole Biamonte, 2011. "Musical Otherness in Rush," in *Rush and Philosophy*.
- 1) Walter Everett, 2002. "The Beatles as Composers: The Genesis of Abbey Road, Side Two," in *Concert Music, Rock and Jazz Since 1945: Essays and Analytical Studies*, pp. 172–228.
- 2) Daniel Harrison. 1997. "After Sundown: The Beach Boys' Experimental Music," in *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis*, 33–57.
- 3) Mark Spicer, "Large-Scale Strategy and Compositional Design in the Early Music of Genesis," in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music*, 2nd ed., 313–44.

Pushing the Boundaries of Sex and Gender in Popular Music:

- 1) Sigmund Freud, "Moses Of Michaelangelo." 1914, *selections*.
- 2) Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality." 1978. in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, 371–90.
- 3) Nadine Hubbs, 2004. "Music of the 'Fourth Gender': Morrissey and the Sexual Politics of Melodic Contour," in *Genders*, Vol. 23, *Bodies of Writing, Bodies in Performance*, pp. 266–96.
- 4) Susan McClary, 1991. "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly," in *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, pp. 148–66.

Cultural As Commodity in Popular Music:

- 1) Sumanth Gopinath. 2005. "Ringtones, or, the Auditory Logic of Globalization," *First Monday* 10/12.
- 2) Ellie Hisama, 2000. "From L'Étranger to 'Killing an Arab': Representing the Other in a Cure Song," in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music*, 2nd ed., pp.199–213.
- 3) Edward Said. 1978. *Orientalism*, pp. 1-4, 15, 38-44, 54-60, 108-110.