

*Lawrence Kramer*

**'AU-DELÀ D'UNE MUSIQUE INFORMELLE':  
NOSTALGIA, OBSOLESCENCE, AND THE  
AVANT-GARDE\***

**Abstract:** This essay draws on the concepts of profane illumination and the *informe* to develop a model of the avant-garde in relation to obsolescence and nostalgia. The model is illustrated musically by accounts of two American works, the finale of Charles Ives's *Second Orchestral Set* (1915) and John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* for twelve radios (1951).

**Key words:** Avant-garde, Brian Ferneyhough, Walter Benjamin, Charles Ives, John Cage, *informe*, nostalgia, obsolescence.

The musical avant-garde has long since become the routine it wants to overthrow. A half-century ago, in his essay "Vers une musique informelle", Theodor Adorno already found its output formulaic, and therefore in default of music's aesthetic mission (as he saw it) to register and resist the administered world of instrumental reason. At the time, this charge might plausibly have been called regressive, symptomatic of Adorno's nostalgia for the high modernism that the avant-garde thought of itself as discarding. (Schoenberg was dead, or so Pierre Boulez had infamously declared.) Today, with the world arguably more administered than ever, and fitted out with a soundtrack on which any and every style becomes a parody of itself, the charge seems not only pointed but also prescient. The very concept enshrined by the phrase "avant-garde", a quasi-military advance along a single line of progress or conquest, has the feel of a cultural relic. New works of avant-garde music fail to shock; we know their tricks too well. Worse yet, many older avant-garde works have become endearing – even, in the digital age, quaint.

This historical irony overshadowed the 2005 New York premiere of *Shadowtime*, a "thought opera" by the composer Brian Ferneyhough and the poet Charles Bernstein. First performed at the Munich Biennale in 2004, *Shadowtime* is based on the life of Walter Benjamin. The choice of protagonist is emblematic: who better than Benjamin could embody the avant-garde's rejection of the false normality of modern life or better embody the concept of the artist-hero self-exiled amid the detritus of history? The opera begins with Benjamin's suicide in 1940 (when he decided – mistakenly – that his attempt to flee Nazi Europe had failed)

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and proceeds through a non-linear, non-narrative sequence of six further scenes exploring different facets of Benjamin's thought. Benjamin himself appears less as an agent than as a personification of the critical consciousness "presiding," in Ferneyhough's words, "over the sublimely catastrophic demolition of Enlightenment values taking place around him as he wrote."<sup>1</sup>

The music is characteristic of its composer, unremittingly dense and difficult. The text is obscure in its own right and further obscured by its setting, with phrases both sung and spoken simultaneously throughout. At one point, a figure with two heads, one of Karl Marx, the other of Groucho, questions Benjamin about the future of memory. At another, in an underworld modeled on a Las Vegas nightclub (had someone been watching the popular television series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation?*), "a Liberace-type entertainer plays a violently difficult and mesmerizing piano work of nearly 20 minutes while reciting a text that mixes droll philosophical questions with gibberish."<sup>2</sup>

The idea that this work would upset its audience seemed to please both the composer and librettist, who also seemed to take it for granted. Good avant-gardists both, they cast themselves as the enemies of a complacency based on a thoughtless clinging to those demolished Enlightenment values. "Listeners," Ferneyhough informs them in a program note, "must let go of a fixed notion of what constitutes musical form" if they are to grasp *Shadowtime*. "Many," says Bernstein, "will no doubt be befuddled," but although "there have been a lot of very clear books written on the subject of this catastrophe ['the blank space of what happened to Europe between 1940 and 1945'] ... can anyone say that they truly understand what happened?"<sup>3</sup>

Maybe not. But the befuddlement never materialized. Neither did the antagonism. Judging from the reviews, those who didn't like *Shadowtime* – apparently the majority – were respectful but lukewarm. Boring the opera may have been; shocking it was not. It would have been far more shocking as a number opera. As an avant-garde production, it was merely predictable. Ferneyhough and Bernstein seemed to harbor nostalgic hopes of re-enacting the 1913 premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps*; what they got was the equivalent of a dud at the movie box office.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferneyhough, quoted by Jeremy Eichler, "A Secular Messiah Gets His Own Opera", *The New York Times*, Sunday, 17 July 2005, section 2, column 2.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "For a New Operatic Type, Complexity Rules", *The New York Times*, Saturday, 23 July 2005, section B, column 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ferneyhough, quoted by Tommasini, "Secular Messiah"; Bernstein, quoted by Eichler, "New Operatic Type".

What went wrong?

I've permitted myself what amounts to a long prologue for two reasons. The first is to suggest that the avant-garde has become a second-order phenomenon. Where it once sought radical immediacy, its principal effect is now to signify its own operation from a reflective distance. Where it once sought to break through the traditional norms of artistic, rational, and social order, it has become a normative practice for the depiction of such breakthrough. The avant-garde has become as stylized as classical ballet. It is a fiction of transgression, often directed against norms that have already become depleted not only in art but also in everyday life. In a sense much stronger than the "classic" one proposed by Peter Bürger, the avant-garde has become historical.<sup>4</sup> Its historical character has become the medium of its perception.

What went wrong in *Shadowtime* is that the opera did not figure this out, and therefore failed to figure it in. The avant-garde, historically regarded, had a certain cultural mission. Amid considerable ideological diversity, most avant-garde programs could take as a motto Rimbaud's famous imperative of 1873, "Il faut être absolument moderne" – one must be absolutely modern.<sup>5</sup> The hallmark of this mandatory modernity was a relentless negation of the authority of the past. As Malcolm Turvey has argued, however, actual avant-garde practice was less monolithic than this program.<sup>6</sup> Especially as the avant-garde aged, it showed elements of nostalgia for inherited forms, even reversion to them. Apparently, the real necessity was to be *relatively* modern. The use of Karl and Groucho Marx as twin icons in *Shadowtime* is a good latter-day example. It is a fairly tired joke that the opera's creators seemed not to recognize as such.

But there is more at stake here than the invocation of a familiar narrative in which radical beginnings wind down ignominiously to conservative ends. The heteronomy of form, the ambivalent dialectic of absolute modernity and renascent tradition, is immanent in the very idea of the avant-garde, built into its underlying logic. The problem is that this logic is not infinitely extendible. After a century or so of repetitions, it has become obsolescent, dulled by familiarity and overtaken by events, both stylistic and technological, in the popular media. The question today is

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> From "Une saison en enfer", in Wallace Fowlie, ed. and trans., *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 208.

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Turvey, "The Avant-Garde and the 'New Spirit': The Case of *Ballet mécanique*", *October* 102 (2002): 35–58.

not how to continue the avant-garde as an open tradition but how to continue appreciating it as a closed one.

That brings me to the second reason for my prologue: to smuggle Walter Benjamin into the picture. Of course in doing so I risk the same self-mystified avant-gardism I have been criticizing in *Shadowtime*. Benjamin has become one of those pop-idol equivalents that the intellectual world insists on manufacturing, replacing one with another at regular intervals like a product line: Foucault out, Adorno in, Derrida out, Benjamin in, and so on. Calling on Benjamin now is almost a cliché. But clichés, as the cliché goes, are clichés for a reason, and Benjamin can offer real help toward a fresh appreciation of the avant-garde by offering a basis – only seventy-five years old! – for a fresh articulation of its logic.

That logic is my true subject here. I will primarily be looking at its operations in the two cornerstone figures of avant-garde experimentation in American music, Charles Ives and John Cage. Benjamin could not have known of the one and died too soon to know of the other. Besides, he had little interest in music. Yet his observations, which were prompted by surrealism in literature, can be adapted to fit Ives and Cage and many others – a broad range of instances outside the art and the era that grounded them.

Writing in 1929, Benjamin thought of surrealism in the spirit of another Rimbaudian principle, the disordering of all the senses. He was looking for an antidote to bourgeois subjectivity and found it in artistic practices that simulated the purported ecstasies of drug-induced delirium: “In the world’s structure dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed [the surrealists] to step outside the domain of intoxication.”<sup>7</sup> Intoxication here is a means, not an end, and even as a means it is only a metaphor. By writing *as if* intoxicated, the surrealists left the domain of intoxication for a higher, non-corporeal mode of ecstasy. Benjamin thinks of this new state of being as a replacement for religious fervor, and more particularly for mystical illumination. Aesthetic intoxication is ecstasy without the sacred and ecstasy *against* the sacred. It is half mimicry and half parody (but the halves do not make a whole). Surrealism arose from a “bitter, passionate revolt against Catholicism [by] Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Apollinaire. ... But the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic,

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<sup>7</sup> “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929), in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), 179.

anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson.”<sup>8</sup>

The concept of profane illumination already both contains the logic of the avant-garde and describes what is at stake in it. On the one hand, the experience induced by avant-garde practice is a quasi-sacred illumination forged by profane means. Its effect is the penetration of a mystery: not a sudden solution of the mystery but the experience of suddenly finding one's way into and around the space of the insoluble, a breakthrough to a realm of mystery that is comprehended only in being experienced thus. Reflection will do no good there. Yet on the other hand, the avant-garde experience is an illumination *of* the profane, both a transcendent clarification of worldly matters and an infusion of them with an ecstatic light. “We penetrate the mystery,” Benjamin writes, “only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world. ... [T]he most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic), as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance. The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flaneur* are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane.”<sup>9</sup>

On this model, the avant-garde artwork is always contradictory. It is always anamorphic, free of the traditional burdens of form, intelligibility, and social compliance; and it is always retrospective, looking back on those burdens with a gaze that sheds new light on them and perhaps endows them with new life. For the most part, the anamorphic aspect strikes the perceiver first, only to be encroached on, at least a little, and often more, by the structuring force of perception.

This encroachment holds the key both to the logic of the avant-garde and to its history. One might surmise that the delirium sought by avant-garde works is an antidote to the violence that lurks beneath the veneer of civilized (read: bourgeois) life: for Rimbaud, perhaps, the violence of the Paris Commune; for Apollinaire and others of his generation, the far worse catastrophe of the Western front. (Of course this antidote could itself take the form of violence, as the example of the Italian Futurists famously illustrates, as does Benjamin's linking of fascism to the aestheticization of politics.) The musical avant-garde after the Second World War, especially perhaps in the Darmstadt of Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, was in part motivated by a similar impulse in the face of a still larger catastrophe. So the stakes in the avant-garde enterprise are

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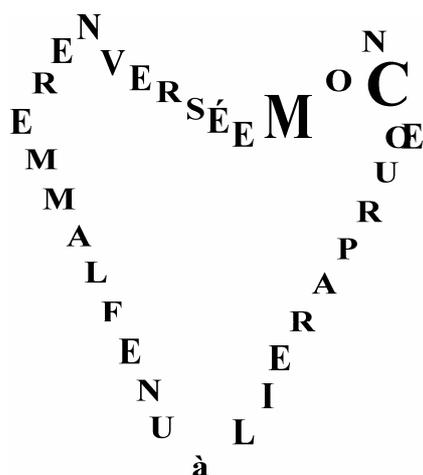
<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Surrealism”, 190.

high, even when its surface manifestations are frivolous, witty, or clownish, more Cage's *4' 33''* than Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*.

The mark of the avant-garde is thus a release of the specific negation that haunts the standard forms of thought and representation, of selfhood and sociality: the giddy or delirious or ecstatic manifestation of the unformed substance that underlies or underwrites all form but that can appear only as a kind of deformity. And the question raised by the avant-garde is how far, for how long, it can sustain this appearance, this negative epiphany, before investing it with symbolic value and therefore "re/forming" it in a double sense: re-forming it, forming it anew; and reforming it, correcting its excesses or defects.

For an example, consider Apollinaire's calligrammes, picture poems composed by deforming standard typography so that the text forms the picture that illustrates it. One of the best known of these is entitled "Coeur" (Heart, 1918) for reasons immediately obvious; it consists of the letters that spell out the phrase – pointedly not a sentence – "Mon coeur pareil à une flamme renversée" [my heart like a flame upside-down] arranged in the familiar shape of a heart:



From the visual perspective, nothing could be more conventional, even banal; the image illustrates the sentiment with the literal-mindedness of a greeting card. (Or an epitaph; it is inscribed on Apollinaire's grave in the Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris.) From the linguistic perspective, the phrase has been deformed in fundamental ways. It lacks spacing between words and it lacks the neutrality of ordinary typography. What is more, it cannot be read from left to right. The phrase begins and ends with left-to-right movement along the wavering line that forms the top portion of the image, although the lack of punctuation between "versée" (poured;

not a word in the text) and “Mon” suggests that “beginning” and “ending” have been suspended here; the eye is invited to rotate in perpetuity around the heart, as if to feed its flame. After “Mon”, the shape of the image draws the eye continuously from right to left until the top line is regained with the completion of “renversée”.

To traverse the text is thus to enact the inversion of the natural-seeming order of reading, at least to Western eyes, just as the heart inverts the flame. The image is immediately legible but the text, though it can be deciphered, can never be read. The words have regressed toward the garbled and the random, the void of which peers through the empty center of the image even as the image denies it. And the same may hold good for the words' meaning. It remains unclear whether the likeness postulated by the phrase is to be taken as a metaphor or as a literal description of the inversional effects of the image and the typography.

The text of “Coeur” is an ideal example of the negativity typically sought by the avant-garde. This quality is perhaps best described by the term *informe*, borrowed from Salvador Dali by the art historian Rosalind Krauss to characterize what she calls the “optical unconscious” of modernity.<sup>10</sup> As Krauss observes, the *informe* is not a negativity or a lack that stands as the opposite of form, but a positive consistency without identity, a “splitting of every ‘identity’ from itself into that which it is not” (166). The *informe* is the substance of what categories and boundaries cannot delimit, yet it cannot appear without them; it is a thing without a self “that form itself creates, as logic acting logically to act against itself within itself, form producing a heterologic” (167).

As the term “heterologic” suggests, it is tempting to assimilate the *informe* to the category of the Other that plays a key role in several influential schools of late modern thought – Derridean deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Levinasian ethics. But to do so would be misleading. The *informe* is not a vehicle of difference. It subtends both difference and identity, difference and likeness; it is too nonspecific to form the concrete opposite or antagonist by and against which a style or genre or identity defines itself. Moreover, unlike the Other, which is postulated as forever irreducible, the *informe* is vulnerable to a historical undertow. It is not supposed to be, but it is. That which is *informe* in one generation becomes a mere difference in the next. A grinding noise eventually acquires an alias and becomes an expressive construction: the *Tristan* chord, the *Petrushka* chord. This reducibility of the *informe* may help motivate the demand for continual disruption in avant-garde art, the

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<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 149–68.

call for a normative iconoclasm: not for a break with tradition but for a break with history, or rather the circumvention of history, the continuation of non-tradition and non-identity.

But as the story of *Shadowtime* indicates, this process cannot go on forever. What happens to each instance of the *informe* also happens to its concept. Eventually history will overtake – will have overtaken – the production of the *informe* as such and bring it to closure. At that point we may be able to recover the sense in which avant-garde works once encountered (that is, produced) the *informe*, but we can no longer recover the perceptual impact of the encounter. The *informe* becomes a trope.

The historical process mirrors the internal logic of the avant-garde work, but it does so with a telling difference. If the era in which it could shock has not wholly expired, the work can sustain and even enhance its presentation of the *informe* in dialectic with the structuring traditions it cannot escape, however much it may travesty them. But the historical process progressively alienates and finally brackets the perceptual shock. What begins as an offense ends as an icon. As it ages, the urinal that Marcel Duchamp signs “R. Mutt” and christens “Fountain” in 1917 becomes easygoing, comfortable, almost comforting; by 1964, eight authorized replicas of the lost original find their way into museums and private collections; in 2004, five hundred British art experts vote “Fountain” the twentieth century’s most influential work of art, just ahead of another once-shocking work, Picasso’s “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J.)” (1911). Against this effect of domestication, we are left to rely on critical interpretation to recover the sense of the *informe* in historically avant-garde works. At best their manifestation of the *informe* will replenish its diminished power with the force of the imagined past.

This process, however, is not only historical. It is also immediate, a property of the present of the avant-garde work as well as a prophecy of its future. Avant-garde works present themselves from the outset in a condition of implicit ruin. They contain the narrative of their own decline and subsist by resisting it. It is this synchronic logic of the avant-garde that the historical revival of once-unformed phenomena seeks to recover.

To facilitate the recovery, we need to describe this logic, presented earlier as a simple conflict between the manifestation of the *informe* and the encroachment of structuring perception, with greater precision and at a further theoretical remove. The *informe* initially appears as a pure lack in positive form, a consistency of negation. It induces a kind of vertigo, the first moment of the delirium in which Benjamin finds – or seeks – profane illumination. This impression, however, fades with time, and sooner rather than later. For the *informe* can appear at all only within a

gap, an aperture, in a formal framework. At first the consistency in the gap threatens to envelop its former container; the white space in Apollinaire's heart dwarfs the little letters that enclose it. But eventually the situation is reversed. The image limits the white space within it and organizes the white space around it. The *informe* becomes manifestly what it always (already) was, a perspectival effect, the burned-out illusion of which is meant to be re-ignited by the next avant-garde "breakthrough". What remains thereafter is the mutual relationship of form and the *informe*, which, without necessarily signifying anything, may nonetheless be or become significant. Thus some avant-garde works incorporate and in part escape their own future nullification. The avant-garde work survives its inevitable obsolescence, if it does survive, to the extent that it can be understood to decline any nostalgia for the purity of the original *informe*.

Charles Ives raises the question of this nostalgia explicitly in the final movement of his *Orchestral Set No. 2* (1909-1915), a work that carries the *informe* as far as it can go within Ives's musical discourse – and that is quite far, indeed – only, apparently, to subsume it in the end under the most familiar of melodic forms. John Cage carries the *informe* even further in his *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951), "composed" for an ensemble of radios. The sounds produced, as no one will be surprised to learn, are entirely random and not subject to perceptual regulation. Yet as its title half admits, Cage's composition is open to the same nostalgia that it gently and playfully rejects.

Like many of Ives's major works, the *Orchestral Set No. 2* broods over the question of American national destiny by associating it with the question of advanced versus traditional musical technique. The first movement, "An Elegy for Our Forefathers", sustains a static background texture throughout. The elegy materializes on solo trumpet out of the brooding atmospheric mass and disappears back into it. Both the melody and its sonority are traditional – nostalgic and hymn-like; the trumpet solo carries overtones of solemn Civil War memorials. The background divides against itself in a way that both enhances and undermines these values. On the one hand it serves the function of a formal ostinato; on the other, it appears as the formless presence of something unknown, dim, and primordial, not music at all by traditional definitions. Memory writes itself on this texture as medium, questions the shape of the future, and then dissolves as the shapeless background persists.

The middle movement is a high-spirited collage of hymnody and ragtime, but for all its vitality (sometimes touched by nostalgia) it is essentially an interlude, an interval of distraction between one elegy and another. The real heft of the piece comes in the last movement, "From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, The Voice of the

People Again Arose”. This finale commemorates an incident following the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania* by a German U-boat in 1915. With the news still fresh, commuters on an elevated train platform in lower Manhattan, Ives among them, spontaneously began to sing the old Protestant hymn “In the Sweet Bye-and-Bye” after the sound of it on a hurdy-gurdy drifted up to them from the street. The random crowd thus momentarily transformed itself into a tight-knit community with a specific national identity.

Ives represents the transformative hymn-singing with a fortissimo brass chorus recalling the solo trumpet of the first movement. The rest of the orchestra moves in swirls of dense, multi-layered dissonance that have been building up throughout the movement. This vast polyphony, the component parts of which can be heard only in random flashes, the lines of which cannot be followed at such, has up to this point been the whole of the music; we have been listening to a progressive unfurling of orchestral sound into the *informe*. Then, at a stroke, this *informe* becomes a mere background, a foil against which the spiritual authority of the traditional rural hymn can present itself as a bulwark against chaos. The music, because there is need for it, revives a world that Ives thought he had lost forever to urban modernity, the homogenous world of the New England countryside, rugged and spiritual and quintessentially American. The voices of the crowd, unheard in themselves, have taken up the sound of the hurdy-gurdy, the sound of the city street par excellence, and raised it to the level of the sublime by simulating the sound of a small-town brass band.<sup>11</sup>

“In the Sweet Bye-and-Bye” momentarily translates the ruthlessness of total war, fought without borders and without quarter, into the communal, well-governed sphere of American pastoral. Yet the sternness of the sound also suggests a resolute face turned toward the war, which Ives’s patriotism would endorse when America joined the Western alliance in 1917. In this context the music looks forward to a triumph of American virtue as the only means of preventing a Europe gone mad from unchecked destruction. (It is one of history’s little ironies that the situation seems to have reversed itself today.) But this is not yet the music of empire, in which Ives had no interest; however triumphalist, it is profoundly and deliberately parochial.

The conclusion comes immediately afterward: a long, slow fade-out based on a static texture recalling the first movement's underlying sound-

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<sup>11</sup> The displacement of voice into instrumental sound is essential to the process of sublimation, which corresponds to the passage of the event from the phenomenal world to the symbolic order. Ives underscores this necessity by placing an actual choir singing a *Te Deum* at the beginning of the piece; after a few moments, the voices fade into the orchestral texture, not to be heard from again.

mass but changing its character. The texture is no longer dark and heavy with the burden of the past but soft and shimmering, a musical mist that slowly drifts away toward the horizon of an unknown future. Elegy becomes prophecy in the medium of memory; the image of national community dissolves into an intimation of spiritual communion. For a moment, and just for a moment, the hymn has torn away the veil of the material world. It has let the aura of spiritual reality take over the scene at Hanover Square, though perhaps this happens only in memory – only, indeed, in the music. Or perhaps two scenes have been involved, blended together so that they cannot be told apart: one from the urban present, the other from the rural past. The combination allows a glimpse of ideal community both in time (the unison hymn) and beyond it (the ethereal background).

It is important that the impact of the Hanover Square incident does not become fully present until the place and the moment have been re-created musically. By adding memory and also serving as its expressive vehicle, the music makes permanent and transcendental the incident's fleeting moment of solidarity. Ives's musical technique serves not just to record or represent a moment of transcendence, but to perpetuate it acoustically. Each performance rises to the point of the music's self-abolition, the point at which the *informe* breaks through in the guise of a shout, and then a whisper, of eternity.

But the breakthrough is unstable, and not only because it, too, is fleeting. In an earlier study of this movement I suggested, along the lines just traced, that "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" is repressive as well as triumphant when it subordinates the dense swirl of music from which it emerges. It reverses the rising tide of that music and forces it back toward the horizon; it makes the pungent, multi-layered texture into a musical melting pot in which the diversity of the urban crowd disintegrates and reforms itself in obeisance to the old-time hymn. The hymn works ideologically more than it does formally or aesthetically.<sup>12</sup>

I would still say so. Ives himself described the music in these terms, and to ears brought up on the contours of tonal melody – still most Western ears today, and all the more so in 1915 – the melodic Gestalt stands out like a rock against a stormy sea. The storm is the storm of the *informe*, immensely powerful but set on the verge of its disappearance. Form prevails in the guise of spontaneous spirit; the collage technique that defines the avant-gardism of the movement collapses into a texture that is both musically and ideologically regressive, a broken-down version of old-fashioned melody-with-accompaniment.

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 190–192.

But I would also suggest something else. The musical whirl and swirl brought to heel by this last trump becomes audible as *informe* precisely through the ear-trumpet of the hymn. Bits and pieces of the hymn have been heard amid the orchestral mass all along. Once the hymn breaks forth, the ear is split between hearing these fragments teleologically, as anticipations of a predestined outcome, or hearing them contingently, as sonic material that the brass choir appropriates as the same time as it wrestles the acoustic mass into a semblance of form. Only with the presentation of this choice – a choice that cannot be made – does the *informe* manifest itself fully.

In saying this, I am not making the banal suggestion that order and chaos can only be heard relative to each other. On the contrary: the point is that what one hears at this moment becomes radically indeterminate, caught specifically in a contradiction between accident and event. The result is that the *informe* persists and permeates the musical texture more fully than does the acoustically more powerful hymn tune, and that it does so precisely *because* the hymn tune is more powerful. Instead of a convenient acoustic image for the local chaos of the urban crowd, the orchestral music becomes, or wants to become, a tangible manifestation of pure spirit. It presents itself as something like the voice of the all-embracing Over-Soul conjectured by Ives's beloved Transcendentalist philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The brassy hymn tells a familiar tale, but it sounds out over a long thunderclap from the unfathomable world beyond. The hymn is helpless to paraphrase this sound, before which it is nothing but ideology. All the hymn can do is to make the sound audible as the sound of the *informe* as such.

Like Apollinaire's calligrammatical heart, the sound of this climax is from one perspective perfectly legible, even sentimental and conventional, and from another perspective permanently inscrutable. The release of the *informe* that negates the idea of purity and disrupts all finite systems of thought assumes its own terrible version of purity that demands total adherence even though there is no known way to hear it. The sound can no longer be contained even by the trope of transcendence. In its rustling, whirring, buzzing, and the like it approaches the negative transcendence that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari associate with the "plane of consistency" of the insect world, the becoming-insect of music in which the music's free-form "molecular flows" are set loose.<sup>13</sup> This limit-condition threatens to captivate the listener even as it tempts the listener

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<sup>13</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 308–309.

to flee: to grasp the ideological anchor – here that old-time hymn – in sheer self defense.

From this perspective the ethereal fadeout that ends the piece is not a consummation that the hymn makes possible. On the contrary, it is an almost involuntary confession that the hymn is no more than a prop, in the double sense of a means of support and a device used to sustain a theatrical illusion. The vanishing trace of the *informe* does not inherit the place of memory, but marks the place to which memory cannot pass.

The kind of critical interpretation I have just performed on Ives's "Hanover Square" is not possible with Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* because there is nothing to perform it on; in traditional terms, Cage's music lacks content. Where Ives understands the *informe* as the horizon of memory, Cage understands it as the erasure of memory. His work – and it *is* a work – is scored for twelve radios, operated by twenty-four players under the direction of a conductor. At each radio, one player controls the volume, another the frequency; a form of traditional staff notation strictly prescribes the changes in both parameters. This carefully constructed order will, however, remain inaudible, while the sound that it produces will form a random assemblage entirely contingent on the place and time of performance.

No doubt there is an element of lighthearted mockery here, a gentle satire on the traditional symphonic ensemble. But as always with Cage the playful lack of solemnity serves a serious purpose. To regard the turning of the radio knobs as a form of musical performance is to defamiliarize the natural-seeming mechanical actions, the fiddling on strings, the blowing into tubes, which customarily produce musical sound. To see and hear an ensemble "playing" the radios fosters the recognition that, in the long historical view, it is just by chance that the sounds produced by actions such as fiddling and blowing count for us as music and not as something else. The fact that other forms of sound count as noise becomes equally arbitrary. The result is to smudge the difference between officially musical sounds and sounds produced at random, as by twiddling the knobs of a radio to see what's on the air.

But more is at stake here than the apparent freedom we may find in chance. The point is not simply to immerse oneself in random sound events, but to grasp the production of the *informe* by the precise following of a score, thus creating a perspective in which the familiar forms of musical sound assume a quality of accidental formation, the way a rock formation might resemble a face. Like Apollinaire's heart, *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* constructs a traditional image of authentic, indeed "heartfelt", expression by means that render what is expressed ultimately inscrutable though not indiscernible. Like the letters that spell out, but do not articulate,

“Mon coeur pareil à une flamme renversée”, the acoustic detritus produced and assembled by the radio ensemble is decipherable – one can make out the static, the voices, the snatches of music – but it is not readable or, as one might say, not listenable.

What do these pieces by Ives and Cage have in common?

The initial answer would seem to be: nothing. Nothing, that is, except their avant-garde status, the mark of which is their willingness or eagerness to admit noise into the sphere of music, or, more precisely, to redraw the boundary between music and noise. It is probably fair to say that the privileging of this mark came only with, and only became articulate with, the music of Cage around mid-century. No matter what audiences may have thought, it is clear that Schoenberg, for example, never thought of his music as resembling noise, much less incorporating it, even though the First Viennese School has a claim to be considered the first self-identified musical avant-garde. The noise idea is already present in certain works of early modernist music, such as Henry Cowell’s “*Banshee*” (1925), played directly on the strings inside a piano, and Edgard Varese’s “*Ionisation*” (1931), scored for percussion and sirens, but there is no category or context for it until later. Pieces like these and like the Ives become avant-garde in retrospect; no such category was available when they were composed.

This absence is itself as much a historical contingency as any random event in an aleatory piece. It is worth noting that by the time Ives composed the *Orchestral Set No. 2* and Cowell (still a teenager) had started experimenting with the piano, Luigi Russolo, in association with the Futurist movement of Filippo Marinetti, had already tried to create a noise aesthetic. Russolo wrote a manifesto on “The Art of Noise” (1913) and actually gave two concerts with a “noise orchestra” composed of sixteen newly invented instruments. The sounds are lost, but the manifesto gives the flavor of his enterprise: “Let us cross a huge modern capital with our ears. ... We will delight in distinguishing the eddying of water, of air or gas in metal pipes, the muttering of motors that breathe and pulse with an indisputable animality, the throbbing of valves, the bustle of pistons, the shrieks of mechanical saws.”<sup>14</sup> The imagery of machines that mutter and throb locates the *informe* qua noise at the point of the pleasurable collapse between the boundaries of the animate and the inanimate. But the First World War, the war the Futurists had foolishly longed for as the consummate expression of modernity, interrupted

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 136.

Russolo's efforts, and when he tried to resume them after the war was over, the moment of noise as art had, for the time being, passed.

In a sense, then, it is Cage and his associates who make Ives avant-garde and realize the latent significance in his noise as well as theirs. Noise is all that links our Ives and Cage exemplars, and all that is needed to link them. But this sense is too limited.

On closer inspection, the Ives and Cage pieces turn out to be closely parallel in both their immediate character and their underlying logic of the *informe*. On the first point: both are deeply invested in the sense of place, conceiving music as they embody it as acoustic landscape. And this landscape is not general; it is national – ideologically so in Ives, by perhaps unconscious allegiance in Cage's. As the musicalization of radio noise, Cage's piece intersects what was still the primary broadcast medium of its time (television being still young); the radio airwaves – the hum of news, weather, talk, music, static – was the primal stuff knitting together the national landscape both at home and in the car, the same sort of jellylike medium that Hart Crane had imagined a few decades earlier when radio itself was still new:

And from above, thin squeaks of radio static,  
The captured fume of space foams in our ears.  
("Cape Hatteras," 23–24)<sup>15</sup>.

On the second point: the scoring and conducting of the radio manipulations serves the same function as Ives's hymn tune; it makes the *informe* audible as such. It does so as much visually as acoustically, by reversing the locus of order and disorder. The normally casual, even random, act of turning a radio dial becomes the basis of a precise choreography while the music normally produced by such choreography never rises above the level of noise, or rather, raises noise to the level of music.

The result is an avant-garde version of the music of the spheres. The actual sound of the radio collage in any given performance is absolutely particular, purely and simply itself in the present moment. Yet at the same time it has no distinguishing features, nothing to differentiate it from any other realization at any other moment. It is both full and empty, an acoustic tapestry and a blank page. To a sympathetic ear, this union of opposites endows the sound with a mystical value. It produces a fusion of immanence and transcendence, the ascetic and the ecstatic, that justifies the scoring and conducting without ceasing to reduce them to a travesty. In so doing, it perhaps brings aesthetic intoxication to a limit, a

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<sup>15</sup> From *The Bridge*, in Marc Simon, ed., *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane: The Centennial Edition* (New York: Liveright, 2000), 77.

point of *aporia*, which is also one of the principles of its logic. Just as the *informe* is released, it threatens to assume a fetish-like character incompatible with the very idea of the *informe*. The avant-garde does not consist of a resolution of this dilemma, but in a persistent reproduction of it – under the illusion that each new instance is precisely the resolution that it undercuts.

A further way to think about the interrelationships of form and the *informe* is in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between smooth and striated space. The latter is the milieu of the "metrical," "arborescent" music of tradition, the former of the rhizomatic movement of the avant-garde. (Traditional music organizes itself like a tree – the paradigmatic metaphor of organic form; the avant-garde runs every which way, like weeds.) For Deleuze and Guattari, the pivotal avant-garde composer is Boulez who, they say, was the first to situate music systematically in a movement between these spaces (477). But the two also think of music in general as essentially rhizomatic, and take Olivier Messiaen along with Boulez as an exemplar. As they hear it, music as such is avant-garde regardless of its formal consistency, for which their model is the refrain: "Music is a creative, active operation that consists in deterritorializing the refrain. ... Music dispatches molecular flows. Of course, as Messiaen says, music is not the privilege of human beings: the universe, the cosmos, is made of refrains; the question in music is that of a power of deterritorialization permeating nature, animals, the elements, and deserts as much as human beings" (300, 309). Beyond the formal grid of the refrain the infinitely smooth space of the *informe* stretches away on all sides.

Nonetheless, as Deleuze and Guattari never tire of repeating, the distinction between smooth and striated space is a transient one. There is perennially a becoming-smooth of the striated and a becoming-striated of the smooth. The authors' own tendency, however, disclaimers aside, is to re-solidify the distinction after its every dispersal: "[T]he simple opposition 'smooth-striated' [always] gives rise to far more difficult complications, alternations, and superpositions. But these complications basically confirm the distinction" (481). Deleuze and Guattari are in the last instance partisans of the smooth against the striated. Although they deny that smooth spaces "are in themselves liberatory", they affirm that it is in these spaces alone that "life reconstitutes its stakes" (500). A prominent sign of this orientation is the privilege that the authors grant to music, or rather the trope they institute of a music that, in its essence, insofar as it *is* music, always moves along lines of flight from the striated to the smooth. They think of this phenomenon in the spirit of Baudelaire: "Music sometimes takes me like the sea!" – for, as they observe, "the sea is a smooth space par excellence" (479).

In this context, re-solidifying the distinction, it would seem fair to define traditional music as that which, at any given moment, minimizes the becoming-striated of the smooth, and to define the avant-garde as that which maximizes the becoming-smooth of the striated. Traditional music arrests the flows of sound through smooth space and draws them as much as possible back to the striated. The avant-garde loosens and scatters the sound lodged in the striated and sluices it as much as possible into the space that, as rendered available in a particular historical moment, counts as smooth. But the boundaries of these spaces constantly change, in most cases irreversibly. The space that seems smooth today tends to seem striated tomorrow.

And here a problem arises. This way of thinking works well enough up to a point, then stalls. The model of spaces in mutual becoming is descriptively strong, but conceptually it is too strong for its own good. It blocks the full-throttle, epiphanic manifestation of the *informe*; it limits delirium by dialectic and thus takes the *informe* as such out of the equation. The noise of smooth space is merely the negation of traditional music, which excludes it altogether or includes it by imitation; as soon as actual noise is heard, traditional music is silenced. The order of striated space is the parallel negation of avant-garde music, which excludes it by design but includes it by accident, or rather by the propensity of performers, listeners, or even of random occurrences to fall into striated patterns. When the patterns appear, the avant-garde collapses back into tradition. There is a kind of drab homeopathy at work, a closed system that works on a kind of toggle.

To think the avant-garde more radically it is necessary to think the *informe* without reference to the accidents of form. To do that, it is necessary to conceive of a condition in which the distinction between smooth and striated makes no sense, or doesn't matter, or simply fails to apply. (This leaves open the question of how to think the presence of the *informe* in traditional music, but that question lies outside the scope of this essay.)

The key point here is that order may occur at random, in which case it cannot be said to be order at all. As Stéphane Mallarmé famously put this principle in the title of an avant-garde poem meant to illustrate it, "A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance". Consider an imaginary musical example: an imaginary landscape number – fill in a six-digit prime. One is listening to Cage's silent three-movement composition *4' 33''* and hears someone on the street outside whistling the *Habanera* from *Carmen*. Or, since the stake here is pure chance, for some reason all the radios in *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* simultaneously begin to broadcast *The Ride of the Valkyries*. Neither outcome is foreign to Cage's design,

even though both are, to say the least, unlikely. But that is what chance is like. If we were to describe either of these situations as a becoming-striated of the smooth, we would be right in a phenomenological sense; the soundscape would indeed fall into the striated pattern. But we would also entirely miss the point.

The point is to hear the tunes as noise: to hear them, not as patterns, but as random assemblages; to hear them, so to speak, as if they were not there. And to hear them thus is also to hear the sound of random presence in all apparent design. The tunes would not be the negation of the prevailing noise, but a part of it. The *informe* of the imaginary landscape would be the enveloping negativity that is the landscape's condition of possibility. This condition would become audible as such through the random fluctuations of sound that realize the landscape as a soundscape.

The problem posed by this outcome, the outcome paradoxically determined by the *informelle* logic of the avant-garde, is the temptation to treat this negativity as the substance of a negative aesthetic theology, as a secret wisdom before which the listener becomes an initiate. Delirium is addictive, as Benjamin's drug-tinged language indicates. One might just as well worship a canonical masterpiece in quest of aesthetic illumination: it amounts to the same thing. In this context the presence of an audible scrap or tune or a hint of pattern might actually be helpful, precisely in deferring the moment of an always false initiation.

Conversely, with the Ives finale: the hymn tune demands allegiance; it denies the *informe* character of the sound mass by giving its own latent presence in that mass a platform on which to come together. It literally trumpets itself as a theological and a national solution. But it speaks too loudly not to strain credulity. And its subsequent disappearance uncovers the trace of an *informe* that neither the hymn nor the sound of the crowd can encompass: a positive presence this time, but one so opaque that it resists all attempts to name or rationalize it.

This ending suggests, in whispers, that the reframing of the *informe* by the hymn tune is no more than virtual, an illusion wrought by ideological desire. The problem is that the reframing is so overwhelming, both acoustically and dramatically, that the lesson of the ending may go unheeded. Perhaps the music even wants it to go unheeded, and allows it to sound only the better to silence it. We may be supposed to hear the ending as a dissolution, a disappearance, the ebbing away of the *informe* as an echo of resurgent form. Whether the music succeeds in giving this impression – a success that would be its failure – depends on just how much delirium the ear, like a vessel, can retain after the brass choir has scoured it out. Just a little may be just enough. Although the ending is no

more than a residue, it may be sufficient to pose a question in the spirit of Walter Benjamin, who deserves the last word (182): "What form do you suppose life would take that was determined at a decisive moment precisely by the street song last on everyone's lips?"

*Лоренс Крејмер*

„С ОНЕ СТРАНЕ ЕНФОРМЕЛСКЕ МУЗИКЕ“:  
НОСТАЛГИЈА, ЗАСТАРЕВАЊЕ И АВАНГАРДА  
(Резиме)

Практично први принцип естетике авангарде је посвећеност апсолутно новом. Али овај принцип никада није тако једноставан или директан као што изгледа; то је чињеница иронично изведена из „класичне“ формулације Артура Рембоа, старе преко једног века: „Морамо бити апсолутно модерни“ (“Il faut être absolument moderne”). Авангардна уметност, било да је акустичка, визуелна или вербална, блиско је повезана са феноменом застаревања. Подразумевајући саму себе као критику естетичке и друштвене носталгије, она развија сопствену, не мање проблематичну носталгију. Авангарда тежи да постане управо она пракса са којом жели да раскине. Да би се препознала ова њена тенденција, међутим, није неопходно авангарду омаловажити. Радије треба описати историјски карактер авангардне уметности и установити оквир за њено тумачење.

Историјност авангарде постаје проблематична само онда када је сама уметност заборави или не успе да је препозна. Мој есеј почиње дијагнозом скорашњег примера овог неуспеха, „мисаоне опере“ *Време сенки* (*Shadowtime*, 2004) Брајана Фернихауа (Brian Ferneyhough), по либрету Чарлса Бернштајна (Charles Bernstein) базираног на животу и раду Валтера Бенјамина (Walter Benjamin). Аутори су планирали да скандализују публику сложености и иновативношћу свог рада, али су успели само да изазову млако одобравање или неодобравање, односно, још горе, индиферентност. Њихов модел иновативности је постао застарео. Одржавао се само на непризнатој носталгији за интелектуалном смелости отелотвореној у лику Бенјамина који је – а што су аутори такође изгледа заборавили – био толико широко слављен и цитиран последњих година (обрнуто од релативног заборава који је трајао много година након његове смрти), да је већ избор Бенјамина као протагонисте представљао клише по себи.

Бенјамин ипак, и опет прилично иронично, пружа одличну полазну тачку за историјско разумевање авангарде. Његов есеј „Надреализам: последњи снимак европске интелигенције“ („Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia“) из 1929. године лоцира естетику авангарде на пресеку трију тенденција: одбацивања буржоаског индивидуализма, покушаја заснивања модела писања као стања опијености и „огорченог, острашћеног бунта против католицизма“. Резултат је естетика „профаног просвет-

љења“, како је Бенјамин назива, концепт који се може проширити тако да обухвати авангардну праксу уопште уз помоћ додатног концепта *безформности* (*informe*), предложеног од Салвадора Далија (Salvador Dalí), а позајмљеног 1990-тих од стране историчара уметности Розалинд Краус (Rosalind Krauss) да означи оно што она назива „оптички несвесно“ у модернизму. Као што Краусова уочава, *безформност* није негативитет или недостатак који стоји на супрот форми, већ позитивна конзистенција без идентитета, „разилажење сваког ‘идентитета’ од себе самог на оно што није“. *Безформност* је супстанца чије се категорије и ограничења не могу одредити, но без њих се она не може ни појавити; то је ствар без сопства „коју ствара форма сама; као што логика – онда када делујући логично унутар себе делује против себе – производи форму хетерологике“.

Мој есеј полази од концепата профаног просветљења и *безформности* да би развио модел авангарде у вези са застаревањем и носталгијом. Модел је музички илустрован на примерима два америчка дела: финала *Другог оркестарског комада* (*Second Orchestral Set*, 1915) Чарлса Ајвза (Charles Ives) и *Замишљеног пејзажа* бр. 4 за 12 радиоапарата (*Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, 1951) Џона Кејџа (John Cage). Приказано овим моделом, авангардно уметничко дело је увек контрадикторно. Оно је увек анаморфно, ослобођено традиционалних оптерећења формом, јасноћом и друштвеном прихватљивошћу; оно је увек и ретроспективно, јер се осврће на ова оптерећења на начин који им даје ново светло, дарујући им можда и нов живот. Највећим делом, анаморфни аспект погађа у први мах слушаоца, да би потом сасвим мало, а често и више, био нарушен структурном силом перцепције.

Ознака авангарде је, дакле, ослобођење од својеврсне негативности која прогони стандардне форме мишљења и репрезентовања, сопства и социјалности: вртоглаво, махнито, екстатично испољавање безформне супстанце која чини основу свих форми, али која се може појавити само као врста деформитета. И питање које авангарда покреће гласи: „Колико далеко и колико још дуго се може одржати ова појава, ова негативна епифанија, пре него што јој се додели симболична вредност и тиме се ‘ре/формира’, у двоструком значењу које та реч на енглеском може имати: реформирати = формирати изнова и реформисати = кориговати претеривања или недостатке?“

(превела Јелена Михајловић-Марковић)

UDC 78.037/.038.6].01/.02