AVANT ROCK’S HYBRID GENEALOGY
AVANT ROCK'S HYBRID GENEALOGY: "ORIGINS," "BRIDGES," AND "MERGERS" ACROSS THE HIGH ART/LOW ART DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT:

Genres develop as historical narratives are created: the narrative pinpoints certain bands and “eras” as markers of the style. In the case of avant rock, the narrative repeatedly relies on a language of “hybridity.” This language forms the foundation for how the bands influential to the avant rock genre are interpreted and discussed by critics, biographers, and fans. The introduction suggests “origins” for the high art/low art discourse that carries over into the avant rock discourse. Chapter Two examines the associations between the Velvet Underground and influential members of the avant garde art world, such as Andy Warhol, John Cage, and La Monte Young. These interactions in turn feed the high art/low art narrative that makes the Velvet Underground an appropriate “point-of-origin” band for avant rock. Chapter Three examines the avant garde background of some of the Sonic Youth band members, and the band’s interactions with avant garde composers such as Glenn Branca. The band’s position as a “leader-in-crisis” also relies heavily on a high art/low art hybrid narrative in order to position Sonic Youth as the “resolution” between high art/low art rivalries. The final chapter shifts focus to the present discussion surrounding early twenty-first century bands, looking at how the discourse is shaped around bands that fall into the avant rock category, and how the discourse fluctuates in the process of carving out new categories, even as genealogies are repeatedly invoked to support the existing genres.
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**Introduction: Methodology and Overview**

When I first began listening to alternative/underground/independent rock, I was struck by the similarities between this genre and twentieth-century western art music. In particular, that subsection of western art music more generally known as the avant garde appeared to share common sounds with alternative rock. Minimalism, electronic experimentation, polyrhythmic layering, timbral and textural experimentation, and performance innovation characterize several indie bands just as these techniques also define the work of Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Milton Babbitt, John Cage, Igor Stravinsky, and Bela Bartok. In fact, record stores, critics, and fans will often label indie bands that incorporate these elements as **avant rock**, demonstrating how closely the two genres (i.e. avant garde art/music and this particular subdivision of alternative rock) are linked in discussion and subsequent categorization of this music.

Throughout the narrative of avant rock, a few key bands emerge as interesting focal points, which shape the way that avant rock as a genre is understood. The Introduction sets the framework for understanding narrative and the way that histories are established for a genre. A brief overview of several larger narratives (high art/low art discourse, the avant garde) provides background for the avant rock narrative and more broadly demonstrates the contextual nature of the discursive formation process: narratives rely upon pre-existing ways of talking. Chapter Two turns to the Velvet Underground’s position as a point-of-origin for avant rock, allegedly establishing a hybridity of high art/low art spheres that in turn serve as a “source” for avant rock’s own claims to hybridity. Chapter Three illustrates how the high art/low art discourse repeats itself
through Sonic Youth’s function as a “leader in crisis,” positioned as a bridge between supposed factions of music-making. Finally, Chapter Four examines the directions the genre currently seems to be taking: the discourse is constantly in flux, changing and adapting as newer, contemporary bands are grafted into the narrative.

The shaping of a discussion (in this particular case, how bands or genres are talked about, described, interpreted, and categorized) is a process that Foucault describes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as discursive formation. In his analysis of how an object or thing becomes evaluated in a certain way (how the ways of talking or discussion are set), Foucault also raises questions regarding facts (or the objects themselves): how was it that these objects or things happen to be the ones under evaluation to begin with? Foucault would find the answer to such questions within the power structures that govern the discourse.

To apply these points to a particular musical narrative, one should not only consider how particular statements come to be made about a band (developing and refining a persona or image for the band), but also question why a particular band is the one having the statements made about it in the first place. The reason (according to Foucault) is that particular groups have an interest in “telling the story” that way. Yet there are several layers of power behind discursive formation. For example, the person who chooses the albums to release or to review exerts a measure of influence on discursive formation that is subtler (but no less greater) than the statements that are uttered by the reviewers or even the listeners themselves. However, an examination of the

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gatekeepers behind the discursive formation surrounding these particular bands and the genre as a whole is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, examining how discussion works to create points of origin and reference that set standards for genre classification will demonstrate how discourse situates objects (or historical “facts”) into a narrative that provides guidelines for interpretation within the genre.

In subsequent chapters, the Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth will be situated within their historical/geographic setting in New York, a setting that facilitated the associations that these bands developed with individual members of the avant garde. These avant garde/rock collaborations that took place in New York led to the formation of an avant rock category: personal interaction between musicians led to the association of particular sounds, ideologies, and usually (but not always the case) a particular geographic space with the avant rock genre. New York as the setting in which these collaborations took place figures as an important point-of-origin that can still be invoked during discussion today in order to signify a particular urban intellectual form of “cool.”

To describe what is meant by a point-of-origin (and how such a concept operates within a discussion to shape ways of thinking or interpreting music), a closer look at Foucault’s account of genealogy must take place. Moving beyond Foucault’s earlier work in archaeology, the concept of genealogy bears one important difference: in the former, “discourse is deemed to shape practice,” whereas in the latter “discourse and practice are deemed to shape one another.” This distinction/refinement is crucial, since

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the framework of genealogy allows for discussion to be rooted in something beyond simply words. In the case of a music narrative, the words surrounding what is heard in the music influence how that music is interpreted, but recursively, elements in the music and performance venues influence the discussion in turn. This recursive mutual interaction between discourse and practice will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters: Chapter Two illustrates how musical elements and historical/geographical elements shape interpretation of the Velvet Underground as an avant rock band; Chapter Three looks at Sonic Youth’s relation to other musical movements and how the narrative shifts to position the band as a bridge between punk and new wave; and Chapter Four examines how avant rock continues to spin off “descendent” variations.

Genealogy is a process of writing historical narratives, or situating the various historical events or objects onto an interpretative framework that subsequently provides meaning for future understanding of events or objects. Foucault builds upon German philologist Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, a work that disparages the various efforts of Nietzsche’s contemporaries and predecessors in their quest to arrive at a definitive origin for morality. Nietzsche recognizes that these various attempts to uncover the origin of morality were a-historical: instead of grounding moral values in abstract “universal” truths, he argued, we ought instead to trace the development of morality as it appears in historical context.⁴

In his essay on genealogy, Foucault builds on this historical contextualization of categories (such as morality) by examining the historical variations on how the

category has been discussed: he examines the discussions that frame how categories are understood. Foucault’s concern is not so much whether a thing such as morality actually exists in a knowable way, but instead he focuses on the changing ways in which past historical eras have talked about a concept. The framework or rules that govern discourse lead his line of inquiry.

Origins and indeed timelines within the genealogical scheme are not linear nor are they progressive. This approach contrasts with German philosopher Hegel’s narrative thread in which an antithesis counters a preceding thesis and synthesizes in a new idea that supposedly advances the sum of western knowledge. Points-of-origin provide frames for the discussion, signposts that cue specific interpretation or classification. Understanding often proceeds in reverse chronology: for example in music narratives, as discussion shapes around a contemporary band, participants reach backwards in time to trace potential predecessors. These “ancestors” from the past are then situated within the discussion as the sources of a particular current sound or style, or else as significant influences, distant mentors to the present. The explanatory narrative is developed out of what we encounter and arranged accordingly. Rarely in their personal listening time do listeners encounter a linear progression of bands that are clearly linked in significance from start to finish. Instead, they encounter a band and then search for

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6 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 139.

7 Jean-François Lyotard notes that the post-modern philosophical era is marked by a lack of overarching narratives, or explanations for “the way things are,” but full of smaller, particular narratives each competing for legitimacy; and Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, (Pantheon Books, 1984), 59.
other bands that are similar; the connections can be drawn both horizontally (to other contemporary bands) or backwards (to predecessor bands) or even forwards (to new bands said to be the "next biggest thing.")

Establishing origins for genres in order to explain sounds found within that genre is not a method limited to avant rock, nor does genealogy as a methodology apply solely to music. However, as a methodology, genealogy provides useful tools for thinking about and presenting both historic and interpretive material. And there are two ways of using genealogy: first, there is the process of actually establishing the origins oneself, of conducting historical analysis and evaluation. Secondly, there is the process of uncovering the process: genealogy also entails examining the discourse itself. Discourse rests on top of historical framing; the particular interpretations for certain sounds are derived through the filtering and arranging of historical data that has already occurred. Both aspects of genealogy will be drawn on to frame the current project. This thesis will not be solely a historical overview that creates its own narrative to explain avant rock, nor will this thesis simply be a look at various ways that avant rock has been discussed or understood in the past. Rather, the focus will be on how the historical data provides fodder for the discussion, which in turn chooses various elements of that history to craft its narrative.

Because the historical context bolsters the ensuing discourse, much attention will be given to setting up the context for these avant garde artists and rock musicians, particularly as these interactions occurred within the bands Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth. These interactions in turn set apart the Velvet Underground and Sonic
Youth as “bridges” between the two spheres. Foucault himself notes that “[g]enealogy…requires patience and a knowledge of details and it depends on a vast accumulation of source materials.” But at the same time, one must recognize how a filter is applied to interpreting the source materials, and how subsequent ways of viewing or understanding the materials influence future and even present discussions: there was certainly interaction between the New York avant garde and New York rock musicians, but to limit the kind of sound produced by these collaborations strictly to the New York scene (using the city as a literal origin rather than an origin that shapes understanding) is tenuous. Foucault disparages the search for origins as a “sleight of hand, an artifice,” and hence I make the distinction between a literal origin and origin-as-a-framework (or point-of-origin) for understanding subsequent pieces within the discussion.

Indeed, Keith Negus recognizes the difficulties surrounding even textbook (perhaps especially textbook) narratives or histories of popular music: “...while pinpointing historical tendencies and understanding social change is important, we should be wary of attempts to draw neat boundaries around musical eras.” Drawing up “neat boundaries” is tempting, because simplicity aids understanding. Negus’s particular concern is the use of the term “Rock Era,” a historical narrative that, through the process of establishing a lineage for “rock music,” also tends to isolate particular movements and artists from the rest of music history. However, Negus also recognizes that history plays

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8 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 140.
9 Ibid., 141.
11 Ibid., 137.
an important role in understanding, whether music or otherwise. He approaches the narrative itself and its effect on identity formation: “History is important for an individual and group sense of identity; it provides knowledge and ideas from which ‘we’ decide who ‘we’ are, where ‘we’ came from and where ‘we’ are going.”

Negus’ account of history-as-understanding, of situating oneself within a wider field, relates to Foucault’s account of genealogy and the search for literal origins (and the resultant “framework origins” that are established). To situate a band as a source of a style not only helps to define what current bands are doing but also, in a sense, legitimates that style by giving it a pedigree. Establishing connections between other genres (spinning out family ties in the pedigree) also expands a genre; for example “rock” has been broadened to the point of including nearly anyone from the Beatles to Bjork. Why these pedigrees/connections need to be established raises interesting questions along a differing vein (indicating that the past is continually being reworked in the present to in turn rework that present, or as Lipsitz notes, the past and present engage in “an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word”). But to take this sort of approach to historical analysis (in which the constructed element of narrative is at the same time acknowledged but appreciated) both encourages interaction with historical data while recognizing the limitations that any narrative (including this one) will encounter.

12 Negus, 137.
13 Ibid., 139; and the title of Bill Martin’s book Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Bjork appears to combine a wide variety of sounds under the moniker “avant rock.”
But while Foucault’s approach to genealogy sheds light on individual discursive formation (and how explanatory narratives are developed), another critical theorist examines the inner workings of established discourses. Pierre Bourdieu’s work in *The Field of Cultural Production* recounts the establishment of what he terms “fields,” differing genres which each have their own discourse, standards for evaluation, and rules for “what counts” as a legitimate artifact within the field (these rules provide a means of classification). These rules and standards may not be voiced overtly but nevertheless operate within the field to govern common judgments, narratives, and interpretations. The rules or ways of understanding/situating historical or musical significance can come from within the genre (in the case of music, generated by fans, reviews, and the bands themselves) or from without (historians, academics, textbooks).

A brief look at the concept of symbolic power reveals more about how rules operate and are enforced, especially within the avant garde field (as a subsection of the larger arts field). Bourdieu notes that the arts, as distanced as the field might like to claim itself to be from a capitalist economy, is nevertheless still run on a system of exchanges. Yet because no “monetary” value is supposed to be placed on what an artist does, the exchange basis takes the form of *symbolic* capital:

“Symbolic capital” is to be understood as economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a “credit” which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees “economic” profits.¹⁵

Symbolic capital at the very least is a form of power that operates within a field to influence discourse.

Indeed, Bourdieu makes this relation between power and capital explicit: “the only usable, effective capital is the (mis)recognized, legitimate capital called ‘prestige’ or ‘authority.’” A significant accumulation of prestige and authority brings with it the ability to shape and influence the field in which the bearer operates. The art dealer who has established himself or herself within a certain field of art is therefore allowed a proportional measure of influence regarding who else is admitted to the field: “the more consecrated he personally is, the more strongly he consecrates the work.” Symbolic power is gained through a disavowal of economic power: those artists who refuse to “sell out” or else overtly pursue commercial interests will later be eligible for recognition. But the distance is only constructed: once an art critic or artist gains a reputation for “serious work,” then the person can begin to exercise power, and turn that “authority” and “prestige” into commissions and high-paying jobs. The economic rewards are delayed, but not entirely renounced.

To maintain and develop power, then, rules are enforced within each field of evaluating and producing art. To transgress the rules is to lose power. Even the so-called anti-Art movements that sought to undermine conceptions of what constitutes art did so by recognized “artistic” methods (operating firmly within the tradition of those who disavow economic concerns). Duchamp was not a real threat: his subversive ready-mades

16 Bourdieu, 75.
17 Ibid., 76-77.
18 Ibid.
could be comfortably “sacralized” because he created them within the institutional boundaries. Rather, it is those who leave the field altogether who truly subvert the paradigm: the commercial artist is the one who challenges the very fabric of the system of power allocation and is therefore excluded.19

Though Bourdieu’s analysis dealt specifically with the genres more commonly associated with the “high” arts, the same kinds of rule enforcement and accrual of capital occur in genres outside the “avant garde” and wider “classical” categories. The disavowal of commercialism in favor of artistic integrity is certainly a concern that pervades the wider genre of alternative rock and subsequently the subgenre “avant rock.”20 Indeed, studies have already applied Bourdieu’s work to the field of rock and pop (in particular among Swedish youth), arguing that the symbolic capital generated serves to mark class, gender, and social status.21

Genres can work as markers of identity because the rules governing categorization (i.e. deciding “what belongs” to a particular genre) are recognizable enough to function as a unit of communication. In his work on speech genres, Mikhail Bakhtin notes that over time, typical patterns arise that set apart a particular set of utterances as a distinct group: “Each separate utterance is different, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these.

19 Bourdieu, 80-81.
20 A concern easily found in reviews of any alternative band that has just left an independent label in favor of signing with a larger label. The tone taken is often a sigh of relief: despite new mainstream ties, the band did not abandon the innovation or experimentalism that “earned” initial recognition in the alternative field.
utterances." As these patterns solidify, they serve as guides for future utterances of a type. The context gives meaning to the utterance, and the genre becomes representational: an utterance written in the form of a letter suggests personal correspondence, whether the “letter” is in fact being sent between two actual people or simply appears within the context of a novel. In a similar vein, genres in music develop as patterns in certain contexts arise. The contexts (who is producing the music and where) become somewhat synonymous with the sounds produced. Thus, particular techniques become associated with a particular genre, and when those techniques are used, serve to suggest ties to that genre.

Bakhtin’s work with speech genres and Bourdieu’s interpretations regarding how power operates within discourse, as well as his theorization of symbolic capital, will inflect the perspective this thesis takes. Yet because the focus of this thesis is less concentrated on power distribution within the discussion surrounding avant rock, the concept of symbolic capital will form merely a background to my analysis and will not be used as much as Foucault’s theorization of genealogy. However, blending Bourdieu’s more specific analysis of rule-setting with a genealogical approach to evaluating both historical data and how that data is discussed and configured (i.e., how lineages are constructed for the avant rock genre and origins established) provides a useful platform from which to begin treatment of the avant rock genre.


23 Ibid., 61-62.
With these caveats regarding methodology and terminology, I have chosen to focus the field geographically, situating the discussion within the New York art scene, examining in Chapter Two the associations between the Velvet Underground and influential members of the avant garde art world (such as Andy Warhol, John Cage, and LaMonte Young). These interactions in turn feed the high art/low art narrative that makes the Velvet Underground an appropriate “point-of-origin” band for avant rock. Chapter Three examines the avant garde background of some of the Sonic Youth band members, and the band’s interactions with avant garde composers such as Glenn Branca. The band’s position as a “leader-in-crisis” also relies heavily on a high art/low art hybrid narrative in order to position Sonic Youth as the “resolution” between high art/low art rivalries. The final chapter will shift focus to the present discussion surrounding contemporary bands, looking at how the discourse is shaped around bands that fall into the avant rock category, and how the discourse fluctuates in the process of carving out new categories, even as genealogies are repeatedly invoked to support the existing categories.

**Avant Rock: A Hybrid Category**

Used to describe so-called experimental music composed “outside the Academy,” the term “avant rock” is a hybrid, self-consciously acknowledging that it comes from two parent sources: “avant rock” refers at once both to “avant garde” and to “rock.” One can find this term everywhere from the title of books (such as Bill Martin’s *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Bjork*) to a genre category in
alternative/independent music magazines such as UK-based Wire and record supply companies such as Road Records. Though lacking a specific category on their webpage for avant rock, the alternative/independent music website Pitchfork frequently employs the adjective in order to describe various bands that project a certain kind of experimentalism. But the term is not simply limited to music communities: “avant rock” seems to have enough circulation in order to appear within a few article titles featured in The English Journal, used when discussing a particular kind of music.

There is no official definition of “avant rock” in Grove Music Online. However, a few articles in The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz do employ the term, indicating that “avant rock” has a circulation more widely associated with popular music discussion (the term also appears much more frequently in journalistic and fan-based discourse rather than in academic writing). The one-sidedness in usage suggests that “the academy” associates the “avant garde” label with modernist composers of the early 20th century, musicians/theorists who were antithetical to popular music (or popular music mergings). The Grove Music Online entry for “avant garde” certainly connects the avant garde with Schoenberg and Boulez. Yet within the avant rock narrative, the composers and artists most frequently labeled “avant garde” are those such as LaMonte Young, Andy Warhol,
and Glenn Branca who were in turn interested in merging "avant garde" and "popular" cultures, or at least challenging modernism. The ties these composers/artists had to both the postmodern avant garde and with "popular" musicians transfers another layer of hybridity to the avant rock narrative.

As subsequent chapters will reveal, the hybrid characterization of avant rock relies heavily on the high art/low art binary. Of course, the so-called blending of high/low art fields would not be so interesting if the high/low art distinction were not such a prevalent interpretive framework. But this perceived barrier between the two fields is a relatively recent one, Lawrence Levine argues in his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy*. According to Levine, the solidification of cultural hierarchy arose partly because of America's search to find its own voice.27 Ironically enough, however, the model for a distinctly American brand of culture was in fact the parent from which America sought to distinguish herself:

The process of sacralization reinforced the all too prevalent notion that for the source of divine inspiration and artistic creation one had to look not only upward but eastward toward Europe.28

Levine goes on to trace this development, noting that in the 19th century, culture was much more fluid regarding hierarchical distinctions. Given the number of Shakespeare parodies that were performed across the country, cultural products that we might consider "highbrow" were in fact very familiar to mass audiences.29 But even behind this ubiquity

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28 Ibid., 140.
29 Ibid., 15-17.
of Shakespeare was a lurking colonial mindset. Americans nodded to Shakespeare’s Old World roots even while adopting him as their own: James Fenimore Cooper declared, based on the playwright’s popularity in America and familiarity to the American people, that the American claim to Shakespeare was at least equal to that of England.\(^{30}\) Other accolades, such as the inscription on the temporary pedestal to Shakespeare’s statue in Central Park, also implicitly gave England her due while claiming Shakespeare for American’s own: “Old World, he is not only thine.”\(^{31}\) Not every praise of Shakespeare mentioned the Old World or England by name, but certainly a dependency that was nevertheless seeking cultural independence from the “Mother Country” characterizes the examples quoted here.\(^{32}\)

Indeed, Americans were calling upon Europeans to create a distinct sound for the country, in the wake of growing Central/Eastern European musical nationalism. In 1891, Jeannette Thurber invited Antonin Dvorak to New York in order to teach at the National Conservatory of Music in America. As president of that institution, she desired the development of a national, distinctly \textit{American} sound, and not just any American sound, either, but one clearly defined as art music. Since the Czech Dvorak was already known for working in the nationalist styles of his home country, he was considered the appropriate choice for Thurber’s project.\(^{33}\) Thus, by the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, there was an emphasis on making distinctions between art and popular musics, the former being

\(^{30}\) Levine, 20.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 20-21.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 21.

based on European models. Of course, merit is largely comparative, and thus art music was set in relief against popular music, in order to further highlight art music’s superiority.  

Supposedly, this distinction did not exist in the earlier part of the century: Levine notes that opera was performed across the country in conjuncture with vaudeville and minstrelsy. The singers often incorporated popular songs of the day into the performance. Yet audiences were familiar enough with the operas to protest omissions, demonstrating again opera’s pervasive influence regardless of class distinction. Quite possibly this “lack of respect” for Italian opera might stem from the fact that these operas were still relatively newly composed; thus, they had the air of contemporaneousness that they have lost in subsequent years, a loss that perhaps also makes them easier to memorialize. The aura of historical significance transforms what was once tremendously popular into a museum piece.  

Yet historical distance was not the only reason for the increasing divide between high” and “low.” Though Rossini and Verdi may have been alive and composing, Shakespeare, of course, had been dead for several hundred years by the nineteenth century. Levine describes the sacralization of culture throughout the progression of the nineteenth century as a process that arose from a growing concern with legitimacy/power: “More and more it was asserted that it was the professional who had the knowledge, the skill, and the will to understand and carry out the intentions of divine art.” And while

34 Levine, 136.
36 Ibid., 139.
frequent changes and insertions into opera or Shakespeare had been perfectly acceptable in the nineteenth century, upon the beginning of the next century, New York critics were disparaging even Mahler for changing Beethoven’s orchestrations. This increasing divide between popular and art music was characterized by the assumption that art music must be fashioned after the European model.

In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen continues the historical thread where Levine leaves it: in the early stages of twentieth-century Modernism. Suggesting that the binary is rooted in the class-based struggle defined by Marxism, Huyssen writes, “Ever since the failure of the 1848 revolution, the culture of modernity has been characterized by the contentious relationship between high art and mass culture.” Though the term “avant garde” originally contained political undertones, the “avant garde” art world became increasingly more alienated from “mass culture,” retreating into academic (i.e. “a-political”) strongholds. Husseyn praises Adorno for trying to cover both “high art” and “popular culture” when examining modern culture, but Adorno really just reinforces the separation. Even later this perceived divide between popular music and European-based classical music shows up everywhere from Chuck Berry’s “Roll Over Beethoven” and to Leonard Bernstein’s *I Hate Music!* song cycle, a prevalent trope almost taken for

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37 Levine, 138-139.
38 Ibid., 140.
40 Ibid., 4.
41 Ibid., 19.
granted. The trope is especially entrenched in academia, as Robert Fink notes in his article "Elvis Everywhere."

The high art/low art binary and the perceived antagonism between the two fields are what make avant rock’s claims to hybridity so “novel” and “revolutionary” in the genre’s narrative. Avant rock supposedly incorporates elements from both spheres, combining them to create, not a disjunct patchwork, but a compatible, unified sound, the “best” of both worlds. The Velvet Underground, boasting a narrative that also emphasizes hybridity or sphere merging, becomes an appropriate “parent” to avant rock. The past hybridity of the Velvets informs present understandings of avant rock as a hybrid, even if current avant rock musicians don’t always come from both the avant garde and rock music spheres.

The New York Avant Garde

Yet before turning immediately to the Velvet Underground (and later Sonic Youth), a brief look at the context and the varying narratives surrounding the movements within New York preceding and concurrent with these bands will be helpful. New York was the setting for a significant population of avant garde musicians, dancers, and artists who can be tied to avant rock. This tie comes through their personal interaction with avant rock musicians or through current categorization of composers such as John Cage within avant rock discussions. Ideological similarities also tie the avant garde to avant rock. The remainder of this introduction will focus therefore on the avant garde, both as a

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43 Similarity lists, such as the one at Epitonic.com for the band Animal Collective, have included John Cage, for example.
community that operated out of New York and as a certain set of aesthetic values, and on particular composers/artists who are understood to have operated within that field. I rely heavily on Diana Crane’s work on the avant garde visual arts, because her narrative provides a comprehensive survey of several “avant garde” movements. Of course, all of the differing movements within the avant garde categories are marked by their own points-of-origin and influence (narratives that are beyond the scope of this thesis to probe too deeply). However, the ideologies and artists of the avant garde narrative that Crane sets forth reappear in discussion surrounding the Velvet Underground and avant rock.

Diana Crane describes the avant garde as those who both oppose current trends and yet appeal to a select “cultivated” audience:

The term “avant-garde” implies a cohesive group of artists who have a strong commitment to iconoclastic aesthetic values and who reject both popular culture and middle-class life-styles... Often esoteric, avant-garde art is purchased by a relatively small group of admirers who possess or have access to the expertise necessary to evaluate it.44

Diana Crane’s definition is quite useful, because it signals the attitudes of both antagonism and inaccessibility that supposedly characterize the avant garde. However, Crane argues, as artists become able to support themselves more and more from the sale of their works to the public, they become less antagonistic towards the populace that is feeding them: “many artists in later styles lost their attitude of opposition toward middle class values and popular culture. Instead, they internalized values and goals associated

with the middle class and with popular culture." Thus, the avant garde is fluid: artists enter the field, become successful and established, and then are replaced by the next "anti-establishment" generation. What may be avant garde in one generation may become The Institution (the rule-makers instead of the rule-breakers) in the next.

Diana Crane concludes that avant garde art has many definitions, but in general artwork is considered avant garde if it questions, expands, or changes then current methods of artistic creation or concepts regarding what art in fact is. Above all, avant-garde art is characterized by innovation—works that challenge current methods or concepts by returning to earlier ones don't usually count. Also considered avant garde is a new understanding of the differences between or else a blurring of the distinction between high and low art. The context of the artwork (the art world institution in which it was created) can be questioned as well as the distribution of art. Indeed, the most pervasive factor seems to be a questioning and changing of aesthetic content, or what counts as art. Without this aspect of formidable challenge in its make-up, a piece of art or a particular style fails to gain the label avant garde.

Ultimately, of course, the avant garde art does not completely break with artistic tradition: instead it uses tradition as a guide to direct future innovation. As Bourdieu has noted, the general means of production do not change, even if the product differs; or if the means of production change, the venue for promoting those works remain largely the

45 Crane, 10-11.
46 Ibid., 14.
47 Ibid., 15.
same. The same concerns with commentary, expression, or interpretation still operate. And most of the time, artists are not innovating in isolation. Rather artistic communities arise, whereby the new avant-garde is fleshed out, through the comparison of works and the validation achieved through the approval of other similarly concerned artists.

All of these factors attributed to the avant garde (innovation—especially innovation characterized by high art/low art blending—and the development of community) help to separate the avant garde from other potential “high art” or “classical” parents of avant rock and situate the avant garde as the appropriate “high art” element in the avant rock high art/low art hybrid. The avant garde’s (perceived) blurring of the high art/low art divide carries over in discussions of avant rock merit (the bands that can achieve a proper blending are the bands that are “good”). The avant garde communities are understood to foster interactions between avant garde artists/composers and rock musicians.

According to several historical narratives, the art scene in New York began to develop as a highly influential center after the devastation of Paris in World War II reduced the French city’s importance. At the time of World War II, Americans

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48 Bourdieu, 80-81.
49 Crane, 20-21.
50 Ibid., 25.
52 DeCurtis, 84.
understood Paris to be the centre of individualism, the thriving hub of avant garde art. American journalists (and even the Vice-President Henry Wallace) voiced this general understanding in various laments over the devastation the city experienced under Nazi occupation.\footnote{Serge Guilbaut, \textit{How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War}, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 50.} Thus, a geographic shift in artists from France to New York symbolized a shift in cultural importance: the immigrating artists moved the centre for avant garde art to the other side of the Atlantic. The artists that ended up in New York banded together in view of their common artistic projects (and in view of New York’s art scene being relatively new in its growing size). This community subculture later grew less underground and more into a social networking system.\footnote{Crane, 25-28.}

Because adequately covering the cultural movements labeled “avant garde” (and all of the artists, composers, dancers, and actors associated with each movement) would require a good deal of space, this thesis will focus on movements particularly important to the avant rock narrative. Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art both had ties to the Velvet Underground in that the composers or artists associated with these movements personally interacted with VU band members. John Cage (whom John Cale of the Velvet Underground notes as an influence on Cale’s own approach to music) was aligned with the Abstract Expressionist movement for a time.\footnote{John Cale and Victor Bockris, \textit{What’s Welsh for Zen: The Autobiography of John Cale}, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), 57.} Andy Warhol (who produced the first Velvet Underground album) led the Pop Art movement. John Cage and Andy Warhol did not necessarily found the particular movements associated with them respectively (in
fact, John Cage associated with the Abstract Expressionism movement only to critique it later on).\textsuperscript{57} However, John Cage and Andy Warhol’s repeated contribution to the field and their association with spaces for artist community interaction (John Cage’s “Happenings” and Andy Warhol’s Factory) seem strong enough to designate them as “leaders” within these movements.

Through Abstract Expressionism, European (in particular French) art became Americanized: “French art ceased to be a foreign ‘import’ and became an integral part of the American art scene.”\textsuperscript{58} In part, this assimilation of European art came about because of the strong communities that American artists had already developed prior to the arrival of European artists. The techniques, learned from firsthand encounters with European artists, spread rapidly.\textsuperscript{59} Quite possibly this influx of and assimilation of European art post-WWII accounts for the intellectual emphasis of these New York art communities that would later characterize the rock bands that operated in close contact with these avant garde scenes.

The proponents of Abstract Expressionism, one of the first major movements to arise out of post-WWII New York, were largely young and antagonistic towards mainstream culture. The Abstract Expressionist artists saw their bohemian subculture as a critique on dominant social values. Though the content of their art was often not directly full of social commentary (in contrast to the art produced during the 1930s Great

\textsuperscript{57} Bernstein, 116-121.  
\textsuperscript{58} Crane, 45.  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 45-46.
Depression era), the lifestyle of the artists was intended to challenge prevailing norms.  
Steering away from overt social commentary, then, the artists focused on revealing inner 
feelings through their works, of exploring the subconscious. Techniques such as Jackson 
Pollack’s paint drizzle were intended to erase the painter/painting distinction: the painting 
not only symbolized but was in fact a part of the artist’s own self. One could compare 
this concern for experience to the techniques John Cage would later incorporate into his 
aleatoric compositions and his concern with focusing on the performance moment rather 
than the “preserved” work. The important goal of the Abstract Expressionist was not the 
end result or particular content of the painting, but rather the experiences the artist 
accumulated through the act or process of artistic creation.

Cage also critiqued the boundaries between art and the world, stating in 1966 the 
obliteration of such boundaries. According to Cage, everything could now count as art, 
everything from staunchly traditional harmonic triads to sheer noise. He questioned the 
linear progression that music historians, especially European ones, drew to demonstrate 
the advance of musical art. Rather than viewing music in terms of one composer after 
another, Cage advocated a world of composers simultaneously. In other words, a new 
composer did not build on and then replace a previous composer, but simply added to the 
diverse sound of what counted as music through whatever personalized approach the

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60 Crane, 47-49.
61 Ibid., 49-50.
62 Ibid., 65.
63 Ibid., 50.
particular musician chose to take. As a result, moving outside the bounds of classical music was simply part of the general freedom Cage appeared to offer:

Cross-fertilization between experimental work and its hybrid forms in all media has produced a creative environment, particularly in America, where distinctions and definitions are neither possible nor important.

Apparently, America figures as the centre fostering this new “creative environment.”

Of course, claiming to move outside of a boundary merely reinforces that boundary: in order to demonstrate that a composer is operating outside a particular field (in this case the avant garde), the lines delineating that field need to be established. Again, this means of “breaking down boundaries” while yet remaining within an avant garde field resembles Bourdieu’s discussion of Duchamp. Duchamp’s anti-Art referenced the tradition of Art and was still produced for a specific sphere of consumers, namely members of the avant garde art world. However, Cage’s concern with boundary-crossing once again evokes the high art/low art binary that also pervades avant rock narratives.

After the Abstract Expressionists came a differing group that would eventually have a great deal of interaction with the Velvet Underground. Whereas the Abstract Expressionists had positioned themselves contrary to mainstream culture, the Pop artists supposedly integrated aspects of popular culture into the aesthetic tradition.

[Pop Art] appeared to question the widely accepted assessment of a leading art critic, Clement Greenberg, that the avant-garde aesthetic tradition and popular culture were totally dissimilar and that any contact between them would endanger the former.

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65 Smith, 6.
66 Ibid., 7.
67 Crane, 64.
According to Crane, Pop Art was rejected by the preceding avant garde community at first because it seemed to lack the critical edge deemed necessary to the avant garde aesthetic. By incorporating elements of popular culture, Pop Art appeared to be reinforcing rather than challenging social norms. However, Crane claims that Pop Art did critique social norms: the norms under attack were simply the art establishment itself rather than society at large (against which the Abstract Expressionists had positioned themselves). Pop Art’s critique, then, was concerned with merging popular culture and the “establishment.”

The transition to Pop Art was aided in part by John Cage himself. French artist Marcel Duchamp was already trying to blur high art/low art distinctions through his “readymades,” objects such as a urinal that Duchamp had simply designated as an artwork. In the 1950s, Cage took Duchamp’s ideas and transferred them to music: “Cage’s goal was to produce accident-determined music, one in which the artist’s self and every distinction between art and everyday experience would disappear.” Cage consciously mingled with artists in other mediums (especially the visual arts) because fellow musicians dismissed Cage’s aleatoric, boundary-eroding approaches to their own field. He even joined the Abstract Expressionists’ “Club” and helped to establish the Greenwich Village “Happenings,” regular gatherings of poets, painters, and dancers.

68 Crane, 64.
69 Ibid., 65.
70 Ibid., 65.
71 Ibid., 65.
His concern with the everyday led to a greater interest in popular culture at large, and the desire to disintegrate boundaries further.\textsuperscript{72}

Pop Art was seen to challenge the art world in other ways. Not only did it supposedly break down the distinctions between high art and popular art in terms of content, but it did so in the arena of production as well: “In other words, part of Pop art was not simply using themes and images from popular culture; it was in fact a form of popular culture, in terms of the way in which it used these materials.”\textsuperscript{73} Popular culture wasn’t just a separate sphere from which to harvest raw materials for artwork, after which the artist retreated to his “high culture” field to work these materials into masterpieces. Andy Warhol in particular demonstrated this fluidity of field-blending. Popular culture is marked by mass production and formulaic simplification, in order to reach as large an audience as possible. Warhol adapted that principle to produce silkscreen portraits in the early sixties. The silkscreen portraits were reduced to rather simple denominators: details were washed out and common features (mouth, eyes) were highlighted.\textsuperscript{74} He also “borrowed” the form of mass media photographs from popular culture.\textsuperscript{75}

The ideas of blending elements of “high” and “low” art forms, an act attributed to Andy Warhol and the Pop Artists, and of making “high” art more socially relevant, a project associated with the Abstract Expressionists, are easy ones to pin to the Velvet Underground as well. After all, the Velvet Underground was a rock band that socialized with Andy Warhol’s crowd. John Cale had even corresponded with “classical” composers

\textsuperscript{72} Crane, 65
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 67.\textsuperscript{77}
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 67-68.\textsuperscript{78}
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 67.
such as Aaron Copland and John Cage and studied under La Monte Young.\textsuperscript{76} And there are certainly many biographers of the Velvet Underground who attempt to make this claim: “The Velvets operated in the ragged seam between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art that opened up in the 1960s and has grown increasingly irritating (to some) and fascinating (to others) ever since.”\textsuperscript{77} The 1960s (when the Velvets released most of their albums) in particular is targeted as a rather fruitful period for “low” and “high” art interaction:

What is interesting about this particular period [the 60s] was that the twentieth-century avant-garde was picked up and inserted into popular culture under the guise of radical youth culture. In one swoop, Surrealism became teeny bopper culture. This was possible because the artists involved in this period of crossover still considered themselves avant-gardists; this was a notion that was still conceivable at this point. Psychedelic music was “progressive” music; it was moving forward, formally, in concert with some notion of progressive social change.\textsuperscript{78}

And New York figures as the geographical catalyst for these interactions: “By 1980 downtown New York City rock clubs resembled art spaces and art spaces resembled rock clubs.”\textsuperscript{79} Analyses of the Velvet Underground repeatedly use a high art/low art framework, both when evaluating the band’s ideological significance and when trying to determine an “origin” for the sounds produced by the band. This interpretation of the band as a high art/low art merger is certainly circulating.

\textsuperscript{76} Cale and Bockris, 43, 45, 58.
Thus, the next chapter will turn more extensively to the Velvet Underground: the historical context of the band and the historical narratives surrounding interpretation of the band's significance will form the bulk of the chapter. Particular songs exhibiting sounds that pertain to the discussion will also be examined. How the band figures as a point-of-origin, both in discussion of the band itself, and within the genre of avant rock, will be further addressed.
Chapter Two: The Velvet Underground

The Velvet Underground figures as a point-of-origin within the alternative/avant rock category. As author Bill Martin observed, “It could be said that the Velvet Underground were the first ‘alternative rock’ group.”\(^{80}\) A review of *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (Deluxe Edition) refers to the band’s significance in rather strong terms:

If Lou [Reed] and John [Cale] hadn’t decided to ditch their respective careers in order to blur the boundary between pop and avant garde there would have been no Stooges, Can [a krautrock group], David Bowie (as we know him) or Roxy Music.\(^{81}\)

Numerous other bands are also linked to the Velvet Underground lineage; the Pixies, R.E.M., Patti Smith, the Ramones, Yo La Tengo, Sonic Youth, the Strokes, Pavement, the New York Dolls, Iggy Pop, and Blondie all cite the Velvets as an influence.\(^{82}\) In particular, David Bowie explicitly declared his debt to the Velvet Underground and tried to revive Reed’s dying career.\(^{83}\) For all of these bands and artists, the Velvets occupy a place-of-origin in a particular history of high art/low art hybridity. This high art/low art binary reinforces ideas regarding “high art” and “low art” fields and establishes avant rock’s so-called role in blending those fields.

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\(^{83}\) Ibid., 14.
Mention of the Velvets repeatedly asserts the band’s importance in creating a “new” kind of sound, sometimes resorting to extreme adulation: in *Blender Magazine*, Douglas Wolk claims that the Velvet Underground was “[t]he second most influential band ever.”84 (Though Wolk doesn’t specify, one can only assume that the Beatles were the first.) According to the same article, the Velvets “invented alt-rock, feedback solos and playing in sunglasses.”85 The *SPIN* Alternative Record Guide asserts that “[w]e understand this music so well...because every corner of it has been absorbed. VU studio goofs have become established subgenres.”86 *A Rolling Stone* album review of *White Light/White Heat* marvels that the Velvets “managed to record four of rock's most enduring albums,” earning the band an influential “place in rock history.”87

But perhaps the most succinct summation of the Velvet Underground’s place in the avant rock narrative is found in the *Grove Music Online* entry for the band:

Despite contempt for the music industry, lack of commercial success, lack of sales promotion and the absence of recognition beyond the avant garde of the time, the Velvet Underground has become one of the most influential bands in the history of rock music. At odds with the prevailing atmosphere in popular music of the late 1960s, the group developed a distinctively hard-edged urban sound, polarized between stripped-back rock and roll and avant garde. The Punk rebellion, the New Wave music of the 1970s, art-rock and the phenomenon of ‘cross-over’ can all trace

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85 Ibid.
their origins to the radical experimentalism of the group’s first three albums.\textsuperscript{88}

This entry not only sets the band up as an influence on subsequent eras, but also referencing the high art/low art polarity that runs through the discourse surrounding the Velvets. Constructions of the Velvets’ avant garde/rock hybridity are reinforced by the band’s location in 1960s New York and proximity to avant garde circles. These factors make the Velvet Underground a useful origin for avant rock, giving the genre’s proponents a source for their claims concerning its hybridity. This chapter therefore focuses on the Velvet Underground and its role in providing a point-of-origin for the avant rock narrative.

Both the historical details and the interpretations of these details guide how an individual band comes to possess particular meanings or provide symbolic representation for the rest of the genre. Foucault notes that since we encounter objects or ideas without a prior existing framework, we must situate a particular object within a framework in order to understand it. During the process of developing such a framework, or creating a genealogy, certain objects/ideas/concepts emerge as more important-looking than other objects.\textsuperscript{89} These are the explanatory markers, or “origins.” Foucault (taking his cue from Nietzsche) would insist that these origins are constructed and not true beginnings, but objects understood to be “origins” nevertheless serve important roles. Sociologist Janelle L. Wilson, building on the work of Fred Davis, finds a very clear connection between


\textsuperscript{89} Michel Foucault, The Foucault Reader, edited by Paul Rabinow, (Pantheon Books, 1984), 59.
nostalgia and identity: nostalgia serves as a way of connecting a present self with a past self.\textsuperscript{90} While an “origin” may or may not be attended by nostalgic longing for the past, an “origin” nevertheless still carries the same sort of explanatory or identity-forming power. In the case of a genre, the “origin” represents not only where the genre came from, but also how to understand the genre in its present form. The interpretive image of the “origin” can be used to create an interpretive “image” for the genre. The cultural setting surrounding the Velvets (and how that setting was construed) helps explain why the Velvet Underground stands as such a central figure in the avant rock narrative.

Of course, though the narrative drawn from historical biography and rock criticism does use cultural/historical data in order to depict the Velvet Underground as a hybrid band, the actual assigning of “high” or “low” monikers to particular sounds in the band becomes difficult if not impossible. Choices are made about which historical data will be emphasized in the narrative. For example, are the alternative tunings that the band employs an influence of avant garde timbre explorations or the result of rock musician experimentation? The answer, according to the avant garde artist Tony Conrad, is both.\textsuperscript{91} And even if particular members could be associated with differing fields, where does one field end and the other begin? John Cale may have started as an avant garde artist, but is he still avant garde when he is playing in a rock band? Is Lou Reed still a rock musician if he is using alternative tunings? Thus, despite the apparent evidence supporting the characterization of the band as a genre merger, making neat divisions in the high art/low


art characterization of the Velvets is dicey work. Though certain factors seem to make the
Velvets the appropriate poster child for avant rock collaboration, the actual historical data
don’t always fit so neatly into the narrative. However, under Foucault’s genealogical
approach, the actual “truth” regarding historical facts matters less than the arrangement of
those facts, the discourse that establishes the Velvet Underground as such an influential
“origin” of avant rock. Indeed, the discourse that sets the Velvets up as an appropriate
origin for avant rock extends into several areas that reach beyond music history, affecting
larger areas of philosophy, art, and social politics.

First, how the decade itself is discussed plays an important role in framing the
discourse around the Velvet Underground. The 1960s, when the Velvets first got
together, is repeatedly defined as the era in which the aesthetic/philosophical theory of
postmodernism developed. Postmodernism as a term began to be used in the 1960s:

From the 1960s onward, postmodernism is variously applied to any
endeavor that breaks with formal codes of representations in favor of
mixed modes or a radical departure from normalized conventions.92

In addition, the ideological set of values that the term represents is traced back to the
1960s. In his discussion on postmodernism, Andreas Huyssen locates its “beginnings” in
that decade:

Since the 1960s, artistic activities have become much more diffuse and
harder to contain in safe categories or stable institutions such as the
academy, the museum or even the established gallery network.93

92 Mary Lynch Kennedy, Theorizing Composition: A Critical Sourcebook of Theory and
Scholarship in Contemporary Composition Studies, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press,
The narrative that frames accounts of the 1960s emphasizes the same story: the 1960s allegedly fostered a particular kind of experimentalism that valued high art/low art merging, a breakdown of the “cultural divide” that separated popular music from the classical music sphere. The decade and the ideology attributed to it supposedly offered the philosophical and socio-historical circumstances necessary to allow the birth of a “new,” hybrid genre.

Indeed, several biographical works illustrate the prominence this decade holds in popular music history. For example, author Bill Martin starts his history of avant rock with the Beatles and progresses chronologically from there: “There has always been experimentation in rock music, but this took off in earnest in the late 1960s.”94 Bernard Gendron maintains an academic skepticism regarding the extent to which high art/low art fields really blended and merged in the 1960s, but he nevertheless echoes the view that the decade served as a significant era in rock music’s development: “Emerging in 1954, rock music was on its way to legitimization in 1964, which it triumphantly achieved by 1967.”95 Other historical/biographical materials quoted in the introduction to this thesis further reinforce the general consensus: the 1960s are repeatedly described as the “turning point” in the high art/low art narrative. In addition to “low” art incorporating

94 An interesting narrative-making move that seems to tie the avant rock narrative into a larger “rock history”; and Martin, 3.
“high” art techniques into its production, “high” art drew from “low” art: Andy Warhol employed mass production techniques from the commercial art world.96

This general framing of the 1960s as such a pivotal moment in high art/low art blending lends support to the specific framing of the Velvets as a hybrid band. Going beyond how the Velvets in particular are discussed, contextualizing the band within a broader historical narrative regarding high art/low art binaries strengthens the Velvets’ position as an “origin” for avant rock. Lou Reed and John Cale first met in 1965.97 The band released its first album in 1967. The Velvets’ activity during the 1960s situates them within a decade already associated with institutional rebellion and a redefinition of “high” and “low” cultural fields: over and above the actual sounds they were producing, the Velvets’ historical situation within the 1960s helps cast the band as a blending of high art and low art fields.

But perhaps more important than the narrative of time period is the narrative of geography that is used to strengthen the Velvets position as an “origin” of avant rock and to construct the image of hybridity associated with the genre. The Velvet Underground developed and operated out of New York City. This city was the heart of the avant-garde movement associated with the “high art” world in the 1960s. In particular, the Pop Art movement, represented by Andy Warhol, was experimenting with high art/low art boundaries.98 Living and performing in New York, the Velvets personally associated with Andy Warhol and the members of his Factory. Indeed, the connection between

96 Crane, 68.
97 Cale and Bockris, 68.
98 Crane, 64, 67.
Warhol and the Velvets appears often in historical discussion: an exhibit of Warhol’s art in San Diego used “Femme Fatale” (from the album *Velvet Underground and Nico*) in a video presentation on the Factory. The film *I Shot Andy Warhol* deals primarily with Warhol’s would-be assassin Valerie Solanas, but still references the Velvet Underground by using John Cale’s music in the score. Yo La Tengo (an avant rock band based in Hoboken, NJ that got its start in the mid-eighties) plays the Velvets during the film’s depiction of a Factory party. Since Yo La Tengo is one of the many musical “descendents” of the Velvets, the avant rock genre is again associated with the Pop Art world of Andy Warhol. John Cale’s music also appears in *Basquiat*, the film story of another Factory celebrity and artist, once more reasserting Warhol/VU associations. The connections are so strong that not only do the Velvets repeatedly crop up in discussion around Warhol, but apparently one cannot celebrate the Velvets without mentioning Warhol: the artist’s work was displayed at a 40th anniversary celebration of *The Velvet Underground and Nico*.100

Again, broader narratives (in this case, narratives regarding geography/proximity) further strengthen the band’s image of hybridity by connecting the Velvets to other movements also understood to be “hybrid.” Because the Velvets frequented the Factory, their music is associated with Warhol’s Pop Art Movement. The concept of high art/low art merging that frames interpretation of Andy Warhol’s art is in turn projected onto

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interpretation of the Velvet Underground. But the geographic interactions do not end at
the Factory: one member of the group, John Cale, even trained within the classical/avant
garde field before joining the Velvet Underground. Indeed, the Velvets’ particular
location (and the personal relationships such a location fostered) plays a large role in how
the band is understood to be a distinct kind of avant garde/rock music hybrid.

It should be noted that the Velvet Underground was not the only band that was
experimenting with high art/low art combinations during the 1960s. The Beatles, for
example, incorporated a “classical” string quartet ensemble into songs such as
“Yesterday” and “Eleanor Rigby,” and used pseudo-Baroque keyboard motives between
choruses of “In My Life.” Yet what separates the Velvet Underground from other
experimentally-prone bands such as the Beatles is the Velvets’ alignment with a
particular kind of high art, the New York avant garde. The members of VU mingled with
the socially transgressive crowd at the Warhol Factory. Another avant garde
characteristic was an interest in innovation, a breaking with the past or current norms.\textsuperscript{101}
The Velvets’ desire to upset normal social order (or at least upset their audiences) and
their explorations in sound production (through stripped down drones and sustained
notes) also tied the band to the avant garde. These avant garde associations made the
music itself seem avant garde, making the Velvets a useful origin for avant rock.

Because the musical backgrounds of the individual band members are diverse, the
avant garde/rock hybrid line can be constructed first within the band itself. The various
members of the band were aligned with differing high art/low art fields. John Cale was

\textsuperscript{101} Crane, 15.
trained in classical music. Sterling Morrison and Moe Tucker had more popular music backgrounds. Lou Reed was an avid rock 'n' roll record collector. This collaboration between musicians from differing fields can be read as a merging of rock and avant garde musics on a fundamental level: the merged genres were personally represented by musicians whose background included training in their respective genres. This collaboration within the band also impacts interpretation of the sounds the Velvet Underground produced. Because the band's more avant rock sound happens during the Reed-Cale era (1964-1968), I will focus discussion on the band's earlier albums, most notably *The Velvet Underground and Nico*. The interactions that the Velvets maintained with the avant garde leading up to and during production of this album shape the way in which the musical sounds can be used to frame the avant rock discussion.

Released in 1967, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was produced by the New York artist and social elite Andy Warhol. Nico (the pseudonym of German-born Christa Päffgen) was added to The Velvets' line-up at the suggestion of Gerard Malanga, a dancer and member of Warhol's "Factory." The Factory involved a crowd of avant-garde artists/intellectuals who occupied the same physical working space (Warhol's art studio) within the New York art scene. The presence of Nico's blonde beauty in front of

103 Ibid., 16.
104 Ibid.
105 The Velvet Underground supposedly released five studio albums. However, the fifth, *Squeeze* (1973), though mistakenly credited to the band, nevertheless fails to contain any of the key Velvets. The album was in fact a solo project for Doug Yule. John Cale had already departed the band between *White Light/White Heat* (1968) and *The Velvet Underground* (1969).
106 Harvard, 8; and Bockris and Malanga, 9.
aggressively chaotic male (or in the case of Moe Tucker, androgynous) instrumentalists was a deliberate attempt to smooth out the "screeching ugliness" of the band.\textsuperscript{107} Nico's loveliness against such a dark backdrop was a self-consciously created contradiction that offered paradoxical commentary (social beauty paired against socially transgressive noise and menace). After the Velvets left the Factory, they left behind its members: Nico does not appear on any subsequent albums the Velvets released. Nevertheless, because of their early involvement in the Warhol Factory, the association between the Velvets and Warhol persists.

Before releasing their first studio album, the Velvets performed with Andy Warhol and other artists (such as dancers and filmmakers) as part of a multimedia show entitled \textit{The Exploding Plastic Inevitable}.\textsuperscript{108} The Velvets had been performing live prior to this and were introduced to Andy Warhol through Barbara Rubin, a "boyishly attractive, precocious 21-year old art groupie."\textsuperscript{109} She first invited Gerald Malanga, a dancer at the Factory, to hear the group perform; after his experience, which included spontaneous dancing to the Velvets' live music, he returned to hear them play again, this time with Paul Morrissey, whom Warhol had commissioned to find a rock and roll group for \textit{The Exploding Plastic Inevitable}. Paul Morrissey in turn invited Andy Warhol to hear the band, and the Velvets joined the community at the Factory.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{108} Bockris and Malanga, 8.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} ibid., 8-10.
Though perhaps this was the Velvets’ first appearance with the New York avant-garde art scene, it was not the first time individual members of the band had been involved with the experimental art world. The Welsh John Cale, who performed bass and electric viola, had originally immigrated to the United States after corresponding with Aaron Copland and John Cage. He spent time at the Tanglewood Music Center under Iannis Xenakis. Cale left what he considered to be the stifling atmosphere of Tanglewood and ended up with La Monte Young in the latter’s Theatre of Eternal Music. La Monte Young is part of an earlier school of minimalist composers who were experimenting with tone resonances and just intonation. His works, such as Trio for Strings, influenced composers such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich, who would further develop minimalism’s stripped-down aesthetic. Minimalist composers sought to reduce music to its essential components. In minimalist music, change occurs gradually, almost imperceptibly. John Cale, along with Tony Conrad, formed a smaller ensemble called the Dream Syndicate, which still continued to operate within the Theatre of Eternal Music’s community. Consisting of John Cale, Tony Conrad, La Monte Young and his wife Marion, the Dream Syndicate experimented with holding pitches for hours at a time, attempting a methodical or “scientific” approach to sound and music-making. Cale also picked up other techniques that he claims established the Velvets’ distinctive sound:

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111 Cale and Bockris, 43, 45.
112 Harvard, 23.
113 Cale and Bockris, 58.
114 Keith Potter, Four Musical Minimalists; La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.
115 Cale and Bockris, 58.
The members of the Dream Syndicate, motivated by a scientific and mystical fascination with sound, spent long hours in rehearsals learning to provide sustained meditative drones and chants. Their rigorous style served to discipline me and developed my knowledge of the just intonation system. I also learned to use my viola in a new amplified way which would lead to the powerful droning effect that is so strong in the first two Velvet Underground records.\textsuperscript{116}

His instrument of choice, the electric viola, provided a visual contradiction in performance. Observers were surprised to see a “classical” instrument played in a rock setting. However, John Cale performed the electric viola in a way decidedly “unclassical,” too: “[Cale] looked perfect holding that thing, absolutely menacing-looking.”\textsuperscript{117} Thus, even performance practices were understood to be distinctly different, a mixture of high art/low art fields.

Cale’s background with La Monte Young also appeared to give an aura of artistic legitimacy to the Velvets that other rock groups were said to lack. Billy Name, another member of the Factory, describes how Cale made the Velvets more appropriate for Warhol’s multimedia project than the other bands that were getting noticed at the time:

Because John [Cale] was already a legitimate part of the avant-garde New York scene when the Velvets came to the Factory, and since I [Billy Name] had known John with La Monte [Young] in our bohemian avant-garde world, it made the Velvets seem even more perfect than if we’d got someone like the Doors. Even if they had poetry in them, they were more pop, whereas John was classically avant-garde. With La Monte Young and John Cage, John brought a continuation of the avant-garde to the Factory.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{116} Cale and Bockris, 60.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 84.
If the Velvet Underground’s contemporaries were setting up the Velvets as a distinctly avant-garde rock band, then to find subsequent biographers doing the same is not surprising. Joe Harvard, a Boston producer who writes on the Velvet Underground for the 33 1/3 series, finds it difficult to situate the Velvets entirely within the rock music genre. Though reluctant to describe rock music as art, believing rock to be more about craft, he nevertheless applies the term to the Velvets, once again demonstrating how the band is perceived to be an uneasy blend of differing streams of music-making.\textsuperscript{119} Again, these associations that the band maintained with avant-garde artists strengthens the Velvets’ position as the representational “origin” of avant rock: the Velvet Underground is supposedly rock music associated with a particular ideology of experimental “high art.”

The band went through a few members before solidifying into the group that would produce the Velvets’ first two albums. Lou Reed and John Cale met in 1965 through a collaborative project that Terry Phillips of the Pickwick label was then arranging. The Pickwick label had released one of Lou Reed’s singles, “The Ostrich,” under the name of a fictional band called The Primitives. When the band was requested to play the single on \textit{American Bandstand}, Terry Phillips needed to throw together an appropriate-looking band. Since Phillips mistakenly thought John Cale’s long hair meant the latter was a pop musician, he asked Cale to join The Primitives. The record was a flop, but it was the start of Reed and Cale’s collaboration.\textsuperscript{120}

Part of the reason Reed and Cale stayed together was a similarity of artistic interests. For “The Ostrich,” Lou Reed used an alternate guitar tuning in which the strings

\textsuperscript{119} Harvard, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{120} Cale and Bockris, 68-69.
were all tuned to the same note. Tony Conrad, also a member of the short-lived
Primitives, was amazed at the similarities between strumming multiple strings tuned to
the same note and the resonances being explored under La Monte Young: "[The tuning]
blew our minds because that was what we were doing with La Monte [Young] in The
Dream Syndicate." 121

After the breakup of the Primitives, Reed and Cale started their own band, going
through a variety of names until Tony Conrad gave them a paperback entitled The Velvet
Underground. 122 Written by columnist Michael Leigh, the book recounts the author’s
accidental introduction to a subculture whose uniting interest was sexual
experimentation, including sadomasochism. The band decided that the themes of the
book were dark enough to fit its own developing aesthetic and accordingly adopted the
name. 123 Sterling Morrison was enlisted to play lead guitar. Angus MacLise, a drummer
from La Monte Young’s circle, played in the Velvet Underground’s first performances,
but proved so unreliable that he was replaced by Maureen Tucker. Though previous
experiences with female performers made Cale leery of allowing Maureen "Moe" Tucker
into the Velvets, her distinctive African and jazz-influenced style of drumming made her
a good fit for the band. With Lou Reed’s lyrics and John Cale alternating between his
electric viola and the bass, the Velvets were set as the group that would record the first
two Velvet albums. 124

121 Conrad, quoted in Bockris and Malanga, 17.
122 Cale and Bockris, 78.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., 78-80.
Yet, however established the Velvets’ membership may have been at the end of 1965, few people were entirely prepared to listen to the band’s music. Indeed, the antagonism and transgressive character of the Velvets is almost as important as the high art/low art configuration, as Max Paddison asserts in the *Grove Music Online* article on the Velvets. While the high art/low art configuration helps to link the Velvets to avant rock (attaching the language of hybridity to the genre), the transgressive element of the Velvets resembled that of the avant garde circles they frequented. The disturbing antagonism projected by the Velvet Underground matched the darkness characterizing much of the Warhol Factory.125

According to Cale, the Velvets’ style was so abrasive and terrifying that their first performance resulted in pandemonium: “On our first gig, we were so loud and horrifying to the high-school audience that the majority of them, teachers, students and parents, fled screaming out of the room.”126 The Velvets further developed this antagonistic, transgressive image at their next gig, a two-week residency at the Café Bizarre. John Cale reminiscences on how the band drove customers away, or at least made them uncomfortable: “We poured our vitriolic sound on the heads of the tourists drinking coffee and looking at their postcards, all trying to pretend they were not hearing somebody say that heroin was his life and his wife.”127 But rather than flounder through...

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125 Cale and Bockris, 90.
126 Ibid., 81.
127 Ibid.
numerous gigs, the Velvets were “discovered” at the Café Bizarre and joined Andy Warhol’s Factory.\textsuperscript{128}

The Velvets wanted to make people squirm. Cale affirms the band’s provocative agenda: “we really wanted to disturb people.”\textsuperscript{129} The goal was to get beyond surface layers of consciousness and speak directly to the unconscious.

What we did was totally about ideas. We were heavily influenced by ideas about the subconscious. Lou was expert in bringing up subconscious images and thoughts and getting them into lyrics. And the aim of the band as a whole was to hypnotize audiences so that their subconscious would take over.\textsuperscript{130}

But lest anyone interpret this fascination with the subconscious (or uncivilized “primitive”) as a lack of knowledgeable skill, Cale notes that all of the sound distortion and noise in the Velvets’ music was in fact “disciplined and intentional.”\textsuperscript{131} The band desired a specific effect, and their performance style and huge blocks of sound were carefully chosen to achieve that effect.

This concern for social transgression and disturbing images fits in with the performance techniques of the other Factory artists. According to Crane, one of the characteristics of the avant garde was a distinct challenge to prevailing social norms (including values).\textsuperscript{132} While the Velvets were playing their (so-called) chaotic music, the interpretative dancers (artists from the Factory) would be acting out scenes from

\textsuperscript{128} Cale and Bockris, 81.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 91.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Crane, 10-15.
sadomasochism or drug culture. Cale describes a typical performance at the Dom on St. Mark’s Place, an old Polish meeting hall that was transformed into a stage:

Gerard [Malanga] would be in his zebra-skin suit whipping Susan Bottomley, or pretending to shoot up with a gigantic pink syringe (the kind used for icing cakes). All that was deadly serious; we really wanted to disturb people...the intention was to disturb people’s consciousness.  

The Velvets’ own image of discomforting transgressiveness further ties the band to the particular transgressiveness of the avant garde at Warhol’s factory, making the band a legitimizing point-of-origin for avant rock.

So far, the presentation of the Velvets, both as a band and as performers, has highlighted two recurring motifs in the discussion surrounding the Velvet Underground. First the hybrid nature of the band, composed of members from both “high art” and “low art” spheres (avant garde and rock), has surfaced several times. The strong presence of this high art/low art motif situates the Velvets as originators of a genre that understands itself to be a hybrid. The transgressiveness of the Velvets’ performance style, by fitting the Factory artists’ aesthetic, further ties the band to the innovative or experimental connotations that surround the avant garde.

But so far unaddressed (except for brief descriptions of public reaction) is the music “itself.” How do the sounds themselves contribute to the high art/low art and transgressiveness motifs attached to the Velvets? How does the music—the timbres, the type of songs, the production techniques—impact interpretation? Or alternatively, how does a high art/low art interpretative lens impact how the music is heard?

133 Cale and Bockris, 90.
If Cale and Reed can be read as the musicians pushing the Velvet Underground towards extreme experimentation, then the other members of the band, Moe Tucker and especially Sterling Morrison, can be viewed as the musicians who kept the Velvets’ sound grounded in the rock genre’s early African-American inflected roots. While inspired by Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olatunji, Moe Tucker also greatly respected Rolling Stones’ drummer Charlie Watts, whose playing was more in line with jazz than with rock.134 Morrison utilized more traditional blues riffs and compensated for the backbeat and harmonic grounding that Cale, despite his position as bass-player, would often avoid providing.135

Altogether, these relationships combined to produce the first Velvet album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*. Cale voiced the band’s enthusiasm to record their music, once again evoking the hybrid motif: “We were really excited. We had the opportunity to do something revolutionary—to combine the avant-garde and rock and roll, to do something symphonic.”136 And indeed, the avant/rock hybrid motif does not merely color the associations that the band had with Andy Warhol, but inflects the interpretation of the sounds themselves.

There are a few tracks on *The Velvet Underground and Nico* that are particularly fruitful in projecting an avant-rock hybridity. Once again, it should be noted that the sounds in the Velvet Underground’s music are not actually traceable to a definitive

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134 Cale and Bockris, 80.
136 Cale and Bockris, 92.
source. However, similarities to either the avant garde or to rock will suggest associations. The similarities do not ensure that such-and-such a sound (such as alternative tunings) is in fact derived from one field or another, but simply inform why the Velvet Underground gets cast as a hybrid band.

An examination of the song “Venus in Furs” illustrates this idea. The song starts with a drone on the viola. Since Cale also experimented with drones at the Theatre of Eternal Music, reflecting La Monte Young’s fascination with classical Indian music, attributing this drone to the avant garde seems reasonable. All of the strings (both guitars and viola) are tuned down one half step. The repetitive, bare sound of the drone and guitar also resembles minimalism, a musical aesthetic of stripped-down, gradual change attributed to La Monte Young. Again the sonic similarity and the relation between La Monte Young and Cale influences how these sounds can be interpreted. John Cale’s bowing style avoids the sweet sonorities typically associated with the instrument, and instead he plays with an abrasive, “screeching” technique that suggests John Cage’s experiments with prepared piano that also elicited abrasive and otherwise unusual sounds from an instrument.

Even though Cale does accent the backbeat with his viola, the real grounding force in the rhythm section is Maureen Tucker on the drums and Nico on the tambourine. The tambourine follows the viola’s lead in hitting the backbeat. The drums, however, set a distinct pattern that emphasizes the main beats of the measure (the first and third beats).

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137 LaMonte Young, interview with LaMonte Young conducted by Ian Nagoski, Halana Number One, accessed January 9, 2007 at http://www.halana.com/lymz.html.

Tucker anticipates the main beat with a short upbeat on the second half of the beat preceding. The steady emphasis of the downbeats creates a dirge-like march, or heartbeat motive, suggesting a figure slowly dragging their feet. Given that the lyrics deal with sadomasochism, this slow march (combined with the screech-like slur of the viola) evokes images of someone continuously cracking a whip or dragging chains. Because of their prevalence in many “rock” songs, the drums and rhythmic “backbeat” pattern might be read as the “rock” elements in the song.139

Cale also claimed to have brought his experiments with tonality to the Velvet Underground.140 Though using the just intonation that La Monte Young experimented with would have been nearly impossible in a band with guitars, given that the frets are often removed in order to achieve the proper intervals, Cale introduced the concept of down-tuning the guitars.141 The down-tuning that VU used for so many of their songs (more often down-tuning a full step so that the lowest string on the guitar was D instead of the normal E) gave Cale greater freedom to experiment with the resonant capacities of his instrument. Cale’s ability to play on open strings gives songs such as “The Black Angel’s Death Song” its sparse character and rather bright tone. Down-tuning a half step (i.e., the D string to D-flat), as in “Venus in Furs,” prevented a fully open, sparse sound, but gave the song a dark tone consistent with its thematic material dealing with sadomasochism.

140 Cale and Bockris, 60.
141 Ibid., 73.
“Heroin” is another song that displays minimalist characteristics. The song rocks back and forth between two chords. This minimalist chordal skeleton anchors the song against all of the amplified distortion that Cale produces on his viola. The feedback again suggests Cage-like sound exploration and experimentation. The song fluctuates between increases and decreases in tempo, the intensity of the feedback and distortion reflecting the pace of the tempo. \(^{142}\)

More elements that suggest the “avant garde” are found in other tracks on *The Velvet Underground and Nico*. “All Tomorrow’s Parties” contains very repetitive chordal patterns performed by John Cale on the keyboard. \(^{143}\) “European Son” incorporates crashes and a chair scraping across the floor, using environmental sounds as music, much like John Cage’s 4’33” or “Living Room Music.” \(^{144}\) Rolling Stone writer David Fricke calls “The Black Angel’s Death Song” atonal. \(^{145}\) Fricke here connects the Velvet Underground to the avant garde, since atonality is a technique associated primarily with the avant garde (at least earlier movements).

Some of the experimentation was accidental, although this “accidentalism” could be interpreted as aleatoric: a lot of the sound distortion on *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was due to poor studio production. An interview with Maureen Tucker reveals that

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the Velvet Underground’s first recording sessions lacked the technology necessary for optimal ensemble cohesion. She notes that the band would simply run through a song and take the recording without doing much subsequent overdubbing or mixing. Hearing the other musicians during the recording process was also difficult, a problem that impacted those songs requiring a great deal of precision, such as “Heroin”:

…the guys plugged straight into the board. They didn’t have their amps up loud in the studio, so of course, I couldn’t hear anything. Anything. And when we got to the part where you speed up, you gotta [sic] speed up together, or it’s not really right. And it just became this mountain of drum noise in front of me. I couldn’t hear shit.146

As a result of the Velvets’ poor production resources, the album has an incredibly lo-fi quality. But whether this lo-fi quality was experimental, accidental, or the accident-construed-as-experiment, the noisiness of the Velvets still contributes to their experimental image.

And yet the avant-garde aspects in the VU’s music were rather limited compared to the rather powerful presence of what can be interpreted as the rock ‘n’ roll influence in their sound. After all, with the exception of the viola, the instrumentation was largely that of a typical rock band: drums, guitars, and the occasional keyboard. Many of the lyrics were patterned after typical verse/chorus structures. Songs such as “There She Goes Again,” use the back-up chorus that either repeats a hook phrase or else vocalizes vowel syllables such as “oo.”

Because these elements can be associated with differing fields of music (whether or not they are in fact derived from or limited to those fields), the Velvet Underground stands as an important meeting place for avant garde and rock music. Or so the story goes. Situated in New York, where an active avant-garde community as well as popular music production already existed, the Velvet Underground was in a geographic location that promoted such hybrid interaction. The eclectic musical background of the band’s members also contributes to the perception that the Velvets achieved an unusual merging of avant-garde and rock music. The presence of Andy Warhol, though he did not directly influence their music by offering suggestions, and their performances with his group of artists nevertheless gave an elite (i.e. “avant garde”) aura to the Velvets.\(^\text{147}\) Operating within a time period that is targeted as one fruitful for high art/low art interactions and the legitimization of rock music, the Velvets also fit into a broader genealogy of rock music in general, tying the avant rock genre to a larger narrative.\(^\text{148}\) All of these factors play into the Velvets’ position as a central figure in the avant rock narrative, as a point-of-origin to explain and categorize subsequent bands. The relationships developed through the narrative process—the association of an “origin” band with “descendent” bands—infuse the Velvets’ high art/low art motif into the rest of the avant rock category.

The complications discussed earlier regarding how to assign or attribute certain sounds (or even band members) to differing fields once again demonstrates how the narrative is chosen and played with to provide a framework for a particular interpretation. The historical data may exist, but fitting it together into an interpretation does not always

\(^{147}\) Tucker, 14.

\(^{148}\) Gendron, 2, 161.
preserve the complexity of that data and often filters the data. However, the constructed nature of the narrative does not mean that the history is wrong or inaccurate and must be thrown out. Rather understanding the narrative in terms of genealogy reveals how bands can act as central figures that define or establish a genre. The constructedness of the narrative does not mean that the narrative is entirely fabricated either; the narrative does bear some relation to “the facts.” Both the sounds the Velvets produced and the associations the band developed are real entities. In other words, the filtered narrative of the Velvets serves better as a short hand to describe what avant rock as a genre is all about than as a historically verifiable account of avant rock, but the narrative is not without basis. The genealogy derives strength from and perpetuates itself from these points where the narrative touches reality.

Thus, within the avant rock narrative, the Velvet Underground serves as a forerunner, a predecessor. Several avant rock bands that come chronologically after the Velvets name the Velvet Underground as a musical parent. In this way, these bands are grafted into the narrative as the heirs to the genre, the next generation of avant rock. One of these “heirs” is Sonic Youth. This band not only credits the Velvet Underground as its inspiration, but also serves as another strong focal point in the avant rock narrative. Though not established as a point-of-origin in the same way that the Velvet Underground is situated, Sonic Youth still figures as a significant influence on avant rock.

In many ways, the narrative pattern repeats when Sonic Youth enters into the framework: the high art/low art hybrid motif surfaces once again. Situated within the no wave movement in 1980s New York, Sonic Youth appears to offer another point in the
narrative of high art/low art blending so fundamental to the avant rock identity. Not only does Sonic Youth have members who actively collaborated with artists associated with the avant garde, but the band deliberately covered avant-garde compositions in their SYR project. Most notable are the band’s covers of works by John Cage, Steve Reich, Yoko Ono, Christian Wolff, and Pauline Oliveros on SYR4: Goodbye Twentieth Century.

Though Sonic Youth cannot function as an origin that defines avant rock (after all, other bands have already been established as predecessors), the band can still function as a crucial landmark in the narrative. The way that Sonic Youth figures as a “leader in crisis” that “achieved” the high art/low art hybrid further reinforces the high art/low art hybridity attached to avant rock. It is therefore to Sonic Youth that this thesis turns next.
Chapter Three: Sonic Youth

If the Velvet Underground functions as an origin for avant rock, then Sonic Youth functions as a “leader-in-crisis” for the genre. But Sonic Youth’s place in the avant rock narrative is not as the “next” band in a linear progression of developing avant rock bands. For example, over a decade elapsed between the Velvet Underground and Nico and Sonic Youth’s first record Confusion Is Sex, and the new wave and punk bands that operated in 1970s New York could easily merit an additional chapter in their own right. However, the analysis will focus on Sonic Youth for two reasons: the band’s presence in the New York avant rock scene and the band’s significance in discourse surrounding avant rock. This does not mean that the 1970s punk and new wave movements will be completely ignored, since the discussion surrounding the punk and new wave bands impacts the discussion surrounding Sonic Youth, but simply that these bands will not be treated as an independent point in the avant rock narrative.

Historical accounts of Sonic Youth situate the band within the no wave movement of the late 1970s/early 1980s. Indeed, Rolling Stone journalist Michael Azerrad credits Sonic Youth as the band that picked up where no wave left off, carrying on the ideology when bitter rivalry brought no wave itself to a close.¹⁴⁹ No wave was also tied up in the new wave and punk movements. According to Bernard Gendron, the terms (new wave, punk) were coined when antagonism developed between New York bands that had originally all played at the same Bowery club, CBGB’s.¹⁵⁰ No wave therefore saw itself

¹⁴⁹ Azerrad, 231.
¹⁵⁰ Gendron, 227, 273.
as a blend of the new wave/punk rivalry.\textsuperscript{151} However, new wave, punk, and no wave were rather messily entangled, often inseparable, movements and styles (Talking Heads, the Ramones, and Sonic Youth were representative of each movement, respectively). Part of the reason for this confusion is the similarity of discourse characterizing all three movements. Whether a band claimed that it merged high art and low art, that it rejected high art all together, or that it combined “art” with “cool,” the discourse in every case reinforced the high art/low art binary.

This binary continually crops up as a basic presupposition guiding evaluation of 1970s New York rock music, but is seldom questioned. Even Gendron does little to probe the persistent discourse as discourse. Instead, he studies eras or bands that appear to demonstrate “avant garde” and “popular music” interactions without questioning very deeply how these interactions are construed, by biographers or reviewers. Thus, though this thesis follows in Gendron’s footsteps to an extent, relying heavily on his historical narrative of 1970s New York, the analytical tack will be different. I will not focus on the interactions so much, but demonstrate how the interactions fuel a certain way of describing and reinforcing a narrative of the high art/low art binary. In addition, the biographical material by Foege and Michael Azerrad provides some of the most extensive coverage of the band and will be used accordingly to demonstrate persistent ways of presenting Sonic Youth.

Certainly, the high art/low art binary is used to define the environment tied to Sonic Youth. Represented by such bands as the Ramones, Talking Heads, and Blondie

\textsuperscript{151} Gendron, 282.
(though only in its earliest days), the developing new wave scene was hailed as the melting pot of the pop and avant-garde worlds:

Partisans of the new wave repeatedly promoted it as the rock music movement that most successfully operated on the tense boundaries between pop and avant-garde without doing injustice to either.\(^{152}\)

New wave rock musicians intermingled with the artists, filmmakers, and performance artists of the New York “artist colony” in the East Village. Mutual support developed as rock musicians attended art shows and artists frequented the clubs where rock musicians performed.\(^{153}\) To their fans, then, these bands represented not only a collaborative interaction between musicians from different genres, but a blending of musical elements that these fans associated with those respective genres (rock and the avant garde).

However, differing ideologies regarding how much the avant garde should interact with rock music began to split the new wave into opposing camps: the new wavers mingled more and more with the avant garde artists while the proponents of a punk aesthetic valued a certain lowbrow toughness.\(^{154}\) Though arguably coming out of the same New York underground scene, by the late 1970s the new wave and punk movements were aligned (in the minds of their fans) with differing values that could be pitted against each other:

[T]he Talking Heads and the Ramones became perfect foils for each other, each defined by the public in opposition to the other, the highbrows from art school versus the lowbrow dropouts from Queens, the quintessential

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\(^{152}\) Gendron, 227.
\(^{153}\) Ibid., 228.
\(^{154}\) Ibid.
new wavers versus the paradigmatic punks. Many who supported one of the groups tended to show contempt for the other.\textsuperscript{155}

The fanzines also did their share in setting up the polarity between the new wave and punk: "\textit{Punk} magazine set ‘punk’ in motion, and the New York Rocker did more than any other publication to present ‘new wave’ as the proper alternative to ‘punk.’"\textsuperscript{156} Thus, what these bands stood for (and subsequently the way that fans perceived the bands) included a stance \textit{against} particular values that were represented by the other side. The movements are in part defined in the negative, by what they are \textit{not} or do \textit{not} represent. One might call this a reverse genealogy.\textsuperscript{157}

The rifts between punk and new wave could be represented geographically: the punk rockers frequented the East Village while the bohemian “art fags” (as the punk rockers called the new wave elites) tended to belong to the SoHo district.\textsuperscript{158} The rivalry was strong enough that getting in with one district could negate a musician’s abilities to make it with the other district. Glenn Branca from the avant garde theatre world discovered this antagonism when he tried to get his band Theoretical Girls started.\textsuperscript{159}

The “precursor” bands that kick-started the no wave appeared first in May 1978 at Artists Space, “a not-for-profit alternative SoHo gallery.”\textsuperscript{160} One of these bands was the Theoretical Girls, led by Glenn Blanca. (Later Sonic Youth member Lee Renaldo would

\textsuperscript{155} Gendron, 256. \\
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 262. \\
\textsuperscript{157} New York punk is read in a slightly different way than English punk, which is read along class-based lines. \\
\textsuperscript{158} Alec Foege, \textit{Confusion Is Next: The Sonic Youth Story}, (St. Martin's Griffin, 1994), 30-31. \\
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 30. \\
\textsuperscript{160} Gendron, 277.
get his start performing with Blanca’s ensemble.) The geographic placement of these bands (i.e., their appearance in performance venues associated with the avant garde) immediately attached a theoretical ethos to these bands: because of their physical presence within the avant garde camp, these rock bands were understood to be philosophically aligned with the avant garde as well.\[161\]

Nevertheless, the configuring of no wave as a hybrid (and not just the product of avant garde artists) was still a part of the way these bands were discussed: “There was occasionally a fusion aspect to no wave, a tendency not only to stretch punk to its extremes, but to combine it with previously foreign avant garde traditions.”\[162\] Thus, punk and new wave find some sort of resolution in the no wave project.

But even if no wave was seen as an attempt to merge avant garde and rock music again, the discourse erects no wave as a hybrid through some rather elaborate narrative construction. Though new wave, punk, and no wave were all operating within New York roughly around the same time (and thus difficult to organize into some linear chronology), the movements can still be configured to represent differing sides in the high art/low art binary. The narrative around no wave construes punk as pure or “basic rock,” pushing punk into the low art field and alternatively, new wave into the high art field.\[163\] In order to establish the differences between new wave, no wave, and punk, a genealogy emerges that both relates and distinguishes the movements. New wave could be painted as the “intellectual” stuff. Punk was the “raw” or “pure” rock. No wave, if

\[161\] Gendron, 279.
\[162\] Ibid., 282.
\[163\] Ibid., 279.
structured as the synthesis between new wave and punk, would then have the
“advantage” of being the bridge-builder, the genre-crosser.

The fact that the bands produced musics that sounded rather distinct from each
other strengthens perceptions that the bands represented opposing ideals. These opposing
ideals could later be merged as a hybrid. The Ramones wrote very fast, guitar-driven
songs with the strong backbeat associated with rock n roll. They wrote “simple” songs
and played them fast, famous for an ability to knock out a full concert set in no time at
all.\footnote{Joe S. Harrington, \textit{Sonic Cool: The Life and Death of Rock n Roll}, (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2002), 330.} Also influencing the Ramones were the developing metal bands, particularly Black
Sabbath.\footnote{Ibid., 330.} The Talking Heads, on the other hand, are timbrally much lighter, because the
 guitars were paired with keyboards. The lyrics tended to incorporate more “highbrow”
elements, such as French phrases in the song “Psycho Killer.”\footnote{Talking Heads, “Psycho Killer,” September 16, 1977 (October 25, 1990), \textit{Talking Heads: 77}, Warner Brothers B000002KNU.}

However, both of the bands used instruments associated with rock: it is not as if
the Ramones are more “rock” sounding than the Talking Heads. Indeed, other
biographers have recognized fundamental similarities between the bands, despite surface
differences:

[In 1975], Talking Heads soon became the Ramones’ regular co-
headliners at CBGBs. If this pairing seems incongruous—the Ramones’
black leather buzzsaw brevity the very antithesis of Talking Heads’ ascetic
appearance and funky quirkiness—they believed they were mining similar
Rather, the opposition construed between these bands (who were both originally associated with new wave and then split into differing camps) creates a crisis that “no wave” can conveniently attempt to solve. The way that punk music is configured further reinforces the high art/low art merger that Sonic Youth represents. Punk, when standing in for “pure rock,” ensures that the hybrid lineage of Sonic Youth is in fact a hybrid.

To illustrate further how punk is pushed into the low art half of the high art/low art binary, one has to look at how punk itself is presented. Some interesting contradictions surrounding punk emerge. Punk is described alternatively as an intellectual ideology and as the valorization of the homemade. On the one hand, punk can be read as very basic, in which skill does not matter as much as originality: “Kim [Gordon of Sonic Youth] to this day will not admit herself a musician; but punk taught her that that was just fine as long as your ideas were fresh.” The Do-It-Yourself attitude combined with a preference for simplicity suggested that production was available to anyone with a guitar, and that intellectual know-how was unnecessary, even detrimental. Yet to self-consciously pursue a “stripped down” or “primitive” kind of music does involve an intellectual, theorizing process. The new wave described punk rockers as posers, suggesting that punk’s claims to unmediated, unconstructed simplicity were really mediated and constructed.

Configuring punk as “basic” draws on the conceptual categories of the high art/low art binary and reinforces these categories. By describing punk as “an almost

169 Foege, 8.
170 Gendron, 272.
intellectual fascination with primitivism," journalist Joe Harrington acknowledges the tensions marking claims to simplicity. However, stressing the "natural" or "basic" side of punk masks the high art/low art discourse in the punk discussion, enabling punk to serve as a "pure" or "raw" element to be used in future binary combinations.

The pitting of punk against the artier new wave further emphasizes punk's "purity" as a "raw element" of "rock" while masking other influences and associations that might undermine that "purity." The relation between punk and new wave is drawn differently depending on who is telling the story. For example, articles on the Talking Heads appeared in Punk magazine in the mid-seventies, indicating that this new wave band was considered punk at the time. On the other hand, in crafting a history for Sonic Youth, Azerrad relates punk to new wave in terms of a downward progression: "the music industry had chewed up punk and spit it out as 'new wave.'" Interestingly enough, an interview with Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth appears in Punk Planet Magazine's history of punk under the section entitled "Partners in Crime: Punk's Trailblazers." Apparently there are multiple narratives claiming a little bit of Sonic Youth in their ancestry. The differences between the Talking Heads and the Ramones, new wave and punk, need be stressed only when distinguishing the movements becomes

171 Harrington, 312.
173 Azerrad, 231.
important in the narrative-creating process: the configuration of punk as “pure rock” and new wave as “avant garde” sets up no wave as a hybrid along high art/low art lines.

If no wave can be established as a hybrid, then Sonic Youth can also be cast as a hybrid. Since Sonic Youth stands as an “indie archetype,” establishing the band’s pedigree ensures the entire genre’s position as a high art/low art merger. But within the narrative, no wave itself is important only in so far as the movement allows Sonic Youth to emerge. According to Azerrad’s narrative, no wave disintegrated because of bickering and controversy over ownership: when in 1978 Brian Eno recorded only four of the bands (Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, DNA, Mars, and the Contortions) claiming to belong to the movement, the marginalized bands were not happy. But painting the no wave movement as an era of fractured, unrealized potential opens the door for Sonic Youth to fulfill what the no wave had only promised.

With this sort of preparation, then, Sonic Youth “arrives” as a culmination point in the narrative:

From the start, Sonic Youth understood and appreciated No Wave’s mission. Punk was revolutionary and exciting, but its scope was too narrow. The establishment New York art world was too elitist. Author Simon Reynolds also sees Sonic Youth as the fulfillment of a movement that was already dead: “the more arty types such as Sonic Youth and Swans moved to resurrect No

175 Azerrad, 233.
176 Ibid., 231.
177 Foege, 5.
Wave.”\textsuperscript{178} In Sonic Youth, all the (perceived) fragmentation can once again be unified into a coherent whole. Genealogically, Sonic Youth acts as narrative glue, necessary in order for all the bits and pieces of the preceding movements to fit into place. Like a Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis, the narrative painted is not one of simple progression, but rather one of high and low points, of crisis and resolution. Though previous bands in the 1970s may have attempted the avant garde/rock music merger and failed because of in-house disputes, Sonic Youth “rescues” the genre and sets it back on the right track.

Though Sonic Youth never achieved commercial success on a large-scale, they nevertheless achieved more commercial success than the avant garde, at least in the public mind. A lengthy discussion within an indie rock internet forum demonstrates that fans of Sonic Youth champion the bands’ ability to take “inaccessible” stuff and make it “accessible.” One forum participant succinctly tied together the perceived artiness of the band to Sonic Youth’s perceived commercial success, once again reinforcing the high art/low art binary that defines the avant rock genre:

Sonic Youth are great, in my opinion, as they made no-wave that loads of people wanted to listen to, not just some self obsessed snooty arty bohemian types in New York like the rest of the no-wave crowd.\textsuperscript{179}

Thus, Sonic Youth’s situation in New York as both a part of and yet distant from the New York avant garde still influences the discussion more than twenty years after the no wave supposedly fizzled out.

As illustrated by the forum user’s description of Sonic Youth, maintaining the “low art” or “popular” side of the binary is as important as establishing the band’s “high art” or artistic credentials. Sonic Youth works as a representative of the avant rock hybrid only if it is so construed as a proper hybrid. Since popularity can in some part be measured by commercial success, Sonic Youth’s “mainstream” achievement is important to establish. However, Sonic Youth’s record sales are marginal compared to the mainstream: as one journalist notes, “Even with the promotion and support of a major label like DGC, Sonic Youth record sales have barely cracked the six-figure ceiling.”

How does Sonic Youth bolster its seemingly slight connection to the commercial profit associated with popular success?

Here is an example of how genealogy, or a particular way of arranging a musical family tree, can accomplish mutual benefit for the bands involved. Sonic Youth is known for its “prescient” skill in finding and promoting other bands that do make the mainstream:

[T]hey were so cool that their chief function was as a magnet band, an act that would serve mostly to attract other, more successful bands. This move paid off beyond anyone’s wildest dreams when Sonic Youth brought a hot young band called Nirvana to Geffen/DGC Records.

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181 Azerrad, 233.
Through this sort of connection, Sonic Youth both distances itself from the commercialism so obnoxious to indie/alternative credibility and yet maintains just enough of a relation with the “mainstream” to preserve its claims to popularity. By tying Sonic Youth to Nirvana, an exchange takes place: Nirvana receives some of the high art/low art discourse that gives avant rock its credibility (in the minds of its proponents) and Sonic Youth receives the high art/low art discourse back in heightened relief, as read through the filter of Nirvana’s success. In other words, the commercial achievements enjoyed by Nirvana give Sonic Youth more credibility as a truly popular experimental band, and the “parentage” of Sonic Youth gives Nirvana credibility as an alternative popular band. The genealogy works to mutually establish both bands as significant figures in the narrative, each band supplying what the other (may have) lacked. But where as Nirvana gains enough of a following to break away from the avant rock category and figure in the grunge narrative, Sonic Youth stays aligned with avant rock.

With a context in the avant garde and rock music fields established by the narrative, Sonic Youth provides a basis for fans and biographers to view it as an avant rock hybrid. Like the Velvet Underground, Sonic Youth is surrounded by historical details that reinforce this interpretation. The members of the band associated with avant garde circles, both before the band’s formation and after. The band owns a label (SYR) specifically devoted to releasing more “avant garde” kinds of compositions. The longevity of the band (Sonic Youth is still releasing albums and touring as of 2006) further contributes to its characterization as a “popular” experimental band. Just as the history feeds and strengthens the genealogy in the case of the Velvet Underground
narrative, the history feeds and strengthens the discourse surrounding Sonic Youth. Thus, examining the historical background and the musical sounds that are perceived to support the avant rock hybrid forms the next portion of the chapter.

Sonic Youth’s core members are Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo on the guitars, Kim Gordon on bass and vocals, and Steve Shelley on the drums. The musical backgrounds of these musicians can also be aligned with differing high art/low art fields. Indeed, as will be demonstrated later, the differing backgrounds of the band members are overtly referenced and juxtaposed in describing the hybridity of Sonic Youth.

Back in the late 1970s, Thurston Moore was an “artistic kid,” who decided to move to New York rather than finish college. He joined a band called the Coachman.\(^{182}\) Kim Gordon was a gallery curator with a degree in art, but interested in doing music.\(^{183}\) Together the two formed their own group, finally deciding to call themselves the Arcadians in late 1980.\(^{184}\) Moore tried to join Glenn Branca’s guitar ensemble, but was rejected as too “wild.”\(^{185}\) However, former art student Lee Ranaldo played in the Branca ensemble and was a friend of Moore’s. The Arcadians and Branca’s ensemble both played the Noise Festival in June 1981. This nine-day event took place in New York’s White Columns gallery, an art venue where Moore curated. During the festival, Moore and Gordon asked Ranaldo to join their group. Though Ranaldo attempted to add some drums to the band’s sound, the group eventually enlisted drummer Richard Edson (the

\(^{182}\) Azerrad, 233.
\(^{183}\) Ibid., 234.
\(^{184}\) Ibid., 235.
\(^{185}\) Foege, 64.
band would go through several drummers before ending up with Steve Shelley). Moore chose a new name for the band, recalling MC5 guitarist Fred “Sonic” Smith’s nickname and the popularity of reggae groups with the term “youth” in their title. According to Kim Gordon, the name Sonic Youth gave the band the direction it wanted and so it stuck. Thus, the band’s membership was set: Kim Gordon played the bass and provided the main vocals. Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo played guitars. After the band’s second studio album Bad Moon Rising (1985), Steve Shelley played the drums.

Because of their varying musical/educational backgrounds, Michael Azerrad portrays Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore as opposing forces: “A generation earlier Gordon might have been a cool beatnik hipster; Moore, on the other hand, boiled over with punk rock energy.” Author Charles Neal also stresses Sonic Youth’s hybridity in his account of eighties underground bands: “Sonic Youth mesh structure with experimentalism, while refusing to be classified in either area alone.”

More dichotomies are highlighted when sources for the band are traced. Thurston Moore claimed Sonic Youth was an “art-schooly” band fascinated by hardcore (especially DC punk bands such as Minor Threat), and Azerrad himself acknowledges the effect hardcore had on Sonic Youth: “Hardcore’s organizational energy was just as important as its musical energy—it showed how Sonic Youth could thrive outside the

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186 Azerrad, 235-236, 258.
187 Foege, 67.
188 Azerrad, 257-258.
189 Ibid., 235.
usual New York art world system of grants and patronage.”  

Moore jammed with DJs from New York’s hardcore shows, indicating that his interest was more than just passing. Prior to joining Sonic Youth, drummer Steve Shelley had also played in a hardcore band called the Crucifuck. Shelley’s ties to hardcore are singled out as an important contribution to the band: “Shelley represented a direct link to hardcore.”

Both a band member (Thurston Moore) and the biographer therefore establish the high art/low art binary once again, this time with hardcore standing in for the “low art” field.

The personal interactions between Sonic Youth and artists/composers associated with the avant garde also contribute to the band’s characterization as an avant garde/rock hybrid. Before Sonic Youth formed, Lee Renaldo played in Glenn Branca’s post-Theoretical Girls guitar ensemble. Glenn Branca hailed from the avant garde theatre, but was interested in combining music and performance art. Branca’s experiments with alternative guitar tunings would later define Sonic Youth. One of the main experimental innovations attributed to Sonic Youth is the degree to which they employed these alternative tunings:

For all the influence Sonic Youth has had on the sounds of the younger, innovation-oriented guitar bands, few of their progeny have dared to explore the world of alternative tunings as extensively as Sonic Youth.

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192 Foege, 87.
193 Azerrad, 258.
194 Foege, 31.
195 Ibid., 188.
Public reception tied these alternative tunings so strongly to avant garde influences that Thurston Moore and Lee Renaldo had to distance themselves from their avant garde associations in order to claim artistic and creative ownership of the techniques:

Both Moore and Renaldo had been privy to the ways in which Glenn Blanca used oddly tuned guitars to drastically alter the tonal palette. Blanca had gone so far as to rig guitars with drastically different string gauges and assigning them chorus parts—i.e., soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. While radically different from the approach taken by virtually any conventional rock band, alternate tunings are a technique that Sonic Youth has understandably been reluctant to ascribe solely to Branca’s work.¹⁹⁶

The element of collaboration can therefore influence interpretation in multiple ways: not only can collaboration link a rock band to avant garde influences, but it can make a narrative break from those influences rather difficult. In other words, sources or origins, even if part of a constructed narrative, cannot be reconstructed very easily: once established, the narrative is difficult to overturn, even if interests such as claims to artistic creativity would make such a reversal desirable.

Not only was Sonic Youth being labeled an avant garde/rock hybrid, but even the avant garde artists associated with them had an interest in combining the fields (though, as noted in the introduction, a combination does not blend or blur but rather reinforces the distinct nature of the original fields). Glenn Branca’s compositions were deliberate attempts to blend rock and avant garde aesthetics:

I wrote a piece called Dissonance, which was meant to be a prototypical idea about rock music as dissonant. And I wrote a piece called Lesson No.

¹⁹⁶ Foege, 94.
However, the fact that Glenn Branca is described as an avant garde performance artist suggests that he remained associated with the avant garde world rather than “transforming” into a rock/avant garde hybrid.

Yet Glenn Branca’s guitar ensemble can be configured as more of a hybrid than compositions such as Philip Glass’ symphonies based on David Bowie’s *Low* and *Heroes* albums. Instead of drawing elements of pop culture into the “high art” venue, avant garde artists were finding a receptive audience by leaving the “high art” venues and bringing their experimental performance acts to rock clubs. The noise, dissonance, and “chaos” of the rock clubs fit the experimental avant garde musicians who wanted to push the boundaries of sound. The venue itself then lends an interpretive lens of hybridity. Just as Duke Ellington appearing at Carnegie Hall appeared to turn jazz into a “symphonic” form so performing in a rock club makes the avant garde appear less academic. In addition, the Philip Glass compositions don’t project the same element of collaboration that grounds the avant rock hybrid (at least for the bands that figure as origins or otherwise significant in the narrative).

This aspect of collaboration is what Gendron sees as the unique feature of the new wave and subsequent no wave movements set within New York’s own cultural climate.

Whereas the avant garde had interacted with popular music fields before, Gendron claims

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198 Gendron, 307
199 Ibid., 131.
that the exchange had been dominated by the avant garde. The anti-art of the Duchamps and Cages had stayed largely within the high art venues and never became popularly dispersed.\footnote{Gendron, 318-319.} He notes that the shift in power relations between the avant garde and popular musics might be tied to the growing avowal of the previously disavowed: to make money from your art was acceptable. Or rather sales affirmed rather than discredited one’s artistic status.\footnote{Ibid., 309.} But in the bands that operated in 1970s/1980s New York, Gendron (and other biographers) see this as a \textit{true} hybridity: the geographic location enabled collaboration.

In addition to their musical relationship with Branca, the members of Sonic Youth developed a business relationship. Branca signed Sonic Youth to his label Neutral and released their debut EP \textit{Sonic Youth} and their first full-length album \textit{Confusion Is Sex}.\footnote{Foege, 72.} However, lack of funds meant Sonic Youth had to seek another label after Branca gave them their start.\footnote{Ibid., 87.} Finally, in May 1990, they signed with the Geffen label.\footnote{Ibid., 193.} Interestingly enough, the Geffen label was still independent at the time Sonic Youth signed their contract, but was bought by MCA fairly soon afterwards.\footnote{Ibid., 199.} Thus, in the discussion surrounding Sonic Youth, the move to Geffen is presented as a “leap” to a major label company.

Indeed, biographers also locate Sonic Youth’s hybridity in the band’s ability to combine “artistic cred” with a move to a major label:
Sonic Youth’s avant-garde musicality and hand-to-business savvy have made them the poster children for eccentric musicians everywhere, creating music without any set precedents while breaking through the taboos associated with working for a major label.\textsuperscript{206}

In \textit{Punk Planet} Magazine’s history of punk (compiled as a collection of interviews with editorial introductions), Sonic Youth is singled out as the first underground band to sign with a major label.\textsuperscript{207} Thus, whether Sonic Youth’s hybridity is located in the musical sounds or in the band’s means of production and distribution, the band is continually figured as a meeting point between “high” and “low” art fields.

What makes Sonic Youth’s relationship with both independent and major labels interesting is that Sonic Youth’s early years are set against the parallel development of another binary, the major label versus the independent label. During the early eighties, the network of independent labels exerting a marketable alternative to major label companies was fairly new.\textsuperscript{208} Sonic Youth can be positioned, then, as a bridge not only between high art/low art relations, but also between mainstream/independent label relations. The band thus enjoys a position in a double narrative that in the end both reinforce hybridity.

The avant garde/rock hybridity motif is carried over into interpretations of the band’s music. Because of the band’s longevity, Sonic Youth’s output is much larger than the Velvet Underground’s. They have released fifteen studio albums, from their first \textit{Confusion Is Sex} (1983) to their most recent \textit{Rather Ripped} (2006). They have also

\textsuperscript{207} Sinker, 49.
\textsuperscript{208} Foege, 72.
produced six albums on their SYR label. According to biographer Alec Foege, though

*Confusion Is Sex* was not well-received at the time of its release, it nevertheless marked a turning point in rock history. He quotes musician Steve Albini’s assessment of the album’s significance:

> There had been people who played rock music in many permutations and people that played sort of head-case music that did not really rock...Sonic Youth were one of a few bands that sort of staked out a territory within head-case music that would, in fact, rock.\(^{209}\)

Several features on *Confusion Is Sex* demonstrate similarities to avant garde techniques. The rhythms are more ambient, divisible mechanically by seconds on a clock rather than by humanly achievable beats. For example, “Freezer Burn/I Want to Be Your Dog” starts with a humming electric guitar. Recorded in a walk-in freezer in order to enhance the low-end bass tone, the guitar continues to hover, slowly growing in intensity.\(^{210}\) Other pitches fade in and out for approximately one and a half minutes. Then the track abruptly switches to a live cover version of the Stooges’ “I Wanna Be Your Dog.” The contrast is striking: the rhythm is a very pronounced 4/4 beat in guitars and drums, with a two-bar repeating harmonic sequence, overlaid with screaming, somewhat improvisatory, vocals. The bass guitars maintain the rhythmic drive, while distorted solos are eked out of the lead guitars. The fact that the track has a slash between two different

\(^{209}\) Steve Albini, quoted in *Confusion Is Next: The Sonic Youth Story*, by Alec Foege, (St. Martin's Griffin, 1994), 89

\(^{210}\) Foege, 88.
titles suggests it was spliced together from two rather disparate recordings, once again contributing to the hybrid image of the band. \(^{211}\)

“Shaking Hell” is episodic, beginning with a drum and guitar riff that repeats for about fifty seconds, the monotony occasionally broken by the increasingly intensifying melodic motive in the lead guitar. The suddenly increased rhythmic subdivision accelerates the pace forward and then just as abruptly the pace breaks down: the “trill” remains in the guitars but the drums pick up an ominous short-long pattern (eighth followed by a dotted quarter). The track fades out with Kim Gordon’s vocals that imitate gasping, the sharp inhalation of breath, in time with the short-long pattern. The feedback in the guitars and the repetitive minimalism are configured as distinctly avant garde elements. \(^{212}\) The association is not because these elements are to be found solely within the avant garde “field,” but rather because the music sounds similar enough to “avant garde” music for an audience to make the associations. The personal and musical relations the band members had with musicians associated with the avant garde further strengthens these interpretations.

Similar to the case of the Velvet Underground, part of the noise on the album is the result of poor recording technology. The band accidentally spilled Coke on master tapes, recorded over takes that they wanted to keep and ended up having to dub off of cassettes (which contained the only remaining copy of the take they wanted), and had to uncrumple and piece together with scotch tape some cassettes that had become tangled in


the recording machine, simply because they had no time to run any more takes. But again whether or not the lo-fi or distorted quality is due to accident or intention, the variance from “normal” slick production makes Sonic Youth seem experimental.

In a move that further strengthens Sonic Youth’s association with the avant garde, their SYR label specifically focuses on compositions of “freely improvised electronic music.” SYR4: Goodbye 20th Century is, in fact, a double disc set of Sonic Youth covering such avant garde musicians as John Cage, Steve Reich, Christian Wolff, and Yoko Ono. When listening to the SYR albums (six in all), one is struck by the ambient intellectualism: it is hard to imagine these songs associated with a popular music canon. The only characteristics that might suggest popular music are the instruments: the electric guitars and drums.

Even the fact that Sonic Youth recorded these pieces with avant garde musicians, composers, and filmmakers (Jim O’Rourke, Christian Wolff, Takehisa Kosugi) signals that the albums will be more squarely aligned within the avant garde tradition. The music is for the most part aleatoric and ambient: there is no discernable beat, no melody, no harmonic foundation. Instead, the sounds simply pass by as washes of sonic frequency. Here the avant garde elements are not noticeably “balanced” by features typically associated with rock music, such as lyrics or a backbeat. In the SYR albums, Sonic Youth “demonstrates” that the band can compose or perform entirely within the avant garde sphere, and not simply take elements from that sphere.

213 Foege, 88.
The SYR projects (comprising six albums) marks a development of the sort of slow, methodical sound exploration that tracks such as “Freezer Burn” demonstrated. In fact, the rock elements are removed almost entirely, and the band unapologetically provides their tracks with “pretentious”-sounding names such as “Heady Jam #1” (SYR6: *Koncertas Stan Brakhage Prisiminimui*), a lengthy composition that at over twenty-four minutes parallels a Mahler symphony movement.\(^{215}\) Rather than marking a departure from their main corpus, the SYR projects might be read as an avenue to produce and market a “purely” avant garde output.

But if Sonic Youth has some albums that are coded “avant garde,” the band also has a few coded “accessible rock.” The liner notes for *Daydream Nation* (1988) describe the album as the point when Sonic Youth moved beyond its “past as an avant-garde New York Noise band [and] into the role as pop culturalists exhibited in all their subsequent work.”\(^{216}\) *Pitchfork*, an online music magazine specializing in but not limited to alternative rock, rates *Daydream Nation* the number one album of the 1980s because the album contained more rock/pop features than the rest of the Sonic Youth repertoire:

> Never was the elusive Sonic Youth balance of noisecraft/songcraft kept so gloriously intact—despite containing few songs under five minutes, this is still the most accessible album they ever made (including even that brief period when they were trying to be accessible).\(^{217}\)

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\(^{215}\) Sonic Youth, “Heady Jam #1,” April 2002 (December 6, 2005), *SYR6: Koncertas Stan Brakhage Prisiminimui*, Sonic Youth/SYR B000BPK2DY.


Rolling Stone, in its review of Rather Ripped, references Daydream Nation, establishing the latter album as the standard for all subsequent albums:

Once upon a time, Sonic Youth summed up the loftiest aspirations of Eighties indie rock with Daydream Nation, the 1988 headphone opus where they made fun of art-rock excess and reveled in it at the same time.218

Yet despite its “pop” status, significant nods to the “high art” establishment remain in Daydream Nation. The album cover uses two candle paintings by German painter Gerard Richter.219 Thus, the two fields, “high art” and “low art,” are still simultaneously evoked.

Indeed, the song “Providence” displays some tape manipulation techniques similar to Steve Reich’s own experiments in this medium. Over a piano playing in the background, Thurston Moore sets a recording of a friend calling from Providence, Rhode Island. The quality is rough: static threatens to override the sound of the piano, and the telephone voice echoes. Sounds resembling an airplane and machines whirring fade in and out.220 Indeed, this track resembles a collection of arranged “noises” or “sounds” more than it resembles a song. Even the piano is included as atmospheric color rather

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than as an instrument per se. The track is a short two and a half minutes and leads into the melodic and rhythmic “Candle.” The contrast is striking.\textsuperscript{221}

Indeed, the most popular song on the album, according to author Stephen Hamelman, is “Total Trash.”\textsuperscript{222} But this track is a noisy jam, full of feedback and distortion, set over a driving rhythm section, and bookended by a melodic chorus. Though certainly the album is hailed as one of Sonic Youth’s most “accessible” productions, what can be perceived as an avant garde element persists and keeps the band operating as a hybrid.

Thus, the figuring of Sonic Youth as an avant garde/rock hybrid perpetuates the high art/low art binary that guides interpretations of the Velvets and the 1970s/early 1980s New York punk, new wave, and no wave movements. This hybridity attaches to Sonic Youth because of the band’s interaction and collaboration with both avant garde artists and a mainstream label. The sounds they produce could potentially be more strongly associated with avant garde techniques than with rock (certainly this strong avant garde element is found in the SYR albums). Yet the associations with the avant garde are not entirely dominant: the band is said to make avant garde music similar enough to rock so as to be “enjoyable” and “accessible.”

The contemporary avant rock scene still contains numerous bands based out of New York, but the genre is growing past one specific geographic location. These bands no longer rely on specific avant garde/rock musician collaborations to merit the hybrid

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.
label. Rather, only the understanding of experimentalism and intellectualism, of innovation and a creativity that resembles past and current avant garde aesthetics is needed for an association with the avant garde. Avant rock bands hail from all over the world in the contemporary scene. Discussion worries more about particular classifications of these bands within subgenres of avant rock, but less about establishing the hybrid nature of the overarching genre or linking the bands to a particular geographic “source.”

Once an origin and representative figures have been established within the narrative, room opens up for widening interpretations and classifications: once the genre is fixed or defined, it can be broadened to include similar-sounding bands that no longer carry the same New York avant garde geographic and collaborative associations. The hybridity that defines the avant rock category is symbolized by the Velvet Underground (as “origin”) and Sonic Youth (as “leader-in-crisis,” which can also be refigured as the “rebirth of an origin”). The narrative is set to move onwards.
Chapter Four: Current Trends

Bypassing the nineties and other key figures in the avant rock narrative such as Yo La Tengo and Pavement, I turn now to millennium New York bands. Though certainly viewed as members of avant rock, the discussion around these bands no longer depends as heavily on avant garde/rock music collaborations in order to fix the bands’ place in the narrative. Though the bands examined all operate out of New York and certainly produce sounds that are coded “experimental” and “intellectual,” no longer are associations drawn between these band members and particular members of the New York avant garde art world. Thus, the historical connections to the avant garde serve to ground the avant rock narrative, but once established with a pedigree, the genre is free to expand its scope, opening up space for innovation (or bands that do not fit the “original” models).

The examination of various alternative rock bands in the New York scene brings this thesis to look at the ways in which these bands are configured within the genre of avant rock, the connections that are made by reviewers and internet discussion forum participants between the avant rock genre (and various subcategories such as noise rock) and avant garde/experimental electronic music, and the connections between current bands and former bands in the avant rock narrative. Though New York as a music scene or point-of-origin will arise, the city (as the point of avant garde/rock musician interaction) no longer figures as the only hub of avant rock activity.

Indeed, the style/movement developed by avant garde/rock musician collaboration appears to have migrated away from the immediate vicinity of New York,
and the crossovers in sound and aesthetic ideologies can no longer be attributed so heavily to geographic proximity of the avant garde and rock musicians and the constant interaction between the two spheres (if indeed such an argument could be made: the interaction between avant garde composers/artists and rock musicians serves best as a description of what the Velvet Underground, the 1970s punk/new wave scene, and Sonic Youth were doing rather than as an origin of a particular sound or technique). New York is still a major hub for indie/alternative rock labels, fostering communities of musicians (the local tour books still list Greenwich Village and SoHo as the art districts). Yet no longer is New York the only place to find musicians that fit into the “avant rock” category. Also, several bands that currently operate out of New York got their start somewhere else and later moved to New York, further blurring particular geographic places as origins per se. Nevertheless, the concept of a certain kind of sound associated with New York and the avant garde still influences the way that avant rock bands are discussed. Now room exists for variation and sub-genre delineation. The thesis accordingly turns to two of these New York avant rock bands—the Fiery Furnaces and Animal Collective—and examines how each represent varying “brands” of experimental avant garde-ism. Finally, a look at garage rock’s link to avant rock through post-punk revival band the Strokes will illustrate how genres are continually in flux, forming new relationships on the family tree.

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223 Animal Collective, a noise rock band, formed in Baltimore, Maryland. An experimental, electronic group Black Dice (currently on the same label as Animal Collective) started out in Rhode Island.
All of these bands (Fiery Furnaces, Animal Collective, the Strokes) are
categorized as less “poppy” because of their experimental and usually eclectic sound,
which often relies on distortion. However, unlike the cultural meanings associated with
sound distortion in heavy metal culture, the noise factor in these particular alternative
rock bands expresses playfulness and fun rather than anger, angst, or power.224 Even if
the lyrics are occasionally dark, there is a lightness of timbre that often belies the
seriousness of the lyrics.

The first example of a playful yet esoteric New York band is the Fiery Furnaces.
The brother-sister duo Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger specialize in everything from
experiments on an old piano that resemble the prepared piano exploits of John Cage or
Henry Cowell to electronic keyboard sound effects. According to the biography provided
by VH1 (the companion or sister channel to MTV), the band specializes in “playful,
unpredictable music.”225 The music background of the Friedbergers’ family, including
their mother’s propensity for the piano and their grandmother’s work as choir director at
a Greek Orthodox church, is often referenced as an influence on their sound: the piano
and keyboard dominate much of the Fiery Furnaces’ most recent albums (Bitter Tea) and
samples of their grandmother’s narration forms the backdrop for the concept album
Rehearsing My Choir.226 The rather diverse source material for their sound, as well the

224 For a full analysis of heavy metal music and meaning, see Robert Walser, Running
with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music, (Wesleyan
University Press, 1993).
226 Ibid.
lack of hooks and regular rhythms (though these are not entirely absent), give the band its particular niche in the alternative rock world.

The band's eclecticism often presents reviewers with opportunities to draft a laundry list of assorted sounds and styles:

Amid Matt Friedberger's tapestry of burping, whistling keyboards, swirling electronica, tack piano, doo-wop waltz, experimental jazz and rock is sister Eleanor Friedberger's gorgeous voice, making for a classic if unpredictable indie pop listen.227

[In Bitter Tea,] the siblings Friedberger employ many of the same whimsical sleights-of-hand that made 2004's Blueberry Boat a critical smash: surrealist, stream-of-consciousness lyrical imagery, disjointed sonic structures that refuse to conform to verse-chorus paradigms, nifty synth effects contrasted with anachronistic upright pianos, Eleanor's clipped news-presenter delivery.228

Waiting to Know You and Police Sweater Blood Vow [tracks on Bitter Tea] are borderline pop, but more typical is Borneo, which shifts from synth-pop to plaintive folk to spoken word.229

In fact, [Bitter Tea is] one of the duo's poppier efforts, with vibrant piano melodies, spry beats and fairly hooky tunes -- relatively speaking. OK, a bunch of these songs contain swooshing synths, noodly guitar textures,


squirrely beatboxes and backward vocals and instruments -- but for the freaky Friedbergers, that hardly counts as pushing the envelope.\textsuperscript{230}

[Bitter Tea] seemed to reference a radio play; here it serves as a reminder that we inhabit the world of one band and one band only. Other interesting choices abound: squelchy Moog that references neither the instrument's classic era nor its 90s update; distorted percussion meant to be disorienting instead of forceful; a disco beat that gyrates in place with quotation marks standing in for the mirror ball.\textsuperscript{231}

These reviews (taken from across the board of public reviews, from a relatively similar time period) illustrate that the Fiery Furnaces is known distinctly for an eclecticism that is both historically referential (drawing on genres from the past in a move somewhat similar to the re-introduction of past fashion styles as Retro) and experimental. Parody and innovation, combined with a playful exploration, characterize their public image and thus set the meaning associated with their sound.

In an interview with In the Raw, Matt Friedberger projects an aura of playfulness. When asked whether he thought he should care or not care about public image (what other people think), Matt Friedberger replied: “you need to care to have the fun of not caring [what people think of you].”\textsuperscript{232} Coming across as mild-mannered and extremely laidback in the interview, Matt Friedberger also notes the difference between being a


\textsuperscript{232} Matt Friedberger, Interview with In the Raw, accessed online March 9, 2007 at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCCz51u7iZ4.
good guitar player and making good music on a guitar, a distinction that seems to safeguard him from appearing to make claims regarding virtuosic talent.\textsuperscript{233}

In a review/interview with NPR (a liberal media network that features not only “classical” musicians but also several “hip” bands), Fiery Furnaces are described again as artists who create “wildly experimental music that is as playful as it is unpredictable.”\textsuperscript{234}

Yet Matt Friedberger downplays the influence that certain genres have had on his musical style. Given the eclectic nature of his music (perceived by and reinforced by record reviewers), Matt Friedberger distances himself from pastiche or parody, nor he claims is his music simply an imitation of various genres (other than rock) simply for the sake of novelty:

\begin{quote}
I know I like to think of our music as being real genre specific. I'm always uncomfortable with people in bands, rock bands, saying 'I'm inspired by the three-penny opera,' or something like that.\textsuperscript{235}
\end{quote}

In other words, Matt appears to be countering the discourse accusing (or lauding) his music of extreme or bizarre eclecticism, arguing that everything he does still fits within rock music. He goes on to note that he finds the music in order to express the concept: in the case of \textit{Rehearsing My Choir}, the tinny piano evoked the era and social life of his grandmother (whose voice narrates much of the text on the album).\textsuperscript{236} He wants to

\textsuperscript{233} Friedberger, interview with \textit{In the Raw}.


\textsuperscript{236} Ibid.

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emphasize that the “unpredictability” is not without careful thought and planning, the eclecticism meant to evoke particular associations, to create what Matt Friedberger refers to as a “musical world.”

In an interview with Splendid, Friedberger again reinforces the image of playfulness that sounds their music and pervades the discourse. In speaking about a particular song “Don’t Dance Her Down” from the album Gallowsbird Bark, Friedberger describes the humor he meant to inspire:

It's almost actually funky, in a jokey, fanciful way. It's not supposed to be ironic--it’s supposed to be enjoyable. It's supposed to be very happy. The music is supposed to be happy and we're supposed to be happy about playing this silly sort of music. Not that playing funky is silly, but it's fun when you can't do it well enough. So it sounds a little rinky-dink, and it's meant to. We're a little self-conscious about it. I like it.

In another interview with Free Williamsburg, Friedberger again reinforces the humorous element that clings to his image (and is projected onto his music). In his response to the question “Do you collect anything?” Matt appears both literary and playful. He replies, “Books. Anything with funny words.”

But Friedberger is not the only one who constructs this persona of playfulness: his interviewers do so as well. Coke Machine Glow, an independent music webzine, described Matt as an artist who “has a clear passion for his records and the music he

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237 Friedberger, quoted in NPR Live Concert Series.
likes, but still doesn’t take it too seriously."\textsuperscript{240} Also in the same interview Matt explains why he uses so many geographic references in his song lyrics: "Good songs should always have city names. City names and place names are funny names."\textsuperscript{241}

But the construction of The Fiery Furnaces as a playful yet esoteric band is not an activity that occurs entirely within a discussion devoid of reference to the music the band produces. The sounds themselves support this construction, but the discussion reinforces and solidifies what might otherwise be more ambiguous devoid of its context within the avant rock discussion. In other words, the interaction between sound and discourse is what directs further ways of discussing the music and the band. A brief examination of the music will illustrate why the characterizations of playful esotericism are rather easy to make.\textsuperscript{242}

Though \textit{Rehearsing My Choir} (2005) is targeted as the most challenging and difficult of the albums released by the Fiery Furnaces to date (in fact receiving quite a wash of disparaging comments in the Metacritic forum discussion thread “2005 CD's Listened To But Didn't care for...or did!” [sic]), the album that illustrates the hybrid avant


\textsuperscript{242} In his discussion of metaphor in the book \textit{Metaphors We Live By}, George Lakoff notes that the closer in similarity two concepts being compared really are in our experience, then the stronger the metaphor linking those two concepts will be.
rock element more interestingly is the band’s latest *Bitter Tea* (2006).\(^{243}\) Though produced as a companion to the heady *Rehearsing My Choir*, *Bitter Tea* is nevertheless described as an easier listen.\(^ {244}\)

“In My Little Thatched Hut,” the first track on the album, sets the tone of the album: it mixes the acoustic and the electronic in a chaotically and rapidly episodic progression. Eleanor Friedberger’s vocal repetition of the lyrics is what ties the ever-changing musical landscape together. As the reviewers of *Bitter Tea* illustrated, the best way to describe such a song is with a laundry list of sound effects. The track calls on many of the elements of the track loop, explored rather extensively by Steve Reich and Terry Riley, and used in many electronic-driven bands such as Radiohead or the more poppy Postal Service. In this particular track, the layers, after building in density and intensity, cut immediately away to a stark acoustic guitar accompaniment.

“In My Little Thatched Hut” opens with a walking bass and percussion both voiced by the synthesizer. Eleanor’s voice occupies a rather narrow melodic range, the repetitive motivic fragments blending into the synthesizer background. A change or break in her vocal line usually corresponds with an abrupt change in the texture or timbre of the music: for example, her motivic melodic lines over the repetitive electronic sections are more declamatory, punctuated by short phrases while her vocal line over the acoustic


sections are more lyrical, longer in phrasing, or else drop out of the sung voice into an introspective spoken monologue. This pace increases significantly towards the very end of the track before abruptly cutting off on the third scale degree, leaving the listener hanging with one of the less stable notes related to the tonic.  

The unprepared episode changes (the “unpredictability” that the All Music biography described) could be unsettling if interpreted merely as chaotic disorder and disruption. But the lighter timbre of the synthesizers and the moments of softly intimate acoustic guitar sections suggests that antagonism or aggression are not the dominant meaning in this music. There is a delicacy to the band’s artiness (reminiscent of Talking Heads) that comes across even as the music appears to careen out of control. Register accounts for some of this delicacy: the synthesizer’s repetitive percussiveness stays in a medium to higher register, only occasionally venturing lower for reinforcement of the beat or for special effect. Elements in the song suggest other places and in turn draw in the associations connected to those places in order to reinforce the persona of “playfulness” attached to the Fiery Furnaces: the higher register keyboard suggests a music box, an object associated with a nursery or child’s bedroom or other place of play. Similarly the electronic “beeps” suggest the video game, which in turn suggests the arcade, another place of play.

Through their playful eclecticism, the Fiery Furnaces create a somewhat different strand of avant rock: instead of looking for new sounds or new ways to create sounds, Matt Friedberger pieces together old sounds from previous genres, relying on stylization

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245 Fiery Furnaces, “In My Little Thatched Hut,” April 18, 2006, Bitter Tea, Fat Possum B000EQ5Q86.
to evoke a particular backdrop for a story. In his essay “Discourse in the Novel” (found in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*), Mikhail Bakhtin describes the communicative powers of stylization. Stylization is similar to parody in that the main characteristics of a particular genre or type are sketched in broad strokes, but different in that the intent is not always to ridicule the referenced genre. Rather, stylization is an excellent shorthand for suggesting all of the particular connotations of meaning associated with a particular style or, in the case of historical stylization, a particular era. The Fiery Furnaces represent, then, an experimentalism defined by “retro-ism,” historicism, and storytelling, similar to Warhol’s use of pop icons.

Another New York band that shares the same elements of humor while projecting a much more “noisy” sound is Animal Collective. The monikers the group records under, Panda Bear, Avery Tare, Deakin, and Geologist, suggest a costume party or other role-playing event, evoking the light-heartedness of the “pretend” scenario. Their album covers range from swirling streams of color imposed over a forest scene to stylized portraits of musicians to children’s book illustrations (see Fig. 1-3)

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Fig. 1: Here Comes the Indian (2003)

Fig. 2: Sung Tongs (2004)


If reviewers found it difficult to label the music of The Fiery Furnaces, they at least had several genres to choose from. In the case of Animal Collective, reviewers talk less about the distinct referencing of different styles and more about the overall effect. And the distinction in the way these two bands are talked about is understandable even with only a brief listen to each of them. Whereas Fiery Furnaces songs are extremely short and episodic, Animal Collective tends to cohere into a single sound. With a steady rhythm and longer, recurring episodes, their music seems to transcend details and inspire the listener to absorb the music in larger chunks.

Animal Collective, too, is touted as a band that borders on the eclectic and esoteric. Certainly the editorial review on the BBC website thinks of Sung Tongs (2004) in that way:

It’s a pleasant collection of experimental ambient folk noodlings and strange noises. Occasionally, tunes drift into the menagerie, floating around in the waves of African percussion, eastern chants and Brazilian tropicalia, like a particularly indulgent David Bowie or Brian Wilson. It’s possibly a little too experimental for many tastes, but rather nice if you like your music a fair way off the wall.\footnote{250}

Another reviewer echoes this perception of esotericism but also seeks to allay fears that the music is too pretentious:

Sung Tongs is a record that you don't want your less imaginative friends to hear you listening to, lest they whisk you off to the funny farm. But unlike many less inclusive experimental works, Sung Tongs doesn't coast on any specious curiosity ticket. Sung Tongs welcomes all comers.\footnote{251}

Whereas another reviewer noted the humorous element that so much eclecticism provokes, attempting to relish with playful fun the perceived difficulties of Animal Collective’s style:

The first time I heard Feels, I laughed. I laughed the second time. I laughed the tenth time. I’m laughing right now. Feels provokes laughter because it overwhelms, generally speaking. I’d be cutting off my toes and trying to sprint if I tried teasing out the emotional resonance of the album without sounding twee, but suffice it to say that it does in fact have something to do with spinning around until you feel the tickle of nausea—positive disorientation via giddy abandon.\footnote{252}

The reviewer for *Blender Magazine* also discusses the “alternative” or “experimental” character of the bands’ persona (both as perceived in the music and as perceived in the way the members present themselves), tagging some more playful attributes onto the performers:

Their last album, Sung Tongs, made them heroes of the “weird music” scene, which includes consciously outsider auteurs Devendra Banhart and Joanna Newsom. Here, AC embrace pop a hair more than on their noisier past work but still dismantle folk, psychedelia and electronic music with an affected but affecting whimsy. What’s most frustrating about them is precisely what’s most appealing: Their refusal to write traditional songs, coupled with their giggling nature-child personas, adds an air of mystery and makes for some beautifully offbeat melodies. 253

This appeal to nature and children appears again in the *Spin* review. Instead of a merely playful persona, Animal Collective also projects quite possibly innocence. However, taken with the (claimed) uniqueness of their sound, this innocence is not entirely safe: the reviewer uses words such as “deranged.”

Lead fellows Avery Tare and Panda Bear drape moiré patterns of acoustic and electric guitars over tribal percussion, and interlace their otherworldly, a-melodic sighs with a watery embrace. And then, just when things seem most chaotic, the maelstrom snaps into focus, revealing a skewed sense of pop melody that's both familiar and alien, catchy and unsettling, something akin to make-out records for deranged forest-children. 254

Another reviewer from the *John Hopkins News-letter* described one of Animal Collective’s live performances at the Ottoman Bar in Baltimore, Maryland:

To describe Animal Collective's performance in words is a somewhat futile gesture due to the fact that their music is not meant to be conceptualized rationally. Their work subscribes to the noise-rock aim of expressing beauty through chaos by tapping a sort of music that exists in the ostensible melee of nature.\textsuperscript{255}

Thus, Animal Collective is repeatedly referred to by variants of three concepts:

1) Mental instability or irrationality ("deranged," "cracked"), 2) Nature ("forest," "primitive"), and 3) Childhood ("children"). Taken all together, the common thread through all these concepts appears to be derived from Rousseau: the glorification of the pre-civilized. In fact, another pervading theme is the non-Western or "world music" side to some of Animal Collective's tracks, garnering such descriptions as "Tarzan and Jane" and "re-scoring segments of The Lion King."\textsuperscript{256}

The association of non-Western elements (found primarily in the drumming patterns) with "primitivism" or "naturalism" privileges Western culture as the "civilized" standard. In his seminal work \textit{Orientalism}, Edward Said describes how Western cultures construct their own versions of differing (and therefore mysterious) cultures:

> It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries.\textsuperscript{257}


Likewise, Susan McClary describes how non-Western music stands in Western compositions as the exotic “Other.” Objectified, another culture can define the first culture, standing in relief as “different” or “not-us” whether or not the objectification is accurate or not. Yet the theme of the pre-civilized also evokes the “outsider” image, or the “margins” of civilization. In a wider genre often called “underground,” “alternative,” or “independent” rock, a certain distancing from the centres of culture is important. Animal Collective represents a kind of experimental rock interested, like the minimalist La Monte Young, in expansive, repetitive sound washes drawn from “world music.” Though perhaps not as radical half a decade later, this kind of music making is still interpreted as “avant garde.”

On the other hand, Animal Collective still represents something new for fans. Forum and critical review discussion surrounding Animal Collective pushes that band towards the much narrower genre of noise rock (although as will be discussed later, the noise rock label is an uneasy fit). Though the discussion surrounding this subcategory of experimental rock generates heated debate (how do fans decide which bands get “to count” as representative?), Animal Collective still tends to show up in noise rock fan forum discussions. Fiery Furnaces, on the other hand, does not tend to show up in discussions of noise rock. Quite possibly this distinction is because the experimentalism of the Fiery Furnaces strays toward the episodic stringing together of disparate genres (which nevertheless remain fairly intact, like the pieces of a mosaic strung together) rather than an experimentalism that blends all of its influences together into a single

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coherent sound (at least, coherent when compared to the Fiery Furnaces). Other reasons for Animal Collective’s presence in the noise rock discussions will be addressed later.

On the Metacritic forum “Indie Rock,” one particular thread struggles to define noise rock, making clear associations with a particular form of experimentalism by labeling the thread “Avant Garde.” The thread not only lists several bands that participants feel fit the “noise” category (spanning a bit of a spectrum from noise-with-a-melody to “straight-up noise.”) Though the thread apparently started out in a more general forum, the moderator switched the thread to the Indie Rock forum, reasoning that noise fit more appropriately in that category: “I’m going to switch this to ‘indie’ because I’m (pretty) sure there aren’t any noise artists in pop, country, etc.”259 The forum moderator’s statement went unchallenged and the discussion continued within the Indie Rock forum (in which location the thread now resides). In the minds of participants in the forum discussion, noise was associated with a certain kind of genre (rock) and accordingly labeled avant garde. Though debate might arise over which bands fit the category and how much leeway to give in describing exactly what counts as noise (no melody vs. some melody), the broad brush strokes of the avant garde or noise rock appear to provoke little if any disagreement.

One of the participants deliberately attempts to tie the noise rock genre under discussion to the history of avant garde music in technology, attributing some artistic credibility to the genre:

I definitely think that noise is a legitimate artform [sic]. There have been avant-garde/experimental artists as far back as there has been recorded music. There is a really great compilation series on the Sub Rosa label called An Anthology of Noise and Electronic Recordings. There are four volumes of this thing, some of the recordings dating back to the 1930's even. You'd be very surprised at what was capable of being produced in the interest of science and recording technology and how much of it is similar to some of the artists I mentioned in the other post.²⁶⁰

The anthology to which this user refers is a four-volume set that contains a historical overview of electronic music ranging from Russolo (of the Italian Futurists' school) to tracks by Sonic Youth and DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid. The connection, therefore, between avant garde experimental ("noise") composers and experimental rock musicians (or in the case of DJ Spooky, hip hop artists who have collaborated with indie rock artists including Thurston Moore among others) is one that is being made, both by listeners (in the forum discussion) and producers (the label that released the anthology).

Connections between this avant or noise rock are made with the New York scene, too, as well as with the "hipster" subculture associated with urban centres. Another user titled Sicnarf expressed appreciation for noise rock bands that still resembled more mainstream versions of rock. Sicnarf responds to the accusation that noise rock is "hipster pretension" with the following comment:

I've been quite impressed by some artists in the more varied middle ground. Animal Collective has made some incredible tracks in this vein along with some of the others in the psych folk vein. The largest hipster vibe I get is from the Wolf Eyes crowd. Seems like New York is going

nuts over these guys and all their similar groups that release limited vinyl/cassettes/cd-rs.  

Though Wolf Eyes is from Michigan, the band did operate for a time out of New York. The connections between the hipster subculture and the avant rock scene are still largely associated with New York, despite the actual dispersion of noise rock across the country, or as in the case of Japanese noise rock band Melt Banana (another band mentioned in the thread), across the world.

*Slate Magazine* also ties Animal Collective in with the history of the avant garde in New York. This connection is made explicit in the title of Slate’s reviews of the latest albums New York bands such as Animal Collective, Black Dice, and Gang Gang Dance have released: “Weird Rock: New York’s New Avant-Garde.” And even with this nod to the urban setting that is New York, the reviewer can’t help but fall back on the ever-recurring nature and mental instability motif, calling Animal Collective’s music a “ceremonial soundtrack to a cracked naturist’s private rituals.”

When thrown into a discussion surrounding noise and the distinctions being made between various bands that are perceived to incorporate noise into their sound, Animal Collective (when mentioned) is referred to as a bridge. According to the forum participant, the band still maintains a discernable similarity to more conventional rock but offers a taste of more experimental timbres:

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I think groups like Liars [another band that also spent some time in NYC] and Animal Collective are great for people who want to test the waters so to speak. They're primarily indie rock, but difficult to classify. Both of them have some records that are easier to listen to and some others that are more difficult.\textsuperscript{263}

Situated as a bridge between noise rock and the rest of indie rock, Animal Collective occupies a somewhat marginal space. Perceived as a transition, the band is neither excluded nor included fully within the category of noise rock. Instead, Animal Collective occupies both spaces without really having to share the full markers of either category (the band can be noise rock and not really noise rock at the same time).

Indeed, if compared to other bands in which “noise” counts as a particular level of distortion, percussiveness, and general abrasiveness, Animal Collective would fail to really count as noise rock. And yet, the band still appears in the discussion on noise rock (and group moderated sources of information such as Wikipedia classify Animal Collective as a noise rock band).\textsuperscript{264} This inclusion of Animal Collective in discussions of other bands such as the much faster and abrasive Melt Banana indicates both the flexibility regarding genre classification and perhaps how extended discussion might influence one’s perception of the music.

Looking at the music of Animal Collective more closely also makes one wonder why they are categorized as noise rock. The track “Visiting Friends” (on Animal Collective’s Sung Tongs) demonstrates a particular aesthetic that pervades much of


Animal Collective’s other works: a lengthy, expansive piece (over twelve minutes long), “Visiting Friends” ebbs and flows (resembling ambient music more than rock) while an acoustic guitar nevertheless maintains a steady moderate tempo. Harmonic changes are used like sound washes. Lyrics distorted electronically beyond recognition fade in and out over the layers of sound effects and the electronic drone and guitar. The simplicity implied by references to children could also refer to the repetitiveness of the music. However, the term “noise” seems to suggest an aggressiveness or antagonism or severe distortion that does not really come through in either the music or the reviews of Animal Collective’s albums. Even on less ambient tracks, the music still projects more of a happy, playful tone, although the band does use some distorted guitars, feedback, and electronic sounds that could be characterized as sound effects. Perhaps this combination of abrasive feedback and soothing sound wash is what causes the participants in the noise rock/avant garde discussion to refer to Animal Collective as a bridge from more conventional rock to noise rock.

Indeed the disparities between Animal Collective and other members of the noise rock category account for the alternative brand the band has received: pysch folk. A much more descriptive term, pysch folk quite possibly attempts to synthesize the elements of simplicity (associating the connotations of nature with folk) and irrationality (perhaps tying into the older psychedelia’s connections with drug use). Again, the existence of multiple ways of talking about this band indicates the discussion is still

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265 Although only two members of the band, Avey Tare and Panda Bear, actually produced the album, Sung Tongs is still considered to be part of Animal Collective’s output.
growing, debating how to describe Animal Collective in particular and subgenres of alternative rock in general.

The third band to be examined, the Strokes, illustrates how current genres continue to use the Velvet Underground as a point-of-origin in order to create relationships between genres. Unlike discussion surrounding Animal Collective and the Fiery Furnaces, discussion of the Strokes repeatedly references the Velvet Underground. In his biography of the Strokes, author Martin Roach notes previous comparisons between the Velvet Underground and the Strokes:

The Strokes sound like The Velvet Underground [sic]. They look a bit like Velvet Underground. Some say they are merely an excuse for music writers to write more about Velvet Underground.266

After a brief history of the Velvet Underground, Roach himself compares the two bands:

There are several obvious parallels with Velvet Underground [sic] worth highlighting, the most pertinent of which is the similarity in vocal delivery between Lou Reed and Julian Casablancas [lead singer of the Strokes].267

Roach continues to outline similarities, comparing Nick Valensi (guitar) to Sterling Morrison and the Strokes’ performance image to the Velvet Underground’s own image. The Spin Magazine writer Marc Spitz also quotes the Velvet Underground when doing a feature article on the Strokes.268 Finally, the comparisons don’t come merely from the critics and fans, but from Julian Casablancas himself: “I think the biggest thing that I took

267 Ibid., 59.

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personally from Velvet Underground is trying to do something so raw but at the same
time I really like beautiful, powerful melody. [sic]"269

The Strokes differ from the Fiery Furnaces and Animal Collective because,
rather than being eclectic, the group sticks to guitar-dominated, riff-driven music with a
pronounced backbeat. While the Fiery Furnaces referred to a variety of “retro” styles, the
“retro-ism” of the Strokes refers primarily to blues-based rock n roll. Even when the band
does add a synthesizer to its “guitars and drum” ensemble, the instrument repeats motivic
fragments that reinforce the guitar-riffs, a technique illustrated rather well in “The End
Has No End” (Room On Fire 2003).270

Given these features of their music, the Strokes are known less for their
experimental “avant-gardism” than for their connection to the post-punk revival.271 Their
connection to the Velvet Underground lineage serves to reinforce that definition of punk-
inspired simplicity: the Strokes’ lo-fi production is linked to the Velvets’ own unrefined
recording practices.272 In this way, the Strokes represent a way in which the Velvet
Underground continues to provide the “origin point” for various genres. When a pedigree
is needed, the Velvet Underground serves as a useful and credible musical parent.

But the relationship is mutual: by emphasizing the punk simplicity of the Strokes
and linking that lo-fi aesthetic back to the Velvet Underground, a different side of the

269 Julian Casablancas, quoted in This Is It: The First Biography of the Strokes, (London: Omnibus Press, 2003), 60.
270 The Strokes, “The End Has No End,” October 28, 2003, Room On Fire, RCA B0000C9ZLD.
272 Roach, 61.
Velvets is emphasized. While avant rock emphasizes the Velvets’ connection the to experimental avant garde evoking an intellectual (i.e. “elite”) image, punk, post-punk, and post-punk revival genres emphasize the Velvets’ connections to the streets (the DIY aesthetic). Standing as the parent of both streams of music-making further reinforces the Velvets’ image of hybridity, of blending avant garde and rock music. A Pitchfork review quotes Rob Sheffield’s words in SPIN Alternative Record Guide: "We understand this music so well because every corner of it has been absorbed. VU studio goofs have become established sub-genres." With the addition of each new lineage and relationship, the Velvet Underground’s place in the canon of rock music is strengthened.

However, the brief look at the ways in which avant rock, noise rock, and these bands are discussed does indicate a measure of flexibility within the discussion even as that discussion appears to set the standards for describing or situating these bands within a category. The gatekeepers for discourse are numerous, and, as Bourdieu notes in his analysis of cultural production and activity, the discussion is shaped by the struggle to achieve power within the discussion. Critics (with published work) generally tend to hold the most power, but through forums and informal conversation, fans can shape, repeat, or question discussion. Do these bands accurately represent new directions in avant rock, new genres all together, reinvented versions of older genres, or a mixture of all three? The answer depends on who is talking (a disagreement especially illustrated within the Metacritic fan forum). But the magazine reviews and fan forum discussions

274 Bourdieu, 106.
illustrate that at least *someone* is talking even if agreement in interpretation is yet to be reached. The bands offer a point on which to focus continued development of the avant rock narrative: as particular bands reappear in the discussion, the narrative begins to solidify around those bands.

Thus, these three bands offer a perspective on the way in which discussion surrounding the bands interacts with elements in the music; certainly these sounds are not limited to the avant rock that is connected to and associated with New York, both in the past and the present. But the way in which these bands are situated within the genre of avant rock still sees some reference to the New York avant garde. These bands illustrate, within the narrow confines of a particular genre, the interaction between discussion and music in the shaping of a public discourse around bands, musical genres, and historical narrative in music.
Conclusion

In the avant rock narrative, certain bands emerge as central defining and legitimizing points for the genre. Recurring markers of identity shape(d) the narrative formation process: in the case of the Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth, the theme of high art/low art merging set these “founding” bands apart as “definitive” sources for the high art/low art hybridity of avant rock. Current bands continue to fit within the avant rock hybrid category, but without such a persistent need to stress geographic origins or artistic ties to both the academy and the “rock music world” (as it was found within New York). The Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth thus play more foundational roles within the narrative, giving the contemporary bands freedom to “innovate,” or further the narrative forward (though the process of narrative formation is not linear, the resulting “history” is often arranged linearly). The words (discourse, tropes, ideologies) and practice (the images and sounds of bands and how they are interpreted) recursively influence each other.

This thesis has attempted to sketch, through the particular case of the avant rock narrative, how this interactivity between words and practice differentiates between the mass of historical objects/events and arranges them in a comprehensible format with explanatory power. In the case of the avant rock narrative, discussion and arrangement of historical detail shaped the Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth into suitable “parents” for the avant rock genre. A key-defining feature of avant rock is the element of high art/low art hybridity. A wealth of historical data seems to support the view that the Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth were self-consciously achieving this hybridity. Indeed, the
degree to which the Velvet Underground and Sonic Youth support avant rock’s identity (and continue to define it) directly strengthens the narrative’s longevity and persuasive power and sets the foundation for further expansion (of the genre) and re-definement.
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