Rock as minimal modernism

Lou Reed, 1942–2013

I wouldn't recommend me as entertainment.
Lou Reed, 1978

It has acquired the status of a primal scene. 1964. A party in New York's Lower East Side, *the* mythical site of the period. Terry Phillips, an executive at Pickwick Records, meets two 'long-haired' young men. Thinking they look the part, he asks them if they want to be in a band to promote a single that has become a (very) minor local hit. The record is called 'The Ostrich', and has been released under the name of The Primitives, but it was actually written and recorded by a 22-year-old Long Islander, and recent graduate of Syracuse University, called Lou Reed. The two men to whom Phillips will introduce him are John Cale and Tony Conrad.

The story is perfect. Art meets rock & roll, and does so at the most unlikely crossroads of mid-1960s' musical culture: the most avant-garde of 'serious' contemporary musics encountering the most industrialized manifestation of commodified pop. In 1964 Cale and Conrad were still members of ex-Fluxus and minimalist pioneer LaMonte Young's ensemble, the Theatre of Eternal Music; Lou Reed was an employee of the Pickwick record factory, churning out the 'latest' product from a base in Coney Island. ('They would say "Write ten California songs, ten Detroit songs"', as Reed recollected, 'then we'd go down into the studio for an hour or two.') Conrad and Walter De Maria, the drummer he recruited for the short-lived Primitives, would return to the artworld; joined by Sterling Morrison and Maureen Tucker, Reed and Cale would, for two albums and a stint as the house band in Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable, produce a music in which Adorno's 'torn halves' of modernist art and mass culture would not so much 'add up' as be forced to get together, whether they liked the idea or not.

The excitement of the 'new' is, of course, intrinsic to pop music, as is the accelerated sense of historical change that accompanies it: just twenty years from Elvis's Sun recordings to Kraftwerk's *Autobahn*. But, while Dylan may have opened up the cultural space that made it possible, it is only with the Velvet Underground that the idea of rock *as* modernism is first self-consciously posed. It has always been tempting to present this primarily as a consequence of Cale's involvement, a classically trained viola player and former student of Cardew and Xenakis, as well as of Warhol's 'sponsorship' of the band. But it was Reed – 'a rock & roll punk straight from the books', as Conrad described him (albeit one who was *reading* a lot of books) – who made The Velvet Underground a very different proposition from contemporaneous 'art' bands like The Fugs or the United States of America.

In a short piece on Syd Barrett published here a couple of years ago (*RP* 165, 2011), Howard Caygill situated Barrett as an exemplary figure in the clash of an artworld avant-garde with pop's 'remorseless' demand for commercial success. Yet, true (and as difficult) as this may have been for Barrett, it is also the case, as Ben Watson observed in the following issue (*RP* 166), that as a generalized account of 1960s' 'counterculture' this risks reinforcing a set of divisions that the kind of rock produced by the Velvet Underground or Captain Beefheart was itself in the process of undoing. Cale's gestures towards early minimalism's experiments with sustained just intonation in the amplified viola drones that propel 'Heroin' and 'Venus in Furs' on the first album,

as well as the startling crashing noise that interrupts the opening rhythmic pulse of 'European Son' (a straight 'borrowing' from LaMonte Young's 1960 fluxus piece *Poem for Table, Chairs, Benches, etc.*), are certainly a direct transference of techniques from the contemporary 'avant-garde'. But at the heart of the seventeen or so recordings making up the original group's legacy is, above all, an intensification and amplification of rock's *own* most basic elements of repetitious pulse, overwhelming volume and electronic timbral affect. (Repetition, and the formal possibilities of the loop or 'riff', was of course the ragged line joining together minimalism, Warholian pop, structural film and early rock in the mid-1960s.)

As a meeting of (minimalist) avant-garde and (minimalist) rock & roll, this did not so much position the latter as the medium for some kind of cultural 'trickle down' effect, sweetening the pill of existing downtown experimentation for a commercial market, as it sought simply to *outpace* the avant-garde on its own negational terms. The Velvet Underground may have been the first 'pop music' to suggest that it could be artistically 'important' without being a 'hit', but, in doing so, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* and *White Light/White Heat* also asserted the potential for the mass-produced sounds of a Bo Diddley or the Crickets to drastically reconfigure the very sense of what an avant-garde in the latter half of the 1960s might actually be. From the perspective of the most advanced artistic material, the history leading from Chuck Berry to Steve Cropper might be understood to constitute a ready-made modernist dynamic – one which, precisely because of its inextricable dialectical relations to a culture mediated through the form of the commodity, could be of as much, if not considerably more, significance than total serialism or abstract expressionism. (The seventeen-plus minute 'Sister Ray', with its constant tonal centre in G, but absent any recognizable 'key', is, for example, at its core, simply an improvisational working through of the sonorities of recent low-budget 45s like 'Louie Louie' or '96 Tears', but at a massively extended and amplified scale.) The power of a subaltern 'aesthetic' deriving from the commercial dissemination of recorded sound – 'nasty white and black rock & roll' played by 'nasty white people', as Morrison recalled his and Reed's early bands – became, as such, the engine of the Velvet Underground's own stripped down dynamic of antagonistic newness and negation.

Of course, a tension between the – social as well as artistic – liberations offered by the 'underground', on the one hand, and mass media spectacle, on the other, is a general feature of late '60s' counterculture (as Caygill's account of Syd Barrett reiterated). But if Reed's songwriting for the Velvet Underground embodied the era's broader cultural demand for 'absolute freedom', in one respect, it did so in a form that positioned it in rigorous opposition to its dominant manifestations. Reed and Morrison may have owed an acknowledged debt to the reductive appropriation of black R&B in the recordings of British bands like the Yardbirds or the early Rolling Stones, but their attitude to America's emergent West Coast hippy culture was one of unbending antipathy. 'Drugs and rock' is Fredric Jameson's pithy summary of the counterculture in his essay on periodizing the 1960s. But both were very differently understood in the Velvet Underground's construction of themselves as the contemporary counterculture's own immanent critique. *The Velvet Underground and Nico* may have been recorded a few months before *Sergeant Pepper*, but it could easily come to sound (particularly in the 1970s) like an effective response to it – the stark urban objectivism of 'Heroin' appearing as an antagonistic counterpoint to the escapist subjectivism of 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' – while the contempt of Reed, Cale and Morrison for 'stupid hippies', and the wide-eyed 'intellectualization' of psychedelics as 'mind expanding' experience, found an obvious echo in the subsequent decade.

Speed's intensification of urban experience and heroin's blank numbing of it – the two intoxicated dimensions of Simmel's metropolitan modern life: hyper-stimulation

and the blasé type – are here creatively opposed to the perceived 'fantasies' of acid, and of acid rock's characteristic combinations of technological utopianism with pastoralist visions of exodus from capitalist urban life. 'It wasn't a question of seeing something as something else, but of seeing what it was in fact', as Morrison put it. If there is, then, an underlying kinship with Warholian pop, it lies, above all, in the distinctive mode of realism to be found in its painting of modern life. 'Only by immersing its autonomy in society's *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronomous market', Adorno wrote of Baudelaire. 'Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated.' Reed and Warhol certainly shared a similar fascination with a kind of dispassionate mimesis of alienation that bordered on cruelty. But, both lyrically *and* musically, it is a piece like 'Sister Ray' – a song about 'a bunch of drag queens taking a bunch of sailors home with them, shooting up on smack and having an orgy when the police appear', as the art critic Robert Hughes memorably described it – that best exemplifies a kind of modernist rearticulation of 'cynical' virtues that the 'New York' response to West Coast escapism came to represent. It's also worth noting that, particularly through its association with Warhol's factory (as well as the camp or 'trash' aesthetic of Jack Smith's underground films), the third term missing from Jameson's 'drugs and rock' – sex – appears, too, in a very different 'East Coast' guise here, confronting that (hetero)sexual liberation embodied in 1967 by Jim Morrison's priapic showmanship with the very different theatricality of the drag queen or hustler. In this way, it looked simultaneously forward to the gay subcultures of the 1970s (and Reed's own 1972 album *Transformer*) and back to Burroughs's and Ginsberg's writings of the 1950s. It is certainly telling that it is in a song like 'Candy Says' that Reed's general persona of the photographically indifferent ethnographic observer can find itself suddenly transformed into a far more affecting sense of giving voice to the culturally dispossessed.

Retrospectively, for the punks and post-punks of the 1970s, it was this specific cocktail of sex, drugs and rock & roll that made the Velvet Underground appear as the first 'prophetic' crack in the promise of a common generational language of pop music around which the very identity of 'the sixties' – and the role played by The Beatles and Dylan, in particular – had come to be produced around the middle of the decade. As such, the Velvet Underground's evocation of a decaying but thrilling New York street life would be taken to anticipate punk's own countercultural expression of the capitalist crises of the 1970s, and confirm Reed as one of only a few respectable reference points for punk in its self-defining distance from the bloated legacy of an ageing rock aristocracy. As for Reed himself, for much of the 1970s his own trajectory took the form of an extreme oscillation between moments of commercial success, the entertainingly camp *Transformer* and dismal *Sally Can't Dance*, which would be immediately, and apparently wilfully, followed by the commercial disasters of *Berlin* and *Metal Machine Music*.

Metal Machine Music, somewhat obsessively returned to by Reed in the last decade of his life, is no doubt some kind of apotheosis in this respect, not least because of the ambiguity surrounding its intentions: Dadaist anti-art gesture or serious 'art' composition. In fact, the record is probably best understood – with an evident debt to Cale's 1966 'Loop' (the first record to be released under the name of the Velvet Underground in the third issue of *Aspen Magazine*) – as a singular attempt to return to, and re-intensify, the milieu from which the Velvet Underground first emerged. Constructed through tape manipulation of guitar feedback, and released on RCA's classical Red Label, the album was both avant-garde minimalism *and* 'the ultimate guitar solo', as Reed once described it.

If *Metal Machine Music* was a one-off, the best of the other 1970s albums, *Berlin*, the hilariously confrontational live recording *Take No Prisoners*, *Street Hassle*, managed to marshall the ghosts of the Velvet Underground without being overwhelmed by them. The 1980s, however, opened with a generally wearying series of attempts to be commercially 'contemporary' before closing with the 'back to basics' sound of 1989's *New York*. An unquestionably listenable and literate album, it also featured, for the first time, a former member of The Velvet Underground, drummer Mo Tucker, and anticipated the rather nostalgic collaboration with Cale on the Warhol tribute album *Songs for Drella* that opened the next decade. In many ways, this reflected the degree to which, by the latter half of the 1980s, the Velvet Underground, along with Reed as its recognizable 'star', had themselves begun to be slowly canonized in rock history, as new generations of bands came simply to trade on pastiches of their more accessible moments, along with the obligatory sunglasses. The complex and often tense problem of autonomy posed in the 1960s was gradually transformed in this way into the cosier, romantic narrative of Reed and the Velvet Underground as rock's own Van Gogh – ignored in their lifetime, redeemed in the present – as *The Velvet Underground and Nico* came to sit comfortably alongside *Pet Sounds*, *Revolver* and the rest, in the kinds of interminable '100 best albums of all time' lists that began to proliferate during the same period (although the more abrasive *White Light/White Heat* was rarely to be seen). Correspondingly, Reed too largely settled into rock classicism, safely canonized alongside Dylan, Neil Young or Paul Simon as another 1960s' survivor.

Against this fate, it is perhaps best to remember Reed as an alternate section waiting to be appended to the final chapter of the late Marshall Berman's classic 1984 book *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, subtitled 'Some Notes on Modernism in New York'. 'To be a modern*ist*', Berman writes, 'is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom', 'to make its rhythms one's own': the 'sensibility' of an identification with 'the perpetual transformation of our world and ourselves'. Jewish New Yorkers born within a couple of years of each other, Reed's and Berman's visions of the city are very different. But as an embodiment of the exhilarating rush generated by 'a dialectical interplay between unfolding modernization of the … urban environment and the development of modernist art and thought', Reed's best work could scarcely be bettered.

David Cunningham

A NOTE ON TYPE This issue of *Radical Philosophy* has been gently redesigned using the Calluna family of fonts. Designed in 2009 by typographer Jos Buivenga of font foundry exljbris, Calluna is one of the new generation of fonts originating from Arnhem in the Netherlands. With its combination of serif and sans-serif forms, it is modern whilst being distinct from Helvetica-influenced typographical orthodoxy.