

A Battle of the Ages

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**Art Rebels: Race, Class, and Gender in the Art of Miles Davis
and Martin Scorsese**

By Paul Lopes (Princeton University Press, 2019)

In *Art Rebels*, Paul Lopes argues that in the past eight decades of avant-garde American art and culture, the innovative and cutting-edge artists from his formative years are the historically most important ones. As you can likely tell from that last sentence, to understand this review and how magnificent *Art Rebels* is, you first must know that not only did I doubt this claim, but I also took it deeply personally. Why, I rhetorically asked myself, are the icons of artistic creativity and innovation from Lopes's teenage years more historically important than the icons of creativity and innovation from my teenage years? And isn't it suspicious that he would believe they are and I would believe they aren't? To convince me of his central claim Lopes had to persuade me that I should be planting the flag of his teenage heroes on top of the mountainous molehill of my teenage tastes. That's a difficult mountain to climb. Having finished *Art Rebels* I say both definitively and begrudgingly that I believe Lopes is right and I was wrong.

Riffing off Bourdieu (pun intended), Lopes argues that the Heroic Age of American music and film occurred from the late 1940s to the 1970s. As Lopes rightly notes this wasn't just a golden age of autonomy, innovation, and creativity, as rather, it also created and defined the structural space of an American avant-garde that artists from later golden ages could then occupy. While we can all have our own bespoke golden ages and find others' discussions of their golden ages both solipsistic and somnolent, the Heroic Age is different: I don't get Freestyle Fellowship's *Innercity Griots* in 1993 or Common Sense's *Resurrection* in 1994 without Miles Davis and others having carved out the permanent position that those works would later occupy. That it is, for me, taken-for-granted that a Bourdieusian field space applies to the American case at all was something that had to be accomplished by Heroic Age artists.

In the twentieth and twenty-first century American context, the structural position of the avant-garde, as Lopes argues, is fundamentally different from the principles of vision and division that made up the field of art in nineteenth century France. As Lopes (p. 24) writes, his “initial research agenda was to apply Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the Heroic Age of French Art to the United States.” Thank god he was unsuccessful in this. Rather than finding a clear one-to-one application of Bourdieu to the American case, Lopes finds that Heroic Age American artists weren’t playing “loser wins” when it came to money making, and they didn’t preoccupy themselves with creating venerated art that was safely tucked away from low- and middle-brow forms. The question for these artists was not how to sequester themselves into a self-reproducing world of art-for-art’s sake, but rather, how to make innovative, smart, inventive, and creative popular culture. Or, as Lopes (p. 48) quotes from the Heroic Age jazz musician of Archie Shepp, “we should know how to play mass music, popular music. And when we play it we should believe in it. If we don’t, we’re bourgeois snobs.”

Lopes makes his case through the analysis of the “public stories” of two Heroic Age American artists: Miles Davis and Martin Scorsese. Wisely, Lopes seems entirely disinterested in trying to unearth who Davis and Scorsese “really” were and are, as rather, it is the public construction of self in interviews and critical construction of a direct linkage between the artist and their artworks in trade and industry journalism that sets the table for what innovative and creative art can be. For both of these towering figures of avant-garde commercial art, the space was also structured with and around an irreducibly misogynist pop aesthetic, as well as the ultimately colorblind white-but-not-quite footsie played by Scorsese, and the public stories of Davis’s blackness as he played for mostly white audiences.

Decades later in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I greedily engorged on avant-garde rap music that was both commercially and critically acclaimed. In trade for its wild innovations, I tried to talk around its unavoidably misogynist pop aesthetic. While devouring its creativity, us pudgy and socially insecure young Jewish boys desperately tried to position ourselves as “authentic” and “aware” white rap fans — nothing like those other 14-year-old white rap fans who threatened our entirely imagined authenticity and legitimacy. All of that, from soup to nuts as they say, wasn’t unique to my bespoke golden age. It had been structurally worked out and inherited (through a fight), both for the positions that were fillable, and the dispositions to fill them with. Rather than Lopes having diminished the importance of the avant-garde tastes I formed in my youth, he has historicized and explained them for me. If the goal of good sociology is to make the formerly obscured suddenly feel obvious, Lopes did that for me as much as any book I’ve read in quite some time.

Art Rebels is a significant achievement. It is careful, considered, reasoned, and eye-opening. If Lopes’s aim was to make me care about *Kind of Blue* or *Taxi Driver*, he failed, but that wasn’t his aim. If his aim is to make me, a cultural sociologist,

fundamentally reconsider what I think both about cultural sociology and my own taste formation, *Art Rebels* is a resounding success.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR(S)

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