

SIGUR ROS
Agaetis Byrjun Seth Kim-Cohen

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If we accept Brian Eno's definition of ambient music (and if not his, then whose?) as music that rewards but doesn't demand close attention, then I guess Sigur Ros is ambient. Their lush, majestic textures conjure pop maestros of the distant past (Brian Wilson, Phil Spector, Joe Meek) while tracing a shorter trajectory to the shoegazers of the late 80s (My Bloody Valentine, Lush, Swervedriver.) There's a contemporary technical proficiency on display in many of the songs on their breakthrough album, *Agaetis Byrjun*. But the atmosphere they create is woozy, aquatic, womblike – almost to the point of sounding New Age. (The album's wordless artwork pictures a luminous line drawing of a winged embryo in fetal position, its hands folded in prayer across its still-attached umbilical cord.) Depending on which article you've read, a percentage of Jon Birgisson's angelic, effeminate singing is either in an invented language or in an impressionistic collage of meaningless syllables like that of Elizabeth Fraser of the Cocteau Twins. (The remainder of the lyrics are in the band's native tongue, Icelandic, which, in most of the world, falls into one of the first two categories.)

Listening to *Agaetis Byrjun* ("A Good Start"), while talking, thinking, writing, watching TV, or serving raclette and merlot is akin to sleeping by the ocean – it's a subtle distraction, easily overcome. Paying close attention to it is actually a bit more difficult. In Italo Calvino's novel *Mr. Palomar*, the title character stands at the seaside trying to observe a single incoming wave.

He concentrates on making out each distinct feature of each subsequent wave, reasoning that when the waves cease to exhibit any new or unique features, that he will have properly seen a wave, digested it, understood it. He tries to fix his focus on a limited field. But the borders of the square are fluid, and soon he realizes that his eyes have drifted and that he's no longer looking at the same spot. He can't be sure whether what he's seeing is one contiguous wave or different waves, breaking at different points, for different reasons. And although one iteration of the form may share certain features with another, he decides it would be inaccurate to find design or intent in these unrelated incidents.

Or would it? Chaos theory finds reiterative patterns at micro- and macroscopic levels of myriad phenomena: a grain of sand may mirror the shape of its parental shoreline the stock market appears to exhibit theoretically predictable swells and contractions (though, like Mr. Palomar, watchers have yet to identify the specifics); and, despite accepted wisdom, researchers have discovered two identical snowflakes.

Ambient is synonymous with atmospheric or environmental – to be ambient is to be part of the atmosphere or indiscernible from the environment. Whole artistic movements have been devoted to toying with this notion. Marcel Duchamp puts a urinal in a gallery. More recently AMM guitarist Keith Rowe puts a local audience on edge by telling them they should feel no more obligated to applaud his art than they would any other ambient sound. What his demurral ignores, possibly on purpose, is intent – and the audience's essential relationship to that intent. The audience must assume that the work is intentional, even if its intention is to call into question the distinctions we make between art and not art.

To make sense of Keith Rowe's music or Marcel Duchamp's art (or Peter Greenaway's films, or even Dave Eggers's writing) it isn't just preferable but *required* that we participate; that we come to the work with ideas and assumptions about the artist's aesthetic, philosophical, and historical stances. This is not true of how we approach, for instance, the music of Kid Rock or Limp Bizkit or Britney Spears. (I'm not trying to pick a fight here; if these examples don't work for you, feel free to swap them out for your own.) Their music can be approached with certain assumptions, but it's not required. Most listeners associate their music with a particular place and time and a particular collection of people (even though any Britney fan is in reality sharing the experience with millions of people all over the world). It's a bonding agent, a sound track, a definer of taste and situation. And here we arrive at something very near to a working definition between art and entertainment. (Though once in place, the distinctions, are subject to change.) Artists ask us to understand their creative choices in a context larger than the individual piece, and to bring complicity, like a key, to the process. Entertainers ask that their music be received, like a gift, regardless of intent or philosophy, for its entertainment value. Which isn't to say that art doesn't have entertainment value nor that entertainment can't have artistic virtues.

So, what of Sigur Ros's intentions? Are they harbingers of the new digital order? Are they adherents to the old rock guard, infiltrating the revolution to maintain the status quo? Or is their music literally ambient, in the sense that it merely reflects its environment? (Iceland is, after all, surrounded by the ocean and its infuriatingly indistinguishable waves.) Their music is undeniably beautiful and undeniably ambitious, combining funeral dirges and drum 'n' bass, the feedback squall of an electric guitar and a mellifluous string quartet, in a single grand, heroic wash. It's also similar in some ways to what John Tesh does.

But there is an impulse toward art buried in the layers of *Agaetis Byrjun*. You have to listen pretty closely and pretty often to notice it. This is the reward Eno promised for our attention. Most critics have reacted favorably to the sweeping, epic beauty of *Agaetis Byrjun*, but my favorite moments are when the crimson robes of the heavenly choir part, revealing the garters holding up their socks.

Throughout the album, Sigur Ros repeatedly cheat vapidly by introducing incongruous elements just in time. In the epic "Viorar Vel Til Loftarasa" ("Good Weather For Airstrikes"), after seven minutes and thirty-five seconds of cinematic piano, strings, and pedal steel, the song is infiltrated by a subtle dissonance, like the sound of an orchestra warming up. The music swells in a moment worthy of the high shoegazers. Melody and dissonance and beauty and chaos wage a two-minute battle for the song's soul, then the whole thing ends abruptly, as if reprimanded.

The fifth track, "Ny Batteri" ("New Batteries"), is a repetitive, trancy two-chord ballad not unlike something by Radiohead or even Stereolab. It chugs along drumless for the first four and half minutes, testing the attentive listener's patience (a recurring theme on *Agaetis Byrjun*). When the drums do arrive, they're thunderous and distorted – the overdriven high-hat opens on impact, sounding like metal plates being stamped by the enormous apparatus of a dark assembly line. Sigur Ros knows that pop music has trained our ears to expect the drums to kick in each time the structure returns to the top. By holding that grand entrance at bay for longer than the length of the average song, they are acknowledging our complicity. Near the end the song dissolves into an alley-cat chorus of horns, then reinflates in a final reprise from which emerges a mournful, muted trumpet solo.

Then there's the pivotal moment that comes two minutes and 55 seconds into the second track, "Staralfur" ("Staring Elf"). The strings rise to an almost saccharine, almost unbearable crescendo, and just as I'm getting up to turn it off and dismiss it as too Enya, the band and orchestra slip away as if swallowed, leaving behind a single, skeletal, unplugged electric guitar. It's the sound of the gears driving the celestial spheres and it gives semantic weight to the glory that precedes it.

While being entertained is a fine thing, its satisfactions are fleeting. Art or aspirations to it, speak to deeper needs. Shouldn't we also want to accomplish, to love and be loved, to be moral and to communicate with others? Shouldn't we want to absorb experiences and sensations as related by friends and strangers? Some look to religion to teach these lessons, but you have to believe in God for that to work. If you don't, there's art. I don't mean to be facetious or hyperbolic when I say that many of my closest relationships have been with men and women I've never met. I have plenty of really good, real-life friends, but the things Primo Levi shared with me in *The Periodic Table*, or PJ Harvey in *Is This Desire?* are every bit as significant to me as anything I've shared with my 'real' friends. I thought it would be simple to dismiss *Agaetis Byrjun* as nothing more than a well-honed pleasantry. But sometimes art, like God, is in the details