

INTERVIEW TO ALEXANDER REED

After many years of working, Sir Alexander Reed, already active with the musical acts ThouShaltNot and Seeming, in 2013 releases a long-awaited and discussed book, *Assimilate*: a cultural history of Industrial Music, often defined as the first proper critical book upon the Industrial music subject, whereas other books more known haven't succeeded in doing the same kind of analysis, of course a musical one but, at the same time, a critic, politic and social one too. That of Reed is an analysis that break goes beyond the musical boundaries created by the purists. Because an Italian translation hasn't been made, we as FLUX thought that it would have been interesting make the author explain us some often ignored topics that are really well-explained in the book and ask him his point of view about what his book doesn't contain (yet).

- 1) Explain to our readers why and when you've decided to write a critical history of Industrial Music. Let me say you that, in my opinion, this is the most interesting book about music i've ever read and i hope that there will be updates.

Thanks very much, and yes, there are a few updates I've already planned to make! I had begun thinking about writing *Assimilate* back when I was in graduate school around 2003, but it took a long time to gather the materials and the knowledge. I had been listening to industrial music since I was 11 years old, and along the way, it became clear that the genre was part of a long heritage of ideas and that it made some really interesting significant claims, even when it didn't fully deliver on them.

- 2) Modern and contemporary forms of art have always inspired the subsequent beginning of Industrial Music, Coum transmission was strictly related to performance art too, and so Fluxus (and mail art) and Futurism, among the others. How art forms influences Industrial Music and viceversa? Explain us this relation.

Most early industrial musicians were self-taught experimental artists, and art groups like COUM or Fluxus were directly anti-academy, and thus empowered those isolated, unschooled sorts in the late 1970s. Industrial music took up those ideas of tearing down the assumptions that underlie our identities and our world, but they did so with a youthful, almost punk kind of anger. While this was happening, music and media technology became more widely available, and the early ideas behind cyberpunk were emerging in the works of Burroughs, Dick, and Gibson. Industrial music was a confluence of lots of simultaneous movements. But it was more influenced *by* art than influential *of* art. In the mid and late 1980s, industrial music had a hip social cachet that attracted lots of artists to its aesthetics: theatre and dance troupes would hire groups like Test Dept., Laibach, Einstürzende Neubauten, and Skinny Puppy to produce music for their shows, and some visual artists adapted the abject thematics, cyber-imagery, and cut-up techniques of the music—most famously Dave McKean on his *Sandman*

covers. But industrial music, more than anything, was viewed as a successful popularization of experimental art ideas, and not so much an advancement of them.

- 3) Let's focus on one of the most interesting concepts written in your book: the notion of "Control machines" and that of "The third mind". Explain us these ideas. How, where and when these topics could be "read" and listened in Industrial Music? How can we rethink the music that we like adding additional "meaning" to what we listen to?

In my book, control machines (a term that William S. Burroughs coined) are systems that constrain our choices in the world—not just easily recognizable ones like government, economy, and religion, but wider and more subtle ones too, like language and gender. These are all things that industrial music, to varying degrees, rages against. By giving them all one name, we can contain in a single idea (and make a single critique or enemy of) all these powers that are normally so big that we barely recognize them. Take KMFDM, for instance. They want to “rip the system” in a wide and unspecific way, but this makes sense when you see how, for example, the lyrics of “A Drug Against War” immediately conflate “television, religion... [and] parental advice.” Their rage isn’t aimless—it’s intentionally omnidirectional.

As for the “third mind,” this is another idea that comes from Burroughs and his co-author Brion Gysin. Put simply, it refers to an unpredictable creative energy that arises from juxtaposing ideas or collaborative contributions. The reason it’s important to industrial music is that it’s a source of meaning that doesn’t come from a single human’s will. This matters because if the control machines are inescapably enabling dictating our every move (like water to a fish), then spontaneous, irrational, and seemingly origin-free creative energies can model a way of temporarily escaping ourselves and the world around us. A great place to hear this is in the “glitch” music on the Coil vs. ELpH records, where the unpredictable mistakes of machines become the main source of the music.

- 4) Nowadays we are observing the return of interest in the "tape medium" as a medium used by an ever increasing number of labels. In your book you write about the "tape" as the medium used by the forerunners of Industrial Music so that it could be possible to talk about the so called "tape scene". What are the points of relation between the way in which the tape was used back in the days and how it's used now in the underground scene?

Back in the early 1980s, the tape scene was really the only global network of independent experimental music. It was the cheapest and most socially encouraging way to make and discover noise. The new tape scene is a willful attempt to recapture that spirit through the medium, but in 2015, it’s no longer the easiest, cheapest, or fastest way to make and discover music. Its participants have their hearts in the right place, but they’re creating exclusivity where there was once a somewhat democratizing

ideal. It's an interesting turn away from the "clean" sound of computers, but I wonder whether it's more backwards-looking than futurist.

- 5) Is there a relation between how the so called Industrial subculture used to wear and think and the music itself, and how these things have changed over the decades?

Genres and subcultures change. Yes there's a relationship between the original scene and the current scene's music, clothes, and ideas—and we can trace a lineage of artists. But the way that people first encounter this music and the social groups that form around it really alter the ideas that accompany it. If it's a secret, strange world of difficult listening and occultic ideas (as industrial music was in 1980), then those who come to the music will be investing more of themselves in order to understand what it's all about. Compare that with a teenager in 1995 who sees Gravity Kills videos on MTV and who can buy a huge Trent Reznor poster at a mall and "learn" how to dress "industrial." A lot of the original industrial ideas became coded, streamlined, and aestheticized over time, and so fans of each generation will come to the music with different assumptions about why it matters and how they should relate to it. But none of this means that industrial music is less valuable to its fans in 2015 than it was in 1985—merely that the kind of value has changed. And that makes sense, because as industrial music critiques the world around it, so too has the world changed.

- 6) In one of the chapters of the book, you talk about the metaphor of the perfect body, associated with EBM, and the unperfect one, associated with Skinny Puppy music. Because it seems to me that your book lacks a point of view about the so called Dark Electro music (that now is experiencing a second life with labels such as Electro Aggression Records) developed, in the past, by acts as yelworC and Placebo Effect among the others, i would like to know your opinion about why and what this genre's message would transmit and why it have known a hiatus for some years.

I definitely hear yelworC and Placebo Effect as closer to Skinny Puppy than (for example) to Front 242. yelworC's music in particular is interested in formlessness, monstrosity, and chaos. As for its hiatus, between the guitar-driven industrial of the mid 1990s and the futurepop of the 1999-2006 era, there was a huge amount of pressure on industrial bands to conform—which is of course ironic in a genre so concerned with nonconformity. I think a lot of the new dark electro emerged both as a reaction against futurepop's "clean" aesthetics and as a stylistic recognition of the power that first-wave dark electro wielded back in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

- 7) In the middle of the 90's we assisted to the beginning of a new genre, known as PowerNoise (or Rhythmic Noise) influenced in some way by techno music (distorted beats). What relation this kind of music has with the previous Industrial Music? Could it be considered a part of the whole and what message

would be transmitted by the artists? Is there a relationship between the music and the Burroughs and Gysin theories here too?

Powernoise is most easily understood as an attempt to bring the aesthetics of the harsh noise and power electronics genres into a club setting. Back when bands like Whitehouse began, “industrial clubs” didn’t really exist, but by 1995 there was certainly an audience who wanted to dance while still having the completely overwhelming experience that those noise bands offered. And acts like Esplendor Geométrico had begun making music like this in the early 1980s. As for a relationship to Burroughs and Gysin, it’s there if one wants to hear it: powernoise overwhelms the sense while also driving the body to a rhythm, even further taking the listener out of his conscious self and into pure response.

- 8) Why different countries have different ideas of what Industrial Music is? There are difference between the idea of this music from the US to Italy to Germany, Canada, Belgium...here, for example a lot of "four on the floor" Industrial Music is considered EBM, although some acts are EBM, others are Harsh or Aggrotech, etc... In the US, it seems to me, that there aren't so many differences...

I think it has to do with marketing and language. In the early 1990s, “industrial” was sold to Americans as a kind of rock. When Sony signed Front 242 in 1992, it made sense to sell their music as “industrial,” because the word had an audience (in America at least), whereas nobody in the mainstream talked about “EBM.” So bands’ subgenres were flattened. Also, in English, the word “industrial” is a very powerful word with powerful connotations: it instantly means factories, military, government, labor, and machines. It’s a great name for a genre in a way that “dark electro” can’t match.

- 9) Let's focus on the Industrial Music lyrics. In the NIN chapter, you talk about how, according to some filters, the lyrics use a different amount of personal words, rather than impersonal. Can you explain our readers why, for example, a genre uses a more personal or impersonal approach according to some factor?

Different music trains audiences to listen in different ways. In most early industrial, the words were very hard to hear, and that was part of the aesthetic: humans were conceptually submerged among machines. But as soon as artists began importing new aesthetics into industrial music, audiences adapted their listening, so that when they heard *The Land of Rape and Honey*, audiences used both industrial and metal “modes” of listening, or when they heard Thrill Kill Kult, they responded to the disco cues with a disco-oriented mode of listening that valued repetition, beats, and sleaze. Of course most pop is traditionally centered around personal and interpersonal experiences—there’s a reason so many love songs exist in the world. So when industrial bands first started venturing into “I/me/you/we” lyrics, people started hearing it in “pop” modes, which some audiences strongly disliked. But it made the music familiar to many, many people who previously didn’t have any way of stepping into industrial modes of

listening. Obviously, this changed the genre and the population of the scene, like I discussed earlier.

- 10) The last few years have seen a come back of the so called "minimalism", that once was applied to some minimalistic 80's music and that now is increasing it's popularity in the underground scene. Everyday new acts mix this approach with the old school EBM, electro and 80's lessons and make some particular and interesting experiments. This "new wave" is bringing new fresh ideas to this music and the old school titans as Dirk Ivens with his label Daft Records are becoming interested with this particular sound. What's your point of view about that? How could it be considered? What kind of message would this music express?

I hear it as part of a larger attempt to reimagine subculture as if the 1990s never happened—and thereby to avoid the corporatization that chewed up and spat out industrial, goth, rave, and punk. There's also an interest in sonic purity, like the artists and audiences are asking themselves, "Ok, what are the bare essentials of a great electro track? What single sound can I use to accomplish what I previously did with ten sounds?" And it makes sense that we would do this now, because if you're making music in ProTools or Reason or Logic, there are no longer any limits to how many sounds you can make, and in a world of creative superabundance, there's something very appealing about scaling back and working with as few tools as possible.

- 11) At the beginning of the interview, we've talked about the relation between art forms and Industrial Music. Thinking about the relation between information and this music, considered as two lines which run on the same track, is there a relation between this music and the new media art forms such as Computer Art, Interactive Art and Virtual reality / Augmented reality-based Arts? Bands as Front line assembly and, in general, electro industrial, have always raised dystopic questions. Is the current Industrial Music having some sort of relationship with what these art forms are currently developing (for example, always more realistic virtual worlds and augmented applications)? Is there a point of conjunction?

I think there have been points of intersection historically. I *hope* there are points of conjunction today, but because subcultures can congregate so quickly and narrowly today, I worry that there's not very much dialogue between them. Industrial music's scene can seem pretty narrow, and while it used to have lots of overlap with conceptual art (on one side) and hacking (on the other), I think that the conceptual artists have largely developed their own sound art (e.g. sonic installations, field recordings), and the hackers have gotten very corporate (e.g. "brogrammer" culture). Maybe we can work to change this.

12) What do you think that the future of Industrial Music could be and what message could it express? Tell us your point of view about this.

I talk about this in the last chapter of *Assimilate*—which, yes, your readers should pick up! I think if industrial music wants to do something useful in the world, we need to ask how to dismantle control machines in 2015. What sounds, images, and ideas hold cultural sway? How can we subvert them? I think industrial music needs to be willing to give up its old WWII-era aesthetics and to engage with modern challenges: privacy, ubiquitous advertising, the crowdsourcing of identity, racism, and post-scarcity. If we made music not just for angry dancing but also for hiding lies and exposing truths, industrial music can be very important.

13) Thanks a lot for your time, greet our readers and invite them to buy your book!

Thank you so much for talking with me. And beyond my book, please check out my new band SEEMING, at <http://seeming.bandcamp.com>