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Master and Slave in the Music of Coil

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For Theodor Adorno, pop music perpetuates the drudgery and alienation of working class existence by providing a distraction from it. This paper turns to a similar critique of pop music, in the work of Coil. Born out of the UK industrial scene, Coil distort the pop song format, reproducing and appropriating its sounds with cynical manipulations. This cynicism shines through a mastery over the forms of pop music and its sounds, that Coil configure without veering into pop's more explicit commercialism. By estranging the familiarity of pop music, Coil point to how listeners are enslaved by the industrial mode of musical alienation, by reproducing this alienation in a new way.

Theodor Adorno damns popular music for infantilizing the masses and keeping the proletariat in its powerless place.ⁱ The pop song produces its own authority through repetition on radio, in a structure of aural power that keeps the listener in a state of submission. For Adorno the pop song has no qualities of its own, and only its standardisation and repetition, its immersion in industrial reproduction, lends the form its cultural power. The solution to this problem is, for Adorno at least, complex classical avant-garde music, whose difficulty helps rather than hinders the critical self-consciousness of the listening subject. This essay turns to sound artists who share Adorno's views, but who do not conclude that complexity is the solution to the problem of a degraded, popular aural intelligence. These are artists working within the genre of industrial music. Arguably, industrial music developed in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s as a means of parodying the

place of pop music in the lives of the British working class. A founder of the industrial genre, Throbbing Gristle, parodies the status of three minute songs with their grinding, shrieking number, "What a Day" (20 Funky Jazz Greats, 1979), in an ode to the use of popular music in relieving the drudgery of working life. Or in another early example, Cabaret Voltaire's "Nag Nag Nag" (Extended Play, 1978) pokes fun at the everyday irritations of English life with layers of feedback squealing before a simple drum machine playing out the forms of popular musical culture. Boyd Rice, working under the name NON, makes noise compositions from layers of pop rhythms.ⁱⁱ For the industrial musician, the critical answer to the totalitarian sound culture of pop does not lie in a high art avant-garde that was instead a part of the class problem in England, but in the distortion and remediation of popular sounds.

Industrial musicians solve the pop problem by pushing pop music so as to distort and parody the sounds of the machines that reproduce it, to incorporate the feedback of the production process so that it reveals its place in the structure of industry. Throbbing Gristle's 20 Funky Jazz Greats (1979), Cabaret Voltaire's The Voice of America (1980) and NON's Physical Evidence (1982) each parody or distort the five minute pop song formula to create a consciousness of industrial production within pop music. In this essay I want to turn to Coil, a post-industrial outfit that emerged from this generation of musicians and released a first 12" in 1984. Largely made up of duo John Balance and Peter 'Sleazy' Christopherson, Coil also included members drifting

in and out of their studios over the years. Balance and Sleazy were both members of the post-industrial project Psychic TV, and before that, Christopherson was a founding member of Throbbing Gristle. Coil do something very different with the pop song to these other industrial and post-industrial groups, however, and it is to their particular operation upon it that I want to turn here, in order to theorise their work.

While Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret Voltaire parody the pop song, and NON turns it into noise, Coil simulate the powerful place of the pop song without actually producing pop music. They denaturalise the pop song by constructing music from their own original recordings, their own noises, to construct a distinctive relationship with popular music. As Balance tells an interviewer in 1987:

Sonic research is very hard to do properly on a Rough Trade advance or whatever. It maintains a pseudo-science, it has a wishy-washy quality that I don't particularly want to be associated with. I'd rather be seen as a perverse noise unit with decidedly dubious musical leanings.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here Balance rejects the avant-garde in favour of the popular. Yet Coil were not always interested in being musical. The first Coil release, *How to Destroy Angels* (1984), is derivative of the avant-garde tendencies within industrialism. For in addition to the kinds of pop-noise crossovers I have been writing of here, Throbbing Gristle and other industrial groups attempted to venture into the nether regions of sound, creating atmospheres with early synthesisers, loops and field recordings. Coil's *How to Destroy Angels* also creates a distinctive atmosphere by using the recorded sounds of clashing swords, gongs and bullroarers. The result is at times cacophonous, at others ambient, but always reminiscent of other, experimental industrial releases of the time, such as Throbbing Gristle's *In the Shadow of the Sun* (1980), Nurse With Wound's *Homotomy to Marie* (1982) and Lustmord's *Paradise Disowned* (1984).

It is possible to turn to the inlay notes of *How to Destroy Angels* so as to unpack the way in which Coil set out to differentiate themselves from their industrial fellows. The subtitle of this first record, printed in the liner notes, is *Ritual Music for the Accumulation of Male Sexual Energy*. This combination of occultism and drug use recalls the influence of Alastair Crowley on the group. Indeed, as David Keenan demonstrates in *England's Hidden Reverse* (2003), Balance and Sleazy cultivated an education on esoteric and occult matters, and took this knowledge seriously.^{iv} Yet for most listeners to

Coil's recordings, this is not an education they share, and this allusion to an inside meaning of the record is mysterious. The record has a doubled function, as it targets insiders who are involved in rituals to accumulate male sexual energy, and outsiders who are not involved in such ceremonies. It is tempting to dismiss the insider meanings altogether, to proclaim that every listener is an outsider, and that the only listeners who could be inside the circle would be Coil themselves. The industrial structure of distribution, in which manufacturing is at a distance from consumption, ensures that consumers could never know if they were performing the right ritual, if they were in fact on Coil's precise wavelength. Thus it is that, even in this first release, Coil reproduce popular music's structure of power by naming their listeners as outsiders, and establishing the listener's desire as the desire of the other, or the desire for another's desire.

Adorno bases his critique of popular culture on Hegel, whose reasoning methods find that there is little that takes place beyond historical causality. Adorno's Hegelian Marxism does not admit of the kind of alternative symbolic universes that Coil mythologises in *How to Destroy Angels*, as its form remains, for Adorno at least, caught up in the historically dominant mode of industrial reproduction. For Adorno only a completely different musical structure can bring into being a sufficient questioning of capitalist modes of thought. The theories of another Hegelian, Alexandre Kojève, make a better framework for thinking through the specificity of Coil's art.^v Kojève reduces Hegel's historicism to a struggle between master and slave. The master depends for his power on the recognition of the slave. The problem for the master, however, lies in the fact that he remains unrecognised, since he does not recognise the slave in turn. The master wants to be recognised by other masters, but no master could recognise another without turning himself into a slave. It is to the master's double-bind, that describes the stratification of history within modernity, that we can turn to unpack the way that Coil also produces popular music that reproduces its own historical situation of power.

In Coil's liner notes to *How to Destroy Angels*, the appeal to insiders is an appeal for an impossible counter-recognition. These notes work against creating an empathetic listenership for the record, and instead places Coil in Kojève's double-bind, as their appeal to other masters is made only on the condition that they go unrecognised. The exclusion of listeners places the listener in a condition of slavery, of what Adorno described as a transfer of recognition-authority to the object.^{vi} To unpack this

troubled structure in more musical terms, we can turn to Coil's subsequent records, that followed after the success of *How to Destroy Angels*. These records are *Scatology* (1984), *Horse Rotorvator* (1987) and *Love's Secret Domain* (1991), after which Coil reaches a definitive break in their style of recording. A 1987 album, *Gold is the Metal*, will not be considered here, as it is composed of offcuts of *Horse Rotorvator*, and nor will releases after *Love's Secret Domain*, since this record sent Balance and Sleazy into a drug-induced state of imbalance that meant these subsequent records were composed between rehabilitation clinics.^{vii} In the three releases chosen here Coil make use of the pop song structure. They mix Balance's lyrics with a combination of instrumentation and sampled sounds that serve as instruments within the songs, to build three to six minute song structures. They work through what Balance describes as the "noise" of popular music to create their difference from this noise, and their mastery over it.^{viii}

My argument here is that their use of sound samples is the particular perversion that most effectively produces this mastery, that by rendering strange sounds to serve the role of instruments, they illuminate the power structure of popular music. The process of appropriating strange sounds for musical uses denaturalises music's association with instrumentation, illustrating a mastery over the pop music form without deferring to its conventions. Scott Lewis estimates that "Samples account for 60 to 70 percent of the sounds on Coil's albums."^{ix} Coil's samples are either original or found recordings, and combine with drum machines, trumpets, guitars, vocals, synthesisers and other conventional sounds to build a distinctive structure of both recognition and non-recognition within their music. This is the recognition of the pop song, coupled with the non-recognition of sampled, non-instrumental sound sources that defamiliarises this pop song, indeed and at times rendering the song structure unrecognisable.

The relationship that Coil has to these sounds is a Hegelian one, as they subject samples to the place of the compositional master. They take the in-itself of sounds without a natural allegory, the stuff of the avant-garde, and turn it into the for-itself of music. Coil construct a dialectic that makes sound unrecognisable except for its relationality in music. The mind wants to treat it as sound on its own terms, in-itself, but is forced to admit it is mere appearance as it consists only of its relations. The capacity to think the in-itself is only possible due to the conception that sound is in fact something that is not

itself, in a dialectical sublation that in Hegelian terms is a demonstration of mastery. This operation is simpler to grasp when we turn to Coil's lyrics. Indeed, Hegel himself preferred music with lyrics, because it was easier for him to grasp than instrumental music.^x

The first cover song that Coil released, "Tainted Love" on the *Scatology* album, was first written and composed for popular singer Gloria Jones in 1964, when it was a popular hit. In the early 1980s the song was covered and for the second time and achieved popular status on the charts, in the hands of Soft Cell. Coil's cover of the song was subsequently released as a single to raise money for an AIDS charity, as well as included on the *Scatology* album. The first and second versions of the song, by Jones and Soft Cell, refer to a passionate infatuation of one person with another, in a typical pop performance of the desire of the other. Coil's cover song, however, embeds the song within a different meaning, this being the virus AIDS. They slow the song down to a melancholy pace so that it is no longer a dance track, but is instead played slow, and the "Tainted Love" of the title alludes not to love but the infection of the body by a fatal disease. Thus Coil shift the meaning of music from being implied in disco humanism to a fracturing of this humanism by mortality, dispelling the illusion that recognition produces identification. Instead they return to a struggle on the terms of recognition itself. How to identify with the death of an other? The for-itself of love turns in this cover into the in-itself of death, and yet as a cover song, Coil's "Tainted Love" can only ever return to signify the for-itself of appearances.

So too in Coil's third record, *Horse Rotorvator*, mastery comes from the conversion of original or found recordings into instrumentation. Here Balance's vocal references to the Roman Empire, to anal sex, death, and to Salò's (1975) director Pier Paolo Pasolini, position the music amidst a set of neo-classical references. Here Coil transform the universal humanism of popular music into a situation of mastery, on both lyrical and musical levels. So that in the song "Blood from the Air" the place for a guitar solo is replaced by the sounds of people crying and screaming, and apparently being sucked into the sound of a reel-to-reel tape rewinding. This substitution of the conventions of a pop song with unconventional sound sublate the structure of recognition established by pop music, turning its naturalism into something else.

It is to Coil's fourth and perhaps most significant record, *Love's Secret Domain*, that we can turn for a fully articulated version of this role of original sound.

This time Coil work with the techno genre, then a popular form of music in the UK. The record resembles the acid house that seeded the late 1980s and early 1990s techno movement, but unlike acid house it does not depend on the electronic synthesizer for many of its sound sources. Its first two tracks "Disco Hospital" and "Teenage Lightning" parody the kind of youthful positivism, once again the humanism, that accompanied the growth of techno's recreational scene. Other tracks play more lightly with techno tropes of this drug culture, the lyrics of "Things Happen", "Windowpane" and "Further Back and Faster" simulating or describing the situation of being totally wasted before or after the dance party. In "Further Back and Faster", for instance, two people talk to one another:

We've gone too far. We need ... we haven't really got anywhere. Anyway, we've gotta go much further out. We have to go much further ... much further back, and faster ... Wait a minute.

On the same record, Coil's collaborating singer Annie Anxiety again defers to the situation of being very wasted in the track "Things Happen":

Do you have another, uh... Did you light that cigarette for me? Oh, did you leave that on the side? Do you have another cigarette for me? You know, uh, Well, I had somebody once, ah, You know, we used to cook a lot It was a... Do you like chilli's in Ohio?

Instead of making music about and for the dance party, the lyrics locate themselves at a slight distance from it, before or after the party.

From lyrics, we can move then to Coil's musical form on Love's Secret Domain, that also shifts from dancefloor highs to come-down lows. The album collages several different sound components that come together in different ways, using sources that are far from techno's electronic repertoire next to techno beats and sound effects. As Keenan writes:

What separates Coil's use of rhythm from mainstream dancefloor music is that on the whole the beats don't lead the track--they're another integrated texture, spiraling chaotically inward. Love's Secret Domain is claustrophobic to the point of suffocation. At points there's so much blurred movement that it sounds like an 202/203 aural action painting.^{xi}

On "Teenage Lightning" voices are distorted and fragmented to slide between beats, and over the sounds of bubbling and speeding tape. Coil's difference is constituted less in musical structure

here, that replicates the acid house genre for the most part, than it is in the quality of the sounds themselves, whose origins are plainly not from the techno genre. As such, Coil enact an estranging relationship to the pleasures of sound within music, as their sounds lie at some distance from the structures within which they are immersed. Coil stage a metamusical relationship with popular music, if not with music itself, as they demonstrate that sound has little to do with this music and vice versa. They also do this on the level of genre, as their albums move from appropriating such forms as industrial, in Scatology, to gothic folk, in Horse Rotorvator, and techno in Love's Secret Domain. Simulating different genres, occupying their structures without using the sounds that are naturalised within these genres, Coil put musical genre in the place of the slave to become its master.

It is my argument here that Coil's appropriation of musical genres enable listeners to recognise the power structures that operate within popular music. In deploying both cynicism and original rather than generically naturalised, instrumental sound sources, Coil perform an estranged version of these popular genres. If, as Adorno claims, the purpose of popular music is to distract the working masses, then Coil's estranged sounds attempt to defamiliarise the familiar. In this estrangement the listener discovers not only Coil's mastery, but their own slavery as listeners, recognising the desire of the other as a desire that is not in fact their own. Indeed, this desire enacts an exclusion that is particular to the logic of the master. To follow Lacan's reading of Hegel, this is a sadistic operation, in a logic that enacts its desires at the price of the other's own power.^{xii} As Balance's lyrics put it in "Circles of Mania":

*And they open me so wide
That you stick your head inside
You stick your head inside alive
You get sewn inside alive
You get eaten alive ...*

*You get eaten alive by the perfect lover
You get eaten alive
When you've swallowed one you just swallow another
When you've swallowed one you just swallow another*

*To drive away this hunger
You stay in there forever
Caught in the center of a
Circle of mania*

Balance here plays the role of the master of music, who incorporates the listener within himself, incorporating him into a place of slavery from where he can no longer recognise his own mastery.

Acknowledgments

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Discography

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Coil. Horse Rotorvator. 1986. Force and Form ROTA 1.

Coil. How to Destroy Angels. 1984. Laylah Anti-Records LAY 5.

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Coil. Panic/Tainted Love. 12". 1984. Force and Form FFK5.12.

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Notes

i See Theodor Adorno. *Essays on music*. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Ed. Richard Leppert. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

ii For an account of Boyd Rice's work with NON, see Brian M. Clark, Review of *Terra Incognita: Ambient Works, 1975-Present* for Mute Records, 2004. Available from <http://www.boydrice.com/terraincognita_linernotes.html>.

iii Charles Neal. Interview with John Balance and Peter Christopherson *Tape Delay* 1987. 115-126 at 120.

iv David Keenan, England's Hidden Reverse: Coil, Current 93, Nurse With Wound: A secret history of the esoteric underground. London: SAF Publishing, 2003.

v Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. Trans. James H. Nichols. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

vi Adorno, 454.

vii See Scott Lewis, 'Human Rites: Coil's Agony and Ecstasy,' Interview with John Balance and Peter Christopherson, *Option* 44 (May-June 1992). Available from <<http://www.brainwashed.com/coil/writings/option.html>>.

viii Lewis.

ix See Scott Lewis, 'Human Rites: Coil's Agony and Ecstasy,' Interview with John Balance and Peter Christopherson, *Option* 44 (May-June 1992). Available from <<http://www.brainwashed.com/coil/writings/option.html>>.

x See Julian Johnson, Music in Hegel's *Aesthetics*: A Re-evaluation. *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31.2 (April 1991), 152-162.

xi Keenan, 203-204.

xii See Slavok Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).