

Sonic and Cultural Noise as Production of the New:

The Industrial Music Media Ecology of Throbbing Gristle.

### Producing the New

It is a truism that modern and contemporary art from the beginning of the Twentieth Century has concerned itself with the production of the new; new styles, new forms, new deformations of existing styles—the shock of the new. It is also well-known that from the 1970s this production of the new was profoundly problematised if not exhausted and that the ascendancy of the postmodern both in all fields of aesthetic practice and in aesthetic discourse, coupled with art-historical re-evaluations of modernity that called into question the avant-garde's originality in the first place, had reduced the modern concept of the new to a dated element of early Twentieth Century artistic discourse. This was not so much a rejection of modernism and its claims of novelty as its exhaustion through incorporating its procedures in a web of intertextuality and pastiche that rendered every expression, including the ones labelled as modernist or avant-garde as already a quotation of other works in a chain of infinite reference.<sup>1</sup> Popular forms such as cinema and popular music did not escape this postmodern orbit, in fact they epitomised it through their rapid transformations from classical forms whether of Hollywood cinema in the 1940s or rock and pop music of the 1960s to postmodern assemblages of pastiche perhaps finding an ultimate expression in the MTV music video genre of the 1980s. What then are we to make of the form of music known as Industrial music, perhaps not popular but circulating in the sphere of popular music that not only explicitly positioned itself as a radical production of the new but even as an absolute break with the past of rock and pop music? Was this just an ironic postmodern gesture, a reading that seems to be backed up by the anachronistic reference to the industrial, just as Western societies were definitively leaving behind industrial modes of production in favour of the post-industrial?

In this essay, I will argue that this was by no means an ironic gesture but rather a different interpretation of contemporary aesthetics that while bearing some resemblances to the postmodern

regime in other respects radically departed from it, not least because of its rejection of the above narrative of exhaustion. This claim that something new was still possible in music and by implication in other spheres is a paradoxical one, especially when many of these groups operated precisely through the recombination of found materials, of the sonic detritus of modernity, in innovative technological practices that would subsequently be taken up in digital practices of sampling. Nevertheless, this recycling of the past was in no way an empty repetition but rather provided the building blocks for the emergence of radically new sonic forms, new forms of distribution and assemblages of ideas that were able to assume an aesthetic and affective charge, approaching that of the avant-garde itself. In this respect there is a considerable resonance between the aesthetic practices associated with Industrial music and the work of Deleuze and Guattari, which similarly rejects the historical distancing of modern aesthetic practices and claims that the production of the new is always possible whether in art, philosophy or science. While Deleuze and Guattari's treatment of art in What is Philosophy? is mostly oriented towards visual arts and literature, music plays a key role since even when dealing with painting, they understand both figures and the plane of composition itself as dynamic and rhythmic assemblages of sensations rather than static forms. Updating the concept of the refrain from A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari describe aesthetic figures as blocs of sensation, affects and percepts, distinct from lived experience, opinions and perception itself, in that they operate on a virtual level prior to any of these actualisations (Deleuze and Guattari 166 ff.). The question is not one of how art is able to represent life but to distill from the world sensations and passages of life or in other words new rhythms and maintain them in a virtual form. It is on the virtual level of sensation that the production of the new is an operative concept in Deleuze and Guattari and this is also what this essay will show in relation to the industrial music practices of Throbbing Gristle (hereafter referred to as TG). Just how this was able to happen in the seemingly unlikely sphere of popular music, can be brought out by looking at the trajectory of this group whose passage from transgressive performance art to industrial music is expressive of both the potentials and limitations of this

tendency in (un)popular music. The essay will then conclude with an examination of noise as a form of cultural anomaly that maintains its potential for reactivation today.

## Industrial Introduction

Industrial Music for Industrial People<sup>ii</sup>—this slogan, coined by Monte Cazazza in the late 1970s today conjures up images of identically dressed (in black and/or combat clothing) and pierced fans at a Nine Inch Nails or Marilyn Manson concert, in an era where industrial music has come to mean just one musical genre amongst others, frequently little more than heavy rock plus electronics. This essay will attempt to present a different vision of industrial music as it was pioneered by TG, claiming that this group was not primarily concerned with developing new forms of music, even if they were undoubtedly influential on the future developments of everything from avant-garde electronic music, to noise experiments to techno and house music. Instead, what this group was primarily engaged in was an experimentation with forms of communication, in many ways anticipating subsequent developments of both media systems and forms of politics in the direction of the biopolitical and network models that are familiar to us today.

### Throbbing Gristle: Entertainment through Pain

TG was the intervention into recorded sound from the members of the performance art group Coum Transmissions, Genesis P-Orridge, Cosey Fanni Tutti and Peter ‘Sleazy’ Christopherson plus one more—electronics wizard Chris Carter, without whom the subsequent experimentation in electronic music and industrial noise would have been technically much more limited if not impossible. There had already been similar experiments in composing music out of non-musical elements in the Futurist's orchestra of noises, the activities of John Cage, various unorthodox uses

---

i

ii Attributed by P-Orridge to Cazazza in Re/Search 6/7, 10-11. The work of Monte Cazazza is presented in the same volume, 68-81.

of tape recording technologies such as in Musique Concrete. There had also been limited uses of electronic instrumentation in the context of popular music as in German 'Krautrock' bands of the Nineteen Seventies such as Kraftwerk, which nevertheless tended to maintain a Classical professionalism or inhuman mechanicism in their approach to musical composition. Nevertheless, the two spheres of popular and experimental music had remained fairly separated. With the appearance in the mid 1970s of TG and a host of other bands, many of which gained an impetus from the emergence of the Punk phenomenon, suddenly, recorded music was emerging that was self-financed, highly innovative, and operating at a considerable distance from the art establishment: the phenomenon that became known as Industrial Music.

The term Industrial Music came about when TG wanted to release their work to a wider audience than the narrow performance art milieu. From the start, it was a project that was critically engaged with the entertainment industry, rather than the art world, and operated via black humour, simulation and parody:

T.G. themselves decided to call the label INDUSTRIAL RECORDS LIMITED. It was a case of stripping down the camouflage of a music industry and an industrial society and naming the essence [...] Music was an industry, Records meant files and research documents, a library. Limited meant a confrontation of business, and limited areas of interest. (Ford 7.17)<sup>iii</sup>

The content of the subsequent recordings varied greatly, and it would be a mistake to associate Industrial Music with a specific aesthetic style such as the generic notion of the industrial as necessarily involving found or synthetic recordings of industrial noise. The use of this kind of material in the construction of music is a Twentieth Century obsession, that begins with both Italian and Russian Futurisms. Even Industrial groups that are based initially around the synthesis of industrial sound such as Einsturzende Neubaten, through striking large metal objects and the use of industrial machinery as musical instruments, rarely limit themselves to this narrow definition of the

---

<sup>iii</sup> This statement appeared on the cover of The Industrial Records Story 1976-1981, Illuminated records 1984, attributed to Terry Gold, but was in fact written by P-Orridge himself.

industrial. In TG's case the word industrial was meant ironically with an untimely awareness of the decline and collapse of the industrial age—if the industrial world of factory labour and fordist production was at an end, the least we could do was to update popular music to this passing era, rather than remaining stuck in the blues derived form of rock music, with its roots in the agrarian slave economy of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In a sense all recordings are industrial as they involve the industrial replication and replay of real-time sonorous events. It is principally this sense of the industrial that was evoked by TG, to at least bring contemporary music up to date with the industrial revolution and its own nature as an industry.<sup>iv</sup> As such Industrial Music can be seen as a reflexive moment in the history of recorded sound. Even when the aesthetics of *TG* and the groups it influenced appear far removed from the narrow definition of the industrial and in proximity to other musical styles such as techno or the classical avant-garde, it is still industrial in the conceptual sense of an exploration of the potentials of industrialized recording technologies.

Instead of merely replicating the modernist obsession with industrial sound, *TG* acted as a simulated corporate entity, exploring the possibilities of recorded sound, challenging the limited use it had been put to so far, and importantly attempting to make highly deviant and provocative material available to a wider audience. This was in the hope that this would encourage formerly passive recipients of the entertainment industry to engage in their own forms of experimentation. This concept of simulation is crucial to the strategies employed by *TG*. Essentially it involved taking on a particular form or style of imagery in performances, clothing, recordings and album covers without identifying with it, in order to confuse and disorient cultural perceptions. By a clever manipulation of images and information *TG* were able to appear in the guise of survivalists, Nazis, or as a religious cult, without ever being fixed an any single identity or point of view. Simulation as employed by *TG*, was not Baudrillard's process of the replication of the model of the Same,<sup>v</sup> but a process of becoming in which difference was able to appear via a series of masks. This is very close to Deleuze's definition of simulacra as being based on the internalisation of difference.<sup>vi</sup>

---

<sup>iv</sup> See Andrea Juno and V. Vale eds., [Re/Search #6/7](#) for multiple accounts of 'Industrial Culture'.

Many of the techniques employed can be seen as an extension and elaboration of the cut-up theories of William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin.<sup>vii</sup> P-Orridge met Burroughs in the 1970's and was already employing cut-up techniques in many of the statements accompanying Coum's performances. In TG, these theories could be applied not only to verbal language but also to recorded sound and images, as Burroughs himself had done in the 1960's in the films he made with the collaboration of Biron Gysin and Anthony Balch. Put simply, for TG, aesthetic activity was a form of social ritual that could have real effects on future events. The frequent use of voice and sound cut-ups, thematic engagement with ideas of control, and particular interest in ways that technology operates as an instrument of control/persuasion, was all part of an investigation into the magical operations of mediated technologies. Whereas Burroughs and Gysin were more interested in the operations of writing and painting respectively, *TG* focused on recorded sound. Nevertheless, in both cases the results of experimental practice revealed a magical or demonic dimension by which both written language and recorded sound operate to 'possess' the bodies they encounter. This interest in the demonic explains the fascination with the voices of aberrant and persuasive figures such as Charles Manson, Jim Jones, Nazi Propaganda, and right wing fundamentalist Christianity (especially religious television) all of which use the demonic powers of sound/language to exert influence over their followers. By simulating these cult phenomena, *TG* were able to examine the demonic mechanisms by which individuals are subjugated and turned into a pliable mass by organisations of sound and language, with a view to reversing these processes into a process of deconditioning. As such, TG's recourse to the demonic was not the invocation of an other, transcendent realm but made reference to entirely immanent processes of desubjectification and subjectivation, highly resonant with Deleuze and Guattari's equally demonic account of

---

v

<sup>vi</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic Of Sense*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, 257-58.

<sup>vii</sup> Industrial Records released an album of Burroughs' tape recorder experiments, *Nothing Here Now But The Recordings*, which are perhaps the seminal influence on Industrial Music.

becomings in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

To make this activity more concrete, it is worth examining a few examples of TG's work to bring out how their concept of industrial music had a strong relation to contemporary art procedures and constituted a genuine production of new sensations, affects and percepts in the sphere of popular culture. The focus of Coum on the body and its limits was continued in TG but transformed from the exhibitionist display of corporeal processes to experimentation on the psychic and somatic effects of recorded sound. These possibilities, already imagined by Burroughs and experimented with by the U.S. army in Vietnam, were expressed by TG not only through deafeningly loud performances, featuring the band's notorious track 'Walls of Sound,' whose title is self explanatory. One great example of this was their performance at Oundle School where they were invited by a young fan who convinced his teachers that they were an artistic musical group following the work of John Cage. According to reports, the kids (aged between 8 and 16) were 'swept into a Dionysian frenzy. During the climactic wall of sound they went really crazy trying to touch P-Orridge and scream through the microphone. [...] A riot was only averted by the conclusion of the gig and the playing of a Martin Denny easy listening tape' (Ford 10.9). A more sinister use of sound as a weapon was against some unwanted (by TG at any rate) arrivals in the area of their Beck road headquarters. At this time they were fully exploring such themes as survivalism, the training of attack dogs, and camouflage and deliberately cultivating the image of TG as something between a paramilitary organization and a religious cult (that would continue in Psychic TV). When a group of Gypsies occupied the common park at the back of Beck road, apparently threatening and stealing from the residents this was a chance for TG to put its paramilitary ideas into practice: "We buried the Pizo horns secretly in the brickwork of the crumbling back wall [...] They pointed at the tinker nest and were camouflaged with moss, bricks and protected by barbed wire." The wires were run beneath the garden and connected to the signal generator and amplifier in the boarded up room. When working the operators found it necessary to wear heavy duty industrial ear protectors' (Ford 9.19). This sonic assault, coupled with the more mundane practices of slashing tyres and smashing

windcreens, resulted in the evacuation of the tinkers and in P-Orridge's words 'a miraculously viable situation for a practical investigation of the theories they were conceptually considering' (Ford 9.21) including of course some of the least savoury ones, as confirmed by the TG song 'Subhuman' with its deliberate Third Reich associations, which was the direct result of this sonic campaign.

As already stated, TG's idea of the industrial was by no means an aesthetic style; this would be much more applicable to other industrial groups and practices such as the use of mass media cut-ups in Cabaret Voltaire or the use of industrial found objects by Einsturzende Neubauten. TG's music was rather a process of synthetic invention, that rather than representing contemporary culture by means of an industrial aesthetic, expressed and embodied it by means of a constructivism; they literally constructed their experimentation out of the excluded detritus of a crumbling industrial society as the following quotation about Second Annual Report shows: 'When we finished that first record, we went outside and we suddenly heard trains going past, and little workshops under the railway arches, and the lathes going and electric saws, and we suddenly thought, "We haven't actually created anything at all, we've just taken it in subconsciously and re-created it"' (P-Orridge, Research 6/7, 11). This is the reason that Jon Savage and other critics saw TG as a mirror to contemporary British culture at the time; often a very unpleasant and irritating one, but a reflection and even an anticipation of social processes, precisely because by bringing to light and presenting sonically in the arena of popular music all the anomalous elements that were being discarded and repressed they were a direct expression of the cultural unconscious or, in more Deleuzian terms, the virtual of British post-industrial society.

TG therefore embodied the virtual forces, desires and fears of the larger culture at this particular time. Songs dealing with all manner of extreme phenomena from suicide cults and serial killers to burn victims could be expressed through sound, lyrics and imagery that while maybe less visceral than a Coum performance on one level, was able to disseminate a dystopian view of contemporary culture to a much wider and more susceptible audience. A track that illustrates this

very well is one of TG's most well-known songs 'Hamburger Lady' from their 1978 DoA/Third and Final Report album. The lyrics to this track were simply the text of a letter from one of Genesis's mail art friends Al Ackerman about a severe burn victim: 'By far the worst is the hamburger lady, and because of the shortage right now of qualified technicians, e.g. technicians who can work with her and keep their last meal down, Screwloose Lauritzen and I have been alternating nights with her, unrelievedly. If you put a 250 lb meatloaf in the oven and then burned it and followed that by propping it up on a potty chair to greet you at 11pm each night, you would have some description of these past two weeks' (Ford 8.25-8.26). This already gruesome text in cut-up form is made much more powerful by its sonic expression in the TG track based on it and becomes a mysterious and disturbing meditation on destroyed organic life.

TG also saw their experimentation not as primarily concerned with music but with cultural deconditioning and interference with control processes. As already stated this showed the huge influence of Burroughs' ideas on their work, ideas that would later influence the by now widely accepted characterisation of contemporary neo-liberal capitalist states as post-industrial control societies from Deleuze's celebrated 'Postscript on Control Societies' onwards. In this sense, TG saw themselves, not as primarily engaged in aesthetic activity, but as taking part in an information war, a war that they claimed is secretly taking place in all areas of cultural production. As they state in the recording Heathen Earth: 'The reasons that determine everything you do, should be as well thought out as a government coup. It's a campaign. It has nothing to do with art' (TG Heathen Earth). As in other parts of this recording there is a clear reference to Burroughs, whose 'Revised Boy Scout's Manual,' essentially a guide to the potentials of media terrorism, anticipated many of TG's experiments and tactics.<sup>viii</sup> By maintaining a flow of media products that serve to produce normalised and sedated subjects, societies of control are able to maintain their power, and pacify any subversive elements. In the domain of music, this is done via harmonics, melodies, stable rhythms and conventional structures, which soothe listeners and place them in an affectively

---

<sup>viii</sup> A part of this manual was reprinted in the issue of Re/Search devoted to Burroughs, Gysin and TG. Re/Search 4/5, 5-12.

enchanting other place. It is a kind of psychic possession that takes place on a subliminal level: the society of muzak.

For TG, the aim was not so much to destroy or deconstruct music, which is as nonsensical as destroying language, but to analyse and interfere with its workings, taking certain elements on in one experiment, and then attacking them in the next, mixing musical elements with elements of language, with recorded and synthetic sounds, in order to then connect up these elements with deviant desires and ideas. TG operated by decoding the magical or demonic operations of language, sound and music, and reinscribing them in new and disturbing assemblages in order to be distributed in the very arena where they were originally produced: the recording industry itself. This was an attempt to create a media ecology that could short-circuit the entertainment industry and its superficial mass produced pleasures, via the paradoxical notion of entertainment through pain. This 'revolution' did not perhaps actually take place in the sense of a definitive victory against these controlling forces, the improbability of which was acknowledged from the beginning. However, the activities of TG did lead to a revolution in the aesthetics and politics of sound production, the dimensions of which were far reaching and whose reverberations are still being heard today.

This brings us back to the question of virtual sensation, since by engaging with anomaly, TG were operating on the level of the virtual, that is the extreme potentials that are made possible by contemporary post-industrial society but then pushed to the margins. It is precisely through engagement with these virtual potentials that TG were able to produce a qualitatively new type of music. The music of TG was neither a mere effect of the technologies they were using, a representation of the surrounding post-industrial environment, nor a representation of the anomalous phenomena that populate their music such as serial killers, occultists, freaks or burn victims. To merely represent these phenomena, particularly the latter would be a too rapid actualization of the forces they embody and express and therefore would result in little more than superficial shock value. This was indeed the case with some industrial groups such as Whitehouse, whose aesthetics TG completely rejected despite the apparent similarities of their subject matter.

This is not to say that there was no use of shock tactics in TG but precisely to emphasise that shock was used in a tactical way, not to immediately actualize anomalous phenomena by representing them but to tap in to their unactualised virtual forces by maintaining them in their virtuality. This is why TG could not be identified with a particular sound or musical form; whereas in one context the most shocking thing might be to produce a wall of sound at the painful limits of human auditory tolerance, at another it might be producing an Abba-inspired electro-pop love song like United, precisely to counter any coding of the group according to previous expectations. All of this was about following a logic of cultural and musical anomaly, which in other words means precisely remaining at the virtual level of unactualised sensations, of blocs of percepts and affects that are yet to be codified in terms of specific meanings or modes of representation. In other words, what was new about TG was less their sonic experimentation or their engagement with extreme phenomena than their refusal to represent themselves according to a pre-existing format but on the contrary their commitment to maintaining a high degree of disturbing ambiguity and anomaly in everything that they produced.

This resonates with the ways TG operated as a media ecology. One way to approach this question would be to examine how TG pushed the usually superficial idea of independent music to new levels, not only by starting up their own record label, Industrial Records, effectively comprising of the most important recordings of a whole new genre of musical production, but also through the setting up of their own distribution networks, enabling through limited edition mail order cassette releases new possibilities for documentation such as the 24 hours of live TG series. More than this, TG were particularly interested in the power of music and other media to produce subjectivity, its operation as a cult phenomenon, capable of affecting minds and bodies through processes of discipline and persuasion. This led TG to take an interest in forms of social organisation, that is the setting up of a kind of 'anti-cult' that was eventually manifested in relation to Psychic TV by the associated ritual network, The Temple of Psychick Youth. This interest in the capacity of cultural production to produce subjectivity effects is vital to the way TG functioned as a

media ecology; it was not merely the case of pursuing more rigorously than most punk entrepreneurs the ideals of independence, which effectively amounts to little more than doing A and R for major record labels, but rather producing new and anomalous modes of experience that go well beyond the production, distribution and consumption of music, which was instead used as a tool for an anomalous refashioning of subjectivity beyond its usual normative parameters.

Conclusion:

Anomalous Cultural Research, Noise and the Production of the New

The San Francisco based magazine Re/Search, that in its transformation from its earlier punk title Search and Destroy, clearly expressed a shift towards the aesthetics and ideas of Industrial Music, was instrumental in the dissemination of industrial music in an extremely interesting way. Rather than being a mere music fanzine presenting interviews and biographies of musical groups, it aligned itself with the idea of anomalous trans-media cultural research, by for example having an issue dealing with TG, William S. Burroughs and visual artist Brion S. Gysin. In its very influential issue featuring Industrial music and entitled Industrial Culture Handbook, only some of the groups and individuals presented could be seen as primarily involved with music (in addition to TG, Cabaret Voltaire, NON/Boyd Rice, Z'ev, SPK and Rhythm and Noise). There are also sections on Survival Research Laboratories, a group of amateur robotics manufacturers who took former military hardware and other machinery and organic materials and re-used them as the basis for spectacular and dangerous performances, and Sordide Sentimentale, a group of post-situationist theorists who also released records by both Joy Division and TG. Even in the more straightforwardly musical sections of the book, there is a surprising emphasis on the reading material of the different groups and individuals involved which ranges from survivalist manuals and books on the Third Reich to contemporary philosophy to various forms of esoterica; and the record collections are no less heterogeneous. What emerges from this handbook, is a project of cultural heterogeneity with a strong emphasis on the anomalous and the extreme, as a key to understanding

and more importantly creating something out of contemporary culture. The array of serial killers, cult leaders, psychopaths and esotericists, not to mention ‘artistes maudites’ that populate this volume, are not just so many attempts to shock normative tastes or to indulge in transgression, even if sometimes this did indeed take over. Rather what these groups were insisting on was the importance of anomalous and barely understood cultural phenomena as essential to current cultural mutation.

In fact the engagement with cultural anomaly can be seen as the equivalent in the realm of culture to the deployment of noise in relation to classical forms of music. Anomalies are noise in the literal sense of unassimilated and in some cases unassimilable sensations yet to be labeled or ordered under a coherent category of understanding. As Paul Hegarty puts it: ‘Industrial music makes noise explicit, acting as cultural noise at many levels, and making sure these layer collide in collage [...] to challenge not only prevailing aesthetics but the notion of aesthetics being its own domain, and also the notions of what is normal, rational, desirable, or true’ (Hegarty 116). If many of these anomalous phenomena have since been commodified in practices from neo-tribalism to music styles ranging from global esoterica to Techno, to the proliferation and extension of cut-up techniques into almost every sphere of cultural production, the anomalous impulse that animated these groups is still of significance for contemporary artistic and social practices today. The challenge is to find the anomalies that can be confronted and engaged with today, to produce new forms of cultural noise and new sensations in an era when it is perhaps much more difficult to do so than in the 1970s, now that the retro-processing of sonic and other forms that groups such as TG pioneered has become the dominant and standardised technique of sampling as a mode of cultural production. Rather than fetishising this past artistic experimentation by freezing it in a genre that betrays this impulse towards the anomalous, as in most of what passes today for Industrial music, it challenges us to construct a plane of composition capable of assembling the ‘noise’ of our contemporary post-industrial environment and expressing its new and anomalous sensations.

## Bibliography

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. What is Philosophy. Trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson. London, New York: Verso, 1994.

--A Thousand Plateaus. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Ford, Simon. Wreckers of Civilisation: The Story of Coum Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle. London: Black Dog, 1999.

Hegarty, Paul. Noise/Music: A History. London: Continuum, 2007.

Juno, Andrea and V. Vale eds. Re/Search 4/5: William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin and Throbbing Gristle. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1982.

Re/Search 6/7: Industrial Culture Handbook. San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1983.

## Discography

Burroughs, William S. Nothing Here Now but the Recordings (1959-1980). London: Industrial Records (IR0016), 1981.

Throbbing Gristle. Second Annual Report. London: Industrial Records (IR0002), 1977.

--DoA: The Third and Final Report. London: Industrial Records (IR0004), 1978.

--Heathen Earth. London: Industrial Records (IR0009), 1980.

--Subhuman/Something Came Over Me. London: Industrial Records (IR0013), 1980.

Various Artists. The Industrial Records Story (1976-1981). London: Fetish records, 1983.