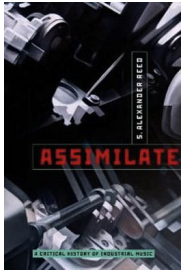


Brainwashed - S. Alexander Reed, "Assimilate: A Critical History of Industrial Music"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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While there have been a few excellent books published about individual bands published over the years (*Wreckers of Civilisation* and *England's Hidden Reverse* spring to mind), no one has quite gotten around to writing a definitive history of industrial music yet. Reed, currently a professor of music at Ithaca College, has certainly made a valiant attempt though (and scored a major coup by getting Oxford University Press to put it out as well).

Assimilate

is essentially half of a truly wonderful book: Reed does a spectacular job chronicling both the formative years of industrial music and its ties to radical art movements, but ultimately gets bogged down a bit in theory and some perplexing choices in focus.

[Oxford University Press](#)

For the first 150 pages or so, *Assimilate* seems like exactly the sort of book that I hoped someone would write, as it opens with a thoughtful introduction by Stephan Mallinder of Cabaret Voltaire, then barrels along in very intelligent and engaging fashion while touching upon a number of compelling and disparate threads. It is immediately evident that Reed knows his subject well and I found myself taking copious notes about unfamiliar and arcane counter-cultural artifacts that I needed to investigate further, such as *Rising From The Red Sand*

,
The Elephant Table

, Robert Ashley's

Wolfman

, and the work of Ilhan Mimaraglu. Also, I learned that William Burroughs is responsible for the concept of "the machine" and how the idea of "brainwashing" originated.

As the book unfolds, Reed skillfully connects the dots between just about everything culturally interesting that happened in the 20th century (mail art/Fluxus, Futurism, Antonin Artaud, Situationism, Oulipo, the cut-up techniques of Brion Gysin and Burroughs, JG Ballard, The Velvet Underground, etc.) and the formation of Throbbing Gristle and their ilk. He then delves into a scene-by-scene history of the various early hot spots, like Berlin, Sheffield, San

Francisco, and the Wax Trax! scene. Some of the information covered has certainly been well-documented before, but Alexander also digs up a lot of interesting material on RE/SEARCH, Berlin squatter culture, and less frequently discussed figures like Test Dept., Clock DVA, Survival Research Laboratories, and Monte Cazazza.

Also, *Assimilate* is surprisingly funny in places, which I would not have expected. Some of it is probably not intentional, like declarations that early industrial musicians were people who "read books," an attempt to analyze the meaning of KMFDM lyrics, or Reed's statistical analysis of personal pronoun use on *Pretty Hate Machine*, but some of the musicians covered definitely offer up some very amusing quotes (I especially enjoyed the bit about SPK deliberately ripping off "Blue Monday" and immediately getting a major label deal out of it). Of course, the sole Steve Albini quote in the book naturally steals the show, as he witheringly dismisses Al Jourgensen's(*) oeuvre with "I'm pretty embarrassed that Ministry keeps putting out our records [referring to Big Black]." There are also some rather lurid bits of industrial lore sprinkled throughout the book, such as the fact that SPK's Graeme Revell once accidentally set a fan on fire with a flamethrower at a Survival Research Laboratories performance. Also, I was very amused and horrified to learn that D.A.F. once played for a bunch of (presumably very confused) skinheads after accidentally being booked as a white power band.

Of course, given that *Assimilate* is a critical history put out by an academic press, the previously rollicking and colorful history necessarily detours into theory later in the book. Some of Reed's deeper discussions are quite thoughtful and compelling, such as his musings on how industrial music is simultaneously technophilic and techophobic, the importance of cut-ups, or how the availability of affordable electronic gear had a homogenizing effect on the genre. Unfortunately, there are also lengthy de rigueur analyses of race, gender, and connection to tradition that touch on some interesting ideas, but either overstay their welcome or go in baffling or exasperating directions.

For example, the chapter on gender spends a long time analyzing Skinny Puppy's appeal to women through their evocation of the "feminine gothic" and the abjection of their theatrical performances. Similarly, the chapter on race spends time pondering the rarity of black musicians in industrial music, which seems kind of pointless to me: like every cool musical trend, industrial music attracted a diverse array of people when it was fresh, vibrant, and exciting. Once that initial period of white-hot creative inspiration dissipated, industrial almost exclusively became the homogeneous province of white males, as everyone else (wisely) moved onto the next interesting thing. It is just the life-cycle of hip subcultures and it plays out that way time and time again (see punk, post-punk, ska, etc.). There is not much deeper meaning to be found than that. Certainly there were some noble attempts to bridge industrial and black culture in the '90s, but most were too clumsily executed to celebrate (Ministry's "Test" being a prime example of an experiment best forgotten). There *are* admittedly some interesting

bits about the appropriation of African imagery and facism/racism in the scene though (a teenage Philip Best marketed Ramleh's

Onslaught

as "white power music," for example).

Finally, the chapter on industrial music's ties to the English folk tradition very nearly drove me insane, as it would have been an ideal time to discuss how bands like Current 93 are coming from the same place as industrial artists, but are rejecting mainstream culture in the opposite way (by looking to tradition rather than the future). Instead, Reed analyzes a folk ballad covered by Spartak and a somewhat martial, modal club hit by Controlled Bleeding. Elsewhere, there is a puzzling discussion of industrial's relationship to the blues. I am sure that Reed is not imagining the references and resemblances, but I also sure that they are not evidence of a deeper significant influence.

Reed's fascination with "club" music/industrial dance is another serious sticking point with me, though it is admittedly colored by a deep personal bias and I can see why he chose to focus on it: bands like Covenant and VNV Nation are a hell of a lot more popular than any of the genre's originators. Unfortunately, Covenant's lyrical embrace of the sublime and VNV Nation's recurring metaphor of life as a battle are not nearly as compelling as the fact that SPK essentially formed at a psychiatric hospital. Once all the fringe-dwelling weirdos left (taking their love of radical/revolutionary art and literature with them), I basically checked out. For Reed, however, the coherence of a rather rigid and dance-focused genre was merely another important and exciting step in industrial's evolution. He is not necessarily wrong in thinking that, but there was undeniably a transition from adventurous art to formulaic entertainment (albeit a dark strain of it) that took place at some point and it seems puzzling to give the two similar importance (ex- both à;GRUMH... and the New Beat genre are probably given just as much ink as Coil, while bands like Zoviet France and Esplendor Geométrico are mentioned only in passing).

Assimilate closes with another requisite "critical history" trope, as Reed discusses industrial music's future and suggests ways for it to stay relevant and meaningful in today's cultural landscape, viewing industrial music's evolution in a maddeningly linear way (and dismissing noise as a dead-end). This again left me scratching my head, as I immediately thought "Why? Does it need to? Hasn't the genre run its course?," followed by bewilderment that he did not mention any of the industrial-rooted bands that are currently making challenging and exciting music right now in 2013 (like Raime, Mika Vainio, Alva Noto, and Vatican Shadow). While that was admittedly a frustrating note for the book to end on, *Assimilate* is ultimately still quite an impressive accomplishment—and, more importantly, it is the only substantial book available on the subject. It is definitely not the book that

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would have written, but I (notably) have not written a book and am very unlikely to ever do so (and if I did, I doubt it would be nearly as well-researched and thorough as this one). Sifting through a mountain of fanzines and compiling a coherent history of 30+ years of a subculture that spans continents is a daunting and difficult task, so whether I agree with everything or not, Reed has done some useful and valuable work and created a helpful reference for navigating some very obscure cultural terrain.

*(*Amusingly, I read Assimilate concurrently with Jourgensen's Ministry: The Lost Gospels, a juxtaposition I would heartily recommend for those who crave extreme cognitive dissonance, as Al's recounting of the same era is an unrecognizably different and depraved rollercoaster of sodomy, bestiality, heroin, and hanging out with The Mentors. □ In fact, I think the only things that the two accounts share is that William Burroughs was very important and that Skinny Puppy were very dysfunctional.)*