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"The Price of Existence is Eternal Warfare": Industrial Masculinity and Coil

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The British band Coil, centered around musician-cum-artists John Balance and Peter Christopherson, has always been difficult to situate generically. Formed in 1982 after the dissolution of the first industrial band Throbbing Gristle left members Christopherson, Chris Carter, Cosey Fanni Tutti, and Genesis P-Orridge free to develop more personal projects, Coil has always been viewed historically as constituting part of the second wave of British industrial music. Not only do Balance and Christopherson feature prominently in both industrial music fanzines and scholarly histories of the genre, but their work is frequently categorized under the label “goth/industrial” by record stores and websites. In a review of the band’s last official album *The Ape of Naples*, for example, a contributor to the website Sputnik Music calls Coil “one of the most influential Industrial bands ever” and credits them with having “formed the entire sound [of the genre].”

After the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, Balance himself began publicly rejecting Coil’s affiliation with the genre. “This industrial music thing,” he explained in a 2001 interview for Radio Inferno, “we don’t fit with that. We’re something else.” In his book-length history of Coil, Current 93, and Nurse with Wound, music journalist David Keenan sketched out what this “something else” might be: a tight constellation of associated interests, beliefs, and working practices that he named “the esoteric underground.” Others have seen Coil’s work (or at least, particular instances of it) as representing radical interventions in traditional genres such as electronica or progressive rock or constituting new, hybrid generic forms, such as “folk-drone.”

David Toop, reviewing for *The Wire* magazine Coil’s 2001 compilation *Moon's*
Milk, likens it to Henry Flynt’s modern hillbilly music and Björk’s Vespertine before declaring outright, “This is folk music.” A year later, in a review for the same magazine of transgender musician Terre Thaemlitz’s recent works, Ian Penman groups Coil together with Thaemlitz and the music collective Ultra-Red as representing a new, queer face of cutting-edge electronica.

Though some might see Coil’s unstable generic identity as ultimately irrelevant to an understanding and/or appreciation of their music qua music, I argue in this essay that such instability is ultimately at the heart of their work, both methodologically and semantically, and represents a concerted effort on Balance and Christopherson’s part to use the genre of industrial music to imagine and promote a queer subject position. I thus read the confusion over whether or not Coil is an industrial band as stemming from their violation of the intrinsic but usually unvoiced strictures regarding gender and sexuality upon which the genre itself is founded. Toops’ grouping together of Coil with Björk, like Penman’s association of the band with Terre Thaemlitz and Ultra-Red, is very much to the point, as such an identification of industrial music men with women, lesbians, gays, and transgendered persons is not only unusual (to say the least), but also functions to justify the relocation of Coil’s music into a “softer” genre such as folk or electronica. By contrast, the two heterosexual male centers of Keenan’s esoteric underground, Current 93’s David Tibet and Nurse with Wound’s Steven Stapleton, despite producing work that is as idiosyncratic and even sui generis as Coil, have rarely been subject to a similar generic handwringing nor themselves demonstrated much concern over how they are identified generically.

My assertion that Coil subverts, or queers, the dominant gendered underpinnings of industrial music depends, of course, on the logically anterior claim that industrial music is, as a genre, organized around an identifiable gendered subject position. This anterior claim is not without its flaws, particularly given the wide range of work that has been identified with the genre over the past three and a half decades. Given such a range, one would expect to find a variety of subject positions associated with different bands or albums, even if one position were more common than others. Nevertheless, I contend that a single identifiable gendered subject position, though not necessarily present in every industrial work, functions as a generic frame, determining the tendencies by which we read or hear such works and also, in perhaps the majority of cases, the conscious aesthetic choices industrial musicians actually make. I call this subject position industrial masculinity, and ascribe to it three general qualities: sexism or outright misogyny, the celebration of discipline via the ends-oriented social form of the troop, and a schizophrenic obsession with the violence of control systems.

In seeking to demonstrate how industrial masculinity works to organize the genre and how Coil’s music attempts to subvert this masculinity, one
might be tempted to argue by way of quantity. One might establish the presence of industrial masculinity, for example, by offering a litany of song titles that are misogynistic, a catalogue of fascist imagery and metaphor, or a series of quotations about the violence of "control." One might do likewise with Coil, presenting a list of all of the band's tracks that involve women, an index of metaphors and language drawn from pagan rituals, or an exhaustive account of the various "ecstatic" production techniques the band has utilized. Though not without some value, this is not my method in what follows; instead I offer close readings of four industrial "texts," one by Coil and three by other bands. Except for the Coil text, which is the group's first official release as a band, none of the texts chosen are particularly famous or historically "important," but rather are exemplary in their general construal of masculinity. By reading these texts rather than merely listing them, I seek to demonstrate how industrial masculinity shapes, at the level of the text itself, what film scholar Rick Altman names the "semantic" and the "syntactic" elements of the genre. In other words, I wish to trace how the aesthetic features of these industrial texts interact and cohere to produce a particular form of masculine meaning. Coil's work, even as it seeks to queer these features, is also itself dependent upon them; in the very act of subverting industrial masculinity, Coil's work thus partially reproduces the values that underlie it.

"We Hate You (Little Girls)"

The opening pages of the nineteenth issue of Kata, a newsletter/catalogue published by record label Come Organisation in support of the industrial band Whitehouse, feature a black and white comic by Spanish artist Miguel Angel Martin titled "Whore Cull." In the comic, a man is approached on the street and propositioned by a female prostitute. After two panels of sex, during which the man "no se ha corrido" [hasn't cum], the woman pulls away, insisting "Yo ya he cumplido, asi que venga la pasta!" [I've done my part, so bring on the dough!]. In response, the man reveals a knife and on the next page is depicted in a series of panels slicing off one of the woman's nipples and then slitting her throat. A square text block quotes serial killer Peter Kurten: "A veces, cuando seccionada la garganta de mi victima tenia un orgasm; otras veces, no, pero entonces el orgasm me llegaba al apunalarla" [Sometimes, when I had cut the throat of my victim I had an orgasm; other times I didn't, but then my orgasm would come when I stabbed the victim]. On the final page, the man is first represented by a dark silhouette shown standing over the woman's body; a complicated series of pipes snake along the walls that surround them while on the wall above the woman's body are
visible the characters “370-ii.” In the next two panels, the man, seen only from behind, removes his pants, and defecates on the woman's chest. The rest of the strip then depicts him walking off into a horizon of factory smokestacks while, in more detailed close-ups, we are shown the woman's mutilated chest and face. In the final panel, one of the pipes along the wall of the alley is show spewing a cloud of smoke into the sky; below it, a pair of lines has been drawn rising from the turd atop the woman's chest as if to suggest that it is steaming in the cold.

That the comic is misogynistic hardly requires sustained analysis to demonstrate; indeed, it is shockingly forthright in its depiction of sexual violence toward women. What is less immediately apparent, however, is the representational strategy the comic employs to construct its specific vision of masculinity. Except for her legs, breasts, and buttocks—which are drawn according to traditional standards of sexual beauty—Martin's prostitute is a hideous caricature of femininity, her face elongated and overly made up, her mouth crammed with sharp teeth, her fingers claw-like, and her hair a thick mass of tiny curls resembling pubic hair. Martin frames the images in such a way that her eyes or head are frequently cut off by the top of the panel, sometimes reducing her to a mere body but other times emphasizing her ghouliness. After the sex has begun, for instance, a panel depicts a close-up of her tongue dripping saliva as it protrudes under a row of pointy teeth; her hand appears at the bottom of the panel, one sharp nail puncturing the panel’s frame, while at the top a speech balloon relays the words, “SLURP! HMMM!” In contrast, the man, dressed in a back suit, remains obscured throughout the comic. His back is often turned toward the viewer and his head, when it appears at all, is angled so as to provide only the slightest sense of his profile. In the panels where he faces us, his body is hidden behind the woman's, providing an unencumbered vision of what he does to her. No speech or thought balloons are visually associated with him (the Kurten quote appears rather to be commentary), and in his silence, lack of expressivity, and general invisibility he appears an almost impassive killer. His body, often drawn in silhouette, is a solid mass of static black, the antithesis of the woman's dynamic form. He is an impassive, almost mechanical figure, whose violence thus reads more as punishment or the product of compulsion (perhaps produced by the industrial environment) than it does the pursuit of jouissance. Even Kurten's quotation sounds oddly clinical, the orgasm figured as rational effect rather than final cause.

Although extreme in its depiction of violence toward women, “Whore Cull” is not an exceptional industrial text nor is its construction of masculinity unusual. Indeed, Martin's comics feature throughout Come Organisation's run of Kata, where they are supplemented by images of dissected female corpses and advertisements for albums with track titles such as “you don't
have to say please," "ass-destroyer," and "i'm comin' up your ass" [sic]. Come Organisation is the most explicitly misogynistic of well-known industrial labels, but the masculine identity it promulgates is observable in varying degrees throughout the genre as a whole—even in the work of Throbbing Gristle, which featured an important female band member, Cosey Fanny Tutti (see in particular the tracks "Slug Bait," "We Hate You (Little Girls)," "Ham­burger Lady," and "Persuasion"). The structuring misogyny of this identity stems in large part from the genre's particular construction of dissent and revolt, wherein the industrial man, recognizing that seemingly natural desires are actually systems of control, works to overcome the values associated with traditional ideals of beauty, love, and family. Within this logic, women, figured as expressive, emotional beings who restrict access to sex, become an impediment to self-actualization and thus a problem to be solved. Whereas the solution for Guy Debord and some of the other Situationists, who imagined women as posing a similar ideological problem, was to reimagine women as liberated and excessively liberal sexual beings, for industrial culture the solution was primarily to representationally obliterate women. Where images of violence were not employed, such obliteration was typically achieved by reducing women to pornographic objects—as on the album cover to Nurse with Wound's Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella (which was reportedly banned by Rough Trade on account of the "sexist" cover art13) or the imagery employed by Sleep Chamber. In its rejection of women as "free" subjects, industrial masculinity secures itself by a refusal to engage with real sexual difference. The male is rather conceived as a self-sufficient subject category, defined, as we will see, in relation only to the same, that is, other men.

If the rejection of women via representational violence can be seen to function as a form of compulsive disavowal designed to secure via negation industrial culture's endogenous construction of masculinity, how might the positive or affirmative identification with such masculinity display itself? To answer this question, let us examine another exemplary text, the twentieth-anniversary edition of Death in June's Brown Book, released in 2007.14 For this edition, the cardboard digipak usually housing New European Recording's releases was replaced by a circular box made out of soapstone with the image of the Prussian Totenkopf and the number 6 (for the month of June) carved into its top. Two CDs are included inside, along with four patches—two containing the Totenkopf 6 image, one containing the Aligz rune, and one containing the image of a gloved hand holding a whip over a circle containing the number 6. Completing the edition are four circular, photographic inserts, each of which depicts a sepia-tinted image of soldiers dressed in camouflage uniform. Two of the photos capture single men in front of the camera: in one a man faces the camera uncomfortably; in the other, a soldier
is photographed looking into the distance in profile. The third photo depicts a tall man staring impassively at the camera while a shorter man, slightly smiling, raises an indiscernible object (perhaps a mug of frothy beer) toward a third man off-frame. In the final picture, the body of a dead soldier, his countenance facing the camera, is in the process of being pulled out of a river by a pole (the men wielding the pole are out of frame). The design of the uniforms and quality of the photographs suggest they were taken during World War II, but no specific information is provided to suggest to what side or nation the soldiers belong.

Clearly, the inserts and iconography of *Brown Book* indicate an attraction to fascism. Indeed, due to the album's flirtation with Nazi symbolism and the inclusion of parts of the *Horst-Wessel-Lied*, the original Nazi Party's anthem, on the track “Brown Book,” the album has been banned in Germany since its original 1987 release. Thanks to albums such as *Brown Book*, Death in June has thus been regularly labeled a “fascist” band by much of the musical press and been singled out as dangerous on anti-Nazi and socialist websites, such as *Who Makes the Nazis?* and *libcom.org*. A close reading of *Brown Book’s* anniversary inserts, however, suggests a more complicated aesthetic project, rooted not in politics as traditionally conceived but rather in gender.

On the one hand, the invocation of fascism via the patches heralds back to an earlier form of martial camaraderie, in which individual men, shedding their individual desires and social functions, come together as a homogenized, end-driven social form. Such a form, as Friederich Hayek notes in *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, is a man-made order of necessarily reduced complexity, organized through relationships that are both rationally determined and dictated from above in order to achieve a specific end or purpose. Writing in the 1970s, Hayek cites the military troop as his primary example of such a form, which he contrasts with both liberal democracy and competitive markets. In contrast to the soft man of the postwar consumer society, the World-War-II-era military soldier thus represents a masculinized, fraternal form of anonymity, his individual social identity sacrificed for the sake of fraternal and national duty and his body and mind repurposed for the win-lose conditions of combat. The photographic inserts attempt to represent individual manifestations of this identity by focusing on moments of stillness, during which the camouflaged men are recorded merely as *being* and not as *acting*. The close, circular cropping of the photos expels from the images any sense of an exterior world; by such cropping, the photographic object is reframed as a psychological subject. In light of the pictures' refusal to identify on which side the soldiers fight, such recontextualization presents to a contemporary viewer the men as individual members of an agnostic troop: nameless men who are nationless soldiers. Such an effect resurfaces throughout Death in June's oeuvre, as multiple and sometimes contradictory nationalist positions (British, Soviet, Rus-
On the other hand, the photographs of nameless soldiers are mournful objects, suffused—despite the discomfort their association with fascist iconography elicits—with a sense of mourning. Here, the extinguishing of individual identity is not merely celebrated for what it gives rise to socially in the form of the troop, but is also dwelled upon as the production of a unique and in-itself valuable form of loss. The photo of the soldier in profile is emblematic in this regard, for though the man's expression is stolid and his off-camera gaze suggests a dutiful refusal to fully engage in the act of image-making, his gaze contains a blankness that can just as easily bespeak mournful resignation as it does vigilance. Indeed, the close circular cropping of all the photos invokes the memorializing function of locket photography. Maurice Blanchot has argued that all photographic images resemble corpses, but here the disturbed temporality that Blanchot highlights as the cause of this resemblance is complemented by the soldiers' literal closeness to death via their identity as soldiers. The sacrifice of individual identity via induction into the troop is redoubled via a corresponding sacrifice of individual identity in toto via death. Lest we miss this, Douglas Pearce of Death in June provides a photograph of a literal corpse, not reduced to flesh via mangling or dissection (of the kind we saw represented in the work of Whitehouse), but merely lying on its side in a river-bed, eyes closed as if sleeping. Taken altogether, the inserts thus produce a vision of masculinity premised upon a disciplined, fraternal acceptance of death. The Totenkopf becomes a badge not for those who bring death but those united in their readiness to die.

Though Death in June are somewhat unique among well-known industrial bands for the mournful quality of their militarism (though see also the work of Der Blutharsch), many if not most industrial bands have employed some form of martial and/or fascist slogans and iconography in their work. Typically the martial trope explicitly references Nazi Germany, as in the work of Laibach and Boyd Rice; in some cases, however, the referents are more wide-ranging, as in Throbbing Gristle's use of the British Union of Fascists' lightning bolt symbol or Sol Invictus's militaristic pan-European elegies. Cabaret Voltaire's tongue-in-cheek “Do the Mussolini” aside, the industrial genre's involvement with fascism exhibits none of the shallow playfulness or tastelessness we find in Punk's flirtation with Nazi symbols. As I have tried to show with Death in June's Brown Book, the industrial genre's relationship to fascism hinges instead on the masculine form of martial social organization associated with fascism. In other words, the genre largely ignores the original political content or purpose of fascism (for instance, its corporatism and anti-Semitism) so as to bring greater emphasis to the masculine modes of being-alone and being-together effected by wide-scale militarization during World
War II. The industrial genre attempts to reproduce this form of masculine identity, partially through collective mourning for its disappearance, but also by invoking and celebrating the values associated with it: discipline, willful uniformity, fraternity, combat-readiness, and a commitment to sacrifice. In this construction of masculine identity, the ability to enjoy industrial music becomes, to some degree, a testament to one's ability to have replaced the need for enjoyment with a readiness for some greater purpose or commitment.

The importance of this purpose or—as Throbbing Gristle called it—"mission" prevents the morbid impassivity of industrial masculinity from settling into mere passivity. Indeed, in service to "the mission," the values of discipline, uniformity and sacrifice acquire an instrumental agency. The withdrawal by the industrial man from the world of individuality and pleasure is figured as a means to an end, an integral part of the process of directing a purified will toward the remaking of the world. This valorization of the will to power, though manifesting itself in numerous industrial texts, can be best appreciated in its gendered dimension by close examination of a relatively simple text: the ten-inch, twelve-pound, solid brass erect penis produced by the band Psychic TV in one of its earliest incarnations (which included Peter Christopherson and—unofficially—a young John Balance) to celebrate the release of Force the Hand of Chance. Rumored to have been made from a mold of Balance's penis, the detailed sculpture, replete with veins and retracted foreskin, is delicately inscribed upon its head with the names, spelled-out length-wise, of record companies who had declined to sign the band: "EMI," "ISLAND," "PHONOGRAM," "RCA," and "CBS." In circular writing on the base of the penis are likewise inscribed "PSYCHIC TV—FORCE" and "THE HANDS OF CHANCE." According to a press clipping reproduced on one of the biogs Simon Reynolds created in support of Rip It Up and Start Again, the band had produced at least fifty of the sculptures (mistakenly described here as "gold dildoes") "to be sent as Christmas presents to all the record companies who refused to offer them a deal last year." By this reckoning, the erect penises are an elaborate joke, a way of getting revenge by "fucking over" a host of almost certainly male record executives.

For Psychic TV fans or members of The Temple ov Psychick Youth, however, the "joke" of the erect penis is itself a joke, designed to mask the intended magical function of the sculpture and the album itself. Drawing from a myriad of magical traditions but in 1982 influenced most by Aleister Crowley's occult system of Thelema ("will") and tantric sex magic, Psychic TV conceived of Force the Hand of Chance as a literal work of magic, designed to channel will, via sound and ritual, so as to effect change—to literally "force ... chance" to resolve into some desired pattern. As a totem, the erect penis thus represents both the manifestation of will and potency as well as the redirection of sexual energy toward magical change. Its purpose when made, one
might suspect, was to help bring about change in the record industry and/or to curse those gatekeepers who, by controlling access to publishing, prevented "serious" music from reaching the public. Such magic, though representing an ostensibly irrational mode of human agency nevertheless shares with instrumental reason an ends-oriented, almost technocratic deportment toward the world. Change, under the doctrine of Thelema, is to be imaginatively conceived and then "forced" into being through the deployment of will augmented by ritual. Will, and magic itself, becomes a weapon—a means both to free oneself from control systems and to exert control over others. The brass erection is thus ultimately not only totem but weapon, and, indeed, its literal heft gives it a genuine menacing quality.

Not all industrial bands organize their aesthetic production around Thelemic magic, but nearly all of them depend upon similar constructions of control as both a cage from which one must escape and weapon to use against others. For bands like SPK, whose conception of post-war control systems resembles Situationist thought stripped of Raoul Vaneigem's optimism, the exhibition of how control operates is the primary purpose of the music. For others, such as Whitehouse, Throbbing Gristle, and Genesis P-Orridge, control systems can be repurposed and thus redeployed in guerilla-like acts of psychic terrorism. The result is an often schizophrenic-seeming approach to control, in which P-Orridge, for example, can at one moment decry control as "very much a virus ov thee spirit, it works like HIV diluting our immunity to conditioning and programming," and at another entreat listeners to be "as skillful as the most professional of the government agencies." Though designating this combative, schizophrenic approach to control masculine may be essentialist, this is in fact how most industrial artists themselves frame it, the brass penis being but one particularly clear example. More importantly, within the context of a mode of masculinity already structured around misogyny and the values associated with militarism and fascism, industrial music's valorization of will as the primary "force" for change realizes itself in gendered metaphors stemming from these values. Will becomes a uniquely masculine property, strengthened through camaraderie, wielded in battle for the sake of a mission that transcends the individual, and endangered or sapped by interpersonal relationships with women.

**Luminous and Constant Change: Coil as Queer Industrial Band**

As I have sought to demonstrate through readings of Come Organisation's "Whore Cull," Death in June's *Brown Book* anniversary edition, and
Psychic TV's brass penis, industrial masculinity can be broadly defined in terms of three determining features: sexism or misogyny; a celebration of the disciplined, ends-oriented social form of the troop; and a schizophrenic obsession with the violence of control. Though individual manifestations of gendered subjectivity will, of course, vary from artist to artist and work to work, the generic form of industrial masculinity described here nevertheless functions for the genre as a naturalized semantic structure, both producing and constraining the repertoire of potential modes through which industrial texts can mean. In other words, industrial texts, by virtue of identifying themselves (or being identified by others) as industrial, are necessarily framed by the values of industrial masculinity; although individual texts may challenge these values or seek to alter them, because of the texts' situation within this generic framework they cannot disregard or ignore them.

This point is a crucial one, as it clarifies the stakes involved in how we position Coil generically. If we position Coil outside the industrial genre—or, indeed, as generating by themselves a new genre—we free their work from the constraints of the semantic field associated with industrial music. The taint of industrial masculinity can be stripped from their work, which can now find new meaning as part of other generic constellations (folk music, queer electronica, etc.). By resituating Coil in this manner, however, we lose sight of both the historical conditions and semantic tension that in large part determined the form and content of Coil's texts in the first place. The resulting hermeneutic possibilities are thus arguably less interesting—because less mediated by conflict and less reflective of the texts' own histories—than those that become possible when Coil is situated as part of the industrial genre. In this section, I examine Coil's first official recording through the lens of industrial masculinity so as to demonstrate why Coil's work should be seen as deeply situated within the industrial genre and how, as part of that genre, their work can be seen as subverting or queering the genre's gendered underpinnings.

Disregarding six tracks released under the name of "Zos Kia/Coil" on the 1984 Zos Kia cassette tape Transparent (published by Nekrophile Records), Coil's 1984 album How to Destroy Angels served as the band's official debut to the British music world. Released as a one-sided 12" vinyl by the Belgian label, L.A.Y.L.A.H. Antirecords, How to Destroy Angels consists of a single seventeen-minute track on which the sounds of bull-roarers, clashing swords, symbols, and gongs have been layered together to produce a resonant proto-drone piece. The B-side, sometimes retrospectively described as a separate track, contains in this, its first pressing, a series of unplayable, noise-filled grooves. Printed in marbled orange-red, the album's sleeve contains no graphics or text save for a white box on the sleeve's front side in which is printed in a small, staid font the album's title and what at first glance appears to be—
due to the preponderance of line breaks—a series of notes. When read in sequence, however, the separated sentences resemble a traditional artist's statement, signed in type at the bottom, which introduces the recording as "[r]itual music for the accumulation of male sexual energy." The band describes their intent with this album of producing "a sound which has a real, practical and beneficial power in this modern era. Specifically, it is intended as an accumulator of male sexual energy." For this reason, the band recommends that the album be played "in circumstances that are exclusively male and/or onanistic in nature." As the notes continue, they allude to various "magickal and numerological" concepts used in the music's construction but name only one explicitly: the image or symbol of Mars. "Mars," the band writes, "is the Roman god of Spring and Warfare. His qualities are dynamic energy recombined with a vital stabilising discipline; when self-control is missing the unbalanced force results in cruelty and wanton destruction." At the bottom of the white box, in a slightly larger, italicized font, is the slogan, "The price of existence is eternal warfare," framed by quotation marks and followed by two symbols, one a broken line with dots on either side of its base, the other the alchemical symbol for Mars (also traditionally used to represent the male sex). Etched into the vinyl's runout is the command, "SHUT UP, IT'S GOOD FOR YOU."

Taken in its original form, *How to Destroy Angels* seems an almost perfect example of how the three determining features of industrial masculinity serve to underpin aesthetic production within the genre. Indeed, the album's overt effort to demarcate a uniquely masculine aesthetic space even frames the piece as a kind of manifesto of industrial masculinity. Whereas most industrial texts work to create an experience that reads as unwelcoming or hostile to women, *How to Destroy Angels* simply excludes women outright via instructional address. Industrial music's sexism becomes, in early Coil's hands, programmatic—a point that so troubled the album's largest distributor, Rough Trade, that they unsuccessfully entreated Coil to change the album's cover. With women programmatically excluded, the aesthetic function of music can more easily be reframed as ritual, uniting male listeners through an auditory experience whose purpose is both singularly determinable (the accumulation of male sexual energy) and "practical." By reframing sound as a masculine "tool" capable of providing "beneficial power," Coil attempts to discipline the traditional free play of aesthetic experience, replacing what Kant called mere purposiveness with the concrete purpose of a single end. *How to Destroy Angels* thereby interpolates its collective auditors (at least, its proper male auditors) as a *troop* in Hayek's sense, mobilized under the sign of Mars for the purpose of "destroying angels." In an early interview with Charles Neal for *Tape Delay*, Christopherson and Balance described the album's target as symbols of "the controlling influence of the [Christian]
The sexless messengers that are angels, they explain, represent the Church’s longstanding effort to stamp out the worship of the “natural,” “phallic” deities associated with pre-Christian paganism. Like Psychic TV’s brass erection, How to Destroy Angels is thus a magical means for reclaiming and exercising control over a soft, feminized world, marked by both mass “amusement and distraction” and undisciplined “cruelty and... destruction.” The aphorism about warfare featured on the cover, which came to be a slogan associated with Coil, figures “existence” as a prize won through a determined commitment to spiritual battle, a point further underscored by the aphorism’s original source: an off-hand comment by Aleister Crowley in chapter 80 of his Book of Lies. Sextist, disciplined, and fetishizing of the will-to-power, How to Destroy Angels thus appears to be, in its construction of gender, an utterly typical industrial text.

As Coil released new work over the next ten years, however, such a reading of How to Destroy Angels would become harder to sustain. Within the context of this new work—and in light of repressings and a 1992 reworking of the original EP—How to Destroy Angels acquires an obscure polysemy that destabilizes its function as manifesto for industrial masculinity. The most important new work in this regard is Coil’s soundtrack for filmmaker Derek Jarman’s avant garde feature-length film, The Angelic Conversation, released in 1985. Shot on both Super 8 and video, Jarman’s film depicts two men in a series of symbolic or ritualistic actions: carrying a boulder, lighting flares in a darkened cave, wrestling with each other and their shadows, sleeping in each other’s arms. The non-synchronous soundtrack consists of field recordings of water, breath, and bees; snippets of gay composer Benjamin Britten’s orchestral compositions; fourteen of William Shakespeare’s “fair youth” Sonnets read by Judi Dench; and recognizable musical quotations and remixes from Coil’s How to Destroy Angels. When released on CD by Coil’s own Threshold House label in 1994, the soundtrack was divided into named tracks—partly but not entirely representing the different sections of the film—with titles such as “Enochian Calling,” “Angelic Stations,” and “Sun Ascension.” A further reference to Enochian, the language of angels (etymologically derived from the apocryphal Books of Enoch), appears on the CD itself, where an occult diagram from Donald Tyson’s Enochian Magick for Beginners, a basic introduction to Elizabethan “scientist” John Dee’s occult “system,” is reproduced. Though this connection between angels and Dee is made most explicit on the Angelic Conversation CD, a similar allusion can be found on the third pressing (probably completed at the end of 1984) of the original How to Destroy Angels EP: in place of the noise-filled grooves of the first pressing, Coil opted for a completely uncut, polished side of vinyl, an oblique reference to John Dee’s obsidian scrying mirror, currently housed at the British Museum—and a recurring visual motif in the band’s later work.
Coil's sudden emphasis in 1985 on *conversing* with angels should seem strange in light of what appeared to be their fairly clear instructions a year earlier on how to *destroy* them. How might we understand this change? Given both the short time frame involved and Balance and Christopherson's history of collaborating with Jarman (whose work had been referencing John Dee and angels since his 1977 film *Jubilee*), the explanation that working on Jarman's film had substantially altered their aesthetics and/or cosmology seems unconvincing. Indeed, Coil's continued repressing and reworking of *How to Destroy Angels*—including its rerelease in 1992 as *How to Destroy Angels: Remixed and Re-Recordings* (replete with a Jarman painting as cover art)—suggests neither a repudiation nor a radical revision of their earlier work but rather a constant return to their first album's aesthetic principals. Nor can we discount *The Angelic Conversation* itself as an aberration, for its themes and motifs—especially its interest in Enochian magic—resurface throughout Coil's oeuvre.

Ultimately, what the shift from *How to Destroy Angels* to *The Angelic Conversation* suggests is that our original reading of the earlier album, despite its apparent obviousness, was incomplete. Though seeming to serve as a perfect example of the generic function of industrial masculinity, in the right context *How to Destroy Angels* also invites us to read or hear it occultly or "queerly." On the one hand, for instance, the album's magic can be read through the lens of Crowley's Thelemaic system: the disciplined assertion of will for the purpose of destroying the powers that limit and restrain our own self-actualization. On the other, however, we might read the ritual as Enochian, a magical system derived from John Dee and Edward Kelley's fumbling conversations with angels. Unlike Crowley's system, Dee's provided neither he nor Kelly with the power or tools for self-actualization; according to most accounts of Dee's magic, it in fact had no practical effects at all besides keeping the two men together (and largely destitute) and providing them obscure glimpses of a higher order of being. As the mock-scrying mirror on the album's third-pressing suggests, Enochian ritual's "purpose" is in fact largely non-purposive: it aims merely to help create conditions for seeing and hearing messages that come from beyond the self. What those message will be cannot be known in advance. This vision of male subjectivity is thus subtly at odds with that of the industrial genre, for though Coil's auditor is still interpolated as one of a disciplined order of power-seekers, his effort to discover power is not for the sake of seizing and controlling it but rather experiencing or even being controlled by it. The willful agent, best represented by Psychic TV's erect penis, is replaced by the open medium, which Coil would later come to represent via the anus on tracks such as "The Anal Staircase."

Given Balance and Christopherson's romantic partnership—a detail about which the band remained taciturn until the 1990s—and the misogynistic
nature of much industrial work, we might also read the album’s self-designation as the “ritual accumulation of male sexual energy” as a way of subverting the genre’s usual misogyny. Though, on the one hand, the album’s exclusion of women can be very easily read as misogynistic, on the other, the emphasis on “sexual energy” can be taken as a subtle and even tongue-in-cheek means of highlighting the homoeroticism to which misogynistic social forms give rise. Indeed, the association within the album’s notes of “circumstances that are exclusively male” with those that are “onanistic in nature” suggests that the proper time and space for listening to How to Destroy Angels is during gay sex or mutual masturbation. The album might thus be seen as a lark on the unsuspecting industrial fan, who has been set up to misunderstand what the ritual is *really* meant to accomplish. Neither Balance nor Christopherson, however, has ever ascribed such playfulness to the album. In a 2000 interview with Ian Penman, Balance even presents the album as an earnest exploration of gay sexuality:

First of all, it was sexual energy. The thing is, they didn’t realize we were gay back then. It wasn’t heterosexual male sex energy and there’s a big difference: a lot of the mistake was that people were thinking “misogyny,” “exclusion of women”—and it was a Mars based record, so it did have that masculine element to it. But ... *it was written by gay men.*

As Balance rightly notes, the sexuality of the musicians does affect how one reads this first album, and given how both personal and overtly gay-themed Coil’s later work became, a contemporary listener would likely find it difficult to avoid seeing How to Destroy Angels as a gay-themed text. Nevertheless, and contra Balance, the album’s queerness does not fully invalidate readings that view it as misogynistic. The deliberate exclusion of women is, whether effected by straight men or gay men, still the deliberate exclusion of women, and depending upon its reason and frequency can still fairly be considered misogynistic. In subverting or queering this aspect of industrial masculinity, the album thus ultimately still preserves it. By withholding information about their sexuality from both the album’s notes and early interviews about the album, Coil even had it both ways, producing an album that, for all its subversive qualities, nevertheless seemed to fit easily into the generic expectations of industrial fans and helped establish Coil as participants in the genre.

“*The Industrial Use of Semen Will Revolutionize the Human Race*”: After How to Destroy Angels

Though *How to Destroy Angels* is one of Coil’s earliest works, the same mode of generic subversion at work in it can be found throughout most of
Coil’s oeuvre. Playing with and subverting the gendered strictures of industrial music, Coil at once reproduce and undermine the three main features of industrial masculinity. Though avowedly male-centered, their work subverts traditional notions of male identity and camaraderie by reframing the exclusion of women as a means both of exploring the multiple manifestations of male identity and of queering men’s affective relationships with each other. By excluding women as both concept and collaborators, Coil are better able to undo the genre’s traditional construction of masculinity and thereby perhaps lay the groundwork for a more welcoming generic environment in the future (modeled by Coil themselves in late work such as “Christmas Is Now Drawing Near,” “The Sea Priestess,” and Queens of the Circulating Library). Similarly, Coil’s work queers the industrial genre’s emphasis on discipline and purpose by maintaining it and substituting for the purposeful purpose of the troop the dissolution of purpose and subjectivity associated with the experience (religious or pharmaceutical) of ecstasy. Like many other industrial works, albums such as How to Destroy Angels and Time Machines demand much of listeners, but unlike other industrial works, these albums promise not power or authenticity as the reward for discipline but transcendence. As for the genre’s obsession with control, Coil maintains this but subtly undoes it by exploring and advocating for the aesthetic, spiritual, and sexual possibilities of letting oneself be controlled. Though sometimes easily mistaken for sadism, as in “The Sewage Worker’s Birthday Party,” “His Body Was a Playground for the Nazi Elite,” and “Boy in a Suitcase,” Coil’s music endeavors to construct the abused or the “bottom” as a site for identification. In Coil’s middle work, “bottoming” even becomes part of the production method itself, as with Worship the Glitch (recorded under the name of “ELpH vs. Coil”), where the sounds were produced by spirits or “elves” (or, as “Fire of the Mind” suggests, mathematical angels) communicating via glitches or malfunctions in the recording and processing equipment.

With the deaths of Balance in 2004 and Christopherson in 2010, Coil as a band and aesthetic project ended, but its subversive approach to industrial masculinity has had a substantial impact on the development of the genre. Though Coil’s music remains remarkably distinctive in its sound and textual framing, a number of bands, including Cyclobe, CoH, Thighpaulsandra, and Black Sun Productions, have borrowed from or adopted wholesale the gendered dimensions of Coil’s aesthetic. Perhaps most demonstrative of Coil’s impact, however, is the work of Trent Reznor, whose band Nine Inch Nails helped in the 1990s momentarily bring industrial music into the musical mainstream through the albums Pretty Hate Machine, Broken, and The Downward Spiral. Like the work of Coil themselves, whom Reznor regularly cites as influence, Reznor’s music reproduces the elements of industrial masculinity but in a way that subverts them, most often through identification with the
position of the controlled but also through an interest in what Aldous Huxley might call "downward transcendence"—ecstasy achieved via sex, violence, and drug use. Nine Inch Nail's aesthetic is thus Coil's reproduced and, via the incorporation of traditional rock motifs, repurposed, an act of borrowing that Reznor happily signaled in the name of his newest band: How to Destroy Angels.

NOTES


10. Ibid., translation mine.

11. Ibid., translation mine.

12. Ibid.


24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Coil, *How to Destroy*.

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