
RE-LAUNCHING THE DREAM WEAPON:

CONSIDERING COIL



Coil, "Constant Shallowness Leads to Evil" tour, 2001. From left to right: Ossian Brown, Thighpaulsandra, Peter "Sleazy" Christopherson, John Balance. Photo courtesy of Peter Christopherson.

INTRODUCTION: THAT OLE POST-INDUSTRIAL MAGIC

The real art communicates before it is understood, it contains the knowledge that all men once had, a knowledge that today is unfortunately often ignored and forgotten. I believe that our life is magical in its essence. The working of magic is a series of actions bringing intention into focus. It's a conscious and active participation in transformation between cause and effect. We know that everything we've ever done and do is intentional, and every intentional act is a Magical act. Not understanding it means human life as a journey from nowhere to nowhere.

-Zbigniew Karkowski¹

The distinction between musician and nonmusician- which separates the group from the speech of the sorcerer- undoubtedly represents one of the very first divisions of labor, one of the very first social differentiations in the history of humanity, even predating the social hierarchy. Shaman, doctor, musician. He is one of society's first gazes upon itself, he is one of the first catalyzers of violence and myth.

-Jacques Attali²

The Bard's curse is supposed to be able to blight crops and bowl over crooked politicians. The Bard is not just another imagemonger: the Bard, the shaman-poet, wields power. When the Bard pays attention, even wild animals come 'round to snuff at the psychic overflow.

-Hakim Bey³

The post-industrial age, obsessed as it is with the narrative of exponentially unfolding technical progress (and the curious notion that this goes hand in hand with the ascent of ethical progress), seems to have a special allergy to the word "magic." Nowadays, "magical thinking" is mostly a pejorative term that connotes not a beneficial seduction or entrancement, but rather a kind of languid, unproductive daydreaming: a hope that good things will come to the dreamer from wishing alone, and with no additional effort made to attain these things (no classical hermetic art now referred to as magic has ever promoted this type of

“magical thinking”, but I digress.) Even when “magic” is utilized in a positive manner, it is now used in a way that de-fangs or domesticates it: surely we’ve all seen some television commercial or another in which a stereotypical homekeeper claims that the latest kitchen cleanser works “*like magic!*”

Meanwhile, in the loftier academic strongholds of philosophical and scientific inquiry, the term is either used in a cautiously complementary fashion, with a host of disclaimers or qualifiers, or used in an apologetic way when suddenly realizing how perilously close its *raison d’être* comes to the emancipatory aims of ‘post-modern’ or ‘post-structuralist’ theory. Take, for example, the cultural critic Brian Massumi, who, when compelled to define his use of the term “transcendental empiricism,” gives us something of a ‘parental advisory’ warning before driving us any further: “Giordano Bruno had a word for something like an incorporeal materialism that is *even more troubling* [emphasis added]: magic.”⁴ Massumi then calms our fears by stating that “...the distance between Bruno and our modernity (or postmodernity) is narrowed by his definition of magic as the ‘alloying of knowledge and the will to power to act’”⁵, which in turn “authorizes a pragmatic understanding of magic.”⁶ Still, it leaves us wondering, what exactly *is* so troubling about magic?

Apparently, there’s nothing very troubling about it if it is simply called by some other name. With just a casual bit of searching through the post-modern marketplace of ideas, we find a healthy amount of concepts synonymous with ‘magic,’ yet refusing to name that particular devil while playing his game. The Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek, for example, is often praised on the back jackets of his books as a “master of counter-intuitive thinking.” More interestingly, the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their challenge to Freud (*Anti-Oedipus*), famously spoke of ‘libidinal flows’ or eroticized desires that did not bind themselves to specific bodily targets, yet seemed to permeate everything. This, despite its greater acceptance by academia, is not entirely dissimilar from the attitudes of someone like the magically-minded artist Austin Osman Spare⁷, whose “...intention was pan-sexual, transcendental, and androgynous in that he claimed he was ‘...all sex.’”⁸ One Deleuze acolyte, the theorist-practitioner artist Joseph Nechvatal, unearths further correspondences between Spare’s trance-induced painting and the going concerns of ‘post-structuralist’ thinkers:

Spare’s relevance here is to be found in his interests in the loss of subjectivity, as experienced in sexual transport and sexual fantasies, interests which now dovetail into our interests in the philosophical loss of sovereignty typical of the disembodied finesse when encountered in virtual space.⁹

At any rate, it is definitely not by accident that Spare’s working methods found their way into the Industrial music counterculture - originally through the

efforts of Genesis P. Orridge, but handled more gracefully by the late John Balance of Coil, who we will be introduced to in short order. As such, it was one of the first art movements of the late 20th century to view radically “anti-passive” use of then-new consumer electronics (read: “unintended” uses) as a way of achieving exactly what Giordano Bruno has outlined above. The musicians mentioned were, if nothing else, cognizant of the way that “libidinal flows” were manipulated, misrepresented, or outright monopolized by humanity’s greedier representatives, and how re-capturing them was crucial to psychic wellbeing. The genius of these musicians was to realize how a society enraptured by technical progress was not immune to appeals to its irrationality, so long as those appeals came clothed in the comfortably ‘rational’ circuitry and wiring of the present day.

If magic really is just a ‘will to power’ as Bruno described it, then maybe the present toxicity of the term stems from a distrust or *ressentiment* of those who now wield it most effectively. And there can be no doubt that magico-religious principles have, even in the modern age, been used to cynically exploit masses of impressionable beings - whether that exploitation was done by means of infusing powerful archetypal symbols into rousing oratory, or into television programming. The special feature of many post-Industrial musicians, then, has been their acknowledgement that simply ceding this controlling power to exploitative authorities would gladden their hearts immensely, and that it was time to reclaim these tools for their own use.

Historical record also shows that, without those actions that went beyond mere need and utility, present civilization may not have even existed. Speaking on the infamous cave paintings at Lascaux, historian Lewis Mumford proposes that, if the art was “...only an incidental by-product of magic, did it not nevertheless exert a special magic of its own, which drew men back to the scene of this first triumphant expression?”¹⁰ In other words, these uninhabited ritual centers became the germ of the modern city-based civilization: they were containers for the “social and religious impulses that conspired to draw men finally into cities, where all the original feelings of awe, reverence, pride, and joy would be further magnified by art, and multiplied by the number of responsive participants.”¹¹ So, there we have it: acts of magic not seen as the enemy of technical innovation, but as the very spur of that innovation. The alchemists’ futile search for the Philosopher’s Stone may have never yielded the secret to immortality, yet in the process of badly aiming for the farthest star, they did lay some of the foundations for inorganic chemistry.

FORM AND FUNCTION

The Industrial music of post-Throbbing Gristle groups like Coil, among its other innovations, placed emphasis on making music that was completed by

some active involvement on the listener's behalf. In the past I have described various post-Industrial music configurations as "functional music", out of pure journalistic convenience, but now I realize that this was far too vague a term. After all, being entertained, and passing time at one's workplace or during a dull commute without becoming agitated are the functions of pop music, as banal and utilitarian as they may be to the thinkers and dreamers toeing society's margins. So, more properly, "functional music" might be that which is (as per researcher Keith Jones) "evaluated primarily by [its]...capacity to impact upon worker output, rather than by its aesthetic or 'artistic' value."¹² Seen in this way, both the calculated peppiness of "music while you work" and the particularly esoteric or hermetic strain of post-Industrial music are "functional." However, they differ in that the former attempts to make mechanized routine more tolerable, and the latter attempts to make radical breaks with that routine.

So perhaps it's more accurate to divide the musical sphere into two 'active' and 'passive' hemispheres - or more accurately, *activating* and *pacifying* - rather than making functionality and aestheticism the criteria for division. On one hand there is 'active' music which requires the listener to complete its work through some heightened mental focus, or with a physical activity like shutting off all the lights in the room, re-positioning the speakers that the music is coming from, or maybe manipulating one record by hand as a second record plays by itself (to be sure, the vastly expanding world of dance music fits into the "activating" hemisphere as well.) That remainder of music that requires no input on the part of the listener, or a negligible amount of mental processing, could then be called pacifying, as in the case of the Muzak discussed in the first chapter.

The concept of pacifying music, or music for 'leisure listening' only, is a comparatively recent one when we go back to the pre-human roots of the song form: birdsong has always been used as a means of marking territory, or as a device for attracting mates. The success rate of these short musical phrases to make their point was very closely tied to a bird's survival, and the furthering of its species. Numerous ethnomusicologists also theorize that the first primitive, human song forms had a function of communicating with neighboring tribes. But even as the variety and amount of passive music has exploded since the dawn of sound recording, the functions of 'active' music have multiplied to the point where its best examples achieve an elegant, uncanny synchronization of the senses.

It was the functional and 'activating' turn of electronic music that endeared it to a nascent esoteric underground within the Occident, one whose aggregated rituals and symbolic actions seemed to aim at Deleuze & Guattari's "heterogenesis," or a process whereby the "othering" nature of chaos is acknowledged as the revitalizing force in an aesthetically and morally stagnant world. Varying degrees of sentience were attributed to this chaos by the underground culture, with some approaching it as a divinity to be invoked (some within the 'Chaos Magick' community even believed that the chaos gods

populating H.P. Lovecraft's fictional universe were speaking through him unawares), and others seeing it as a Deleuzo-Guattarian 'plane of immanence.'

Accepting chaos as a benefactor was an act that, in theory, would seem to generate untold different strains of cultural behavior. However, one unfortunate consequence of this acceptance was the outright evangelizing of destructive forces as being those most representative of "chaos", or the uncritical acceptance that anything inverting the popular consensus on morality and ethics was a change for the better. So 'power electronics', free-form distortion, and unyielding death drive became valuable tools for many post-Industrial performers to clarify their outcast role in society. For many others associated with the Industrial genre, though, this was not enough - such exercises in unbridled extremity tended to shore up the parochial nature of the performers, and their susceptibility to sheer frustration, more often than not. As per Throbbing Gristle's Peter Christopherson, "it's only a culture with a long history of decadence and decay that has a need for music that strikes that particular chord. In Thailand, for example, people mainly like to have fun, so really only appreciate music that answers or assists in that need."¹³

Many of the artists associated with the esoteric wing of Industrial culture set out to become like the 'sorcerors' in Attali's above assertion or the 'Bards' of Hakim Bey, though not all managed to transcend their status as downtrodden, disgruntled citizens with an unorthodox way of articulating their grievances against modernity. And for what it's worth, many of these unorthodox techniques supposedly 'exclusive' to the new breed of dark electronics manipulators had already been employed by individuals worlds away from their (anti) social circles: Afro-futurist composer Sun Ra is a noteworthy example here, having incorporated cyclones of synthesizer violence into his work already in the mid-1960s, and having used sheet metal resonance (normally seen as the hallmark of 'ritual Industrial' music) as a central feature of his 1965 album *Strange Strings*. Even the themes of eschatology, death, and stereotypically 'evil' iconography (see the *Fireside Chat With Lucifer* LP) were deeply woven into his music, albeit in a more generalized and less 'site-specific' way than in Industrial music.

Perhaps a greater dilemma concerning the esoteric Industrial music of the 1980s was the fact that many of its representatives *epitomized* the modernity they intended to diametrically oppose. Considering that many of these specimens were steeped in the transgressive *vamachara Tantra* or 'Left Hand Path' lore of Aleister Crowley - the Victorian age's "wickedest man in the world"- it is unsurprising that they would become late-20th century avatars, in this respect. As Hugh Urban writes, "Crowley is a remarkable reflection of the era in which he was born. On the one hand, he deliberately set out to overthrow all established values; on the other, he merely expressed the darker underside or 'secret life' of the Victorian world in which he was raised"¹⁴ (the same could easily be said of Freud, Crowley's contemporary.) In this same way, much esoteric Industrial art was an aesthetic mutation of late 20th century concerns rather than its wholesale

rejection. The “taboos” of self-realization that the 80s subculture flaunted with its “modern primitive” forms of tattooing and piercing could certainly shock (as the ludicrous Operation Spanner¹⁵ attests to), yet the increasing materialism of this era suggests that theirs was a competing manifestation of indulgence - despite the underground’s Crowleyan blasphemies against the Church, monastic self-denial was hardly the order of the day.

There were, of course, other formative influences on the scene besides Crowley - individuals who ignored the glamorous and self-aggrandizing elements of ceremonial pomp in order to concentrate more fully on the fundamentals of the creative ritual. In doing so, they may have lost the seductive power of the ‘secret’ (and were in fact more intent on the public exposition of secrets than upon finding the proper aspirants to entrust with them.) However, the works of these influences more elegantly achieved the esoteric-scientific symbiosis discussed earlier in this chapter.

RUBBING OUT THE WORD

...and, as I point out, the montage method is much closer to the actual facts of perception than representational painting. So, that’s it- life *is* a cut-up, every time you walk down the street or even look out the window, your consciousness is cut by random factors. And it was a question of bringing that back into writing.¹⁶

-William Burroughs

While the ‘war universe’ of William Burroughs may have provided Industrial culture with much of its insurgent tactical apparatus, his luminary status could not have been accomplished without the aid of his long-time friend and associate, Brion Gysin- who in turn influenced the underground’s embrace of alchemical process art, while bridging a gap between the European avant garde and the more loosely-defined of cast of characters evolving out of Industrial music. Sound artists as diverse as Throbbing Gristle, Carl Michael von Hausswolff, and the concrete poet Henri Chopin (who published Gysin’s poetry in his magazine *Ou*) have adapted works or key concepts of Gysin’s to suit their own needs. At the very least, Gysin deserves credit as the co-author, along with Burroughs, of the now omnipresent ‘cut-up’ writing techniques - with his declaration of ‘poets don’t own words’, Gysin validated this new enterprise of forming magical narratives out of randomly chosen, de-assembled and then re-assembled texts.

It was an idea that was dismissed as “plumbing” by Samuel Beckett (when Burroughs relayed to him that he was fusing Beckett’s texts with sliced excerpts

of the *Herald Tribune*), looked upon with ambivalence by even staunch Burroughs supporters like Gregory Corso, and wasn't entirely without precedent in modern art (see Marcel Duchamp's exhibition of four separate texts placed within a square, or Tristan Tzara's Dada poem composed from paper scraps pulled out of a hat). It has also been argued that *all* writing is essentially "cut-up," given that all writing is a composite of diverse sources and mental images- and, with this in mind, skeptical minds could ask why it was necessary to engage in this activity another time. Gysin and Burroughs believed that having writers engage in this process on their own was remarkably different in its effects than merely accepting writing as another form of montage; that "the exposure to both the product and the process of this technique aims to remind the cutter-reader (because reading is also inevitably a process of cutting-up) that the word is not what it seems."¹⁷ Or, as Nathan Moore suggests, the word "is not what it *is* [*italics mine*]"¹⁸ - the words on a page were never anything but representations, and cutting them up was to deny them their 'secret' power of ordering the world. New "meaningless" recombinations of words could then be steered towards the pure affect or sensory impact that Gysin and Burroughs already felt existed within painting.

Though the written word was clearly the focus of the 'cut-up' technique, its ability to be at once critical, revelatory and transformational endeared it to a good deal of culture working with means other than textual or linguistic ones. The musical 'sampling virus' of artists such as John Oswald and Christian Marclay, for one, put the basic cut-up principle to devastating, often hilarious effect by stripping well-known musical quotations of their original context and re-configuring them to serve the artist's own ideological ends. The text cut-up was a necessary step towards using the products of broadcast media as just another 'musical' material, and reconfiguring them to have more of an affective power than a dictatorial one, or to focus on potentialities rather than inevitabilities and creation rather than communication. It was a fact already understood by Throbbing Gristle and eventually carried over into Coil by common member Peter Christopherson. Meanwhile, the basic theory of the cut-up also allowed for simple communications devices (shortwave radio, satellite TV feeds) to be re-interpreted, with a built-in degree of serendipity, as musical instruments when their informational feeds were modified by modern studio editing techniques.

Brion Gysin's appeal to the current crop of avant-garde musicians and sound artists lay in his natural, non-trained (yet not "dilettante"-ish) expressive ability, and also in his ability to distribute creativity across the entire artistic spectrum: to adopt an ecumenical anti-professionalism more suitable for personal questing, in which art and "normal" life both work towards the same ends of continual subjective transformation. Though never experimenting with music himself (outside of some recordings that feature his speaking voice complemented with musical instrumentation), Gysin was certainly well capable of expounding on the transcendental power of music, especially the tornadic musical frenzy he

encountered in the Moroccan hill country of Jajouka. Yet his infatuation with it only served to fuel his other creative endeavors - concrete poetry, painting - rather than to divert energy from them. Put in Gysin's own words:

...ecstatic dancing to the secret brotherhoods is [in Morocco] a form of psychic hygiene. You know your music when you hear it one day. You fall into line and dance when you pay the piper...inevitably something of all this is evident in what I do in the arts I practice.¹⁹

Gysin was born in Buckinghamshire to Swiss parents in 1916, with his father dying in the battle of the Somme before he was one year of age. Numerous relocations would occur, taking him to New York, Kansas City, Edmonton, and finally back to England where he began publishing poetry at the highly-regarded Downside school (despite his studies there, Gysin taught himself painting and had no formal training in the arts.) His early status as a child without a country perhaps informed the de-centralizing nature of his life work, and would encourage him to become involved with the Surrealist group in the 1930s. After the war, and after garnering a Fulbright fellowship for his studies on the history of slavery, Gysin eventually settled in Tangier and became a restaurateur - spending one of the most fruitful periods of his life in an environment where, as he claims, magical phenomena were a daily occurrence and an accepted fact of life. Unfortunately, this often manifested itself in the form of 'curses' personally directed at him: once a mysterious packet addressed to the "Djinn of smoke" was discovered in his restaurant, The 1,001 Nights. Among other things, the talismanic packet bore an unmistakable silhouette of Gysin himself, and an inscription "may Massa Brahim depart from this house, as smoke departs from this chimney." A few days after receiving the cryptic message, Gysin had a falling out with his financial backer, and was effectively through with the restaurant business - a result he saw as testifying to the potency of the curse.

In spite of demonstrable technical genius, Gysin was by no means perfect. He was beset by a tendency to weave intricate, paranoid conspiracy theories when the public and the modern art vanguard (including Surrealist figurehead André Breton) showed indifference to his art. A mean misogynist streak may also prevent some students of Gysin from completely identifying with him. Both of the two counter-productive energies crash together when Gysin suggests "...The reason I'm a flop is that I don't have a really potent built-in widow as a wife, working for my success morning noon and night. Just what Gala did for Dali all those years. While he was producing, she was on the phone setting prices and arranging dinner parties."²⁰

Yet, even with such embittered quotes attributable to him, Gysin's work still provides one of the best templates for new and revelatory sound art (and we can safely concede that few practicing artists are ethically infallible, anyway.) Gysin's methodology is one in which the term "experimental" art truly means art in

which the creators have certain clear intentions yet no advanced knowledge of the results, or rather the “experimental” quality derives from uncertainty over the work's reception and an openness to unintended consequences. This, I submit, is a better way to conceive of “experimentalism” than the bastardized catch-all term applied to anything too ‘weird’ for the tastes of the *zeitgeist*. Certain of Gysin’s artistic imprints - such as his gently chiding poetry recital voice, and the whirling micro-organisms created by his fluid synthesis of Arabic and Japanese calligraphy (some Japanese-language skills were acquired when he was drafted into the U.S. army), - are signature elements obviously coming from years of refinement, keeping his art from ever sinking into the anonymity that most would-be “experimental” artists inhabit, voluntarily or involuntarily. All the same, Gysin achieved his most striking results by surrendering some part of the creative process to the whims of unknown entities. Commenting on his own relation to this form of experimentalism, Peter Christopherson says:

I never really know what 'x' is until I get there, so the process of reaching 'x' is always, in a way, the result of happy accidents. The tools nowadays (software in particular) are so complex that chance and randomness are always part of the process. For me the artistic process is ALWAYS a matter of ceding to another entity (not ceding control, exactly, but guidance for sure)- but what it is, or from where that comes, I can't describe.²¹

One of Gysin’s most curious contributions to the luminous art underworld was not his poetry or painting, but a stroboscopic light device called the Dreamachine, intended as a drug-free hallucinatory aide which could be used indefinitely with no physiological side effects. Conceived with intentions similar to those of multi-disciplinary artist Tony Conrad - whose film *Flicker* “puts viewers in intense contact with their own retinas, and with some of the ways in which eyes and brain interact when stimulated by different rhythms of light and dark”²² - the Dreamachine was an attempt to inculcate a threshold experience in users who might not otherwise have the means or mobility to do so. “Threshold experience” was, incidentally, a choice of words that would eventually make its way into the Coil lexicon (their vanity label and Web presence was, for some time, referred to as “Threshold House,” while variants of the term itself featured in interviews with the band.) In providing a novel sort of cinematic experience, both *Flicker* and the Dreamachine were part of a new category of 20th century artwork that, as per Deleuze, “can replace the film stock, in a virtual film which now only goes on in the head, behind the pupils.”²³

The Dreamachine was little more than a paper cylinder a few feet high (though other materials such as copper have been used) mounted on top of a turntable spinning at 78rpm, and with geometrically arranged slits cut in the cylinder, through which the light of a single 100-watt bulb would filter and fall upon a viewer’s closed eyelids. Unlike other proto-scientific or pseudo-scientific

inventions adopted by the counterculture (see Wilhelm Reich's Orgone box in particular), the Dreamachine was built on sound mathematical principles, mapped out by the mathematician Ian Sommerville, which would cause the light to flicker at a rate of 8-13 pulses per second, thus stimulating the optical nerve and simulating alpha rhythms in a viewer's brain. Varying accounts of the device's efficacy exist, as well as a host of unfounded urban legends (such as its contributing role in the shotgun suicide of alt-rocker Kurt Cobain)- but at the very least, it accomplishes the goal of being 'the first artwork to be viewed with your eyes closed'.

Panoramic dream visions or no, the colorful barrage of light that falls upon the viewer's eyelids is an alternately relaxing and stimulating thing to behold. With some meditative persistence, a hypnagogic state can occur where viewers begin to fish distinct images out of this ocean of strobing color, producing filmic sequences like those found in dreams, but without dreams' tendency to be totally forgotten upon waking. Gysin's enthusiasm for this device was great: its potential to liberate people from preset patterns of thought and action would have dwarfed anything accomplished by, say, the Situationists, and he once felt that mass-produced dreamachines could replace the television as the central fixture in the modern home. Despite the dreamachine's status as an icon of counter-cultural ingenuity, and a limited number of manufacturers, this would never come to pass, though- for reasons that the reader can probably surmise. Whatever the case, the dreamachine was like a 'kinetic art' attempt at realizing the same goals of the cut-up: bypassing waking consciousness in order to make artwork / life more vibrant, honest and revelatory. Like the shamanistic Tibetan practice of *chöd*, which attempted to destroy the ego by surrendering the body to the demons lurking in a charnel ground at night, these techniques forewent academic study and encouraged direct engagement with unknown (even hostile) forces as an alternative or supplement to conscious thought and reasoning.

Perhaps returning the favor to the younger generation he had helped to inspire, Brion Gysin recommended Throbbing Gristle's largely improvised live record *Heathen Earth* as, outside of his beloved Moroccan trance music, the ideal music for viewing the device. Gysin acolytes The Hafler Trio and Psychic TV would, in turn, record a CD with the intention of being used as dreamachine backing music, while numerous lesser-known tributes and soundtracks exist.

To say Brion Gysin deserves sole credit for drafting the blueprint of 21st-century counter-cultural expansion would be false, but he has more concretely embodied its principles and methods than most of his 20th century contemporaries. By ejecting the quasi-Luddite fear of technology as a block on spiritual progress, and by merely becoming a 'doer' rather than a recorder of events, Gysin certainly lit a bright and mesmerizing torch to pass on to those working in other artistic media. Only a few were truly ready to have it handed off to them- although one of the willing recipients, Coil, ran with it to places maybe not even imagined by Gysin himself.

DARK START

The musical project Coil was founded in 1982 by the late Geoff Rushton, who would become better known by his *nom de guerre*, John Balance (spelled 'Jhonn Balance' in later years). A connoisseur of Throbbing Gristle, fanzine publisher (*Stabmental*), and all-around omnivore regarding any kind of esoteric information, Balance eventually took to music as a means of reconciling his celestial aspirations with the mundane realities of his youth: having grown up on RAF base camps in Germany and having been unceremoniously shuttled from one school (and consequently, formative social environment) to another, the then-Geoff Rushton suffered through an isolated youth made more uniquely strange by unexplained hallucinations and visitations - some hellish and some angelic. Claiming to have been partially "raised by mushrooms," the pre-teen Balance experimented intensely with psychedelics before having even sipped an alcoholic beverage, and was likewise inclined at an early age towards such sidereal activities as projecting himself into schoolmates' heads. Apparently well-read and seasoned beyond anyone in his immediate peer group, it seemed unlikely that Rushton would fade into the background scenery without first delivering some missives from the parallel universe he inhabited - and so it happened when his fanzine writing put him into contact with Peter 'Sleazy' Christopherson. Christopherson, 7 years Balance's senior, describes his own background relative to his partner's:

I did not have much spiritual awareness before the age of 10, when my parents decided to send me to a Quaker co-educational boarding school - rather than the tougher and more posh school I was previously destined for. I guess they reckoned (correctly) that I needed a gentler 'alternative' approach to my education. At Ackworth all the pupils attended Quaker meetings, during which one sits in silence and anyone (in theory) can stand up and contribute thoughts or ideas to the meeting. Learning the ability to sit quietly with one's thoughts, for an hour or so, is a great and wonderful gift - everything else flows from there.

Although history will likely remember him for his Coil work first and foremost, John Balance contributed to a number of like-minded projects before his flagship project crystallized: Vagina Dentata Organ, Cultural Amnesia, and Current 93 early contributions from him. While still in Geoff Rushton guise, Balance was also able to make good on his Throbbing Gristle fandom by participating in Psychic TV, alongside TG's Peter Christopherson and Genesis P-Orridge. That band's 1983 LP *Dreams Less Sweet* still stands as a high watermark of post-Industrial culture's eclectic abilities: the quintessential 'cult' album, it was

recorded in Zucarelli holophonic sound and features such subversive gems as a choirboy recital of Charles Manson's "Always is Always," and words from the final sermon of Jim Jones (prior to the mass suicide of his followers in Guyana) set against a lilting backdrop of 1960s pop. The incarnation of Psychic TV during Balance's involvement was a musical collective whose main aim was to examine and parody the power structure and indoctrination methods of such cults, and of more "professional" religious organizations as well (it was pitched by P-Orridge as the musical propaganda wing of his TOPY or 'Temple ov Psychick Youth').

Picking up more or less where Throbbing Gristle left off, early 80s Psychic TV was an iconoclastic hybrid dedicated to the Burroughsian rallying cry of *conflict creates energy*. The music itself was a mixture of the arcane and the futuristic (or 'technostic,' to borrow the term from Erik Davis), aesthetically linking the historical and the speculative. It was moored by paganistic / ritual drumming, cut-up tape collages almost identical to those of TG, and a many-hued tapestry of electronic effects. Balance's most visible role within Psychic TV performances was as a performer on Chapman Stick bass: a versatile stringed instrument whose strings could be either tapped, plucked, or slapped- in Balance's hands it was used to generate a distinctive combination of wolfish growl and keening feedback.

Ideologically, the band promoted overt sexuality and ecstatic noise as a means to destroying pre-set systems of social control - going so far as to suggest that exposure to certain types of noise could alter one's own genetic code. Seeing the orgasm as a concentration of psychic energy or a "self-reprogramming", TOPY was very much an heir to esoteric groups like Crowley's *Ordo Templi Orientis* and the Process Church, although Genesis P. Orridge insists upon a key difference ("TOPY did away with obfuscation and deliberate theatricality, and made public the 'secret of all ages,' while publicly confessing that sex magick was central to our contemporary occult way of life.")²⁴ A certain initiation ritual involved combining three bodily fluids (blood, semen and saliva) and mailing them to TOPY. It was a wry poke at religious sacraments that was bought hook, line, and sinker by some of PTV's more humor-impaired fans and also by (tragically for the group) the voracious, sensationalist news media. Although Balance would come to strongly disagree with Psychic TV's emphasis on the collective rather than the individual as creativity's driving force, the inclination towards the orgasmic would be retained for use in Coil- sometimes manifesting itself in more pronounced or more sublime ways than what Psychic TV had suggested.

The departure of Balance and Christopherson from Psychic TV marked the beginnings of Coil proper, as well as a long cooling of relations with Genesis P. Orridge. Both parties would fire shots across one another's bow in the years to come, with P. Orridge even blaming the Christopherson family's influence (Peter Christopherson's father was a former Cambridge professor granted a knighthood) for the infamous early 90s police raids on his home, and his subsequent tabloid status as "the most evil man in Britain."

Fortunately for Coil, their decided emphasis was on building and refining their own work rather than on dismantling another's, and there would come to be a pronounced difference between the musical apprenticeship in PTV and the Coil project proper. Most significantly was Coil's emphasis of the aforementioned Austin Spare within their personal pantheon, an artist whom John Balance praised for his ability to visualize the strange mutability of the myriad life forms: "all of the Janus-headed, multi-faced, theriomorphic swarms which proliferate in "Spare's paintings threaten to break out of their world and spill into ours."²⁵ It was this emphasis on mutability and evolutionary uncertainty as a desirable, if not outright erotic state, that arguably made the group's regular shifts in musical style and attitude seem more organically "right" than jarring.

With this in mind, the project name Coil was itself chosen by Balance for its seemingly inexhaustible multiplicity of meanings - just an association with DNA coils on its own would be loaded with such meaning, provided their role in the development all cellular life. Spiral galaxies are another point of reference, as are coiled serpents of wisdom, hypno-spirals and coiled electrical inductors providing opposition to changing or varying currents. Choosing a project name with apparent connectivity to everything was only the first step towards the group's larger project of revealing the hidden order within, and arising from, chaos.

Because of its breathtakingly unpredictable and varied body of musical work - not merely its fraternity with other key artists - Coil remains one of the most celebrated acts in the post-Industrial scene. Their *oeuvre* has ranged from hedonistic dance music to multi-layered synaesthetic sound art pieces, with numerous stylistic deviations in between. The main reason for this may be that Coil has incorporated a far greater number of cultural (read: not only 'musical') influences into its eclectic mix than is normally expected of popular musicians. A single credits page of the booklet accompanying the an album from the group's *Black Light District* alias serves as a perfect introduction to Coil's theoretical and artistic alliances - the literary anarchism of William Burroughs and Hakim Bey rests alongside the eschatological 'singularity' theories and "DMT elves" of Terence McKenna. The gay camp film aesthetics of director Bruce LaBruce are acknowledged in the same space with the sidereal painting of, again, Austin Osman Spare. Other influences not mentioned on this list are no less important to Coil's output, such as the eternal drone of LaMonte Young, Karlheinz Stockhausen with his hymns to 'Pluramon,' or Angus MacLise's solar invocations and transposition of Eastern *mantra* onto electronic instrumentation. From this collective pool of influences and cultural memes came Coil's ability to shape-shift without seeming as if they'd gotten stuck in mid-transformation. Yet Coil is more than the sum of its parts: it is the confrontation and reconciliation between highly personal experience and this canon of underground ideas that makes Coil what it is; making for its richest sonic moments. Coil's Occidental

origins, for one, are never completely subsumed by their interest in bringing together the globe's occult currents into a unified whole.

In spite of the group's apparent *élan vital*, though, it is surprising how much contemporary commenting upon the band has dealt exclusively with their treatment of "darkness." As we will see, such concerns are not entirely unfounded, especially given the proclamation of *out of light cometh darkness* on their *Love's Secret Domain* LP. However, I submit that this is not an attempt on the band's part to outdo its Industrial music peers in the realm of morbidity, but an acknowledgement of both actual and metaphorical darkness as an "illuminator of spirit." The darkness inhabited by Coil is like the *yami* used as the raw material for the theatrical works of Tatsumi Hijikata and Juuroou Kara - as critic David Goodman saw it, "an endlessly repeating, constantly changing form of time" where "things are not orderly or predictable, but as innumerable and conflicting as words and images."²⁶ Put another way, the group uses its engagement with dark matter in the same way that J.G. Ballard suggested of the Renaissance, e.g. "the Italians had the right idea...most of their paintings were in dimly lit churches, unclean and difficult to see. As a result, the Renaissance lasted for centuries."²⁷ So - if, in spite of its vibrant eclecticism, much of the band's work seems to have a sinister or "dark" tinge, it is because, by their own admission, darkness - and not the pallid orange glow of endless columns of streetlights - is necessary to see the stars.

VARIOUS PANICS

With this last realization in mind, it seems natural that Coil's music treats both the lofty sophistication of spiritual ideals and the rapidly decaying world born out of unchecked or unthinking materialism. They have made no secret of their disgust with the pervasive 'quantity over quality' aspect of modernity, shielding themselves with defensive mottos such as "*avoid that which is everywhere*", while counseling the depressed to take a "*deep-rest*" in natural surroundings before relying on mass-produced panaceas. The indomitable, cyclical flux of nature is held up by Coil as being superior to humanity's constant striving towards definite endpoints and landmarks in 'progress', and to this end they have (like Brion Gysin before them) used the Greek nature god Pan as a sort of patron saint. Pop culture aficionados will also be familiar with Brian Jones' album *The Pipes Of Pan At Jajouka* (an encounter between Jones and Gysin in Morocco ended with the latter finding the former to be an arrogant, self-absorbed dilettante.) A biography of Pan in Harris & Platzner's *Classic Mythology* applies strikingly well to the music of Coil:

Like nature itself, Pan creates both beauty and terror: with the seven-reed *syrinx* (panpipe), he produces enchanting music; he is

also the source of unreasoning fear (panic) that can unexpectedly freeze the human heart. With his horns, hairy shanks, cloven hooves and lustful energy, Pan becomes in postclassical times a model for the physical shape of the Christian devil.²⁸

On the jacket of Coil's *Scatology* LP, there is a short text with the header '*I summon little Pan; not dead*' penned by John Balance, which outlines the beneficial possibilities of Pan's 'unreasoning fear':

We are great believers in the redeeming powers of Kaos [*sic*] and confusion. Panic is about the deliberate nurturing of states of mind usually regarded as dangerous or insane. Using fear as a key, as a spur, as a catalyst to crystallize and inspire. It is about performing surgery on yourself - psychic surgery - in order to restore the whole being, complete with the aspects that sanitized society attempts to wrench from your existence...a murder in reverse.²⁹

This is the preparatory text for an intense piece of guitar feedback, feral singing and mechanized Linn drum machine rhythms also entitled 'Panic'- the condition known by the ancient Greeks as *panikon deima*. The track is one of the more immediately recognizable tracks on the original 1984 release of *Scatology*, which was the band's earliest long-playing attempt at reconciling the profane with the divine. As the band discovered to their dismay earlier, with the release of a one-sided EP [*How To Destroy Angels*] intended "for the accumulation of male sexual energy" not everyone within the alternative culture, let alone the cultural mainstream, was immediately or entirely sympathetic to their methods of 'psychic surgery'. In fact, the very reference to male sexuality was, laughably enough, condemned as a 'misogynist' statement by some parties- the fact that Coil was a group of homosexual artists must not have been readily apparent. Such misinterpretation - if not outright alarmist fear - of the band's mere acknowledgement of what they were places them in a niche also occupied by contemporary artists and countrymen Gilbert & George, whose own comments on their work neatly mirror the *How To Destroy Angels* 'controversy'. From an interview with the subcultural journal *Rapid Eye*:

RE: One PC criticism of your work is that you don't include women in your work.

GILBERT: We are not politically correct.

GEORGE: Perhaps *too* politically correct. Actually we don't get much criticism from feminists, except the feminazis in America who hate gay men. Modern feminists should agree with us that we

are not exploiting women. It became interesting because all over the world people started asking us about women. They never ask Anthony Caro about women. But we know nothing about women. Most other artists have used women's images for centuries, the art world is run by men.

RE: So, you're not objectifying women in any way...

GEORGE: Also, men are the sex women are the most interested in. The moment you exclude something in art it becomes important to people. We didn't even think about it.³⁰

Never ones to capitulate or to let misinformed critics have the final say in anything, though, Coil merely upped the stakes - the packaging of the neo-Surrealist opus *Scatology* was graced by numerous blasphemies against the guardians of 'acceptable' sexuality and social mores. There's an excerpt of a pornographic story swiped from the pages of one *Mr. S.M.* magazine, tales of drug-induced religious visions, the obligatory Charles Manson quote, an excerpt from *The Selfish Gene* (Richard Dawkins' pioneering work on natural selection, and the origin of the 'meme' concept), references to "the clap- both the action and the affliction" and a confession by Salvador Dali that moments of defecation give him the divine inspiration necessary for his 'paranoia-critical' method.

All of this intellectually charged, defiantly heretical text is anchored into place by a 'black sun' logo, an alchemical symbol that clarifies Coil's intentions of transforming base material (read: 'shit') into gold, and is also a symbol which bears a strong resemblance to the 8-pointed 'chaos star', another motif heavily used by the band. From the simultaneously clumsy and grandiose opening instrumental "Ubu Noir", to the crumbling and apocalyptic *denouement* "Cathedral In Flames", *Scatology* masterfully combines sonic elements both crude and refined, drawing uncomfortable parallels between the ethereal atmospherics of the church and the reverberations of the sewer. Murky production on some tracks meshes with moments of crystalline sonic clarity. Heraldic, regal brass parts collide into atonal flare-ups from guitar and John Balance's Chapman Stick. Numerous samples (played on a then state-of-the-art Fairlight CMI music computer) strive to harmonize with the unique tonal vocabulary - e.g. disruptive howls, slurs and choirboy flourishes - of Balance's vocals. The execution of this LP would be an unmitigated disaster in the hands of others, but the group (abetted significantly by guest arranger J.G. Thirlwell) draws on a knowledge of both cinematic and ritual methods of creation in order to pull it off.

The aesthetic inaugurated by Coil on this album would come to be Coil's career-long *modus operandi*, despite their aforementioned tendency to continually re-assess their inventory of techniques - in a way, it is a fulfillment of the much-touted Dionysian and Apollonian fusion promised by rock music, but scarcely delivered. Coil convert Ian Penman, writing in *Wire* magazine, suggests that

Coil's success lies in their refusal to embrace only the cosmetic or seductive aspects of occultism, hoping that audiences will not call them on their bluff. Upon visiting the group, he writes:

If Coil were more archly / laxly rock'n roll, I would doubtless be received in some be-scarfed den, black candles burning, tattoos all on show: all the surface paraphernalia. Such diletantism probably explains why rock's would be diabolists have come to such grief-why they usually emerge hurt and chastened by the experience. Stubborn ego clings on to contaminate the work, which fails to progress any further than dark-knight affectation.³¹

If the music itself isn't sufficient to drive home the point, there is one final visual reminder in the *Scatology* packaging of Coil's 'post-industrial alchemist' intentions. An iconic black and white photo on the record's inner sleeve, taken by Lawrence Watson, depicts Peter Christopherson and John Balance in a pastoral English setting, where the sight of cherubic Balance with darkened eyes and a frost-white sheaf of hair contrasts with a heavily soiled, wild-eyed Christopherson (whose filth-smearred presence is made even more unsettling by his proper business attire.)

Scatology was one of the most coherent explorations of the Burroughs / Gysin aesthetic yet converted into audio form - a fact not lost on the poet and Burroughs associate John Giorno, who, in 1985, included the band on his Giorno Poetry Systems LP *A Diamond Hidden in the Mouth of a Corpse*. Yet even as Coil trumpeted the news of their iconoclastic existence to all adventurous enough to listen, death was not far behind - with the AIDS menace taking a personal toll on those close to the band, the post-*Scatology* phase of Coil meditated on death in a way perhaps too intense to be correctly interpreted by an ill-equipped music / 'alternative' press. Shortly after their first LP release, Coil issued a crushingly spare, sorrowful cover of Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" (itself a cover version of Gloria Jones' Northern Soul ballad of the same name.) The song is practically an *a capella* turn by Balance, save for some tolling bells and orchestral hits - it vampirizes the beat-driven energy of the original until only an elegiac core of sound remains. The harrowing visions of its accompanying video clip were so unusual for that medium at the time, that they were taken to be a sick bit of *schadenfreude* concocted for the band's personal amusement. The threats and denouncements from gay activist groups would, in their refusal to go beyond surface level impressions, ironically equal the hue and cry raised by the conservative agents of morality who once called Throbbing Gristle the 'wreckers of civilisation'. For all the outrage, though, the record would eventually be recognized for what it was - the first real AIDS benefit record released by any artistic entity, underground or mainstream.³²

With the stark tone thusly set, the next full-length effort by Coil - *Horse Rotorvator* - was a brutal Coil-ification of the classical tone poem, a haunting song

cycle produced astonishingly well with only an independent label's budget to work with. The album carried lyrical warnings such as "*you get eaten alive by the perfect lover*" and "*you must realize...that everyone changes, and everything dies*", staring down inevitable doom in a way that, thankfully, eschewed fashionable Goth teases and aimless, maudlin moping.

The inspiration for the album's title and cover imagery came from an IRA assault on a marching parade, a gory and surreal incident which resulted in horse carnage flying at the assembled spectators. The historical significance of this gruesome event was then overlaid by one of Balance's characteristic visions-of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse using the jawbones of their horses as a ghastly tilling device. The very lifeblood of the record is death, as well as the events leading up to and following it. From a lush musing on the filmmaker Pasolini's death at the hands of a rent boy, to a cover version of Leonard Cohen's "*Who by Fire*," *Horse Rotorvator* hardly blinks in the face of its unpleasant, yet all-enveloping subject matter. Its symphonic, cinematic allure is tempered with heavy doses of percussive battering and acidic Industrial squall - exemplified most disturbingly on the short 'bridge' of layered, terrified tape voices contained on "*Blood From the Air*". Slinky 'crime jazz' (again supplied by Jim 'Foetus' Thirlwell) and strange snatches of distended brass only seem to reinforce the orchestral portions of the album, rather than distracting from them. In yet another grand stroke of irony, the LP finds Coil, as a musical entity, in full bloom even as they contemplate their extermination. Having mastered the application of the 'cut up' theory to music, the result was a professional product which, were it a conventional motion picture rather than one of the 'audio only' variety, would have been marketed as an epic tragedy rather than as an intellectual oddity.

SIDE EFFECTS OF LIFE

Throughout the 1980s, Coil had never made any concerted attempts to draw attention to their own artist personae, but rather to the energies their music was liberating and transferring. It made perfect sense, then, that the next incarnation of the group would be involved with a subculture based on similar premises. By the dawn of the 1990s, the 'rave' party culture had built itself upon the dissolution of "performer" and "audience" in favor of a different social model, in which the DJ was (originally, anyway) no more than a conduit for energy that informed the audience's interactions. This smiley-faced and often pill-besotted rave culture promised a new communal, utopian current (Hakim Bey's much-referenced 'temporary autonomous zone'), and brought with it a massive upsurge in the amount of ecstatic electronic music available on the market - but precious little of it attempted to, as Coil did, highlight the continuity between the contemporaneous 'eternal present' of rave culture and its shamanic ancestry.

Coil's forays into this scene were very much an attempt at embodying Terence McKenna's "archaic revival," in which (as per Ben Neill) "the emerging electronic media and connectivity art would assume a role similar to its position in pre-literate societies."³³ To "*see the future leaking through...see the person who once was you*" - as John Balance sang on the proto-'trip-hop' track 'Windowpane' - was a necessary supplement to the technological ecstasy of the moment.

Techno producers of the late 80s and early 90s were initially refreshing for their willingness to operate in complete anonymity in order to further the cause, but too often were limited in the life experience. The rave community did indeed pride itself on youthful exuberance: it rejected the inevitable by-products of adult social life such as alcohol consumption, taking a "lest ye become as a child, ye may not enter the kingdom of Heaven" approach that favored pure light and sound over the prizes (marriage, home ownership, job promotions) occasionally found along the way during the phased march into the oblivion of conformity. The movement also seemed to be grasping at a more pure kind of spirituality than what was on offer in the urban (and suburban) sprawls of England and America: a church which served to temporarily pacify the unrest created by poor government and myriad socio-economic inequalities, rather than to offer any lasting, transcendent experience. As with the majority of television and print media, its non-spiritual motive of performing social "damage control" were becoming insipid and transparent to even wet-behind-the-ears club kids, who sought to build their own euphoric tribal movement from scratch.

Along these lines, the noted psychologist Stanislav Grof (whose psychedelic research was too often given a 'back seat' to that of the more media-savvy Dr. Timothy Leary) sums up the hopes of urban rave culture with an account of his first LSD-assisted self-analysis:

Even in the most dramatic and convincing depths of the [LSD] experience, I saw the irony and paradox of the situation. The Divine had manifested itself and had taken over my life in a modern laboratory, in the middle of a serious scientific experiment, conducted in a Communist country with a substance produced in the test tube of a 20th-century chemist.³⁴

John Balance would come to empathize with the rave culture's acceptance of Grof's 'paradoxical' situation as a natural development, and would identify with the youth movement 's replacing some of the pastoral escapism of hippies with the street-smart "suss" of the punks. This bass-driven Never-Never-Land could clearly have its merits, yet the sum total inexperience of ravers meant that their visceral music was rarely informed by intellectual rigor or by tested methodology.

It is difficult to bring judgement down on those who did not have the economic means to, say, travel abroad or to cultivate specialized skills whose application required years to learn. The worst exponents of the scene, though,

got by solely on knowing the right passwords to the clubhouse and waving all the right emblems, while either willfully or inadvertently ignoring the 'science' in the colorful science fiction they were weaving. The ideologues of previous counter-cultures made cameo appearances as the 'grand old men' of pharmaceutical and cybernetic questing, but it cannot be easily verified that ravers took anything from their beat-assisted monologues beyond a kind of 'parental endorsement' of their activities. If it seemed that Coil forgave much of the scene's naiveté, it was perhaps because they noticed a continuity between the new culture's variety of ecstatic dancing and the ancient kind romanticized by Brion Gysin in Morocco. John Balance described his initial positivity towards the rave as follows:

When [dancing] happens properly, it's a liberation...and I've had a lot of revelations on it, I completely conquered my fear of death. I have a disturbing faith in human nature actually, now....maybe I am deluded (laughs). Before I thought that the universe was sick, and that people were sick...and I've seen that it doesn't have to be that way.³⁵

Despite having conquered this fear of death, Coil injected their so-called "dance" album (*Love's Secret Domain*) with touches of unease and theriomorphic menace, conjuring up a disco populated by Austin Spare's strange fluid organisms. Among these flourishes were incantations lifted from William Blake (see the quotes of Blake's *The Sick Rose* on the album's title track), and an especially subversive style of sampling and vocalization that did what few bedroom techno producers dared to do: leavening the rolling technoid bliss with admissions of fragility and (in direct contrast to the psychedelic egotism often embraced by 'instant gratification' youth drug cultures) the seeming indifference of the universe to see any individual organism as its center. "Man has given a false importance to death", intones a genteel, sampled voice over tight piston-pumping rhythms and ambient swells - "every animal, plant, or man that dies adds to nature's compost heap".

Meanwhile, hitherto unexplored sonic juxtapositions mark the record as another link in Coil's chain of unpredictable releases: 'Teenage Lightning' makes use of vocoder-aided voices and over Latin rhythms and flamenco guitar, while one of the few recordings to successfully combine throaty didgeridoo and robotic Roland drum patterns pops up elsewhere. A gorgeous string arrangement even surfaces as an interlude between slabs of electronic mayhem. Impossible to pigeonhole as a "techno" album, it is really an example of 'Coil' becoming a category of music unto itself.

Despite its purely technical innovations, the record has achieved an oversimplified reputation that places it in a category no less restrictive, i.e. "drug music." The track 'Windowpane' of course references the LSD variant of the same name, while the acronym spelled out by the three words in the album title

will be obvious to just about anyone (as will the acronym contained in the “Answers Come In Dreams” remix of the strobe-lit dancefloor masterpiece ‘The Snow.’) This may seem to come into conflict with the Coil slogan of ‘music to take in place of drugs’ adopted later, yet the band’s chemical enhancement during this period was no trifling thing either. John Balance recalls:

...we started [Love’s Secret Domain] in January ‘87, and then in February ‘87 we went out to a club, and it took us six months to recover from that visit, and we had to start again. Each time we do some recording, we tend to get involved in, uh, mind-altering experiences of one kind or another, and our minds are so altered that when we come to record again, it means something different.³⁶

Chemically guided recording sessions were apparently the norm for the ‘LSD’ era - Peter Christopherson claims that “we made the studio sacred and then blasphemed it” - although this was to be the apex of Coil’s experimentation with chemical intake, as Balance confesses:

Personally I found that the path of excess leads to the palace of excess, and to insecurity, neuroses, a profound disillusionment with almost everything, and an insurmountable depression. I have never been one to do things by halves, and I have suffered as a consequence of my youthful adventures with the Left-Hand Paths.³⁷

If Balance harbors some regrets for his dissipation into narcotic limbo, he is especially embittered about the side effects of the legally sanctioned pharmaceuticals meant as an alternative: “I wish I had never gone onto antidepressants. They were a nightmare to come off of and my doctor, along with nearly all the medical industry, seems to want people *on* the fucking things.”³⁸ Echoing Balance’s thoughts on these subjects, Christopherson states:

I am not a fan of the pharmaceutical industry, and do not recommend un-informed acceptance of advice by it, or by the medical profession in general, especially when it comes to soporifics. I don't think the trend towards popularity (or rejection) of drug use is very culturally or artistically important. People who repetitively use cocaine or Ecstasy for example, are not learning anything or creating anything original, they are just burning themselves up, and causing uncontrolled flows of money that bring about all kinds of damage to economies - and hence uninvolved people - around the world. On the other hand, I do believe the use

of some psychedelics can open doors for artists to new perceptions that could impact our destiny.³⁹

Christopherson's attitude towards soporifics extends to the musical variety as well, which may mark the distinction between the industry-sanctioned varieties of dance music and *Love's Secret Domain*: by Christopherson's reckoning, the former was intended to reduce thought, while the latter was meant to encourage it as an adjunct to rhythm-fueled physical rapture.

WOUNDED GALAXIES TAP AT THE WINDOW

By the mid 1990s, it was becoming obvious that - as Tactile's John Overall notices in a personal appreciation of the band - not *that* much was new underneath the black sun: recent notable innovations, like Scanner's blurring of private and public space with recordings of pirated phone conversations, were eerily similar to the audio voyeurism of Peter Christopherson's street recordings for Throbbing Gristle and Coil. Rising electronic artists of the time, like producer / sci-fi writer / cultural theorist DJ Spooky (a.k.a. Paul Miller) were able to perform regional variants on what Coil had done- in Miller's case, melding a distinctly Afro-American futurism and mytho-poetic approach with cross-generational collaboration involving monumental figures like Iannis Xenakis.

Positive developments also occurred in the ambient music realm, where projects like Mick Harris' Scorn took the rhythmic structures of hip-hop and dub reggae, and had them sucked into some negative universe, inverting the bland 'chill out' nature of much ambient music into an unnerving sensibility of heightened tension and premonition. Scorn was, incidentally, one of the chosen few to be graced with a Coil remix of their work, and also one of many such projects to be saddled with the silly "isolationist ambient" designation - a scene shadowed in no small part by Coil, who were proving to be increasingly influential despite genuine reclusivity. In fact, Coil were fast becoming the toast of the entire electronic music spectrum, forging bonds with the likes of Industrial dance heartthrob Trent Reznor as well as asymmetrical beat scientists Aphex Twin and Autechre - they were now the perennial act that everyone had heard *of* but never actually heard (a fact that owed itself partially to the World Serpent distribution network's habit of charging exorbitant import prices for their records and compact discs, which also had a tendency to quickly go out of print.) Meanwhile, as the 1990s electronica boom upgraded to a full-blown glut, more and more musicians took to the wholesale re-think of mass media apparatus, as if Industrial culture had not happened at all: with a new breed of musicians seemingly hellbent on providing a Cliff's Notes version of the lessons already taught by artists like Coil, the only option for them was to once again divorce

themselves from the fleeting, the temporal- and, in the case of their ELpH project, from terrestrial communication itself.

When Coil titled the double-10" record set by their pseudonymous project ELpH as *Worship The Glitch*, few probably could have predicted that "glitch" would become the watchword for a whole genre of pre-millennial electronic music using the breakdown of technology as its primary 'instrument'. The existence of technology presupposes the existence of accidents, although, as this singular form of music shows, not all those accidents have to be synonymous with catastrophes.

In retrospect, *Worship The Glitch* may have had the misfortune of being released in the same year as Oval's landmark *94 Diskont* album on the Mille Plateaux label - Oval's Markus Popp is, to the present, one of the names most commonly associated with "glitch" as a method and cultural movement. Popp's basic approach was to create woozy and melancholic instrumentals from montaging the music contained on scratched CDs (a habit which he eventually tired of, going on to make purely 'hands off', generative music with his *Oval Process* software.) While it is tempting to draw parallels between both Oval and Coil for their refusal to be the heroic 'protagonists' of their own music, and to let a certain degree of 'the unknown' filter through, the two do not share a common *raison d'être*- much of Coil's work has been predicated on something like Crowley's motto "*the method of science - the aim of religion*," while Markus Popp humbly shrugs to *Haunted Weather* author David Toop "I just want to make a contemporary statement."⁴⁰

As Popp was laying out a new theory of user interfaces, Coil claimed to be sensing extra-terrestrial presences in their musical equipment, seized with a feeling that other entities were 'playing through' them at those times when certain functions of their electronic gear seemed to be malfunctioning in ways that were more unexpected than the malfunctions themselves. The exact nature of the equipment and its faults is vague, even clandestine - although Christopherson hints in one interview about being intrigued by the sound of an Eventide harmonizer choking up. All the same, the results are suitably otherworldly, with highly disorienting panning effects and odd changes in the audio's depth of field predominating. Flitting high-frequency sounds zoom in and out with a Doppler effect added, and overall the pieces feel not so much like 'songs' as inter-species attempts at bridging a vast communicative gulf: they needle away at one's perception in the same way a Morse code transmission might, before abruptly ending. One track entitled 'Opium Hum' is especially beautiful in its peculiarity; the buffering function of some digital studio tool failing as a mournful alien melody taxes the machine's available memory. If *Worship The Glitch* is not regarded as one of the 'canonical' Coil albums, it is definitely one of the most intriguing and unusual. And given the enthusiasm of mentors William Burroughs and Karlheinz Stockhausen (an 'honorary member' of Coil) for reaching into space and eventually ridding mankind of his terrestrial shackles, the ELpH project carries on a grand *kosmische* tradition of sorts.

The last ELpH recording to date is their contribution to Raster / Noton label's award-winning "20 minutes to 2000" series of mini-CDs, meant to usher in the new millenium. Titled *Zwölf* (a polyglot play on words, with the German being *elf* being 'eleven' and *zwölf* being 'twelve'), the musical content is something like a protracted alien birdsong combined with the droning sound of a malevolent artificial intelligence learning how to hate. In light of the terrifying birth pangs that have so far characterized the new millenium, it is especially eerie to speculate about the music being characterized by a celestial being with foreknowledge of things to come. Or, it could just be Coil having a laugh at the expense of those inclined to make these connections: Coil, after all, did not recognize the authority of the Gregorian calendar and consequently did not view the rollover into the year 2000 as a 'new era' in human history.

DRONES AND LUNACY: SOME CURES FOR TIME

The idea behind the drone state of mind is that, by using my sound environments, you can set up a pattern of harmonically related impulses. The environments are created with harmonically related sine waves that produce periodic composite sound waves. The resulting impulses make a periodic composite waveform that flows through the ear, and is relayed through the neurons and up to the cerebral cortex where, if it's a constant sound, these patterns become continuous [...] If you have this drone state of mind as a point of reference, the mind then should be able to take elaborate flights of the imagination to faraway and very specialized places that it has probably never been to before.⁴¹

- LaMonte Young

As Coil inched closer towards an arbitrary place-marker in human history, they likewise ignored the trend towards hyper-complexity that ran roughshod over the ecology. With new cultural fusions sprouting from the sidewalks of Tokyo and New York on an almost weekly basis (to say nothing of cyberspace) an accelerated groping for a collective cultural identity was taking place - but the result was, more often than not, an inconsistent rag-bag eclecticism or a profound lack of cognitive and spiritual depth. Style tribes and micro-variations in design and musical expression came and went with depressing regularity. Unprecedented access to satellite broadcasting, the internet and mobile telephony only seemed to reinforce people's ability to 'say nothing loudly,' often overshadowing the valuable role it could and did play in connecting marginalized peoples from around the globe. Meanwhile, whistle-blowing media theorists like 'dromology' expert Paul Virilio became more in demand to make

sense of the reckless velocity at which all this was happening. The latter offered no soothing panegyrics, and in fact did much to contribute to the millennial sense of apocalyptic finality, likening the "emergence of global information networks" to "the frontier velocity of electromagnetic waves [...] hitting the wall that stands at the limit of acceleration."⁴²

Coil did not necessarily 'pull the plug' on the self-intensifying enjoyment of all things new, shiny and convenient (as evinced by Christopherson's endorsements for products like Apple computers and Ableton Live music production software.) However, they did step far enough outside of the madding crowd so as to not be as dramatically affected by it. One obvious step was to flee London's oppressive atmosphere of CCTV cameras and general paranoia for the relative comfort of the seaside. Another was to strip their music to the bone so radically that it inverted the common ratio of *content* to *message*: rather than composing pluralistic mash-ups which showcased prodigious editing skill, Coil began to rely on the simplest aural artifacts to open gateways onto inner and outer space.

An approach based on stern minimalism or drone could manifest itself in a number of ways, as Coil antecedent LaMonte Young had already demonstrated with his "theater of eternal music". One face of Coil's drone-based period was the bracing *Constant Shallowness Leads to Evil*, one of the harsher examples of their 'trial by music' phase. Movements with titles like 'Lowest Common Abominator' and 'Freebase Chakra' coalesce into a banishing / purification rite carried out primarily with analog synthesizers and vicious electronic distortion; a cyclical instrumental assault on those citizens of the 'global village' whose misuse of everything from drugs to laptop computers has caused them to devolve rather than to gain any higher realization of themselves: "*color, sound...oblivion*" Balance growls in an apparent indictment of uninformed hyper-stimulation and easy access. In a blatant mockery of the instructional labels carried on bottles of prescription painkillers, the CD also includes a warning not to use while operating heavy machinery or driving.

The compositions on *Constant Shallowness...* would end up becoming (along with the occasional "classic" like "Blood From The Air") the rough schematic for the music on the first-ever Coil concert tour, which compounded the wrathfulness of that release with 15-minute fusillades of strobe light, huge video projections of wheeling, polymorphic, *yantra*-like symbols, and torrential rains of electronic noise. The band members were outfitted in costumes that gave them the appearance of institutionalized lunatics escaped from some prison spacecraft orbiting the Earth: Balance looked especially unsettling in a reflective designer straitjacket with blood dripping from his shaven temples, an effect that would likely have impressed even such celebrated theatrical madmen as Antonin Artaud. Needless to say, this aura was lessened none when Balance hurled objects at a 'thunder sheet' in the midst of a free-form electronic tsunami, or hurled screams and shouts at the bewildered spectators: it is difficult to tell from

hearsay and video evidence alone if this 'concert-as-exorcism' routine was more physically draining for the performers or the audience.

Whereas *Constant Shallowness...* exorcised, the two volumes of *Musick To Play In The Dark* healed using a new 'lunar' technique: dubbed 'moon musick' by the band, the two volumes (released in 1999 and 2000) are among Coil's most critically acclaimed material, weaving together more divergent strands of unmistakably 'personal' material in two discs than most recording artists will achieve in the span of a career. Subject matter for songs ranges from Balance's taking stock of his unwanted obsessions ("Paranoid Inlay"), to more alien interventions ("Tiny Golden Books"), and the musical composition follows suit: twittering machines formed from digitized clicks and pops, alien birdcalls, lonesome refrains played on an Optigan 'optical organ', every conceivable tone color of analog synthesizer from sepia-toned to glimmering silver. On the lunar devotional ("Batwings- A Linnal Hymn"), Balance - like the admitted inspiration Robert Wyatt on his *Rock Bottom* LP - sings in a language of his own invention over a palpable sequence of four smoothly descending tones. And even as Balance whispers "the key to joy is disobedience" beneath the synthesized tumbling of glass beads that opens the track, there is a remarkable restraint to it all.

The release of these albums also gave Balance a personal platform from which to discuss ideas related to the earth's sole natural satellite: he advocated returning to the Mayan calendar and its thirteen-moon cycle (as well as its inclusion of a single 'nameless' day in the calendar year), and decried all forms of light pollution. The latter was one thing that largely went unnoticed by the Jeremiahs of global warming given the most 'face time' in the media, who focused their energies on recycling plastics and reducing carbon dioxide emissions. Balance, in contrast, was an avid campaigner for reducing the amount of artificial lighting, claiming that it actually made people in populous cities less secure (what car thief, as the logic went, would try to steal a vehicle he couldn't even see in the first place?). The function of darkness was, for Balance, analogous to the enforced silence Christopherson experienced during his schooling at Ackworth - a necessary screen upon which to project one's inner thoughts and to confront them; a feature of antiquity that had been forgotten even during the trance-dancing sessions of the 'archaic revival.' Balance, seeing the need for total artificial illumination as an outgrowth of evangelical Christians' metaphorical 'lighting up the world' with the Gospel, saw this as one particularly negative byproduct of humans' severing themselves from respect towards natural virtues.

Just as the black sun symbol embodied certain aspects of Coil's *Gesamtkunstwerk* early on, the monad glyph of John Dee - English occultist and advisor to Queen Elizabeth - was the symbol emblazoned on the Coil banner during their final creative phase. Dee was famous for his use of mirrors as 'scrying stones', an activity which would be taken up in the Beat Hotel of 1959 by Brion Gysin and William Burroughs, who hoped to see past incarnations of themselves during brutally prolonged mirror-gazing sessions. The monad

symbol, introduced in Dee's work *Monas Hieroglyphica*, does the same for the late-period Coil: used frequently in live projections during the band's concerts, in promotional photography, and appearing also on the artwork of the *Time Machines* release, the symbol unifies all the raging currents which have run through Coil over the years. If nothing else, two of its component parts (a solar symbol and a lunar crescent) hint at the types of stylistic and philosophical reconciliation they would attempt in their final years.

Also included in this glyph is the astrological symbol for Jupiter, indistinguishable from modern 'first aid' and medical crosses, and a wavering line of fire beneath that. Dee himself never fully disclosed the ultimate significance of this hieroglyph, and his writings on it were seen merely as an introduction to a more detailed description that he would give when coming face to face with adepts. It takes on a deeper meaning, as with all Coil's symbology, when applied to the sounds on the *Time Machines* release - this release is comprised of four electronic drones spread over a similar number of tracks, which in themselves conform to the musical definition of a monad (a single note or pitch). These four tones, which span almost the entire 74 minutes of the compact disc, have been designed by the group "to facilitate travel through time." To aid this process, the album comes with a set of four image stickers, each one printed with one of the four component parts of the Dee glyph on a brightly colored background. The images, as deceptively simple as the sounds on the album, combine hermetic knowledge with modern pharmacological science. Beneath each one of the brightly colored images, the name of a powerful, if sometimes obscure, hallucinogen is written: DMT, psilocybin, DOET (a.k.a. Hecate) and Telepathine. Printed on the inner sleeve of the album is the slogan *persistence is all*, which would seem at first to be a gentle warning insulating listeners against disappointment - obviously there will be those who expect instant 'mind-blowing' gratification and immediate time-warping effects. Viewed in light of Coil's past influences (*Perdurabo* or 'I will persevere' was another magical motto of Aleister Crowley), it is a further attempt to re-introduce such ideals into an era short on patience and long on insubstantial distractions.

The last of Coil's more "conceptual" releases was realized in 2004 - a triple CD and DVD box set entitled *ANS*. All the enclosed audio works were performed on the monstrous photoelectric synthesizer of the same name, built by scientist Evgeny Murzin, kept at Moscow State University and named in honor of the ecstatic Russian Symbolist composer Aleksandr Nikolai Scriabin (1872-1915). Scriabin was known, like Coil, for a rich tonal vocabulary and for his immersion in the pantheistic and the esoteric - his connections to Madame Blavatsky's Theosophist circle being one prime example of this. His enthusiasm for the apocalyptic also shone through in his unfinished composition *Mysterium*, a symphonic work performed to be by an orchestra in an Indian temple and basically intended to usher in the end of time. His *Poem of Ecstasy* was another philosophically-informed symphonic work meant to spur on the triumph of the (artistic) will, while his interest in synesthesia led to the scoring of works for the

clavier à lumières, the ‘color organ’ developed exclusively for the performance of his *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*.

As the keyboard of the *clavier à lumières* was played, colors corresponding to the notation were meant to be projected onto a screen in the concert hall - it was this basic concept that inspired the construction of the ANS unit, and which attracted composers like Edward Artemiev and Alfred Schnittke to have a go at utilizing the machine’s uniquely spectral sounds. When handed over to Coil, the results are supple and singular as could be expected - the set of DVD visuals by Christopherson attempts to add the synesthetic component to a program similar to the one inaugurated on *Time Machines*: a lengthy yet effective immersion into a pool of slowly moving, concentric electronic ripples, which tame the raging mental flux and allow one to omit needless thoughts. The music’s neutralizing of intensified emotions and mental narratives, and its attempted exploration of the non-cognitive world of the senses, place it in a tradition alongside projects such as LaMonte Young and Marian Zazeela’s *Dream House* installation. The latter aimed at becoming a “fluid, variable environment...which appears to contain self-luminous colored bodies freely suspended in an atmosphere of continually moving calligraphic strokes,”⁴³ and the *ANS* discs seem to have a similar environment-building exercise at their core. That is to say, they challenge the common misperception of minimalism as an emptier or annihilator of space.



With just one major career compromise, it seems that Coil could have easily slipped into wider acceptance, joining the ranks of artists like Matmos and Björk on the short list of the mainstream’s tolerated eccentrics. As it stood, though, one major element of their presentation always seemed to interfere. They were too firmly rooted in queer culture for the heterosexual Industrial and ‘dark ambient’ orthodoxy. They were too taken with the hermetic for those trying to make their abstract electronic music complement more strictly polemical concerns. They were too fond of the redemptive qualities of abrasion, and too familiar with the coordinates of Burroughs’ “war universe” (announcing early on that “*the price of existence is eternal warfare*”)⁴⁴ to sit well with more pacifistic, or at least, pacific neo-pagan communities. If a quick browsing of online CD reviews is anything to go by, projects as diverse as *How To Destroy Angels* and *Time Machines* tended to infuriate as much as they illuminated. When representatives of the major league media came knocking, proceedings were not always marked by enmity, but nevertheless managed to kill the band with kindness: one wince-inducing BBC documentary lauds the band for being like “lovely aunties” while giving the impression that the many-faceted band has a library composed of nothing but musty grimoires and well-thumbed Crowley books.

Happily for their die-hard listeners (and a skimming of Coil-related internet message boards over their lifetime indicates that there may be no other kind of

Coil listener), no perceptibly major creative compromise was ever made. The same talents that Peter Christopherson applied towards programming Coil's equipment and overseeing their albums' sleeve design were also funneled into various lucrative day jobs, such as the direction of occasionally award-winning music videos for a host of industry names, and even for the composition of advertising jingles (a selection of such was made available as a single track on Coil's *Unnatural History III* compilation.) These activities allowed Coil to achieve an enviable level of creative autonomy, despite having to simultaneously weather the typical accusations of having one foot planted in the consumer mainstream and one in the underground. As unromantic as these gigs might have been to the more starstruck and idealistic Coil followers, their regular presence finally allowed Coil to sever connections with deadbeat record labels and distributors, and allowed the world to 'come to them,' as it were - by the end of their career, Coil was selling their material almost exclusively (and by all appearances, not unprofitably) through mail order.

Some items in the Coil mail order catalog were also of such an intimate nature that stocking them in retail outlets seemed out of the question: there was the special "trauma edition" of *Musick To Play In The Dark 2* smeared with Balance's blood after a psychotic episode, and "beast boxes" of the Coil live *oeuvre* hand-painted in an ectoplasmic fashion. Perpetuated partially by the mania of the band's own fans, and partly by the band's own desire to 'bless' their final product, raising them from lowly merchandise to functional totems, each new release seemed to have a corresponding *objet d'art* edition. With this in mind, keeping a complete record of the band's discography is a perplexing hobby that one enters into at his or her own risk.

Coil's success, whatever level it may have ultimately ascended to, was curtailed when John Balance died of injuries sustained from a fall in autumn of 2004. Some subsequent efforts (e.g. 2005's *Ape of Naples* release and 2007's *The New Backwards*) would be possible thanks to a decent number of previously recorded Balance vocals, yet Coil's status as a musical partnership was effectively ended. In light of Balance's erratic mental health and relapses into heavy drinking, along with a string of lyrical predictions, all this seemed sadly inevitable: Balance sang that "*most accidents occur at home*" (he was home at the time) on one of the final Coil tracks, and *the* final Coil track to be performed live was "Going Up"- a re-working of the popular *Are You Being Served?* theme which, when associated with Coil, was almost certain to be taken as a musing on death or dissipation into the ether. The original song's quirky cataloging of material goods, recited while ascending a department store elevator, seemed to be recontextualized as the shedding of material commitments accompanying death - the last in a series of trying purifications.

In his final few years, John Balance's vascillating dispositions gave rise to a host of apocryphal tales, vengeful gossip, and the requisite clever winks about how he failed to live up to his stage name - it is difficult to sift the truth out from the well-crafted smear jobs, although one believable proposition is the psychic

toll that the 'live' Coil era took on the often hesitant artist. Not all of Coil's live performances lived up to the grueling standard set by the *Constant Shallowness...* shows, in fact Coil concerts - as their recordings might suggest - served up a full complement of stylistic variations, from sweet nocturnal balladry to demonic noise avalanche. Yet the amount of psychic energy expended by the enigmatic vocalist was perhaps out of proportion to what audiences actually perceived - few people, let alone people with the sensitivity and awareness of a John Balance, transition smoothly from lengthy periods of enforced solitude into a public arena as demanding as that of the concert tour business. Balance's terminal discomfort underscored the difference between Coil and those who cleave to music for purely financial and egotistical reasons - the pressures would result in a few Balance-less Coil performances (at high-profile events like Toronto's Mutek festival) and in the end of Balance's relationship to Christopherson as a life partner.

Christopherson would eventually, like Gysin, cut himself off from the paranoiac fundamentalism of West, and 'go native' in a culture in which he claimed daily life was intertwined with magical happenings. His relocation to Bangkok also provided a necessary reprieve from recent trauma- in a 2006 interview, he states:

At the time - Spring 2004 - living alone with Geff (who was going through a 'bad patch' - screaming, passing out on the rocks, pissing and shitting the bed etc) in the cold and draughty North Tower building, with the rain beating in from the sea onto cracked windowpanes with bits of Geff's hair in the glass where he had smashed his head against them, it was a comforting fantasy for me to imagine a different life where I was waited on hand and foot by beautiful brown skinned houseboys, who would do anything I asked of them, and take care of my every need...⁴⁵

As a Bangkok resident, Christopherson had access to, and documented, deeply ingrained aspects of Thai culture rarely seen by Western eyes - one such example is his film of the GinJae festival, in which entranced youths submit to acts of ritual bodily piercing in order to ward off evil spirits. His one-off musical project The Threshold House Boys' Choir remains as the soundtrack to such, fittingly enough, threshold moments. Christopherson eventually came to identify himself as a Buddhist, because "the basic tenets and precepts seem to make the most sense to me - but also because I cannot help being moved by the passion that even the sleaziest or unlikeliest of street boys has for [Buddhist] spirituality."⁴⁶

Christopherson would remain busy until the end maintaining Coil's vast back catalog, which was meant to be converted to BluRay format by the first printing of this book, though the equally daunting *Colour, Sound, Oblivion* live DVD archive would be as far as this re-appraisal effort went. Meanwhile,

Christopherson joined in a limited number of engagements with the newly reformed Throbbing Gristle, as well as forming an electronic duo with Ivan Pavlov (SoiSong), and generally cultivating a Pan-infused creativity spanning nearly all the available electronic media.

If the growing number of 'tech-gnostics' prove to be among the 'winners' who write history, then the work of Christopherson, Balance and valued accomplices will be spoken of in the same breath as that of ambitious mages like Kenneth Anger or Harry Smith. That is to say, works which use all available methods to unveil the contradictions of human existence, and to aid personal advancement by acknowledging and reconciling them. Reflecting on his part in this ongoing struggle, Christopherson concludes, "I certainly feel that the music of Coil was 'informed', and reacting to, as yet unfulfilled & inevitable events...if we were able to lighten our own load, and in doing so, perform a similar service for others then it was worthwhile."⁴⁷ Having died in his sleep in November of 2010, Christopherson himself is no longer available to hear from those who did have their loads lightened. However, Coil's work still beckons for new listeners who, in spite of Austin Spare's caution that "the price of identity is suffering," still prefer the pain of developing new identity over that of enduring a stagnant reality.

The foregoing text is excerpted from the revised (2012) version of [*Micro Bionic: Radical Electronic Music & Sound Art in the 21st Century*](#), by Thomas Bey William Bailey.

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