1. Extremism as the Norm

Industrial music’s pan-revolutionary streak isn’t just fond of extreme imagery; it relies on it. The Debordian tyranny of the spectacle, with its aligned control machines and hegemonies, is perceived as so all-encompassing that industrial music often takes neoliberal moderation as useless. In particular, the genre’s imagery of totalitarianism is pervasive enough to have rightly become a recurring topic of curiosity, caution, prurience, and debate within industrial music’s communities of fans and commentators. Graphically in videos, performances, and on record sleeves; sonically in the music’s unforgivingly quantized march rhythms and samples of political events, news, and films; and discursively in bands’ lyrics and interviews, industrial music borrows from, enacts, mocks, documents, and embraces signifiers of political and ideological extremism from seemingly every corner of human belief. This makes a certain sense given that the purported enemies on whom the genre fixes its crosshairs take so many forms. Instead of surveying and cataloguing industrial music’s extremist rhetoric, this chapter looks deeply at how and why musicians use these signs (both theoretically and functionally), as well as how audiences have interpreted them.

Throughout its entire history, the industrial music scene has been home to socialist ideologues, Randian libertarians, anarchists, academics, mistrusters of western intellectualism, utopian mystics, racial purists, nihilists with nothing to lose, and a substantial crowd who either hold aestheticized and underdeveloped ideologies or deny any interest in politics, culture, and the discourse thereof, and who just want to dance. With this apparent variety in mind, it’s useful to turn to Slavoj Žižek, a savvy theorist of extremist politics and mass culture, who says, “The fundamental conflict today is no longer Left versus Right, but rather, liberal openness versus neoethnic closedness.”¹ This perspective helps us move past some of the picky distinctions between one band’s particular brand of sloganeering and another’s. Nearly all industrial music falls to the “open” side of Žižek’s new division, advocating for collective transparency and individual free action, if not always for ideological fluidity and open-mindedness. Indeed, Jon Savage’s assertion that industrial is concerned with “access to information”
rings true across the genre’s history. From Throbbing Gristle’s insistence that the cut-up reveals hidden truths behind cultural texts to the 1990s’ glorification of the hacker figure within cyberpunk and beyond, the music deals with exposing secrets hidden by the powers that be.

Industrial music resists these powers, and it prioritizes resistance above the particulars of politics, a sentiment illustrated by Fifth Colvmn Records’ oxymoronic and only slightly tongue-in-cheek 1996 compilation album title Fascist Communist Revolutionaries. Industrial groups’ reactive resistance has frequently made them slower to offer solutions than to point out problems—most notably that authoritarian powers of any stripe exert more control over us than we realize. It’s true that some unambiguously leftist acts call for specific political engagement: the band Consolidated springs to mind, with their vegetarian advocacy, their use of second-wave feminist Barbara Kruger’s art on the cover of their Business of Punishment album, and their featuring of African American separatist rapper Paris on 1992’s “Guerillas in the Mist.” But Consolidated are the exception to the rule here, for two reasons. First, on the theoretical level, any positive alternative to a totalitarian regime or a commodity-based economy risks being superficially appropriated and defanged by the system—recall Debord’s phrase “the recuperation of the spectacle.” Second, on a practical level, industrial audiences have historically rejected preachiness; Consolidated’s album Play More Music kicks off with a recording of an audience member angrily declaring to them at a live show, “If you don’t like fascism, don’t play industrial music.”

Despite the actual antifascist beliefs of most industrial musicians, then, how is it that a fan could conclude that “Industrial Music is Fascism,” as Consolidated’s track title suggests? How is it that at a 2001 VNV Nation concert in Montreal, a fervent skinhead fan saw fit to offer the hardline leftist lead singer Ronan Harris a Nazi salute in a mistaken presumption of solidarity (to which Harris responded with a communist salute)? The first part of the answer is in the aforementioned tendency of most industrial music simply to critique and tear down authority rather than to verbalize a utopian replacement for it. The second part has to do with the fact that this critique comes coded in industrial music’s now familiar and often intentional language of ambiguity. We’ll return to the first issue in some depth, after this question of ambiguity has been addressed.

2. Silent Politics

In an essay on industrial music videos, Jason Hanley expresses concern that fans might sometimes misunderstand musicians’ uses of totalitarian imagery.
Specifically, Laibach built their reputation by declaring themselves to be a nation (Neue Slovenische Kunst—New Slovenian Art) and then staging their concerts and videos as unblinking state military rallies, driven with tactics that were all too familiar in Cold War Yugoslavia, such as constructivist graphic design, formation marching, and domineering one-way demagoguery. The band's embodiment of an oppressive regime “makes no attempt to subvert this image [so] it has the aura of authenticity.” According to Hanley, as a result, “Many Laibach fans began to revel in the evils of the band and to take their stage act at face value.”

Hanley grants, “Perhaps that is what these bands are hoping for, that the origin of the sign is so powerful that it immediately connects with the audience, shocking them, awakening them, violently attacking them.” Then once the image has grabbed the audience, the band can do its work. But as we'll explore more thoroughly in this book's final chapter, the fact of shock gives way to the content of shock with near inevitability—especially upon its less shocking repetitions—and so we oughtn't fall prey to Artaud's error of treating shock as an end unto itself. The uniformity of Laibach's provocation seems to insist that we grapple with fascism specifically—or at least with the way that pageantry itself can dress up fascism and democracy with identical ease.

Taken literally, “provocation” means inciting a verbal response; it asks questions. Laibach, for example, is referred to as an “interrogation machine” by scholar Alexei Monroe because their actions target the tyrannical and demand a response—to the degree that this reply (whatever it is) can be seen as part of the artistic work itself. The nationalism they stage is so extreme as to become overidentified, and it effectively calls a bluff: for example, the Yugoslav government in the 1980s either had to take a position affirming the band's obviously dangerous national zeal (aligning themselves through silence or advocacy with unambiguous tyranny), or they could denounce it, thus revealing nationalism (and thereby the state itself) as limited and flawed. It can duly attempt to dismantle any patriotism born of listeners’ unspoken (even unrecognized) desire for totalitarianism by “traversing the fantasy,” preemptively exorcising that longing.

* In the early 1980s, the Neue Slovenische Kunst outraged Slovenia's government and culture at large. However, Laibach have since attained significant stature and commercial heft in their tiny home country; prior to the fall of communism, they were, in western countries, the top-selling Eastern Bloc band of any genre, and today their largest markets are in Germany and the United States. In 2003 they began receiving financial support from the Slovenian government. The practice of anti-authority acts receiving government funding is arguably paradoxical, but within the industrial scene it dates back to COUM Transmissions, to whom the Arts Council of Great Britain repeatedly awarded grants.
The context of industrial music’s extremism can ask other important questions too. Noise journalist Mikko Aspa convincingly argues that social shock is no more the goal for acts like Whitehouse or Brighter Death Now, who sing about murder and pedophilia, than it is for murderers or pedophiles themselves—which is to say not really at all. Rather, this extremist music instead asks the question of how ordinary people become such monsters, suggesting an underlying paranoia that it could happen to anyone, that our free will is illusory. In a way, that’s what’s going on with Throbbing Gristle’s commentary on normality in “Very Friendly,” as discussed in Chapter 4. And if we listen carefully, we might hear that this music answers its own question, musically portraying oppression and evil as the unforeseen fallout of a technologically modern, (post) industrialized world—a claim supported by the violence that pervades Futurism, the obsession with virus and addiction in the work of Burroughs, and the Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv’s argument that mental illness is a symptom of capitalism.

But it’s rare for industrial music actually to verbalize questions and answers of this sort. And moreover, the music almost never takes the step of suggesting what we might productively do about tyranny or the postindustrial political condition.

Here’s why. Hanley worries that “audiences can still interpret [fascist] signs in many ways,” leading him to argue that the music shouldn’t merely insinuate questions about the roots of violence and control, but in the name of discouraging real totalitarian politics it should ideally clarify its stance. “Education is so important to Industrial music,” he insists, effectively siding with the outward partisanship of bands like Consolidated and Test Dept. But this is easier said than done, for reasons that both underlie and supplement the avoidance of preachiness and the diversity of specific politics across the genre’s breadth.

First, direct attempts at “education” are frequently misinterpreted; recall Genesis P-Orridge’s recognition that “revelation and education” reach only a fraction of the industrial audience. For example, at each concert on their 1990 tour, American industrial rock juggernauts Ministry launched into a rant against George H. W. Bush’s government before performing their classic “The Land of Rape and Honey”—a song that contains a “sieg heil” sample from the 1979 film The Tin Drum. Hanley singles out this onstage rant as good education, but even explicitly moralizing gestures like this get lost in music’s noisy reality: Ministry’s concert footage shows sweaty fans deliriously singing along to their songs’ ironically sampled dialogue, which raises the question of whether a “sieg heil” is really successfully détourned when the audience joins in without visibly distinguishing it from earnest lyrics. (Certainly Ministry’s record company didn’t “get” their politics when they shipped the band’s CDs to Desert Storm soldiers
who used them as psych-up music for bombing raids on Baghdad. In short, there’s a conflict between the verbal intellectualization of industrial music and its desire to bypass conscious thought.

Second, and more importantly, dictating the social meaning of one’s music not only renders the music redundant but goes against the individual autonomy that industrial music so privileges in its directive for people to “think for themselves.” The fact that telling an audience to think for itself is paradoxical and offers a pithy but effective summary of why so many industrial acts resist both utopian proposals and self-explanation. An artist who instructs audiences in the imperative becomes another authority to behead, which is certainly one reason why industrial vocals are traditionally cloaked with distortion: singers reject the signal clarity that aurally identifies authority.

The endgame of didactic preaching is dogmatic tyranny, and any ideological specificity becomes a fixed point to be pinned down and coopted by control machines. In the name of individual liberty, then, industrial music’s ambiguity risks misinterpretation; hence we get situations like the gay, leftist Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft in 1981, hot on the heels of the success of “Der Mussolini,” accepting a gig in Middlesbrough UK only to discover at showtime that they’d been billed as a neo-Nazi act—and had drawn an audience of more than a thousand amped-up skinheads. However, not only do these risks diminish bit by bit over time as the music insinuates its subversion, but to the pan-revolutionary frame of mind they are outweighed by the ambiguity’s vital rewards: an apparently airtight consistency of ideology and a resistance to assimilation.

### 3. Loud Apolitics

Some would say that audiences’ conscious misinterpretations of industrial music are hardly the biggest problem of its flirtations with extremist symbols—that the real political troubles are more complex. This makes sense, because although 1980s audiences sometimes identified certain bands as fascist (often

More recently, the post-9/11 industrial scene’s reception of songs like Dutch act Grendel’s “Soibleed” even hints at a new air of genuine reverence for the specific reality of the United States military. The song was ubiquitous in clubs from 2005 to 2007, and its samples of *Full Metal Jacket* (which Ministry also pillages on 1989’s “Thieves”) were contextually heard by more than a few agreeable dancers as a pep rally cheer for the United States Marine Corps.

In one interview, the band says the number was more like three thousand skinheads—and not one woman among them.
incorrectly), since that time such controversies have become more the stuff of press releases and scene boasting than of reality. After all, industrial music is historically contemporaneous with—and in its small way, part of—the trickle down of popular postmodernism, in which mass audiences over the last several decades have become at least dimly aware that a sign’s past use and its present interpretation need not bear a one-to-one correlation. Willful public misreadings of Laibach’s rally-esque concerts, of Skinny Puppy’s staged animal testing (on a stuffed dog named Chud), and of Rammstein lead singer Till Lindemann’s emphatically pronounced rolled “r”—reminiscent of Hitler’s mannerisms—have all become part of those bands’ purported danger: fans get off on the music’s supposed political extremism because they feel safe in their belief that these bands are secretly on “the right side.”

This kind of enjoyment presumes that the music bearing quasi-totalitarian imagery doesn’t in fact promote totalitarian beliefs. There are a lot of questions to ask about this presumption, though. It’s useful to bear in mind the long communicative chain that a piece of music is a part of: an artist has a set of subconscious beliefs about the world, which feeds into a conscious identity, which feeds into an impetus to create a song, which feeds into a piece of packaged music, which is then heard and seen by innumerable individuals who all bring their own political identities and unspoken beliefs to its interpretation. And chains like this aren’t just lateral; they run parallel and they intersect in webs. Amidst the multitudes of artists and songs and identities and images, people assemble repertoires and genres, and they congregate into subcultures, and all the lattices in this web connect back to the individuals, their politics, and their silent fundamental worldviews, mutually reinforcing, coaxing, or uprooting them. It’s how culture works, and it’s why we can’t reduce a discussion of totalitarian imagery in music to a game of spot-the-fascist.

Certainly very few musicians publicly and un-ironically advocate genocidal totalitarianism (though some in the White Hardcore and National Socialist Black Metal scenes do, as 2012’s Sikh temple shooting in Wisconsin soberly reminds us). However, a hoard of industrial acts—particularly in the offshoot “martial industrial,” “dark ambient,” and “neo-folk” genres that first arose in the mid-1980s—present what scholar Anton Shekhovstov considers a more insidious cultural threat than bands like Ministry or Nitzer Ebb, who stage totalitarianism as pageantry to expose how western culture and economics still use fascist control techniques. The artists that Shekhovstov writes about instead insist that their music is apolitical and spiritual (often invoking elements of northern European paganism). Calling it apoliteic, he explains that this music “does not promote outright violence, is not related to the activities of political organizations or parties, and is not a means of recruitment to any political tendency”;
nor is it a direct critique of modern government per se. Instead, apoliteic music saturates its surrounding culture with, and accustoms its audience to, what many consider an aesthetic and poetic core that fertilizes fascism.

This makes sense when we consider that fascism isn’t just an authoritarian form of government; it’s genuinely rooted in and inseparable from aesthetics. As many theorists conceive of it today, rather than explicitly referring to Mussolini’s Italian regime in which government, corporations, and the military operated in lockstep, fascism can indicate broader alliances of cultural, media, military, and commercial powers—the techno-paranoid specter incarnate. Political historian Roger Griffin asserts that fascism’s “mission is to combat the allegedly degenerate forces of contemporary history (decadence) by bringing about an alternative modernity and temporality (a ‘new order’ and a ‘new era’) based on the rebirth, or palingenesis, of the nation,” where “nation” may be ethnically or culturally imagined. Fascism, then, like industrial music, is resistant by nature. It exists to exert itself against another; it exists to discipline. Žižek puts it more plainly: “Enough of enjoyment, enough of debauchery: a victim is necessary.”

Therefore, when we see an instance of fascist aesthetics—like the straight unambiguous lines of military uniforms, parading social and athletic demonstrations, or in the case of industrial music’s appropriations the architectural cleanliness of EBM—we can start to reconstruct and thus identify the purported decadence to which these aesthetics respond. Fascism invokes the spirit of corporate manufacturing, technological reproduction, and military enforcement to issue an ethical mandate, via aesthetics, against alternative ways of being. Musicologist Sean Portnoy goes deeper into this:

Fascism stridently foregrounds the inherent aesthetization of politics (rather than destroying the gap between the supposedly separated spheres of art and politics), [so] there is no such thing as a “fascist aesthete,” instead merely a fascist, and this fascist does not “borrow” from the aesthetic realm but sees the intrinsicness of that vocabulary in politics.

In fascism, aesthetics are the necessary, visible means by which the conspiratorial unification of force, technology, and commerce is culturally endorsed and maintained. Through their purity, fascist aesthetics socially safeguard fascist politics by instantly singling out deviance, squelching resistant attitudes before they can become resistant action.

To this line of thinking, then, it’s not much of an excuse to embrace only the fascist aesthetic while claiming to be apolitical—indeed how else would a world saturated with supposedly nondoctrinal imagery “spontaneously give way
to the spiritual grandeur of national reawakening,” in the plan of postwar fascist philosopher Armin Mohler? As Shekhovstov says, “Fascism is definitely not confined to the realm of politics. One can be a metapolitical fascist without being drawn directly to politics.” As such, he observes:

Significantly, all the movements and groups that, in one way or another, turn to Neo-Folk/Martial Industrial bands in an attempt to infiltrate certain youth subcultures are metapolitical, rather than political. . . these New Right groups focus on the cultural terrain in their attempt to influence society and make it more susceptible to undemocratic and authoritarian ways of thinking.

The reasons for this boil down to a disdain for sullying the perceived purity of the spiritual and national—ethnic—ideal with the dirtiness of modern practical politics, as well as an understanding that one can’t be vocally pro-fascist today without severe social repercussions. Nazi sympathizer and philosopher Ernst Jünger thus explained the need after World War II for fascist ideologues to “retreat into the forest” to safeguard, in Shekhovstov’s words, “‘a secret Europe’ . . . hidden in the interregnum, while the Europe of the ‘deadly’ liberal democratic order and of ‘homogenizing’ multicultural society triumphs.” As such, there are very few open neo-fascists in the industrial scene, but rather than assuage antifascist worries, this points to a useful extension of Shekhovstov’s argument: recalling the weblike nature of people, politics, music, and meaning, it’s not so much that we ought to worry about the self-declared fascists and racists. Instead we should question the effects of fascist symbolism on our own instinctual, unvoiced oppressive urges.

These apolitical tactics of symbolic bombardment in the absence of stated politics are evident in some industrial music. For example, consider Boyd Rice’s choice of the wolfsangel rune as the logo of his band NON.

![Figure 13.1](image-url)

Rice insists that the symbol’s runic origins represent a balance between death and life, overlooking the functional reality that the symbol has also been
the emblem of the Wolf’s Hook White Brotherhood, and that regardless of its history, the wolfsangel’s visual similarity to the swastika is unmistakable.\textsuperscript{20} Inasmuch as meaning is a process that involves human interpretation, words and symbols mean what people interpret them to mean, and thus the wolfsangel is de facto a racist symbol.\textsuperscript{6} A charitable interpretation of NON’s logo is that Rice is reclaiming the wolfsangel from the perceived racism that it predates, but his glee in provoking listeners is well documented and teeters on the abusive. (To offer but one example, 1975’s “Hazard Music” is a conceived but never performed piece that involves heating bullets on a grill until they explode, firing in all directions through suspended plate glass, and into the audience—“It wouldn’t give them time to run, just maybe time to know it was coming.”\textsuperscript{21})

Rice, who can be disarmingly charismatic and charming, personally rejects clear political interpretation of his own music. Asked directly if he would go on record stating that he is not a Nazi, Rice’s reply—notably not “I am not a Nazi”—is that “there’s no such thing as Nazis. If you think people with jackboots are going to be kicking in your doors, it’s going to be a long fucking wait.”\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, in his book No, Rice relegates Nazism exclusively to its original historical context, claiming that the term “has lost its specific meaning, becoming instead a word applied to any person with whom one disagree[s].”\textsuperscript{23} Rice justifies his position by asserting that using the word Nazi ahistorically disrespects the real victims and survivors of the Holocaust, but this line of reasoning also conveniently offers plausible deniability to any rebranding of Nazi aesthetics. Additionally, it self-righteously defangs the vocabulary of those who would critique aestheticized extremism. This is particularly useful to the likes of Rice, for whom aestheticism is a tradition and a way of life—a little reminiscent of such bygone dandies as Oscar Wilde and Radclyffe Hall. Indeed, Rice tells us today that he’s more concerned with his own immediate happiness than with politics. He has written for Modern Drunkard magazine and he is blasé in his dismissals of public opinion: “I don’t care about a lot of the things that people care about. If I were upset every time someone did something that I thought was wrong or ugly or misguided, I’d be a nervous wreck.”\textsuperscript{24} Might this detachment serve as part of a Jüngerian “retreat into the forest?”

Through these tactics, Rice asserts that his interest in Nazism, for example, is strictly an intellectual and spiritual one. It was a revelation to him when as a young man he read Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier’s The Morning of the

\textsuperscript{6} Lest this essay blindly vindicate what might be the baiting of “puritan leftist” politics (for which most crypto-rightist industrial music has little patience), another perspective on this type of provocation is offered in a few pages through the lens of Žižek.

\textsuperscript{2} Incidentally, a long fucking wait is not quite the same thing as never.
Magicians, which probes the curious fact that Hitler had merely been “some weird artist who lived down the street” but within a few years somehow became “the most powerful man in the world, through his use of occult imagery and strange ideas.” Notions like this are undeniably compelling, if prurient, and they’re in keeping with the idea stated earlier that industrial music questions how such monstrosities come to be. But there’s hardly a case to be made for inquisitive detachment or ironic reversal when it comes to Rice: he is the self-appointed head of the mostly defunct Church of Satan (which advocates hedonism and personal gain, rather than devil worship or intentional evil), and as such, a study of Hitler’s acquisition of power stinks less of “how can we prevent this?” than “how can I do this too?”

Rice rightly complains that few reviewers really address his music. His lounge-inspired spoken-word recordings are at times poignant and funny, and his noise-based NON material is often sonically appealing in its tape-loop sensibility, where colossal roars of din form long rhythms that refuse to subdivide rationally. The largely undifferentiated nature of NON’s sound can often turn the audience’s attention, in their grasping for the work’s identity, to Rice’s lyrics and imagery (he is a visual artist too). In fan favorite “Total War,” a military drum pattern provides a soundbed over which other musicians might choose to scream, but Rice instead interrogates his audience with calm, serious authority; the song’s muffled, lo-fi patina situates the affair not in a recording studio but at an outdoor political rally, where a Socratic sermon of eternal violence becomes a listener’s reward for actively straining to hear. Sonically difficult or cloudy music seems to demand listeners’ exerted engagement, investing them in its meaning.

Verbal declarations of “Might Is Right” and symbols like the wolfsangel make it hard to interpret NON’s whole package purely aesthetically. The mythic and political vocabularies that this and nearly all martial industrial noise draws from is so uniformly one-sided that through most lenses it simply doesn’t hold up as a general critique of power itself. Beyond that, its participants’ real politics impede an ironic reading; neo-folk singer Tony Wakeford (of Sol Invictus), for example, was once a member of the National Front.

Ideally, to artists like Boyd Rice, an audience’s difficulty in experiencing this supposedly apolitical music as purely aesthetic ideally becomes a critique of listeners’ political assumptions and indoctrinations—Laibach’s old trick of provoking a response that completes the art work. But it’s hardly a fair move for crypto-rightist music, a little like saying that a driver who stops at a red light is

*He has since declared this “a big mistake”—the worst of his life.* Some journalists and music fans have continued their criticism of him despite this.
a slave to authority signs. If indeed these artists want to challenge the fundamentals of cultural semiotics, then why do symbols linked to racism occupy so specific and central a role in so ostensibly broad a critique?

Appraisals like this can also apply to acts that pervasively invoke a mythic imagery of pre-modern Europe, as with Von Thronstahl, Blood Axis, or Der Blutharsch—this last group having been blocked from performing in Israel by government officials in 2004. Within more popular industrial circles, Feindflug, This Morn’ Omina, and even Wumpscut have all been dogged by similar political suspicion. None of this is to say that any band invoking Euro-pagan imagery or reappropriating military aesthetics is unwittingly fascist; indeed if that were the case, then practically the whole industrial genre would be guilty by association. As Shekhovstov argues persuasively, though, a lot of music that treads this line of controversy acclimates its fans, scenes, and surroundings to an aesthetic whose dominant twentieth-century use was in creating an ethic of exclusion and oppression, and many musicians doing this may be more aware of the potential role they play in Mohler’s “interregnum” than they let on.

4. The Effects of Fascism’s Specter

Let’s look more specifically at the roles industrial music plays in laying an aesthetic and political groundwork for oppressive attitudes and behavior. Hanley quotes a Laibach fan responding to a 1989 concert: “I felt pride in a country I did not belong to. . . . I liked it, I just want to know if they are serious or not.”

But beyond the fact that Laibach’s tactics surpass mere ironic reversal, their “seriousness” is almost a foregone conclusion if the fan has already felt the swell of aesthetically induced pride in a content-free, spurious nation.

There’s an unexpected flipside to the fan-level interpretation of fascist signs in music, though. On the Stormfront messageboards, the internet’s central meeting place for white nationalists and neo-Nazis, the user “English Celt” witnesses the undermining of real fascist expression by the industrial music community’s familiarity with détournement:

I went to a Blutharsch gig in Camden a couple of years ago. The audience consisted of a good handfull [sic] of blatant homosexuals, a couple of ethnic goths, the Nazi memorabilia fetish brigade (some very Jewish looking) and a couple of Nationalists in the corner wondering if we where [sic] in the right place or not.

Like NSBM [National Socialist Black Metal], another weirdo genre designed to attract freaks to a once honourable movement! Why the
hell would patriots want to associate themselves with “industrialism” anyway? I thought these Evolian types rejected the modern world? Not that you have to be an Evolian to revolt against the modern world of course.

Sorry to say all of that, I just can’t understand why we’d want association with that crowd?

Just as “English Celt” questions his own native belonging (or at least Der Blutharsch’s belonging) when confronted with the possibility of its ironic cooption, the confused Laibach fan is upset with the possibility of earnestness; optimistically, he might now know that the next time he feels such pride as Laibach inspired, it’s potentially the product of yet another imposed aesthetic political theater, and not of any native belonging. (Certainly no one has ever accused Laibach of expecting too little from their fans.)

Ultimately, Shekhovstov’s concern isn’t that audiences will misinterpret anti-fascist bands’ cutting-up and recasting of fascist symbolism as hateful; as discussed, audiences don’t really do this very often anymore. Instead, a greater danger might be that fans will assume the motivations behind actual fascist displays to be harmless. Despite the potential victory of “blatant homosexuals” and “ethnic goths” overtaking white nationalist space, Shekhovstov would worry in the case of Der Blutharsch’s concert that the band’s message and iconography have become less politically shocking and are thus more naturalized, one aesthetic step closer to becoming acceptable ethics.

One of the west’s most important public intellectuals of the late twentieth century, Susan Sontag, says, “Shocking people in the context also means inuring them, as Nazi material enters the vast repertory of popular iconography usable for the ironic commentaries of Pop Art.” Sontag focuses on the aforementioned idea that fascist aesthetics are indelibly linked to fascist ideology, and as such she believes that even an ironic recontextualizing of this imagery contributes to this naturalization, and ultimately to oppression. Through her lens, even bands such as Ministry or Front 242 who are decidedly advocates of liberal openness give power to evil by fetishizing it: in her influential 1975 essay “Fascinating Fascism,” she comes out swinging against the day’s semicomic genre of Nazi exploitation porn, among other enemies. She points out that in these films the aesthetics of fascism are beautiful, appealing, even sexy.

Never before was the relation of masters and slaves so consciously aestheticized. Sade had to make up his theater of punishment and delight

Julius Evola was an Italian philosopher influential in postwar fascism.
from scratch, improvising the decor and costumes and blasphemous rites. Now there is a master scenario available to everyone. The color is black, the material is leather, the seduction is beauty, the justification is honesty, the aim is ecstasy, the fantasy is death.30

Sontag’s last sentence applies as easily to industrial music as it does to Nazi propaganda. (Needless to say, it also reasserts industrial music’s connection to BDSM—as she says of Hitler’s rapturous hold over his audiences when speaking, “The expression of the crowds in Triumph of the Will is one of ecstasy; the leader makes the crowd come.”)31 The extension of her argument is that neither artists nor fans can meaningfully criticize fascism while reveling in its aesthetics and values (which Sontag, like Portnoy, argues are one and the same). Black, leather, beauty, honesty, ecstasy, and death: regardless of whether the genre’s telemetry of this constellation was originally intended ironically, one can’t deny the embraced vitality of these aesthetics in such songs as Neuroticfish’s “Black Again,” My Life With the Thrill Kill Kult’s “Leathersex,” and Laibach’s anthem “Smrt za Smrt” (“Death for Death”), which was among the last of the band’s songs with original vocalist Tomaz Hostnik prior to his December 1982 suicide.

Beyond these specific signifiers, to Sontag the very act of aestheticizing power is itself a fascist gesture. In light of this, the only industrial musicians who might escape the fascist trap are those like Nigel Ayers of Nocturnal Emissions, who tried scrupulously to avoid even hinting at totalitarian imagery; with grave doubt, Ayers rhetorically asks in a 1992 letter to the industrial zine Electric Shock Treatment, “At what point does the imagery ‘turn around’?”32 Can industrial music, in its central discourse of control and technology, avoid serving the goals of its authoritarian enemies? The chant of “Smash this fascist racist bullshit” by the 1990s Seattle-based industrial act Kill Switch, Klick swagers to a decidedly unwhite shuffle beat—a smart musical call, considering—but ultimately it comes across as naïve and easily appropriated. This sort of explicitly antifascist disclaimer rings especially ineffectual when we take to heart Ministry’s Burroughsian belief that capitalism and democracy—often purported as an antidote to totalitarianism—merely privatize the role of a fascist state.

5. Who’s Assimilating Whom?

So if “Everything Provokes Fascism,” as Slavoj Žižek and coauthor Andrew Herscher assert, then is any attempted revolutionary move by industrial music doomed to be rejected by its own community, to champion either intentionally or “apolitically” a regime of punishment, or to fuel the machine against which
it rages with even more power still? This question, decidedly central in industrial music’s iconography and politics, is directly connected to the old problem of assimilation that Marx, Adorno, and Debord all grappled with, wherein revolution’s grand duty is to be endless and ever-changing, even amidst the potential futility of any single revolutionary act. Did industrial music misstep at some point, as some purists such as Jon Savage believe? In the isolation and insularity that, as we’ll see, the genre takes on in the late 1990s, does it play the deluded soldier, clutching his gun in the jungle decades after the war’s end? Let’s consider what it means to say yes or no to these questions.

Remember that fascist aesthetics by nature identify and seek to reprogram the decadent and the degenerative, confining social expression until, in Sonntag’s words, “Masses are made to take form, be design.” Imagine a narrative in which an ever-assimilating economic and cultural fascism succeeds in regimenting industrial music like this—a history that compels us to answer yes to those questions of whether industrial music’s political game a losing one:

The amorphous strangeness of the early music—Throbbing Gristle, Chrome, Cabaret Voltaire, Z’EV—lost a degree of its effluent sonic variety when its second wave—Laibach, NON, SPK—started to militarize their image and sound. The media industry named the genre and began to market it in an attempt to bring it under epistemological and economic control. This wasn’t just the result of big business descending on the music—the musicians themselves took on the form and image of business and government in détournement and protest, but that ultimately served only to inure industrial music to the language of the controlling economy. As the dance beat became more standardized, the limited space on club playlists and record label rosters enforced simultaneous competition among bands where there had previously been a communal ethic. Even as the music attempted organizational autonomy and informational warfare, the foisting to popularity of the most verse-chorus-centric acts of the 1980s illustrated that industrial music as a whole was being sculpted to the rigid patterns of pop, despite—or perhaps because of—EBM’s preemptive efforts to inoculate industrial against pop cleanliness by exposure. What’s more, these popular acts became the public faces of industrial music (as we’ll see in the coming chapters), marginalizing the uncategorizable degeneracy of acts such as the Hafler Trio or Muslimgauze. Today, even the shape of the industrial scene is a fascist confining of force—a subculture with formulaic music whose military aesthetic goes beneath the surface, informing not just the stomping of dancefloors but the homogeneity of output. The whole move-
ment is thus known, replicated, and sold. Ultimately its power to upset—once extending to the British parliament and the RIAA—is now contained culturally by its size, by its circularity, and as far as the arbiters of youth culture are concerned, by its cyclical uncoolness. Industrial music has over time gone beyond subscribing to an aesthetic of fascism and now instead can “take form, be design.”

This is of course just one way to tell the story, but it’s a sobering one. A more complete and honest narrative would (and will) note that from the musicians’ perspective, some creative developments within the broader genre have suggested new if less bombastic ways for industrial music to explore resistance. From the audience’s perspective, not every approach to industrial music’s totalitarian borrowings lies on the Hanley-Shekhovstov-Sontag continuum. It is still thankfully possible to read the dialogue of power in redemptive ways that ultimately can help us answer no to the questions asked a few paragraphs ago.

To this end, Žižek is not so quick as Sontag to assume that if it looks like fascism, it must be fascism. A fan of some industrial music himself, Žižek has written a fair amount on his fellow Slovenians Laibach, and in his 2010 book Living in the End Times he turns his attention to the German act Rammstein. Rammstein is not strictly industrial by most definitions, but the style of metal they play (the German press call it Neue Deutsche Härte) couldn’t have happened without the likes of Laibach, Die Krupps, and Ministry.

Of Rammstein’s flirtations with Third Reich aesthetics, Žižek writes, “Not only are such mass performances not inherently fascist, they are not even ‘neutral,’ waiting to be appropriated by Left or Right—it was Nazism which stole them from the workers’ movement, their original home.” From this perspective, first, it’s merely an empowerment of Nazism (or whatever -ism last appropriated a given sign) for an audience to align those symbols with evil; by doing so, listeners vindicate their own paranoia, effectively carrying out their enemies’ dirty work. Second, by demanding a moratorium on using certain symbols (either legislatively as the German government has done with the swastika, or artistically as Nigel Ayers has), people effectively leave these symbols unquestioned in the hands of the bad guys. This type of reasoning also contributes to why Žižek has been critical, for example, of political correctness. Giving new meaning to an old cliché, he says of the political panic that Rammstein set off in Europe, “The only thing we have to fear here is fear itself.”

And some even insist that the point of it all lies well beyond fear or reclamation or acceptance. SPK argues in an early manifesto, for example, that besides “completing” the provocative artistic act, any kind of audience response at all
is freeing because of its incited visceral honesty: “To use overpowering force is not, in itself, fascist. Fascism is the lack or limitation of choice; so to use intensity/confusion as weapons to actually force a choice (instead of leaving pre-coded rationalism intact) is necessarily anti-fascist.”\(^{36}\) They mean here that when a reaction to art is instinctual and not premeditated, it’s not subject to the limited behavioral options preselected by culture. (What they don’t acknowledge here is the link that some see between this honesty and the revelation of a supposedly “true nature,” which all too often devolves quickly into social Darwinism.)

Going backwards from Žižek’s point, though, if it’s the do-gooder leftist critics of (and within) industrial music who are actually empowering fascism by fearing its presence and signs, then it’s no surprise that some figure the purpose of industrial music is not just to reveal the fascist in and among us, but additionally to reveal the prejudiced fascist hunter. From this point of view, think again about NON’s wolfsangel logo: a response to the accusation that Rice’s use of it is racist would be that it’s in fact the sensitive neoliberal who’s reaffirming the symbol’s racism, that the accuser is the real threat to equality. As Lisa Crystal Carver, Rice’s ex-partner and the mother of his child, sums up, “It’s everyone else who’s sick. That’s always his art piece.”\(^{37}\)

It’s worth saying, incidentally, that the people who feel most shafted in these disputes are the fans who merely like how the music sounds. Out of all this theoretical debate, they’re effectively asked to justify their own pleasure from a selection of hopelessly flawed political positions.

6. Battle Scars

Because both fascism and industrial music are resistant by nature, their relationship is in some ways a constant back-and-forth where the reversal of signs’ meanings can become dizzying. The strange misapprehensions of Ministry, Laibach, and Der Blutharsch in this chapter are testament to that. The very nature of these overlapping political reclamations emphasizes an element of truth in both Žižek’s and Sontag’s positions: we can indeed subvert the signs and methods of tyranny, but we can’t whitewash the fact that in doing so we become desensitized to (or even drawn in by) the aesthetic seeds of casual bigotry.

Consider UK-based Pauline Smith, whose mid-1970s mail art appeared alongside the work of industrial VIPs Cosey Fanny Tutti, Genesis P-Orridge, Monte Cazazza, and Vittore Baroni in \textit{Vile}. In 1974 Smith launched a mail art project called the Adolf Hitler Fan Club. As she explains, “All the hostility encountered during the time of the ‘Adolf Hitler Fan Club’ was part of the event
and where-ever possible incorporated into it.\footnote{The attributed author of the source from which this quote comes, “Klaos Oldanburg,” is a pseudonym for Stewart Home. A mid-1970s pamphlet by English mail art duo BLITZFORMATION (Stefan Kukowski and Adam Czamowski) declares, “it has become one of BLITZFORMATION’s foremost projects to change everyone’s name to Klaos Oldanburg.”} Unambiguously prefiguring Boyd Rice, Smith considered the retaliation against her work to be the real art: a display that the enemies of tyranny were the ones responsible for its persistent power. By packaging Hitler into a teenybopper “fan club,” she may have succeeded to some degree in critically emphasizing how mass culture cares more about celebritizing than it does about what sort of people it celebrates—a compelling statement, for sure, and one well within Rice and Žižek’s territory. But Smith’s project also ultimately validates Sontag’s concerns about abyss staring.

As Smith explains, she began ironically aestheticizing Hitler as a figure of provocation in 1970,

but I did not read Mein Kampf until 1971. At that time I was struck by the way Hitler’s description of decadent Austrian democracy prior to WW1 could equally well suit the last few British governments. In 1971 ruthless destruction of the community in which I lived was being carried out by commercially minded people whilst those who had the power to stop this happening stood by like reeds in the wind.\footnote{The frustration that Smith vents on her 1983 CV should look awfully familiar:} The frustration that Smith vents on her 1983 CV should look awfully familiar:

I am preoccupied with Adolf Hitler’s involvement in the occult, the mediumistic nature of his public speaking and the mystery of his charismatic appeal to the multitudes. He may have been a bad man but he knew very well that people do not live by bread alone—a fact our leaders seem to have forgotten, and probably forgotten precisely because Adolf Hitler thought so deeply about meeting a people’s need for inspiration.\footnote{By criticizing those whom her project shocks, Smith seems on one hand to mock audiences for spending too much energy thinking about Hitler, but at the same time she plainly suggests that England would be better off if its leaders paid closer attention to him. Somewhere in the reasoning behind Smith’s provocation, she seems to stop focusing on the public’s enslavement to its own fear of tyranny, and instead she starts recommending tyranny to them, insisting that it should be embraced, not feared. What may have begun as a détourment of propaganda’s dictatorial voice becomes a mere echo of it. In Smith’s}
work, fascism ceases to be a mere bogeyman the moment she casts accusations of decadence and proclaims the virtues of inorganic rigidity by comparing her enemies to reeds in the wind; her words tellingly drip dangerous disdain when she pouts, “It seems that Jewish people in this country had become worried that the ‘Adolf Hitler Fan Club’ may be a front for some kind of pressure group building up against them.”

Similar to Smith’s provocations, industrial music’s extremism is a screen on which grand struggles are acted out in shadow. Stepping back, we can explain the genre’s ironic use of fascist imagery by (at least) two verifiable models that, significantly, don’t actually cancel each other out. One indicates the power of the artist to repossess the images of tyranny while the other points to the simultaneous power of tyranny to diminish the impact of any artwork that takes up its symbols.

This dual action is especially clear when we move beyond theory and look at some actual events within industrial history. In 1988, Nurse With Wound released the track “A Precise History of Industrial Music,” which is little more than the sound of a dot matrix printer’s whine, presumably as it spits out the song’s titular narrative. By offering just the noise of machines while suggesting that all of the genre’s history can be inked in forty-two seconds, Nurse With Wound snidely asserts the genre’s reducibility. In 1990, the Killer Tracks series of generic radio advertising jingles published *Power/Industrial*, a synth-plus-guitar collection of instrumental ditties for high-tech tough guy commercials. Two years later, the Evolution Control Committee released “The Industrial Polka,” affirming the commodity attributes of a style as only parody can do.

Now, these events aren’t condemnations of industrial music, but we might consider them as battle scars. As part of what Chapter 3 calls the revolutionary class, industrial music has never operated alone politically but has assembled at the front lines of little revolutions. It’s therefore no surprise that industrial music has lost some nuance and taken some symbolic damage. As part of a duly resistant multimedia (sub)cultural effort, it has helped to deal a kamikaze blow by weakening the signs of authoritarian control machines through overidentification and exposure to unresolvable debate. By agitating the dialogue over totalitarianism outlined in this chapter, industrial music has helped to belabor certain cultural tools of tyranny into blandness and affixed permanent red flags to others. In this narrative, industrial music’s imagistic language has indeed forged progress, helping to render strong-arm politics and authoritarian censorship neither effective nor culturally tolerated anymore.

Some of the cultural and technological changes to which industrial music has contributed are hard to see today because they’ve become normalized. Think, though, of the giddiness with which industrial-aligned magazines such as
Mondo 2000 fetishized the near future in the early 1990s. The promise was one of a free, anarchic, grassroots society in which technology would level the playing fields of gender, appearance, language, location, and disability. The dizzying, aggressive collages that hip-hop created before the advent of sample clearance lawsuits, those few years of endlessly experimental online self-presentation in the mid-1990s before the web’s social networking lock-in, or Napster’s pirate free-for-all in the summer of 2000—these were brief moments of victory for technology-driven “liberal openness,” harbingered by the anti-authority victories of the tape scene long ago. Inevitably, the desire of copyright holders, governments, entrepreneurs, and lawyers to control and monetize these situations ended the celebrations, but that’s simply how power responds when threatened. It assimilates.

The back-and-forth volleying of meanings or accusations between a resistant culture (like industrial music) and a resistant controlling force (like fascism and its analogues) serves to reify extremist signs and their contexts into mere commodity attributes. In other words, the historical moments just mentioned above reveal the game of resistance and recuperation that industrial music and its enemies both play, chipping away at one another’s armor, with the overdetermined signs of fascism a weapon on both sides. Just as a musical gesture such as vocal distortion can be reduced over time from an ideological claim to a mere advertisement for a genre, the propaganda techniques of media politics are understood by the public through increasingly savvy and cynical lenses.

It’s more useful and correct to think about industrial music and totalitarianism in this way than as an either-or proposition. To the question of whether, in tragic self-deception, industrial music ultimately serves its enemies, this deeper understanding affords us a productive way to answer no. Whatever the punishment, stepping out of cultural ranks to assume degenerate victimhood under fascism exposes its tyranny. It’s therefore fitting with the genre’s thematic proclivity for self-destruction that the whole of industrial music behaves as a suicide commando.

Here the question posed by neo-folk act Death In June takes on new poignancy: “What ends when the symbols shatter?” Writing about Survival Research Laboratories and their giant robot demonstrations, technoculture scholar Mark Dery says, “The problem of SRL-inspired fantasies of a techno-revolution by garbage pail kids is that they’re underwritten by an incongruously Weathermen-esque faith in the power of a well-placed bomb to ‘strike at the heart of the state’ as the Red Brigades put it.”43 In general, though, industrial music doesn’t seem to expect a lasting victory. A single bomb—COUM Transmissions’ Prostitution exhibit or Einstürzende Neubauten’s riotous “Concerto for Machinery and
Voice”—can’t explode eternally, although Marinetti’s Futurist fantasies resonate with Survival Research Laboratories’ hope to the contrary. Instead, Front 242’s directive “Never Stop!” applies: industrial music is most effective and vital as a program of revolutionary work, continuing the back-and-forth of assimilation that Guy Debord and the Situationists pioneered. Both as an historical reading and as advice to today’s musicians, this ceaselessness is necessary not just to the existence of the music but to the hopes of the pan-revolutionary.

7. The Hidden Reverse

Interpreting industrial music’s use of extremist imagery as part of this ultimately productive struggle against authority doesn’t serve as a blanket justification of its every artistic gesture. The genre’s extremist flirtations call into question our preconceptions about propriety, the functions of music, and our internalizing of institutional signs, but recall how they spur what Shekhovstov and Sontag see as the preconditions of prejudice. Despite the genre’s purported antihegemony, its unchecked battle wounds weaken its already shaky stance on some key social and political grounds.

As previous chapters mentioned, industrial music has had gender problems. Skinny Puppy took some important steps toward opening the genre to women, and we’ll see that Nine Inch Nails did too, but it wasn’t until the 1990s that many people started asking questions about industrial music and sexism. Examples of this questioning include the Diva Ex Machina compilation series organized by Kim “X” Nguyen of Cop International Records, which highlighted female industrial musicians, and more recently the label machineKUNT Records was founded on a policy of signing only female artists. The gender-dissolving Pandrogyne project has also raised awareness of the issue, but even as of 2012’s Kinetik Festival, the year’s largest industrial event in North America, troubles persist. Taking the stage as Adversary, Canadian rhythmic noise musician Jairus Khan used video projection to issue “a public service announcement regarding the use of racist and sexist imagery by two of tonight’s performers,” juxtaposing Marie Shear’s definition of feminism as “the radical notion that women are people” alongside the band Combichrist’s lyric “All you feminist cunts, you know that you want it. Give head if you got it.”44 Khan’s screen declared, “We are not offended by this toxic language. We are contemptuous of it,” and after reinforcing the industrial credentials of his antibigotry politics with a quote from Peter Christopherson of Throbbing Gristle and Coil, he concluded, “Reject Sexism . . . We demand better.”45 The genre still largely works under the assumption of maleness. At least some are asking why.
The audience at Kinetik had been primed for half of Adversary’s message by decades of liberal voices within industrial music addressing and inviting gender difference—albeit with slow progress. But it was a bigger surprise when Khan also seized the moment to criticize Combichrist’s use of the Confederate flag. He effectively revealed just how infrequently the topic of race comes up among the community; indeed, industrial musicians and fans mostly see themselves as socially progressive, and direct racism in industrial music’s most trafficked corridors is exceedingly rare. Instead of calling out any one band, then, the question we should ask is how race had become such a blind spot within the genre that using a Confederate flag seemed like a good idea to anyone—especially in a context apparently devoid of any attempted détournement. Within this broad discussion of how industrial music has handled politics, the upcoming chapter asks why the particular issue of race reveals an incongruous glitch in the genre’s supposedly omnidirectional mission of radical empowerment.

It’s no doubt tempting for some to declare, exasperated, that race has absolutely nothing to do with industrial music. There are two important reasons, though, why it should.

First off, whether or not one shares Shekhovstov’s concerns about Europagan themes incubating fascism, to reveal this kind of blind spot is absolutely in keeping with—even necessary to—the industrial idea of questioning hegemonies. The spectrum of genders, abilities, and sexual orientations in industrial music communities means that even though there is certainly attitudinal work yet to be done, these differences are not invisible. Race, on the other hand, is basically unplumbed in the genre, owing in no small part to industrial music’s near homogeneity of whiteness.

The other reason is because despite the tactics of ambiguity that industrial music embraces, its wide-angled revolutionary politics can significantly benefit from the specificity that certain nonwhite musics have voiced. It’s an obvious springboard for industrial music’s thematics of enslavement and liberation. Let’s move forward, now.
1. Whiteness

In light of industrial musicians’ purported concern with the politics of control, one might expect them to engage with the topic of race. This happens only rarely in a direct sense, though. A close look at this music over time nonetheless helps us not just understand its racial attitudes but also explain why these attitudes matter, and how they relate to the music’s past and future.

By the numbers, the overwhelming majority of industrial musicians and fans are caucasian. The low level of minority participation in the music might have something to do with the already rich body of protest music in Latin America and the African diaspora; one could argue that there’s an abundance of protest musics more welcoming of diversity. But beyond that, there’s a more insightful set of reasons for industrial music’s predominant whiteness (and perhaps its maleness). This book notes early on that a lot of industrial music embodies the enraged response to “waking up” from a supposed hegemonic enslavement. For example, Paul Lemos of the band Controlled Bleeding wrote in 1985 that his output “reflects the frustration that comes in realizing one’s own inability to affect a political system, and one’s own insignificance in the scope of the masses.”

But waking up to a cataclysmic personal shock like this is only possible to those lulled into slumber to begin with—a condition predicated on certain privileges, such as the promise of adequate earning power, correct fluency in the dominant language, and an inheritance of social autonomy, trust, and belonging.

To many people who aren’t socially granted these privileges of identity, it’s self-evident that the system is rigged. Although the cultural conversations of racial disenfranchisement might not be overly concerned with exterminating all rational thought, it’s yesterday’s news that western culture’s particular brand of rationality sometimes offers limited benefit to outcasts. Industrial music’s privilege, along with its post-1990 surge of lyrics about romantic relationships gone bad (more about this in the coming chapters), largely accounts for the occasional journalistic criticism of the genre as being whiny.
Industrial music’s mission of exposing western control systems has the greatest potential significance to those for whom such controls and their categorizations are least visible. Put plainly within the specific context of race, this means that industrial music presumes a white audience. This doesn’t mean that the music is racist; nor does it preclude deeper, more nuanced articulations of racial politics within the genre. It does suggest, though, that a genre concerned with recognizing and combating social hegemonies could potentially learn and gain strength from an ongoing dialogue with other racial expression and critique.

This chapter looks closely at how industrial music inadvertently operates within, and reinforces its presumption of, identity. It also acknowledges and analyzes the genre’s engagement with racial otherness, highlighting both some actualized moments and some missed opportunities in the dialogue just mentioned.

2. The Inheritance of Blues, Jazz, and Dub

Before delving into how industrial music assumes and responds to whiteness, let’s begin by locating some of its nonwhite origins. Recalling Chapter 3’s differentiation between industrial and classical values in music, we should reiterate that industrial is a form of western popular music, and that broadly some of the most ubiquitous features of modern popular styles derive expressly from African American music. A kick-snare backbeat and a pervasive syncopation in vocal rhythm are just two practices that have become so normalized across rock and dance music that, taken on their own now, they convey only faint traces of any markedly African music. With a few exceptions like the power electronics subgenre, most industrial music has spoken with—or at least spoken about—this pop language since 1980 or so. In the overwhelming majority of industrial music and pop styles, rhythms are looped with consistent tempo and beat emphasis, harmonic progressions repeat cyclically (often in patterns of two or four chords at a time), key changes are rare, and melodies recur unchanging. The modern use of these musical building blocks is remarkably consistent on records by Al Green and a;GRUMH… alike, and it all stems unambiguously from the collision of African musical practices with the historical Euro-American soundscape.

Beyond industrial music’s prerequisite (and occasionally resented) pop heritage, it intersects in a few more meaningful and specific ways with African American music. For example, Chapter 9 noted the pleasure that Nitzer Ebb took in the blues; Douglas McCarthy’s voice constantly slides between a song’s tonic and its minor third, a hallmark gesture of the style. As more influences
from rock filtered into industrial music in the 1990s, borrowings like that spread; Sister Machine Gun’s “Cut Down” is a prime example, with a flatted fifth in its melody, a jivey offbeat emphasis in its drums, and a brass-filled, zero-irony chorus about “the middle of the big ol’ night.”

From a chronological view, though, the first important junction we should acknowledge between industrial music and racial otherness is in the genre’s early connection to experimental jazz. The pop and blues idioms just outlined are so ingrained in modern western music as to be plausibly transparent, but industrial music’s invocation of jazz comes from a self-aware position of musical understanding. In most cases, it’s a nod of kinship to a shared revolutionary moment when musical worlds were bridged by commonalities of improvisation, (Afro-)Futurism, and organizational independence.

The heavily improvisatory nature of early industrial music, combined with its literate self-inscription within a twentieth-century political tradition, compels connections to the Englishman Cornelius Cardew. Cardew was a former protégé of Stockhausen who, with a Maoist focus on equality, formed the radically improvisatory Scratch Orchestra in 1969. Like Genesis P-Orridge, Cardew was involved with the Fluxus art movement in the 1970s and saw the bounds of musical composition as extending well beyond traditional performance: in addition to his fascination with the recording studio as an instrument, he studied graphic design to allow his nebulous, abstract musical scores to stand as art themselves.²

Outside this European intelligentsia, however, the fundamental improvisatory force in music was the free jazz that Ornette Coleman and others had been playing since the early 1960s. Free jazz (a loaded term that, like nearly any good subgenre name, was largely disavowed by its practitioners) is wilder and less populist than Cardew’s music, and it thrives on the tension between players’ responsive musical dialogue and the loud tantrum of their individual, isolated monologues, warring for the listener’s ear.

Both of these approaches to improvisation hung fresh in the air when early industrial acts like Clock DVA got their start. Their debut White Souls in Black Suits offers a panorama of thin, reverberant soundscapes devoid of steady rhythm and littered with saxophone whines; bearded band member Charlie Collins was a self-described Ornette Coleman fan.³ Remember also the choking, frantic saxophone that pervaded early performances of Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft (the 1979 live version of “Gib’s Mir” on Die Kleinen und die Bosen is particularly ferocious); it becomes clear that the innovations of jazz music in particular were important to industrial musicians, especially because so many of them had been weaned on the jazz inflections of the prog-rock scenes of the 1970s—even Kraftwerk’s first records were full of flute solos.
This jazz crossover is evident in the media surrounding early industrial music as well. The November 1984 issue of Artitude magazine boasts in-depth artist profiles of both Coleman's guitarist James “Blood” Ulmer and NON's Boyd Rice, unblinking in its juxtaposition. In 1987, the Jazz Composers' Orchestra Association took out full-page ads for their New Music Distribution Service in San Francisco's industrial zine Unsound, hawking records by Coleman, goth-blues shrieker Diamanda Galás, turntablist Christian Marclay, and John Zorn, a jazz wild man from New York's No Wave scene.

It was in this downtown sensibility that the connections between industrial and jazz are most clearly forged, and their mutual encounter is still visible today in crossover magazines such as The Wire. Although Zorn, for all his clattering abjection, never had much to do with the industrial scene, he and his New York contemporaries (notably Glenn Branca, Lydia Lunch, Elliott Sharp, and bands like Bill Laswell's Material and Sonic Youth) were similarly concerned with moving beyond punk's rockabilly trappings and exploring noise. No Wave scene historian Marc Masters writes, “No Wave's deconstructive approach drew on other ancestors from the 1960s and '70s: the radical noise of free jazz musicians like Albert Ayler and Sun Ra, the experimental blues-rock of Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band, the trance-inducing rituals of German groups like Can and Faust.” The majority of industrial music however, had generally seemed to jazz-descended hipsters in the 1980s a bit too white both in its inability to achieve a relaxed coolness and in its real (if rare) pockets of racial extremism. Recalling the geography of industrial music's earliest years, we might even posit that at the turn of the 1980s the genre's relative silence in New York (and for that matter, Chicago, Bristol, and Paris) had a lot to with the degree to which African-descended populations contributed to the urban dialogue of cultural innovation. Despite this, a few important No Wave–related acts managed to appeal both to the ever-trendy offspring of the New York scene and to the industrial milieu. Prominent among these are Michael Gira's occasionally gothic band Swans (later joined by tape scene chanteuse Jarboe); some projects by Jim G. Thirlwell (of Foetus), whose York (First Exit to Brooklyn) album, for example, employed No Wave's session players and its spirit; and Jon Spencer's pre-hardcore band Pussy Galore, arguably most known for their raucous 1988 version of Einstürzende Neubauten's “Yü Gung.”

The rare direct borrowings from jazz in later industrial music reach back to a cultural moment when cacophony bleated a pruriently appealing threat to the

* By the middle of the 1980s, nearly all of these cities had developed industrial scenes, but this was more an effect of the music's growing popularity at large than of the cities' particular racial politics.
western status quo. (This jibes particularly well with industrial’s debt to Burroughs and beat poetry.) Such nods include Trent Reznor’s modal saxophone improvisation in “Driver Down” from the soundtrack to *Lost Highway*, whose auteur David Lynch stands at the crux of industrial extremism and 1960s cool cat Americana. Or take Nettwerk Records signee MC 900 Ft Jesus, whose career’s odd shape owed heavily to the fact that neither he nor his record label could seem to figure out whether he was an industrial musician, a rapper, a comedian, or a jazz man; he delved deep into Coleman territory on his third album, 1994’s *One Step Ahead of the Spider*, on which he traded out Steven Gilmore’s cyber-cool graphic design for a whiteness-obscuring, neobiblical portrait by graffiti artist Greg Contestabile. Or consider 2004’s “Sex With Sun Ra (Part One—Saturnalia)” by old school industrialists Coil; Sun Ra was among the most daring and opulent performers in free jazz, and in this marimba-driven song John Balance narrates an imagined religious experience with the man (who had in fact been dead since 1993). Within later dance industrial music, Haujobb’s 1996 “The Cage Complex” concludes with a thrillingly earnest saxophone solo, full of altissimo squeals and multiphonic squonks directly from the bebop language of the 1960s, and Mona Lisa Overdrive’s 1993 “It’s Time” opens with a faux Miles Davis moment of trumpet cool. The message in all these songs’ close brushes with jazz is at the very least a recognition of its musical power, both in the notes themselves and in its stylistic connotations—a consideration inextricable from race. To most musicians (and likely many audiences), these borrowings function as musical admiration or homage.

Production effects and recording techniques are other touchstones that have connected industrial music across racial lines in ways that don’t immediately strike one as problematic. Dub music—a 1970s reggae-derived experimentation with beats, textures, and effects—has especially close ties to industrial, both historically through a handful of individuals who straddled both scenes and conceptually through the idea of Afrofuturism, which is the practice of re-claiming and controlling the dialogue of one’s racial otherness by becoming “out of this world” through technology and sheer strangeness. By recasting disenfranchisement as literally alien, Afrofuturists tap into science fiction’s treatment of the alien as awe-inspiring and plainly superior. Musicians such as Sun Ra, Afrika Bambaataa, Janelle Monae, and Kanye West have all invoked Afrofuturism, and production practices like sampling and remixing (first practiced live by African American DJs) are inextricably associated with it. Scholar and electronic music producer Steve Goodman asserts that it’s a driving force behind jungle, dubstep, and nearly every major innovation in recent dance music, and its compatibility with industrial music’s technophilia (if not its techno-paranoia) is self-evident.
The closest continued acknowledgment between Afrofuturism and industrial music occurred in the mid-1980s with the racially mixed Bristol UK–based dub reggae scene that Adrian Sherwood and Mark Stewart helped to kickstart. Assisted intermittently by New York–based compatriots Doug Wimbish and Keith LeBlanc—both backing musicians for first-generation rap acts such as the Sugar Hill Gang—Sherwood and the On-U Sound collective applied dub production techniques to records by Nine Inch Nails, Ministry, and KMFDM. The Bristol scene, which also included Tricky and the future members of Massive Attack, effortlessly applied what they called “dub logic” to reggae and harsh dance music alike.

Dub involves the spacialization and blurring of musical events through looping, equalization, and reverberation; in the hands of Sherwood, dub owed nearly as much to Brian Eno as it did to Jamaican production and DJing. In the 1980s, Sherwood and his buddies produced and played on literally hundreds of albums—mostly for Jamaican artists—while maintaining a relationship with industrial music. For example, as Keith LeBlanc cut tracks for World’s Famous Supreme Team’s 1986 album *Rappin’*, he was at the same time assembling his own underground hit single “Major Malfunction,” sampling the Challenger shuttle explosion and looping Ronald Reagan’s intonation that space was “pulling us into the future.” Similarly, Mark Stewart’s band at the time, the Maffia, felt at home crafting straight-up reggae tracks such as “None Dare Call It A Conspiracy” alongside the classic industrial assaults “Hypnotised” and “The Wrong Name and the Wrong Number”—tracks beloved by cEvin Key of Skinny Puppy. For these musicians, the path between Black Uhuru and Big Black was clear and open: “I don’t see race,” Stewart says flatly. Jamaican reggae and dub are the sound of a culture transplanted from Africa across the ocean and forced to adapt; the sound that Sherwood, Lee “Scratch” Perry, and Mark Stewart crafted is that of a culture now twice transplanted, echoing the cold of England and its postindustrial techno-ambivalence into the old song. Displacement itself is the subject here, and it follows the trade routes of slave ships.

It should be noted that Sherwood is white, which in the 1980s led to a few members of the Rastafarian sect Twelve Tribes accusing him of appropriating a sound that was “rightfully theirs.” However, to most of the musicians he worked with, his commitment to and respect for reggae was in no conflict at all with his race and his industrialist tendencies. In Sherwood, industrial music and Afrofuturism mutually absorb one another; On-U Sound’s releases used to be stamped with a copyright date of ten years into the future, boldly reclaiming the music’s displacement with sci-fi panache.

But On-U Sound is an anomaly, and after the 1980s Sherwood only occasionally popped his head into the industrial scene. Even then, it was just to
remix a twelve-inch version for old friends like Skinny Puppy and Nine Inch Nails. In the dub-meets-industrial world, there are remarkably few descendants of this bloodline: Godflesh and Scorn both mixed noise, reggae, and metal together, Legendary Pink Dots bassist Ryan Moore founded Twilight Circus Dub Sound System, and the French act Treponem Pal broke modest ground with some rootsy industrial rock records in the 1990s, but these endeavors had limited impact on industrial music as a whole.

3. Exotica, Caricature, and the Techno-Oblivious

Although the previous examples suggest a symbiosis between industrial music and African-derived traditions, the relationship is usually more parasitic. Beyond the aforementioned blues, jazz, and dub inflections, industrial music's connection to race is less a dialogue than a monologue: as mentioned at this chapter's outset, industrial music tends to presuppose whiteness—that is, hegemonic non-otherness—on the part of audience and musician alike. This manifests in its use of racial caricature and its engagement with certain technologies as racially incidental rather than intentional. In what follows, the point again is not to brand any music or individuals as racist, but to look at how industrial music seldom acknowledges racial otherness.

Part of industrial music's vocabulary is its “Third World tribal rhythm mentality [that] was thrown in to add a sense of disembodied cultural yearning,” according to tape scene historian Scott Marshall. Some industrial musicians feel a genuine empathy with the ritual and trance elements of specific foreign musics, but this is in nearly every instance an outsider's projection, not a case of “going native.” Marshall refers mostly here to the influential lineage of 1950s exotica, which manifests musically in certain recordings by Throbbing Gristle (the song “Exotica,” unsurprisingly) and NON. It lurks behind the band names of Pygmy Children and Voodoo Death Beat, and with varying degrees of irony it’s also an undercurrent in the music of 23 Skidoo, Hula, and other postpunk acts. Masked as world beat, this exotica was the entire foundation of the Italian pseudo-Inca band Atahualpa, whose “Ultimo Imperio” was a hit on industrial dancefloors in 1990.

Musicologist Phil Ford connects exotica to Futurism in its ability to relate simultaneously to modernity and also to an imagined world that offers an alternative to the military-industrial control of culture, “Seeking a residue of the primitive in a present cluttered with our machines.” In this way, it occupies a role similar to the “fallen Europe” trope that martial industrial music has centralized, or more recently, the playful vintage aesthetic that the industrial-turned-
steampunk act Abney Park invokes. Exotica, Ford says, “is a kind of pictorial music, broadly representational though not necessarily narrative,” and thus (again, not unlike steampunk) inasmuch as exotic sensibilities feed into industrial music, its no surprise that they’re most evident in the visual component of the genre. Recall, for example, Monte Cazazza’s forays into Mondo-derived filmmaking, or consider the record sleeves seen here.

Figure 14.1: The cover sleeve of Hunting Lodge’s 1985 “Tribal Warning Shot” single uses a photograph of African tribespeople from a 1935 textbook. The rear sleeve quotes the book, “The little people are very good to us when they learn that we do not mean to harm them. They listen with great curiosity to our small radio, which seems like magic to them.”

Figure 14.2: The Fair Sex’s 1987 “Bushman” single exoticizes the southern African people by name while its cover obscures the German quintet in a gauzy jungle of otherness.
Figure 14.3: Bizarr Sex Trio’s 1990 self-titled record closely resembles (and overtly sexualizes) the Congolese Pende tribe’s Gitenga mask art. Art by Paul B. Hirsch.

Figure 14.4: The Neon Judgement’s 1986 Mafu Cage, inspired by the 1977 film of the same name. Frontman Dirk Da Davo says, “We wanted to do an album that fits a voodoo kind of feeling. We wanted to use monkey sounds, earthy sounds.”

It’s apparent that there’s a dimension of cultural and racial border crossing at work here. Ford explains, “The exotica imagination is orientalist . . . whether or not the places it envisions are literally Oriental, or even belong in the real world.”13 Westerners’ use of these racialized images then isn’t specific but is instead based on the otherness of the supposed cultures it portrays; it illustrates a sexual, safarilike, dangerous fun that’s presumably absent from the white post-
industrial world. Here this manifests beyond the African diaspora and includes the near eastern flavor one hears in SPK’s Zamia Lehmanni album, Laibach’s version of “God Is God” (originally by Juno Reactor), and A Split-Second’s 1988 “Mambo Witch,” a catchy single that freely conflates “the Hindu curse”—whatever that is—with Cuban mambo.

Ford characterizes exotica as “a libidinous fantasy stocked with convention-lized others. The human objects of orientalist perception are unreasoning, instinctual, indolent, childish, cruel, sexual—the old colonial hand’s half-wishful
inversion of his own self-understanding.\textsuperscript{14} And so for industrial music, this wishfulness takes the form of the Burroughs-esque wild boy persona to whom abjection comes laced in gross whimsy, more clownish than miserable. Good examples of this are 1992’s “Do the Monkey (Hitchhike to Mars)” by Swedish act Peace, Love & Pitbulls and 1995’s “Hey Fuck Da’ World” by Klute, a side project of the Danish EBM powerhouse Leæther Strip.

The critical considerations of exotica lie well beyond its aesthetic intent. Ford concludes, “When intellectuals handle this music with the hermeneutic equivalent of tongs and a HAZMAT suit they are in a sense not hearing it at all. The moment we insist on the interpretive priority of colonialism and commodification, fun time’s over.”\textsuperscript{15} Certainly this chapter is guilty as Ford charges, but nevertheless, in order for exotica’s fun to work at all, one needs to assume a collective self-identity against which to frame the otherness portrayed. From its Tiki theater, exotica gives free rein to the white imagination—but perhaps only the white imagination—to roam outside the western responsibilities of culture and privilege.

Another possibly contentious way that industrial music interfaces with race is in its use of gestures from traditional African-derived musics as a source of irony, reading them as kitsch. A clear case of this is KMFDM’s 1995 “Juke Joint Jezebel,” whose chorus features a massive gospel choir erupting out of nowhere, rhyming “sister salvation” ridiculously with “my cremation.” In addition to the
backup singers, the chorus’s harmonic use of the flatted seventh within a major key (the Mixolydian mode, as it’s called) immediately sets the song apart from industrial conventions. It’s a send-up, to be sure, but of what? At once sleazy and exuberant, the chorus takes pleasure in self-destruction (as the lyrics describe), tapping into shallow perceptions of religious fervor and lasciviousness. Is the musically encoded sense of African American stereotypes the point, then, or is KMFDM using it as a genuinely expressive meeting ground for the old industrial warhorse topics of Christianity, sex, and hypocrisy? Both interpretations are problematic. And there are other examples too. Nearly the exact same reading is available to 1985’s “The Only Good Christian Is A Dead Christian” by Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel, a foot-stomping jive song that in gospel harmony declares, “I’m payin’ for the price of sin,” while simultaneously, “The time is ripe for satisfaction.” Or for that matter, Revolting Cocks’ “Beers, Steers, and Queers” is plainly a rap song about (among other things) “sex in barns,” proclaiming, “Texas has religion: Revolting Cocks are God!” Are industrial musicians taking pleasure in African American tropes while simultaneously turning their nose up at those for whom such music is a genuine expression, or are they shooting holes in minstrelsy by parading it as absurd? If the latter is the case—a charitable reading—then the tactics of reversal here share the same pitfalls as industrial’s treatment of fascism, as discussed in the preceding chapter.

In this industrial tackiness (which seems to have all but died out since the mid-1990s), racial borrowings are a source of humor. Even if this humor might not expressly come at the expense of African American culture or its music, it’s worth asking whether the joke would work in the same way if the musicians were not white. Describing a similar kind of borrowing in language, anthropologist Jane H. Hill talks about what she calls “mock Spanish,” as when Arnold Schwarzenegger’s badass cyborg character learns to say “no problemo” and “hasta la vista, baby” in Terminator 2. But, as Hill argues, “It is only possible to ‘get’ ‘Hasta la vista, baby’ if one has access to a representation of Spanish speakers as treacherous,” and by extension, “getting” the caricature thus reinforces it. So although there is real musical pleasure and power in these industrial borrowings, and despite their arguable status as “crossover” gestures (“curiously indeterminate” in their politics, Hill says), they nevertheless occupy an uneasy position, their value relying to a degree on the genre’s baseline assumption of whiteness.

Here the use of “crossover” is adapted from Geneva Smitherman by way of Hill.

White Souls in Black Suits
4. Technology and Racial Engagement

Not all connections between industrial music and race are borrowings. Technology provides musical similarities across genres that can be both historically incidental and ideologically loaded. Prior to the advent of the sampler as an instrument, musicians who wanted to make electronic pop of any kind had a decidedly finite choice of sounds, due to the limited number of synthesizers and drum machines for sale. Thus the drum and bass sounds we hear in the mid-1980s work of Chris & Cosey come in some cases from the same presets on the same gear that was used on disco records from the era. For example, musicologist Robert Fink has traced the use and history of the “ORCH5” preset on the Fairlight CMI workstation, replete with appearances in the music of Kate Bush and Afrika Bambaataa alike. As hinted at in Chapter 8, it makes for a sonic sameness across styles that might optimistically be read as kinship: it’s part of why clubs like Antwerp’s Ancienne Belgique and Chicago’s Muzic Box could play breakdance records alongside Cabaret Voltaire. It’s also why on Front 242’s first U.S. tour they attracted massive audiences of African Americans who heard a connection between early EBM and the electro to which they regularly danced; a quick listen to 1983’s Enter album by Juan Atkins’s band Cybotron drives home the point nicely. Through the first half of the 1980s, neither these electronic sounds nor the gear nor the production practices were particularly racially coded.

But the way people enjoyed this music could indeed be racially coded. As this book’s discussions of beat-driven industrial and EBM have suggested, much of the musical pleasure in repetition is rooted in bodily pleasure, most directly connected to dancing, but also mapped as an analogue for sexual expression. Pop scholars have pretty conclusively demonstrated that a lot of the repetition and bodily-ness that we hear in popular music today takes funk and disco as its basis, and that because those musics share a common cultural and racial origin, there’s an associative cultural element in dancing to the harmonically static and the rhythmically relentless. This is certainly the case in America, Africa, and Western Europe by virtue of their long, often ugly history in which music, culture, money, and slaves repeatedly crossed the Atlantic.

Beyond the shared sounds across electronic musics in the 1980s (racially imprinted or not), we can talk about repetition in popular music as a potential function of technology. Recall, for instance, the loop-based songs of Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft discussed in Chapter 5. The technological repetition of a groove, digitally precise in its sameness, resonates naturally both with this somewhat racialized bodily pleasure and with industrial music’s ironic fetishization of technology and uniformity. This is another reason why the musi-
cal phrase lengths in GRUMH...’s “Ayatollah Jackson,” addressed in Chapter 2, are of seemingly arbitrary duration: in the recording studio, a singer who belts lyrics over a looping beat doesn’t have to memorize a predetermined timing but instead can start and stop as the mood strikes. The coldness of technology and the human “feel” of music’s structure find a common ground here. As Skinny Puppy’s cEvin Key says, it “wasn’t intentional to throw in time changes as much as it was a hunch, like what sounded right at the time.” Again, this hearkens back to the improvisatory nature of the music and its connections to jazz.

As the 1980s moved along, sampling became an affordable reality in record production, and this started to differentiate electronic styles that had previously shared sonic profiles. The records and sounds being digitally reproduced reflected musicians’ taste, culture, and physical surroundings. Samplers made first by AMS and later by Akai and Yamaha allowed multisecond snippets of sound to become building blocks of production, and musicians used them no longer just to capture a drum hit or a guitar pluck; now they were lifting entire one- and two-measure segments from records and looping them. Probably the most impressive work done with this technique occurred in hip-hop between 1988 and 1991, where Public Enemy’s producers the Bomb Squad aligned old funk loops in tempo and layered them with one another amidst horn jab samples, nonverbal funk grunts, and gospel choirs to create a veritable curriculum in African American music history. The Dust Brothers, who helped assemble the Beastie Boys’ Paul’s Boutique album in 1989, used their samplers with similar cultural savvy, highlighting the group’s white boy wackiness.

Loop-based sampling is especially well suited to hip-hop and industrial music because both styles tend to downplay traditional melodic and harmonic concerns, thus minimizing the degree to which a producer might worry about clashing tones in the sampled measures. Jon Savage recognized in 1983 the connection between hip-hop’s sound collage and the “anti-music” of the industrial movement: we “hear cut-ups played freely on the radio, in popular ‘scratch’ and ‘rap’ music...” With the sonic retooling of the past being a tenet of industrial and hip-hop, it’s no surprise that they both reached the boiling point at the same time in the late 1980s, driven in part by the availability of sampling.

Simon Reynolds writes, “Sampling is enslavement: involuntary labour that’s been alienated from its original environment and put into service in a completely other context, creating profit and prestige for another.” In this distant way, sampling allows musicians to turn the tables on the slavery narrative, or alternatively to abreact it; the racial power in this act is clear, but industrial music’s themes of authoritarian control and sadomasochism resonate here duly, if with less historical force. And as exemplified by Meat Beat Manifesto, Consolidated, the Beatnigs, the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, MC 900 Foot
Jesus, and other moments of crossover such as Ministry’s 1989 guest vocal rap “This Is A Test,” industrial music and rap found common ground in their anger and the practice of sampling. It wasn’t that Burroughs-reading anarchists were expressly concerned with racial struggle, or that the Bomb Squad had been necessarily listening to Test Dept., but rather the sampler was a vital, shared tool in the political expression of all contemporary urban cultures. Thus the modes of production between these musics overlapped as a result of political similarities, emphasizing certain common musical characteristics.

Legal battles and shifts in technology and trends toned down the sampling-as-politics practice in hip-hop and industrial music by the mid-1990s. This move away from reliance on the sampler was simultaneous with the mutual distancing of industrial and hip-hop, though technology may have played less of a role in this divide than suburbia’s remarkable repackaging of hip-hop as a marker of coolness and toughness for dominant white social groups; as an emerging soundtrack to high school jock culture, hip-hop became a flag of outcasts’ enemies. Nevertheless, postmillennial industrial rap groups such as SMP and Stromkern serve as a reminder, if only as a throwback, of this hinted-at kinship.

In terms of sonic artifacts on industrial recordings, the connection to African American musics via sampling also means that hip-hop sounds are all over records by the likes of Front Line Assembly: for example, 1992’s “The Blade” samples James Brown’s classic “Funky Drummer” beat, while 1997’s “Sadomasochist” samples NWA’s Eazy-E. Nine Inch Nails similarly sample Prince’s “Tamborine” on 1990’s “Head Like A Hole (Opal mix).” This indicates both some cross-stylistic ideologies and tactics and also the simple fact that industrial musicians were listening across racial lines; for example, Paul Lemos of Controlled Bleeding boasts his fandom of Public Enemy and Ultramagnetic MCs in a 1989 interview. This crossing of lines was largely a one-way practice, though: industrial DJs in the UK, Germany, and America could spin rap records, but the days of the left-field crossover into hip-hop culture had effectively ended with the advent of its explicitly political self-awareness, around 1987.

One of the reasons for this unidirectionality was that despite a common attraction to the cut-up and a desire to subvert and confront, industrial music, on the rare occasions when it grapples with race directly as a topic, has a tendency to misunderstand or naively misuse elements of racial discourse.

German EBM act Funker Vogt offer a politicized racial context in their fascinating 2000 song “Black Market Dealers,” which seeks to capture the experience of German children following their nation’s defeat in 1945: “The first black men they ever saw were among the foreign soldiers. Some of them were really kind,” states the lyric. There’s a noncommittal strangeness to this passage that
goes beyond Funker Vogt's frequent infelicities with English. Rather, the careful mention of the soldiers' kindness hints at a consciously civil response to racial otherness that may reflect the band's modern politics as much as the experiences of the children they sing about.

Belgian project Holy Gang evidently felt the need to comment musically on the 1992 rape conviction of boxer Mike Tyson. The one-off group, which included Front 242’s Richard 23, titled their 1994 album Free! Tyson Free!, explaining to industrial zine Music from the Empty Quarter, “We felt if there was a rape, it was the rape of Mike Tyson more than anything else . . . he was black in America.”22 But any racially savvy critique that the trio offered of “New York City’s ghetto streets” badly misfired with the title track’s chorus chant of “Free Tyson! Fuck that bitch,” obliquely attacking submerged racism with direct and senseless misogyny.

This off-kilter treatment of race plays out elsewhere. Consider, for example, three industrial songs that sample the voice of Martin Luther King Jr.: Swedish act Covenant’s 1994 “Voices” replays a segment of his American Liberties Medallion acceptance speech, but incongruously it is a song about a man’s individual paranoia and regret; German electro-industrial band X Marks the Pedwalk transforms King’s cry of “Free at last!” from a dream of racial equality into a personal escape from “emotional lies” on their 1992 “Repression” (notably not “Oppression”); Australian act Snogs “Born to Be Mild” of the same year critiques yuppie culture’s “Rick Astley look” and then confusingly throws in a sample of “I have a dream,” reframing either King himself or his dream—or in a less likely reading, perhaps commenting on yuppie suburbia’s coopting of King’s legacy. Regardless, in all of these songs artists play fast and loose with race. The industrial information war means cutting up the signs of the control machines, but in some of these cases artists are instead destabilizing other victims of that same control. Even when KMFDM aims for camaraderie across racial lines, enlisting Adrian Sherwood’s friend reggae singer Morgan Adjei to implore “Black man [and] white man” to “rip the system,” the message falls a little flat in its simplicity.

The industrial artists mentioned here hail from countries outside what cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy calls the Black Atlantic. As such, the cross-racial interactions in their work are different from those of American, African, Caribbean, English, or French artists. Indeed, nearly every nonwhite industrial musician lives in America, including Charles Levi and Jacky Blacque of My Life With the Thrill Kill Kult, Ministry engineer and keyboardist Duane Buford, the members of Code Industry, Noise Box’s Dre Robinson, and members of Hawaiian Cleopatra Records signee Razed in Black. Brit Dean Dennis of Clock DVA and Amadou Sall of the French act Collapse are among the only exceptions.
Industrial acts from within the Black Atlantic region—especially American musicians—comment musically on race less frequently than those based elsewhere. Generally, by the late 1980s in America leftist white musicians, regardless of genre, shared an understanding that, however benevolent the intention, their overt critiques of racial power dynamics contributed little to what was an already exceedingly rich discourse in African American and Latin American music, and in fact many felt that by speaking they risked silencing other voices in this dialogue. This, combined with a few particularly mortifying public instances of white attempts to co-opt hip-hop (including rapping commercials for Chicken McNuggets and Fruity Pebbles), contributed both toward the relative lack of white American music expressly about race (including industrial music) and toward the perception that genre lines were racially enforced. The difference of approach to race in music between Europe and North America has a story all of its own, and it includes, among other chapters, a white British fascination with reggae in the 1970s and some often-overlooked German forays into rap idioms in the early 1980s, among them Spliff’s “Das Blech” and Die Toten Hosen’s “Hip Hop Bommi Bop.”

5. Black and White

There are a few important exceptions to the rule that American industrial music avoids race as a lyrical topic. As discussed in the preceding chapter, San Francisco’s ultra-Marxist industrial rap act Consolidated often invited confrontation, and they delighted in interspersing their album tracks with live recordings of their political sparring with concertgoers. In one such encounter, documented on the 1991 track “Murder One,” an African American man expresses concern that the band is speaking on behalf of minorities despite “not going through what I’m going through.” This leads to their inviting him on stage to speak and rap for himself. More noteworthy in this category is the band Code Industry, who were probably the first (and perhaps the only) all African American industrial act to release a record. On their 1990 debut, released only in Belgium on Antler Subway, racial politics are submerged, but 1992’s followup (distributed by Caroline Records in the United States) was called Young Men Coming to Power and boldly asserts a revolutionary stance, complete with Malcolm X samples.

*Not only did this 1983 song featuring American rapper Fab Five Freddie predate the canonically “first” rap/rock crossover of “Walk This Way” by Run-DMC and Aerosmith, but in an unsettling commentary on race, its video portrays the band as jungle-dwelling cannibals in blackface, cooking Freddie in a cauldron as he raps—into a banana.*
A few years later, Seattle-based Noise Box released “Monkey Ass.” The song begins auspiciously with a sample of Black Panther founder Bobby Seale declaring, “We're gonna walk on this racist power structure and we're gonna say to the whole damn government . . . motherfucker, this is a hold up.” Both “Monkey Ass” and Code Industry’s later oeuvre invoke a militant language reminiscent of Public Enemy—at once a call to political action for racial minorities, a scathing exposé of institutional western racism, and a celebration of collective expression.

If these are exceptions, though, then we can at this point summarize the racial politics of the genre. What follows are tendencies, not rules, and they are based on past industrial practices, not necessarily current or future ones.

Like nearly all western popular styles, industrial music derives its rhythms from African Diaspora music, but notably it also celebrates a political and musical kinship with postwar experimental jazz. However, industrial music more readily appreciates this music’s experimental status than its racial origins. A few exceptional figures aside, industrial music in general passively presumes whiteness, as evidenced by its cavalier use of caricature and exotica, both of which declare racial otherness to be a playground. Thus, despite its ostensibly parallel ideals of freedom from oppression and technologically rewriting the past, industrial music has been largely oblivious to its own potential for a radical discourse of real politics, resulting in its consistent use of African-derived signifiers as barely differentiated from any other.

It’s possible that this presumption of whiteness is inextricable from the genre’s central debates. To move beyond empirical history and into a bit of theory, recall that a large amount of industrial music is concerned with mechanically replacing the body. This move is much easier when the body is hegemonically invisible—when it’s “normal” enough to be blindly assumed, and thus inessential to one’s identity. Questions of the body—like whether it’s necessary or outmoded, or whether it’s a site of pleasure or a site of discipline—are available to industrial music largely because of the normativity of whiteness within the western culture it participates in (or rails against): in the west, the white body is not a site of constantly reinforced difference, and so it can be ambiguous and amorphous in industrial music. A body of another race, however, is almost always fixedly at the center of hegemonic attention, demanding definition. In turn, because industrial music has so privileged these debates over the body’s different meanings, it tends to be a poor stylistic fit for racial otherness, in which one has less control over the dialogue of social identity that surrounds one’s own body. It’s therefore no surprise that most moments indebted to free jazz within the genre don’t happen within electronic body music. Front 242’s Patrick Codenys cautiously explains: “We were asking what ‘white
rhythm’ meant, because people talk about black rhythms or Hispanic rhythms. That idea of EBM, the physical body, white rhythm—it comes from something very mathematical and very tribal."23 In short, industrial music’s politics themselves are in conflict with the otherness of the body; if racial status is culturally foisted upon a body as its primary concern, then the issue preempts both Skinny Puppy’s abject destruction of the body and Laibach’s commanding it in salute.

6. Addendum: Repetition and the English Ballad

As an appendix to this chapter, let’s explore one final intersection, considering industrial music’s largely Anglo-Saxon heritage for the time being not as a hegemonic blind spot but as a meaningful source of musical traditions. Scholar Peter Webb has correctly connected the dots between industrial music and the neofolk genre. Sometimes called apocalyptic folk, this style freely employs the noise textures, military soundscapes, quasi-totalitarian imagery, and thematic direness of Throbbing Gristle and Whitehouse, but unlike those acts neofolk bands such as Death in June, Current 93, and Sol Invictus are also steeped in the folk music revival and psychedelia of the 1960s. Neofolk’s antecedents use modern technology to comment on the past; industrial music arose in response to the postindustrial society, and as folk music historian Britta Sweers makes clear, the electric instrumentation of hippie-era revivalists such as Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span was directly tied to how they explored “the exotic and grotesque . . . mythic topics.”24 Both industrial music and electric folk are also rooted in the imagery of (and occasionally the participation in) pagan belief systems.

Although the development from early industrial music into neofolk has been made clear through shifts in personnel and musical practices, not much has been said about how archaic folk derivations have fed back into industrial music’s dance-oriented strains. Earlier in this chapter and in this book, the idea of repetition in pop music was cast in terms of the African diaspora and technology: machines make possible a never-ending groove. Consider here a partial supplementary explanation for this repetition, one that stems from the ever-present repetition in the British Isles ballads so favored by late-1960s electric revivalists and neofolk bands alike.

In his book Origins of the Popular Style, Peter van der Merwe writes:

In European folk music, as in African music, the repeated cycle remain[s] the standard form. It might be closed, that is, come to an end in the fa-
familiar way, or open (or, as it is sometimes put, circular), where instead of coming to a close, the tune simply repeat[s] itself indefinitely.\textsuperscript{25}  

A clear example of this is “Twa Corbies,” an English-Scottish ballad with a text dating to 1611 and a melody adapted from the old Breton song “An Alarc’h.” After being popularized by electric folk band Steeleye Span in 1970, “Twa Corbies” became a mainstay in the repertoires of neofolk acts Sol Invictus (1989) and Omnia (2006). “Twa Corbies” consists of a repeated melody, with every line in every verse based on the same melodic ascent of a third. In the earliest printed version of the melody (1839), thirty-two verses were to be sung, though in most later versions this number is reduced to five.\textsuperscript{26} The ballad’s lyrics (about crows in a tree), its modal tune, and the brightly majestic arrangements that bands drape around the song all emphasize repetition within the modern context of a mythic, lost England.  

Even if neofolk acts themselves seldom make industrial dance music, one could reasonably suspect that the highly repetitive old northern European melodies and texts that so compel them have assuredly crossed back into the central vocabulary of industrial music. In certain industrial songs, the cyclical relentlessness we hear is not merely technology’s resonance with blues-derived musical practice but an arcane assertion of a pre-modern tradition.  

Among the clearest examples of British Isles balladry in industrial music is 1993’s “Soldiers Song” by the Swiss act Spartak. The track is a highly appealing EBM cover of “The Kerry Recruit” (also called “The Irish Recruit”), a ballad about the Crimean War of the 1850s, first collected in an 1870 issue of \textit{Putnam’s Magazine}.\textsuperscript{27} The band’s interest in folk music had been evident in their earlier song “Volkstanz.” On “Soldiers Song,” Spartak’s vocals are arranged as a unison male choir, which suggests a certain workmanlike solidarity—a sound that the band Funker Vogt would later make their trademark.  

We might also consider the 1989 club hit by Controlled Bleeding “Words (of the Dying).” Though the band has at times identified as a noise act, this song comes from a period when they were signed to WaxTrax! and were releasing a fair amount of dance music. The song’s rhythm loop is built around a flammed drum pattern, the snare rolling just enough to militarize the beat. Harmonically and melodically, the song is almost entirely composed with the black keys of a synthesizer, giving it a folky modal sheen while perhaps suggesting the band’s limited comfort with keyboard performance. The chorus of the song is a two-measure sequence with alternating G-flat and A-flat major chords, one per measure, and this pattern continues six times as the chords rock back and forth, resolving indifferently to E-flat minor. It’s in this repetitive chorus pattern that
the influence of old music filtered through electric folk and neofolk is heard: the upper vocal part is an unsyncopated leaping gesture whose lower note, instead of fitting into the sounding chord, follows a melodically determined sequence.

Figure 14.8

The effect of the straight rhythm, its short repeated cycle, and the modal emphasis on melody (in the absence of harmonic consideration) is unambiguously folkish. Paul Lemos, who cowrote the song, doesn’t recall specifically channeling folk music in its composition—“If anything, it was our attempt to sound a bit like D[epache] Mode, whose music Chris [Moriarty, his bandmate] was really digging at that time.” But influence is seldom a one-to-one correlation; Lemos does grant that during this time “I came to really like Fairport [Convention], Nick Drake and others in this genre.”28 The band’s pronouncement that “We’re very interested in the music that was developing in Europe, from the period of 1100 or 1200 to 1400 or 1500,” speaks loudly of an openness to old forms like the English ballad—the first of which (“Judas”) appeared in the thirteenth century.29

A third convincing example might be the 1998 song “Genetik Lullaby” by the Pennsylvanian-based act THD (or Total Harmonic Distortion). The melody of the verse follows a logic identical to “Words (of the Dying),” in which a two-note cycle—as before, played just on black keys—is transposed upon repetition (Figure 14.9).

Figure 14.9

This pattern repeats eight times before the chorus ever arrives, again always guided by melodic considerations that effectively ignore the unchanging harmony. Despite the aggressive dance beats of the song, its compositional seed was this melody, which as frontman Shawn Rudiman explains immediately sounded like a lullaby when he first thought it up.30 Verses commence with “Hush little baby, sleep,” and “Hush little child, don’t you cry”—derivations of.
“Hush-a-by baby” from the English book of children’s folksongs *Mother Goose’s Melody*, dating back at least to 1796.

Even stranger is the case of “Little Black Angel,” which began as “Brown Baby,” a 1958 spiritual by African American activist Oscar Brown Jr. and was subsequently rewritten as “Black Baby” in 1973 by Marceline Jones, the (white) wife of Rev. Jim Jones, whose cult’s nine-hundred-member suicide in 1978 made headlines. In 1992, Death In June rewrote the song’s lyrics to address an angel (note the bodiless-ness here) and altered its music, replacing the vibrato-rich organ, free rhythm, and melodic glides with majestic acoustic guitars in rigid 3/4 time and Douglas Pearce’s declamatory British baritone. The effect is specifically a channeling of the English ballad style, almost completely replacing the soul of the original. Then in 2011, to the delight of goth club DJs everywhere, synthpop act Ladytron released their own cover of Death In June’s rewrite of Marceline Jones’s rendition of Oscar Brown Jr.’s song. Filtered through Death In June’s über whiteness, the song’s transformations make musically clear the stylistic influence of the British Isles ballad on music from outside its tradition. Ladytron’s end result is appropriately befitting an industrial club, complete with pounding kick drums and synths in an unflinching 4/4 meter and a vocal performance so compellingly sterile as to be creepy.

Ladytron found their way to Death In June’s ballad-esque catalogue, Controlled Bleeding captures a particularly northern sense of nobility in their alternating chord progressions. THD channels the lullaby tradition, and Spartak directly recreate an Irish ballad: these examples are evidence that industrial music, almost certainly more so than most other pop, is in meaningful dialogue with British Isles folksong. This is hardly a surprising claim, given how often industrial musicians play concerts and share record labels with faux-medieval and neofolk acts, but it’s an important point.

It’s also important to remember that the conversation between archaic folk music and industrial goes two ways: plenty of acts have straddled the stylistic line successfully. For example, sometime WaxTrax! artist In the Nursery had, on one hand, made a name for themselves by recording orchestrally tinged military new age music and scoring silent films that directly depict a “lost England,” while on the other hand they’ve packed club dancefloors with remixes by Flesh Field, Haujobb, and Assemblage 23. More recently, the French act Derrière Volonté has similarly hybridized industrial dance and neofolk. The upshot of all of this is that in the songwriting and production of industrial music, when we hear repetition, we should recognize not merely the confluence of technology and African heritage that pervades nearly all western dance styles of the late twentieth century but also a rare strain of something expressly European, conjuring the past through its relentless repetition.