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“Revolt Against the Modern World:” Exploring the Post-Industrial
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From the antiwar anthems, protest songs, and punk rock of the 1960s and 70s, twentieth-century pop music continues to exert political influence and inspire social change. However, artists championing political and social causes can complicate matters by approaching these issues through controversial textual and musical oppositions. The neo-folk genre that originated in London, England in the 1980s exemplifies a political ideology based on contradiction that offers constructive critique even as it engages with and risks propagating dangerous and intolerant ideas. Neo-folk emerged as a bizarre love child of punk rock, industrial electronics, and traditional folk music, often embracing the imagery of fascism and the rhetoric of cultural traditionalism. The themes of neo-folk music encompass both the romantic and appealing and the dangerous and subversive. Despite presenting many paradoxes, the genre has gathered a worldwide network of support through tours and internet fanzines. Yet, as is often the case with artists who choose to work with loaded imagery in order to articulate political subtlety, musical politics becomes a treacherous game.

The neo-folk genre offers a loosely-knit worldview that varies from band to band and is often unclear and ambiguous.

However, all these artists express a yearning for something beyond the modern material world of capitalism and unfettered consumption. Many reject modern themes, instead preferring nineteenth-century romantic imagery, including mythology, folklore, and nationalist rhetoric. Rather than championing specific political or activist causes, neo-folk bands frequently weave together explicit imagery and subtle cultural references in order to problematize the world of modern politics and of political music itself. The common link between various neo-folk artists remains a strong critical wariness of the modern world and what they perceive as its vices. In particular, the bands Death in June, Current 93, and Sol Invictus exemplify this paradoxical preoccupation with modern issues through historical imagery. In an attempt to understand these artists in a critical light, I will examine how their political perspectives, drawn from a wide, eclectic range of contradictory contemporary and historical sources, have influenced their musical styles and marketing strategies. I will explore the problematic fusion of historical, sexual, and religious references that point to a complicated engagement with modern issues.

Historical Influences

The neo-folk preoccupation with the fascist regime of Adolf Hitler represents not only a fascination with contentious ideology but reveals a wider, historical interest in the nineteenth-century cultural movements and prominent German thinkers influencing the totalitarian regimes of the next century. Many neo-folk artists draw on Nazi imagery as well as on works by those historical figures who (posthumously or directly) influenced the Third Reich’s politics: Richard Wagner, Friedrich Nietzsche, Hermann Löns, Knut Hamsun, Leni Riefenstahl, Savitri Devi, and Julius Evola. The young artists who formed the first neo-folk bands grew up in the wake of World War II, and although they did not

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directly experience the hardship of war, many of their parents did. The city of London also bore the scars of wartime destruction, and so it is no coincidence that the city gave birth to a genre at once fascinated by Nazi imagery and apprehensive of the modern world. For instance, the group Death in June began as a politically charged punk band that retained explicitly totalitarian symbols in its lyrics and cover art. Beyond these fascist influences, however, neo-folk artists insist on the significance of the völkisch movement, neo-paganism, and folk tropes.

The neo-folk appeal of the nineteenth-century völkisch movement centres on its emphasis on the corrupting influence of the industrialized world and on the value of cultural tradition. In *Mensch und Gott* (1921), Houston Stewart Chamberlain, a British ex-patriate and son-in-law of Richard Wagner, encapsulates one of the central views of the völkisch movement and reflects that the industrial revolution was the “most terrible catastrophe ever to have befallen mankind.”¹ Chamberlain further privileges the rural, pastoral, and natural through images of soil, writing that “the enduring cultivation of the soil...is the prototype of every constructive cultural idea.”² Neo-folk similarly grounds its discontent with modern industrialization in a völkisch and wistful evocation of the past. The electronic journal *Tyr*, to which prominent neo-folk musicians such as Michael Moynihan of Blood Axis have contributed and which features articles on other neo-folk artists such as Coil and In Gowan Ring, describes its mandate in terms similar to Chamberlain:

Published annually, TYR celebrates the traditional myths, culture, and social institutions of pre-Christian, pre-modern

¹ Cited in Roderick Stackelberg, *Idealism Debased: From Völkisch Ideology to National Socialism* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1981), 12.

² *Ibid.*, 150.

Europe. It includes in-depth original articles, interviews, translations of essential works by radical traditionalist and anti-modern thinkers, as well as extensive reviews of books, films, music, and the arts.³

Furthermore, the journal’s titular reference to the Norse god suggests neo-folk’s spiritual awareness. The vast majority of neo-folk artists explore a type of esoteric, pagan spirituality imitating the pre-Christian religions of medieval Europe. Current 93, Death in June, and Sol Invictus have each adopted the historical pantheon of Germanic gods as well as spiritually-symbolic runes in order to revive the cultural practices of early European civilizations. Douglas Pearce (b. 1956) of Death in June stated in an interview with the neo-folk webzine *Heathen Harvest* that he sees the band “as part of a European cultural revival,” adding that he is “pleased that the Old Gods” and “Old symbols” are “being resurrected, for want of a better word.”⁴ Sol Invictus, founded by former Death in June member Tony Wakeford (b. 1959), also seems to participate in the European cultural revival described by Pearce. The band name itself references the central divinity of a sun cult that rose to prominence in the late days of the Roman Empire as a pagan alternative to early Christianity. In addition to these historical and cultural European movements, more recent sources of inspiration include the slew of occult figures that appeared during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; writers and public figures such as magician Aleister Crowley, self-

³ “Tyr Journal;” available from <http://tyrjournal.tripod.com/>; internet; accessed 5 December 2008.

⁴ Death in June, “Death in June Interview; Nothing Changes,” interview by *Heathen Harvest* (Austin, Tx., 9 April 2005), <http://www.heathenharvest.com/article.php?story=2005041114215993>; internet; accessed 27 November, 2008.

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appointed rune expert Guido von List, and Wicca movement founder Gerald Gardner represent the bands' more modern influences. Like the völkisch movement, the German revival of the occult at the turn of the century offers an appreciation of nature that attracts those neo-folk artists committed to denouncing modern industrialization. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke identifies the nineteenth-century occult revival movement as a reaction against the modernization of the Western world.⁵ Significantly, he discusses this revival within the context of the evolution of Nazi ideology, a connection that is again borne out by Tyr's publication list, which prints articles and stories by writers with close associations to the Nazi movement, including Löns and Evola.

Neo-folk's combination of longing for a pre-industrial, pagan past coupled with the value it places on traditional cultural values is reminiscent of neo-luddite rhetoric. In his book *Rebels Against the Future*, Kirkpatrick Sale discusses how a reactionist stance against the modern technological world arose following the horrors of Hiroshima and the Nazi death-camps during World War II, a response reflected in the science fiction and horror movies of the post-war period.⁶ The clash between romantic imagery and radical Nazi symbolism in neo-folk music thus provides a new response to an old tension between modernity and nostalgia for "simpler" times. The neo-folk band Death in June perhaps best exemplifies the political import of this play on dichotomies.

⁵ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 18.

⁶ Kirkpatrick Sale, *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and their War on the Industrial Revolution, Lessons for the Computer Age* (New York: Perseus Publishing, 1995), 238-240.

Death in June and Sexuality

In 1977, two young Londoners, Douglas Pearce and Tony Wakeford, met on a train headed to a political demonstration. Shortly afterwards, they collaborated to form the political punk outfit Crisis.⁷ The band reached a modest level of popularity through self-released records, radio sessions, and rallies and concerts like Rock Against Racism. The band eventually disbanded in 1980, and Pearce and Wakeford then joined forces with Patrick Leagas to form Death in June.

With Death in June, the musicians adopted a more eclectic sound by introducing electronic and industrial noises, relying heavily on synthesizers and drum machines, incorporating simple military-like drum beats and trumpet lines, and writing folk melodies for acoustic guitar. The resulting music is much more subdued than the punk rock of Crisis, but also sounds cold and alienating because of uncomfortably lo-fi electronic sounds. Likewise, the textual content of the songs is less overtly political, though still concerned with issues of power, and is more steeped in indirect metaphor and imagery compared to the protest songs of Crisis. At this time, the group also began to embrace pagan and fascist ideas by adopting the Totenkopf symbol, made famous by the Schutzstaffel (the SS) during World War II.⁸ However, in 1985, after releasing several singles and their first three full-length records, *The Guilty Have No Pride* (1983), *Burial* (1984), and *Nada!* (1985), Leagas and Wakeford parted ways to pursue their own musical projects, 6 Comm and Sol Invictus, respectively. Both bands would become major fixtures in the world of neo-folk. In the absence of Leagas and Wakeford, Death in June became the private musical and artistic outlet of

⁷ Peter Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2007), 70-71.

⁸ Sale, *Rebels Against the Future*, 75.

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Pearce. Building on the politically-charged Totenkopf imagery, Pearce introduced issues of sexuality and gender distinction in order to problematize the textual messages of his songs.

Pearce's work is rife with contradictions that give it a unique character. At first glance, he appears to espouse neo-Nazi, pagan, and homosexual images simultaneously. However, despite Pearce's public references to his sexual orientation in interviews, the sexual connotations in his music often remain ambiguous. Throughout the various recordings published by Death in June, there are few overt references to sexuality in the lyrics. Although Pearce's texts often feature the narrative voice of an alienated figure, the autobiographical influence on the songs is unclear. Certainly, the theme of alienation is prominent in the works of many neo-folk artists and is not unique to Death in June. Specific textual and cover images, such as the gloved hand holding a whip that appears on the band's merchandise, seem suggestively sexual. However, in a 1996 interview with the Judas Kiss fanzine, Pearce indicated that the gloved hand symbol actually points to general issues of personal power and control.⁹ Building on this assertion, in a 2001 interview, Pearce responded to a question regarding a homosexual community by denouncing the notion of a broad and all-encompassing gay identity, saying, "that question is sort of like asking someone about the heterosexual community in the world. How can something so varied and diverse be talked about outside the confines of a book or a thesis on the matter?"¹⁰ Significantly, Pearce only privileges sexual identity in a long list of ideological and philosophical influences. In an interview in which

⁹ Death in June, "Interview: 1996 – Judas Kiss," interview by Judas Kiss (July 1997), http://www.deathinjune.org/modules/mediawiki/index.php/Interview:1996-Judas_Kiss; internet; accessed 2 December, 2008.

¹⁰ Death in June, "Death in June," interview by Simone (July 2001), *Heimdallr*, <http://www.heimdallr.ch/Interviews/2001/dijinter.html> interview; internet; accessed 1 December, 2008.

author Peter Webb asked if he feels a part of the neo-folk community, Pearce responded by stating, “the only thing I truly feel part of is Myself...I also feel I’ve been part of a wider re-awakening of certain interests or concerns that form part of a greater calling. The Runes, vegetarianism, Gay emancipation, Euro-centrism etc.”¹¹ Pearce thus emphasizes the building of an individual identity, an identity that influences and is influenced by broader social and political movements.

While Pearce does not identify his sexual orientation as a major influence on his work, most of his lyrics lack gender-specific pronouns, which betrays a deliberate blurring of gender and sexual divisions. Many of his songs, especially those expounding on matters of love and romance, use pronouns such as “I,” “we,” and “you” instead of “he” or “she.”¹² Thus, sexual differentiation, or rather indifferenciation, remains at the foreground of his work as a politically-charged critique of the basic biological categories of modern society. More importantly, Pearce implicitly juxtaposes his homosexual identity with neo-Nazi costumes and lyrics. To theatricalize the Totenkopf symbol, Pearce occasionally dresses in a typical Schutzstaffel uniform for live performances. Likewise, the band’s website features a prominent “pride flag” alongside runic and Nazi icons. This ironic collision of symbols of fanaticism and tolerance stresses Pearce’s nuanced critique of modern politics; the evocation of a turbulent and violent past re-contextualizes the problems of capitalism, industrialization, and discrimination. His song “Sons of Europe” points to these contemporary issues while drawing a

¹¹ Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music*, 97.

¹² This pronoun game is a common strategy for homosexuals who do not wish to divulge their sexual preference, as A. C. Liang discusses in “Con conversationally Implicating Lesbian and Gay Identity,” in *Reinventing Identities*, 293-312, ed. Mary Bucholtz, A.C. Liang, and Laural A. Sutton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 301.

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distinction between “East” and “West” that evokes the geographical divides of World War II. His emphasis on Europe reflects his self-admitted interest in “Euro-centrism.” The lyrics, from the album *Burial*, read:

*Sons of the West have grown weak,
The American Dream has sent you to sleep.
Sons of Europe sick with liberalism,
Sons of Europe chained with capitalism.*¹³

Pearce’s appeal to the “Sons of Europe” to be wary of foreign influence and to resist the trappings of modern globalism and convenience recall his *völkisch* and occult influences.

Spirituality in Current 93 and Sol Invictus

Formed in 1982, Current 93 has enjoyed only one steady member, David Tibet (b. 1960), who has exerted his interest in politics through the band’s aesthetic decisions. However, unlike Pearce’s Death in June, Tibet’s lyrics offer a distinctly spiritual and magical perspective. He often addresses obscure and magical concepts, referencing ancient runic systems and Aleister Crowley’s *Thelema*, a form of philosophical and magical thought that draws on esoteric influences from ancient Egypt and India. Over the years, Tibet has collaborated with friends and contemporaries interested in pre-history and the occult, including Freya Aswynn and Death in June’s Leagas, Wakeford, and Pearce.¹⁴

Tibet and Pearce collaborated extensively in the 1980s, so their musical language shares many similarities. On Current 93’s

¹³ Death in June, “Sons of Europe Lyrics,” <http://www.deathinjune.net/lyrics/sonsofeurope.htm>; internet; accessed 1 December, 2008.

¹⁴ Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music*, 83-84.

most influential album, *Swastikas for Noddy* (1988), Tibet uses combinations of acoustic guitar and folk-like melodies interspersed and overlaid with samples of industrial, military sounds and synthesizers. Although Tibet, like Pearce, uses Nazi imagery in songs like “Panzer Rune,” he complicates these themes through a spiritual angle. Freya Aswynn appears on several tracks chanting runic incantations, including the piece “North,” which evokes the Norse god Odin. The track “Oh Coal Black Smith” refers to an English folk song commonly known as “The Two Magicians.” In his 1977 book *Pagan Imagery in English Folk Song*, R.J. Stewart argues that folk music (and by extension, neo-folk) retains the roots of earlier magical and religious cultures; significantly, he cites “The Two Magicians” as one of his main examples. The song describes a young maiden being chased by a dirty blacksmith driven by sexual desire. Throughout the chase, the two characters shape-shift into different animals, which Stewart argues preserves the pagan belief in magic and references an annual ritual in which a child was pursued by a Goddess who takes the symbolic forms of the seasons.¹⁵ Tibet’s decision to include his updated version of this song on an album full of pagan references further accentuates the theme of spiritual and magical mystery that permeates the album. Like Pearce, fascist totalitarianism is interrogated through stark opposition, in this case, ancient spirituality. Ironically, the occult roots of Nazism become tools for deconstructing the violence of fascism.

Indeed, Tibet describes his spiritual interests in broad terms; like Pearce’s flexible approach to sexuality, Tibet avoids straightforward religious divisions. In a 2006 interview conducted by Brandon Stosuy for Pitchfork Media, Tibet stated: “I was always interested in religion. My main interest was initially

¹⁵ R.J. Stewart, *Pagan Imagery in English Folk Song* (New Jersey: Humanities Press Inc., 1977), 41.

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Christianity, but I was also interested in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism because that's what I was growing up around."¹⁶ In addition, he is quoted in Charles Neal's *Tape Delay: Confessions from the Eighties Underground*: "any organized form of philosophy or thought is garbage, it's just another excuse for molding people, cloning people."¹⁷ Despite his multifaceted fascination with various religious denominations, Tibet explores the Christian apocalypse in his album *Black Ships*.¹⁸ Tibet transforms his earlier destructive imagery of German tanks rolling through an industrial wasteland in "Panzer Rune" into a depiction of the Second Coming, focusing on biblical bleakness. In a 2006 interview with PopMatters, Tibet described his apocalyptic perspective:

The idea of apocalypse, the original Greek word meaning "unveiling," is where everything is revealed. Now, of course, it has the sense of Armageddon and total destruction, but I still look at it as a total unveiling, the taking off of all masks, and the return, perhaps after the Armageddon, to that state of pristine purity and innocence and love, which is the natural human condition.¹⁹

Tibet's concern with the end of the world centres not on violence but on a longing for the past. Tibet repeatedly mentions that he enjoys learning ancient languages such as Coptic, studying

¹⁶ David Tibet, "Current 93," interview by Brandon Stosuy, *Pitchfork Media*, http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/feature/37055/Interview_Interview_Current_93; internet; accessed 7 December, 2008.

¹⁷ Quoted in Charles Neal, *Tape Delay: Confessions from the Eighties Underground* (London: SAF Publishing Ltd., 2001), 209.

¹⁸ Jennifer Kelly, "The Apocalyptic Visions of Current 93," *PopMatters* (16 May 2006), <http://www.popmatters.com/music/interviews/current-93-060516.shtml>; internet; accessed 7 December, 2008.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

early religious texts, and listening to early liturgical music. All of this is reminiscent of the *völkisch* movement’s retreat from the modern material world toward a realm of spiritual purity.

Unlike Tibet’s passive, mystical spirituality, Wakeford’s group Sol Invictus presents an aggressive mixture of fascist and spiritual symbols. For example, his first album, released in 1987, is entitled *Against the Modern World*, a reference to Julius Evola’s radically traditionalist book *Revolt Against the Modern World*, while his 1989 album, *Lex Talionis*, features a stylized swastika and a chalk drawing of a fertility god sporting an erection. The song “Kneel to the Cross,” included on the latter recording, incorporates a critique of Christian imperialism:

*See the roof fall, hear the bells crash
As flesh and bone turn to Ash
Tried to conquer the sun, with a Christian frost
The corpses stench beneath the cross.*²⁰

While the song’s obvious message condemns the brutality of religious authority, the album’s explicit references to Nazism, a regime that itself promoted pseudo-religious posturing and brutality, pose a contradiction typical of totalitarian politics that inevitably secure power by compromising their own ideology.

Neo-Folk and Ironic Fascism

Unfortunately, like the political movements they seek to examine through ironic juxtaposition, the exaggerated critical language of neo-folk artists occasionally becomes *hypo*-critical; Nazi symbols, while stimulating powerful political discussion, do not coordinate well with such heavily-marketed music. For instance, Wakeford’s website features photos of his pilgrimage to Leipzig’s

²⁰ Sol Invictus, *Kneel to the Cross*, Lex Talonis TURSA 001, 1993, compact disc.

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Völkerschlachtdenkmal, notorious today for having hosted many of Hitler's speeches. Although Wakeford justifies his trip, saying that "when I'm looking at Englishness it's not a racial thing it's a cultural thing,"²¹ his esteem for specifically totalitarian history becomes troubling. As José Ortega y Gasset writes,

fascism has an enigmatic countenance because in it appears the most counterpoised contents. It asserts authoritarianism and organizes rebellion...Whichever way we approach fascism we find that it is simultaneously one thing and the contrary, it is A and not A.²²

The neo-folk genre of bands like Death in June, Current 93, and Sol Invictus attempts to explore this contradiction, succeeding insofar as their work continues to spark debate and controversy. Their anti-modern agenda remains appealing in that it relies on romantic nineteenth-century tropes and emphasizes individual identity. However, the fascist and militaristic aesthetic underlying this political rejection of modernity remains highly problematic, predisposed as it is to attract a potentially dangerous demographic. Theodore Gracyk summarizes this difficulty in *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*, writing that

when the details mentioned in the lyrics are taken as exemplary – as placeholders for the general concepts thus illustrated – then the audience is quite free to imaginatively substitute their own examples of the same conceptual

²¹ Webb, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music*, 99.

²² Cited in Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2002), title page.

content. A misreading is an interpretation that ignores or overlooks the placeholders supplied by the music lyrics.²³

The issue remains whether or not neo-folk succeeds in supplying sufficiently clear “placeholders” in order to communicate its radical political project; as in any collaboration, music and politics struggle to find a vibrant but useful balance.

²³ Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 42.

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