

Nicolas Ballet

Q & A



Nicolas Ballet is an art historian and associate curator in the New Media Department of the Musée national d'art moderne – Centre Pompidou, Paris, France. He specializes in research into alternative visual cultures, experimental art, sound studies and the avant-garde. He received his Ph.D. from the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, where he teaches contemporary art history.

*What inspired you to write *Shock Factory*, and how did the idea first come to you?*

This project stems from a desire to explore the visual and theoretical productions of industrial music and include them within the field of art history. And it turns out that these works had not yet been analysed or contextualized within the artistic context of the 1970s and the 1980s. I therefore set out to write this history based on the bands I had been listening to for years.

I discovered industrial music as a teenager, even though I originally came from extreme metal and post-punk scenes. I was born in 1985, so I didn't experience the early days of the industrial movement first-hand. But the intensity and sonic saturation of black metal for instance naturally drew me toward the early noise and industrial scenes. At the same time, I've always been interested in visual art and the language of contemporary art, which led me to explore how the industrial scene developed its own visual culture. While I was studying art history at university, I remember wanting to trace the genealogy of noise and electronic culture. That brought me to Luigi Russolo's *The Art of Noises* (1913), though I also developed a critical perspective on the political issues tied to Italian Futurism.

Can you summarize what *Shock Factory* is about for readers who haven't encountered it yet?

This book is a visual history of industrial music, which stood at the intersection of various artistic expressions in many countries throughout the 1970s and 1980s. One of the aims of this study is to integrate industrial culture into the broader field of art history by creating a comprehensive overview of the most emblematic works of the genre on an international scale. It's about uncovering entire bodies of work, but also much more than that. This book joins the dots between the different sources in the industrial galaxy, exploring the different material used by these artists.

What surprised you most during your research for this book?

In examining the initiatives of several industrial groups, I came to realize that they had anticipated, from a very early stage, the issues surrounding the coercive power of the media – issues that are more relevant than ever today. The manner in which these artists appropriated highly specialized theoretical literature in order to translate complex concepts into their own daily lives as countercultural agents proved particularly stimulating. It resonates deeply with our current experience, though in a more intensified form, as we have moved from a post-industrial era to what Bernard Stiegler aptly termed a hyper-industrial period.

Another great aspect was the genuine warmth and sensitivity displayed by the artists I encountered. It is clear that transgression, darkness and radicality in artistic expression do not preclude empathy or kindness – quite the opposite, in fact, insofar as such works often serve as a powerful form of catharsis for some of these artists. One of the most rewarding parts of this research was therefore meeting exceptional people around the world, each with very different backgrounds. Whether it was in Tokyo, where I met Masami Akita from Merzbow, in Paris with Graeme Revell during an event we organized together, or in New York with Genesis P-Orridge, Al Margolis and Paul Lemos, in Belgium with the members of Club Moral, among many other encounters. I also had the chance to connect with artists from the French scene, who were always incredibly enthusiastic about discussing their work.

These trips also gave me access to some incredible archives in different institutions, both directly related to the subject and sometimes more indirectly. For example, I worked on the Genesis Breyer P-Orridge papers at Tate Britain, as well as the Joseph Nechvatal, Terence Sellers and Nick Zedd archives at the Fales Library in New York. I also looked into the archives of William Burroughs and Timothy Leary at the New York Public Library. I discovered historic projects I hadn't known before and came across many books that helped me both analyse the scene and shape my own approach. Writers from a wide range of fields played a big role in helping me define my perspective.

How long did it take to research and write *Shock Factory*, and what was the most challenging part?

This work is a condensed version of my Ph.D. in art history, which I started in 2012 and defended six years later at the Université of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. My thesis contained four volumes: 780 pages of text, 550 pages of images, 600 pages of interviews with 60 artists and a playlist providing an overview of an international scene that, since the mid-1970s, has been part of a global art movement. I subsequently revised these results to produce a more concise written version, with the aim of publishing the book in French and in English. Several years thus elapsed between my initial research and the publication of the book, although the second phase of rewriting was conducted on a part-time basis.

One of the main challenges was figuring out how to approach the topic through the world of images and concepts. Many of the artists came from visual arts or performance backgrounds, so it was important to include their visual work alongside their music. Another difficulty was finding the visual sources I wanted to study. While a lot of material is now available online through various databases, I often had to purchase original releases to access the full content that these productions offered; texts, images and sounds. It was also imperative from the outset to engage with the most controversial topics appropriated by certain groups, in order to clarify the artists' original intentions and to explore the limits of the genre – totalitarianism in particular, which opened the door to potential political instrumentalization.

What role did political and social unrest play in shaping industrial culture?

The earliest industrial genre initiatives emerged in opposition to the conservative spirit of the western governments. This dissent took the form of transgressive art implemented through 'shock tactics' designed to expose the most conflicted aspects of post-industrial systems. When these artists investigate the control mechanisms employed by certain historical dictatorships, their aim is to draw attention to a form of totalitarianism that remains unnamed: that exercised by mass media. This comparison is of course more than limited, as the actions of a dictator do not carry the same consequences as those of an advertising executive promoting consumerism.

Industrial music thus responded to the social and political unrest in western societies at the time – with all the distinctions that must be made between the different cultural contexts of the countries studied in this book. Yet, in return, the industrial scene itself has sometimes generated unrest when certain bands escalated their provocations, thereby normalizing the violence through their productions.

The book combines art history, music and media studies. How do you balance those disciplines in your analysis?

The wide range of topics and issues explored by industrial acts – such as totalitarianism, mind control, serial crime, pornography, psychiatry and the occult – requires drawing on a broad spectrum of methodological tools, which have contributed to renewing art history methods over the past thirty years. Porno studies and cultural studies addressing the sociological and political dimensions of the subject (traumatic cultures and destruction in art), as well as occult sciences and science fiction literature, have enabled me to engage more fully with the unifying themes of the scene and its multimedia forms. These themes must be considered through the lens of intersecting disciplines – anthropology, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology – in order to understand the context in which the works were created and disseminated, as well as the full range of artistic and theoretical influences shaping the bands. Additionally, gender studies are relevant when these performers subvert stereotypes, while media studies are essential insofar as the use of new technologies – such as video and sound experiments – is grounded in an awareness of the political and social implications of technological evolution.

It is important to emphasize how, in my view, this multidisciplinary approach is even more natural given that my entire corpus was produced by artists who worked with circulating images: the recycling of avant-garde movements and other trends further justifies this engagement with diverse fields in my methodology. This is complemented by the variety of media and artistic protocols adopted by these artists, leading them towards a multimedia scene characterized by its own graphic and theoretical codes.

Were there any major misconceptions about the industrial movement that you wanted to challenge in the book?

This study aims to demonstrate that industrial music does not merely represent a musical genre, but rather constitutes an artistic movement, defined by its unique visual and musical codes.

Another key point regarding the misconceptions about the movement was to untangle the complex situations generated by the disinformation spread by industrial groups themselves. Beyond the critical distance required when conducting interviews, it was also necessary to identify erroneous information found in certain books that had reproduced false claims originally disseminated by the artists in various fanzines. While this strategy enabled the groups to construct their own history and mythology, it also gave rise to misconceptions that needed to be addressed through renewed investigative work with the artists and extensive archival research.

Finally, it was essential to highlight the crucial role played by women artists in the emergence of industrial music – a facet that has been insufficiently acknowledged in existing musical histories.

Why do you think industrial culture developed such a strong visual identity alongside its music?

Industrial acts placed great importance on images to materialize their concepts. This is one of the characteristics that distinguishes them from other movements: the ability of industrial acts to play with concepts and images more than music – even if they do, of course. In their efforts to resist the mass media of their time, industrial artists tried to deprogramme the individual – the media consumer that we all are – through both sonic and visual shock. This idea of deprogramming led to an aesthetic of horror, using violent, provocative and often controversial imagery. They recycled visuals related to mind control, totalitarianism, the medical world, occultism and pornography. These images were often reproduced through photocopying techniques, which created a kind of visual noise that mirrored the aggressive sounds of the music itself. But through repeated use, this visual violence could also become normalized. A good example is the project SPK, which clearly denounced the repressive conditions faced by psychiatric patients – using shocking images to make their point. The visual repulsion they created functioned as a memento mori intended to counter the way in which the media hides all mortuary representations, to only favour the promotion of healthy bodies. And at the same time, SPK wasn't free from a certain fascination with the morbid. Their interest in clinical imagery led them to extremes – they even broke into a medical school to stage scenes with cadavers in disturbing settings – according to the myth found in many sources.

What do you think is the most enduring legacy of the industrial movement today?

A certain visual and sonic transgression stems from an acute awareness of the coercive power of the media – a concern that remains highly relevant today. This leads new artists to revive this mindset, which is more prominently expressed in the fields of image and music rather than through conceptual frameworks.

In *Shock Factory*, I referred to current acts that have visually and musically transformed the scene. This included important and exciting projects like Himukalt, Pharmakon, Puce Mary, Prurient and Geography of Hell, a French collective whose members do not reveal their identities to better welcome different musicians during live performances. The industrial scene is very active and takes different forms when it crosses paths with other musical genres: noise, harsh noise, power electronics... A new generation of artists is very aware of these historical scenes and is opening up to a much more hybrid relationship with creation: between noise, hardcore (darkcore, digital hardcore, gabber), industrial music and hyperpop. From the breakcore revival of KAVARI, through the explosive live performances of Dreamcrusher and Concentration, to the experimental hip-hop of Death Grips, there are many proposals to renew the industrial genre.

How would you describe the term 'industrial culture' to someone unfamiliar with the movement?

Industrial music emerged in the mid-1970s in England and at the same time experienced significant development in Europe, the United States and Japan – although it was a very different scene. It is an extreme form of electronic music whose sonic experiments were very different from rock culture of the time. Artists were building their own synthesizers, messing around with recorded sounds – sometimes using recycled tapes or stuff they created themselves – way before sampling became mainstream in the 1980s. They also used more traditional instruments, but in ways that totally subverted their usual roles. And it wasn't just about music – the concepts and visuals that came with it were super important too, though numerous artistic practices: graphic design, film, installations, performance art, video... These visuals also stem from a wide range of interests, including totalitarianism, mind control, criminality, pornography, psychiatry and occultism.

Industrial music was initially conceived as a counterculture, as the first bands rejected the self-promotion systems of the music industry. The whole industrial mindset – designed by the English group Throbbing Gristle with the slogan coined by Monte Cazazza, 'Industrial Music for Industrial People' – was all about resisting standardization. This was achieved notably through the creation of independent labels founded by the bands themselves to distribute their works (flyers, booklets, postcards, tapes, records and videos). The international circulation of these works through a parallel network eventually gave rise to a visual culture with its own codes and audience, shaped in the image of the bands. This is an interesting point when it comes to countercultures in general: by fighting against mainstream norms, the underground ends up creating new ones, based on the tropes created by the bands and fans – industrial tropes in this case.

Who do you hope reads this book, and what do you hope they take away from it?

This book is aimed at students and scholars of art, design, music and performance history, as well as anyone who has come across the term 'industrial' in different musical genres and artistic practices and wishes to learn more about its origins through its visual and conceptual universe.

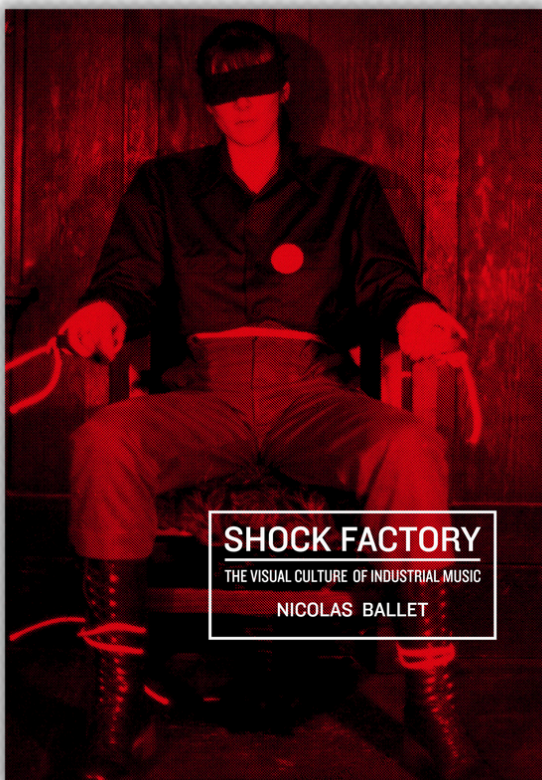
What can be taken from this study is that the field of experimental art has provided a way to think differently about the socio-political issues we face in contemporary society, particularly regarding information technologies and their constantly shifting power dynamics. Studying this historical subject also helps us, perhaps, to identify new ways of creating and thinking beyond current norms, within a context that is, of course, very different from that of the 1970s and the 1980s.

What has the response to *Shock Factory* been like so far? Any reactions that surprised you?

I was very pleased to receive the positive reactions from both artists and readers following the publication of the French edition of *Shock Factory* in 2023. This edition was awarded the Olga Fradiss Prize in 2024, which recognizes the best work in art history published in France. Such recognition was profoundly meaningful, both in regard to the artists whose works are featured in the book and from the feedback of my peers in the field of art history, acknowledging the culmination of many years of research. So I'm looking forward to hearing the reactions to the English edition of the book, which will include additional text and visual material.

What are you working on now?

I'm currently working on pro-sex perspectives in art from the 1960s to the present, for an exhibition project with the Centre Pompidou, in collaboration with filmmaker Beth B. The goal is to explore the development of sex-positive feminism through the artistic initiatives of those directly or indirectly involved in the movement. This project also aims to analyse the evolution of the movement and its influence on younger generations of artists today. I wanted to explore this topic after writing the chapter on sex-positive feminism in *Shock Factory*. For another project, I'm also looking at how industrial culture continues to influence contemporary artistic practices; I analyse how new generations conceive works in different fields, based on the legacy of industrial music.



Shock Factory:
The Visual Culture of
Industrial Music
By Nicolas Ballet