'This Machine Is Obsolete':
A Listeners' Guide to Nine Inch Nails' The Fragile

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- Respond To This Article

Volume 2 | Issue 8 | Dec, 1999

On many levels, the new Nine Inch Nails album The Fragile is a gritty meditation about different types of End: the eternal relationship cycle of 'fragility, tension, ordeal, fragmentation' (adapted, with apologies to Wilhelm Reich); fin-de-siècle anxiety; post-millennium foreboding; a spectre of the alien discontinuity that heralds an on-rushing future vastly different from the one envisaged by Enlightenment Project architects.

In retrospect, it's easy for this perspective to be dismissed as jargon-filled cyber-crit hyperbole. Cyber-crit has always been at its best too when it invents pre-histories and finds hidden connections between different phenomena (like the work of Greil Marcus and early Mark Dery), and not when it is closer to Chinese Water Torture, name-checking the canon's icons (the 'Deleuze/Guattari' tag-team), texts and key terms. "The organization of sound is interpreted historically, politically, socially ... It subdues music's ambition, reins it in, restores it to its proper place, reconciles it to its naturally belated fate", comments imagineer Kodwo Eshun on how cyber-crit destroys albums and the innocence of the listening experience. This is how official histories are constructed a priori and freeze-dried according to personal tastes and prior memes: sometimes the most interesting experiments are Darwinian dead-ends that fail to make the canon, or don't register on the radar.

Anyone approaching The Fragile must also contend with the music industry's harsh realities. For every 10 000 Goth fans who moshed to the primal 'kill-fuck-dance' rhythms of the hit single "Closer" (heeding its siren-call to fulfil basic physiological needs and build niche-space), maybe 20 noted that the same riff returned with a darker edge in the title track to The Downward Spiral, undermining the glorification of Indulgent hedonism. "The problem with such alternative audiences," notes Disinformation Creative Director Richard Metzger, "is that they are trying to be different -- just like everyone else." According to author Don Webb, "some mature Chaos and Black Magicians reject their earlier Nine Inch Nails-inspired Goth beginnings and are extremely critical towards new adopters because they are uncomfortable with the subculture's growing popularity, which threatens to taint their meticulously constructed 'mysterious' worlds. But by doing so, they are also rejecting their symbolic imprinting and some powerful Keys to unlocking their personal history."

It is also difficult to separate Nine Inch Nails from the commercialisation and colossal money-making machine that inevitably ensued on the MTV tour circuit: do we blame Michael Trent Reznor because most of his audience are unlikely to be familiar with 'first-wave' industrial bands including Cabaret Voltaire and the experiments of Genesis P. Orridge in Throbbing Gristle? Do we accuse Reznor of being a plagiarist just because he wears some of his influences -- Dr. Dre, Daft Punk, Atari Teenage Riot, Pink Floyd's The Wall (1979), Tom Waits's Bone Machine (1992), David Bowie's Low (1977) -- on his sleeve? And do we accept no-brain rock critic album reviews who quote lines like 'All the pieces didn't fit/Though I really didn't give a shit' ("Where Is Everybody?") or 'And when I suck you off/Not a drop will go to waste' ("Starfuckers Inc") as representative of his true personality? Reznor evidently has his own thoughts on this subject, but we should let the music speak for itself. The album's epic production and technical complexity turned into a post-modern studio Vision Quest, assisted by producer Alan Moulder, eleventh-hour saviour Bob Ezrin (brought in by Reznor to 'block-out' conceptual and sonic continuity), and a group of assault-technicians. The fruit of these collaborations is an album where Reznor is playing with our organism's time-binding sense, modulating strange emotions through deeply embedded tonal angularities.

During his five-year absence, Trent Reznor fought diverse forms of repetitious trauma, from endogenous depression caused by endless touring to the death of his beloved grandmother (who raised him throughout childhood). An end signals a new beginning, a spiral is an open-ended and ever-shifting structure, and so Reznor sought to re-discover the Elder Gods within, a shamanic approach to renewal and secular salvation utilised most effectively by music PR luminary and scientist Howard Bloom. Concerned with healing the human animal through Ordeals that hard-wire the physiological baselines of Love, Hate and Fear, Reznor also focusses on what happens when 'meaning-making' collapses and hope for the future cannot easily be found. He accurately captures the confusion that such dissolution of meaning and decline of social institutions brings to the world -- Francis Fukuyama calls this bifurcation 'The Great Disruption'.

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For a generation who experienced their late childhood and early adolescence in *Reagan's America*, Reznor and his influences (Marilyn Manson and Filter) capture the Dark Side of recent history, unleashed at Altamont and mutating into the Apocalyptic style of American politics (evident in the 'Star Wars'/SDI fascination). The personal 'psychotic core' that was crystallised by the collapse of the nuclear family unit and supportive social institutions has returned to haunt us with dystopian fantasies that are played out across Internet streaming media and visceral MTV film-clips. That such cathartic releases are useful -- and even necessary (to those whose lives have been formed by socio-economic 'life conditions') is a point that escapes critics like Roger Scruton, some Christian Evangelists and the New Right. The 'escapist' quality of early 1980s 'Rapture' and 'Cosmocide' (Hal Lindsey) prophecies has yielded strange fruit for the *Children of Ezekiel*, whom Reznor and Marilyn Manson are unofficial spokes-persons for.

From a macro perspective, Reznor's post-human evolutionary nexus lies, like J.G. Ballard's tales, in a mythical near-future built upon past memory-shards. It is the kind of worldview that fuses organic and morphogenetic structures with industrial machines run amok, thus The Fragile is an artefact that captures the subjective contents of the different mind produced by different times. Sonic events are in-synch but out of phase. Samples subtly trigger and then scramble kinaesthetic-visceral and kinaesthetic-tactile memories, suggestive of dissociated affective states or body memories that are incapable of being retrieved (van der Kolk 294). Perhaps this is why after a Century of Identity Confusion some fans find it impossible to listen to a 102-minute album in one sitting. No wonder then that the double album is divided into 'left' and 'right' discs (a reference to split-brain research?). The real-time track-by-track interpretation below is necessarily subjective, and is intended to serve as a provisional listener's guide to the aural ur-text of 1999.

The Fragile is full of encrypted tones and garbled frequencies that capture a world where the future is always bleeding into a non-recoverable past. Turbulent wave-forms fight for the listener's attention with prolonged static lulls. This does not make for comfortable or even 'nice' listening. The music's mind is a snapshot, a critical indicator, of the deep structures brewing within the Weltanschauung that could erupt at any moment.

"Somewhat Damaged" opens the album's 'Left' disc with an oscillating acoustic strum that anchor's the listener's attention. Offset by pulsing beats and mallet percussion, Reznor builds up sound layers that contrast with lyrical epitaphs like 'Everything that swore it wouldn't change is different now'. Icarus iconography is invoked, but perhaps a more fitting mythopoeic symbol of the journey that lies ahead would be Nietzsche's pursuit of his Ariadne through the labyrinth of life, during which the hero is steadily consumed by his numbing psychosis. Reznor fittingly comments: 'Didn't quite/Fell Apart/Where were you?' If we consider that Reznor has been repeating the same cycle with different variations throughout all of his music to date, retro-fitting each new album into a seamless tapestry, then this track signals that he has begun to finally climb out of self-imposed exile in the Underworld.

"The Day the World Went Away" has a tremendously eerie opening, with plucked mandolin effects entering at 0:40. The main slashing guitar riff was interpreted by some critics as Reznor's attempt to parody himself. For some reason, the eerie backdrop and fragmented acoustic guitar strums recalls to my mind civil defence nuclear war films. Reznor, like William S. Burroughs, has some powerful obsessions. The track builds up in intensity, with a 'Chorus of the Damned' singing 'na na nah' over apocalyptic end-times imagery. At 4:22 the track ends with an echo that loops and repeats.

"The Frail" signals a shift to mournful introspectiveness with piano: a soundtrack to faded 8 mm films and dying memories. The piano builds up slowly with background echo, holds and segues into ...

"The Wretched", beginning with a savage downbeat that recalls earlier material from *Pretty Hate Machine*. 'The Far Aways/Forget It' intones Reznor -- it's becoming clear that despite some claims to the contrary, there is redemption in this album, but it is one borne out of a relentless move forward, a strive-drive. 'You are finally free/You could be' suggest Reznor studied Existentialism during his psychotherapy visits. This song contains perhaps the ultimate post-relationship line: 'I didn't turn out the way you wanted it to, did it?' It's over, just not the way you wanted; you can always leave the partner you're with, but the ones you have already left will always stain your memories. The lines 'Back at the beginning/Sinking/Spinning' recall the claustrophobic trapped world and 'eternal Now' dislocation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder victims. At 3:44 a plucked cello riff, filtered, segues into a sludge buzz-saw guitar solo. At 5:18 the cello riffs loops and repeats.

"We're in This Together Now" uses static as percussion, highlighting the influence of electricity flows instead of traditional rock instrument configurations. At 0:34 vocals enter, at 1:15 Reznor wails 'I'm impossible', showing he is the heir to Roger Waters's self-reflective rock-star angst. 'Until the very end of me, until the very end of you' reverses the traditional marriage vow, whilst 'You're the Queen and I'm the King' quotes David Bowie's "Heroes". Unlike earlier tracks like "Reptile", this track is far more positive about relationships, which have previously resembled toxic-dyads. Reznor signals a delta surge (breaking through barriers at any cost), despite a time-line morphing between present-
past-future. At 5:30 synths and piano signal a shift, at 5:49 the outgoing piano riff begins. The film-clip is filled with redemptive water imagery. The soundtrack gradually gets more murky and at 7:05 a subterranean note signals closure.

"The Fragile" is even more hopeful and life-affirming (some may even interpret it as devotional), but this love -- representative of the End-Times, alludes to the 'Glamour of Evil' (Nico) in the line 'Fragile/She doesn't see her beauty'. The fusion of synths and atonal guitars beginning at 2:13 summons forth film-clip imagery -- mazes, pageants, bald eagles, found sounds, cloaked figures, ruined statues, enveloping darkness.

"Just like You Imagined" opens with Soundscapes worthy of Robert Fripp, doubled by piano and guitar at 0:39. Drums and muffled voices enter at 0:54 -- are we seeing a pattern to Reznor's writing here? Sonic debris guitar enters at 1:08, bringing forth intensities from white noise. This track is full of subtle joys like the 1:23-1:36 solo by David Bowie pianist Mike Garson and guitarist Adrian Belew's outgoing guitar solo at 2:43, shifting back to the underlying soundscapes at 3:07. The sounds are always on the dissipative edge of chaos.

"Pilgrimage" utilises a persistent ostinato and beat, with a driving guitar overlay at 0:18. This is perhaps the most familiar track, using Reznor motifs like the doubling of the riff with acoustic guitars between 1:12-1:20, march cries, and pitch-shift effects on a 3:18 drumbeat/cymbal. Or at least I could claim it was familiar, if it were not that legendary hip-hop producer and 'edge-of-panic' tactilist Dr. Dre helped assemble the final track mix.

"No, You Don't" has been interpreted as an attack on Marilyn Manson and Hole's Courntey Love, particularly the 0:47 line 'Got to keep it all on the outside/Because everything is dead on the inside' and the 2:33 final verse 'Just so you know, I did not believe you could sink so low'. The song's structure is familiar: a basic beat at 0:16, guitars building from 0:31 to sneering vocals, a 2:03 counter-riff that merges at 2:19 with vocals and ascending to the final verse and 3:26 final distortion...

"La Mer" is the first major surprise, a beautiful and sweeping fusion of piano, keyboard and cello, reminiscent of Symbolist composer Debussy. At 1:07 Denise Milfort whispers, setting the stage for sometime Ministry drummer Bill Reiflin's jazz drumming at 1:22, and a funky 1:32 guitar/bass line. The pulsing synth guitar at 2:04 serves as anchoring percussion for a cinematic electronica mindscape, filtered through new layers of sonic chiaroscuro at 2:51. 3:06 phase shifting, 3:22 layer doubling, 3:37 outgoing solo, 3:50-3:54 more swirling vocal fragments, segueing into a fading cello quartet as shadows creep. David Carson's moody film-clip captures the end more ominously, mirrored by vocal shards at 2:59 and soundscapes at 3:45, before piano fades in and out at 4:12. The models are clearly natural morphogenetic structures. The track twists through inner storms and torments from 2:42 to 2:48, mirrored by vocal shards at 2:59 and soundscapes at 3:45, before piano fades in and out at 4:12. The source of much of the album's imagery.

"The Great Below" ends the first disc with more multi-layered textures fusing nostalgia and reverie: a twelve-second cello riff is counter-pointed by a plucked overlay, which builds to a 0:43 washed pulse effect, transformed by six second pulses between 1:04-1:19 and a further effects layer at 1:24. E-bow effects underscore lyrics like 'Currents have their say' (2:33) and 'Washes me away' (2:44), which a 3:33 sitar riff answers. These complexities are further transmuted by seemingly random events -- a 4:06 doubling of the sitar riff which 'glitches' and a 4:32 backbeat echo that drifts for four bars. While Reznor's lyrics suggest that he is unable to control subjective time-states (like The Joker in the Batman: Dark Knight series of Kali-yuga comic-books), the track constructions show that the Key to his hold over the listener is very carefully constructed songs whose spaces resemble Pythagorean mathematical formulas. Misdirecting the audience is the secret of many magicians.

"The Way Out Is Through" opens the 'Right' disc with an industrial riff that builds at 0:19 to click-track and rhythm, the equivalent of a weaving spiral. Whispering 'All I've undergone/I will keep on' at 1:24, Reznor is backed at 1:38 by synths and drums coalescing into guitars, which take shape at 1:46 and turn into a torrential electrical current. The models are clearly natural morphogenetic structures. The track twists through inner storms and torments from 2:42 to 2:48, mirrored by vocal shards at 2:59 and soundscapes at 3:45, before piano fades in and out at 4:12. The title references peri-natal theories of development (particularly those of Stanislav Grof), which is the source of much of the album's imagery.

"Into the Void" is not the Black Sabbath song of the same name, but a catchy track that uses the same unfolding formula (opening static, cello at 0:18, guitars at 0:31, drums and backbeat at...
"Where Is Everybody?" emulates earlier structures, but relies from 2:01 on whirring effects and organic rhythms, including a flurry of eight beat pulses between 2:40-2:46 and a 3:33 spiralling guitar solo. The 4:26 guitar solo is pure Adrian Belew, and is suddenly ended by spluttering static and white noise at 5:13.

"The Mark Has Been Made" signals another downshift into introspectiveness with 0:32 ghostly synth shimmers, echoed by cello at 1:04 which is the doubled at 1:55 by guitar. At 2:08 industrial riffs suddenly build up, weaving between 3:28 distorted guitars and the return of the repressed original layer at 4:16. The surprise is a mystery 32 second soundscape at the end with Reznor crooning 'I'm getting closer, all the time' like a zombie devil Elvis.

"Please" highlights spacious noise at 0:48, and signals a central album motif at 1:04 with the line 'Time starts slowing down/Sink until I drown'. The psychic mood of the album shifts with the discovery of Imagination as a liberating force against oppression. The synth sound again is remarkably organic for an industrial album.

"Starfuckers Inc" is the now infamous sneering attack on rock-stardom, perhaps at Marilyn Manson (at 3:08 Reznor quotes Carly Simon's 'You're So Vain'). Jungle beats and pulsing synths open the track, which features the sound-sculpting talent of Pop Will Eat Itself member Clint Mansell. Beginning at 0:26, Reznor's vocals appear to have been sampled, looped and cut up (apologies to Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs). The lines 'I have arrived and this time you should believe the hype/I listened to everyone now I know everyone was right' is a very savage and funny exposure of Manson's constant references to Friedrich Nietzsche's Herd-mentality: the Herd needs a bogey-man to hype/I listened to everyone now I know everyone was right'. Reznor has read his psychological operations (PSYOP) manuals pertaining to blasting the hell out of his audiences' psyche by any means necessary. Computer blip noise and black light flotation tank memories. Dislocating pauses and time-bends. The aural equivalent of Klein bottles.

"Complication" juggernauts in at 0:57 with screaming vocals and a barrage of white noise at 1:56. It's clear by now that Reznor has read his psychological operations (PSYOP) manuals pertaining to blasting the hell out of his audiences' psyche by any means necessary. Computer blip noise and black light flotation tank memories. Dislocating pauses and time-bends. The aural equivalent of Klein bottles.

"The Big Come Down" begins with a four-second synth/static intro that is smashed apart by a hard beat at 0:05 and kaleidoscope guitars at 0:16. Critics refer to the song's lyrics in an attempt to project a narcissistic Reznor personality, but don't comment on stylistic tweaks like the AM radio influenced backing vocals at 1:02 and 1:19, or the use of guitars as a percussion layer at 1:51. A further intriguing element is the return of the fly samples at 2:38, an effect heard on previous albums and a possible post-human sub-text. The alien mythos will eventually reign over the banal and empty human. At 3:07 the synths return with static, a further overlay adds more synths at 3:45 as the track spirals to its peak, before dissipating at 3:1 in a mesh of percussion and guitars.

"Underneath It All" opens with a riff that signals we have reached the album's climatic turning point, with the recurring theme of fragmenting body-memories returning at 0:23 with the line 'All I can do/I can still feel you', and being echoed by pulsing static at 0:42 as electric percussion. A 'Messiah Complex' appears at 1:34 with the line 'Crucify/After all I've died/After all I've tried/You are still inside', or at least it appears to be that on the surface. This is the kind of line that typical rock critics will quote, but a careful re-reading suggests that Reznor is pointing to the painful nature of remanifesting. Our past shapes us more than we would like to admit particularly our first relationships.

"Ripe (With Decay)" is the album's final statement, a complex weaving of passages over a
repetitive mesh of guitars, pulsing echoes, back-beats, soundscapes, and a powerful Mike Garson piano solo (2:26). Earlier motifs including fly samples (3:00), mournful funeral violas (3:36) and slowing time effects (4:28) recur throughout the track. Having finally reached the psychotic core, Reznor is not content to let us rest, mixing funk bass riffs (4:46), vocal snatches (5:23) and oscillating guitars (5:39) that drag the listener forever onwards towards the edge of the abyss (5:58). The final sequence begins at 6:22, loses fidelity at 6:28, and ends abruptly at 6:35.

At millennium's end there is a common-held perception that the world is in an irreversible state of decay, and that Culture is just a wafer-thin veneer over anarchy. Music like The Fragile suggests that we are still trying to assimilate into popular culture the 'war-on-Self' worldviews unleashed by the nineteenth-century 'Masters of Suspicion' (Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche). This 'assimilation gap' is evident in industrial music, which in the late 1970s was struggling to capture the mood of the Industrial Revolution and Charles Dickens, so the genre is ripe for further exploration of the scarred psyche. What the self-appointed moral guardians of the Herd fail to appreciate is that as the imprint baseline rises (reflective of socio-political realities), the kind of imagery prevalent throughout The Fragile and in films like Strange Days (1995), The Matrix (1999) and eXistenZ (1999) is going to get even darker. The solution is not censorship or repression in the name of pleasing an all-saving surrogate god-figure. No, these things have to be faced and embraced somehow. Such a process can only occur if there is space within for the Sadeian aesthetic that Nine Inch Nails embodies, and not a denial of Dark Eros.

"We need a second Renaissance", notes Don Webb, "a rejuvenation of Culture on a significant scale". In other words, a global culture-shift of quantum (aeon or epoch-changing) proportions. The tools required will probably not come just from the over-wordy criticism of Cyber-culture and Cultural Studies or the logical-negative feeding frenzy of most Music Journalism. They will come from a dynamic synthesis of disciplines striving toward a unity of knowledge -- what socio-biologist Edward O. Wilson has described as 'Consilience'. Liberating tools and ideas will be conveyed to a wider public audience unfamiliar with such principles through predominantly science fiction visual imagery and industrial/electronica music.

The Fragile serves as an invaluable model for how such artefacts could transmit their dreams and propagate their messages. For the hyper-alert listener, it will be the first step on a new journey. But sadly for the majority, it will be just another hysterical industrial album promoted as selection of the month.

References


Citation reference for this article

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Chicago style:

APA style: