

Year Zero: Trent Reznor looks outside himself

By Peter Kloze
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Objective events have a way of catching up with even the most subjective of individuals. Trent Reznor, founder and leading member of the industrial rock group Nine Inch Nails (NIN), is one of the more introspective and self-analyzing artists in modern popular music, yet, like everyone else, he is not and cannot be exempted from the force of events.

Indeed, humanity faces a tempestuous future on account of the present social and economic crisis of capitalism, reverberations of which have impelled Reznor to dedicate two years to the creation of a studio album built around major political issues.

The album under review, *Year Zero*, was released under his NIN moniker in April 2007, first in streaming format on NIN's MySpace web page, and subsequently to retailers worldwide under the patronage of the Universal Music Group. NIN's sixth major studio release since 1989's *Pretty Hate Machine*, *Year Zero* was recently re-released in November as a remix by various admiring musicians and artists.

Conceived of as a dystopia that begins in January 2007 and ends in the year 2022 (re-dubbed under a new international calendar in the story as "Born Again," or Year Zero), Reznor envisions a United States whose citizens have endured a nuclear war with Iran, come under heavy government surveillance, been drugged with a stupefying substance called "parepin" (introduced into the water supply to supposedly minimize the effect of bio-terrorism attacks) and been forced to live under a government completely at the beck and call of fundamentalist Christians.

Throughout the work, a sort of entity ("The Presence") appears, apparently a hallucination derived from the drug parepin, which induces those who see it to experience feelings of passionate veneration. It is depicted on the cover of the album as what appears to be a four-fingered hand descending from the sky.

Dystopian (the opposite of utopian) works, from such well-known novels as George Orwell's *1984* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* to films like Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, have often contained thinly veiled attacks on certain aspects of the working artist's contemporary social and cultural environment. It is well known that Orwell's seminal *1984*, for example, was written as an implicit critique of the totalitarian conditions of life under Stalinist Russia in the 1930s and 1940s.

Reznor has created his own dystopian work to make a quite explicit attack on the calamitous domestic and foreign policies of the present US government, from the artistic perspective of a future nightmare world.

"There are no concepts in the [*Year Zero*] story that aren't rooted in things that are already happening," Reznor told online music journal *Gigwise*. "When it came time to write the words, I really wanted to focus on something that was at the forefront of my consciousness which is, as an American, I'm appalled by the behavior of our government, the direction that it has taken, the direction that it's taken everyone else in the world, and its arrogance.

"I decided to write an essay about where the world might be if we continue down the path that we're on with a neo-con-esque government doing whatever it pleases...." While there is an entirely justifiable and

commendable anger here, political limitations abound. These will be discussed further on.

The lion's share of Trent Reznor's music is evocative and thought provoking, and, according to singer-musician David Bowie in *Rolling Stone*, darkly repellent and attractive in equal measure. An apt description for compositions that, frequently by way of uncanny melodicism subsumed in propulsive harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment, are often capable of both lacerating and soothing the listener, sometimes even simultaneously.

Born on May 17, 1965, in the small Pennsylvania town of Mercer, Reznor began taking piano lessons at the age of five. He eventually moved to Cleveland, Ohio, to pursue a career in music. After playing for several synthesizer-pop bands in the mid-1980s as a keyboardist, Reznor secured a job at Right Track Studios (now Midtown Recording). He was able to obtain the permission of the studio owner to record demos of his own material. Signing with independent label TVT Records, Reznor released NIN debut album *Pretty Hate Machine* in 1989, with many songs on the album culled and revised from the original demo material.

In that work, Reznor began displaying his talents as a composer and arranger, with exceptional use of pulsating synthesizers and oscillators often enmeshed in an atmosphere of string layers and noise. This is a style that became identified with Nine Inch Nails, carrying with it heavy influences of such groups as Joy Division and The The.

The most well-known NIN album, *The Downward Spiral*, was released in 1994. Reznor's renowned studio perfectionism, his "blood, sweat, and tears," is evident throughout.

Reznor was compelled to check into a New Orleans rehabilitation center as a result of substance abuse two years after recording his 1999 album *The Fragile*, and lived in that city from then on. He finally overcame and recovered from his addictions at the time of his sixth major NIN studio album in 2005, *With Teeth*, recorded in his French Quarter studio.

Fortunate to have been able to move out shortly before the August 2005 Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, Reznor was subsequently one of the millions who watched as a historically vital cultural metropolis was flooded, with thousands of lives lost or destroyed as a result. Infuriated by the government indifference toward human life during the disaster, as well as the lack of planning before the hurricane touched down, he participated in a benefit concert shortly afterward for families who suffered in the tragedy.

Reznor had been progressively disillusioned with the music industry to the point where he became an outspoken critic of its brazenly predatory practices, while at the same time advocating online music acquisition.

Reznor is a member of a musicians' coalition who have come together as Artists and Musicians for Internet Freedom to "support network neutrality legislation" on the Internet. In effect, the organization functions as a pressure group on Congress, particularly its Democratic Party members.

Reznor is not an open supporter of the Democrats, but this is precisely

at whose feet the Artists and Musicians for Internet Freedom throw their roses. However, the Democratic Party, the political representative of one section of the US ruling elite, as much as the Republican, is fundamentally hostile to the interests of sincere artists.

In the case of Reznor's newest album, *Year Zero*, the political illusions of its creator have helped produce an album that attempts to deal with social reality in an altogether perfunctory and artistically unsatisfying manner.

Year Zero needs to be considered within the context of Trent Reznor's admirable musical career. With that in mind, NIN's newest album is all the more striking for both its general lyrical and musical poverty.

In *Year Zero*, according to the musician, he adopted an entirely different approach to lyric writing: "For the first time in my life, I wanted to break away from the idea of opening up my journal and transferring that into song lyrics." A step in the right direction as far as "getting out of oneself" is concerned, but not too far in this case.

Despite the breadth and inventiveness of the entire dystopian *Year Zero* project, the lyrics on the album are generally banal and unimaginative. In contrast to the lyrics on past NIN albums, which revealed painstaking thought and effort, the hasty release of this album is written all over it.

Take, for example, a lyrical excerpt from a single off the album, "Survivalism." The insipidity of the rhyme is unmistakable: "Don't try to act surprised, We did just what you told us, Lost our faith along the way, And found ourselves believing your lies, I got my propaganda I got revisionism, I got my violence in hi-def ultra-realism, I'm a part of this great nation, I got my fist I got my plan I got survivalism."

Or "Zero Sum," the last song on the album. These are the final words: "Shame on us, Shame on us, We knew from the start, May God have mercy on our dirty little hearts, Shame on us, Shame on us, For all we have done, And all we ever were, Just zeros and ones."

Reznor, on the YouTube interview mentioned above, expressed the desire to avoid "preachiness." An admirable ambition, but after reading the lyrics above, one is obliged to ask: how well has he done on that score?

The dystopian concept itself is rather limited. Why is it that in most dystopias the "hero" is usually just that, a lone individual fighting an unjust social order? The rest of humanity tend to act like mindless cattle, devoid of any individuality (or power of resistance) whatsoever. It is up to the lone warrior to combat this egregious state of affairs, against the odds, and against the prejudices of the brainwashed mass around him. This is a theme prevalent in most dystopian works, the recent film *V For Vendetta* among them.

Certain class prejudices make themselves felt. The middle class observer often combines ignorance or even fear of the mass of the population along with a degree of self-aggrandizement. He or she alone is immune from the brainwashing, he or she will "liberate" humanity. Such individuals congregate regularly in cafes and house parties, chattering flamboyantly about their "special" place in society. Former "radicals" of a certain age, they may look upon the defeats of the working class in the 1960s and early 1970s not as the outcome of the betrayals of its leaders, but the fault of the masses themselves. Various causes are posited, from "sexual repression" to "inherent consumerism."

Such is the ideological conception behind *Year Zero*. When the very last words on the album are "shame on us, for all we have done, and all we ever were, just zeros and ones," the role of various social forces is brushed aside and the onus is placed on humanity as a whole. The population is guilty, apparently, of accepting or even preparing its own miserable fate. Along with everything else, this is simply lazy and superficial.

The music on *Year Zero* represents a departure from Reznor's past work. "This album is a bit more electronic and...is veering away from concern about song structure," Reznor told *Kerrang* magazine. As it

happens, a lack of "concern about song structure" is fairly palpable on the album.

Reznor has decided to adopt a more minimalist feel for *Year Zero*, leading one online blogger to describe it as mainly whispers and screams backed by "funny drum noises." While of course there is more than that to the album, the comment contains a grain of truth. As it happens, a sticker on the physical album's shrinkwrap points out that it contains "16 noisy new tracks," not an altogether welcome emphasis, but not altogether misleading either.

Gone are the elaborate, intricate layers and arrangements found on previous NIN albums, the plangent synthesizer work, the explorations of tempo, rhythm and pitch—in short, all the characteristics of NIN's music that gave it an intelligent consistency and demanding hold on the listener in the past. When Reznor says that this was his most "painless" album, one can hear it. The "blood, sweat, and tears" simply isn't there. Along with the lyrics, it seems rushed, as if Reznor could not wait to release it.

There are some redeeming moments. The welcome addition of an instrumental track ("Another Version of the Truth") represents a step up from *With Teeth*, highlighting Reznor's graceful feel for the piano, and for melody in general. "Me, I'm Not" has a creative drum beat. In "God Given," what sounds perhaps like samples of slot machines apparently represents the theme of the Religious Right's obsession with financial gain. If so, an amusing treatment.

While the previous NIN album, *With Teeth*, featured more melodious and catchy songs, *Year Zero* is in general more of a musically and artistically ambitious album. Yet its strengths are relatively minor, and are overridden by its overall weaknesses.

What may seem the harsh tone of this comment is bound up with the seriousness of the present social and economic crisis. The depth of the present situation requires *serious* thought and feeling. Artists are not exempt from broaching and treating the subject, in their own way, with due diligence.

It is not good enough to address social life in any manner one pleases. Objective reality makes its own demands. Reznor, a public figure who is held in high regard especially by young people, has broached the current crisis, yet altogether cursorily. The complex social relationships that *Year Zero* attempts to explore have not been given serious artistic treatment.

One expects more from such a serious artist as Trent Reznor. Yet an artist's development is a contradictory process, and while Reznor has moved forward in regard to his focus of attention, it will be interesting to see where he takes his music from here.

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