

Aesthetics of Constraint—Propaganda and the Industrial Management of Pop Creativity

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Abstract

The 1980s marked a turning point in the pop music industry, with increasing tensions between artistic experimentation and corporate control. Amid this shift, synth-pop emerged as a space where aesthetic evolution often clashed with commercial imperatives. From this point of view, the trajectory of the German band Propaganda (1983–1990) offers a compelling lens through which to explore the tensions between artistic ambition and managerial constraint within the 1980s music industry. Signed by the British label ZTT Records, the band operated under an innovative yet tightly controlled regime of technological production and promotional strategy. While this centralized and hierarchical framework fostered a distinctive sonic identity, it simultaneously curtailed the band’s creative autonomy and strained internal cohesion. Unequal distribution of roles and resources contributed to organizational fragmentation, exposing a core paradox: a project framed as a collective endeavor, yet driven by top-down perspective of control. This article analyzes Propaganda’s evolution to illuminate the ambivalent consequences of the industrialization of pop music—where formal professionalization and curated aesthetic experimentation often come at the expense of collaborative artistic agency.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Commercial strategy, Creativity, Label politics, Music industry, Propaganda, Synth-pop, ZTT Records

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1. Introduction

In the 1980s, the European music scene was transformed by the meteoric rise of new wave and synth-pop—genres that fused groundbreaking electronic sounds with avant-garde aesthetics (Cateforis, 2011). These musical movements injected a wave of freshness and experimentation into the industry. At the heart of this cultural effervescence, one band stood out with force: Propaganda. With tracks such as *Dr. Mabuse* and *p:Machinery*, Propaganda merged art and technology, boldly exploring new sonic territories that challenged conventional pop structures. Their innovative approach to music, visual imagery, and live performance positioned them as a leading figure in the post-punk revolution (Reynolds, 2006). Yet despite their undeniable creative potential and critical acclaim, Propaganda failed to secure a lasting foothold on the international music scene. By the end of 2024, however, their music experienced an unexpected resurgence. Featured in French television commercials and rebroadcast on multiple radio stations, their work acquired a surprisingly timeless resonance. This revival not only underscores the enduring relevance of their artistic output but also highlights a striking paradox: a band whose musical innovation remained underappreciated in its own era. The opposition between their belated recognition and truncated career invites compelling questions about cultural timing, industry dynamics, and the nature of music legacy.

The central question surrounding Propaganda is why, despite a brilliant debut, the band was unable to sustain its momentum throughout the 1980s—a case that reflects broader tensions between artistic innovation and the structural constraints of the music industry (Negus, 1999). The answer lies primarily in internal tensions and the restrictive conditions imposed by their contract with ZTT Records label. As Horn’s (2024 [2022]) autobiography reveals, although the label championed innovation, it also enforced a vision that sought to merge avant-garde artistry with commercial viability—a combination that ultimately proved untenable for the band. One of the major paradoxes of Propaganda’s trajectory is the exceptional sonic quality of their productions, which stands in stark contrast to the creative limitations they faced. Indeed, the commercial pressures exerted by ZTT Records—particularly its emphasis on profitability and the rapid release of new material—conflicted directly with the band’s values, which prioritized time, experimentation, and introspection. Propaganda’s pursuit of creative freedom, a defining feature of their artistic identity, was increasingly constrained by the evolving demands of the

music industry, which, by the late 1980s, was driven by short-term success and shaped by the broader rise of neoliberal power (Wilson, 2024). Trapped in a rigid contractual framework, the band found itself negotiating a precarious balance between artistic integrity and market expectations. This enduring opposition between creative autonomy and commercial imperatives lies at the heart of Propaganda's fragmented legacy—and constitutes a central point of analytical focus.

Through the trajectory of Propaganda, this article seeks to examine how tensions between artistic creativity and commercial constraints shape the careers of musicians in the pop music industry. The research problem is as follows: How did contractual limitations and market-driven logic curb the creative potential of Propaganda's members, emblematic figures of the 1980s new wave movement? By analyzing the role of ZTT Records—both a catalyst for sonic innovation and a contractual trap—we aim to understand how strategic decisions by producers and record labels can not only influence but sometimes dismantle a band's artistic development. Propaganda represents not merely an artistic failure conditioned by external forces, but a compelling illustration of the structural power dynamics embedded in the music industry. The case study raises important questions about the extent to which record labels can either facilitate or inhibit creative expression. By interrogating these dynamics, we highlight the systemic challenges artists face in reconciling their creative vision with the commercial imperatives imposed by industry stakeholders. Ultimately, this analysis opens a broader reflection on the degrees of agency available to artists operating within restrictive contractual environments and underscores the lasting implications of institutional control over cultural production and artistic identity.

2. Propaganda's Artistic Promise

At the dawn of the 1980s, as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher laid the foundations for a new global economic order, the European music scene was undergoing a profound transformation. The sonic experimentation of 1970s German krautrock—exemplified by bands such as Can, Amon Düül II, Neu!, Kraftwerk, and Tangerine Dream (Adelt, 2016)—paved the way for a new generation of artists captivated by the expressive possibilities of electronic technology. Far from being a passing trend, the emergence of synth-pop signaled a genuine paradigm shift: machines were no longer just tools but instruments capable of conveying emotional depth and articulating a distinctly melancholic modernity (Borthwick & Moy, 2004). The formation of Propaganda, a band from Düsseldorf—a city already steeped in a tradition of musical innovation—was emblematic of this cultural effervescence. More than a musical ensemble, Propaganda positioned itself as an aesthetic laboratory where sonic sophistication, literary allusion, and post-industrial imagery converged. Their work marked a pivotal moment in which pop music shed its *naïveté* and embraced conceptual ambition, while still retaining a measure of accessibility. To understand the genesis of Propaganda is to engage with the ways in which a group of artists channeled both the creative aspirations and existential anxieties of their time, straddling the line between the popular and the experimental.

2.1 Born in the Heart of Synth-pop

Propaganda emerged within a dynamic musical ecosystem at the heart of Düsseldorf—a vibrant hub for avant-garde experimentation. This German city, shaped by its industrial legacy and home to giants like Henkel, Bayer, and ThyssenKrupp, also maintained deep ties to the krautrock movement. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Düsseldorf became a key center of musical innovation, where artistic ambition converged with technological possibilities (Esch & Stein, 2021). Krautrock laid the foundation for contemporary electronic music by boldly integrating machine-generated sounds with radical experimentation, dismantling traditional musical boundaries. As the epicenter of this sonic evolution, Düsseldorf provided fertile ground for new artistic forms, and Propaganda—formed in 1982—quickly emerged as one of its most prominent figures. Associated with the burgeoning German new wave scene, the band's members—Ralf Dörper (keyboardist and sound designer), Andreas Thein (keyboardist and programmer), later replaced by Michael Mertens (percussionist), and vocalists Susanne Freytag and Claudia Brücken—developed a sound grounded in experimentalism, technological sophistication, and aesthetic ambition. This aligns with Frith's (2016 [1986]) view that technology is not an obstacle to artistic expression but rather an additional means of exploring and communicating ideas. The band's emergence as a prominent force in the German music scene represents the convergence of diverse musical legacies and avant-garde aspirations, drawing explicit inspiration from Kraftwerk's innovations, yet paradoxically infused with retro-futuristic imagery. Propaganda's style forged a bold, distinctive fusion of past, present, and future, reflecting the era's simultaneous fascination with nostalgia and innovation.

From the outset, Propaganda distinguished itself through its artistic ambition to fuse sonic innovation with visual aesthetics in a coherent and unified creative vision. Illustration 1 captures this aestheticization, exemplified in the

band's debut album *A Secret Wish* (1985), which presents a bold exploration of electronic music while remaining firmly rooted in the pop sensibilities of the era. The use of synthesizers allowed the band to craft futuristic soundscapes and intricate auditory textures. Tracks such as *Dr. Mabuse* and *p:Machinery* showcase the band's ability to blend robotic rhythms with melodic hooks, while also integrating cinematic references—most notably to Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse*. In this context, the song's titular character is reimagined as a spectral presence: omnipresent, unsettling, and manipulative—a metaphor for invisible forms of power, whether political or media-driven, in a society where individuals are reduced to mere pawns. This fusion of musical experimentation with a pop framework positioned Propaganda as a distinctive voice within a genre still negotiating the opposition between avant-garde expression and mainstream appeal. What truly sets the band apart is its capacity to craft a visual identity as sophisticated and conceptually rich as its sound. Every element—from album artwork to music videos—functions as an extension of their artistic vision. In this sense, Propaganda transcended the boundaries of music-making to construct an immersive, multi-sensory universe that redefined the aesthetic contours of German new wave.



Illustration 1. Propaganda: A Deliberately Engineered Aesthetic
Source: <https://www.topmusique80.com/> (Accessed April 16, 2025)

2.2 The Quest for a Perfect Visual and Musical Identity

Propaganda is not merely a music band but a fully realized artistic project in which every element—from musical composition to visual presentation—constitutes an inseparable whole. The band is distinguished by an ambitious creative vision that fuses music, imagery, and cinematic references to deliver a uniquely immersive experience, echoing the aesthetic principles discussed in Holbrook & Hirschman's (1982) seminal work on experiential consumption. This approach goes beyond conventional pop aesthetics, aspiring instead to construct a multisensory experience that engages listeners both intellectually and emotionally. Investigations in multisensory integration highlight how the interplay between auditory and visual stimuli enhances the depth and complexity of audience engagement (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2023). By blurring the boundaries between sound and image, Propaganda embraces an artistic logic akin to contemporary installation art rather than traditional pop production. The “*holistic ethos*” aligns with broader cultural initiatives observed in post-industrial cities undergoing cultural-led regeneration, where art projects act as catalysts for urban revitalization and identity reconstruction (Popa *et al.*, 2025). Through their album artwork and music videos, the band aspires to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, in which the visual dimension constantly dialogues with the sonic evolution of their compositions. Deruty *et al.* (2023) moreover confirm that inharmonicity and noisiness are no longer mere technical accidents but essential components of modern popular music, contributing to its textural richness and evocative power. Propaganda thus seeks not to decorate their music but to construct a coherent world in which every element is meaningful.

Recent research reinforces this close relationship between *what we hear* and *what we see*. For instance, Çeçen & Iancu (2023) underline how visual identity significantly shapes listener perception, influencing emotional response, song likability, and even judgments of quality. In this light, Propaganda's meticulous visual strategy—marked by stark design, retro-futurist motifs, and theatrical stylization—acted as an emotional amplifier for its sound. The band crafted not only songs but conceptual environments in which sound and image reinforced each

other, but the creative process aligns with design-oriented models of innovation, such as those proposed by Egiri & Wuritka (2015), which emphasize knowledge integration, intrinsic motivation, and cognitive exploration. These elements are equally evident in the crafting of Propaganda's distinctive sound and artistic identity. The project requires rigorous attention to detail; each output, whether a video clip or an album photograph, is conceived as an integral component of a broader aesthetic system. The "*holistic ethos*" places Propaganda among the most avant-garde acts of their era—artists who do not merely produce songs, but construct coherent, captivating worlds. Much like leading figures in the visual arts and cinema, the band infuses its work with a visual depth that transcends mere illustration. Instead, image becomes an extension of sound, forming a tightly integrated aesthetic experience. It is this rare ability to harmonize auditory and visual creativity that distinguishes Propaganda within the synth-pop movement.

Propaganda's debut album rapidly established itself as a seminal work in the evolution of European synth-pop, largely due to its resolutely avant-garde sonic and visual aesthetic. The band exhibited an exceptional level of artistic ambition, merging intricate electronic textures, heavily processed vocals verging on abstraction, and cinematic atmospheres. Their formal experimentation transcended conventional songcraft; each track was conceived as a fragment of a broader immersive universe in which sound, imagery, and cultural reference points intersected. The music videos produced to accompany their songs did not merely illustrate the music—they extended it, adding a "*second narrative layer*" that deepened its interpretive potential. Drawing heavily on visual codes from German Expressionist cinema, futurist manifestos, and political iconography, Propaganda's aesthetic strategy lent their work a theatrical and intellectual sophistication rarely encountered in electronic pop at the time. The band did not simply compose music—they staged ideas and orchestrated multi-sensory experiences. This radical artistic approach, widely praised by critics, contributed to their recognition as vanguards of the genre. However, this bold artistic stance soon clashed with commercial domination in the music industry. Too conceptually ambitious for mainstream audiences, yet too melodic for the experimental underground, Propaganda struggled to maintain a stable position within a rapidly shifting cultural economy shaped by neoliberal restructuring in the mid-1980s. Under the management of ZTT Records, the band's initial creative freedom was quickly constrained by corporate imperatives that contradicted their commitment to artistic autonomy.

3. ZTT Records' Ambivalent Role

Founded in 1983 by visionary producer Trevor Horn, journalist and pop culture theorist Paul Morley, and legal director Jill Sinclair, ZTT Records represented an audacious attempt to redefine the relationship between art and industry within the rapidly evolving musical landscape of the 1980s. Drawing inspiration from both the artistic avant-garde and the commercial view of mainstream pop, the label sought to conceptualize music as a totalizing product—where sound, image, narrative, and performance converged in a coherent and often spectacular strategy of presentation and promotion. For a band like Propaganda, this approach offered the prospect of unprecedented visibility in a saturated and competitive musical environment. ZTT Records thus functioned both as a launchpad and a mold: it provided the material means and infrastructure to realize ambitious artistic projects, while simultaneously imposing a tightly controlled creative framework. Despite their alignment with ZTT Records' aesthetic aspirations, Propaganda's members—whose sensibilities leaned strongly toward sonic experimentation—found themselves increasingly constrained by the label's rigorous management style, particularly concerning production oversight, content directives, and strict release timelines. The opposition between the band's aspirations for creative autonomy and the contractual constraints of ZTT Records would come to define their experience with the label. This evolving relationship oscillated between moments of spectacular artistic exposure and mounting frustration, ultimately revealing the complex interplay between innovation and institutional control in the production of pop music.

3.1 A Hybrid Label at the Intersection of Avant-garde and Business

From its inception, ZTT Records rapidly established itself as a distinctive force within the music industry, merging an avant-garde artistic discourse with a highly disciplined economic strategy. Illustration 2, a visual homage to Dmitri Mendeleev's 1869 periodic table of elements, serves as one of the most emblematic representations of the label's singular positioning over its forty-year history. From the outset, ZTT Records made no attempt to conceal its pursuit of profitability behind artistic pretenses. Its objective extended beyond the production of innovative music; the label sought to transform musical output into a meticulously engineered cultural product designed for international market success. This ambition manifested in a centralized and tightly managed creative process: artists signed to ZTT Records were not granted full autonomy but were instead

integrated into a broader ecosystem in which every aspect—from sonic design to visual presentation—was coordinated as part of a unified vision curated by the label. For Propaganda, as for other contemporaneous acts, this meant becoming enmeshed in an industrial apparatus where virtually every artistic decision required institutional validation. Profitability governed every level of operation: track selection, single formats, release schedules, and distribution networks were all optimized for commercial impact. ZTT Records functioned less as a traditional record label and more as a streamlined cultural enterprise—an aesthetic laboratory fused with an economic engine. This dual orientation stands in stark contrast to the libertarian ethos often associated with electronic music, underscoring the friction between artistic innovation and market imperatives.

In this context, Propaganda exemplifies a band ensnared in a process of progressive dispossession from its original artistic vision. Despite the members’ strong commitment to crafting a unified sound and visual identity, they quickly encountered the contractual constraints imposed by ZTT Records. Notably restrictive, the contract included stringent clauses governing exploitation rights, musical direction, and even the possibility of outside collaboration. This extensive contractual framework effectively transformed the band into mere executors of the label’s overarching strategic directives. As a result, the band found itself pressured to produce a product that adhered to a pre-established and highly controlled plan, leading to growing frustration and internal conflict. Creativity—so central to ZTT Records’ rhetoric—was increasingly directed, and at times stifled by the demands for market performance (for further discussion on this point, see for instance Negus [1995]). The opposition between the label’s commercial priorities and the band’s artistic ambitions became increasingly systemic, ultimately undermining Propaganda’s internal cohesion and threatening its very survival. While ZTT Records’ business model was undeniably effective in terms of distribution, its attempt to industrialize innovation inadvertently led to the depletion of the very creative energy it sought to exploit, stifling the band’s originality and long-term potential.

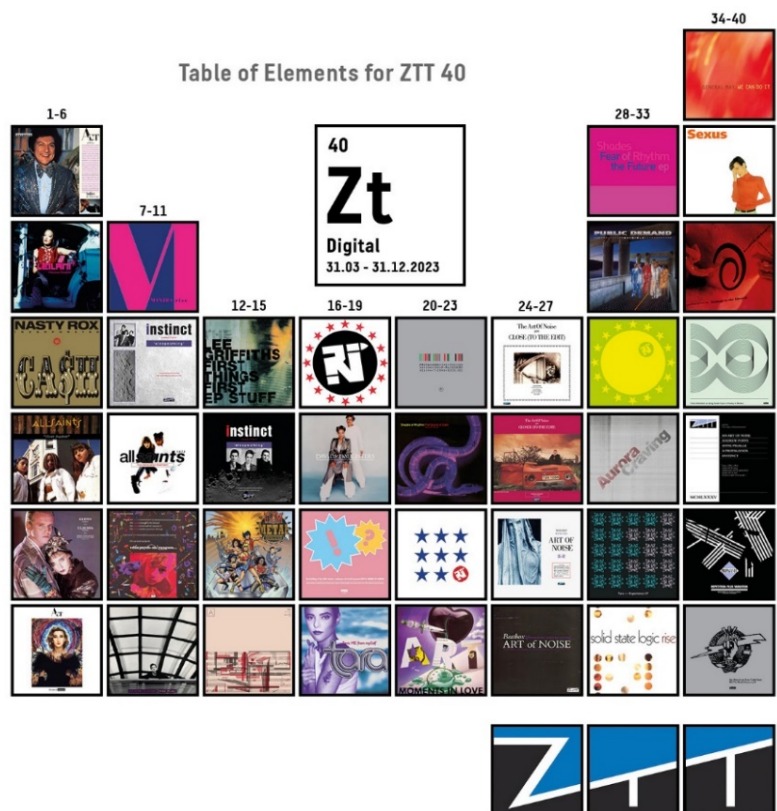


Illustration 2. Forty Releases for 40 Years of ZTT Records
 Source: <https://www.djfood.org/> (Accessed July 6, 2024).

3.2 Propaganda in a Golden Cage

The relationship between Propaganda and ZTT Records, initially conceived as a strategic alliance between artistic innovation and robust production resources, gradually deteriorated into a site of imbalance and conflict.

Driven by ambitious aesthetic goals, the band soon came under mounting commercial pressure. The ZTT Records model—favoring rapid profitability and tight control over image—left little room for the kind of organic experimentation described by Mintzberg (1994), where iterative learning allows for adaptive, experience-based development. Propaganda’s members, rooted in alternative musical traditions and shaped by the German industrial scene, were now compelled to adapt their work to formats optimized for the British charts. This clash between their creative intentions and the label’s commercial vision intensified tensions within the group. While Trevor Horn’s perfectionism yielded polished sound, it also served as a tool of standardization in the emerging digital era (Warner, 2003). Songs were reworked to the point of exhaustion, turning the creative process into a constrained exercise devoid of spontaneity. Rather than enabling artistic growth, the system imposed by ZTT Records gradually alienated the musicians, confining them to a production environment in which image and narrative eclipsed musical expression. What began as a carefully orchestrated, media-savvy collaboration ultimately became a golden cage—difficult to escape, and just as difficult to endure.

This shift centers on Paul Morley, the key figure responsible for constructing Propaganda’s mythology. A master of narrative framing, Paul Morley crafted a dense conceptual discourse around the band—one that blended cultural allusions, cryptic slogans, and techniques of depersonalization. His strategy generated a compelling, instantly recognizable aesthetic but also imposed a fixed and reproducible image upon the group. Much like the Campbell’s soup can, which Andy Warhol transformed into a visual icon of mass-produced culture (Grudin, 2010), Propaganda became a marker of *commodified identity*, more consumed for its symbolic power than for the nuances of its sound. Years later, Paul Morley would defend this industrialization of music as a necessary evolution, arguing that mechanized, rationalized production processes—akin to those found in other art forms—were essential to democratizing music in the 1980s (Loydell, 2021). Through mass media like radio and television, a wider audience could now access both the means of musical creation and its large-scale dissemination. Paul Morley’s vision positioned Propaganda as an “industrial artifact,” engineered more for its visual and conceptual provocations than for traditional musical authorship. The band thus operated at the intersection of postmodern media strategies and pop aesthetics, enacting what Jameson (1992) described as the logic of late capitalism: a cultural production deeply embedded in commodification and spectacle.

The friction between image and creation becomes increasingly visible over time, as Propaganda’s artistic identity is reshaped by external imperatives. Poon (2017) highlights how creative processes can be overtaken by visual and commercial expectations, especially in contexts where branding eclipses substance. In Propaganda’s case, the dominance of aesthetic choices imposed by ZTT Records transformed a potentially fluid and innovative collaboration into a tightly controlled communicative apparatus. The result was a growing disconnect between public perception and internal reality. Band members—initially energized by radical ambition—began to experience disillusionment, unable to recognize themselves within the polished image presented to the world. This erosion of creative agency marked a slow unraveling of the project, culminating in the departure of vocalist Claudia Brücken. Her exit functioned as a symbolic rupture, revealing the deeper tensions between artistic expression and industrial control. Although Propaganda’s music carried enormous artistic potential, the cumulative weight of contractual restrictions, intrusive production practices, and rigid marketing strategies led to their dissolution in 1990 after the release of the *1234* album. Their story underscores the paradox of aesthetic perfection: that in tightly choreographed environments, artistic excellence may not ensure cohesion or durability but instead accelerate fragmentation and exit.

4. A Textbook Case of Unintentional Industrial Sabotage

Propaganda’s story is not merely one of halted musical progress; it reveals the complex mechanisms that transform artistic promise into structural failure. Beneath the band’s apparent early success lies an increasingly conflicting dynamic between creativity and control, spontaneity and rigid planning. Propaganda’s trajectory exemplifies a growing imbalance between artists’ aspirations and the managerial vision of the labels that claim to support them. In this sense, it serves as a textbook case of what might be termed unintentional industrial sabotage—not out of open hostility, but due to excessive oversight and an insatiable desire for total control, which ultimately drains the very source of artistic inspiration. This gradual breakdown had profound effects: the departure of a key member, the erosion of artistic cohesion, and the imposition of a commercially incompatible business model. More than just a simple disagreement, it represents a slow process of disintegration, in which innovation was sacrificed on the altar of commercial efficiency and profitability. Propaganda’s failure, far from being accidental, appears to be the result of paradoxical management, where the drive for success ultimately undermines the very conditions needed to achieve it, creating an environment where true creativity was stifled.

4.1 *The End of a Creative Dream*

Propaganda's story is not simply one of halted musical progress; it unveils the intricate mechanisms that transform artistic potential into structural failure. Beneath the band's apparent early success lies an escalating conflict between creativity and control, spontaneity and rigid planning. Propaganda's trajectory exemplifies the growing disjunction between artists' aspirations and the managerial practices of the labels that support them. In this context, it serves as a prime example of what could be termed unintentional industrial sabotage—not the result of overt hostility, but of excessive oversight and an insatiable drive for total control, which ultimately depletes the very wellspring of artistic inspiration. This gradual unraveling had profound and long-lasting consequences: the departure of a key member, the erosion of artistic cohesion, and the imposition of a commercially incompatible business model. More than a simple disagreement, it represents a slow, insidious process of disintegration, where genuine innovation was sacrificed in favor of commercial efficiency and profitability. Propaganda's failure, far from being incidental, seems to stem from paradoxical management practices, in which the relentless pursuit of success ultimately undermines the conditions necessary to achieve it, creating an environment where true creativity is stifled and ultimately extinguished. Such a trajectory echoes Wicke's (2024) analysis of how industrial processes in music production, particularly the control over sound formations, shape and constrain creative output, transforming artistic potential into a commodified product.

In short, Propaganda's downfall lay not in a lack of talent or vision, but in an inability to retain creative freedom in the face of short-term management priorities. Conceived as an innovative artistic collective, Propaganda was gradually dismantled by ZTT Records, which imposed a rigid structure on every aspect of production, from aesthetic choices to release dates. Obsessed with tried-and-tested promotional formulas, the label paid little attention to the band's internal evolution or its need to reinvent itself over time. This inflexible view prevented Propaganda from charting a new course, condemning its productions to remain in the background, without achieving significant impact. The project of fusing the rigor of German electronica with the flamboyance of British pop ultimately collided with the industrial mechanics of a business model that paid scant attention to nuance or artistic individuality. Propaganda's slow demise illustrates the inherent fragility of artistic projects when confronted with rigid, unyielding business models. Commercial demands suffocate creativity, stifling the initial promise rather than nurturing it. Ultimately, this failure highlights the dangers of management that is too focused on short-term results, neglecting the importance of long-term evolution and creative freedom for the lasting success and sustainability of an artistic project.

4.2 *A Substantial Human Cost for Commercial Success*

As a production and distribution entity, the ZTT Records label epitomizes a paradox: it serves as both a catalyst for artistic innovation and, simultaneously, a force of standardization. The partnership between Trevor Horn and Paul Morley, fueled by extraordinary aesthetic and commercial ambitions, established a business model based on total control. While this approach resulted in the creation of powerful, visually compelling works, it revealed its limitations in managing bands with strong artistic identities, such as Propaganda. The initial promise of an audacious creative space ultimately devolved into a rigid straitjacket, where every aspect had to align with a coherent branding strategy, as conceptualized by Aron & Wildman (2023). ZTT Records not only shaped Propaganda's music but also dictated its image, production schedule, and public narrative. The excessive manipulation gradually drained the band of its authenticity, stifling any potential for creative independence. Behind the avant-garde facade, the label replicated the deficiencies of a music industry fixated on efficiency and profit. The illusion of an artistic laboratory ultimately proved to be a production line, where individuality was compromised in favor of the "calibrated" product—one whose musical experts identify the generic use of fundamental elements such as pitch and timbre (Serrà *et al.*, 2012). Propaganda's failure was not self-inflicted; it was dismantled by a finely tuned machine.

This case highlights a broader contradiction within the cultural industries of the 1980s: How can artistic radicalism and economic viability be reconciled without stifling creative momentum? The ZTT Records experience with Propaganda demonstrates that "hyper-management" of a musical project—though intended to ensure quality—can ultimately sterilize it. By controlling every aspect—the sound, visuals, and narrative—the label stripped the artists of their autonomy. This dispossession led to frustration, disengagement, and the eventual implosion of the band. The failure of the ZTT Records model lies not in its intentions, but in the rigidity of its business model. By refusing to recognize the unique temporalities of musical creation, the label transformed a promising band into a short-lived consumer product. Other synth-pop bands, like Frankie Goes to Hollywood, also fell victim to this predatory strategy, resulting in exhaustion (Jones, 2023). However, Propaganda stands as the *archetypal example* of this drift: a project driven by ambition yet undermined by authoritarian methods. As Tranmer (2021) argues, independent British labels of the 1980s followed a similar pattern, adopting standardized

production and distribution practices to survive economically, while striving to maintain an alternative aesthetic. This raises important questions about the role of labels—not as factory managers, but as partners in a creative process that, by nature, is chaotic. More recently, digitalization—accelerated by the pandemic—has further transformed musical practice. The rise of “digital musicianship,” which blends creative autonomy with technical fluency, is now reshaping both music education and industry expectations (Cheng *et al.*, 2025). This shift challenges traditional control models, encouraging more flexible and collaborative dynamics between artists and producers.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The recent use of Propaganda’s music in a TV advertisement for the French car manufacturer Renault creates an unexpected link between past and present, ironically illustrating the ongoing process through which cultural works are reclaimed by market-driven forces. Drawing on the synthesis proposed by Tschmuck (2012), this article explores the complex interactions between artistic innovation and business objectives in the music industry. Through an analysis of Propaganda’s meteoric rise, we demonstrate how external factors—such as commercial expectations and the stringent contractual management imposed by ZTT Records—restricted the creative potential of the band members. As pioneers of electronic music, Propaganda ultimately serves as a prime example of the friction between art and industry—a friction that has only intensified in the context of neoliberalism. In this regard, the article provides a deeper understanding of how misguided managerial decisions can transform a creative endeavor into a distorted commercial product, while emphasizing the need for balanced management that respects and integrates the objectives of both parties. The disintegration of Propaganda, exacerbated by these tensions, highlights the dangers of excessive, authoritarian control over artists’ work and raises important ethical and economic questions about the human costs associated with marketing imperatives that dominate contemporary capitalism.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

On a theoretical level, the emblematic story of Propaganda resonates directly with the seminal work of DiMaggio & Powell (1983) on organizational isomorphism. Their framework illustrates how mimetic, normative, and coercive isomorphisms serve to homogenize managerial practices, even within sectors renowned for their creativity and inventiveness. In the case of ZTT Records, the drive to replicate a standardized success model—largely inspired by the dominant patterns of the Anglo-Saxon music industry—contributes to a coercive isomorphism that stifles the band’s artistic singularity. This predatory practice also underscores the criticisms raised by March & Olsen (1985 [1976]) in the 1970s, asserting that organizations often prioritize conformity to established routines and procedures, neglecting necessary contextual adaptation. By imposing rigid decision-making frameworks on a band immersed in creative effervescence, ZTT Records exposed a form of *bounded rationality*, more concerned with organizational legibility than true performance. The procedural vision ultimately neutralizes emerging dynamics, revealing a kind of strategic blindness. This situation prompts broader questions about the compatibility between the industrial way of thinking and artistic production. It encourages us to reconsider the tools of strategic management within cultural industries, considering uncertainties, non-linear temporalities, and forms of collective intelligence that are often overlooked in traditional business models.

Beyond the specific case of Propaganda, this managerial situation within the music industry raises broader questions about the governance of creatively intensive collectives. Schein & Schein’s (2016 [1985]) framework on organizational culture offers critical insight, emphasizing the foundational role of shared beliefs, tacit values, and founding narratives in fostering cohesion. When these cultural elements are overlooked or misinterpreted, deep-rooted tensions can emerge, disrupting collaboration and trust. In this instance, the band’s distinctive culture—experimental, transgressive, and grounded in a deliberate embrace of ambiguity—clashed with ZTT Records’ more bureaucratic and profit-driven orientation. This cultural dissonance ultimately contributed to the fragmentation of the artistic value chain. Argyris’s (2006 [1991]) work reinforces this diagnosis by showing how organizations often struggle to learn when they fail to challenge their core assumptions, remaining trapped in defensive routines. Hatch’s (2018 [1997]) research on organizational symbolism further underscores how the interplay between artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions shapes meaning within institutions. By neglecting the symbolic architecture, ZTT Records inadvertently weakened the foundation of artistic engagement, accelerating the breakdown of the Propaganda project. Despite substantial resources and creative potential, the absence of cultural alignment and reflexive learning mechanisms significantly undermined the band’s long-term viability. If Propaganda made an unexpected and spectral return with a self-titled album in October 2024 on the

Bureau B label, it nonetheless reemerges as a mere shadow of its former self, markedly distanced from the creative exuberance that defined its 1980s era.

5.2. Managerial Implications

For stakeholders in the music industry, this article offers several important lessons in artist career management. The main conclusion is that creativity must be safeguarded from the excessively rigid constraints often imposed by commercial contracts, and it is the responsibility of labels to strike a delicate balance between financial imperatives and respect for artistic integrity. The management of a band like Propaganda, which was subjected to relentless pressure to conform to commercial standards, demonstrates how unresolved friction between art and commerce can lead to irreversible fractures among key stakeholders. Producers and top managers must therefore account for the creative needs of artists, foster an environment of mutual trust and collaboration, and avoid excessive interference in the creative process, which often results in disengagement or conflict. Moreover, it is in the industry's long-term interest to adopt flexible mechanisms that empower artists to retain meaningful control over their image, musical direction, and narrative voice. This autonomy reduces the risk of internal conflict, improves artistic quality, and enhances loyalty among both artists and audiences. In short, a more artist-centered management approach can help labels build lasting relationships with talent while ensuring sustainable creative output, robust brand identity, and long-term financial performance in a volatile market.

In our view, the lessons drawn from Propaganda's experience are broadly applicable across other cultural industries, such as film, theater, and advertising, where highly creative individuals operate under significant commercial pressure. Like the music industry, these sectors constantly navigate the challenge of maximizing returns on investment while preserving the artistic integrity of their output. Managing artists, creators, or designers in these contexts requires a delicate balance between profitability and creative freedom. Excessive control from decision-makers or investors often stifles innovation, resulting in diluted content and a loss of narrative or aesthetic coherence. Conversely, an overly permissive approach can compromise the project's financial viability. This dilemma is especially salient in cinema, where high production costs and frequent friction between directors and producers highlight the fragile nature of creative autonomy. The Propaganda case is instructive in showing that undermining artistic freedom can ultimately damage long-term financial performance by prematurely dismantling promising projects. This lesson remains vital for all cultural industries aiming to avoid creative stagnation and commercial disappointment—evident, for instance, in the proliferation of uninspired film franchises like *Transformers*, *Fantastic Beasts*, or *The Exorcist: Believer*, which prioritize brand maintenance over storytelling.

5.3 Research Avenues

This article opens several promising avenues for future research on creative management within the music industry. First, it would be valuable to examine various models of collaboration between artists and record labels to better understand how contractual structures influence creative output. A comparative analysis of bands like Propaganda, but operating under different contractual arrangements, could help identify effective managerial practices that balance artistic freedom with commercial viability. Second, investigating the internal dynamics of music bands—particularly the friction between artistic vision and commercial expectations—could yield important insights into conflict management within creative organizations. Third, future research might explore the long-term effects of rigid management frameworks on artists' career trajectories by comparing the paths of bands that, like Propaganda, experienced premature disbandment due to organizational constraints. It would also be relevant to extend this analysis to other cultural industries, such as film, fashion, or video games, to assess whether the difficulties encountered by Propaganda are unique to music or indicative of broader structural challenges in art-commerce relations. Collectively, these research directions could deepen our understanding of the trade-offs between creative autonomy and economic imperatives, while paving the way for more adaptive and supportive managerial approaches that enable artists to flourish in an increasingly commercialized environment. Ultimately, future investigations could draw on organizational theory to further explore how institutional logics and power asymmetries shape the governance of creative work. Such investigations would enrich our understanding of how cultural industries can develop managerial practices that reconcile artistic singularity with organizational cohesion.

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