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Soundscapes of Fear: Resonance as a Weapon and the Sonic Warfare Continuum

Original Study

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Abstract: The main goal of this article is to combine, within the context of sonic warfare, the concepts of soundscape (R. Murray Schafer), narrativity (Algirdas Greimas), and sonic warfare continuum (Steve Goodman), all interpreted through the lens of the resonance theory as postulated by Hartmut Rosa. The thesis is that resonance, as an unstoppable and affective force that can be exerted on (and by) all physical objects, contains a dangerous component that can be identified in so-called "sonic weapons" and "sonic war machines".

By identifying specific soundscapes and analyzing different sonic weapons, it becomes possible to use the sonic warfare continuum to study the resonance they establish with listeners, and one can also conceive different effects and inclinations towards the same "resonating" objects.

To illustrate this theoretical framework, two recordings of Rudyard Kipling's poem *Boots* and their reception in different contexts and soundscapes will be analyzed. This will demonstrate how, within the sonic warfare continuum, different narratives surrounding sonic war machines push the listeners to react to similar stimulations. Therefore, listeners establish resonance through sonic war machines in powerful, tensive, and potentially threatening ways.

Keywords: resonance, sonic weapon, war, soundscape, sonic warfare, narrativity

INTRODUCTION

Scholar and composer Michel Chion has stated that ears do not have lids (2010, 24–25), as it is impossible for human beings to shut off sounds completely. Someone cannot escape from a very loud or very low sound since sound reaches the hearing organs via vibrations and frequencies that cannot be stopped by merely "covering" the ears. An able-bodied human cannot choose to hear in the same capacity he can choose to see. And this is true for many species inhabiting the planet.

Noise has long been the object of study in both scientific and humanistic fields. The classification of a sound and the reaction of bodies to it is of interest to physicists, engineers, sociologists, musicologists, and semiologists.

Sound, as a physical object invisible to the human eye, is better understood in terms of "vibration" or "frequency". In this sense, a connection arises with the concept of "resonance", understood both in sociological terms, following the eponymous theory of Hartmut Rosa, and in physical terms. Resonance becomes a force to which humans (and other bodies) are commonly exposed.

In the context of war or guerrilla soundscapes, resonance emerges as a crucial factor in determining which warlike or pseudo-warlike strategies are implemented to elicit affective reactions in listeners and how sounds propagate among individuals inhabiting the same soundscapes.

Throughout the article, it will be highlighted how soundscapes possess some narrative qualities, while some of their components, the sounds or noises, are to be considered pre-linguistic entities. Once it is established that it constitutes a *sui generis* form of narration, a specific type of soundscape will be analyzed: the war soundscape. Within the war soundscape, the prevalence of sonic weapons/machines will be discussed as they exist within a continuum that classifies them according to the forces they exercise on the listeners: centripetal or centrifugal.

These two opposing poles of the continuum, as will be seen, both have resonance potential. And while weapons endowed with so-called "centrifugal" energy are more easily recognizable, this does not make their opposites (weapons endowed with centripetal force) any less effective. On the contrary, their pronounced resonant qualities are what makes their effects even more "contagious".

Finally, it will be shown how weapons that utilize centripetal force can evoke different affects in listeners, yet they produce the same resonant reactions.

1. SOUNDSCAPE AS A NARRATION

In 1977, R. Murray Schafer wrote *The Tuning of the World*, in which he theorized the concept of the soundscape. The success of this theoretical object is self-evident as testified by the academic literature on acoustic ecology and its use in fields such as urban design and architecture.

Places possess distinctive soundscapes that are not merely the result of a chaotic juxtaposition of clanging noises and sounds, but rather, Schafer argues, a combination of accidental sounds and strategically designed ones (237).

Schafer theorizes that soundscapes are made up of different levels of sound that, if put in semiotic terms, somehow resemble Greimas's generative trajectory of meaning (1966, 1970, 1989) (Figure 1).

On the deeper or most unconscious level, there are what Schafer describes as "keynote sounds", background sounds that often go unnoticed even though constantly heard, these sounds could, unconsciously, influence people's behaviors and actions. At a more conscious level, there are what Schafer calls "sound signals", which can be described as sounds that emerge from the soundscape and demand its inhabitant's attention.

Lastly, Schafer identifies what he calls "soundmarks", which are sounds that characterize a particular place. Such sounds, differently from "sound signals", carry a deeper cultural value. Therefore, in Greimasian terms, they are the manifestations of a specific soundscape.

Figure 1. Correspondence between Schafer's levels of sound and Greimas's generative trajectory of meaning.

Steve Goodman, in his book *Sonic Warfare Sound: Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (2012) directly quotes scholar Jacques Attali, stating that sound (and music) cannot be understood in terms of text. Sound, as Attali notes "[…] cannot be equated with a language […] [because it] never has a stable reference to a code of the linguistic type." (Attali 1985, 25). If it must be construed as a language, then it is one that abandons narrative; it is not myth coded in sounds instead of words, but rather "language without meaning".

As soundscape differs from sound, which is to be intended as a physical and emotional pre-linguistic phenomenon, soundscape could be understood as a "narrification" of sound.

Such parallelism seems to be suggested by Schafer himself when he states that there are "archetypal" sounds which he describes as "those mysterious ancient sounds, often possessing felicitous symbolism, which we have inherited from remote antiquity or prehistory." (Schafer 1994, 9)

Schafer further describes the keynote sounds of a landscape as

> […] those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, birds, insects and animals. Many of these sounds may possess archetypal significance; that is, they may have imprinted themselves so deeply on the people hearing them that life without them would be sensed as a distinct impoverishment. They may even affect the behavior or lifestyle of a society. (Schafer 1994, 10)

These sounds set the tonal "structure" of a place, akin to how Greimas conceptualizes the fundamental structures of meaning.

Therefore, if soundscape cannot be understood as a language *strictu sensu,* it is still theoretically possible to conceptualize it as a form of narration.

All soundscapes exist within the three-partied configuration suggested by Schafer, and this rather descriptive classification could be combined with Greimas's narrative theory.

2. WARFARE SOUNDSCAPES: THE SONIC WARFARE CONTINUUM

Jaques Attali (1985) suggests that noise possesses an inherently revolutionary quality. Such vision, as Steve Goodman (2012) argues, probably comes from a modernist-avant-gardist tradition. Italian futurists celebrated noise as a product of modernity as opposed to traditional, orchestral music and opera. Attali also sees noise as a powerful tool in understanding revolutionary movements; he argues that listening to noise can effectively help understand the future. Noise is a precursor to social transformation rather than "destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, an aggression against the code-structuring messages." (Attali 1985, 27) as it was interpreted before modernism.

Steve Goodman argues that, amid radical in its theorization, the avant-gardist formulations of noise as a weapon in the war of perception do not hold much critical value. The critique is that the noises reproduced and celebrated by the futurists as a revolution against the tradition are, in fact, a reiteration of what is (and was) already commonplace. The soundscape of the early twentieth century, as Louise Varese points out (Goodman 2012), was already radically schizophonic and therefore, the sounds that the futurists had associated with modernity and revolution were already common experiences.

Simon Reynolds (2007, XII) eloquently observes that there are not, in modern society, ears that can be shocked by noise since everyone who has ears and inhabits contemporary soundscapes is already used to these kinds of sounds.

It is also important to note that, while noise holds a relational value—the same sound is *culturally* interpreted, and its meaning can change based on external factors—one thing that is not negotiable is its physical component.

As Schafer has highlighted, sounds and noises are pre-linguistic objects, and they engage with humans on a bodily, senses-based level as well as a cultural one. As Goodman states: "Before the activation of causal or semantic, that is, cognitive listening, the sonic is a phenomenon of contact and displays, through an array of autonomic responses, a whole spectrum of affective powers." (Goodman 2012, 10).

A human body's response to a sound can be both one of pleasure and relaxation or one of displeasure and distress. The sonic weapon has been traditionally identified within the second category: very loud, very high-pitched, or low sounds have been understood as potential sonic weapons since it is known that the ear and the auditory organs can be damaged when put under great vibrational pressure. Nonetheless, as Goodman highlights, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988) propose an alternative conception of the sonic war machine. Unlike traditional views linking noise with violence, they envision "guerrilla sonics". The sonic war machine, as they conceive it, would focus on rhythmic consistency, emphasizing affective mobilization and contagion rather than violence.

Deleuze and Guattari (1988) have observed a conventional artistic alliance between noise and destruction in a transgressive attempt to shock, but they also argue that noise can be seen as a vibrational field of rhythmic potential. In this sense, the "sonic war machine" is analyzed in its rhythmic and archetypal components, and the violence is not necessarily its primary object, in this interpretation, the war machine can be designed to generate mobilization and contagion rather than distress and displeasure.

Lastly, there are similarities between what Jacques Attali calls "noise", a cultural object that possess distinctive tangible qualities, and how Harmut Rosa describes resonance (2019). As physical and cultural phenomena, both noise and resonance exist within a constant negotiation of meanings. Resonance, in the modern, accelerated, late capitalistic society, is a physical and an emotional force and it always implies a relation between two actors. Its name already suggests its connection to sound and vibrations; resonance has a clear goal within modern society, and to resonate is an act of resistance and a response to the system that favors alienation, its opposing force.

Nevertheless, resonance is, especially within its scientific definition, a force that is not inherently positive. Resonance is a characteristic that all bodies possess, as all bodies can be put under vibrational pressure. Within narrative contexts (like soundscapes), resonance becomes the main actor of engagement between two bodies, and as Goodman, Guattari, Deleuze, and Reynolds have highlighted, it can be used and understood as something potentially dangerous or frightful: a "sonic war machine".

Resonance is to be intended as a force that holds undeniable potential, but this potential exists within a continuum called "the sonic warfare continuum", which has sonic authoritarianism at both poles. (Goodman 2012, 12)

At opposite poles of the sonic warfare continuum, two fundamental tendencies could be identified: one is militarized, and the other engages in warfare with an altogether different set of priorities (Figure 2).

This continuum, as Goodman theorizes, opposes the centripetal and attractive force of some sonic war machines (guerrilla sonic) to the centrifugal and repulsive force of others (sonic weapons). Repulsive sonic war machines interest the military and law enforcement systems since designing and implementing non-lethal weapons can be particularly useful in suppressing mass demonstrations and civilian action.

Figure 2. Representation of the sonic warfare continuum as theorized by Steve Goodman.

Attractive sonic war machines can be a form of resistance and can create resonance, but they should not be naively celebrated for these intrinsic "resonant" qualities as the potential for resonance exists in different capacities throughout the continuum.

3. BOOTS-BOOTS-BOOTS: RESONATING SONIC WAR MACHINES

There are, in fact, many examples that show how resonance can be observed at both poles of the continuum through its entire length. To further clarify how a war soundscape can be described using the sonic warfare continuum one could think about how the sonic weapon called "the Scream" (Rawnsley 2011) has been firstly used by the Israeli army to dissipate (centrifugal, repulsive force) civilians in Palestine in 2005, and later again in 2011. "The Scream" has been described

as a less-than-lethal weapon: a vehicle-mounted sonic blaster that shoots repeated pulses of sound at targets, leaving them dizzy and nauseous. At the same time, the Israeli Defense Force has also implemented other sonic war machines that were designed to concentrate population in specific areas. It is the case of the military drones that have been flying over Gaza every day for the last twenty years, which the Gazan population call "Zanana". The sound of the drones constantly hovers over Gazans, preventing them from sleeping and concentrating on their daily tasks, making them hyper-aware of their status and anxious about what could happen (Saif 2014). The Zanana are not sonic weapons (even though they can be used as such, the sonic component is not their main warfare technology), but their distinctive sound, a constant loud buzz, invades the soundscape of Gaza to the point where it becomes a soundmark. The Zanana colonize the soundscape and while doing so, they also erase the pre-existing traditional soundmarks. The drones become therefore a resonant sonic war machine, which possesses a centripetal force: while the Scream dissipates, the Zanana freezes people in place, keeping them from running away. Resonance occurs in both cases as it is impossible for humans not to resonate with other sonic objects that inhabit the same soundscape, but the results are opposite.

While we can see that these two different kinds of sonic war machines (the Zanana and the Scream) lead to opposite poles of the sonic war continuum within the same soundscape, it is also important to note that, within different soundscapes, the same sonic war machine can lead to the same pole of the continuum.

Keeping in mind Deleuze and Guattari's rather philosophical theorization of sound as a vibrational field of rhythmic potential (opposite to a more physical or literal interpretation of the notion), the other half of the sonic warfare continuum can be better understood using an exemplative case study that has periodically re-appeared into the cultural zeitgeist throughout the last century and until today.

In 1903 the poem *Boots* was first published in Rudyard Kipling's *The Five Nations*, a collection of poems about the author's experience as a correspondent during the Second Boer War.

In 1915 actor Taylor Holmes recorded his reading of the poem, which has recently trended on social media. The hundred-year-old recording has gained momentum again since it has been used as the sole soundtrack for the trailer of the upcoming horror movie *28 Years Later*. People online have quickly pointed out that the recording itself, the way Holmes reads the words, and his tone are scarier than the gory images the trailer shows (Starling 2024).

Boots[1]

We're foot—slog—slog—slog—sloggin' over Africa
Foot—foot—foot—foot—sloggin' over Africa —
(Boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up and down again!)
There's no discharge in the war!

Seven—six—eleven—five—nine-an'-twenty mile to-day
Four—eleven—seventeen—thirty-two the day before —
(Boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up and down again!)
There's no discharge in the war!

Don't—don't—don't—don't—look at what's in front of you.
(Boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up an' down again);
Men—men—men—men—men go mad with watchin' em,
An' there's no discharge in the war!

Count—count—count—count—the bullets in the bandoliers.
If—your—eyes—drop—they will get atop o' you!
(Boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up and down again) —
There's no discharge in the war!

Try—try—try—try—to think o' something different
Oh—my—God—keep—me from goin' lunatic!
(Boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up an' down again!)
There's no discharge in the war!

We—can—stick—out—'unger, thirst, an' weariness,
But—not—not—not—not the chronic sight of 'em,
Boot—boots—boots—boots—movin' up an' down again,
An' there's no discharge in the war!

'Taint—so—bad—by—day because o' company,
But night—brings—long—strings—o' forty thousand million
Boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up an' down again.
There's no discharge in the war!

I—'ave—marched—six—weeks in 'Ell an' certify
It—is—not—fire—devils, dark, or anything,
But boots—boots—boots—boots—movin' up an' down again,
An' there's no discharge in the war!

The repetitions and the structure of the poem build a rhythm, this is a poem that is supposed to be read out loud, as Kipling had left instructions on how it was supposed to be read: slower on the first words of every stanza as if to mimic the marching of the troops. The constant repetitions also produce the same result: while reading the poem it is almost natural to fall into a specific rhythm (Hamer 2010). There is a sonic component to this literary work that

1 Full poem retrieved from "The Kipling Society" website

the author successfully conveys through structures and literary devices.

For the goal of this analysis, a lot of the complexities of the poem will be glossed over: the words and the images undeniably play a crucial role in the meaning-making of the poem, but the focus of this article is highlighting its sonic qualities, while a further comprehensive semiotic study of all of its components should be conducted elsewhere.

This poem can, given its peculiar characteristics, be considered as an attractive sonic war machine, not a sonic weapon, as if it is not concerned with violence but rather focuses on rhythmic consistency and affection.

This poem has a long history and different instances of sonic translation, each one connected to a specific soundscape.

To begin with, one should try to imagine the soundscape that Kipling had in mind while writing *Boots*; the poem itself seems to be an attempt at describing it not only in its sonic components (the marching sound of boots) but also in its emotional components: how this soundscape makes the soldiers feel.

The poem emphasizes what the soldiers see: nothing but boots and the bullets they are forced to count. The vision is so limited that one can easily imagine how numbed the senses must be. While vision zeroes on boots and war machinery, the sonic component of the poem emerges. In the last two stanzas, when the day sets and the vision is denied, what is left is the haunting presence of ghost boots, the repetitive sounds they make still rumbling in the soldiers' ears.

These men were unused to the natural soundscape of the land they were crossing by foot, unaccustomed to its keynote sounds and soundmarks; what they experienced was a soundscape that consisted mostly of the sound of their marching feet.

It is also worth noting that, on top of their personal and psychological conditions, the British soldiers were engaging in an imperial war, a war of conquest in a country they did not know, which could partially explain why they might have found it particularly hard to "tune in" with the soundscape that surrounded them in South Africa.

In addition to the soundscape Kipling was referring to, there is also the specific soundscape in which actor Tylor Holmes was when he recorded his reading. It was certainly a very different setting from what Kipling would have recalled while writing the poem, but how the actor reads the poem echoes its sentiments. The eerie voice and the tensive crescendo in Holmes's voice match both the words and the rhythm of the poem. The repetitive clangs of the boots on the ground become the soundmark of the soundscape and the meaning of the words emerges from it.

As Taylor Holmes says in the brief introduction to the recording, those who have not experienced war first-hand have no idea of some of its worst horrors. His intention is therefore acting the poem in a way that will help the audience understand these horrors. In 1915, he reads the poem as an unrelenting descent into madness and a soldier's desperate prayer to keep his sanity intact through war.

This message is conveyed by Holmes through acting, intonation, bodily sounds and breathing, but as the recording has aged its grain has become important in interpreting its meaning. The scratches and the echoes that can be heard throughout the recording give it a more solemn aura, but the effect of the imperfections caused by time and the old technologies used to record the actor's voice also amplify the sense of uneasiness that Holmes wanted to convey.

While listening to the recording today, people get sucked into an atemporal dimension where sound creates an ancestral fear that resonates between the pained voice of the man in the recording and the contemporary people who listen to it.

The recording is scary, but it also possesses a rhythmic quality that engages the listener, the displeasure and the fear are put aside as one gets entranced by the recording. For its resonant qualities, the sound has become a trend on social media platforms like TikTok, where people celebrated it for its scary characteristics while also admitting that they could not stop listening to it. A centripetal, attractive sonic war machine that does not use violence as its main strategy of sonic engagement.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the recording that is trending in 2024 on social media thanks to a movie trailer is not the only existing one.

The poem, in song form, was recorded in 1929 by baritone Peter Dawson. Compared with Holmes's recording, the tempo is faster and there is an orchestral component, but the voice and the tones of the two interpreters are completely different as well. One is reciting, the other is singing, which are two entirely different activities, but this only partially explains the different results.

Both performers use precise diction, but while Holmes sacrifices clarity for emotional depth and builds up his performance towards a tragic finale, Dawson keeps the same intonation throughout the whole recording, and he sings the lyrics with a rather upbeat tempo which does not suggest fear nor desperation.

It could be noted that the last verse, which is repeated in every stanza, assumes two different meanings based on how the rest of the poem is executed.

The verse "There's no discharge in the war" as read by Holmes stanza after stanza, highlights the sad irony of these words. It does not matter how much a soldier tries to save his own sanity, there is no escaping war, it is a devastating, all-encompassing experience.

On the other hand, as Dawson sings, it seems that the same words are charged with a patriotic, brave spirit, "there's no discharge in the war" seems to be suggested to soldiers as a motto to keep their spirits high and their minds focused on their duties.

Ukrainian researcher Natalia Butko has written that:

> […] Kipling appeals to any man's admiration of courage, energy and stoicism. The feelings he glorifies always have universal value […] Soldiers of different

> countries are alike. And that's why we Ukrainians can take this poem close to our hearts because it reminds us of the life of our Ukrainian soldiers. (Butko 2023, 258)

As it appears the poem, thanks to its rhythmical structure, resonates and it could be interpreted as a centripetal, attractive sonic war machine, but what resonates with TikTok users about Holmes's interpretation is different, and almost the opposite, of what resonates with Butko and, as she suggests, with Ukrainian soldiers. Butko's resonance is more similar to that suggested by the tone and soundscape built within Dawson's recording.

Still, both exercise an attractive, centripetal force on the listener and therefore they could be interpreted as sonic war machines that occupy the same pole on the sonic war continuum. The pole where Goodman would put what he calls "guerrilla sounds", those war machines that rely on rhythm and vibrational force rather than violence (Goodman 2012).

Therefore, it can be observed that, within different "narrative" soundscapes, specifically the sensory dense soundscape where the "noise" of social media coexists with other noises or the soundscape of a nation experiencing war, the sonic war machine still operates according to its resonant qualities, stimulating fear as well as bravery.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, stemming from the notions of soundscape and the sonic warfare continuum, the concepts of resonance and sonic war machines have been examined.

While certain sonic objects are explicitly designed as weapons, others acquire these characteristics only when interpreted within the continuum, as they do not appear explicitly "dangerous" and do not use violence as their primary means of propagation. Situated within a war or dreadful soundscape, sonic weapons are all the more effective when they possess resonant qualities.

Both the coexistence of "traditional" sonic weapons and "resonant" sonic war machines within war soundscapes, such as the Gaza Strip, have been considered. After clarifying the existence and potential of sonic war machines—as opposed to more traditional sonic weapons—a specific case study was analyzed: a poem with a strong rhythmic structure.

Boots by Rudyard Kipling was interpreted as a sonic war machine precisely for its ability to resonate with listeners. It was highlighted how it possesses an attractive, centripetal force, as opposed to the centrifugal, repulsive force that characterizes sonic weapons.

Having established the capacity of objects like Kipling's poem to establish resonance, it was also observed how this resonance is connected to different affects depending on the soundscapes in which it is reproduced and the varying rhythms with which it can be interpreted. However, although the affects differ, the resonance established between sound and listener remains the same, raising further questions: once established that a sonic war machine can resonate with its listeners, how should these resonant qualities be interpreted? Should they be approached critically? Is the resonance of sonic war machines a type of resonance born from a world irreversibly immersed in the alienation described by Rosa, or is it a natural reaction between physical objects?

Sound—particularly sound configured in service of war/fear and its propagation among individuals and soundscapes—problematizes the very concept of resonance and opens new avenues for reflection on the relational and resonant potential among physical objects, or bodies, inhabiting the planet.

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