



Transposition

Musique et Sciences Sociales

6 | 2016

Lignes d'écoute, écoute en ligne

J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma and Survival in Wartime Iraq*

Oxford et. al., Oxford University Press, 2015, 344 p.

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/1456>

DOI : 10.4000/transposition.1456

ISSN : 2110-6134

Éditeur

CRAL - Centre de recherche sur les arts et le langage

Référence électronique

Morag Josephine Grant, « J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma and Survival in Wartime Iraq* », *Transposition* [En ligne], 6 | 2016, mis en ligne le 20 mars 2017, consulté le 23 septembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/1456> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.1456>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 23 septembre 2020.



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RÉFÉRENCE

J. Martin Daughtry, *Listening to War: Sound, Music, Trauma and Survival in Wartime Iraq*, Oxford et. al., Oxford University Press, 2015, 344 p.

- 1 This book, described by Daughtry as born of his personal ambivalence regarding the war in Iraq, began as a study into the music on US service members' iPods. As a result of his initial interviews, however, Daughtry expanded it to cover what he defines as the *belliphonic*, "the imagined total of sounds that would not have occurred had the conflict not taken place" (p. 4).
- 2 Daughtry's sources are manifold, with the backbone formed by interviews with both members of the US armed services and a number of Iraqi civilians, many now living elsewhere. Daughtry describes such testimony as "crucial" to his methodology, but "decidedly secondary as a representational strategy" (p. 16): he foregrounds the voices of those interviewed relatively rarely. The decision to treat testimony in this way is never explicitly explained, and occasionally it is not entirely clear who is speaking in the text - his interlocutors through Daughtry, his interlocutors with Daughtry, or Daughtry himself. An important exception is the series of "fragments" inserted between the main sections of the book, each focusing on one interview, set of interviews, or other primary source.
- 3 The main purpose of the book is to use such sources to develop a theory of belliphonic sound. Daughtry begins with a four-fold "selective taxonomy of belliphonic sound": vehicular sounds; communications; civilian sounds; and weapons. The second batch of

categories is slightly more complex, marking four concentric circles radiating out from the epicentre of direct violence. The outermost is the “audible inaudible”, those sounds – even of violence, but of faraway violence – which effectively become background noise; the “narrational zone” is where, for example, a shot is heard and registered but does not pose a threat (the idea of “narration” refers to the scenario auditors construct from the sound); the “tactical zone” is even closer to the point of impact, where auditors are in a position to locate the nature and proximity of a potentially dangerous sound, and establish whether it constitutes a threat; and finally, the “trauma zone”, in which the sound (and not just the exploding object with which it is indexically linked) is close enough to cause physical damage. Tinnitus, hearing loss, and traumatic brain injury related to the force of blasts, are the most common injuries reported from those serving in Iraq; they are caused not only by enemy fire and IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), but by the very technology used by US combatants themselves if they do not use proper ear protection. Daughtry also briefly discusses the “ethical possibilities” available in each of these four zones. He suggests that both the “audible inaudible” and “trauma” zones present an “ethical vacuum” – the latter since the trauma renders the subject temporarily incapable of making such choices, the former because it means being deaf to the sign of another person’s suffering, which, Daughtry points out, can be essential for the subject’s own continued wellbeing. In the other two zones, according to Daughtry, ethical thought is still possible. Having raised this question of ethics here, however, Daughtry’s discussion of this remains vague.

- 4 The next and most definitive group of categories for Daughtry’s theory are explored in the three central chapters of the book. “Auditory regimes” refers to the ways in which what and how we hear is affected by various power structures and normative frameworks. “Sonic campaigns” brings us to the ways in which sound and violence can be intertwined. “Acoustic territories”, finally, focuses on the relationship between sound, listening and space, with the word territory chosen to emphasise not only the importance of the environment, but the fact that this environment may be contested. The introduction to the threefold system of auditory regimes, sonic campaigns, and acoustic territories is framed around a threefold refrain on war’s exceptionality: “Nowhere are the levers of power that shape listening [viz., auditory regimes] more robust than within a wartime military operation” (p. 124); “Nowhere is the public, intersubjective dimension of sound [sonic campaigns] as invasive as it is in wartime” (p. 125); “Nowhere are acoustic territories as dangerous or potentially damaging as they are in wartime” (p. 126). I am not convinced these statements are always borne out by facts. Daughtry’s need to exceptionalise war is understandable, however, and he repeatedly emphasises the real and serious harm to real humans inflicted by the practices he analyses. A more serious question, and one that affects the book as a whole, is encapsulated in the contrast between the spatial describer “nowhere” and the temporal describer “wartime” in these statements. The limits of this study are, to a large extent, the auditory limits of the very sonic events Daughtry discusses. The silence characteristic of our own distance from the warzone is not really addressed. And that is a crucial difference, throwing Daughtry’s idea of the audible inaudible into a new light, since we could easily extend it to the selective deafness of those of us in countries very much implicated in wars which rarely encroach on our daily lives. Or to put it another way: we are always in wartime, but not always in war space.
- 5 This brings me to the subject of Daughtry’s other sources. Communication is central to warfare on many levels, from the operational through to psychological warfare and the

larger question of what information about a war is allowed to seep through to the outside. Daughtry's approach to sources is not always critical in this regard. This is most obvious when we turn to the third of the fragments, which focuses on a video posted to YouTube of a house raid by US service personnel. Daughtry transcribes and discusses the video, contrasting the workaday conversations between the (male) service personnel with the screams of the woman whose private sphere they have breached. The service members' inattention to her screams, Daughtry suggests, is just one example of how the aural contexts of combat can "create an ethical crisis without a single shot being fired" (p. 111). Yet while in a later section he discusses the impact of newer social media representing the Iraq War, he does not address the additional and pressing ethical questions surrounding such sensitive and private material being posted by a serving member of the military. What is really going on here? The question could also be posed of some of Daughtry's other sources, including the many military blogs referenced. These too represent a new stage in the reporting of warfare, in which the intermediate role of the war correspondent is circumvented, and details of the fighting come directly – it seems – from those doing the fighting. But all information from a warzone, especially official information, has a military function. This, however, is not explicitly addressed in Daughtry's discussion.

- 6 I would also take issue with some aspects of Daughtry's conceptualisation of violence and its relationship to culture, and sound. In the introduction, he suggests that culture, both in the anthropological and vernacular senses, "is eroded under the caustic power of violent acts [...] Violence erodes culture horizontally, as the lamentably common experiences of war-torn civilian populations around the world attest. But it also does so vertically, bringing a degree of commonality to the experiences of victims and combatants alike" (p. 19). Implicit in his comment is the idea that violence is outside of culture, something that *acts on* culture rather than arises within it. Both, in fact, are characteristic of the violence of war. And while he is right to stress again and again the harm that the sounds of violence cause, he overgeneralises what he calls a "conceptual overlap" emerging from the fact that all sound, by its physical nature, necessarily disturbs the medium through which it moves. Thus, suggests Daughtry, "both sound and violence can be understood to involve *disturbance events introducing forced change to a system*" (p. 169, his italics). Such comparisons seem to suggest the inevitability of force, a violent default setting for our world, not unlike the social Darwinism which several researchers on war have linked to many of the most calamitous conflicts of the last hundred years. Another interpretation is possible, however, which would start by pointing out that sound creates disturbance only because of its relationship to movement. I am reminded here of one of the most famous sound-related anecdotes in recent cultural history – the story of John Cage in the anechoic chamber, surprised to hear two sounds in this apparently silent room: these were the sounds of his blood circulating, and his nervous system. The internal and involuntary movements of the body, normally drowned out by ambient sound, continue to resonate in the absence of this other sound; in the presence of a hearing being nothing is completely still, nothing completely silent. Life is movement, which is not to say that all movement promotes life: some movements kill.
- 7 The final chapters turn more directly to the question of music, the first through the material history of the iPod in the Iraq War, thus extending the discussion beyond the issue of soldiers' playlists to the many other functions and symbolic purposes this iconic device served in the war. The second musical chapter, the last full chapter in the

book, focuses on Iraqi musical life, discussing both the practical difficulties musicians face as well as musical aspects and impacts on music of increasing sectarian violence and fundamentalism. He also addresses the responses to this adopted by US forces: possessing cassettes with music linked to insurgents has, Daughtry suggests, led to countless arrests.

- 8 Despite my many points of contention, this book represents a major contribution to the debate on all these issues, and will be of real value to anyone wishing to understand the role of sound and music in the American way of war. And while I think Daughtry underestimates the extent to which the importance of sound in physical trauma and PTSD is already recognised by clinicians and therapists, this issue – raised frequently in the book – does desperately need more recognition. If it can help push this agenda, this book's impact could be as significant as its publication is timely.

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Morag J. Grant (b. 1972 in Scotland) studied musicology in Glasgow, London and in Berlin, where she is based. From 2008-2014 she was junior professor of musicology at the University of Göttingen, where she founded and led the research group "Music, Conflict and the State". She has written extensively on music and armed conflict and on music in the context of punishment and torture. Her other research interests include the theory and aesthetics of new and experimental music, the social functions of song and singing, and the historical anthropology of music, particularly of Scotland and Britain. Her first book, *Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics: Compositional Theory in Post-war Europe* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2001; a second book, *Auld Lang Syne: A Song and Its Culture*, is awaiting publication. She is currently writing a third monograph on the social musicology of war (www.mjgrant.eu).