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*'Hopefully, you try to get the enemy to think,
"Oh my God, these guys are freaking insane, look
at the music they are playing".'*

—C.J. Grisham, US soldier in Iraq.

It is one of the most famous and chilling scenes in cinema. A fleet of Hueys, assault helicopters of the 19th Airborne Cavalry, appear over the horizon at sunrise. As they approach the apparently peaceful Vietnamese village, an eerie sound can be heard above their engines and beating rotors: a kind of screaming or wailing, or perhaps even singing. For the commander of the fleet, Lt. Colonel Bill Kilgore, this noise is his signature and accompanies every airborne assault because he believes 'it scares the hell out of the slopes'. For this reason, the Hueys are not just equipped with rockets and guns, but an elaborate sound system linked to a reel-to-reel tape machine that can blare out the beginning of Act III of *Die Walküre* by Richard Wagner, 'The Ride of the Valkyries'. Part of the original screenplay by John Milius, the scene is one of the highlights of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), but it is a curious scene that bears no relation to any actual event in the Vietnam war. Certainly the US military used loud speakers, but as would be expected they broadcast propaganda in Vietnamese, and if they played music they played Vietnamese music. Rather than terror, it is not likely that Wagner would be greeted

by the Vietnamese with anything other than incomprehension. The sinister sound of rotors signalling the helicopters' approach would in itself have terrified a Vietnamese village far more than some weird foreign music almost certainly drowned out by the noise of the engines. The scene is purely cinematic and what it conveys has significance only for a cinema audience.

In these globalized days, however, the US's enemies are much more likely to be familiar with Hollywood movies and their conventions. Indeed, as Jonathan Pieslak recounts in *Sound Targets*, his book on the recreational and operational use of music in the Iraq war (2003-4), it was the knowledge that 'Saddam Hussein liked old American movies' that inspired US soldiers to blast Wagner's 'Ride' on the outside of their trucks as they attacked Baghdad (85); that and the desire to persuade the Iraqis that they were 'freaking insane'. 'The Ride of the Valkyries' features in a number of old American movies, of course, most notably in the original score of DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) at the climactic scene of the third act when a number of white Americans, threatened by a group of liberated slaves, are rescued by the Klu Klux Klan. One assumes, however, that Hussein was a Coppola rather than Griffiths fan (surely *The Godfather* films would have been favourites). *Apocalypse Now* is a movie that is routinely voted one of the most powerful war films of the twentieth century, but it also significant as the inspiration for the use of music as a psychological weapon of war even, as we see, being used as such a weapon itself.

The effective use of music as a psychological tactic was decisively confirmed for the US military by the

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success of Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989 where it was used as both a barrier to President Manuel Noriega's communications with the outside world and a powerful incentive for his removal by the local residents of and around the Vatican consulate. It also had the added benefit of driving Noriega himself nuts. Aware that Noriega was a fan of opera (no point in Wagner then), but hated rock music, the military blasted the Pope's House with AC/DC, Mötley Crüe, Metallica, Led Zeppelin and others, with satisfying results. 'Operation Just Cause became a seminal event in the practice of utilizing music as a distinct psychological practice' (Pieslak, 82). Subsequently, the hard rock/metal genres have, along with rap, been the music of choice for the military, paradoxically perhaps for both recreational as well as operational purposes. Tanks, Strykers, and Humvees, equipped with audio and communication technology that soldiers customize into throbbing sound systems, pound out mainstream rap and metal while on patrol. In interviews with troops, Pieslak shows how music has various functions in the theatre of war: in recruitment videos, in combat training, motivational preparation, as battlefield weapon, post-operational recreation and extreme interrogation tactic. Pieslak works his way through these uses and some of their apparent paradoxes teasing out cultural significance and offering musicological insights, somewhat dubiously attempting to find justification in the so-called 'ideologies of rap and metal'. The book is a worthy although compared to others perhaps too credulous account that did not for me add very much to the powerful essay by Suzanne Cusick, 'Music as Torture, Music as Weapon' (2006), that first drew people's attention to the range and violent extent of the military use of music. Pieslak does, however, embed this use deeply in contemporary American popular

music and culture. The most famous use of rock as a battlefield weapon came in the battle for Fallujah which because of the extensive use of music became known by the troops, after Lollapalooza¹, as LalaFallujah (AC/DC and Guns 'n' Roses featuring prominently). Along with concerts and festivals, Pieslak notes the crucial importance of MTV from the 1980s as a model for Army recruitment advertisements, although as with the TV station the advertisements featured mainstream rock and metal rather than rap,

presumably for similar reasons. With these examples and others we can see American popular culture not just as the vanguard of American Empire but as its shock troops in battle; the Iraqi conflict was very much MTV at war.

Just as music fought with the GIs and the aircrew, it worked also for the CIA and its employees. In the area of interrogation, Suzanne Cusick has already noted that there was a 'torture playlist' of tunes that guards and interrogators liked to use when they sought to disorient detainees or deprive them of sleep. Again, paradoxes arise with the choice of music, paradoxes that arise whether the music is actually pleasurable to the interrogators (along with favoured heavy metal acts like Metallica, there Eminem and Bruce Springsteen featured) or intensely annoying (like Neil Diamond, apparently, or the theme tunes to Sesame Street and Barney). Pieslak is scrupulous and perhaps a little too credulous in insisting that the use of such music did not constitute torture, accepting at face value the interrogator's claim that every aural assault inflicted on the detainee was equally suffered by the interrogator. Wagner-user in battle, music aficionado C.J. Grisham also used some of his collection during interrogation and in a rather gruesomely comic way (though no doubt unintentionally) describes interrogation as a sort of stand-off, a competition in sleepless musical endurance: 'we can't treat them any worse than we treat themselves ... you can't, the purpose – it's sleep deprivation [that's] me staying up just as long as they stayed up' (88-9). In this marathon dual by musical ordeal and red-eyed wakefulness, Grisham starts off with Britney Spears and Metallica, adding later some Mudvayne, ultimately cranking up the pressure with Slipknot. The use of pop, however, was prohibited because it ran the risk of turning the tables, the detainees' toes might start tapping. On his

patrols, Grisham had previously seen Iraqis wearing N'Sync T-Shirts and doing the Moonwalk:

And I'm like 'what's that kid saying?' Then he started doing the little moves, the foot moves and stuff like that, and I'm like 'Holy Cow!' ... I never used any of that because, you put on a Michael Jackson tape, which to me would make me talk, but you put it on for those guys and like, 'Oh Michael Jackson', and it doesn't do anything [to] them. But you put on the hardcore, heavy metal American music from the Deep South or wherever. They don't want to hear that stuff, they think it's Satanic. (Pieslak, 89)

In George Gittoes's documentary *Soundtrack to War* (2006), multiple soldiers make the claim that 'War itself is heavy metal' (53), but perhaps not simply as analogy but also as substitution. As with those US bomber pilots who, Christopher Coker notes, 'flew missions with heavy-metal music pumping through their headsets while graphic-simulated displays helped guide their bombs to their targets' (Coker, 2004: 117), music functions simultaneously as both simulation and barrier to the reality of war. As Jean Baudrillard argued in a different way for the first Gulf War against Iraqi, music meant that for many US combatants the war it seems did not wholly take place. Pieslak reports, 'one woman I spoke to said that since her brother came back from Iraq he listens to death metal constantly even though he was not a dedicated fan before he left' (53). Heavy metal, as the musical illusion of massacre, is also the cultural compensatory repetition of the trauma that for many American combatants may have been essentially missed.

In war, metal seals off Americans from the real world of their own un-making in another world of pleasurable sonic madness and pumpin' aural carnage – a world of their own. Commenting in 1986

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on Louis Wolfson, the schizophrenic translator who years before the appearance of the Walkman used to wander around wearing a stethoscope plugged in his ears attached to a tape recorder, Gilles Deleuze claims him as the device's true inventor: 'a makeshift schizophrenic object lies at the origin of an apparatus that is now spread over the entire universe, and that will in turn schizophrenize entire peoples and generations' (Deleuze, 1998, 13). Or, as a soldier in *Sound Targets* says, 'music was a huge thing for me while in the war, music played a great deal in deployment. I listened to it as much as I could. I really don't know what I would have done without my ipod over there. The military ought to issue an mp3 player to every soldier' (Pieslak, 2009: 3).

Freaking insane schizo war machine, man.

Scott WILSON

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