

THE SOUNDSCAPE OF A TERRORIST ATTACK AS MATERIOLGY FOR LIVE PERFORMANCE AND ITS PERFORMATIVE, SOCIAL AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS.

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Abstract

The paper focuses on specific issues that arise from the use of a soundscape of a terrorist attack in music composition and its *performative*, *social* and *ethical* implications. It examines ways of transforming a disastrous event into an artistic statement which will be communicated in the listening context of a concert space. Among these issues are: how such unfortunate and devastating events can gestate powerful expressions of sonic art? Moreover, in which ways the electroacoustic medium can communicate a catastrophic event with impact on the social psyche - such as the defacement and destruction of sites and human lives - in a meaningful and intelligible way? Do sounds exist independently of any connotations we attach to them? Shall the soundscape of a terrorist attack, as the one in Brussels, be disconnected from the terrorist act and its memory? Which ethical considerations shall guide these decisions? A case study is provided through a short analysis of a piece - entitled "Winter Landscape 1: Brussels" - that uses soundscapes of a terrorist attack in Brussels.

Keywords: *soundscape, live performance, terrorist attack, live electronics, music composition*

1. When violent events strike...

...the global community responds in various ways. The social media and the World Wide Web are quickly flooded with works from artists, illustrators, designers, photographers, typographers and others expressing their support and anguish. Artists tend to respond expressing their solidarity by either creating art or commenting on the events. From Penderecki's "Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima" to Stockhausen's controversial statement on the attacks at the World Trade Centre in New York (Wolfson, 2001), artists ensure that such events will never fall into oblivion. However, in my personal opinion, what mainly interpret the social reaction are the instantaneous and intuitive posts, responses and comments of the general public.

Both a terrorist attack and the instantaneous reactions that follow it on the mass and the social media share some common characteristics: they are instinctive, spontaneous, non-filtered and they do not leave space for argument and antithesis. They can be regarded both as acts of violence (either physical or verbal) and non-acceptance. They are not the production of reflection and dialectics and, therefore, they can be interpreted as trials of destruction and anger. Opposite approaches (including some artistic ones) would argue that an artwork should create smoothing (and even healing) traces of memory and remembrance and carve a space where one can discuss, remember and evaluate.

1.2. Media Systems Dependency Theory.

In today's societies, people depend on the mass and social media for their understanding of an increasingly complex social, financial and political world. According to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's (1976) Media Systems Dependency theory, people's level of dependency is related to the number and importance of the specific information delivery functions served by a medium.

The unexpectedness and unpredictability of a terrorist attack is identified by the lack or/and inadequacy of first hand testimonies. Neither cameras nor microphones are installed prior to the event and the witnesses are too emotionally engaged for objective evaluations.

After such an event the role of the mass media become disproportionately important since they are considered as the only and immediate source of information. As a consequence, they become influential and authoritative and, often, they play the role of an opinion maker.

How this information can be characterised? Two main factors affect and shape the first waves of information that emerge from the scene of a terrorist attack:

1. The public demand for immediate briefing and updates.
2. The foremost concern of the mass media to provide it.

Due to the lack of first hand testimonies and the above-mentioned factors, the mass media can simultaneously act as the transmitter and the moderator of the information. As the information needs increase, the public seeks mediated information, increasing thus, at the same time, its dependency on the media. Consequently, the likelihood for the media to affect the public becomes significant.

In an interview entitled “How do I live in the shadow of terrorism?” (Lyons & Davies, 2015), Phillip Hodson, spokesman for British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists, states: “The media probably contributes to the malaise and anxiety...There is a failure to provide a scale, for example to stress that Isis only has so many soldiers and volunteers, and only has the capability to kill so many people”. Also: “When the imagination takes over, people think they’re about to get their throat cut, when they’re not. If the threat is measureable and strategic and specific, we can handle that.”

Moreover, new variables have already entered this equation: the new media technologies and the social media. In his Ph.D. thesis, Yoonwhan Cho (2009, p. 1) highlights: “... new media technologies have become indispensable. We are living in an ever-changing new media environment in which people and media interact and influence each other in various and profound ways. People are adopting and using the newest applications of new media that are becoming ever so embedded into their daily life which is akin to McLuhan’s (1968) notion of invisible ‘extension’. Unlike any other time, people are now participating in the creation of new media environments, playing multiple roles - users, producers, and transmitters of media content - and changing the very landscape of what is called media. This symbiotic relationship between people and new media technology best characterizes the current status of the new media environment”.

The new media environment treats the information according to the symbiotic rules developed between the public and the media. In this environment, neither the first-order-treatment (first order sources: the event itself, camera, recording) nor the second-order-treatment (second order sources: eye- and/or ear-witnesses) of the information are always important. The availability and usability of new media technologies by the public has established a third-order-treatment of the information according to which, the social media deal mainly with instantaneous and intuitive responses and evaluations rather than objective analyses of the facts and the causes. The first and second order sources are often excluded or replaced by hearsay and speculative glances.

According to Cho (2009, p. 1), the public and the media interact (or communicate). The one is *exposed* to the other through their symbiotic relationship: “...media use, which is commonly considered to be a unidirectional or a ‘one-way’ process by media effects scholars (e.g., Lasswell, 1971; Lippmann, 1991), can also be understood as an interactive mechanism that makes the development of the relationships between people and media technology possible (Ball-Rokeach, 1985)”. Tweets and Facebook uploads are common practices of this interactive

mechanism and fruits of the new media technologies. They can either provide instantaneous guidance and instructions or emotional purification. They feed and shape in loops both the media and the public at the same time.

Whenever this mechanism serves as an intermediate between the information and its delivery to the audience, both the importance and the delivery functions of the information are mutually affected providing a bread-and-butter environment for artistic expression.

2. The soundscape of a terrorist attack...

...is not a typical soundscape that one can use in a composition. Although it possesses all the characteristics of a soundscape, it does not offer a research field that can be approached easily. One cannot contact a field research in order to study, identify and categorise its sonic content. The recording levels cannot be adjusted properly and the time and the conditions of the recording cannot be chosen prior to the event. These are only some of the technicalities concerning the recording of unforeseen circumstances.

Ethical considerations burst out imperatively, even in the case when a microphone is ready to record on-site. The decision between recording, providing assistance to the injured or escaping the scene is not to be taken lightheartedly. Moreover, listening to injured people screaming in the context of a musical performance could be considered inappropriate or unacceptable by parts of the audience. Soundscape audiences are familiar with recordings of animal screaming in the nature but not necessarily with injured people's screamings. Each performance of a soundscape of a terrorist attack spotlights always a fine line between commemorating and exploiting.

The establishment of constant anxiety and fear in the public psyche is a side effect that should also be meticulously considered. Referring to the Paris attacks in 2015, Dr David Purves, a Reading-based psychologist specialising in trauma and post-traumatic stress states: "When something dramatic happens, such as the attacks in Paris, something called the 'availability heuristic' kicks in... Traumatization makes people feel more vulnerable... They start to make decisions based upon fear; making a decision based on fear reinforces that anxiety." (Lyons & Davies, 2015). The likelihood of experiencing again a traumatic incident produces vulnerability; an undesirable event seems more probable than it really is. As a result, a constant feeling of fear might be deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of people. The reminder of a terrorist attack and its emotional implications through repetitive performances which reproduce its soundscapes might feed these sentiments and resurface social discord and scapegoating.

2.1. "Winter Landscape 1: Brussels"...

... is a live performance piece of music that involves a narrator, live electronics and tape. It is a hybrid between live electronics and live acousmatics (pre-processed and pre-mixed sections that can be triggered in a predetermined but loose sequence). Its sonic material derives from the soundscapes of the deadly attacks at Brussels airport and the underground train station in Maelbeek, recorded and uploaded by eyewitnesses in March 22, 2016. The piece creates a neutral space in which excerpts from the live radio broadcasting of the attacks in Brussels and selected posts of the general public and authorities on the social media can be heard. At the same time, the narrator reads the first online announcements uploaded by the international media without uttering their meaning. The sounds in the piece are allowed to exist without emotional or conceptual content, and with no intentions of drawing a definite conclusion or inculcation. The piece acts as a filtered emotion versus the instantaneous, intuitive reactions of

parts of the society which were expressed, immediately after the incidents, via Twitter, Facebook and the media headlines.

The element of the live electronics is provided by a Max patch, which consists of a real time process of the voice with a FFT (Fast Fourier Transform) algorithm (Image 1) that alters randomly its pitch (Image 2). The overall time structure of the piece is controlled by a part of the patch that also initiates the FFT process (Image 3).

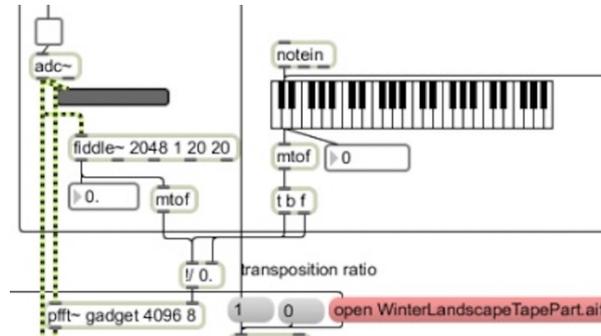


Image 1. Spectral audio processing of the voice using the Fast Fourier Transform (FFT).

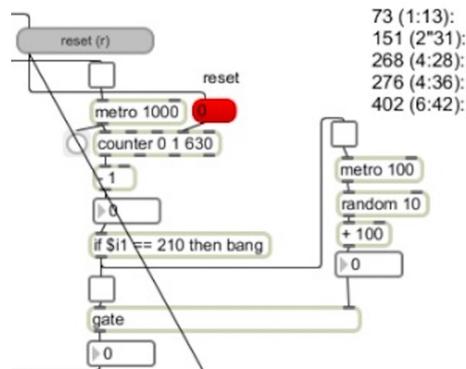


Image 2. Random pitch transpositions of the voice.

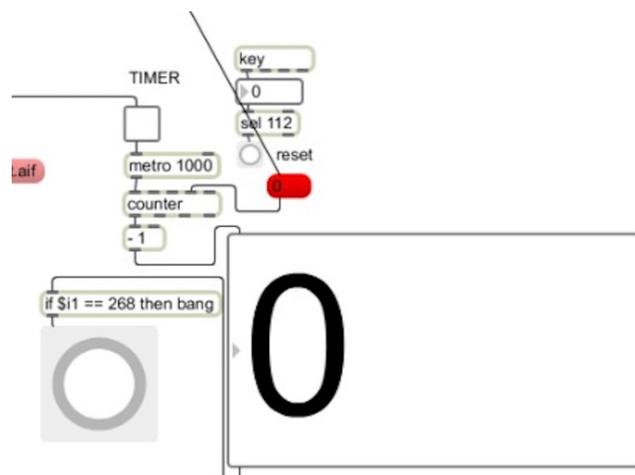


Image 3. Control of the time structure.

2.2. The passage of time...

...after a terrorist attack offers alienation from the actual event. Even the greatest atrocities are smoothed after enough time has passed and acceptance is established. "Winter Landscape 1: Brussels" uses the soundscapes of the blasting in Brussels within this context in order to commemorate the event. It offers a testimony well distanced from the heat of the event; a sonic place for collective evaluation, remembrance and contemplation.

2.3. Is it a typical soundscape composition?

"Winter Landscape 1: Brussels" fulfils grosso modo the 4 basic criteria of a soundscape composition as described by Westerkamp (1999):

1. *The recognisability of the place.* Selected sounds from the blasting can be heard and recognized. However, some of them have been surrogated due to signal processing techniques.
2. *The awareness of the listener in relation to the place.* A bond between the listener and the sites of the events is established through the recognisability of the place and its soundscapes, and the interpretation of the title and the program notes.
3. *The awareness of the composer in relation to the place.* Both the acts of composing and performing the piece contribute to a better understanding of the place and its soundscape.
4. *The promotion of knowledge and understanding.* Any artwork that contains material with social impact or comments on that triggers collective (positive or negative) discussion.

However, although the recordings of the blasting used in the piece reveal an extremely noisy and opaque lo-fi soundscape, the piece itself is composed with transparent, reverberant and whispery sonic environments.

3. Codetta.

All the ethical considerations that arise from the use of the soundscape of a terrorist attack lie beyond any strictly compositional processes. The acousmatic nature of the radio broadcasting and its schizophonic (Schafer, 1974) reproduction re-contextualise both the events of the attacks and their meaning. According to M. Schafer (1974), this perceptual split of sounds results into a de-familiarisation, which consequently, leads to a perceptual alienation. The latter is taking place on both social/political and cultural level. The electroacoustic medium engages the composer to shift the focus away from the media aided representation of the terrorist attacks to the aesthetic sides of artistic creation and communication. The level of surrogacy (Smalley, 1986) bonded with perceptual alienation is an important and critical tool for the preservation of meaning, semantics and memory. During the compositional process, the illocutionary decision of including (or not) the utterance of the radio broadcasting and its semantics, and the voices and screaming of the injured, determine the communicative effect to the audience of the performance. However, this is an ethical decision and not a compositional one. The relation between the mass and social media with the society becomes an affair between the composer and the audience.

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