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# *Cantata of Fire: Son et lumière* in Waco Texas, auscultation for a shadow play

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Strategically placed with the right degree of persistence and ‘sympathetic vibration’, sound can reveal itself as a potentially devastating force. As used against the Branch Davidian religious sect in 1993 at Waco Texas, the FBI’s little remembered ‘sonic assault’ – involving Tibetan monks in prayer, dentist drills, and other bizarre recordings – arguably contributed to the tragic denouement of events as they were witnessed live on TV by millions around the world. The use of sustained, high-pitched, loud or repetitive noises and music added to an already incendiary narrative endgame, established first by the sect but later supported by the media. This essay draws on this tragic event, and later ‘forensic’ research conducted by the author in the process of writing, scoring and producing an audio performance work, *Cantata of Fire*. Specifically, it explores the way in which amplified ‘concrete’ sound and electronic ‘viral’ voices were used as a weapon at Waco – materially, psychologically, theatrically and ‘diegetically’. And in the context of a much longer (and repressed) history of sound as used in ‘theatres of war’ and other conflicts, the author reconsiders the overlooked and underestimated powers of sound, music and noise in an age dominated by digital ‘real-time’ electronic media and ‘tele-visual’ surveillance.

And there appeared to them, tongues dispersed like fire.  
(Martin Luther)  
Behold I will bring evil upon this place,  
the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle.  
(Jeremiah 19:3)  
Stay indoors – There might be some noise. (Troopers,  
Waco, Texas, *TIME Magazine*, 3 May 1993)<sup>1</sup>

On 28 February 1993, agents of the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) raided the headquarters of the Branch Davidian religious sect in a compound on the outskirts of the town of Waco, Texas. The agents intended to confiscate weapons they believed the group had illegally stockpiled there in the belief that the Apocalypse was rapidly drawing near. The raid was a failure; four ATF agents were killed, and several sect members were wounded, including leader David Koresh. A stand-off ensued between members of the sect behind the walls of their compound and the Federal agents surrounding it. This turned rapidly into an ‘international media

event’ as agents, tanks, helicopters and federal law-enforcement personnel assembled at the scene, along with hundreds of journalists and television crews. Over the course of the 51 days of the siege – the longest in US law enforcement history – authorities attempted to resolve the situation via telephone or loud hailer. They also employed other less conventional methods, blasting the compound with loud and exotic musics, sound effects, or harsh lights. At 6 a.m. on 19 April 1993, the decision was finally made to breach the walls of the compound. In circumstances of great confusion, and as millions of TV viewers around the world watched in real-time, the building inhabited for so long by this group of outcasts was consumed by fire. Seventy-six sect members (twenty-five of them children) lost their lives in a blaze the media later described as ‘of biblical proportions’ (Byrnes 1999).

## 1. SOUNDING THE TRUMPETS

But no one was supposed to get hurt. ‘You are responsible for your own actions,’ agents called out. ‘Come out now and you will not be harmed.’ ‘Do not fear what you are about to suffer ... Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.’ (Gibbs 1993: 24)<sup>2</sup>

Late in the course of the siege at Waco Texas, I was to discover a little commented upon fact: the agencies involved in the crisis with the Branch Davidians had made use of recorded sound as a physical and psychological weapon. During the long nights of seemingly featureless and uneventful waiting that were to characterise the siege until its final days, the FBI launched an *arsenal of amplified sounds* – in what they called a ‘sonic assault’<sup>3</sup> – at the Davidians’ compound. Combined with the use of harsh lights, in what could also be termed *son et lumière*, the FBI

<sup>2</sup>Emphasis in *Time*.

<sup>3</sup>Research conducted for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) by Tara Libert (Washington Office). Libert spoke to FBI representatives in Washington (Fax to Producer, Tony MacGregor, 28 April 1993, ABC) who confirmed ‘the sonic assault’. The sonic assault (using sound and light) had limited media and press coverage at the time, but is reported in various government documents (see note 4) and is briefly mentioned in a number of documentaries dealing with the siege.

<sup>1</sup>Cited by Gibbs 1993: 22.

attempted to drive the inhabitants of the besieged community out into the open.<sup>4</sup>

'This is not an assault!' agent Byron Sage cried over the loudspeakers. 'Do not shoot. We are not entering your compound.' (Gibbs 1993: 23)

Some time soon after these events, I decided to write an audio performance piece based on what I had seen (and only partly heard) on television. I became fascinated by the use of this sonic assault (a theatrical and indeed musicalised event) and by the fact that very little reportage had mentioned its use at the time – or for that matter has commented upon it in any depth since the tragedy. As a context for the work that resulted from my increasing interest in this event, I was commissioned as a composer and writer for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's national audio arts radio programme, *The Listening Room* (1988–2003). I was also teaching new approaches to sound performance at the University of Technology in Sydney, such that during the course of my research for the ABC I decided to experiment with this 'media event', using it as the basis for an extended sound performance workshop at the university. Here my class was asked to participate in exploring new ways to approach such highly visible, although in this case less obviously audible, media events – and from a musical, dramatic, sound arts and forensic perspective. The audio arts radiophonic 'forensic theatre' of Gregory Whitehead was an influence for this kind of work, as was Steve Reich's experiments since the 1960s with 'found sound', including his use of documentary sound and voice in a variety of musical and music theatre works for stage, video and gallery. It was at this early stage too that I imagined the emerging piece as a series of movements, with the narrative 'progressing' through the use of sampled voices and performers recorded in the studio to be arranged in cantata form.

In my workshops, I asked students to play with key textual fragments I'd collected from a variety of media sources and to transform these into narrativised scored 'parts'. The class was then divided into three types of 'voice': representing the authorities (FBI, military, and so on), the media (journalists and commentators) and a collective voice from 'the inside' (the women and men inside the Branch Davidian compound). At this stage I had not yet envisaged how I might employ the sounds of sonic assault; I had not yet established how these might form their own dark sound play in the shadow of media, or create a 'signature tune' for this ill-fated bunch of outcasts. As the siege intensified, I contacted ABC representatives in Washington requesting more

information, but only after conducting my workshops and hearing the great potential in this event as a tragic play of voices complete with something akin to a Greek chorus, did I finally write the 'score', aurally imagining *Cantata of Fire*.<sup>5</sup>

Actual voices of participants are used, but the script ... turns into a sort of Greek chorus, echoing a mounting madness. By using sound and music in this way, the true feelings of the people involved in the siege, both inside and outside the walls, reverberates through you ... (Clarke 1993)

This story seemed a particularly compelling one to be told with the radio. In many respects, the Waco 'narrative' unfolded as a series of uniquely audio events, even if the title also alerts us to the visual spectacle of fire and media which was all that remained to see in the end. First and foremost *Cantata of Fire* was a listening (turned towards composition). In this listening, sound dominates, drawing us into the interior of events in the hope of some epiphany. No camera image taken 'from the outside' could take us to this place 'inside' the event, behind the walls, or allow us to hear, as those from the inside might have experienced it, the determining signature tune as played out before the Branch Davidians.

Along with millions of others I watched a good deal of the Waco siege on television, but then I was a spectator. *Cantata of Fire* insists you become a participator. (Clarke 1993)

During the initial writing stage I also became convinced that this largely 'overlooked' and muted *son et lumière* (with all its apocalyptic overtones) had been highly invasive, but in ways that were not so obvious to the casual TV viewer. Invoking the ancient power of sound as a weapon, this sonic assault appeared to carry with it still living resonances from the history of war, and other more submerged and distant echoes from the biblical Jericho:

And it shall come to pass, that when they make a long blast with the rams horn, and when ye hear the sound of

<sup>4</sup>Details in United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform; *House of Representatives Investigation into the Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies toward the Branch Davidians*, Union Calendar No 395, 104th Congress, 2nd Session, 25 July 1996.

<sup>5</sup>A radiophonic music theatre work for 6 voices and 'sonic assault', written by Virginia Madsen and directed by Tony MacGregor. Co-produced by Madsen and MacGregor with technical production by John Jacobs for *The Listening Room* (ABC 1993). The singer Mina Kanaridis performs a Sephardic lament for King David. The chorus of women include Jenny Vuletic, Lucy Bell and Deborah Pollard. 'The Men from the Agency' are played by Richard Moore and Peter Carroll. Carroll also plays 'The Man in the Submarine'. *Cantata of Fire* was commissioned by the Australian national public broadcaster and first broadcast on 30 August 1993. Subsequently it was broadcast in the USA as part of the 'New American Radio' series and in several European countries, with a German-language version produced by Barbara Schäfer for Bayerischer Rundfunk in 1995. It is included in the New American Radio Archive (<http://new-radio.org>) and was performed at various sound art and electronic media festivals, including in the public programme of The Biennale of Sydney (2008) and for ABC Radio National (July 2008).

the trumpet, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city shall fall down flat. (Joshua, 6: 5)

Somewhere on the border between documentary and fiction, theatre and *musique concrète*, my compositional practice produced a 'post-mortem' play, itself a product of the performance process: a kind of critical auscultation or forensic reading of the waves still emanating from the site. In turn, *Cantata of Fire* becomes, here, a launching pad for this much later reflection on what might be heard as a perverse 'art of sound' employed as part of a theatre of war.

## 2. SON ET LUMIÈRE: GOING ALL THE WAY TO THE ABYSS

MALE VOICE (1):

At first they were respectful,  
then the tone switched to disdain.

MALE VOICES (1 & 2):

We mocked him and began  
our sound and light campaign.

(*Cantata of Fire*)

Although I know of no detailed historical studies of this military usage and performance potential of sound, music and noise, sound as weapon has a long history: of engagement, and of performance. Warring armies and campaigns consistently and imaginatively have used to their advantage sounds and voices in their arsenals. We might think of all those drums and trumpets and bagpipes wafting over hill and mountain, fronting armies, heralding their own particular apocalypses. We might also recall the *buzz bombs* and aircraft designed by the Nazis and used during the course of the Second World War to inspire terror, amplifying an almost Godlike power that, in the form of a sonic assault, they too announced.<sup>6</sup> These sonic traces have not yet been erased from living memory, and their screaming could be interpreted as heralds of more terrifying forces to come. The screaming of all kinds of voices and machines should be heard perhaps as one *movement* in the continued amplification and echoing of a whole array of sounds we know from the historical record to have been orchestrated by this machine of war – with the Nazis launching one of the most extravagant and terrifying *son et lumières* the world has yet witnessed.<sup>7</sup> This *son*

<sup>6</sup>The Germans produced two rockets; the first was the V1, commonly called the buzz bomb or flying bomb. They also created the *Stuka* or *Junker 87*, which, as Virilio writes, 'swept down on its target with a piercing screech designed to terrorize and paralyze the enemy. It was completely successful in this aim until the forces on the ground eventually grew used to it' (Virilio 1989: 6).

<sup>7</sup>Finally, when the Führer steps on the monumental altar, a hundred and fifty searchlights suddenly spring alight, raising over the Zepelinwise a cathedral of pillars a thousand feet high to test the sidereal significance of the mystery being celebrated ... In the sign-saturated sky a storm is gathering which will be violent as an

*et lumière* can still be recognised in the recorded iconography of Hitler's voice, which resounds not only with his unmistakable fever-pitched delivery – as mediated and cultivated through loudspeaker and radio technology – but with the clamour of the crowd that invariably accompanied it, acting as its approving and ultimately destructive echo. According to Alice Yaeger Kaplan, Hitler's voice was what she called the fascist 'triumph of Echo', 'not the despairing Echo of Greek myth, the Echo condemned to repeat the sentence endings of the beloved Narcissus. This is a successful Echo, jubilant in sharing Narcissus's voice, strong in following, in imagining itself repeated, rather than repeating.' This is also the echo of the dictator, literally 'the one who speaks' (Kaplan 1986: 8).

The writer Jacques Attali noted too that noise 'in all cultures is associated with the idea of the weapon, blasphemy, plague' (Attali 1985: 27). Historically, sound functions as more than sign or metaphor here. As Deleuze and Guattari have suggested, sound organised and *de-territorialised* as 'music (drums, trumpets) draws people and armies into a race that can go all the way to the abyss (much more so than banners and flags, which are paintings, means of classification and rallying)' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 302). The weapon of 'sonic assault' using all kinds of audio frequencies and pre-recorded sound effects was not new to this event either. Something similar had been deployed in various international crises: during the Vietnam War by American Forces; in 1980s Korea by student protestors; and against General Noriega during the 1989 Panama crisis, part of what the US called its 'Just Cause' Operation. A recent report of sound used as a weapon comes from Israel.<sup>8</sup>

The power belongs to those who possess clock or siren, to the network of sound emitters. Even armies pour forth music in their wake. (Serres 1985: 114)<sup>9</sup>

Thus long before the final pounding of tear gas that ultimately would precipitate the end for the Branch Davidians, an acoustic signature tune coming from a long history of sonic military theatre could be detected, announcing in no uncertain terms what was nigh. Not quite the aural equivalent of a mirage,

(*F'note continued*)

apocalypse, and which will engulf us all!' This account of the Nazi's annual party congress in Nuremberg (Tournier 1983: 262) is based on eyewitness accounts. See Schlör (1998: 282) and Virilio (1989: 55).

<sup>8</sup>A sonic assault weapon, dubbed 'The Scream', was reported at a protest by Palestinian and Jewish sympathisers against Israel's West Bank separation barrier in 2005. The vehicle-mounted device reportedly emitted 'bursts of sound' using 'a special frequency that targets the inner ear' and 'leaves targets reeling with dizziness and nausea ... potentially causing auditory damage with prolonged exposure'. In Associated Press 2005: 14.

<sup>9</sup>[L]e pouvoir appartient à qui possède cloche ou sirène, au réseau des émetteurs de son. Même les armées faisaient défiler la musique devant elles'. Translation from French by the author.

the hallucinatory tones of pre-recorded bugle calls – traditionally a call to arms – could be heard to echo across that Texas plain and the increasingly confused divide between reality and its real-time electronic and virtual substitute.

After reading reports produced after the tragedy, too, one's impression had been unmistakably of an invasion or war. This was regardless of comments from authorities attempting to divert media attention away from their more unconventional strategies.<sup>10</sup> Alan Stone, MD Professor of Psychiatry and Law, Harvard, in presenting his report (1993) to the US Justice and Treasury Department regarding the handling of the siege, described the sound/light assault as the 'third phase of the standoff'. This saw the FBI engage (in his words) in a 'more aggressive approach to negotiation' (Stone 1993: 7–13).<sup>11</sup> Contradicting FBI official language, this approach, he said, was 'all-out psycho-physiological warfare intended to stress and intimidate the Branch Davidians' inducing 'mood disturbances, transient hallucinations and paranoid ideation' in 'predisposed individuals' (Stone 1993: 7–13).

### 3. SIGNAL TO NOISE

[N]oise ... does not exist in itself, but only in relation to the system within which it is inscribed: emitter, transmitter, receiver. (Attali 1985: 26–7)

The replay of specific sounds and musics could perform in this situation then 'strategically' and 'logistically' according to the type, intensity, duration and semiotic deployment of the sounds in the resonant field opened up by the principal and competing narratives: here between the authorities in charge of operations, the media's own storytelling, and sect members and their leader David Koresh's collective interpretation of 'the signs'. (You will hear in Sound example 5 from *Cantata of Fire* how these sounds can also be heard to become fused and confused. Listen to the dentist drills, distinguished most clearly in the early parts of the sound play, which, by its close, recall air raid sirens and also screams. Hear how the sound of the phone off the hook, through high volume and extreme distortion, becomes an alarm. Likewise, babies crying become a whole sea of infants in distress, their collective voices

<sup>10</sup>Agent Byron Sage downplayed the sonic assault, explaining it was to 'keep them on guard, to keep them so they weren't at a fine-honed edge' Tara Libert (ABC). Libert also cited (FBI agent) Jeff Jamar: the music and loud noises were not 'psychological warfare' but mere 'sleep deprivation'.

<sup>11</sup>Such a strategy needs to be understood in the context of the FBI operation at the time, which by this 'third phase' (Stone 1993) was unmistakably military in character. Stone tells us in the same report, for example, that armoured vehicles were deployed in a circle around the compound, slowly 'tightening the noose' – to use the FBI's own terminology.

merging with the sound of the dentists' drills into one extended nightmarish wail of high-pitched terror.)

Even as this bizarre array of sounds (and voices) became players in the unfolding drama being witnessed at Waco – and we will deal specifically with these soon – we should not assume their roles can be clearly defined. Although we might predict certain outcomes, *phenomenologically* and *semiotically* speaking, these sound effects and voice positions remain unstable in their meanings. They slide between signal and noise. In part they do this because sounds – separated from a visible source, and released into the charged air, which could be said to surround Waco at this time – perform (in Pierre Schaeffer's terms) as *acousmatic* events. By *acousmatic*, Schaeffer meant those 'sounds one hears without seeing their originating cause'.<sup>12</sup>

In his book on film sound, French sound designer and writer Michel Chion discussed the use of the *acousmatic* as a 'dramatic technique in itself' (Chion 1994: 72). Sounds, which no longer can be sourced in a corresponding visible event – like the ones heard to penetrate the walls of the Davidians' compound – become overtly dramatic: lacking in clarity through disconnection from their source, they are more open to the power of suggestion. Their reception and interpretation moreover will be directly connected to the state of the system into which they were (here, pathologically) inserted. To some extent they are also liberated from the more bounded meanings imposed on them by the visible presence of a source. Just as with the little, mostly unidentifiable, sounds we hear so acutely in suspense-film (and horror) genres leading us into danger, these sounds of assault likewise could be positioned in such a way as to unsettle their intended audience. They are *vectorised* – to use one of cultural critic Paul Virilio's preferred terms – leading their audiences astray into a dark unknown, off-screen and beyond the limits defined by the frame. These noisy ghostly emissions deployed at Waco by government forces could function then as 'voices' – voices able to attach themselves parasitically to other bodies and organs, summoning, possessing, calling out through the voice of another. In terms of the narrative terrain I am mapping at Waco, these vectorised voices appear to have been highly audible to those already pre-disposed to hearing their messages.

### 4. LISTENING TO THE PROPHETS OF BAAL

MALE VOICE (*as if through loud hailer*):

If you can't see,  
walk toward the loudspeaker.  
(*Cantata of Fire*)

<sup>12</sup>The word is of Greek origin (Pythagoras), although theorised by the principal exponent and founder of the French *musique concrète* movement, Pierre Schaeffer 1967. See Chion (1994: 71).

According to a variety of reliable sources, including eyewitness accounts, the FBI employed a curious selection of sounds and music at either high volume or repetitively over long periods – whilst also blasting the inhabitants of Mt Carmel with light, or alternately switching off their electricity so that the sounds might be received in darkness. While this happened, ‘negotiations’ through loud hailers added to the barrage.

We should not underestimate the physical and psychological effects of the material qualities of the sounds used here. This is crucial to any overall understanding of *effect*. A high-pitched (high-frequency) sound, for example, played over long duration repeatedly and at high volume – in this obvious context of stress – is likely to contribute to the force of its impact and extended effects upon the hearer. Of significance here is the opinion that many of the sounds used were reportedly in the high-frequency range, and these sounds have the ability to cut to the heart through the *denser* overall sonic atmosphere. ‘The screaming sounds of rabbits being slaughtered’ is but one example. Not surprisingly I was unable to find this sound listed in any of the standard effects compilation CDs routinely used by film-makers, and TV and radio producers. This type of sound effect – if indeed it was a ‘faithful’ rendition of an actual audio event – was most plausibly recorded for its associational impacts rather than as the ‘real thing’. It performs no doubt as yet another player in the *trompe l’oreille*<sup>13</sup> affected by high-fidelity audio, merely invoking the sound of rabbits being slaughtered, as one might aurally imagine them. Needless to say, a sound like this, part of an arsenal, would also rely on its *vectorial* (and this is also a tending to the virtual) powers for impact. In other words, *associations* related to this *effect* in its particular milieu might become increasingly significant as they extended into and over time – distress linked to the high-pitched whining whistling sound, similarities between these sounds and a baby’s cry or even any helpless creature’s squeals of pain. (There were many families inside the compound for whom these sounds would be most affective). Listen now to Sound example 2, ‘A Sign from God’.

David Koresh played a role here too, sending out messages on the winds and wires and via radio to anyone who might tune in to his ‘show’. A murmur of cosmic proportions, in *actuality* and in *effect*, enveloped the site of Waco, and this murmur pitched noise against appearance, chaos against order, with all tribes proclaiming to speak in the name of God and with the tongues of prophecy. As a prophetic weapon, sound could be employed in this ‘theatre’ of operations as much more than a representation.

Able to penetrate and vibrate walls, it remoulds and destroys them in extreme circumstances.<sup>14</sup> Sounds, in the form of music or sound effects, are also endowed with complex meanings, functioning as signs. Penetration operates at both levels: at the level of sign and as a material force that literally touches or sets in motion. This penetration occurs directly on the physical plane that includes the neurological, but it also operates from within the perspective of the psychological. It is in this latter context that the penetration of the sonic begins also to operate within the frame or narrative space of the diegetic – that is, with reference to the ‘reality’ fabricated by one’s placement in particular narrative worlds. From a physical and psychological ‘point of listening’, therefore, the many unorthodox sound recordings used against the Branch Davidians could reveal a highly affective power, with the potential to induce disintegration or dangerous ‘sympathetic vibration’. The double-edged motif of *sympathetic* yet destructive vibration also moved to the centre of the sound performance *Cantata of Fire* as we hear voices imitating and echoing one another, becoming fused and confused in the mix between reality and fiction. Listen to Sound example 1, where we hear Mina Kanaridis singing the recurring lament for King David, and hear what becomes a refrain: ‘There are things igniting even as we speak’.

On the symbolic level, and in order to assess the possible impact of specific sounds used in the FBI’s arsenal, this confrontation must be considered within a framework of the construction of a particular narrative world and in terms of competing God-like voices performing on both sides of the divide. Koresh, self-appointed leader and prophet of the group, spoke ‘for’ the others and to those not yet within his power, routinely delivering sermons in house and on the radio. His was a personal yet electronically distributed voice contained within, and yet emanating from, the walls of his church sited at ‘Mount Carmel’. Through TV and radio, Koresh’s words circulated widely as they burned brightly for that short time in which the media chose to fan them. And even as this church was built upon a flat prairie – a misnomer for those beyond its influence – for the Davidians this ‘mountain’ could come to exist powerfully on the symbolic plane, with all its particular psycho-religious overtones. This place, this scene, recalled battles fought by the prophet Elijah against ‘the prophets of Baal’ described in the

<sup>14</sup>For example, take the extraordinary film footage of the collapse of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, USA, on 7 November 1940, destroyed by ‘large amplitude resonance vibration’. The sequence depicts an iron bridge played upon by a howling gale until its rigid structure becomes plastic, the harmonic vibration of the structure turning to wild sine wave undulations until finally the bridge is flung apart by the ‘catastrophic torsional vibrations’. *Teaching Notes* to accompany the film (Sydney: Powerhouse Museum of Technology): cited in MacGregor (2000: 5).

<sup>13</sup>Literally ‘trick of the ear’. A word play derived from *trompe l’oeil*.

Old Testament. From the camera's and outsiders' perspective, Mt Carmel would always be nothing more than flat earth, a buckle at most to distinguish it, a small shadow cast across an otherwise featureless landscape. For the Davidians, however, not only was this place their holy mountain, a refuge from the forces of evil turning America (they believed) back into a profane wilderness, it could also become the future scene of a re-enactment – the spiritual plane brought to earth, a new prophet once more before an old enemy, the forces of Mammon or Baal.<sup>15</sup> Here we might understand a version of *spirit* speaking through Koresh, who prophesied apocalyptic endings as written in the Bible. In Koresh's voice (in the live radio reports as the FBI bullets rip through his stomach, for example), we hear him crying out in pain, a sympathetic echo perhaps of the sacrificial and suffering Christ as he endured the assaults of the Roman guard on Calvary. Listen to Sound example 4 ('Possessed'), where we hear the mediated voice of Koresh.

THE MAN IN THE SUBMARINE:

It is always the same picture  
day in day out, the same pictures.

THE WOMEN:

And the winds blew driving them mad.

They said, 'stay indoors, there might be some noise.'

(*Cantata of Fire*)

Voices became weapons in more ways than one in this play between light and dark, on and off screen, obscurity and high definition. A voice representing the State could be discerned, sounding out above and beyond the other noises. This was a voice sure of its moral superiority and embodied in its agents. Here was a voice given to conjuring and commanding, speaking in recognisable refrains: 'If you can't see; walk towards the loudspeaker. Follow the voice.'<sup>16</sup> This collective, yet also singular, voice carried on the winds and wires over loudspeaker, monitor and telephone, could hail from the wilderness or promised land depending upon your perspective. And in the unfolding narrative at Waco, it hardly requires a major leap of the imagination to hypothesise that for the Branch Davidians these same surrounding and threatening government forces might be discerned as 'forces of evil'. Reports indicate Koresh described government agents at the time as 'the Assyrians' (Smolowe 1993: 29). Within such a narrative foundation

– a context conditioned by a skewed and isolated Biblical interpretation, which included Koresh's reported 'pathology' manifest as a 'control mania'<sup>17</sup> – it is entirely plausible that the FBI be cast as foot-soldiers to a corrupt and heretic government. To this *legend* and casting of performers, another voice could be heard to speak over and between these voices, another God-like actor who can always be called upon to play mediator or *Devil's advocate*. This voice, becoming legion (and enacting its own *son et lumière*), reverberated with the words so often re-cited by media in their coverage of this tragedy and as repeated in Sound example 4 of *Cantata of Fire*: 'We did not introduce fire into this compound. We did not introduce fire.'<sup>18</sup>

But how could forensically oriented performance techniques, using sounds as concrete 'sound objects', assist us to hear this story 'from the inside', to effect a hermeneutic reading from auscultation? What might we hear in the dangerous sympathetic vibrations building in the play between opposing forces, and between voices pitched against one another at Waco?

## 5. PSYCHO-ACOUSTIC REFRAINS AND THE RELEASE OF DEMONS

Much of the text created for *Cantata of Fire* derived from media accounts – on TV, radio and print, incorporating words from survivors, journalists and the FBI. From these I extracted and played with fragments of ever-reiterative media speech. Fragments of radio news also operated as 'found sounds' becoming, through repetition, almost concrete sound objects. The sounds of the FBI's sonic assault, as I aurally re-imagined and re-performed them – presented in 'loops', changing in duration, frequency, and intensity and quality of sound over the course of the piece – were designed to work on the listener in a number of ways. At the same time as functioning musically, psycho-acoustically, semiotically and *concretely*, they served to build dramatic and narrative sequences. Through a process of repetition, principally using the figure of the tape loop (a digitalised sample was used in my case), I attempted to listen more *intensively* to the sounds (or phrases) that I had chosen to represent the FBI's sonic assault. Trying to understand through mind and body how hugely amplified walls of sound such as dentist drills, babies wailing, a telephone off the hook or ringing into this long day's journey into night might have actually

<sup>15</sup>A story not long after resounded in the Oklahoma City bombing.

<sup>16</sup>As is common practice in the era of audio-visual virtual reality via video and digital 'windows', the FBI agent commanding the operation of the siege worked out of a remote command centre. This place, or submerged communication *vehicle*, was popularly referred to as 'the submarine'. Jill Smolowe (1993: 29) wrote: 'A short rumpled lawyer named Danny Coulson watched it all on a TV monitor from the "submarine", the FBI's windowless command centre in Washington ... All Coulson could do was watch, and think about the children'.

<sup>17</sup>Unfortunately, those responsible for ultimate decision-making at Waco did not listen to those who understood the meaning and psychological significance of David Koresh's "mania." Instead they tried to show him who was the "boss". See Stone (1993).

<sup>18</sup>These words, originally used by an FBI agent and included in the radio coverage, could be interpreted as coming from both government forces and from the media who reported and echoed them. Source: ABC Archives, Australia.

been received from the inside, I drew on Pierre Schaeffer's notion of *écoute réduite* (literally a 'reduced listening').

As Schaeffer discovered, when a sound is played and listened to repeatedly, its particular qualities and formal properties may be *revealed* in something like an objective sense. From a phenomenological perspective, the sound becomes an object when more intensely perceived in this way. Through repetition and the severing of the sound phrase from its contextual continuum, a *reduction* in the field of perception is effected. According to Schaeffer, the listener becomes more intensely aware of the objective qualities of the sound; apprehends the sound event in its concrete, now almost architectonic form.<sup>19</sup> These found-sound objects, when repeatedly performed and organised into musical phrases or refrains (for Schaeffer this work was also in a sense constructive) could reveal through the very process of repetition their other only half-submerged *siren*-like voices. Sonic feedback and decay were important in this rendering, too, as they are properties of the electronic repetition process. I recalled Steve Reich's early minimalist tape phase pieces. Experiments in *Its Gonna Rain* and *Come Out* (Reich 1987) encouraged me to play with the repeated sound fragment – revealing a *machinic* ability to *release* other only barely submerged voices.<sup>20</sup> Yet, unlike Reich's unpredictable – and as he has said 'mysterious' – music-sound experiments (cited in Nyman 1999), I was working directly and consciously with narrative material and an outcome that was already known. Listen here to Sound example 3 ('The Prophecy'), which opens *Cantata of Fire*. This is the first time in the piece where we hear the samples of the sonic assault effects, and as they might have been selected by the FBI. At this point they are plainly presented, almost 'raw', without the added *accidentals* that come with repeated listening. In their unadulterated form, they may remind us of a prior 'innocent' or uncorrupted state before their more intense deployment.

<sup>19</sup>This practice essentially formed the basis of Schaeffer's conception of a *musique concrète*, invented as a term in 1948 and developed as a practice in the 1940s and 1950s. The idea of the 'reduction' was taken from the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl.

<sup>20</sup>Both pieces use the going-out of phase of two, and then multiple identical tape loops of voices recorded as 'found sounds' off the street. In *Its Gonna Rain*, a young black Pentecostal street preacher repeats the title words – a fragment of a sermon: 'the effect is a kind of controlled chaos, which may be appropriate to the subject matter – the end of the world' (CD Notes in Reich 1987). In *Come Out*, Daniel Hamm, wrongfully arrested for murder during the Harlem riots of 1964 and desperately trying to attract attention to the violence inflicted on him by police, utters 'I had to like open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them' (Reich 1987). Reich: 'First the loop is in unison with itself. As it begins to go out of phase a slowly increasing reverberation is heard. This gradually passes into a canon or round for two voices, then four voices and finally eight' (Reich 1987): the 'accidental' sounds are then revealed via Reich's *machinic* repetition process.

This is perhaps the last time we hear them as mere sound effects.

But is it not the truth of the voice to be hallucinated? (Barthes 1985: 272)

There is perhaps also something of William Burroughs' conception of the parasitic 'viral' voice in the authorities' recordings and verbal hailings via loudspeaker and telephone. I certainly reference this in my usage of the word 'possessed'. For Burroughs a concrete 'demon word' – literally and materially proliferating, invading and controlling bodies of all kinds via media – could constitute a very direct, although concealed, form of warfare.<sup>21</sup> In his oral story-telling, Burroughs spoke of such sonic weaponry, imagining a new weapon of 'sympathetic vibration' in *The Job* – which 'magnified sound frequencies' to shift 'the battlefield to the internal arena of the body itself' (Lydenberg 1992: 416, 417).<sup>22</sup>

Is it possible that something like Burroughs' viral demon-like voices and parasitic words were in operation in this sonic assault? Although we may not have been dealing with weapons inspired by paranoid *cut-up* artists, traces of a perverse sonic inscription are to be detected here and resounded in the system that appeared to mask them. By way of an explanation, Tibetan monks recorded in rounds of prayer were played repeatedly at the Davidians during the siege. A *Washington Post* staff writer was quoted in the *Tibetan Network News*:

Tibetan chants rose across scrubby central Texas farmland early today as federal officials intensified their psychological assault on an armed religious sect by broadcasting through loudspeakers the meditative prayers of monks who follow the Dalai Lama. The droning mantra continued until 3 a.m. on a night when FBI negotiators also beamed intense spotlights into the windows of the Branch Davidian compound near here. (Schneider 1993)

While the sounds of some effects – babies crying, rabbits dying – appear to have an obvious material

<sup>21</sup>William Burroughs' and Brion Gysin's cut-up techniques and experiments with tape loops became a method to disturb and dislocate those invading messages, 'the word as a weapon of illusion and control' (Lydenberg 1992: 410) as they sought out bodies and resonant spaces in the body – the head being only one of these spaces. In Burroughs, according to Lydenberg, tape recorder cut-ups are a method of resistance; they 'vibrate word and sound out of the body' (Lydenberg 1992: 417). This is akin to a kind of exorcism of those possessing voices, internal and external, which manipulate the social body as well as the individual one. (See Lydenberg 1992: 409–37.)

<sup>22</sup>In *Wireless Imagination*, Lydenberg (1992: 416) references *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs* (Burroughs 1970). In Lydenberg's description, Burroughs' sound weapon could work 'directly on the internal organs. There is a rubbing between the various organs because of a sort of resonance. It provokes an irritation so intense that for hours afterwards any low-pitched sound seems to echo through one's body.' Reportedly developed by the US military, a weapon like this, 'that will make internal organs resonate', would have effects ranging 'from discomfort to damage or death' (Pasternak 1997: 4).

and psychological profile, the effect and use of these other sounds in the FBI's repertoire appeared to be more enigmatic. What can we make of the apparently wholesome American pop group of the 1970s, The Carpenters, who also were on the FBI's 'playlist'? Fronted by what many will remember as the angelic voice of Karen Carpenter, the group was innocuous enough and still heard with regularity on golden hits radio formats and shopping-mall PA systems.

What might these choices signify? Knowing the narrative terrain in which the Waco drama found itself, a more hermeneutic reading might be productive. Calling my attention as if from afar, Karen Carpenter's characteristic angelic tones spoke to me as a symbol of purity and innocence. One might well imagine the FBI offering Karen Carpenter's voice as gift, as invitation to leave the darkness and come to the light. *Follow this voice*, they might have summoned; *if you don't trust us, put your faith in her...* But her voice – a highly controlled, almost cool voice – might just as well have functioned as something other, something darker. For those inside their bunker, the Devil himself might be expected to speak in such seductively simple and dissembling tones.

Roland Barthes has suggested that there is a direct relationship between a voice and a body – specifically, the grain of the voice and the weight of the body that is its resonator. Taking into account the fact that it was no longer any secret at the time that Karen Carpenter had effectively starved herself to death (she suffered from anorexia), what repressed noise might have been heard here in this redeployment of a voice revealing (through its 'grain')<sup>23</sup> a body already on the way to disappearance? Could the marks of death found in the *punctum*<sup>24</sup> of Barthes' photographs also be discovered here – in this voice with wings, as light as air, of Karen Carpenter?

Musical loop, 'Close to You', by The Carpenters, (*Audibly decaying over time, as if through tinny loud-speaker or telephone. Full volume. Feedback and accidental noises audibly 'infecting' the 'purity' of the recording.*)  
(*Cantata of Fire*)<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the FBI's usage was accidental – and this *audio-graph* emerging out of the FBI's own obscuring

<sup>23</sup>The "grain" is the body in the singing voice, in the writing hand, in the performing limb' (Barthes 1985: 276). 'The "grain" of the voice is not – or not only – its timbre; the *signifying* it affords cannot be better defined than by the *friction* between music and something else, which is the language (and not the message at all)' (Barthes 1985: 273).

<sup>24</sup>[F]or punctum is also; sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice ... that accident which pricks me, but also bruises me ...' (Barthes 2000: 27). For Barthes' reference to death in the *punctum*, see Barthes 2000: 31–3.

<sup>25</sup>The voice of Karen Carpenter was never actually included in the sound play; its presence, where I wished it evoked, only persists as a residue of memory and in the realm of aural hallucination.

camera could claim to be an innocent, albeit misguided, usage. But what can innocence mean here – in this specific narrative context, in the cultural and listening context of this time and place in America? In the 'promised land' or the 'land of broken dreams', this voice – at once so fragile and yet so highly polished – might have had the power to cut through the walls of darkness and, depending on which side of the wall you stood on, be received as an embodiment of safe passage (a guardian angel) or the perverse and monstrous messenger who well reveals America's hollowed-out voice as it is perceived to be 'possessed' by demons. 'Isn't belonging to this voice of no one, the same as being possessed', the female chorus cries out in my sound-play (Sound example 4; 'Possessed'), 'like the prophets and saints always were?' In this context of tumult, Carpenter's voice might well be heard as a 'pre-echo' of disappearance: her disembodied heraldic message an invitation to shipwreck. The Carpenters at Mount Carmel inserted into the *son et lumière* during those long nights of parasitic and dissembling sound-play might have been *misinterpreted* in the dark spaces of aural hallucination (from the *inside*), and with some degree of perversity. Emerging then from this Pandora's box, Karen Carpenter's voice now resonates with a bitter bathos, her angelic tones taken as subterfuge falling from grace in the visible darkness.

## 6. SYMPATHETIC RESONANCES: SOUNDING THE JERICHO EFFECT

In my response to this now symbolically marked terrain, figured and eventually torn apart by the effects of *sympathetic resonance*, the FBI's more exotic offerings – the monks, for example – could penetrate those inside as heretical voices, the sacred chanting one more indicator of the presence of dissembling demons who advocate with forked tongues. For those keeping another flame burning for *their* God behind the walls of their sanctum sanctorum, these holy rounds might have provided more proof of America's 'possession'.<sup>26</sup> We might imagine hearing in them a kind of bass or foundation track into which the other more profane voices were inserted. But none of these sounds played out in a theatre of war operates in isolation, as we have seen, or on only one plane.<sup>27</sup> So it is possible to imagine the repressed

<sup>26</sup>Howard Schneider (1993) also quotes a psychology professor at Georgetown University (Rev. Daniel C. O'Connell), who said that Koresh could just as easily have used the standoff to 'reinforce with followers that they are being persecuted by officers of a decadent society'.

<sup>27</sup>Another history and pathology is to be invoked here: the history (and stigmata) of the technologically disembodied voice, its glosolalia, heavenly and diabolical, and its traffic with various kinds of spiritualism and mysticism. This is a history that has accompanied the development of sound recording, playback and wireless transmission from its most early days – and not simply in the distant



noise in Karen Carpenter's apparent purity of voice intermixing and *sympathetically vibrating* (to ill effect) with these other apparently *extra-diegetic* offerings from the FBI. In his *Sympathetic Vibrations: Effecting sound histories*, Tony MacGregor discusses the story of Joshua and his crowd bringing down the walls of Jericho with trumpets and shouts. He imagines the walls of Jericho to be undone by equally sympathetic vibrations:

The frequencies of the energy emitted by Joshua's horde (from the regular impact of marching feet on hardened earth, the sustained vibration of the horns, the culminating explosion of the unison shout) resonate with the molecular structure of stone and mortar. This is of course not an impossible scenario. (MacGregor 2000: 5)

While invoking the Biblical story of Jericho, this cantata of voices 'released' through intensive audition or auscultation aimed to also explore the essentially interpenetrating zone between the interior and the exterior brought into inflammatory contact through a kind of *friction* or 'energetics of information'.<sup>28</sup> Sound and light – two interconnected but, in this *mise-en-scène*, incompatible speeds – were able to operate on the fault lines between what we might refer to as the realms of media-induced *virtuality* and an *actuality* turned on its head. In this scenario, my score suggests that the friction produced by these two *affektive forces* coming into contact was able to spark off a chain of events that at first glance appeared to have been the fault of no one. Waco 1993 might usefully be understood as an instance of Paul Virilio's *energetics* of information. This is the energy carried and released in the speed of light transmission of images and sounds with potentially catastrophic effects. Following Virilio's argument, these events can be understood to have been ignited by (and made a logical consequence of) the media and FBI's real-time *fusion* and *confusion* of matter and energy, reality and fiction. In many respects, this play was called up from that other obscured side of the media's apparent illumination. It marked the site of an *intensive* listening, aiming to take heed not only of a repressed soundtrack, but *sound* as it now interacts with the realm of the visible – and as it is 'muted' or even 'blocked' by the media's own obscuring camera. Perhaps more importantly, we are dealing not only with

(*F*'note continued)

past, but in rock and popular songs from the Beatles' *No. 9* onwards. It is in the light of these histories that I attempt to interpret these unearthly and, for some, alien voices of devotion hugely amplified into walls of sound.

<sup>28</sup>Virilio has spoken of an 'energetics of information' in a number of his books. For example, in Virilio (1993: 177–8) he describes: 'énergie en image et en son, énergie du tact et du contact à distance. Cette fusion/confusion télématique de l'énergie et de l'information live ...' and in *Lost Dimension* (1991: 95) he proposes: 'If informatics – with its networks, memory banks and terminals – is actually a kind of energetics, an energy form ...'.

the dominance of the visual via electronic vectors – which appear to offer us a transparent passage to the real through continuous 'high resolution' – but with the realm of desire made visible, indeed palpable. I will try to explain.

## 7. IMAGE BLOCK: 'A PUBLIC OPINION-GENERATED EFFORT'<sup>29</sup>

Virilio suggests that the sphere of the virtual is increasingly impinging on the sphere of the actual. In the age of electronic media *vision*, virtual and real no longer stand in opposition to one another, rather they exist in a new relation.<sup>30</sup> Virilio argues we are increasingly being governed by a 'paradoxical logic' that 'emerges when the real-time image dominates the thing represented, real-time subsequently prevailing over real space, virtuality dominating actuality and turning the very concept of reality on its head' (Virilio 1994: 63). The virtual (from the Latin *virtus*, indicating potential) now *tends*, in Virilio's terminology, towards the actual. The realm of the virtual thus can have actual effects, with the potential to alter the state of play in the real world.

Virilio names this new milieu the *dromosphere*. This is the sphere of speed in which a new kind of theatre of operations insinuates itself upon and begins to *inhabit* the real. This sphere is characterised not so much by high-speed vehicular movement – planes, trains and automobiles – but by the real-time instant speed of dispatch and delivery of images and sounds. Now transmitted at the speed of light via satellite and other digital technologies, sounds and images can *substitute* themselves for reality. As Virilio has suggested, we have become engaged in '[a] war of images and sounds rather than objects and things' (Virilio 1994: 70).

But how does this substitution impact upon us? With the development of technologies that enable real-time transmission and reception of sound and images, there is no longer any delay between dispatch and delivery, the 'son-image' (sound-image) performs as if it were the actual event, in a certain sense (through its speed) *grafting* itself onto perceivable reality. Pressing up against history – and in effect, *piercing* the real with its gaze – those on the receiving end of the 'transmission' (the audience) are able to contribute a powerful and statistically devastating *voice* to the outcome of such events, rendered 'telesized' (as Virilio would have it) and happening in real time. How should we measure, then, this potent

<sup>29</sup>Reported by Riley, Woodbury, Johnson and Shannon (1993: 40) citing Jack Zimmerman, lawyer representing two Branch Davidian survivors.

<sup>30</sup>It could be argued that sound already operates in this fused/confused sphere as a virtual and actual phenomenon, a material and immaterial force.

off-screen voice? In sub-sonic vibrations? Or could we imagine a kind of pre-echo feedback rather than any direct sound? Although hidden from view, this ‘voice’ is of a crowd-in-absentia,<sup>31</sup> and its parasitic murmurings ‘broken down into millions of small rooms’ (writes author Don De Lillo in Begley and Lillo 1993), appeared to my thinking as deeply enmeshed in the apocalyptic outcome as the other player/voices ‘performing’ at Waco. Using Virilio’s critique of real-time media energetics this crowd’s voice could come to contribute its force inadvertently to what was already an incendiary mix. Jack Zimmerman, a lawyer representing two Branch Davidian survivors concurs with this fusion/confusion trope for me when he described Waco as ‘a public opinion-generated effort’.<sup>32</sup>

## 8. ONE MORE RETURN OF THE LOOP

We have harvested it is true...

But why did all our fruits turn rotten and brown?

What fell from the wicked moon last night?

We have all become dry; and if fire fell upon us  
we should scatter like ashes – yes, we have made weary  
fire itself.

(*Cantata of Fire*)<sup>33</sup>

Listen now to the final movement (Sound example 5: ‘The Mystery’), which brings us full circle, returning us to the opening prophecy. Note how the singer in the finale no longer sings the sephardic lament; rather, words and phrases from the sound play are sung in fragments, although with the same melody as before. The ‘image’ I wished for here was one where the words without narrative are all that remain; their story is now exhausted, and they rise like ashes swirling, eddying in updrafts of wind, the last remnants of a mystery that implicated all players. For fifty-one days the eyes of millions of spectators were upon Waco. This was a site subject to negative *development* before the media’s ‘absent’ eye. For fifty-one days, the international news media waited. For the TV cameras – hungry for lights, action, exposure – there was little to develop, little to be *seen* on the outside except the boarded-up white building on a treeless Texas plain. Images appeared to be over-exposed – saturated with light and with the desire for spectacle (the light of continuous live coverage). This desire implicated the audience as player, not simply as passive spectator. Exposure could lead to overexposure. Images, sounds and stories could repeat themselves, creating feedback loops, and dangerous

sympathetic vibrations. As the days dragged on, tensions built, not only were the officers growing weary, so too were audiences and media. In their paranoia, the Branch Davidians were not to know how time could catch up with them – that ‘the End’, their Apocalypse, could come at such speed, and so soon. They had dug in for the long duration, as if duration still counted.

WOMEN:

And the winds blew, driving them mad

THE MAN IN THE SUBMARINE, WOMEN:

I don’t recognize you. I don’t recognize this.

**Fire pours from your mouth**

(*Cantata of Fire*)

In this obscuring camera, we as audiences saw only more light and more fire, a fascinating spectacle in which the abject reflection of ourselves in the ashes was all that remained. This was an old shadow play of fallen angels and mistaken messengers. This was ‘closed circuit television’ excised of its multitude of (unheeded) vibrations. Here a theatre of phantom voices, concealing a war fought with images and sounds, was taken to its logical conclusion.

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<sup>31</sup>From the town, as theatre of human activity with its church-square and marketplace bustling with so many *present* actors and spectators, to CINECITTA and then TELECITTA, bustling with absent tele-viewers’ (Virilio 1994: 65).

<sup>32</sup>Reported by Riley et al. 1993: 40, and included in the score.

<sup>33</sup>This is a quotation taken from Friedrich Nietzsche (1988: 155–6), which appears in The Prophecy (Sound example 3).

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