

Critical Reflection Essay
Sonic Warfare and the Politics of Sensation
MAIS 601: Making Sense of Theory in the Humanities and Social Sciences
December 6 2021

Summary

This class marked my return to a higher learning, academic classroom in nearly 20 years. I remember the feelings of inadequacy, of disconnect and of isolation. I had to offset these feelings by choosing a topic that I felt confident with. I chose a topic that explored the thinking body and connected it with the sensing body - a topic that I have been fascinated with throughout my academic career. This mind/body connection is a topic that I continued to explore throughout my MAIS journey.

I am including this piece as my first artifact because it perfectly showcases my academic interests as well as my artistic interests. It showcases my strengths as a student, and it showcases some of my strengths as an educator - I love fun, absurdity and a connection to popular culture and current events in order to make the material relevant to my students.

In this paper explored topics that I was very familiar with including electronic music, sounds and a sensory experience - both as assault and pleasure. I loved reading and connecting to female theorists who worked in the electronic music genre. My undergraduate degree was in fine arts so I was attuned to discussing complex abstract topics. I did very little in music theory, focusing more on performance, this

was a great way to branch into something that challenges me and something I strongly connected with.

This mini essay was with which I led the forum discussions. I wanted to include questions which engaged my classmates, but also made them experience the text with the same joy that I felt. I needed to find a fun entry point for those that did not share my love or knowledge of electronic music. I came up with a bonus question that explored a teen girl's experience at Coachella. Absurdity and humor can be fun ways to break the ice. I needed to do this to combat the anxiety that I felt in this class. If I felt it, perhaps there were others that felt it too. I began to notice how my reflections as a student are consciously influencing my actions as an educator.

Prior to fully committing to my choice in masters, I had played around with the idea of doing a Masters in Fine Arts or Early Childhood Education. I could not make a better case for either, and my inability to decide kept me out of the classroom for as long as it did. Right before classes began, I almost joined the Canadian Music Incubator with the hopes of learning more about the Canadian Electronic Music business. I chose this topic, because I wanted to see if I could challenge myself to discuss electronic music in a masters level classroom. Later in this course I discussed the work of Deluze and Guatari as an exploration of electronic music. I had wanted to connect to their work for a long time, and finally being able to complete this challenge was a major milestone for me to achieve.

I appreciate my professor suggesting this topic for me to lead. I had accidentally chosen a topic on anthropology - thinking that my background in museums would help me. It did not. I spent a great deal of time reading and re-reading a 30 page paper, understanding very little of it. To overcome this, I watched the author's lectures and listened to podcasts where he spoke. I did countless hours of additional research, but in the end I could not connect to the material. Changing topics, and choosing this one instead was like magic. Here I realized how important it is to have a personal connection to the material, both as a student and as an educator. I am forever grateful to my professor for allowing me the opportunity to change topics. In the end I realized that there is always a solution and discussing your problems with your professor is incredibly important.

Sonic Warfare and the Politics of Sensation

In chapter 4 of *Sonic Warfare: Sound Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Steve Goodman explores soundsystems- systems of bodies, technologies and acoustic vibrations in rhythmic symphony- that exist both between the world of dance and pleasure and the world of war and destruction: essentially the exploration of noise and its effects of the human body. He refers to these systems as Sonic Warfare (Goodman, 2019).

The notion of sonic warfare began with the advent of experimental music which glorified the sounds of war and the *noisiness* of industrial machinery. This evolution in music attacks the nervous system, rewires the body with sonic sensations. As with many of our theoretical readings, the author pauses at the start of the article to remind us that “it is always useful to ask what something can do -its potential, rather than what it is -its essence” (Goodman, 2019).

What sonic warfare *is*, began with the futurist theories of the 1910s, which described an intersection between art and pain, and their belief that one cannot exist without the other. The new genre of sounds was a natural progression from the symphonies of the time which were beginning to feel too limiting both in the sounds that they produced and the class of people that enjoyed them, including the settings in which they were presented.

Futurism wanted a new world order, one that understood art as being created from pain. In the 20th century noise is about “invention, aestheticising mistakes, deploying randomness and asserting the percussive and the textual over melodic and harmonic”(Goodman, 2019). The acoustic warfare is a cultural weapon attacking music, musical code, networks, and aesthetics, and ultimately our collective bodies.

What sonic warfare can *do* is conceptually “rewire the microsound of politics and the micropolitics of sound” (Goodman, 2019). Noise lies outside music and threatens music from within. Noise has always been experienced as destruction, disorder and has been associated with the idea of the weapon, blasphemy, plague and other agents of destruction. This exploration is about sound as a force. Sound has seductive powers, it can entice, caress the skin, immerse, sooth, beckon, heal and modulate brain waves and message the release of certain hormones within the body. At high intensities it can also damage the ears, distress the nervous system. Sonic weaponry is centered on intensity and acoustic power.

Noise, like anything else that touches you can be a source of pain *and* pleasure. The force of the sonic war machine does not take violence or noise as its primary object, but rather would concentrate its forces on

affective mobilization and contagion. Imagining sonic warfare as a continuum with two opposing poles of sonic force:

- 1) A militarized force with repulsive powers producing a movement that spirals out from the source. It's strategic aim is crowd dispersal, the dissipation of collective energy. The dissolution of clusters. Bodies moving individually, instead of as a cluster.
- 2) Naturally there is an oppositional force which is attactional, producing a movement that spirals in toward a source. Its objective is that of intensification, to the heightening of collective sensation, an attractive, almost magnetic or vortical force, sucking bodies towards its source. This collective attraction has power.

In sonic cultural situations there is a combination of both. There is an intersection where fear and dread meet. This relationship is not simply about good or bad, loud or quiet, soft or harsh, rather their "ambivalence indicates some of the emergent features central to the strategies and tactics of control within contemporary capitalism."(Goodman, 2019) - we are drawn to it knowing it is dangerous, we have a gut feeling telling us to leave.

1) I had a lot of fun reading about sonic warfare and I have reflected on some of the dualistic topics that we have explored in class such as can equality exist without exploitation? Can happiness exist without pain? I was astonished to find myself discussing the fact that that freedom cannot exist without oppression - and through the discourse of theory I found myself defending this concept. For my first question I would like to hear what dualism of thought has resonated with you. Were you surprised about some of the conclusions or discussions you explored?

2) Knowing that I have spent almost twenty years being surrounded by thousands of my closest friends wiggling in unison to its rhythmic sonic assaults in the shape of large outdoor raves, are there other spaces of assault that you gravitate to? Straddling the line between fear, dread, pain and joy, happiness and belonging? What does this interplay between positive and negative say about us? What aspects of late capitalism are you drawn to against your better judgment?

3) Bonus: Aphex Twin played Coachella in 2019, from the digital corners of online discourse one voice rose to the surface, it was a teenage

girl discussing her experience at this show. Her response encompassed many of the elements that were discussed in this article, her experience was at the intersection of [fear + disgust] and [pleasure + curiosity] This is the song that she heard that day:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVewGTK3Cf0&ab_channel=HATE

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What do you think?

[note this is not an apheX twin song, but he sampled it as part of his set]

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