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Popular Culture, the Avant-Garde and the Detainment Camp

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The remit for this text was to explicate the relevance of “contemporary works that integrated elements borrowed from popular culture, such as the icons or logos of transnationals, cartoon characters, or objects from daily life, industrially produced.”¹ The framework of the investigation has been expanded however; in order that we can contemplate the ways in which popular culture and its old nemesis the avant-garde represent ‘borrowed elements’ that have been integrated into the military-entertainments complex’s contemporary work of illicit violence—Guantánamo Bay. The essay will argue that popular culture in the form of music is being used, as we speak, to further specific cultural, economic, and socio-political goals. As a result, the role of aesthetics is not only bound more closely than ever to the excessive realities of Western culture, more accurately it comes to represent and amplify them. Whilst the products of popular culture function in a global network of economic exchange, they are now being used by occidental groups to debilitate and compromise the operating capacity of parts of this system. The conclusion to this deliberation will question whether the techniques of assimilation assigned to musical production could be practiced upon the artworld by a military that desires culture to be appropriated as armament.

The Black Ecstasy of Popular Culture

Whilst there are numerous torture techniques and acts of inhumane cruelty to be taken into account when analysing the full spectrum spread of Guantánamo’s organised violence, we shall be focusing on “the use of this kind of audio-technique (that) is rather new in interrogation,” according to Vice President of the Psy Ops Veterans Association, Rick Hoffman.² The use of culture—in the form of popular music—as torture, appears to have been widespread throughout all the camps within Guantánamo Bay. The reports from ex-detainees being

numerous and detailed. “Shafiq Rasul, one of the ‘Tipton Three’—British Muslims detained in Guantánamo for over two years tells of being short-shackled to the floor in a dark cell while Eminem’s ‘Kim’ and pounding heavy metal played incessantly for hours, augmented by strobe lights.”³ It is during Michael Winterbottom & Mat Whitecross’s Silver Bear winning 2006 documentary drama ‘Road to Guantánamo,’ (concerning the captivity of the ‘Tipton Three’) that re-enacted scenes of this recently developed sonic technique firmly entered public consciousness, amplifying the searing acoustic brutality of sensory overload and excess into our collective imaginations.⁴

In an article named “The Pain of Listening: Using Music as a Weapon at Guantánamo,” Tobias Rapp relates to us the circumstances in which the employment of popular music by artists such as Eminem and Metallica⁵ reveals the states choice of ‘mainstream’ apparatus by which to apply force. However in Jon Ronson’s interview with Jamal Udeen Al-Harith, another Briton held in extrajudicial detention as a suspected terrorist, a different sonic aesthetic approach to torture is revealed. In conversation with Al-Harith about the types of music used to disorient and disturb him in Guantánamo, Ronson cannot hide his surprise at learning that guards played atonal soundscapes that had no beats or rhythms; aural collages consisting of noise, industrial sounds, electric piano and synthesizer lines. Such descriptions suggest that we could loosely categorise the music as experimental electronic composition.⁶ Whilst we have become used to reading reports of popular music genres such as country, heavy metal, and rap being employed by the military for their abusive ‘through the day and night’ torture sessions, the revelation that sonic compositions plausibly equitable with avant-garde cultural production is as bizarre as it is telling. Or is it?

Whilst populist musical genres such as ‘Country’ and ‘Rap’ enjoy huge market share and attention in the USA, they also have traditional structures at their core

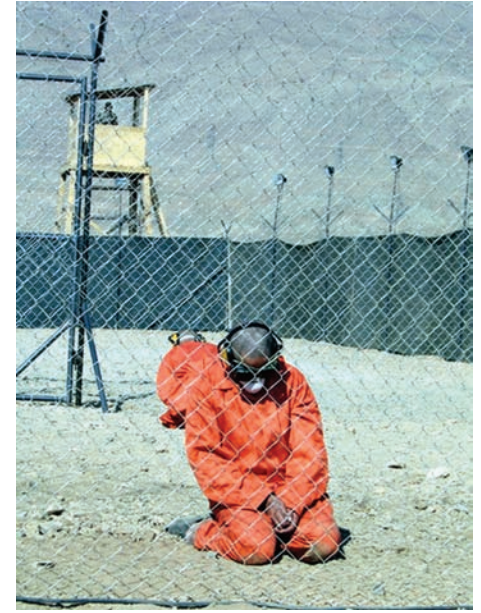
Cover of the *Enfer Sandman* single released by Metallica in 1991 on Vertigo Records. This was one of the most utilised tracks in Guantánamo Bay to torture detainees.



The Ghost Army logo.



Image of a detainee on his knees in the Guantánamo Bay detention camp.



Convoy of armoured vehicles and tanks made of rubber by the Ghost Army.

which have long historical lineages and which often share musical structures, narrative interests, and socio-political affiliations to musical genres from other countries. Thus for the Country genre we could think about the relations it shares with traditional storytelling songs such as European Sea Shanties from the 19th century, or Mariachi music from Mexico. Meanwhile, for the Rap genre we can think back to its West African traditional oratory roots in the songs and poems played by musicians known as Griots; or laterally conceive of the associations and relations of resistance it holds as an art form with the Afro-Brazilian form of music, martial arts and dance known as Capoeira, to realise that the lineages of these genres of music have long lasting and easily identifiable connections to global forms of musical organisation and politicisation.

Whilst Country and Rap are identifiable as American mainstream genres, avant-garde music can be plausibly considered as being more deeply entrenched in Occidental value systems than either of them. By employing avant-garde music to make coercive statements about its cultural, social, and martial ascendancy, the U.S. military-entertainment complex has resonantly performed its own sono-cultural coup d'état. For that which speaks most intimately about a culture and its particular distinguishing characteristics; those phenomena that set one culture apart (and thus serve to construct identity formation) from another are surely not the mainstream ones. Surely they are not those genres, compositions or movements of people, ideas, or practices that generate the amorphous and ambiguous models of globalized culture that speak about everywhere and tell us everything about nowhere simultaneously. Attali constructs a similar argument when he says, "Mass music is thus a powerful factor in consumer integration, interclass levelling, and cultural homogenization. It becomes a factor in centralization, cultural normalization, and the disappearance of distinctive cultures."⁷

Instead of thinking about mass, mainstream, and global cultures, we would do better to think about the grassroots activities, the micro movements, the modulations of DIY culture, the esoteric collectives, the locally occurring rhythms of dissent and play, and the obtuse units of production as being more accurate and meaningful purveyors of that which constitutes a nation's identity. Musically speaking, it is just such newly emerging, experimental and radical cultural sonic gestures that better articulate site-specific geographical locality, psychological associations and socio-cultural relations. As a genre, we could say that the avant-garde is therefore idiosyncratically more definable as Western and by extension American than any of the other genres we generally think of as being sonically symbolic of the USA. Through such logic, avant-garde productions can be posited as the most effective signifiers of specific cultural identity, a proposition that the military-entertainment complex is starting to evidently explore.

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The use of music as a form of torture signifies that a new set of relationships has been orchestrated between the military-entertainment complex, the cultural industries, and the wider social body. Popular culture has become a direct weapon, not an abstract or ambiguous tool, but a focal armament with the calibre to perpetrate surmountable damage upon the single and social body. Thus Guantánamo's music represents not only an assault on individuals, it also symbolically announces the intentions of the U.S military-entertainment complex to ideologically propagate and transmit their culture into Muslim ipods, living rooms, shopping malls, public transportation system, and the streets—into the core networks of everyday living. With powerful global communication networks, production facilities, and distribution systems at their disposal, this threat from the

U.S. is not an idle one. The culturally imperialistic timbres embedded within the western voices of the camp guard and the rappers and rock singers employed to torture consequently come to represent the tonal currency of a moral chaos for the Muslim subject and state; their individuated narratives of excess predicting the future degeneration of a collective religious ordering. As Foucault rightly points out, "in the 'excesses' of torture, a whole economy of power is invested."⁸ The power implicit within Guantánamo's musical torture resides in the threat of contagion, and in the potential for such excessive musical and sexual practices, overflowing with seductive virulent intent to become irreconcilably embedded within the Muslim's naturalised surroundings and systems of living.

In conclusion, we can say that by having assimilated sonic frequencies into a violent force the military-entertainment complex has forever changed the political, aesthetic, and cultural standing of musical expression. Attali foresaw this radical shift in music's vital agency with his pessimistic declaration that "Music, exploring in this way the totality of sound matter, has today followed its path to the end, to the point of the suicide of form."⁹ With this in mind, it should not be overly dramatic to suggest that music and by extension, popular culture can never be thought about in the same way again. When culture is employed to extend the interests of a nation state by methods of manipulation, coercion, and torture, it places us into a very different relationship with all facets of cultural production whether they are conceived as being lowbrow, middlebrow, or highbrow. In the face of military co-option such designations become useless (if they are not already) as their associated aesthetic logic is subsumed by ontologies of usage and efficacy. Surely now, the germane question to posit within this rupture of popular culture's meaning and socio-political position is—what form of cultural production will be employed next for such purposes? Could the productions of the art world—paintings, installations, performance, and sculpture, or artists such as Paul McCarthy, Brian Jungen, or Pharrell Williams who utilise popular culture to their own ends, be harnessed in a similar way. The simple answer to this is yes, they could; and more than that, the martial employment of artists to; define and extend territory; increase the motility of the war machine; and accentuate the resonance of a nation's capacity for violence, has in fact already happened.

In World War II, the 'Ghost Army' was a U.S. tactical deception unit consisting of approximately 1,100 artists, actors, musicians, and other 'creative types' taken from art schools and advertising agencies to construct fake military installations, rubber tanks, fabricated soundscapes, and false radio transmissions, amongst other things.¹⁰ Notable artists and designers that produced works based on perceptual trickery and dissimulation included fashion designer Bill Blass, and minimalist/colour field painter Ellsworth Kelly (who later declared that the time spent in this unit had an important influence on his artistic practice after the war). The directive of the Ghost Army was to saturate the Nazis with disinformation about the numbers, plans, and whereabouts of the allied forces.¹¹ This example of the military employment of artists is proof of how artwork can be assimilated for military purposes, yet it is not the same as directly assimilating pre-existing artworks as weapons. There is however, no reason to think that this might not happen in the future. As noted before in this very magazine, the ad hoc installation aesthetics of mainstream 1990's Young British Artists (YBA's) are now being utilised in military training camps such as 'Pretendahar' in Toronto, Canada¹². We have also heard that even the most experimental types of cultural production can be utilised to functional affect by the military so why should we not think that new-media interactive installations, flash mob interventions, and relationally aesthetic Web bots could be utilised by the military next? In this era, in which cultural forms of expression have been assimilated into the tools and techniques of combat, a disturbing question remains. Could the next truly experimental art practice be manifested by the military?

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Notes

- 1 From Patrick Poulin (guest editor for the edition of ETC that this text appears in).
- 2 Andrew Hultkrans, "The Wrong Note," *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 119, Nov-Dec 2008. <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_wrong_note/> (last accessed April 24th, 2010)
- 3 Read about the film at - <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0468094/>> (last accessed April 25th, 2010).
- 4 The Top Ten songs most often used to prepare prisoners for interrogation at Guantánamo Bay have been released by human rights group 'Reprivee'. <http://www.reprivee.org.uk/Press_stop_torture_music.htm> (last accessed April 24th, 2010).
- 5 Read Jon Ronson, "The Men Who Stare at Goats," (London: Simon & Schuster, 2004).
- 6 Jacques Attali, "Noise: The Political Economy of Music", trans. by Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson, afterword by Susan McClary, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) p. 111.
- 7 Michel Foucault, "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison". Translation: Alan Sheridan. (New York, Random House, 1975) p. 35.
- 8 Jacques Attali, "Noise: The Political Economy of Music."
- 9 A recent art exhibition documenting the activities of the Ghost Army was recently mounted at the University of Michigan's Hatcher Library. More information can be found at, <<http://www.lib.umich.edu/gallery/events/ghost-army>> (last accessed May 21st, 2010).
- 10 For more information see, Philip Gerard, "Secret Soldiers: The Story of World War II's Heroic Army of Deception," (New York: Dutton Adult, 2002).
- 11-12 For more information see, <<http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=4f791085-5dfb-4221-83d7-10e26755ac7f>> (last accessed May 20th, 2010).



Ellsworth Kelly, *Study for "Cit ": Brushstrokes Cut into Twenty Squares and Arranged by Chance*, 1951.
The Art Institute of Chicago.