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The Sound of the Sublime:
Notes on Burke as Time Goes By¹

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Think of the sublime: images come to mind first. Images of mountains, oceans, deserts, and other wild natural sites. Images of pyramids, cathedrals, skyscrapers, and other colossal cultural artifacts. Most of these mental images are probably still and silent, very much like photos. They might also portrait dynamic situations, like big waves breaking on a rocky shore, or high trees moved by a thunderous storm, or the wind howling across the ruins of an ancient temple. Yet these scenes are likely to be imagined as sublime independently of their inner temporality, perhaps as animated still pictures like GIFs or “live” smartphones photos.

But maybe something else comes to your mind. If you are a classical music lover, you might think of Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*, Handel’s *Messiah*, some Beethoven’s symphonies –the *Eroica*, the *Fifth*, the *Ninth*–, or maybe a symphony by Mahler. And if you are fond of cinema, you might evoke, say, Stanley Kubrick’s *2001. A Space Odyssey*, especially the metaphysical travel on György Ligeti’s music; or Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, and *The End* by The Doors mixing with the noise of helicopters and images of Captain

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Willard and Colonel Kurtz; or the ominous opening of David Lynch's *Lost Highway* with David Bowie's *I'm Deranged*; or any other scene you may have in your personal short list of horribly delightful moments, spend in the darkness of movie theatres. The possibilities are wide open, since there is arguably no canon of sublime moments in the history of cinema, as there is one of sublime visual objects, and also one of sublime classical music works.

Now, classical aesthetic theories of the sublime –from Addison to Burke to Kant to Schopenhauer- were all written at a time when cinema, and photography for that matter, did not exist. And they did not address music either as a privileged source of the sublime, for reasons ranging from the authors' tastes and competences, to the complex temporality of reception histories, to the position of music in the hierarchy of the fine arts. Still more importantly, even if some canonical examples did concern human culture, especially architecture, philosophers considered that the sublime was more often than not an experience made in natural environments (Brady 2013; Shapshay 2013).

Most of these eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries theories speak of a unified kind of experience, before trying to describe its sensorial modalities. They focus in sight, while being ready to consider other senses as well – Burke, for one, explores the cases of smell and taste. Also, they distinguish between the beautiful and the sublime, before eventually considering cases in which these two mingle or interact. A case in point of this last appears in the section “Of the combination of the beautiful arts in one and the same product” in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement*: “Further, the presentation of the sublime, so far as it belongs to beautiful art, can be united with beauty in a *verse tragedy*, a *didactic poem*, an *oratorio*; and in these combinations beautiful art is all the more artistic” (Kant 2000, 203).

It is generally assumed that, for Kant, a token of these three artistic genres does not afford an experience of the sublime, but rather, an experience of the beautiful caused by an allegedly sublime object. According to Emily Brady (2013, 55), “if the original sublime is

beautified, this would suggest that it is no longer truly sublime, but only a beautiful representation of the sublime”. Indeed, while Kant implies in this sentence that the sublime characterizes the re-presented object, throughout the third *Critique* he makes a case for the sublime being an experience by the subject, in other words an “altered state of consciousness” (McBride 2014, 23). In Kant’s own words: “Hence it is the disposition of the mind resulting from a certain representation occupying the reflective judgment, but not the object, which is to be called sublime” (Kant 2000, 134).

The passing mention of the oratorio is the only moment in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* where the sublime is associated with the art of music. It is also the only moment in which the sublime is associated with sound, if one leaves aside the sonic dimension arguably implicit in mentions of hurricanes and waterfalls, to which, however, Kant refers only in terms of sight. A case has also been made for the importance of the voice of God resulting in a privilege of hearing as the most sublime of the senses (Rasmussen 2010); whatever its merits, the argument –which refers to written representations in the Bible and in an Egyptian temple- bears no relation with the hearing of actual sounds. Last but not least, because a music work cannot be conceived without its inner temporality, the oratorio is arguably the only connection Kant makes between the sublime and the perception of time, even if he does not address the issue either.

On the other hand, he does describe a specific temporality of the subjective experience: “The mind feels itself *moved* in the representation of the sublime in nature, while in the aesthetic judgement on the beautiful in nature it is in *calm* contemplation. This movement (especially in its inception) may be compared to a vibration, i.e. to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object” (Kant 2000, 141). In Kant’s appraisal, sublime objects with no inner temporality allow for an experience whose phenomenology does have a duration, best described as an oscillation, or a wave-like,

temporal form. According to Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (2007, 221), classical authors typically depict the sublime as “a pleasure mediated through displeasure, the first coming *after* the last. In this familiar view –she argues–, the sublime is a narrative feeling with a crisis and turning point – a moment of judgement - that transforms pains of fear or frustration into delights of relief or transcendence”.

The reason for Kant mentioning the oratorio is unclear. According to Rasmussen (2010, 160), Kant’s interest in it was only due to its sublime “subject matter”, namely “the ideas of God and morality”; it seems unlikely, though, that he was totally unaware of it being a musical genre. By the time he wrote, the music of Georg Friedrich Handel -born in Halle in 1685 and active in London until his death in 1759- started to be well-known in German-speaking lands. On the other hand, Kant was no music lover, and the oratorio genre had not reached the prestige that will give it works like Haydn’s *Creation*, first performed in 1800. Music plays a subsidiary role in his theory of the fine arts, thorn between the beautiful and the agreeable (Buch 1993). It is even a kind of counter-model against which some German Romantics will develop their metaphysical aesthetics of music, towering in Schopenhauer’s 1819 *The World as Will and Representation* (Dahlhaus 1978).

Yet, Schopenhauer’s discussion of the sublime does not mention music either. Nor is sublime music preeminent in British authors such as Burke, whose ideas Kant discusses at some length. On the contrary, Burke makes of the art of music an example of the beautiful, without mentioning the oratorio at all: “The beautiful in music will not bear that loudness and strength of sounds, that may be used to raise other passions; nor notes, which are shrill, or harsh, or deep; it agrees best with such as are clear, even, smooth, and weak”. Indeed, he continues, “that great variety, and quick transitions from one measure or tone to another, are contrary to the genius of the beautiful in music” (Burke 1990, 112).

Now, since at least John Lockman's praising in 1744 the "wonderful Sublimity of Mr. Handel's compositions", the sublime was regularly invoked by eighteenth-century music critics as one of the composer's most remarkable features. According to Claudia Johnson, "by 1776, when [John] Hawkins wrote that Handel's 'greatest talent' was the 'sublime in music,' the epithet had become routine" (Johnson 1986, 517). In Britain, Handel was famous not only for composing *Messiah* and other oratorios, but also as the author of *Zadok the Priest*, the 1727 Coronation Anthem regularly performed in similar occasions. With Handel's posthumous 1784 "Great Commemoration" in the Abbey of Westminster, narrated by music historian Charles Burney, the sublime was, in a way, enthroned as the aesthetic core of state music (Buch 2003; Mathew 2009; Dubois 2009).

Thus, the notion of sublime music seems to have entered critical discourse in Britain before acquiring philosophical credentials in Kant's third *Critique*. And even there, sonic artifacts such as oratorios stood right in the threshold, or the tension, between the beautiful and the sublime. On the other hand, when Burke characterized the contrary of beautiful music by "excessive loudness", "great variety", and "quick transitions" that "overpower the soul" and "fill it with terror", he was leaving room, as it were, for a concept of sublime music for which he had no taste nor name. And in fact, in his account of sublime experiences Burke did mention *once* a very special kind of "music".

Burke's Natural Music

In the section "Sound and Loudness" of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in 1757, Edmund Burke makes an intriguing allusion to a "music" which has nothing to do with "the beautiful in music", nor with Handel's compositions, nor with any other composition for that matter:

The eye is not the only organ of sensation, by which a sublime passion may be produced. Sounds have a great power in these as in most other passions. I do

not mean words, because words do not affect simply by their sounds, but by means altogether different. Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror. The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind, though we can observe no nicety or artifice in those sorts of music (Burke 1990, 75).

Burke does not put square quotes to the word “music” in this passage, but it is pretty clear that he uses it ironically. As we have seen, for him real music does suppose nicety and artifice, and is incapable of eliciting the feeling of the sublime, i.e. terror and a “great and awful sensation in the mind”. On the other hand, this negative assessment suggests continuities between music and non-music, and between culture and nature. In another passage, he speaks of sounds that “imitate the natural inarticulate voices of men, or any other animals in pain or danger”, thus disregarding the human vs animal divide (Burke 1990, 77). Loudness affects the human ear independently of the sound being artistic or not, and also, independently of whether it emanates from a natural source –cataracts, storms, thunder, animals- or from an artificial one –the artillery, this all too human non-artistic cultural artifact. This is followed by another example:

The shouting of multitudes has a similar effect; and by the sole strength of the sound, so amazes and confounds the imagination, that in this staggering, and hurry of the mind, the best established tempers can scarcely forbear being born down, and joining in the common cry, and common resolution of the croud (Burke 1990, 76).

Thus, at the very moment when the sonic sublime is distinguished from human art, it is associated with human politics – and very negatively so. This passage by the young Burke rings like a forebear of his 1790 critique of the French revolutionaries: “The Assembly, their organ, acts before them the farce of deliberation with as little decency as liberty. They act like the comedians of a fair before a riotous audience; they act amidst the tumultuous cries of a mixed mob of ferocious men, and of women lost to shame, who, according to their insolent fancies, direct, control, applaud, explode them” (Burke 2012, 67). In this late, counter-

revolutionary essay, the “tumultuous cries” of the mob are associated with the power of women as a symbol of all that is wrong with revolutionary institutions, thus heralding the misogynist and elitist view of the crowd to be theorized by Gustave Le Bon and others.

The continuity between Burke’s ideas on the sublime and his hatred of the Revolution was noted by contemporary critics such as Mary Wollstonecraft. But the relation was not straightforward, as the *Enquiry* established a gendered distinction between beauty as feminine and the sublime as masculine, which such passages of the later essay destabilize. In recent years, some feminist authors have opposed the masculinist sublime to a “feminine sublime” allegedly represented, for example, by Lee Miller’s war photography (Liu 2015). Yet, according to Barbara Claire Freeman (1997, 45), in Burke “the sublime cannot remain encased within an aesthetic domain because it is the force that undercuts the stability of boundaries, including those that divide masculine from feminine, politics from aesthetics”.

Indeed, most striking in Burke’s mentioning the crowd in his 1757 essay is not his negative tone, but rather his implicit confession that, since its shouting can move even “the best established tempers”, he might have felt himself the temptation of “joining in the common cry”. An Irishman born in 1729 and arrived in London in 1750, this was probably an echo of his young years in Dublin. However, the essay on the sublime was written only a few years after the 1745 Jacobite crisis during which two modern political devices were first used by the English in all but a revolutionary sense, namely the “common cry” of the national anthem *God Save the King*, very different from the crowd’s spontaneous shouting, and an army of volunteers to defend the established Crown (Buch 2003, chap.1). By bringing together the artillery and the multitude, and quite independently of his political views, Burke arguably makes of the sonic sublime a key to the birth of modern politics.

The sound of cannons, in particular, made a strong impression on him, evoked several times in his essay:

For, I have observed, that when at any time I have waited very earnestly for some sound, that returned at intervals, (as the successive firing of cannon) though I fully expected the return of the sound, when it came, it always made me start a little; the ear-drum suffered a convulsion, and the whole body consented with it. The tension of the part thus increasing at every blow, by the united forces of the stroke itself, the expectation, and the surprise, it is worked up to such a pitch as to be capable of the sublime; it is brought just to the verge of pain. Even when the cause has ceased; the organs of hearing being often successively struck in a similar manner, continue to vibrate in that manner for some time longer; this is an additional help to the greatness of the effect (Burke 1990, 127).

When speaking about cataracts and crowds, Burke described mostly static situations, as sonic images with no inner temporality. In this passage on the artillery, though, sound is associated with the passing of time. This introduces in the theory of the sublime a temporal dimension that, as we have seen, Kant and others disregard as a consequence of their privileging sight. In a sense, also in Burke this can be said to derive from spatial phenomena: “We have observed, that a species of greatness arises from the artificial infinite; and that this consists in an uniform succession of great parts: we observed too, that the same uniform succession had a like power in sounds” (Burke 1990, 126). This “artificial infinite” is first described in relation to repeated physical objects, like a colonnade in a temple. Yet the temporal version of uniform succession crucially switches from vision to sound.

At this point, Burke’s reflection is congruent with the “investigation of the natural and mechanical causes of our passions” which informs his general theory, aptly named “the physiological sublime” by Vanessa Ryan (2001; see also Dwan 2011; Binney 2013). The physical behavior of the “ear-drum” is such a “mechanical cause” of the sublime effect, which Burke explains in detail:

When the ear receives any simple sound, it is struck by a single pulse of the air, which makes the ear-drum and the other membranous parts vibrate according to the nature and species of the stroke. If the stroke be strong, the organ of hearing suffers a considerable degree of tension. If the stroke be repeated pretty soon after; the repetition causes an expectation of another stroke. And it must be observed, that expectation itself causes a tension (Burke 1990, 127).

The depiction of cannons firing at presumably regular intervals seems quite different from what happens in a battle, whose sounds Goethe and some Romantics will picture as a chaotic, overwhelming, disorienting phenomenon (O’Neil 2012; Shaw 2018). Situations where, in Burke’s words, “I fully expected the return of the sound”, evoke rather ceremonial occasions, like coronations, weddings, or funerals. Yet he adds that in such cases, “when it came, it always made me start a little” (Burke 1990, 127). Contrary to the common definition of surprises as unexpected events, in his account “the expectation, and the surprise” go together.

Besides artillery, Burke mentions other sublime experiences resulting from repeated sonic events:

It may be observed, that a single sound of some strength, though but of short duration, if repeated after intervals, has a grand effect. Few things are more awful than the striking of a great clock, when the silence of the night prevents the attention from being too much dissipated. The same may be said of a single stroke on a drum, repeated with pauses; and of the successive firing of cannon at a distance; all the effects mentioned in this section have causes very nearly alike (Burke 1990, 76).

For sure, the great clock is a human artifact whose sound is strictly periodical. This is a paradigmatic example of what Burke calls “the sublimity from succession”, which he takes for “rather more obvious in the sense of hearing”, as it is due to the “power in sounds” (Burke 1990, 126). Also, the drum brings us back to the army, thus suggesting a sublime associated with military music, even if the author falls short of addressing it. Burke, in fact, does not mention war either as a source of the sublime, contrary to Kant who does it in most emphatic terms, “if it is carried on with order and with a sacred respect for the rights of citizens” (Kant 1914, §28).

Burke’s theory of temporal successions -be these due to cannons, clocks, or drums- departs from the purely physiological, as the sublime depends on a psychological experience of expectation. Granted, he still postulates a mechanical element in this last, namely the

conjectural vibration of the ear in the absence of new impulses. This derives from his belief in “contractility”, i.e. “a dynamic language of vibrating fibers” which was “a concept designed to encompass extreme states of power” (Sarafianos 2008, 24). The sublime being an element of his “critique of reason” (Ryan 2001), it does not entail a rational anticipation of likely events, but rather an instinctual reaction: “Expectation itself causes a tension –writes Burke-. This is apparent in many animals, who, when they prepare for hearing any sound, rouse themselves, and prick up their ears; so that here the effect of the sounds is considerably augmented by a new auxiliary, the expectation” (Burke 1990, 127). Still, two different levels do seem to be involved, one which results from the mechanics of vibrating membranes, the other that supposes the existence of mental “tension”.

Most importantly, in Burke’s account, the experience of the sublime results from a subjective *threshold*, the passage to the limit of an iterated sequence. Pushing the subject “to the verge of pain” is an incremental process, until the cumulated effect of sound, expectation, and surprise, attains a certain “pitch”. And never mind if this qualitative leap results from the quantitative insistence of the same. The gap cannot be wider between the monotonous “music” of cannons and clocks, and the climactic listening experience. Repetition of the object of perception leads to difference in the subject of perception, and the temporal shape of this difference is climax (Fink 2004; Buch 2019).

Now, while repeated sounds are his favorite examples, Burke notes that “the modifications of sound, which may be productive of the sublime, are almost infinite” (Burke 1990, 77). Two other temporal patterns are singled out. The first is suddenness, including sudden silence:

A sudden beginning, or sudden cessation of sound of any considerable force, has the same power. The attention is roused by this; and the faculties driven forward, as it were, on their guard. Whatever either in sights or sounds makes the transition from one extreme to the other easy, causes no terror, and consequently can be no cause of greatness. In every thing sudden and

unexpected, we are apt to start; that is, we have a perception of danger, and our nature rouses us to guard against it (Burke 1990, 76).

The second combines synchronic and temporal dimensions, namely pitch and texture:

A low tremulous, intermitting sound, though it seems in some respects opposite to that just mentioned, is productive of the sublime. ... I have already observed, that night increases our terror more perhaps than any thing else; it is our nature, that, when we do not know what may happen to us, to fear the worst that can happen us; and hence it is, that uncertainty is so terrible, that we often seek to be rid of it, at the hazard of a certain mischief. Now some low, confused, uncertain sounds, leave us in the same fearful anxiety concerning their causes, that no light, or an uncertain light does concerning the objects that surround us (Burke 1990, 76).

In all previous cases, the source of the phenomena was important for their selection as examples, but its function is not essential to Burke's idea of the sublime experience itself. When speaking about the sound of the artillery, he says nothing about it evoking war or destruction; nor does he associate the great clock with, say, the ineluctability of aging or death. This shows his general opposition to John Locke's theory of "associationism": "It would be, I fancy –writes Burke-, to little purpose to look for the causes of our passions in association, until we fail of them in the natural properties of things" (Burke 1990, 119; Sarafianos 2008, 24). On the other hand, he does admit the role of some associations, especially those structured in childhood. Yet Brillenberg Wurth (2009, 45) reads Burke's sublime being "only occasioned through lack and indetermination, since it is these that evoke – or at least quicken- the affect of terror". In the passage on the "low tremulous, intermitting sound", association does play a key role, except that we don't know with *what* the sound is associated with in the first place.

From Handel to war

Edmund Burke's 1757 *Enquiry* is an inaugural, and quite sophisticated, contribution to what we might call a theory of the sonic sublime. At a disciplinary level, this has potential

consequences for musicology, sound studies, and political history. What Burke wrote in the eighteenth century might enrich the discussion of allegedly sublime music, composed up to the present times (Campbell 2018). His bringing together sounds produced by humans and by animals might help understanding the sensorial (dis)continuities between human and non-human environments. His remarks on the crowds and the artillery are pertinent for considering sonic aspects of today's wars and politics, especially as these appear in the media and social networks.

Also, what Burke said of sounds allows thinking the temporality of the experience of the sublime. Beyond the history of the concept, the sublime as time goes by is an open question in contemporary aesthetics. Brillenburg Wurth (2009, 24) focuses in what she calls the "traumatic sublime", i.e. "a sublime that resists a decisive sense of closure or resolution". Others pursue it along the lines set up by Gilles Deleuze (Zepke 2011). Indeed, in *Difference and Repetition*, Kant's idea of the sublime is discussed through the musical oxymoron of "discordant harmony", as the faculties of thought and imagination communicate each other "only the violence which confronts it with its own difference" (Deleuze 2004, 183).

All this points to a field of research that cannot be summarized, let aside analyzed, in a single article. In this final section, let us only mention a few examples of how Burke can help sketching a typology of *affordances* of the sonic sublime. The first bring us back to Handel. More often than not, in the eighteenth century the adjective "sublime" is applied to him in a generic fashion (Johnson 1986; Gilman 2009). Yet, in a review of the first performance of *Alexander Feast's* at Covent Garden in 1739, a commentator evoked in the *Daily Advertiser* "sounds" that "express'd in so sublime a manner the Praises of the Deity itself", alluding to a choir - "Now strike the golden lyre", the first number of the second part- which represents a "list'ning crowd" (Chrissochoidis 2009, 631). In 1785, Charles Burney singled out as "truly sublime" the setting of the word "wonderful" in the choir "For unto us a child is born" from

Messiah (Johnson 1986, 527). Following these examples, Burke's grammar of sonic patterns might also help understanding how Handel's music afforded the experience of the sublime through *specific* clues, while making always thinner "the veil between representation and presence, between music standing for something else and embodying it" (Chrissochoidis 2009, 614-616).

Take *Zadok the Priest*, the 1727 Coronation anthem². It begins with a twenty-two bars orchestral section, before the choir enters *fortissimo* on the Biblical text: *Zadok the Priest, and Nathan de Prophet / Anointed Solomon King / And all the people rejoic'd and said:/ God Save the King, Long Live the King!* The passage builds on an unexpected contrast between the rhythmical, dynamical and motivic regularity of the soft instrumental introduction, and the sudden, powerful, long notes of the first *D*-major chord by the choir, prolonged by a sequence of other accentuated chords, the longest of them on the word *King*. This illustrates Burke's sublime being elicited by a "sudden beginning", "excessive loudness", and a repetition of strokes.

Alexander's Feast is also worth considering, especially since its subtitle was no other than *The Power of Music*. During the celebration of the victory of Alexander the Great over the Persians, the musician Timotheus demonstrates the powers of his art, including those of persuading the hero, who stands alongside "the lovely Thais", to -so to speak- make love not war³:

*War, he sung, is toil and trouble,
Honour but an empty bubble,
Never ending, still beginning,
Fighting still, and still destroying.*

The last verse occurs four times during this air in A minor, as a pattern XX'XX'. The words *Fighting still, and still destroying* are set twice to a very simple motif, a single note

² spotify:track:2CNwkGNsDTRjpXwuL38YEj.

³ spotify:track:1U0OpkMABTK9p791fv6CEL.

repeated in crotchets over two measures, and prolonged by a long melisma over the *-troying* syllables. The first time (X) the repeated note is a C:



Fig. 1: Handel, *Alexander's Feast*, "War he sung is soil and trouble", mm.16-19.
Ed. John Walsh, London, c. 1736.

Handel's setting of the text conveys by isochronous pitch repetition the "never ending" nature of war, and the monotony and vacuity of destruction. This is close to Burke's repetitive patterns, including the threshold effect produced by saturation, with the ensuing melisma expanding a long-contained energy. The second time, on a repeated A, the variant (X') includes an octave leap on the first *-troy-* syllable:



Fig. 2: Handel, *Alexander's Feast*, "War he sung is soil and trouble", mm.29-32.
Ed. John Walsh, London, c. 1736

The octave leap in the second bar of this second occurrence can be heard as an additional return of the same A, but an A whose expressive content is altered by the subjective saturation that Burke derived from a repeated ominous sound – very much like in his account a cannon shot could bring “to the verge of pain”, despite its being identical to the precedent ones. Thus, in this air Handel’s musical depiction of war brings together objective and subjective traits of Burke’s temporal grammar of delightful horror.

Let us consider a very different example, namely an excerpt of the coverage of the 2003 Iraq War by CBS⁴.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmwYNS97EbE>.

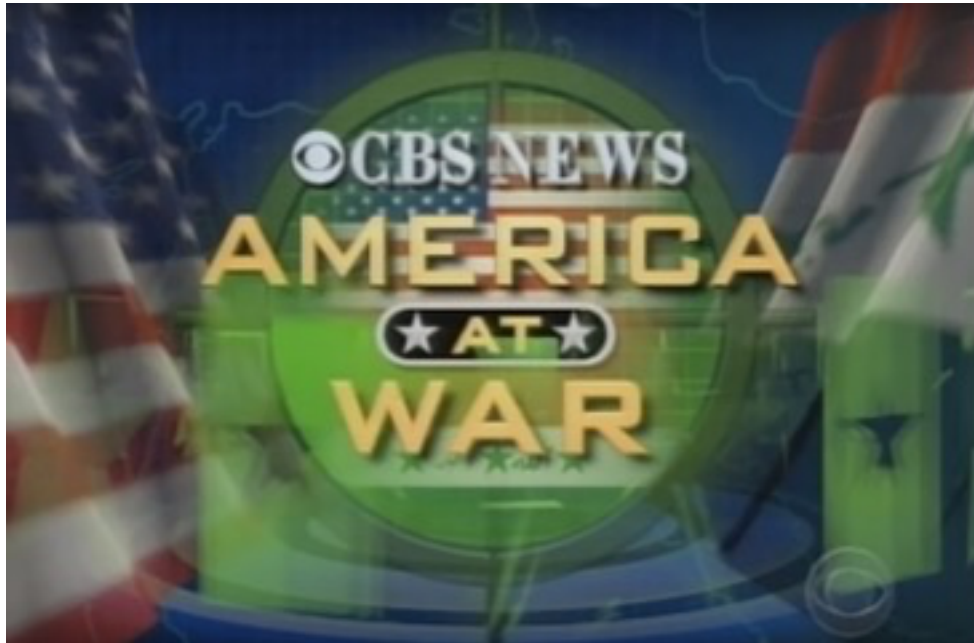


Fig. 3: Image from CBS News, Iraq War, 18th March 2003
www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmwYNS97EbE.

The minute-and-a-half excerpt begins with a “CBS News –America at War” placard, set on a music consisting in a single three-chords motif played on a hectic drum machine sequencer rhythm, and repeated several times while a voice off introduces news anchor Dan Rather. The jingle has already vanished by the time Rather explains that “the attack came in waves”, at which point his image is replaced by the night sight and loud sounds of US ships rhythmically firing cruise missiles. “Now”, Rather continues, “this is how it looked and sounded in Baghdad”. We then hear still more loud low-pitched explosions over a sight of the Iraqi capital, occasionally punctuated by –presumably- the lower and higher-pitched sound of Iraqis anti-aircraft defenses. Thus, this whole moment of television coverage of the 2003 war is built on a series of repeated sonic sequences, first that of the music, then the intentionally periodical montage of shots from US ships, finally what seems to be the actual regularity of gun firing by American forces.

Now, we might ask, is Handel’s air sublime? Is the coverage of the Iraq war by CBS sublime? To answer the first question, we might remember Burke’s reluctance to consider

music as sublime, and Kant's suggestion that music can represent the sublime without being sublime itself. According to some authors, artworks in general do not qualify as sublime for a number of reasons that include their comparatively small scale. To answer the second, beyond the difference of scale between a TV set and a real war, we might argue that TV coverage of a war is not intended to produce aesthetic or pleasurable experiences of any kind. In both cases, then, the answer would be negative (Abaci 2008; Brady 2013).

On the other hand, as we have seen, the notion of sublime music has a history and a legitimacy of its own, and many art historians and critics do believe that sublime art is a heuristic category. Also, as Margaret Weigel argued after 9/11 in an article aptly titled "Terrorism and the Sublime, or Why We Keep Watching", besides wanting to know what is going on in the world, some aesthetic dimension of the media coverage of horrible events is likely to be instrumental in capturing the spectator's attention (Gluck 2003; Shaw 2017).

In fact, since most authors agree in defining the experience of the sublime by specific subjective qualities, like the sense of a diminished self (Arcangeli, Dokic and Sperduti 2019), there is arguably no point in giving a yes or no answer to questions about the sublime quality of any particular event. Yet, some updated version of Burke's sonic grammar might help describing affordances of the sublime in a variety of objects or situations -artworks, media events, natural settings- that can trigger a sublime experience or not, depending both on the context and on the subject's state of mind and disposition. This, of course, implies accepting the principle that art *might* elicit an experience of the sublime in the first place. Following the methodology presented elsewhere for studying the political meaning of music (Buch 2018), it can be described as an ecological approach to the sonic sublime.

To end on a single, and negative, example: Handel's air *War, he sung, is toil and trouble* appears briefly in Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 *Children of Men*, a dystopian sci-fi movie which narrates the birth of a baby girl as humanity's only hope in a context of global

infertility and civil war. The extinction of humanity is a likely theme for the sublime, even if, of course, the actualization of such an experience could only be attested by empirical means, like experimental and/or ethnographic observation of the audience. Anyway, in this film Handel's air is unlikely to directly elicit such an experience, since it is heard as the musical part, softly played in the background, of an artistic patrimony that one of the characters, a rich and powerful man, egoistically treasures for himself as the world collapses. In other words, the director downplayed the work's sonic affordances for the sublime, to turn it instead into a generic example of beautiful music. Now, by making of appreciation of this beautiful art the symbol of power in an apocalyptic context, Handel's music arguably still contributes, albeit indirectly, to afford an experience of the sublime.

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