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The Sound System of the State: Critical Listening as Performative Resistance

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What is heard and what goes unheard in contemporary sonic experience is subject to constant negotiation. Although high-powered industrial emissions overshadow fainter organic vibrations, meaningful signals are still frequently intercepted in spite of the noisy environment. Such sonic signifiers or ‘cues’ could be considered as the fundamental ‘sonic blocks’ of ideology.¹

This chapter discusses the sonic methodology of critical listening as a means of interpreting these cues in their political context. This methodology can be used to reveal the ways in which sound operates as an ideological sphere. I will examine critical listening both as a method for analysing state sound systems and as a performative act of political resistance in its own right. The text draws on John L. Austin’s influential theory of speech acts, outlining the role of the listening agency in setting the conditions for the failure or success of illocutionary acts. Listening is then conceptualized as a means of resistance that can challenge or subvert the ideological signification of state-produced sounds. Building upon this performative role, critical listening is theorized as a method which broadens our understanding of how ideological sound systems can be challenged and resisted.

The chapter also includes a case study of critical listening, based on the author’s experience of listening to state-produced sounds in Tel Aviv during the 2014 Israel–Gaza conflict. The case explores Israel’s Iron Dome missile defence system and its part in the state’s self-produced soundscape of war. The case helps to support the underlying argument that reading and observing politics and ideology must also be supplemented by critical listening to the ‘Sound System of the State’ as one of the central tools of ideology.

The performativity of listening

When considering listening as a method of political critique, it is helpful to think of sound as a language and of listening as a performative act. In 1962, the philosopher and linguist, John L. Austin, first introduced his influential theory that utterances can be understood in terms of the rules governing their social use as ‘speech acts’ (e.g. promising, confirming, vowing, commanding, exclaiming, questioning, warning, etc.) (Austin 1975: 4). Austin argues, pragmatically, that a performative utterance is only deemed effective if the conditions for its success have been met. He divides speech acts into a three-stage framework, where ‘locution’ is the very act of uttering (and sounding); the ‘illocutionary force’ is the intent of the speaker and the contextual or social function of the uttered statement; and the ‘perlocutionary effect’ is the resulting act in the particular context in which the locution is made (99). In this sense, an utterance has a performative significance, since it operates in a particular contextual setting and has agency, in much the same way as a physical act. Utterances such as ‘I do’ in a marriage ceremony, or ‘I commend this statement to the House’ in a legislative assembly, such as the UK Houses of Parliament, are notable examples of how speech can usher in new realities and is considered as action in the eyes (and ears) of the law (6). But the discourse around speech acts often neglects to mention either the corresponding agency of the listener who confirms the performative function of the uttered words, or the capacity for different modes of listening to yield different realities.

Austin touches on listening when he considers the situations in which an utterance would fail because it is not accepted by the other party (Austin 1975: 27). Once again, he uses a matrimonial example: if someone says ‘I divorce you’ but the intended listener does not accept this statement, the speech act fails. A speech act is subject to particular conventions and contexts, and it fails to be performative if it is not accepted by the listening party. Speech acts thus require a listener; in the absence of a listening agency which registers and responds to it, a speech act will fail. Moreover, for a performative utterance to be effective, the listening agency must be aware of the specific meaning the sounds carry in the particular context in which they are uttered.

A stable operating relationship between sounding and listening is indeed crucial for an ideology to work. Mladen Dolar offers a poignant if amusing anecdote as an illustration of this. In the midst of battle, an Italian officer shouts, ‘Soldiers, attack!’, three times in a loud, clear voice – yet none of his soldiers move. Following his third and loudest cry, a tiny voice rises from the trenches, commenting appreciatively, *che bella voce!* (what a beautiful voice!) (Dolar 2006: 3). For the command to be made manifest, the soldiers (the listening agents) have to be aware of the contextual significance of the officer’s utterance in order to respond to its interpellation. In this case, the speech act failed because the contexts of the listeners and the speaker did not align. The listening agency did not register the logic or discursive meaning in the officer’s performative order, only the phonic beauty of the calling voice.

This example illustrates how a change in the listening mode can subvert a performative act; it is the listener who *listens for*, selects, filters, identifies, and determines the utterance’s

capacity to *act*. In this case, the different mode of listening led to the officer's locution becoming a musical illocution instead of a military one. The listening agency altered the conditions and thus stripped the utterance from its ideological significance, illustrating how indispensable the listening party is to the performative sequence. Changing the listener, their attention or their mode of listening, altered the performative function of the uttered speech act. A similar albeit more conscious performative act of resistance takes place in critical listening.

Critical listening as resistance

Critical listening requires an awareness of *how* we listen and what we listen *for*. An apprehension of its performative agency enables listening to become an act of resistance since it breaks the performative chain between illocution and perlocution. Critical listening entails recognizing the performative meaning of sounds and considering the ideological meaning embedded in them. It involves suspending any immediate response to the sound, in order to identify the cultural or political expectation embedded in it. By withstanding the automatic urge to heed the meaning of the call, the listener resists the 'hail' of ideology.

'Hailing', or 'interpellation', is the process by which a dominant ideology transforms individuals into subjects. Louis Althusser famously uses the example of the moment when a police officer shouts, 'Hey, you there!', and a startled individual turns round; the very act of turning transforms that individual into a subject as they identify themselves as the addressee (Althusser 2014: 191). They might not even have turned; their attention and recognition alone is sufficient as an act of self-production. This recognition happens at the point of listening. Critical listening becomes an act of resistance precisely at that level – where the listener acknowledges their position as the sound's addressee yet questions who the instigator is, and the purpose and consequence of their call, and then considers whether and how to respond. For Althusser, ideology is the 'imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (256). This relationship is mediated in listening, through the knowledge, stories, or primed expectations listeners have towards the sounds they hear. In order to resist the call of ideology, critical listening requires some disengagement from the immediate meaning and affect that sounds can provoke. To adopt Roland Barthes's advice, critical thinking involves asking not only what signals mean but also what they tell us about their producers (Barthes 1991: 245). Listening can establish a critical relationship between the listener and the emitter if the former questions the message and, by doing so, interrogates the emitter. Thus, listening critically implicates the listener in the distribution of ideological sounds by producing a buffer within which the performative chain of sounds can be questioned.

Here, I would like to extend the notion of illocutionary acts beyond pure linguistics into 'sonic acts' which, much like speech acts, carry their own performative ideological meaning and 'speak' to the cultural context by which they are heard. Sounds such as car alarms, sirens, engine revs, or the sound design cues on a phone or game console, all

transmit performative messages and have a similar function and effect to words. Sonic acts therefore warrant a similar treatment to speech acts, when they are listened to critically, within their political context.

There are therefore two stages to the critical listening method. First, an attempt is made by the listener to undo the causal link between sounds and their performative significance. This act suspends the affective impact of the sounds and questions their ideological meaning. One way to do this is by distinguishing between the sound's 'phonos' (material presence) and its 'logos' (the discursive signification it carries). This separation is achieved by withholding interpretation of the abstract meaning of sounds, delving instead into their concrete material properties so as to describe the sounds and chart their timbral, temporal, and spatial organization. Second, the illocutionary (social, political, contextual) meaning of the sounds is isolated from their locutionary (abstract) presence. This stage aims to unpick the performative significance of the sounds from their immediate affect. While listening, an attempt is made to listen for the intrinsic structures of the sonic event and thus to reveal the underlying ideological mechanisms at play. If we follow Austin's pragmatism, such an act of critical listening may lead to the failure of a sonic act since its immediate function as an ideological hail has been undermined by the very act of questioning.

The 'sound system of the state'

The case study below exemplifies the use of critical listening during a political conflict, drawing on the notion of the 'sound system of the state' (SSS) which has emerged from my analysis of the use of sound in conflicts in Palestine–Israel (Tlaim 2017). The SSS refers to the sonic aspect of the state's 'apparatus' – the discourses, legislation, emissions, and interceptions the state employs to assert its power and sovereignty, manage ~~(decode)~~ its flows,² and forge and propagate its identity, both internally and externally (Althusser 2006). The performative role played by sounds in constructing ideological spaces is central to this investigation. As Leonardo Cardoso notes in his introduction to *Hearing Like a State*, sound is a particularly 'tricky' medium for the state to grasp, due to its 'ontological fluidity, measurement complexity, and legal instability' (Cardoso 2019: 2). Yet, the power of language, the sound of the voice, of amplification and music, and the echoes of landscapes and architecture are all too great for the state to ignore.

The ideological use of sound is explored in Carolyn Birdsall's influential book *Nazi Soundscapes*. Birdsall's investigation rests on the underlying premise that the study of soundscapes can be particularly helpful in gaining insight into social organizations and the ways in which power relationships between **states** and civilians unfold within public spaces (Birdsall 2012: 12). **State ideology** is expressed sonically within myriads of interactions in the contested borders of Palestine–Israel, where confrontations often take place outdoors, in and around border spaces. The gamut of noises produced by state apparatuses, a vast range from military emissions to festive sounds, have been studied widely by sound scholars. The military use of sonic tactics, for example, includes the sonic booms produced by fighter jets

flying at supersonic speeds, drone sounds emitted by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and the deployment of sonic weaponry such as long-range acoustic devices (LRADs), sirens, megaphones, and other ‘crowd control’ devices (Goodman 2010: 14; Tlalim and Schuppli 2014; Cusick 2015: 379; Schuppli, Tlalim, and Hoare 2015).

The metaphor of a sound system may refer to the use of sonic techniques and technologies in social gatherings as a means for sharing knowledge, cohabiting, and directing communal gatherings. Sound, according to Julian Henriques, offers a dynamic model of thinking, where the traditional barrier between thinking and doing is crossed, and where embodied knowledge and gestural codes can be rehearsed, practiced, and exchanged (Henriques 2011: xviii, 3, 252). As group identity (national or otherwise) is often celebrated and expressed through sound, music, dance, and/or voice, informal groups frequently use sound amplification systems as part of a process of identity formation. These systems provide a peaceful means by which to differentiate and demarcate a shared space.

The SSS also encompasses more hostile or violent soundings produced by organizations or individuals who identify with or embody the state’s ideology. Israeli settler groups, for example, frequently use sonic territorialization practices, such as song and dance, traditional herding calls, whistling, and other utterances, as well as sound amplification devices such as megaphones, to dominate spaces in contested areas of the West Bank. Such sounds are deployed to produce an exclusionary ideological space using minimal infrastructure. Many of the settlers’ sonic tactics have been documented by videographers working with the B’Tselem Video Archive and are used as evidence of the tactical deployment as part of the Israeli civilian occupation of the West Bank. Some of these documentary videos are showcased in the performance piece *Archive*, on which I collaborated with choreographer Arkadi Zaides and B’Tselem (Zaides and Tlalim 2014; see also Abeliovich 2016; Segal, Weizman, and Tartakover 2003).

The methodology of critical listening proposed in this chapter can serve as a means of exposing the presence of ideological sonic cues within the varied soundscapes around the Israeli state and its many borders.

Case study: The 2014 Israel–Gaza conflict

As discussed above, critical listening offers an analytical tool, a performative act, and a potentially powerful means of resistance. Listening to war, sounds are often heard without the corresponding visual image of their sources. The experience involves listening to acousmatic sounds as the vibrational forces of weaponry propagate through the air (Kane 2014). Martin Daughtry describes in his important study of a US soldier’s experience of the 2003 Iraq War, that violence was often first encountered as sound, emanating from those epicentres of explosions into which the eye had as yet no access (Daughtry 2015: 272). Listening in the midst of battle is a hyper-charged form of listening, involving constant frantic auditioning, interpretation, and speculation about the origins and nature of the sounds, their sources, and their spatial location. Critical listening is therefore a particularly

challenging methodology in the midst of conflict as it requires dissociation from the immediate sonic affects, and a focus on the messaging, patterns, and organizations of specific sounds.

The following case study offers a specific examination of the ideological role played by the sounds of the Iron Dome, which is an Israeli missile defence system that was used extensively during the 2014 Israel–Gaza conflict. The system was deemed by some military experts to be a political rather than a strategic weapon, and I argue here that the changing patterns of explosions produced by the system, alongside the blare of sirens, produced a soundscape that reified the spectre of war for Israelis in civilian areas, affecting their mood and morale throughout the conflict.

The Israel–Gaza conflict unfolded during the summer of 2014. During the fifty days of the conflict, the immensely high and extremely asymmetric civilian death toll reflected the horrors of modern warfare (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHCR] 2015a). The asymmetry was also reflected in the difference in costs of the opposing military systems, as Israeli Iron Dome missiles were estimated (by Israeli analysts) to cost up to a thousand times the costs of missiles deployed by Hamas (Azoulay 2014; Blay 2015). The United Nations Independent Commission of Inquiry on the 2014 Gaza conflict found that the scale of the devastation in Gaza was unprecedented, as ‘Palestinians struggled to find ways to save their own lives and those of their families’ under the intense Israeli bombardment (UNHCR 2015b). In Israel itself, there was a sense of panic among civilians, especially those living in the southern regions closest to Gaza, due to the constant threat of rocket and mortar attacks, with particular anxiety focused on the threat of assaults from tunnels penetrating into Israel. Residents of major Israeli cities experienced constant disruptions to their daily lives, with the regular wail of sirens announcing yet another emergency, forcing them to run for shelter, followed by the thuds of loud explosions, although a high percentage of Hamas rockets fired from Gaza were, in fact, intercepted by Israel’s Iron Dome. Meanwhile, Israel retaliated with ground operations and intense aerial bombardment, reducing large areas of Gaza to dust. The region is still reeling from the intensity of that conflict as civilians were profoundly shaken by the events (UNHCR 2015b).

The immense destruction, suffering, and horror experienced by civilians, the different ways in which online and broadcast media were used, and the many violations of international humanitarian law comprise only a fraction of the aspects of this asymmetric conflict that call for further research. However, as the sheer volume of subjects to be interrogated greatly exceeds the scope of this chapter, I intend to focus on the conflict’s sonic dimensions, using my experience as an Israeli-born sound artist working in Tel Aviv during the summer of 2014. I hope that my findings on critical listening during that period can help shed light on the sonic experience of the conflict from a civilian perspective.

In the early days of the war, I wrote the following account:

2.30 am: I am shaken from my sleep. ‘Quick. There’s a siren!’ my wife whispers, and she gathers up our six-month-old baby, cautiously trying not to wake her. We grab our mobile phones and sprint to the *Mamad* or ‘Sealed Room’ – a reinforced nuclear, chemical, and biological security room, which has been a statutory requirement in all residential properties in Israel since the 1992 Gulf War [Weisenberg et al. 1993: 462; ‘IDF Home Front Engineering

Advice' 2018]. We lock the shelter's vault-like door and shut the fortified metal window. It is an eerie feeling to shut ourselves in like this, in the dead of the night, behind thick walls of reinforced concrete and under an all-scrutinizing white neon light. We have not prepared ourselves for this. Most households would have installed some comfortable furniture in the room as well as food supplies, first-aid kits, emergency lamps, spare batteries, and other emergency provisions. As we are only visiting here for three months, our sealed room is empty and bare.

Before we have time to reflect on the situation or give rein to our anxiety, we hear four deep thuds. It is the first time I have ever heard such loud explosions. These are blasts that shake the room, setting off car and property alarms. Growing up here, we are used to the shrill of sirens that trigger well-rehearsed, embodied emergency routines. Our physical memory knows exactly what to do: grab essential items, run to the shelter, ensure everyone is in, seal the doors, switch the radio and mobiles on, and then wait for confirmation that it is safe to come out. But these blasts are new to us; they announce themselves very clearly. Sitting on the floor of the *Mamad*, my wife is breastfeeding our daughter as we try to keep calm. We wait for fifteen minutes. Nothing happens. How are we meant to know when it is safe to come out? I check my phone for news. Eventually, as we have heard the explosions, we decide that this specific attack has probably passed and we can emerge. Things seem quiet. No unusual signs anywhere. We go back to bed, distraught, lulling our baby back to sleep.

Inside the sealed room, the connection with events outside is primarily mediated through sound. The room **is** isolated and the thick concrete walls muffle the sounds, providing some distance from the immediate impacts. Despite its eerie and claustrophobic atmosphere, the space is conducive to critical listening as it provides the distance required to evaluate and question the sonic patterns heard outside. As sirens and explosions would be heard several times a day, the wails and thuds became recognizable sonic cues. The traditional shelter routine would involve hearing the sirens, entering the shelter, then listening to the radio for updates. The sirens provided the cue to enter the shelter, but it was always far more difficult to ascertain when it was safe to venture out. Listening inside the shelter, the terrifyingly visceral explosions had the effect of punctuating the moment when an interception 'event' had occurred. They signalled that an attack was over and that it would soon be possible to emerge from the shelter. The thuds reified the moment of attack, rendering it audible.

Later, it became clear that the immense explosions we were hearing were not caused by rockets launched by Hamas but by Israeli interceptor missiles fired by the Iron Dome (Landau and Bermant 2014), a missile defence system developed by the Israeli defence manufacturer Rafael and US defence contractor Raytheon. The system itself is funded by an annual package from the US Congress; by 2018, it had received a cumulative US investment of about \$6.5 billion and its operational costs are about \$1 million a day (Shapir 2013; Bash and Cohen 2014; Hamblen 2014; Samaan 2015; Winer and Ari Gross 2018).

The loud thuds caused by the interceptors provided Israeli civilians with an awe-inspiring orchestration of power that boosted their confidence and had a positive effect on their morale: civilians cheered and often filmed the interceptor missile launches, sharing their videos online. The noise of the explosions emanating from the skies dominated the soundscape of Israeli cities during the conflict (Samaan 2015; Wood 2016). According to military expert Yiftach Shapir, due to pressure from the mayors of Israeli cities most

Iron Dome batteries were stationed near city limits rather than next to strategic military infrastructure. Their audible and visual presence provided civilian populations with a sense of security. According to Shapir, this supports the view held by some military analysts that the political role of the Iron Dome was as important as its strategic one (Yehoshua 2011; Harkham 2012; Shapir 2013; Blay 2015; Richemond-Barak and Feinberg 2016).³ One decorated Israeli missile expert caused much controversy by claiming that the Iron Dome was not intercepting missiles but providing an 'audio-visual display that merely intercepts Israeli public opinion' (Broad 2013; Pedahtzur 2013; 'Israel Security Prize Laurate' 2014). The morale-boosting effect of the system helped secure popular support for continued operations in Gaza, as Emily Landau and Azriel Bermant explain in their analysis of the effects of missile defence systems:

Additional benefits of missile defense systems relate to the public mood. Critics of the Iron Dome have overlooked the positive impact that successful missile defense has had on Israeli national morale, and its contribution to strengthening public resolve in a war situation. This is borne out by the very positive response of the Israeli public to the Iron Dome system's success in intercepting missiles from Gaza, both in 2012 and 2014.

(Landau and Bermant 2014)

Critical listening in the sealed room

In late August 2014, the temporal and spatial relations between the sounding of the sirens and the sounds of the explosions underwent a noticeable change. Suddenly, although the loud blasts continued, the wailing of sirens was significantly reduced, disorienting civilians who were used to hearing them as an accompaniment to the explosions. In answer to complaints voiced in the media, the civil defence authorities explained that the reduction in siren soundings was made 'in order to prevent unnecessary anxiety among civilians' (Zeytun 2014). Of course the change caused some initial panic but reduced the anxiety involved in running to a shelter in anticipation of the blasts; it was replaced by the strangely mundane experience of simply hearing the explosions. The blasts produced a momentary shock but then would be gone, causing less disruption and less panic overall. Without the sirens, the explosions' emotional affect was somehow diminished. As civilians were no longer primed by the wail of sirens to seek shelter, once the explosions were over, life continued as normal.

The Israeli distribution of sirens soundings is centrally controlled through a system called 'Wall and Tower'. This system analyses the path of projectiles and then isolates the area where a missile is likely to hit, selecting its landing point from a system of 204 spatial 'polygons' into which the state is divided (Cohen 2014). It is a human decision whether or not to sound the sirens and across how many of the polygons surrounding the epicentre. The soundings are operated by soldiers in a military operations room and based on policy authorized by the head of operations of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). The policy is often changed tactically during warfare, and decisions not to sound, which may raise less anxiety, did

sometimes lead to loss of life (Cohen 2014). The siren-distribution system is an emblematic example of the SSS. For example, the IDF stated directly that the decision to reduce siren soundings in August 2014 was aimed at reducing the levels of ‘unnecessary’ anxiety in the population and not due to a reduction in the quantity of missiles. The sound system was thus operationalized in order to change the civilian experience of the conflict, which was primarily aurally mediated. The ability to manipulate the public mood in such a way gives politicians and military planners important strategic advantages. Landau and Bermant, for example, discuss the strategic significance of the Iron Dome’s effect on public morale:

Public mood can translate into concrete strategic benefits [...] [T]he public’s sense of protection by Iron Dome gave time and space for the government to make calculated decisions [...]. No serious military expert would claim that missile defense systems are able to provide hermetic protection, but missile defenses do create conditions for enhanced freedom of action for decision makers – defense systems ensure that they have time, and are not compelled to resort automatically to pre-emption and retaliation.

(Landau and Bermant 2014)

For the Israeli government, the Iron Dome system provided a lever of control during the conflict as its effect of raising public morale allowed policymakers space and time to carry out ambitious ground operations. It can be inferred from Landau and Bermant’s study, and from the IDF’s statements, that the spatial distribution of siren soundings had a similar political effect. As the frequency of siren soundings affects the levels of anxiety in the population, the ability to influence the public mood by controlling the soundscape in this way provides the government with a second lever of control. When used in tandem, these two levers form part of a wider political sound system in which different ‘mixes’ can create different sonic ecologies that have implications for both military and political strategy.

As the voices of political pundits and military analysts dominated the media and were heard everywhere – in homes, in shops, and on public transport – during that period, alongside the pervasive beeping and buzzing of mobile alert apps such as ‘Red Alert’ and ‘Home Front Command’, the political soundscape of war was almost exclusively rendered audible through the state’s own sound systems and media. These systems operated together as a ‘heterogeneous ensemble’,⁴ producing the soundscape of conflict and war (Foucault and Gordon 1980; Cohen 2014; Hamblen 2014; Sales 2016). This soundscape gave Israelis in cities far from Gaza a palpable sense of being under attack. It carried a dual meaning: on the one hand, it had a materializing effect as it reified the population’s anxiety of an imminent attack; on the other, it boosted their sense of confidence in the state’s military apparatus (Chion, Gorbman, and Murch 1994; Landau and Bermant 2014). The soundscape of the Iron Dome created an orchestrated ‘ecology of fear’, directed at Israel’s own population, while creating a sense of complete protection. The Iron Dome system seemed to appeal to both the public’s sense of fear and to its need to experience a feeling of power, security, and confidence (Davis 1999; Goodman 2010: 15).

Abigail Wood’s insightful ethnographic work in Palestine–Israel provides a lucid reading of the sonic at work. In an article called ‘The Siren’s Song’, she quotes Brian Massumi’s

proposition, that 'a history of modern nation-states [...] could be written following the regular ebb and flow of fear rippling their surface, punctuated by outbreaks of outright hysteria' (Massumi 1993: viii quoted in Wood 2016). Wood adds:

While the experiences of most civilians living in Israel's central regions during the 2012 and 2014 military operations were very far from the physical destruction that civilians in Gaza experienced at that time, the soundscape of the war touches on the ripples of fear that armed conflict causes in the stable surface of the state.

(Wood 2016)

The Middle East's postcolonial history is fraught with conflict, and Israeli civilians' modes of listening are well trained to follow prescribed emergency guidance in response to set 'sonic cues'. These responses to actionable sounds such as sirens, explosions, red alert app sounds, coded slogans, and performative military-expert speak, have been rehearsed and re-performed repeatedly during every person's life in peacetime, instilling the habit of fear and institutionalizing trauma. The sonic techniques of the state exacerbate this trauma as each generation of civilians is trained to embody the emergency response to these cues following the state's ongoing emergency response training. The devastation of the 2014 conflict might not have been experienced first-hand by many Israelis living in central cities, but the collective embodied impulse to respond to the emergency was provoked by the state's own sonic apparatus which produced the bulk of war sounds in major cities through its various defence systems. In the 2014 Israel–Gaza conflict, the earwitnessed elements of the system described here included the Iron Dome missile interception system, the 'Wall and Tower' siren-distribution system, and a plethora of analysts' voices, mobile app signals, and other sonic cues. The Iron Dome, a most recent addition to the state's missile defence apparatus, added a terrifying sonic component to the soundscape of the conflict. The awe-inducing soundscape of explosions had a dualistic effect of on the one hand reifying civilians' fears from attack, and on the other signalling to civilians that they were absolutely secure. This form of dualism is an essential attribute of ideological interpellation.

Conclusion

Listening critically to the soundscape of war in 2014 revealed that many of the sounds heard in central cities – sirens, missile explosions, radio signals, mobile phone alerts, and the like – were produced by the state's own sonic apparatus. In this chapter I have referred to the sound systems and infrastructures producing these sounds as the 'sound system of the state' – a sonic interpellation machine that prompts civilians to respond affectively, either with ripples of doubt and fear or with surges of confidence and pride. These conflicting affects are emblematic of the dual nature of ideology which, according to Althusser, simultaneously attracts and repels its subjects. The dualism is also embodied in the very term 'subject' which connotes, on the one hand, 'a free subjectivity, a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions', while on the other, it refers to 'a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, [and] is therefore stripped of all freedom' (Althusser 2006: 108).

The methodology of critical listening mirrors this dualism by enabling an analysis of state-produced ideological sounds while at the same time constituting an act of performative resistance. Critical listening resists the performative power of the state's sonic apparatus by questioning and subverting its illocutionary instruction. It is at the point of listening where performative acts may fail or succeed, and the methodology of critical listening proposed in this chapter therefore prioritizes the act of listening. The listening agency can make or break the causal link between performative sonic acts and their intended political consequences. Critical listening as a method separates the ideological content, meaning, and affect of state-produced sounds from their material properties, temporal organization, and acoustic qualities. As such, critical listening can be instrumental in unpacking the workings of ideology in its sonic form, and in interrogating the workings of the sound system of the state.

Notes

1. 'Sonorous or vocal components are very important: a wall of sound, or at least a wall with some sonic bricks in it [...]. Radios and television sets are like sound walls around every household and mark territories (the neighbor complains when it gets too loud) [...] [O]ne draws a circle, or better yet walks in a circle as in a children's dance, combining rhythmic vowels and consonants that correspond to the interior forces of creation [...]. A mistake in speed, rhythm, or harmony would be catastrophic because it would bring back the forces of chaos, destroying both creator and creation' (Deleuze and Guattari 2008: 311).
2. The term flow (flux) is used here in reference to Deleuze and Guattari, who regarded social theory as a generalized theory of flows (economic, commercial, material, cultural), the decoding of which is the business of every society (Deleuze and Guattari 1977: 262; Smith 2011).
3. According to Richemond-Barak and Feinberg (2016): 'IDSs [Intelligent Defence Systems] neither qualify as weapons nor as military objectives under humanitarian law [...]. An in-depth analysis of the little-known concept of civil defense shows that its rationale to afford absolute protection to those specifically assigned to protect the civilian population, even if they are members of the armed forces, is much better suited to IDSs and furthers the policy-oriented objective of incentivizing the use of IDSs.'
4. In a 1977 interview with Colin Gordon, Michel Foucault refers to the apparatus of the state – the system of relations between discourses, institutions, architecture, legislation, science, philosophy, and morality, both spoken and unspoken – using the term 'heterogeneous ensemble' (Foucault and Gordon 1980: 194). Foucault does not mean 'ensemble' in its specific musical sense, but rather refers to a system of relations between heterogeneous elements operating 'in-simul', in agreement or in concert. In this sense, it has a political meaning speaking of unity and coordinated organization. The valorization of 'simultaneity', 'synchronicity', 'harmony', or 'accord' in Western music traditions is perhaps precisely a reflection of how deeply embedded politics is in Western musical aesthetics.

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