

A SEISMIC MOMENT: SOUND AS WEAPON, FROM JERICHO TO WACO

By Virginia Madsen

Today I want to retrieve for audit, the soundtrack of one event that existed for a time on that critical and fragile border between what we term virtuality and actuality.

I want to take your memories back - a memory formed through media images - to the siege of 1993 at Waco, Texas. I want to try and recover the overlooked and repressed sound track. I don't imagine this memory jogging will be too difficult a task, considering how Waco has been re-cited and re-sounded through the Oklahoma City bombing which can be understood as an aftershock of the Waco conflagration.

In the limited time available here, I want to re-perform a listening, a listening that depends upon a weak point in the system, a listening that has allowed me a way-in to what was to become, **WACO - the media/military Show, WACO, the tragedy, WACO, the melodrama, WACO, the 'freak occurrence', the 'pulp fiction'.**

My radiophonic practice involved taking a profile of this seismic moment and retrieving from the chaos of noise, (the shock waves still trapped in the system) some sense, some direction. In scoring *Cantata of Fire*, a radio 'play' on the ancient idea of sound as weapon, I sought to track sonic fault lines, recording the tremors and murmurs, diagnosing the ratio of attack to decay.

Inspired by a reading of urbanist/philosopher Paul Virilio's work on how speed and the accidents of speed re-organize both real and virtually real (VR) spaces (this is the space, in effect, that we inhabit), I decided to investigate the events at Waco with the sonographic tools of my trade. What interested me was the curious way in which **son-et-lumière** performed together to in fact determine the course of events. For the T.V. cameras, hungry for 'lights, action, exposure,' there was little to develop here, little to be seen on the outside, except the boarded up white building (the compound) on a treeless Texas plain.

In this **auscultation**, in this listening to the tremor of the heart, I was drawn into the interior of events - sound offers such a passage - into the resonant speed-spaces of sound, precisely because Waco brought into play, the ancient power of sound as a weapon, to herald the coming 'apocalypse', to inspire fear and disorientation, and to penetrate where all else had failed.

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For 51 days the eyes of millions of spectators were upon Waco. For 51 days, the international news media waited. Exposure led to overexposure. Amidst this 24 hour-a-day 'over-exposure' of Waco by FBI and media surveillance cameras- the light of real-time media - technologically channelled and processed sound, (what the FBI called a 'sonic assault') was used to **literally** bring the walls down on David Koresh and his followers - an echo coming back to haunt us of Joshua and the trumpets of Jericho.

Sound here should be heard 'in excess' of metaphor. Sound here is paradoxical, **fusing** and **confusing** matter and energy. It is not simply material or medium, carrier of information, or expression of time; it can be thought of (and felt) as an energy. What's more, in its virtualised but potent form, a looming and invisible virtual presence, it becomes **radio-active**; highly charged, energetic, a matter of **attack** and **decay**.

Waco, the media/military VR extravaganza, fueled by the narrative of biblical apocalypse and competing Gods, found itself laying foundations directly onto the **terra-infirma** of America's great foundational myths- myths of exile, apocalypse and redemption in the promised land, God's chosen in the New Eden.

The site the Branch Davidians decided to build their bunker was the promised land all over again. They called it Mt Carmel. [remember this was a flat prairie] It was to be a refuge from the forces of evil now turning America back into a profane wilderness. The Pharisees, the heretics now in charge were trumpeting the coming **Revelation** - they were the Centralised Government; their footsoldiers were the FBI and their Devil's Advocates were of course, the Media.

In their paranoia, the Branch Davidians were not to know however, how time had caught up with them, they were not to know that the End, the Apocalypse, would come at such speed, and so soon. But they were prepared for the approaching critical mass. They were on the faultline, out of synch, out of gear, playing the discs on the wrong speed. They were digging-in for the duration - no matter how short or long it was to be.

In one sense, *Cantata of Fire*, aims to explore the interior and exterior spaces brought into inflammatory contact through the friction of information. Sound and light, two interconnected but here incompatible speeds, battle it out on the faultlines between virtuality and actuality, sparking off a chain of events that at first glance appears to be the **fault** of no-one, an accident turning tragedy into farce, theatre into circus.

Amidst this sound and light **thaumaturgy** or information pyrotechnics, the relationship between presence and absence becomes critical. Who is inside, who is outside, who possessed, who possessing? The interior **must** be seen, but to enact a seeing one needs to go in, one needs to violate walls, implant 'listening devices', and thus 'resolve' definitively the Waco eruption, interruption.

We could call the media's presence or intervention, in this instance, the 'resolving power' of Real-Time tele-vision. Its ability to **resolve** definitively **the reality of the moment**, and by so doing **lay claim** to it. It is here surveillance, penetration through interface, the Gods playing with fire.

But to begin my sounding out of these interior spaces, I want bring the interior to the exterior through the technics of auscultation. This is a listening to the heart's murmur, a listening for signals of tremor or anything out of the ordinary, and things were extraordinary in Waco, Texas in those days leading to the fire that killed 71 people, 25 of them children.

Now, before I replay some of this 'soundtrack' you'll need to know a bit more about the topography of Waco, in other words you'll need to recognize some of the '**attack signals**' (very odd indeed) that were largely overlooked by media coverage. This 'overlooking' and lack of listening, I'll call, taking Paul Virilio's term, '**image-block**'.

Waco, is an example I think, of 'image block', a kind of blindness that comes from an overexposure of information. Too many images, overlit, travelling too fast, no time for reflection, **no time to see things in relief: no time delay** in which to receive even an echo. So fast is 'real-time' in fact that the ground against which - in relief - a landscape is defined, this ground, loses all stability; with 'high definition' we just keep 'improving' our resolution until it seems that there can be no profile at all.

The media/military machines need (or desire) to see immediately, to make **transparent/trans-apparent**, to illuminate, through the light of speed, to possess through virtual sight - this desire led to what Virilio calls 'image block'. The urgent need for visible action - and for a long time at Waco, there was none - meant that the Media and the FBI exchanged 'development time' for overexposure, bombarding the site with light and white noise, fashioning in that peculiar time we call 'Real-Time' a new relief that bore less and less resemblance to the actual place inhabited by a bunch of wacko outcasts calling themselves 'The Branch Davidians'.

The real-time image pick-up of Waco, 1993, **in effect**, blocked other information, other evidence of **sense**; it blocked access to knowledge, to understanding, to **diffusion** - instead we were presented with **fusion**, with **confusion**. This insistence on 'real time' coverage blocked access to the 'Other' that a 'sounding out' might have provided. What, in the end, we got, was more light more fire, a fascinating spectacle in which we could discern only the reflection of ourselves. This was a feedback loop, (images and sounds repeating over and over, going nowhere, creating friction without release until fusion/confusion burned even our images away). This was the tragedy of Joshua and his tribe by the God of **seismic Word**. The walls of Jericho and Waco, in this closed circuit narrative, **would** come

tumbling down, God had **willed** it to be and besides, this was no subtext to the story, it was the **key** text.

Seismic activity here is discerned by **attending to what is invisible, to what cannot and could never be 'brought to light'**. The seismic activity I'm referring to here has its sonic profile and carries with it another type of energy, **radio-activity** which even now in the light of Oklahoma, has not totally decayed.

But enough speculation; the sounds of sonic attack (FBI's words) what were they?: During the long nights of featureless waiting, the FBI directed at the compound, an arsenal of amplified sounds using loudspeakers; the sound of babies crying, small animals (baby rabbits?) being killed, telephones off the hook, or ringing, dentists drills (more than metaphor, don't you think?), and adding a touch of bathos to the show, the music of *The Carpenters* (I'll let you work out that particular choice).

While reporters kept vigil, and talked, and talked and talked, making up for what was seen as the absence of action, the FBI launched this 'counter attack', at the **speed of sound**, headed by a man stationed hundreds of miles away (the nerve centre of operations) who watched and listened to everything from his 'bunker' in Washington, popularly referred to as '**the Submarine**'.

Cantata of Fire, is a radiophonic performance for 6 voices. It is designed for the intimacy of the medium of radio. Here I am exploring a particular radiophonic 'space-speed' and a certain type of listening and *durée* that might attend to that. Much of the text, I derived from media accounts of the siege, incorporating words from participants, survivors, journalists, the FBI. Fragments of radio news reports are heard, including Koresh and his grandmother - these are the traces of sonic inscription I talked about earlier, inscriptions that still resonate perversely in the system, in the main frame of the media VR machine.

In this **dromospheric** realm (Virilio's 'speed-space') the sounds of warning, of prophecy, of impending war, can be heard to come to us, delayed.- an aftershock of the initial seismic event. These sounds (another way-in that gives us a reading, gives us resonances rather than resolutions) these sounds 'appear' to be out-of-synch with the memory images they now must occupy and metamorphose. Even though some of these sounds are sampled at high speeds and are 'digital' they in no way are 'high definition' - they do not have high resolution.

The sounds of sonic assault, babies cries, phones, drills etc echo with the memory traces of other sonic 'weaponry' - the trumpets of Jericho, the sound of bagpipes coming over the hill which once inspired terror in the enemy clan, the buzz bombs, the scream of flying bombs, and that whole class of weapon now being developed in the 'smart bomb' category, the ammunition that uses subsonic frequencies, to induce nausea, and thus literally puts the enemy off balance.

With these echoes in mind, I will play now an excerpt of *Cantata of Fire*, (the last 'scene' where the chorus begins to break up like ashes) you of course already know the end, the image of flames, black clouds, dis-integration, the fire that erupted/interrupted the stasis of action, that final release of energy in light which made everything totally **transparent**, that final release generated by the rapid and continual flow of data through this single dense 'fault' in the informational landscape. You had this vision, but what do you remember hearing?

Cantata of Fire, for soprano, chorus of three female voices, two males and of course, the sonic assault.

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