

“Cremation of senses in friendly fire”: on sound and biopolitics (via KMFDM & World War Z)

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Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Acoustics, Article, Cultural Studies, Digital Media, Film/Movies/Cinema

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There’s a 20-year gap in chronology between [KMFDM’s 1993 song “A Drug Against War”](#) and [Marc Forster’s 2013 film *World War Z*](#), but sonically and ideologically they’re very, very similar. They contain the same kinds of sounds—machine guns, military orders barked over radios, buzzing crowds—and they use these sounds in the same way: to build sonic intensity past its breaking point (a “sonic bombardment brighter than sunlight,” as the KMFDM lyrics say). Their sonic similarity is evidence of neoliberalism’s intensification in the 20 years between them: what was once avant-garde opposition is later mainstream norm.

The songs’ sonic similarity reveals the central role of *sound* in contemporary biopolitics. By listening closely to “A Drug Against War” and the soundscape of *World War Z*—a film in which Brad Pitt saves humanity from a zombie apocalypse by giving all survivors a terminal disease—I show sound as more than a privileged *aesthetic* domain; sound actually provides the epistemic background and the concrete mechanisms for organizing society. Just as vision and “the gaze” are the ideological and technological foundation of panopticism, sound is the ideological and technological foundation of contemporary biopolitics. Much more is at stake in this post than just a song and a film: it takes on how—and why—society is organized as it is. It’s also about a particular understanding of “the sonic”: sound as dynamic patterning.

Because “A Drug Against War” lays out, in fairly elementary form, this “biopolitical” sonic vocabulary, it makes sense to start there. But before I do that, I will briefly define what I understand as ‘biopolitics.’

Life

Like “neoliberalism,” “biopolitics” is a trendy concept whose precise meaning can get lost in loose usage. By “biopolitics,” I mean both an ideology of health and vitality and a political strategy whose medium is “life.” “Life,” here, isn’t individual health, wellness, or existence; it’s the ongoing vitality of the segment of society that *counts* as “society” *tout court* (e.g., in white supremacy, that segment would be whites). Biopolitics manages society like a living thing; for example, we often talk about the “health” of the economy, or use metrics such as obesity rates to compare different countries.

[“Overweight or obese population OECD 2010” by ZH8000 – Own work. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons](#)

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As Foucault explains in [Society Must Be Defended](#), biopolitics’ “basic function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances, to avoid accidents, and to compensate for failings” (254). But to do that, power sometimes has to kill. Pruning my raspberry bush causes more berries to sprout, for example, just as weightlifting tears all my muscle fibers so they’ll rebuild in bigger,

stronger shape. Killing off the weak is a positive investment in society’s overall strength. Again, Foucault:

The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer. (*Society*, 255).

Hitler’s “final solution” is an obvious example of this biopolitical approach to killing, but this practice also informs many contemporary US policies and practices. In the US, [black people as a population](#) have significantly higher mortality rates than any other race, for example. Following Foucault, we could say it’s in the interest of white supremacist society to maintain a high mortality rate among black populations because this makes white supremacist society “healthier.” The key point here is this: biopolitics promotes and administers life by generalizing and naturalizing what Foucault calls “the relationship of war: ‘In order to live, you must destroy your enemies’” (*Society* 256). Biopolitical warfare is precisely what is waged in both “A Drug Against War” and *World War Z*, and sound emerges as a weapon of choice.

“Kill Everything”



In its original context, KMFDM’s “A Drug Against War” used sound to counter US Presidents Reagan and Bush 1’s War on Drugs/“New World Order” thinking. Indeed, in 1993, it was hard not to hear it as a response to 1991’s Operation Desert Storm, the US’s first military action as the ‘winner’ of the Cold War. It performs, in music, the “cremation of senses in friendly fire,” that its lyrics describe. It burns out our hearing, realizing through sound the sort of “creative destruction” or “shock doctrine” that characterizes neoliberalism more generally. In this rather [Nietzschean model](#), the only way to make something “stronger than ever, ever before” is to first kill it. Death is the means to the most vibrant life.



<https://youtu.be/i4-bUYU3BH8>

The lyric—“stronger than ever, ever before”—is the first line of the chorus. At the end of every verse, there’s a short drumroll that leads into it. As S. Alexander Reed notes in [Assimilate: A Critical History of Industrial Music](#), “clocking in at “322 bpm, the eighth-note snare fills at the end of the verses fire at about eleven rounds every second—the same rate as an AK-47” (29). This flourish foreshadows the gesture that, in the song’s bridge [after the second chorus, around 2:17 in the video above], musically “cremates” our senses in friendly fire—in this case, in the rapid fire of percussion. This rapid-fire percussion is one of the sonic elements that “Drug” shares with *WWZ*; in fact, the chorus uses what is likely (according to Reed) a machine gun sample. The machine gun effect mimics blast drumming. As Ronald Bogue explains in [Deleuze’s Wake](#), blast drumming is a “tactic of accelerating meters to the point of collapse,” produced through the “cut-time alteration of downbeat kick drum and offbeat snare, the accent being heard on the offbeat but felt on the downbeat” (99). “A Drug Against War”’s AK-47 rolls actually accelerate to the point of *auditory* collapse, *i.e.* to the point at which humans generally can’t distinguish individual sonic events—the aural equivalent of seeing 24 frames per second as one continuous image. The AK-47’s rolls of ‘friendly’ fire cremate our sense of hearing.

The song’s chorus includes many other sonic elements shared by *World War Z*: doppler effects (such as the sounds of dropping bombs or planes buzzing the ground), rubble being moved around, military orders barked over radio. In the bridge several kinds of crowd noises are introduced: first, guitars buzz like a swarm of insects; then, a call-and-response in which singer [Sascha Koneitzko](#) echoes the chorus (which reverses the usual order in which the chorus echoes the individual leader); finally, a chaotic rabble of voices builds in intensity and leads into the sense-cremating climax.



KMFDM, 1 October 2009, Image by Flickr User Axel Taferner

An extended and intensified version of the “friendly fire” at the end of each verse, “A Drug Against War”’s climax builds to a peak by layering two full measures of AK-47-style drumroll on top of sounds of rabble, evoking the image of the military firing on an unruly crowd. This roll barrels towards the point of auditory collapse—if it got much faster, we’d be unable to distinguish individual rhythmic events, and hear a constant buzz (like in the beginning of the bridge), not a series of eighth notes. The roll’s forward momentum intensifies musical energy to an apex, culminating on the downbeat of the next measure in a florid lead guitar solo.

Describing the song as “sonic bombardment brighter than sunlight,” the lyrics confirm the music (and vice versa). The song overdrives sound until it sublimates into something else—if sunlight is more intense radiation than even soundwaves, here soundwaves amplify to a state more powerful than that. Cremating our senses in friendly fire, KMFDM channels soundwaves into a revolutionary drug, a drug against war. The band presents cleansing fire meant to purify us of disease: just as a fever kills pathogens in our bodies, the song burns our senses to kill a pathogenic ideology. Overdriving mainstream musical taste, offering something so brutal, so damaging to one’s ears, that only the avant-garde can survive, KMFDM inoculates the population against its most reactionary, war-mongering elements. “A Drug Against War” uses sound to perform a biopolitical operation, one that emerges as the basis of WWZ’s plot: the only way to save the human race from the zombies is to *kill everything*.

WWZ



World War Z intensifies the horrors of contemporary biopolitics to the point that the only way to recuperate from them is to intensify them even further: in order for humanity to survive, everyone must be dead on their feet. In the sci-fi universe of *World War Z*, zombies aren't eating for *their* survival, but for the survival of the virus they carry; they only attack and eat prey that are also (and primarily) attractive hosts for the virus. Pitt's character, protagonist Gerry Lane, discovers that terminally ill humans aren't legible to the zombies as human—that is, as attractive hosts. They won't live long enough and/or are too weak to aggressively spread the virus. So, he decides the best way to protect humans from zombies and the virus they carry is to infect the remaining people with a deadly but ultimately curable illness. The World Health Organization develops a vaccine that allows healthy people to 'pass' as terminal cases. The only difference remaining in the post apocalyptic world of *WWZ* is between the quasi-dead and the walking dead. Death is the drug against *WWZ*.



<https://youtu.be/HcwTxRuq-uk>

The film doesn't represent or express the biopolitical recuperation of death visually, but sonically: to make audiences *feel* what the narrative depicts, *WWZ* cremates their sense of hearing—often with more amplified and complex versions of the same sonic elements mobilized in “Drug.” Doppler effects, crowd noises, machine guns, military orders barked over radio bombards the

film’s audience as sonic “friendly fire.” Though the film’s soundtrack doesn’t actually blow out its audience’s ears (what lawsuits!), it repeatedly simulates sonic cremation; the tinitus-y buzzing one hears after auditory trauma—what one hears *in lieu of* hearing—functions as a constant refrain. Narratively climactic moments are composed, cinematically, as sonic overdrive. The massive car crash as everyone tries to evacuate NYC in the beginning of the film, the moment when Pitt’s character thinks he may have been infected atop the NJ apartment building, the plane crash outside the Cardiff WHO office—each of these events culminates in tinitus-y ringing. As physical and psychological trauma overwhelms the characters, the film pretends to inflict overwhelming—cremating—auditory trauma on its audience.



WWZ Screen Capture

In the WWZ universe, sound is destructive; it unleashes the zombie horde. At 49:00, a soldier says: “remember these things are drawn to sound...there’s only one way we’re getting you on that plane, and that’s quiet.” In a scene set in Jerusalem, excessive sound turns something miraculously positive—a Muslim girl and a Jewish girl leading a mixed crowd in song, a mini Arab-Israeli peace accord—into a massacre. The sound attracts the zombie horde, leading them to swarm and overrun Jerusalem’s walls. Similarly, at the film’s end, Pitt’s character empties a soda machine so the cascade of cans will attract zombies away from the doors he needs to enter. By this point, Pitt’s character has injected himself with a deadly disease, effectively killing himself in order to preserve himself from zombification. The cascade of cans aesthetically represents this narrative point and hearkens back to KMFDM. The cans drop out of the machine at an increasingly rapid rate, mimicking “Drug”’s intensification of percussion events to and/or past the limit of human hearing. Just as Pitt’s character has crashed his body, the cascade of cans crashes our hearing.

The climax presents a narrative and the auditory convergence on the same biopolitical idea: kill everything, because then the best will bounce back, phoenix-like, from that sensory cremation,

stronger than ever. Zombies can’t rebound from death, but still-living humans sure can (via immunization). Like a sonic bombardment brighter and more radiant than sunlight, this anti-zombie camouflage tactic phase-shifts death into exceptionally lively life. Just as the muted, tinitus-y moments in the film make the subsequent scenes feel comparatively more sonically rich and dynamic, intentional and carefully managed mass extinction ultimately makes the living more *vibrant*.

Sound & Biopolitics

Such vibrancy—that is, what Julian Henriques dubs “the dynamics of [the] periodic motion of vibrations” in *Sounding Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing* (265)—is what “life” and “sound,” as they are conceived by and function in contemporary biopolitics, have in common. “Sound,” according to Henriques is “a particular kind of periodic motion, variation and change” (247). Sound waves are dynamic patterns of intensities (pressure); they move through matter and respond in turn, both to that movement itself and the secondary sound waves (harmonics) that movement produces. *WWZ* treats this notion of periodic motion, variation, and change as the conceptual basis for the ideally biopolitical “life.” At around 20:00, when Pitt’s character attempts to convince the Latino family sheltering him to leave their apartment with him, he says “movement is life...Movimiento es vida.” Sedentary fortresses protect no one from zombies—we see this repeatedly in the film. The only way to survive is by rapidly adjusting to new conditions. The dynamism of adaptive flows—the ability to bounce back and recuperate (like an echoing pressure wave), to dynamically recombine (like both harmonizing frequencies and like a virus), to find signal in noise—this dynamism is life. Because it adapts to new challenges, because it moves, varies, and changes, life can bounce back from total annihilation, stronger than ever before. Only life lived like sound can be properly and sufficiently resilient. In *WWZ*, the zombie virus is a *eugenic tool that weeds out insufficiently “sonic” life*, life that is too static to respond to capitalist and biopolitical mandates for calculable motion, variation, and change.



WWZ Shooting in Glasgow, Scotland, Image by Flickr User Gerry McKay

When read through “Drug,” WWZ illustrates the epistemic and ontological importance of sound to contemporary biopolitics. We think “life” works like we think sound works. Because “life” is the object and the mechanism of biopolitical government, power works on and through us sonically. If we want to analyze, critique, and fight the institutions, structures, and practices that put power to work for white supremacy, cis/het patriarchy, and all other forms of domination, then we need to start thinking and working sonically, too.

Some theorists, such as [Elizabeth Grosz](#) and [Adriana Cavarero](#) incorrectly think this move to sound and voice is *itself* revolutionary and counter-hegemonic. Just as the critique posed in 1993’s “Drug” has been co-opted by 2013’s WWZ, white feminist theory’s sonic counter-modernities are the medium of biopolitical white supremacist patriarchy. When we think and work sonically, we’re working with the master’s tools; to bring down the master’s house, we have to use them critically and strategically.

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Featured Image by Flickr User [crisper fayltrash](#)

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