

If music be the food of love

PREFACE

In the secret prisons of Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib (at least), the U.S. forces applied music as a means of torture. As far as the public knows at this point, the selection of songs used, which is known as the “Torture Playlist” or “GTMO-Playlist”, consists of Pop, Rock and Metal Songs which are well known, accessible and very popular in the western world.

While the precise criteria for the selection of particular songs are as yet unknown, there is a rather plausible possibility: the lyrics.

Of course, the majority of the prisoners, who don't speak English, were not able to understand them. Additionally, the playing back of two songs simultaneously (as reported by some sources) might render the lyrics incomprehensible, even for someone with sufficient language skills. For the torturing soldiers, though, the lyrics provide yet another way to further humiliate their victims.

Having been used as torture instruments, the songs themselves are imprinted with ambivalence in three ways: The victims do not have access to a way of hearing the songs as popsongs. For them they can only mean pain, suffering, the inability to hear their own thoughts.

For us, the popsongs are still popsongs. Our perception might be slightly changed because of our knowledge of their use as weapons, which, then again, lies far beyond our imagination.

The torturing soldiers themselves actively change their own relation to the songs in a drastic way. Of course they have not been exposed to the songs in a way similar to their victims, they are however directly involved in the procedure. They must know the songs pretty well, after all, they made the decision to use them. They consciously decided to use something they like, something they identify themselves with on a cultural level, as a weapon against their prisoners.

I find it quite hard to imagine that they could later listen to the songs without also hearing the torture instruments.

The songs, I think it safe to presume, have been selected because the soldiers think of them as cultural symbols, because they like them, because they listen to them regularly anyway, because they have access to them and because the lyrics open up possibilities for some incredibly cruel and cynical jokes.

The songs are imprinted with two opposed ways of perception, that can never be accessed simultaneously. On the contrary, they obscure one another. While listening to them, the songs *as weapons* and *as songs*, are always present and absent at the same time, yet always in the directly inverse relation.

The GTMO-playlist is, as of yet, unverified. Various sources claim however, that certain songs have been used. A selection of those serves as the sole musical material for this piece:

Bee Gees	“Stayin’ Alive”
Neil Diamond	“America”
Barney & Friends	“I Love You”
Drowning Pool	“Bodies”
Bruce Springsteen	“Born in the USA”
Britney Spears	“Baby one more Time”
Christina Aguilera	“Dirty”
Eminem	“White America”
AC/DC	“Hells Bells”
Queen	“We are the Champions”
Metallica	“Enter Sandman”
AC/DC	“Shoot to Thrill”
Deicide	“Fuck Your God”
Dope	“Take Your Best Shot”
Nine Inch Nails	“March of the Pigs”

Both performers are equipped with two microphones, head- (or ear-) phones and a speaker. For most parts of the piece, each of the performers hears a different song of the GTMO-Playlist on their headphones and, in excerpts, plays along to it, in the rhythm of their respective song’s lyrics. Every single note played by one performer causes the other player’s current song to be audible for the audience, through the respective other player’s loudspeaker. The songs are modulating each other. Both are there, simultaneously, in both saxophone & speaker-combinations, both as the rhythm that modulates the other song and as the “carrier” that is being modulated. Both are simultaneously present and absent: Our perception does not permit us to actively listen to both layers at once. The focus has to change, to switch, back and forth. The respective other relation is permanently inaccessible.

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If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again! it had a dying fall:
O! it came o’er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour. Enough! no more:
‘Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

William Shakespeare
(The beginning of "Twelfth Night; or, What You Will")

If music be the food of love,
Sing on till I am fill'd with joy;
For then my list'ning soul you move
To pleasures that can never cloy.
Your eyes, your mien, your tongue declare
That you are music ev'rywhere.

Pleasures invade both eye and ear,
So fierce the transports are, they wound,
And all my senses feasted are,
Tho' yet the treat is only sound,
Sure I must perish by your charms,
Unless you save me in your arms.

Henry Heveningham
(Set to music by Henry Purcell)