The Sirens' Glissando

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In the early nineteenth century, a French inventor took the name of a seductive monster from Greek mythology and attached it to a sound warning device he developed. Thus was born the familiar device "siren." If we reflect on the connection between the ancient myth and the device whose shriek pierces the air in times of war, we will discover that it is not just semantic. Both sirens – the mythological siren and the war siren – are woven into the webs of masculine power and ideology. Moreover, like the hero Odysseus, who was willing to temporarily chain himself to a mast in order to listen to the sirens' song, so are the citizens of Israel willing to lock themselves in a shelter so that their country can wreak terrible destruction.

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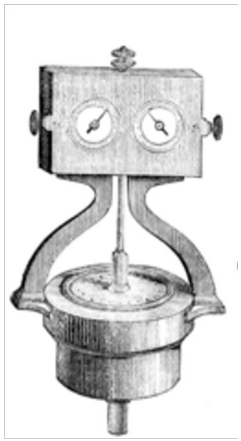
In times of war, we have learned, it is natural to hear objects rubbing against the air with greater speed and force: planes taking off, helicopters circling. A new sound has been added to the recent wars in Israel – an interceptor missile being launched from a nearby battery. This sound is loud and ominous, always sounds too close, although in the blink of an eye it moves away and fades. Of course, there are also sounds of war that are beyond the hearing range of the Israeli home front: a heavy object falling from a plane and leaving a charred crater where buildings used to be, armed drones cruising the streets and inside buildings, black rain saturated with oil pounding on the window. All of these, except for the last one, have a common sound characteristic: a continuous rise or fall in pitch. This is a tonal glide, and in Italian musical terminology – a glissando.

When an object accelerates or approaches, the pitch of the sound it produces rises; when it slows or moves away, the sound drops. The gliding effect of all accelerating machines – missiles, airplanes, cars – is related to the increase or decrease in the intensity of friction in the medium of the air. This soundscape also incorporates a parodic element: the wail of the alarm, or warning siren, which imitates the rising and falling gliding. Although the siren was supposed to be a distinct sound, rare in its quality, its opening with a tonal surge, at the very least, is cunningly woven into the soundscape of rushing motorized objects. Unlike the often-imagined sensation of the vibrating phone in one's pocket, the momentary startle from a passing vehicle – perhaps it is the sound of an alarm – is based on this sonic similarity.

Another parodic imitation lies in the name "siren." The French inventor Charles Cagniard de la Tour took the name from Greek mythology and applied it to a sound warning device he developed in the early nineteenth century. This device was based on an earlier prototype by a Scottish scientist named John Robison, who wanted to warn factory workers of the myriad disasters that might befall them there. Robison created a mechanism that rotates at increasing speed, the sound of the air emitted from it gradually becoming stronger and louder

as it accelerates. The glissando alarm sound we are familiar with originates from this mechanism, which is also based on friction with increasing intensity in the medium of air.

Michael Ball's book *Sirens* (2020) is an attempt to take seriously the mytho-historical connection that de la Tour outlined when he sought to link together his development, which could make a sound even through water, and the sirens from Greek myths, whose gentle voice tempted the sailors of ancient Greece to crash their ships onto the shore in search of the bodies that produced it. Among the heroes of mythology, only Odysseus and Orpheus managed to outwit the sirens and return home safely. The former, on the advice of the witch-goddess Circe, ordered his sailors to plug their ears and tie himself to the ship's mast. Thus, when the sirens' singing did not interfere with the sailors' work and the sailing routine, and when he was forbidden on his own ship, Odysseus listened to their voices and went mad with lust. His sailors did not heed his cries: most of them continued to row with their backs bent, and two of his companions tightened the ropes around him even more. The other, Orpheus, who sailed on Jason's ship, covered the sirens' voices with his ingenious playing of the lyre. Thus, by the gifted musician's embellishment of the ship with his sounds, a deadly swimming competition between all the sailors was avoided.



Right: Detail from an engraving of an early siren mechanism, unknown artist, Harper's New Monthly Magazine, issue 270 (November 1872); Left: Roland Zumbühl, horns in the village of Bretzwil, Switzerland, 26.10.2005 (Wikimedia)

Visually, de la Tour's siren might be reminiscent of a woman's form (or a lyre!), a metal body resembling an hourglass with a rotating disk inside. Modern sirens, on the other hand, are more reminiscent of Odysseus chained to a mast: a pole suspended from the top of a building, usually a government facility, to which speakers are attached that face in several directions. But Ball seeks to trace the internal logic of the historical sonic path created by this moment of naming, however arbitrary, after even multidisciplinary studies that go beyond classical musicology have continued, he says, to ignore the connection between siren and siren – between the one that appears as a seductive figure in musical works since the Middle Ages and the one that cuts through the traffic jam on a nervous ambulance, and even the one that

is heard rising and falling in some avant-garde and popular musical works. And does consciousness necessarily recognize a connection between objects, phenomena, and ideas that are bound together by the same sign, the same word, even if it does not always do so consciously?

Both sirens – the mythological siren and the war siren – are woven into the webs of male power and ideology, the latter as an expression of male anxiety and the latter as an integral part of male war. In Israel too, the sirens – with all the warning mechanisms that have been added to them, and whose successes and mistakes the media has followed almost religiously, just as they have followed the performance of missile interception systems in the rounds of fighting against Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon in the past year – contribute to the endless potential of war in defending the home front, in both exhausting and subduing it. And they are not just mechanisms of control, since the two sirens hold knowledge and beliefs about it – knowledge concerning what is happening "in every part of the country":

> Come hither, as thou farest, renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans!
> stay thy ship that thou mayest listen to the voice of us two [...]
> For we know all the toils that in wide Troy the Argives and Trojans
> endured through the will of the gods,
> and we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth.[1]

In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer presented the division of labour between the chained and hearing Odysseus and the deafened sailors as a symptom of the structure of industrialized society, which is divided into senseless workers and factory managers, whose exemption from strenuous labour is also a form of incapacity or disability. For Adorno and Horkheimer, Odysseus is the embodiment of the enlightened subject, the calculated adventurer. His encounter with the Sirens, borne by the power of the rowers' labour, captures the essence of bourgeois aesthetic pleasure as it binds together listening with self-bondage, mass labour with numbness, and temptation with a safe distance; for on the backs of the senseless workers, who are unable to refuse, the bourgeoisie can impose various restrictions on himself and thus insure himself against danger. From here, temptation is uprooted, becomes a mere object of thought – art.

This progress by limitation, by retreat, is the dialectic of the Enlightenment as presented by Adorno and Horkheimer, and it is present in the division of labour and hearing, disability and deafness on board. Its sounds are heard by the two thinkers of the Frankfurt School as a modern sweatshop, the place where wealth is forged and the masses retrogress. They recognize a similar dialectic in the figure of Odysseus, who enjoys the harmless temptation not despite his bondage but because of it. Nor are the adventures of late modernity free from this similarity, for what is this willingness to confine oneself in a shelter, a momentary and measured detention until the "release signal" if not one of the conditions that make war possible in the first place? What is the relative security of the Israeli home front if not the

[1] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, 1919), book 12, 184-190.

other side of the power intoxication that has sown terrible destruction in Iran, and is still striking its blows in the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon?

The retreat of mythology

That last Saturday in February 2026, when Israel and the United States launched their down attacked on Iran, caught me far away. On the way to the Czech National Gallery in Prague, with announcements from the media in the country vibrating the phone in my pocket with each alarm, the creak of the light rail in the leisurely European city sounded to me like a siren rising and trampling my senses for a tiny moment. One painting in the National Gallery, ***Fauns Fleeing from an Automobile***, seems to me to be the mytho-historical equivalent of that illusory moment of emergency: the mythic living world, momentarily illuminated by car headlights, flees in panic into the darkness.

Beneš Knüpfer, "Peonies Fleeing from an Automobile", 1905 (Wikimedia)

In this painting from 1905, the Czech painter Beneš Knüpfer presents a parable about technology as a late incarnation of the primal predatory drive: mythological primitiveness flees from technological progress before being crushed under its wheels. The car headlights reveal to us and to the driver and passenger next to him two creatures, a hybrid of man and

goat, one of them already grown-up, bearded, the other still a child. Whether or not the fauns manage to escape, one way or another, they are destined to pop up dimly and disappear. As vibrations and sounds penetrated my senses, I pressed my ear to the canvas: not only from the blinding light of the headlights and from the silhouettes of the men driving the faun and his son, but also from the roar of the motor vehicle, rushing along the rocky road and pounding on it, almost completely covering the sound of their hooves. The car, it must be remembered, is not just a mechanism of rushing movement that one makes way for or a source of light that blinds; it also produces intense friction along the road and a tremendous sound. In this painting, then, not only does myth retreat from technique: the pre-modern sound world also gives way to that of the car.

Advancement and retreat – rush and escape – thus constitute the moment depicted in *Fauns Fleeing from an Automobile*, even if in a slightly different structure from that of the plot of Odysseus and the Sirens. And just as the modern siren embodies, perhaps, something of the voice of the Homeric siren, so only in the light of the car can we see, if we are lucky, fauns retreating to the side of the road. And although the fauns in the painting are revealed to our eyes and to the eyes of the driver and passenger in form and colour and are relatively clear against the backdrop of the forest darkness, the driver and passenger themselves – our contemporaries, so to speak – appear to us only as silhouettes. In contrast to the driver on the right, an unfamiliar figure who seems to be concentrated on her work, the silhouette of the passenger on the left is clearly visible. He looms forward in the open car, as if seeking to get even closer to the landscape to which he is already being driven. It is that childish longing, that arched back, that smooth hair of United States President Donald Trump.

Here is a captain who has not chained himself – on the contrary, you can really feel his characteristic unbridled enthusiasm: in a moment he will stomp his feet, shake the car and leap out of it. Trump's driver's ears were not clogged with wax either; only the sound of the car's roar and the passenger's cheers crowd them to the point of deafness. At the beginning of the last century, it was a Czech painter could have sent a warning to the future about the complete opposite of every enlightened Odysseus, to paint the outline of a lightminded adventurer, incapable of being chained, let alone self-restrained. Trump is revealed to us from behind, like a silhouette, and all we can do is ride along in these capricious adventures of that wonderful deviation from the model of the ruler of Adorno and Horkheimer, more wonderful than anything we could have imagined.

And a final note on the similarity between sirens: just as car headlights blind the creatures of wonder and prevent them from seeing the source of the light, so too are both sirens acousmatic, carriers of a sound whose source cannot be seen. Modern sirens are hidden at the top of towers, and as for the mythological ones, Bull draws attention to the fact that the Homeric epic provides no visual information about them. In contrast to other monsters and wonderful creatures, described in detail in the Odyssey, Homer does not devote a word to describing the sirens – neither in the scene of Circe’s advice nor in the seduction scene itself. Although over the generations several traditions have perfected their image into beautiful

mermaids with tails or birds with the head of a woman, it seems that for Homer the sirens are nothing more than a sound.

The buzz of the world

In his book *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977), composer Raymond Murray Schaffer traces the changes in sounds and noises over the past few centuries, describing the transition from a quiet, noiseless rural environment to an urban environment in which sounds merge into one large background noise. In this book, Schaffer introduced the term "soundscape" into musical and musicological discourse, and he also laid out a vision for a less violent and domineering sonic world, and for a society that would develop a sensitivity to sound and restore its sonic landscape from low fidelity to high fidelity—that is, it would lift the veil of sound in which sounds are drowned, so that one day they could be heard with clarity. In other words, he sought to transfer the fidelity to sound that companies that manufacture listening equipment pride themselves on today from speakers and headphones, which are supposed to overcome and repel environmental noise, to the environment itself.

Schafer traces the brief history of the changes of time and their sounds by distinguishing between three basic components of any sound environment: keynotes – the most common and characteristic sounds of that environment, which are found in its background and are easy to ignore; signals – those that attract attention because they often encode a message, for example, warning sounds such as bells, whistles and cheers; and soundmarks (a word he derived from landmarks) – those that have an organizing role in the social and communal framework. Soundmarks are sounds unique to a particular community, their quality is recognized by its members, and they are what gives the acoustic life of the community its distinctive tone.

In his descriptions of the rural soundscape, it sometimes seems as if Schafer is immersed in a pastoral nostalgia for shepherds' songs and wind-inspired whistles, the clatter of horses' hooves, and other sounds of tilling the land and the routine of the farm. The blasts of the hunter's and postman's horns do, in a certain way, disturb the air-compressed sounds of modernity, but his descriptions of these sounds help him show how much the melody of the world changed during the Industrial Revolution, and how the multitude of machines that have crowded it since then have brought with them a new type of sound: the flat line. A continuous sound, devoid of oscillations and accents and entirely a continuous transition without decay, is the sonic sign of modernity's detachment from rural life. In the pre-urban space, the sounds are distinct from each other, interrupt each other, and therefore have an affinity for each other; In contrast, the flat line of the machine is devoid of changes, and is internally acousmatic – it has no beginning, body, or end, and it also does not relate to or is influenced by other sounds, as it overshadows them and swallows them in its noise.

Although the flat line is an artificial human product that goes beyond biology, according to Schafer, its birth is in the increasing human desire for speed: when a circular motion is accelerated to more than twenty cycles per second, the sounds of all the cycles are fused together, so that they are perceived as one line. And in the field of transportation, as in the field of manufacturing, "the human foot accelerated the pace and created the rumble of the car; the hooves of the horses became the whine of a train and the whistle of an airplane."[2] It is worth noting here that Schafer's taxonomic approach did help map a certain cultural chronology in the West in the late 1970s through its audible effect, but it is not the latest cry in the field of sound studies. Lawrence Kramer, one of Schafer's critics, dedicates his book *The Hum of The World: A Philosophy of Listening* (2018) to the attempt to listen to and understand sound not as something that accompanies objects, but as a living element in itself, as the measure of life. He traces the hum of the world, the sonic fullness of silence. This silent murmur has echoes in Virgil's poetry and Wagner's operas. It is a gentle hiss, an undertone that seems to be the world itself, whatever the setting of time and place, rustling and blowing it at the listener's lower threshold of hearing.

To Sheffer's quote a few lines above, we can add that the subtle and elusive hum of the world has materialized into a hum that is visible to all, an extraneous and annoying buzz. In one of the viral videos that emerged from Gaza in recent years of war, Gazan musician Ahmed Muin Abu Amsha sings with his students against the backdrop of the disturbing sounds of IDF war drones in August 2025 (today, residents of the north and Israeli soldiers in southern Lebanon know this buzz well). Muin and his students harnessed the buzz of the aircraft that circled around them that day to serve as the tonic note of a song written and composed by Palestinian singer Zaid Hilal, which imitates the style of Palestinian folk songs. "Shel, shel, ya Jamali, shel" – the speaker in the song calls from afar to the camel rider, *ya Jamali, there is something here for you to carry. May God be with you, the blood of the martyr is scented with cardamom.* Only in the third line does it become clear what will be loaded on the camel: not a bride and groom as usual, but the beast is to collapse under the weight of the dead, its footsteps to be barely audible beneath the flat line of the flying war machines that saw the air. Inspired by this video, artists from among the participants in the 61st Venice Biennale invited the audience present during the preview days in May 2026 (before it opened to the general public) to gather four times and become a "drone choir" – to play a drone sound file from their mobile phones or to produce this hum with their voices for ten minutes. The hustle and bustle of the global culture elite on the touristic island was distilled for a few moments into a siren choir that contained no danger – art.

The same rhythmic impulse that created the flat, humming, monotonous line is also likely to create, according to Schafer, its only decoration: the glissando, the continuous transition between tones with no jumps or stops. The mechanized glissando has two similar sources: one is the increase in pitch as an object accelerates its movement and the decrease in pitch as it slows down; the other is its increase as it approaches and its decrease as it recedes. The

[2] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and The Tuning of The World*, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1977, p. 79.

principle of the change in pitch as it approaches and recedes was described by the Austrian physicist Christian Doppler and is named after him the "Doppler effect." When the moving object approaches the listener, the sound waves it produces accumulate, and this is heard as an increase in pitch; as it recedes, they expand again, and the pitch is experienced as falling (and there is a perspective logic in the fact that what is approaching seems to be accelerating while what is receding seems to be slowing down).

Against the backdrop of the two historical worlds of sound, the rural and the urban-industrial, Sheffer places two guest melodies: war and religion. They disrupt the key notes, by amplification or fragmentation, and reorganize them by virtue of being "sacred noise." The church bell, the organ's blasts, the war cries (and in our places we can also add the blasts of the shofar, the muezzin's chant) – these are, according to Sheffer, the incarnations of thunder and volcanic eruptions, deafening and awe-inspiring sounds that were considered expressions of divine power. Herein lies the essence of the sonic turning point heralded by the Industrial Revolution: as soon as industrialists were allowed to make almost unlimited noise with steam engines and furnaces, sacred noise moved into the realm of dance. According to Sheffer, the human imagination has always associated noise with power. From God the power passed to the servants in the sanctuary, and from them the path to the industrialist, the broadcasting station and the airline is already short. And he clarifies: " to have the Sacred Noise is not merely to make the biggest noise; rather it is a matter of having the authority to make it without censure.."[3] And this is the secret of the great success of the Industrial Revolution: " noise is so important as an attention-getter that if quiet machinery could have been developed, the success of industrialization might not have been so total. For emphasis let us put this more dramatically: if cannons had been silent, they would never have been used in warfare."[4] And if it were possible to alert the public silently, it would never have been mobilized to fear the war and support it.

Epilogue: the slotless utopia

It is not just our soundscape that is a smooth, continuous smear. Photos of faces are retouched (if makeup and Botox haven't smoothed out the wrinkles first), wooden furniture is well-polished, and plastic is already smoothed; 360-degree panoramas stitch together multiple images into a complete, spherical representation of spaces; video games create flawlessly perfect worlds; spinning knives mix fruit, powders, and water into a drink that slides through a straw without sediment; the back glistens from an oil massage, the penis from lubricant, the DJ melts the musical tracks into each other – this is the "set," which is no longer an array of separate objects but one long mass of rhythms immersed in each other. Television and radio also broadcast nonstop, and streaming services – no longer "broadcasting," but "streaming" – play song after song, video after video, conveyor belt after escalator after train; The roads are smooth, and only patches of asphalt, speed bumps, prominent reflectors, traffic lights,

[3] Ibid, 76.
[4] Ibid, 77-78.

traffic jams, and border barriers disrupt the flow of traffic; the finger flicks across a smooth black surface, scrolling through texts and images into unfathomable abysses in an extensive network of social and economic connections, and releasing endless information to float between computers and servers – text messages, images, bank transfers, news updates, links to register, to choose a track, to pay, to a security wall, to a verification pull, to the camera immediately activating facial recognition to complete the password and move on, into the next stream of information.

In this slippery utopia, in the realm of continuity, another sonic glide pleases our ears. If the glissando of friction in acceleration and approach, that of the car and the plane, is the key sound of our soundscape, and if its signal-sound is the rising and falling alarm that suddenly interrupts every action and requires an immediate decision about the next step, then the soundmark – around which communities gather – is the endless, ecstatic glissando of popular electronic music, of the party and the rave.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the Shepherd-Risset glissando has begun to gain traction in electronic music. In contrast to the bounded sound glides, which have been documented since the Renaissance in string and wind instruments and in singing, the Shepherd-Risset glissando is a tonal line that seems to ascend (or descend) to infinity. It is an ecstatic sonic illusion, an eternal erection developed by the American scientist Roger Shepherd and the French composer Jean-Claude Risset. In a 1964 article, Shepherd presented the sonic version of Escher's visual illusion of stairs that endlessly ascend or descend. The human ear has difficulty distinguishing between notes in an octave interval, so it is possible to play the same scale by playing several notes together in this interval and changing the volume of the different overlapping notes – gradually increasing the volume of the low notes and decreasing the high notes. Thus, the listener will perceive the notes as rising steadily, even though in reality there is no change in pitch between the repeated playing of the scales.[5] A few years later, Risset transformed the steps into an inclined conveyor belt, thereby realizing the ecstatic potential of the Shepherd scale in the form of a glissando: a continuous tonal line that seems to rise infinitely.

Shepherd and Risset embodied in sound what Adorno and Horkheimer wrote: “The servant remains enslaved in body and spirit; the master withdraws. No authority has ever been able to escape this tax, and the seemingly circular nature of the progress of history is partly explained by this depletion, the counterpart of power.” [6] Thanks to the parallel, interdependent paths of perfection and degeneration, progress and retreat, audacity and self-restraint, say Adorno and Horkheimer, history seems to proceed only in circles – like that wondrous glissando that sounds like it ascends to infinity even though it always returns to

[5] Roger N. Shepard, "Circularity in Judgments of Relative Pitch," *Journal of the Acoustic Society of America* 36(12), 1964, pp. 2346–2353.
[6] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, New York: Continuum, 1998, p. 35.

the same notes. Similarly, progress and limitation govern Odysseus's ship: it advances safely to the Sirens only because the captain has chained himself.

The pleasurable, ecstatic infinite glissando is the beautiful double of all other glissandi, the perfected offspring of his sirenic nurses: the everyday glide of the speeding automobile, the emergency wail of the alarm siren, and the terrifying buzz of the explosive drone. Whoever listens carefully to the soundscape of the slotless utopia will discover its dystopian underside: the elimination of protrusions, interruptions, and leaps has produced a terrifying glissando. Throughout this sonic journey – from Odysseus aboard his ship to the silhouette of Trump in his automobile – we have seen that the enlightened ruler binds himself to the mast, while the populist ruler calls upon the sailors to loosen the knots, unbuckle the seatbelt, and cast off the burden of Enlightenment itself. And once every rope has been cut, what remains audible is only the resistance of the air to the effortless movement from emergency back into routine, from pleasure into horror.