

Twenty-nine Days into the War: War Journal Notes

Steven Feld

CHRISTMAS WEEK, 1990

In the car, at home, routinely, my dials are set to KUT, the university's NPR affiliate. About the most alternative thing they've got going now is saturation-level Christmas-theme rhythm and blues, zydeco, and rock tunes. There are enough of those songs to constantly remind me of the multiple commodification contradictions that abound in musical sources that can also be so freeing, so liberating. Ray Charles's version of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" is so ironic, so finger-popping hip, that it completely neutralizes or inverts the totalizing muzakization process that dominates the holiday soundscape. But why aren't the NPR dj's reminding listeners that Elvis Presley's "I'll Be Home for Christmas" or James Brown's "Let Make Christmas Mean Something This Year" have a particular reading for many working-class people or families of color right now?

It takes me about five listening minutes to get irked with the NPR fare and roulette the dial down to KAZI, the local black college and community station. There the tunes are contemporary soul and almost every one of them is a call-in request dedicated to some friend or family member stationed in the Middle East. After listening for a few hours I have the feeling that every black person in Austin is related to or knows someone in the troops. That's really depressing, but listening to the love and pride in those many "This one's goin' out to Dufus from yo' little sis' Tanya," I can at least feel more in touch with one powerful and deeply affecting way this whole mess is central to racism at home.

CNN AND THE FIRST BOMBING OF ISRAEL

Video vérité meets the carnivalesque in CNN's immediate Israeli newsroom segments after the first Scuds hit outside Tel Aviv. The images depict a sole reporter trying to put on a gas mask while tangled in three phone cords and talking on the radio phone to Atlanta. For a good part of the time

this reporter's back is to the camera. He is fumbling with everything, shaking, barely coherent. It looks like he can't figure out whether to stick the microphone in his mouth or ear in order to free his hands for the gas mask. The image is a hasty one, not framed and composed. The camera is shaking and tilting, moving often and everything is confused and freakish. The lighting is harsh and uneven; often the light stands and lights are in the picture frame, along with piles of wires and open cases of equipment. The thrill of vérité video conventions are played up on the sound track too as the phone lines crackle and pop, come and go. For a moment my mind races to juxtapose all this with the brilliantly constructed out-of-control quality of Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* radio drama.

In the background of the newsroom is a large monitor tuned to Israeli TV; on the screen is a talking head instructing, alternately in Hebrew and Russian, how to put on a gas mask. Cut to close-up: standing with a gas mask in hand, then putting it on, the Israeli reporter tells the CNN audience that Israeli TV is carefully and continually instructing Israeli citizens, in both Hebrew and Russian, how to use gas masks. This is spontaneous but looks like a cross between Buñuel and Robbe-Grillet; cinematic hilarity of terror and experimental memory narrative.

Then the reporters open a window to avoid glare and to more fully image the deserted street scene below their building. American voices deep and resonant and authoritative from CNN headquarters tell the Israeli reporters that the boss says they must close the window right now "I repeat you *must* close the window *right now*" and all of a sudden the news moment becomes a surreal parody of military orders as a disembodied hand reaches in at the margin of screen left and cranks the window closed. It's the newsroom as the intertextual war room. *Dr. Strangelove*.

The Atlanta voices become more and more frantic, urgent, strident, trying to pump every ounce of new-this-second news from the reporters. Once they get the radio mikes to work inside the gas mask the voices sound like a gaspy cross between avant-garde Laurie Anderson vocoder talking machine whispers and Jacques Cousteau speaking through his underwater apparatus. Or like those horrible American Cancer Society commercials spoken by the voice of emphysema. High adrenalin, low camp.

Watching all this I vacillate between thinking this is the height of transnational TV Keystone Kops and grappling with the horrifying feeling that the attack on Israel and the impending discourse of Israel's involvement

in this war will inflame international anti-Semitism everywhere including down-home central Texas (where there is as much of it as there is virulent anti-Arab sentiments). This is one of the most unsettling media experiences of my life.

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The daily dimension of TV representation that disgusts me most is the notion of "the desert." This begins, obviously, with the depicted management of the terms *Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm* (names I imagine advertisers thinking up for products like beach-party condoms and new age wind chimes). It is most oppressive verbally in the locative and deictic distances of a war removed, over there, visually coordinated with images of vast openness and arid expanses. The "desert" connotes open-ended nothingness, just huge drifts of sand occasionally dotted by oil fields, refineries, air bases, arms plants, and the like.

I keep feeling like I know very little Middle Eastern history, but even so, I know that Iraq means culture and civilization with big C's: from chapters in the history of writing and invention, to names like the Tigris and Euphrates, Mesopotamia, Nineveh, Assyria, Ishtar, Samarian pottery, the cemetery of Ur, the temple of King Gilgamesh, the tomb of Jonah, the Tower of Babel, Babylon. Why is there no mainstream media mention that "the desert" is such a central repository of human history, home to, among other things, hundreds of historically vital archaeological sites, sites that are now being destroyed by the air war?

The only media piece I've seen mapping the close proximity of major bombing sites to major archaeological sites in central Iraq appeared in the January 22 *Village Voice*. But there has been very little discussion or reporting of the horrible reality of cultural destruction and how it fits into the racist underpinnings of war. Certainly nothing on TV. I am particularly repulsed by the images of General Schwarzkopf with his pointer, standing in front of huge maps, maps that are there to convince us of the precision, the strategic "surgical strike" capabilities of our airplanes. The real purpose of these maps is to erase the names and places and dates of Iraqi history. This is what I think of every time I hear the phrase "the desert" used to cover the entire spatial and temporal zone of the war.

Surely just the level of vibration from warplanes (much less B52s) is enough to demolish or irreparably harm buildings and ancient sites. The grotesque irony is that when the war is over, what might be left of the great legacy of Iraqi antiquity will be in the display cases of museums in the so-called Allied countries. Why aren't any of those museums featuring major exhibits of this material right now, reminding us of what we are busy blasting into sand heaps? I keep having the image that the war isn't really being fought in a desert but its purpose, rather, is to make Iraq into one. More and more this is what "Desert Storm" signifies to me.

This semester I'm teaching an upper-division undergraduate course called "The Anthropology of World Beat." The course deals with the global music industry and the dynamics of homogenization/heterogenization of various world musical styles since the invention of the phonograph. Yesterday I asked my students if anyone had ever heard Iraqi music. None had. So we listened together to some *ataba*, a popular sung poetry form known in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq, performed in colloquial Arabic and accompanied by the *rebabé*, a one-stringed bowed lute. These are narrative quatrains sung by elder male bards; their central themes are approach, reproach, and loss between lovers. As with other Islamic mystical concepts, there is a doubleness to the expression of physical love in these quatrains, related to the representation of divine love. We talk a little about this notion, the singleness of the physical and spiritual; the students are interested.

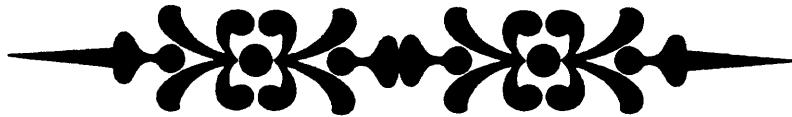
The response to this recording, particularly the persuasive and emotive edge of melismatic vocal techniques in a dialogue with the thick grain of the *rebabé* bowing, was quite strong. There was a wonderful stillness in the room as people listened. My students seem startled and moved to find out that there was a great Iraqi tradition of love poetry. And that its performance brought out so much of the plaintive dimension of the voice. I think they were both soothed and agitated by the experience of just hearing a voice improvising in Arabic. The discussion reminded me of responses to the subversion of setting a love story in Hiroshima after the bomb in Marguerite Duras and Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

This listening was juxtaposed with another one, of the track titled "Qu'ran" from David Byrne and Brian Eno's 1980 hit pop recording *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. The basic tracks for this cut are Byrne and Eno's synthesizer, guitar and drum funk dance grooves. To this they overdub (from an ethnographic recording, "The Human Voice in the World of

Islam") a segment of Algerian Muslims reciting the Qu'ran. Byrne and Eno credit the original recording they have copied in their liner notes, but have nothing else to say there about the reasons for this dubbing. When I asked my students for their take on the politics of turning the prayer activity of Qu'ranic recitation into avant-pop-rock party music, they were astonished and embarrassed. Some talked of how this deeply violated their previous sense that world beat appropriations were more about respect than about violation of cultural property. One suggested surprise, then fear, that Byrne and Eno hadn't met with the same fate as Salman Rushdie. An Arab-American student stopped by after class to thank me, quite privately and almost in tears, for playing the recording of *ataba*.

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