Soundscapes of war: the audio-visual performance of war by Shi’a militias in Iraq and Syria

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In the past decade a vibrant new field of study in International Relations (IR) has turned its attention to the performative and emotional power of imagery for war and security.¹ Scholars have shown how visual interconnectivity and new media technologies have conditioned novel ways of producing and showing violence, for instance in the infamous beheading videos broadcast by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, in citizen journalists’ detailed accounts of civilian suffering in wars or in Hollywood’s complicit collaborations with the military-industrial complex.²

Curiously, however, the music and soundscapes that are always part, sometimes even a dominant part, of war imagery and film productions have received little attention. This is all the more peculiar as IR visual studies usually contend that imagery cannot be studied in isolation, but must be related to text for interpretative meaning.³ Yet music and sounds steer, frame and caption imagery in powerful ways very similar to text.⁴ Jihadist videos without the guiding of the religious nasheed would be sterile or even incomprehensible;⁵ Apocalypse Now without Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ accompanying the relentless bombings of Vietnamese villages would lose much of its surreal impact; and the violins often added to ‘documentary’ war imagery of the wounded and victims of war less effectively direct spectators’ sympathies. Although we as spectators may not always notice musical backgrounds, melodies and timbres are effectively used to govern and enhance our emotions and interpretations of visual signs, or to install

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⁵ Nasheed is form of singing popular in the Islamic world, which in its purest form can be described as rhythmic a capella combined with religious lyrics, usually without musical instruments, as some ulama argue that the use of musical instruments is prohibited in Islam.
shocks and dissonances deliberately counterpointing the imagery. Sound and music, to paraphrase Judith Butler, audially frame what we see, or do not see, in an image, and how we interpret it, just as the audial produces emotional meaning and knowledge about visual events and visual subjectivities.

This article therefore aims to bring sound and music into the study of visuality in IR by examining the interplay of the visual and the auditory in war music videos. While there is already a wealth of literature on imagery and IR, and some on music and IR, this article will analyse the two together. It will propose four key analytical themes, drawn in part from (film) musicology, and from works on imagery and war. These will be used to study three ‘war music videos’ employed in mobilizing Shi’a militias for fighting in Iraq and Syria. War music videos in this context, I will argue, are not just artefacts of ‘popular culture’, but practices integral to war-making itself. The videos work to recruit new fighters and to keep soldiers motivated, and they are listened to during training and recreation, as well as in soldiers’ home communities and families. In this sense, they can be seen as technologies of war, or even weapons of war. But the videos also frame and regulate spectators’ knowledge of warfare. They articulate, select and enhance always specific and selective notions of what war is, and solicit viewers in distinct ways, for instance inscribing viewers in the same moral geography as the soldiers.

The Shi’a militias’ war music videos that this article will examine are circulated massively online by the soldiers themselves and through Shi’a transnational networks, and are aired on Middle East TV stations. Many are produced by the fighters; others by more professional production companies, Shi’a political parties (such as the Lebanese Hezbollah) and the Iraqi Hash al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Units or PMU). It should nevertheless be stressed that the production and viewing of war music videos are activities shared by armed actors outside the Middle East, including US, Russian and European military forces. This article may therefore also provide more general insights into how (post-)modern warfare is waged through audio-visual means, as well as raising broader questions about the ethical and political implications of turning warfare into audio-visual spectacle. Moreover, as tensions rise between the US-led coalition forces in Iraq and Shi’a militias supported mainly by Iran, this article may also offer unique insights for policy-makers interested in how war is currently imagined and practised by powerful Shi’a militias and networks in the Middle East.

6 Butler, Frames of war.
11 Butler, Frames of war.
12 Butler, Frames of war.
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The remainder of this article is organized in five parts. The first part analyses why and how music and sound are crucial to IR’s consideration of imagery and the visual. This is followed by a short overview of the use of music in warfare, and a third analytical section proposing four key analytical concepts for studying the visual and the auditory together. The fourth, empirical, section examines three different war music videos by Shi’a militias fighting in Iraq and Syria, each being an exemplar of what I call different aesthetic moods. The fifth section is the conclusion.

The curious absence of the audial

Visual security studies in IR have focused in particular on how visual representations condition our understandings of warfare and violence. Imagery is seen as deeply involved with the politics of war, as visual signs frame perceptions of current conflicts, the actors and subjectivities involved, influencing whom we as spectators may grieve and sympathize with, or who and what may become constituted as a security threat. Hansen, for instance, points to how imagery can work to securitize events internationally; Friis analyses how Islamic State beheading videos shaped the UK and US decisions to intervene militarily in the conflicts in Iraq and Syria; and Fish examines how hacktivist videos by the Anonymous collective have visually framed and militarized threats to online freedom. Others have interrogated the relationship between imagery, war and moral agency. Chouliaraki draws on Judith Butler to show how war photography has historically made certain compositions of combative actions intelligible, while making others invisible and morally impossible. Der Derian, inspired by Virilio, has explored how the intimate relations of cooperation between Hollywood and the military-industrial complex sustain a moral distancing from warfare.

However, as the anthropologist Sumera has argued, these studies have ‘too often been carried out as if the world was without sound’—or perhaps it would be fairer to say: as if the world were only imagery and text. Most authors writing about visuality contend, or implicitly assume, that images do not ‘speak’ for themselves and cannot be studied separately from international political discourses. Instead, imagery is seen as constituting an image–text composite. As Bleiker puts it: ‘Images always need to be interpreted. They have no meaning on their own. Their

13 Vuori and Andersen, Visual security studies, p. 7.
14 Butler, Frames of war; Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image for security studies’.
17 Der Derian, Virtuous war; see also Lacy, ‘War, cinema, and moral anxiety’.
meaning is contingent on other images and the verbal context in which they are embedded.\textsuperscript{20}

This article suggests that moving imagery is partially regulated not only by text, but also by sound and music, and that these elements work together as audial–visual frames. Sound and music contribute to making imagery intelligible to us; they can articulate visual or discursive absences, transgress discursive taboos, enhance certain emotions while overwriting others. In a visually saturated world, the aural landscapes or frames that accompany almost any movie, video or news clips that circulate on our screens or on social media platforms may not always be noticeable. Many of the small video and news documentary clips and memes from current wars and conflict zones that travel on Twitter, YouTube and global media outlets are produced by semi-professionals or political groups who subtly add background music or sounds to war imagery in order to enhance or steer emotions in certain ways and provide interpretative frames to the imagery. We are not always aware of this; yet music heavily affects what we see, and do not see, in an image, and how we interpret it.\textsuperscript{21} Although sounds and music are not unambiguous—as with imagery, there is an excess of meaning—music and sounds can offer a form of interpretative clarity to visuality in ways that are unobtainable in the ‘real’ world.\textsuperscript{22}

How, then, can we make sense of how the audial regulates the images of present conflicts and wars, the soundtracks that partake in the production of war while also shaping our perceptions of those wars? First, we may turn to the field of IR and music, and particularly to war and music.

The audial and war

Sound and music remain relatively unexplored fields in IR. Where attention has been given to them, they have been approached predominantly as positive forces and aesthetic practices that open up other ways of knowing and being than reason and logic.\textsuperscript{23} A handful of studies from musicology and anthropology have, however, addressed the other side to music and sound, uncovering how music has (also) become deeply implicated in how we understand war, and the technologies and ways whereby warfare is practised.\textsuperscript{24}

The intertwining of music and war is not a novel phenomenon. In the Bible, trumpets help to tear down the walls of Jericho, Homer’s \textit{Iliad} is full of trumpets, and Sun Tzu writes about the importance of the drums in war. In modern European history, march music, drums and cadences have been used as signalling mecha-
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nisms on the battlefield and to lift the spirits of soldiers, just as triumphant works by Beethoven or Handel were used to celebrate war victories. Military music has served to discipline the bodily movements of soldiers, for example, organizing combat formations into battlefield positions to prepare them for fighting. In Rwanda, music was used to incite violence and genocide; and in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, popular music was employed to boost morale and harden ethnic self-othering, and also as a means to humiliate the enemy. The US military has for decades employed heavy rock music as a weapon against their enemies, while the same music is paradoxically also used to motivate, drill and inspire US combatants for warfare. When US soldiers roared into Baghdad in 2003, they all listened to the same heavy metal in their helmets. As one US marine notes in George Gittoes’s documentary Soundtrack to war: “That music gets you pumped up and ready to kill.”

War music videos as technologies of war

During the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, US soldiers produced and shared what Sumera calls ‘war music videos’. These videos, composed of the soldiers’ own video clips from the battlefield, are compiled and edited with popular music and posted online for watching by soldiers and civilians alike. US soldiers listen to the videos for recreation and inspiration, and to prepare themselves before patrols or combat missions. In this mediated or hyperbolic reality, the soldiers are themselves simultaneously producers of, participants in and consumers of the war music videos, at times even staging combat situations to emulate the aesthetics of Hollywood war movies. But just as ‘reality’ apparently simulates ‘unreality’, so ‘simulated unreality’ also feeds back into reality. The war music video has become an official technology of war; it is now used as part of the soldiers’ training and preparation, being shown at all US Marine schools and when soldiers first arrive at base in Iraq or Afghanistan. Music videos have thus become an integral part of how US soldiers know and practise war. They are part of their training, recreation and inspiration; and even when they return from military service, soldiers continue to watch war videos and share them with families and friends online.

Making and watching war music videos is not a practice limited to the US military, but one that militias and armies in the Middle East also are engaged in. The music videos of Sunni Islamist groups such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are probably the most well known outside the region; but Shi’a militias and/or hybrid state actors such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas and Iraqi PMU have been producing war music videos since the mid-2000s as part of their war-waging practice. Like their US counterparts, these too are a

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26 Baker, ‘Music as a weapon’.
27 George Gittoes, Soundtrack to war, documentary, 2006.
29 Sumera, ‘The soundtrack to war’, p. 238.
combination of mashup elements produced by official political organizations, soldiers and ordinary citizens alike. They are similarly used to recruit new fighters and keep existing fighters motivated, and they are widely listened to, watched and shared online in their wider home communities and families.  

In the societies of Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, however, which are deeply split on ethnic, sectarian and class lines, the war music videos are also divisive and highly politicized. The Hezbollah supporter and singer Ali Barakat, whose music video will be analysed below, received numerous death threats following the release of his booming martial ballad. The lyrics are violent and sectarian, praising Hezbollah’s military victory over Syrian rebels in Yabroud. Shortly after its appearance, rebel groups in Syria produced their own songs to counter it. In Iraq, war music videos were already being used in the fight against US forces in the 2000s. They have spread and become popularized since during the battle with Islamic State, but Iraqi intellectuals have pointed to the cheapness of their production and generally distanced themselves from their sectarian lyrics and propagandistic purposes.

In sum, war music videos are more than mere representations of war or cultural artefacts. They are part of how post-modern warfare is currently fought and how war is known by fighting actors and spectators alike. They are in a sense part of the materiality of war, a way of conducting warfare, while also recruiting or soliciting us as spectators to such conduct of war. In our visually saturated and online-mediated world, it has become a practice shared by a diverse range of armed actors and states, from Shi’a militias fighting Islamic State and the US-led international coalition in Iraq and Syria to Islamic State and the United States themselves.

How should we analyse the combined audio-visual field? Key analytical concepts

How, then, can we analytically study the audial and the visual together? This is not an easy task, as the two vast fields range across several disciplines and methodologies (media studies, cultural studies, musicology, IR). In the sections below I will take a first attempt at carving out an analytical framework. Four key themes that analytically relate the auditory with the visual will be suggested. These draw on conceptual insights from (film) musicology and the now seminal works of Susan Sontag and Judith Butler on imagery and war.
Audio-visual frames

An image is, as Butler succinctly argues, never just a visual artefact awaiting our interpretation, but itself interprets, effaces and frames. A photograph is always a selection, from a perspective that leaves something out. Frames structure visual fields and produce certain positions of subjectivity or points of view, never just representing or documenting reality, but producing it. Analysing a visual field is, therefore, above all, about this frame, and what it enables and leaves out. In war photography, for instance, the dead fleshy bodies of one’s own soldiers are seldom allowed to appear visually, just as the exclusion of the faces of one’s adversaries can sustain (western) fantasies of enemy lives being inhuman or simply irrelevant.

Sounds and music, as this article suggests, also forcefully interpret by working as audial frames that equally select, silence, amplify or distract. When looking at war music videos, or other moving war imagery, the visual frames work to efface not only fleshy body parts or other visual horrors of war, but also the cries of the wounded or the yearning calls of fear and mourning. Music and sounds frame by pointing audiences in certain directions and closing off others; muting certain sounds, while enhancing or directing away from others. As Chion, a scholar of film music, argues: ‘Creators of a film’s sound know that if you alter or remove sounds, the image is no longer the same.’ Analysing moving imagery thus also implies interrogating the audial frame, asking what it positions inside/outside its aural frame, its conditions of possibility and the way it selects, amplifies, mutes.

Point of view/point of audition

A related question is that of how subjectivities are performed and how the viewer is solicited through point of view. For instance, the camera’s position may ‘invite’ the viewer to take aim and shoot; or spectators may be inscribed within the trajectory of the bullet, becoming friends or foes. The soliciting may also happen outside the frame, for instance in the Abu Ghraib torture photos, where the photographer, although behind the camera, by his very presence partakes in, and invisibly condones, the acts on behalf of the viewer. Yet, as musicologists would emphasize, there is also a point of audition in moving imagery. The point of audition partakes in the interpellation of viewer/listener and locates subjectivities in a certain space. For instance, the way the sounds of gunfire rattle may determine whether the viewer is positioned on the side of soldier or victim; or the point of audition may interpellate the listener in a distinct geographic locale or time. Thus, probing into point of view/point of audition may enable us to analyse


38 Chouliaraki, ‘Iconic photojournalism of the battlefield’, p. 79.


crucial questions such as how subjectivities are produced and the viewer/listener is solicited into certain moral geographies or specific self–other relations of power.

**Modes of audio-visual synchronization**

Classic concepts developed in the early days of talking films, such as synchronization, counterpoint and what the musicologist Nicholas Cook calls complementation, allow us to probe into how the auditory works to either match and enhance imagery (synchronization) or contradict and make images ambivalent (counterpoint), or to bring out and show off something not entirely there in the imagery (complementation). Synchronization occurs when sounds reinforce or deepen visual narratives, for instance in the second music video considered below, where imagery of a church in Iraq is accompanied by religious tunes and the sound of church bells. Counterpoint, by contrast, occurs when visual meanings are contradicted or a certain ambiguity is inserted into the interpretation of the imagery. For instance, in the first video considered below, pictures of missiles being fired and Iraqi soldiers on patrol are put together with light and upbeat party music, starkly counterpointing the footage of war. The auditory may also overtake and absorb a visual field, or give an aural blast to something not entirely there in the imagery, by way of complementation.

The invisible, or that which is difficult to express verbally, such as certain emotional states, subjects’ inner life or unspoken taboos, can be brought to light or accentuated by complementary sounds and music.

**Aesthetic moods**

It is usually assumed that moving imagery has powerful affective abilities, compared for instance to a written discourse or text. Through different aesthetic styles, film and videos may effectively elicit strong emotions and inscribe viewers/listeners into corresponding emotional spaces. Richardson and Gorbman suggest that to capture the way aesthetic styles produce affectivity, we may analytically ask what is the dominant mood of a film or video. Is that mood, for instance, joyful, energetic, sentimental or tense? And how is that mood established through micro-aesthetic choices such as lighting, musical tempo, auditory shocks, duration of shots, contrasting colours or continuity in editing? We may also look for macro-level aesthetic choices such as beauty, complexity/banality, novelty and comprehensibility. In considering the second video examined below, for instance, I

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43 Donnelly, ed., *Film music*, p. 3.
44 See e.g. Carol Vernallis, ‘Music video’s second aesthetic?’, in Richardson et al., eds, *Oxford handbook of new audiovisual aesthetics*.
46 Richardson and Gorbman, ‘Introduction’.
47 Tarvainen et al., ‘The way films feel’.

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argue that a banal narrative, combined with kitschy micro-aesthetic styles (e.g. close-ups of a pretty Christian girl bowing her head in gratitude to Hezbollah, or an elevated camera angle), inscribe the viewer/listener into a sentimental mood. Equally, in the first video, micro-elements such as energetic upbeat music, a gaze dwelling on the male singer, lively contrasting colours and an absence of narrative together create a joyful aesthetic mood that familiarizes violence. Taken together, all three of the videos analysed can thus be seen as exemplars of different aesthetic moods that through different micro and macro stylistic choices beautify and seal off the horrors of war.

These four analytical themes create an overall framework for the empirical analysis presented below. It should be emphasized, however, that while all four themes will be addressed across the three videos, to allow each video to appear in its specificity the various themes are not necessarily given equal prominence in each analysis.

Before embarking on the empirical analysis, a brief note is in order on the selection of the three war music videos chosen for consideration. There is a wealth of ‘war music videos’ circulating online and on local Arab and Shi’a TV stations that I have watched over the last seven years of research. To permit a close analysis, I have chosen three from the period 2012–19. These are all very popular songs that have been played on TV stations, radio and YouTube channels, including AA Mediaproduction, Aldahiyiya, Shi’aTv, Purestreammedia and AlforatTv. Hezbollah’s ‘Ali Maddad’ (the third video) has in just one of the many uploads on YouTube received over one million views,48 while the Iraqi video ‘You star’ analysed below has become so popular in Iraq that there are requests for the tune to be played at weddings.49 As noted above, the three songs have also caused public debate and division outside the militia communities, and ‘Ali Maddad’ by the Hezbollah singer Barakat has been censored from YouTube multiple times.

Frames of joy, beauty and strength: three war music videos

War as joy: ‘Ya sattar’ by Ahmed Jawad from Iraq

The music video ‘Ya sattar’ (‘Oh you star’) by the Iraqi pop singer Ahmed Jawad was made in 2015 to support the Iraqi PMU (predominantly Shi’a militias) in their fight against Islamic State.50 The video opens with a group of handsome soldiers, possibly an elite unit, moving in slow motion, while a simple piano chord builds up suspense. Then an upbeat and festive pop refrain starts. The imagery cuts to a computer screen that indicates the longitude of a target on the ground, and bombs

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48 The numbers of views are not, however, always particularly revealing, as the songs are repeatedly taken down from YouTube, and then reloaded in other versions, sometimes with other visual material and sources.
50 The video can be seen e.g. at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37AtQmL-KGg. The PMU is an umbrella term for the paramilitary forces and militias in Iraq that have fought against Islamic State (and, at times, each other). The various forces within the PMU are affiliated with different parties and religious leaders and are overwhelmingly Shi’a. Many of the militias, including Kataeb Hezbollah, remain closely affiliated with Iran; in 2019 Kataeb Hezbollah was also in direct confrontation with the United States in Iraq.
are dropped over a graphic visual of blurred-out mountains. The singer Jawad appears in his music studio smiling, singing and flirting with the camera. Cross-cuts are made to Iraqi men in traditional clothing dancing in the streets, jumping up and down to the fast beat of the refrain with rifles held high in the air.

Throughout the video the overwhelming aesthetic mood is one of joy. This is partly achieved by the many micro-aesthetic choices that appear to emulate MTV-style pop music videos (e.g. studio footage of the handsome male singer, imagery of dancing men/soldiers, fast camerawork/cuts). The male singer seemingly invites the viewer to join the fight (continually raising his fist in the air) and then uses the same hand to gesture ‘come, come’ as in a sensual dance, his eyes flirting with the camera. This aesthetic mood is further accentuated by the dancing men in the streets; even the soldiers dance at times. Yet in contrast to the deliberate fictive visual universe of traditional MTV-style videos, this video also contains grainy documentary footage of dancing Iraqi men and of the PMU elite units on search missions or dancing, thus claiming a form of representational truth and authenticity: war is really joyful.

**Point of view**

This aesthetic mood creates a dual solicitation of the viewer. We are invited to celebrate the war: the war is a fun party, the singer assures us with a playful smile, and we too can partake in it. In this ‘war party’ the guests are all handsome and hyper-masculine; the singer seems to be holding out a promise to the viewer that he can join the feast and become as desirable as them. By the end of the music video, this interpellation of the viewer has become even more explicit, as viewers are compelled to join in the violence experienced by the soldiers. In the closing scene, the point of view moves from a third- to a first-person war-game shooter; and in another, extremely short scene, two fingers are slowly moving to pull the trigger to a bomb. The camera zooms in on the fingers moving towards the trigger and then a quick cross-cut is made. You expect to return to the scene to see a bomb go off, presuming that the cross-cut is just to hold the viewer in suspense. But the bomb never explodes. The spectator waits for it, wants it to happen, for the bomb to be released and to sense the ensuing relief. But that desire for it to go off is, of course, the ruse that works to inscribe us within the same moral geography as the soldiers.

**Modes of audio-visual synchronization**

Without the music, this interpretation of the visual as depicting a ‘war party’ would be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain. The music is an overtly, even demonstratively, cheerful and bubbly pop song with an easy refrain; the upbeat tempo and drum rhythm steer the viewer to jouissance and dance. The music thus works as a counterpoint to the imagery of soldiers on patrol and weapons on display, in a sense absorbing the violent visuals, while the music in the dance scenes is closely synchronized with the moves of the soldiers, creating a total sense of joy and festivity. Gunshots are even incorporated into the music as substitutes for drumbeats. The sounds of violence thereby become musical nodes in a seamless aestheticization and familiarization of violence. The
rattle of gunfire is no longer a sign of danger or death, but one of pleasure and amusement.

Another dissonance erupts between the lyrics and the danceable melody. The singer, always with a smile—or perhaps even a smirk—is in fact singing about blood and revenge:

We come oh Iraq with a warning,
We have packed our brave army,
We will dry out the fire and jealousy (of the enemy),
By spirit and blood, they are evil,
And there shall be pain.51

Yet the aggressiveness of the lyrics appear not to be taken wholly seriously. The singer, who, as it were, acts as the listener’s authoritative interpreter, and provides our **point of audition**, sings about blood that will be spilled and revenge taken, but smilingly and flirtingly, turning the words into seemingly inconsequential utterances, also for the listener who is subtly steered to sing along with the pop refrain. There is a strong musical component in this relinquishing of the ethical, in the sense that what is uttered in the lyrics is not really said, but is sung. Singing works differently from saying/writing, as the rhythms and timbres of musical melodies allow the lyrics to articulate and capture emotions or transgress ethical boundaries in ways other than spoken discourse, reaching beyond discursive and visual limits.52 As the melody and rhythm take over, listeners are solicited to enter the same transgressive, violent space, humming the melody or perhaps, even unwillingly, moving the body to its beat. The music allows the violent words to appear less destructive and more palatable. Its joyful rhythm absorbs the lyric’s aggression and mutes its violence.

**Audio–visual frame** The audial–visual frame, by associating war and dance, provides an interpretative framework in which the battlefield becomes a comforting space for partying, and soldiers become dancers and party-goers. Within this frame there is no place for the uncanny danse macabre, reminding fighters of the imminence of death. On the contrary, the music works to reassure and familiarize; war is joyful, and the heavy arms on display are merely entertaining props. Also, the visual framing selects and withdraws. Curiously, within these frames of weaponry and joy, violence appears as if directed at no one. The other, as an enemy, a target, a human with a face, is never visible. We see imagery of a door being kicked in by soldiers on a ‘search mission’, and bombs are dropped, but the objects of these violent practices are never shown. Only in one scene does a computerized image of blurred mountain-tops appear to be the target of a bombing, but the image is distinctly non-human, distant and unreal, represented merely on a computer screen within a screen. Without the presence of the enemy’s face or

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51 Author’s translation.

52 See also Bleiker, ‘On what we hear but cannot see’, pp. 188–90; Buhler, ‘Analytical and interpretive approaches to film music’; Pieslak, ‘A musicological perspective on jihadi nasheeds’; Malmvig, ‘Allow me this one time to speak as a Shi’a’; Baker, ‘Music as a weapon’.
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even a concretization of who he is, opposition to his killing and the associated violence is all the more difficult.\textsuperscript{53} Within these frames death is out of sight; war can remain an entertaining party.

Although the audial–visual frame in this way tries to stabilize a certain meaning inside it, there is always a \textit{trace}, to use Butler’s word, that haunts the frame. While war is portrayed and perceived as a fun feast, a space for laughing, dancing and perhaps even flirting, the trace is still there, as that which makes what is inside the frame possible and yet must be denied.\textsuperscript{54} The insistence on laughter and dancing, one might argue, works as a psychological negation of fear, supposedly sweeping away the anxiety the soldiers and their home communities must surely feel when going to war against Islamic State—still a formidable force at the time, which had already driven the Iraqi army to flight and desertion. The audial–visual frame, however, never completely succeeds in its framing; its insistence on laughter and partying points to the very fear it was meant to erase.\textsuperscript{55}

The burden of war, just as in much western war imagery, is thus virtually absent or unbearably light. Der Derian’s \textit{corporal gravitas} seems to be glossed over with laughter and dancing.\textsuperscript{56} In the second video, as we will see below, it is perhaps rather the grim ugliness of war, and the highly politicized and war-hardened religious identities in Iraq, that is sentimentalized and swept away by a kitschy aesthetics.

\textbf{War as sentimentality: ‘The church bells will ring again in Mosul’}

In this war music video by the Iraqi Shi’a militia Kataeb Hezbollah, the scene opens with cinematic imagery of a ruined alleyway in Mosul. The electronic drumbeats and long fanfares in minor keys direct us to anticipate events of grandiose importance. A soldier of superhuman proportions enters on the pathway in slow motion with a small group of soldiers behind him. His intense gaze looks at a church wall sprayed with red graffiti in Arabic reading ‘property of the Islamic State’ and the letter \textit{nun}, which marks Christian homes for extinction. This graffiti is sprayed over and replaced with ‘Iraqi’. The wooden doors of the church are closed with a massive iron chain, which the soldier tears off with a sledgehammer, opening the doors. A roaring metallic sound punctuates the blow. At the altar the soldier gently picks up a cross from the floor and almost caresses it, as he puts it back in its place. A few elders, a woman in a wheelchair, a limping man, a little boy and a girl are about to enter the church, while holding hands with the soldiers. The music shifts to choir vocals and the tunes of church bells. The little girl appears in the doorway, veiled in a white embroidered scarf and slowly bowing her head with a grateful gesture to the soldier inside.

\textsuperscript{53} Butler, \textit{Frames of war}, p. 77; Lacy, ‘War, cinema, and moral anxiety’.
\textsuperscript{54} Butler, \textit{Frames of war}.
\textsuperscript{55} Similar war music videos with a festive tribal dancing theme can be found here: https://www.shiatv.net/video/120094163.
\textsuperscript{56} Der Derian, \textit{Virtuous war}.

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Within this audio–visual frame a number of highly stereotyped subjectivities and self–other constructions—Hezbollah vs the Islamic State, saviour vs victim, masculine adult agency vs feminine/childish dependence—are performed. Together these binaries allow Hezbollah to emerge as a rescuer of the weak, bringing back order from chaos (reopening the church and putting the cross back in place) and doing so in a gentle, almost parental way (holding hands, gently caressing the cross). Kataeb Hezbollah, we are led to believe, is respectful and protective of the Christian minority—in contrast to the Islamic State—seemingly recognizing Christians as Iraqis, symbolized by Kataeb Hezbollah spraying ‘Iraqi’ on the outside church wall.

Point of view/point of audition Despite this purported message of religious tolerance and equality, the video is presented from a position of Hezbollah (Shi’a) superiority. The camera is positioned at an elevated angle—from the perspective of the superhuman Hezbollah soldier—looking slightly down on the group of Christians in the church. Curiously, Islamic State, as the enemy other, is almost invisible, signified only by non-human signs—graffiti and the destruction of the church. Instead, it is the representation of the group of Christians that functions as a sympathetic, yet inferior, other. Christians are depicted as children, elderly or disabled (as crudely signified by the wheelchair), devoid of agency or capability to protect themselves, whereas Hezbollah is hyper-strong, masculine and protective.

This saviour–victim framing is, of course, well known from other war and crisis imaginaries, which often include portraits of victimized groups presumed to be vulnerable, usually women, elderly or children. Children, as David Campbell has argued, are ‘symbols of innocence, seen to be dependent and requiring protection’. The image of a suffering child is a touchstone of moral purity, a depoliticized victim, waiting for, and especially worthy of, external assistance and protection. Alongside other vulnerable groups, children are seen as residing outside the contestation of politics; they are to be pitied rather than politically engaged.

Modes of audio–visual synchronization The victimization of Iraqi Christians and the heroism of Hezbollah are synchronized and enhanced by the melancholic music in a slow, adagio tempo that accompanies the visual appearance of the Christian group. Church bells and a yearning vocal in the background allude to their suffering at the hands of Islamic State. The imagery of Hezbollah soldiers is in

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57 This is also echoed in the comment section to the video on YouTube, where many users praise Shi’as for ‘saving the Christians’ and allegedly ‘having more honour than Sunnis’: see e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMsvIDlsgiM.


60 Berents, ‘Apprehending the telegenic dead’.
contrast set to exciting tunes with drums and long fanfares signalling heroism, danger and triumph. There are no lyrics accompanying the music; the crude shifts of musical idiom (e.g. from yearning to fanfares) in themselves enforce the simple narrative of saviour/victim in times of danger. In the video’s final credits, ‘the saved ones’ are even explicitly reminded of who their rescuers are, with the statement: ‘The bells of Mosul will ring again from the Popular Mobilization Units (Kataeb Hezbollah).’ This sounds like a promise, even a gift, an idea reinforced by the little girl, who bows her head in gratitude to Kataeb Hezbollah, while the slow tempo of the church bells creates a sense of ceremonial gravity. ‘Gift-giving’ is, as Derrida reminds us, also a power game; an economy of exchange. Gifts cannot be refused, and must be reciprocated. By this logic of the exchange, Christians are reinscribed in a position of inferiority, in debt to their saviours.61

Aesthetic mood

The viewer/listener, I would argue, is smoothly solicited into Kataeb Hezbollah’s point of view/point of audition by an aesthetic mood of sentimentality brought about by a macro-aesthetic choice of kitsch. Kitsch here is to be understood as more than just poor taste or bad art, but along the lines of suggested by Walter Benjamin and Milan Kundera, as the deliberate beautification and sentimentalization of the political. Kitsch, according to Benjamin, provides a kind of heartwarming intimacy, a feeling of togetherness, a sense of being moved by being moved.62 There is a sentimental self-enjoyment in kitsch, where the fact of being excited by the object itself becomes the cause of enjoyment.63 This meta-feeling or sentimental self-awareness is eloquently described by Kundera as the ‘second tear’: ‘Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!’64

I would suggest that the same kind of kitschy solicitation is at work here. Kataeb Hezbollah—and we, as viewers being interpellated through the point of view/point of audition of Kataeb Hezbollah—are moved by our own second tear: ‘How nice it is to see Christian children and elderly holding hands with our soldiers’, and ‘How beautiful, is it not, that we can help and protect them?’ Thus, we are predictably moved not only by the idyllic scenes in the church and Hezbollah’s apparent benevolence in saving the Christians, but also by the experience of ourselves being moved. Kitsch uses stock emotions and stylistic stereotypes; being neither inventive nor experimental, it draws on the already familiar in order to move us in the same emotional direction.65 It is comforting in its consensus and reassurance that everybody is stirred in the same way.

65 Benjamin, ‘The work of art in the era of mechanical reproduction’.
Even in desperate situations of extreme suffering and war, kitsch may enable a kind of substitution of what is beautiful, monumental or already well known for what is ‘real’. The (real) violence and persecution that Christians have indeed experienced in Mosul, and the very real conflict between Iraq’s different religious groups and militias, are converted into a melodramatic and almost beautiful experience, a heartwarming spectacle for us, as viewers, to consume and to make us feel good. It anaesthetizes by its beautification, acting as a folding screen set up, as Kundera warns, ‘to curtain off death’. The sentimental spectacle of saviour and victims, enhanced by the beautiful imagery and yearning vocals, by the continuous slow motion and long shots, withdraw the spectator from the multiple battlefronts where Iraqi militias and different sectarian groups clash, and from any real appreciation of the suffering (Christian) other. The kitschy aesthetics and feelings of pity instead become sources of moral satisfaction and self-aggrandizement for the viewer and Kataeb Hezbollah.

In the third and last video considered below, it is perhaps the staging of the unified mass for the camera, unequivocally prepared for battle, that curtains off hesitation and ambivalence towards war.

**War as total strength: ‘Ali Maddad’ music video by Lebanese Hezbollah**

The scene opens with Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah at a mass party rally invoking the unity and strength of Shi’a Muslims. The crowd answers his call and yells their allegiance (‘Labbayk ya Nasrallah/Labbayk ya Hezbollah’). Yellow and green Hezbollah flags are waved, and Roman salutes are made. These are mixed with imagery from the battlefield: long-distance missiles are fired; soldiers move ominously through mountainous terrain; late at night young soldiers are about to leave for service, kissing the Qur’an before they leave for war in Syria. In the closing scene, Nasrallah warns the enemy of its imminent defeat and the crowds cheer in exultation.

**Modes of audio-visual synchronization** Although the music accompanying the imagery is a catchy Arabic pop song, the rhythm and melody include strong martial elements. Drumbeats are synchronized with the tramping boots of parading soldiers, and the male choir repeating the refrain sounds like soldiers shouting in obedience to an order. The music is synchronized with the imagery to the extent that the male choir responds in unison with the jubilant crowds rising in response to Nasrallah’s speech. At one point the electronic instrumentation even emulates the sounds of a massive wave rolling through the crowd. The music reinforces the images of the masses, invoking a sense of overwhelming strength, of totalitarian unity without ambiguity or counterpoint.


67 In Lebanon the Roman/Nazi salute is not illegal, and some parties and movements have occasionally used it, among them the Kataeb Party/Phalangists and the Palestinian Fatah. It can at times also be viewed at national rallies and demonstrations, as a salute to the national flag. Today, however, it has become an integral part of mass Hezbollah rallies and Hezbollah war music videos.
Aesthetic mood    The mood is one of force and unity, arrived at through totalitarian, even fascist aesthetic choices, understood along the lines of Susan Sontag’s seminal analysis of *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl’s film of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally. In Riefenstahl’s film, the display of countless bodies moving in unity, the choreographed mass spectacle, the simultaneous exultation and saluting, all point to a common submission to a single irresistible leader, as do Nasrallah’s thundering against an unnamed enemy, the aggressive shouting and building up of the mass’s anger, the shifting visuals of the Hezbollah leader (photographed close up and from below), allowing him to appear both almighty and in his own individuality; the crowd responds to his commands like a choir to its leader, with one voice and one body. The crowd, as they simultaneously yell the same slogans of obedience and exhilarating cheers, sound as one, and yet they are also made up of a thousand voices, together demonstrating their numbers and their strength.

Audio-visual frame    This video produces a grand spectacle. It never zooms in on any of the individual faces of the Hezbollah supporters, as if they are allowed to appear not in their specificity, but only as a mass, photographed from a distance, in overpopulated wide shots, just as their cries are only allowed to sound as one. As Sontag argues, the rendering of such bodily mass movements in grandiose and rigid pattern rehearses the very unity of the polity. Its choreography is meant to stage and thus perform the people’s will in public. Riefenstahl’s movie ‘documenting’ the Nuremberg rally was exemplary of such staging, the grandiose Nazi party rally being orchestrated primarily for her 30 cameras. At the same time, the gatherings of the thousands, the masses looking at themselves as masses, as Walter Benjamin suggested, was made possible only by the novel technique of the camera itself and the reproducibility of its images. It is the camera’s wide shots and bird’s-eye view—an impossibility for the naked human eye—that enable the crowd to appear in its awe-inspiring totality. Similarly, it is the floating view of the camera parading over the Hezbollah crowds that enlarges and enhances the spectator’s view, producing it as a single mass, just as the rolling soundwaves of the jubilant crowd reinforce a sense of aural unity.

Point of view/point of audition    The point of view/point of audition changes slightly in the many inserted battlefield scenes. For the most part, the camera lets the viewer observe the scenes from afar with a ‘neutral’ third-person perspective. But at times we are suddenly placed inside the camera’s field of vision, becoming a direct target of its gaze. In one particular scene, a group of soldiers moves along a hilly path; then a soldier stops and, in a short glimpse, points his gun

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68 To be clear: the point here is not to argue that Hezbollah is a fascist movement, but to highlight how the closely choreographed mass rallies and the ‘documentation/filming’ of such rallies draw on totalitarian aesthetic strategies.


70 Der Derian, *Virtuous war*, p. 67.

Soundscapes of war

directly at the camera. The spectator is now placed directly in the line of fire, seemingly being the enemy of the soldier. This hostile solicitation of the viewer is also reflected occasionally in the point of audition, as the lyrics and some of the inserted clips from Nasrallah’s speeches appear to be directed at an outside audience, or a so-called ‘you’. In one section the lyrics say: ‘Hezbollah came to Syria to protect the shrine [of Zainab, a Shi’a mosque in Damascus] and to take out the most evil army on earth, who can blame us? Do not underestimate Hezbollah.’ The last two phrases (my italics) are directed at a threatening outsider presumably watching the video. Similarly, in the final scene we hear Nasrallah shouting to the jubilant masses: ‘Under any rock or any loam, on any battlefront, mosque or husseiniya you may try to kill us, but we are the Shi’as of Ali Taleb.’ Here the ‘you’ again points outside the camera to an enemy who is presumably watching/listening, just as the wide shots of the rallying crowds may be intended not only to induce feelings of strength within Hezbollah sympathizers, but also to create fears within their foes, convincing the enemy spectator/listener of the absence of internal division and the complete unity of the polity.

Taking these three war music videos together, all can be said to play with distance from and proximity to war. On the one hand, they seem to bring war closer, with their supposed ‘documentary imagery’ from the battlefield, the dramatic scenery of missiles being launched and soldiers on patrol, and all the heightened emotion induced by the different aesthetic micro-styles: the sounds of tramping boots, musical fanfares, exciting drumbeats. On the other hand, the kitschy and romanticized auditory and visual aesthetics also create a distance from war. These frames entertain, beautify and heroize destruction and killing. They are soundscapes, and also escapes, from the very violence they purport to describe.

Conclusion

The topic of visuality and war has predominantly been studied as if imagery were without sound. Perhaps for obvious reasons, as scholars have been preoccupied with introducing and showing the importance of the visual for IR, the field necessarily had to neglect how sound and music relate to, and structure, our understanding of images. And yet, as any film critic can tell us, the aural plays a crucial interpretative role for imagery, especially for moving imagery: online memes, documentaries, news clips or music videos from any global war zone would often appear tame or outright incomprehensible without sound and music.

This article has suggested an initial analytical framework for studying the visual and auditory together. It proposes four key themes: (1) the audio-visual frame, (2) the point of view/point of audition, (3) modes of synchronization, and (4) aesthetic moods. This framework is only a first step, aimed at starting a conversation in IR on how the visual and the auditory forcefully play together. In our media-saturated world, where governments and armed militias increasingly engage in persuasion and explanations online, justifying their foreign policy decisions or
mobilizing for war with the help of videos, memes and documentaries, it is essential that scholarship engages critically with such audio-visual products.

Indeed, what I call ‘war music videos’ are now used globally by friends and foes alike on and behind the same battlefields, in the global South and the Middle East in particular. Though employing slightly different musical genres—e.g. heavy metal for US soldiers or Arabic pop for Shi’a militias—these music videos offer an affective intensity that a rational discourse or political speech may not always provide. The transgressive and incisive capacity of these music videos instils a sense of being closer to the emotional reality of war, while also withdrawing reality from sight through its specific audial and visual framings. While fuelling certain emotions, such as joy, sentimentality and strength, at the same time they silence, numb and create distance. Music videos act as Kundera’s ‘folding screens’, protecting and shielding spectators/participants from alternative frames of war; its grim horrors, its everyday banalities, its frightening prospect of killing and death. Within these audio-visual frames, the wounded and weeping bodies are invisible and silent, the fear of dying erased. Missiles hit invisible targets, soldiers heroically save little girls, the masses cheer them on in forceful unity.

Knowing war, or training for war, through the sanitized, joyful and beautified aesthetics of war music videos is therefore far from benign or politically inconsequential. As Sontag once argued, the problem is not that art is subordinated to politics, but that politics appropriates art. For scholars in the vibrant field of IR visuality, popular culture and aesthetics, this may imply that we have a dual task at hand: not only exploring how aesthetic frames work and fascinate emotionally, but also how we may avoid the reification of such audio-visual spectacles to the detriment of politics.

72 Kundera, *The unbearable lightness of being*.
73 See also Williams, ‘International Relations in the age of the image’.