

A.I.

When a sound is indefinitely reverberated, who thinks of doubting his ears? ¹

On Sung Tieu's *Sound TV*

by Jade Barget

The whisper heard in *Sound TV* is chilling. Coming in and out of hearing, it is otherworldly and undecipherable, overlaid with a hostile high pitch noise. When screened at Tate Modern's Starr Cinema as part of *East London Cable: TV Dinner Episode 3*, the sound was amplified to the point where viewers covered their ears, enduring the work. In pushing the spectatorial experience to its limit, Sung Tieu laid bare the power of the cinematic and televisual machine. Whilst our viewing regime has familiarised us with visual aggression, this sonic overload felt new, menacing and our conditions of spectator precarious.

In the context of *Nameless. echoes, spectres, hisses*, the work is viewed on the computer screen. Sung Tieu's encoded whisper traverses the domestic space. Losing control of the level of intensity and submission of the viewer to the work, but gaining in proximity and intimacy, *Sound TV* resonates across the private space with the psychological warfare tactics of televisual media.

Sung Tieu's practice is concerned with infrastructures of control. *Sound TV* stems from this interest, and her specific research into psychoacoustics— the study of psychological responses associated with sound. The high pitch noise is the official recreation based on witnesses' account of a sound allegedly heard in 2017 by U.S. diplomats in Cuba and followed by health issues—the Havana syndrome, the basis of Sung Tieu's Nottingham Contemporary 2020 exhibition, *In Cold Print*. The sound was recreated from auditory memory and used in court to investigate claims of the existence of a sonic weapon designed by Cuba officials and used against U.S. diplomats in Havana.

¹ Henri Michaux, *Miserable Miracle (mescaline)*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1972), p. 76.

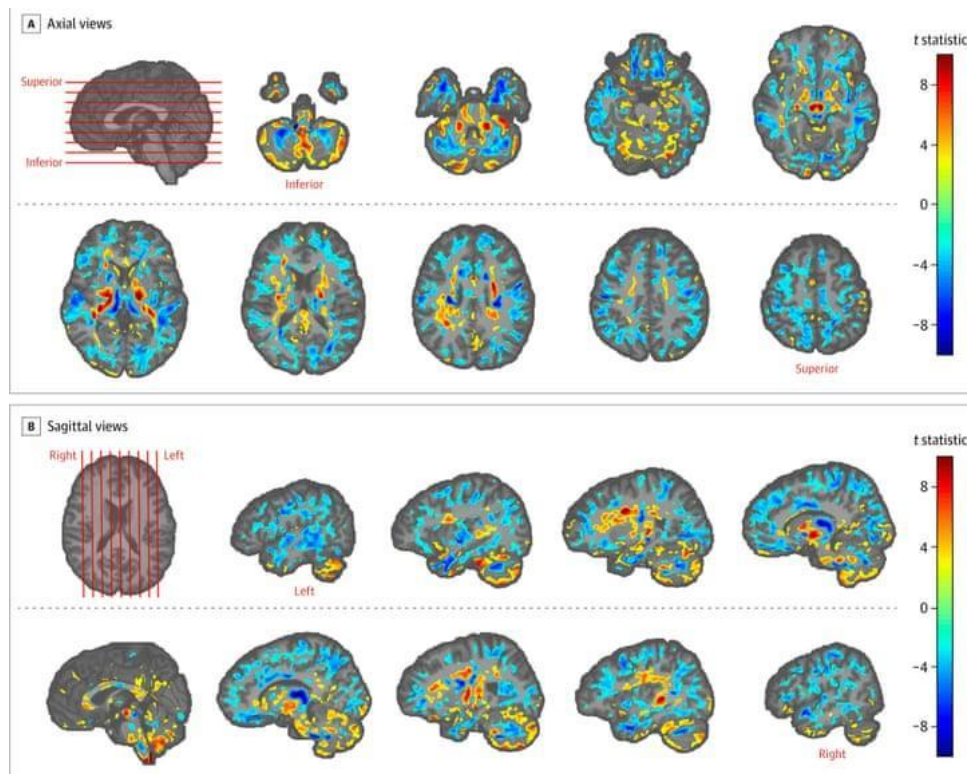


Fig 1 - Brain scans revealing differences in white and grey matter volume between patients from the US embassy in Havana and healthy controls. The yellow to red regions show areas of higher volume in the patients, white cyan to blue marks areas of lower volume in the patients versus controls. Courtesy Jama American Medical Association.

The sound of the Havana syndrome has a phantomatic essence—invisible, its existence and psychological effect only speculative. In *Sound TV*, it is overlaid with an encrypted message written and spoken by the artist, presented over footage taken on the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, where the psychological weapon *Ghost Tape No.10* was broadcasted by the Americans during the Vietnam war. The sensorial and psychological manipulation also known as operation *Wandering Soul* exploited a Vietnamese cultural belief about death—that the one killed far from home would turn into vengeful spirits wandering the earth eternally. The American army recorded Vietnamese voice actors speaking as angry spirits of dead soldiers, asking fighters to go back home at the risk of becoming wandering souls. Played via speakers placed in the forests or on helicopters and planes, it haunted the night. *Sound TV* collapses two conflicts—the Vietnam War and the Cold War. Highlighting the US's presence in both conflicts, Sung Tieu's synthesis provokes a reflection on the notion of victim and perpetrator.



Fig 2 - Propaganda mission conducted by South Vietnamese and American PSYOP soldiers. Piles of leaflets are visible near the helicopter door. Image courtesy of Psy Warrior.

Delving into the impossibility of knowing, the heard but not seen, belief systems and conspiracy theories, *Sound TV* leaves us asking: when a sound is indefinitely reverberated, who thinks of doubting his ears? ²

² Henri Michaux, *Miserable Miracle (mescaline)*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1972), p. 76.

Credits

Sung Tieu

Sound TV, 2019

5:30 min

HD video, colour and sound

Camera and Editing: Sung Tieu

Camera Assistant: Rory Gill

Sound: Alexis Chan, Christian Sumner and Sung Tieu

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