

## Listening-in to the long-1930s

James Barke's novel *Major Operation* (1936) portrays mid-1930s Glasgow. At the centre of the text is an account, polyvocal and exuberant, of a May Day march through the city:

Politics, thy name is acrimony. Let's have – music!

Sit Jessica! Let the sound of music creep in our ears. Your name isn't Jessica by any chance?

Getting fresh are you? My name's Sarah. Sarah Cannan. Call a flute band music?

Sorry, can't give you Henry Hall and his band. But don't despise the flute, dear lady. Orpheus and his lute – which, doubtless as you told at school, is just a polite name for flute. It is a little rift within the flute... Afraid the flutes are causing the rift, however. Suppose you'd rather hear a Mae West story? Ah, Mae West! Sex! Taboo! Wonder what Mrs Bloom would have thought about Mae West? Or Mae West about Marion Bloom? Mmmmmh! Bulged right out of his face! Seven miles! Guess I've got nothing on you dearie.

Labour on the bench and a smutty story round the corner: under the trees. Music down the street. Hold the mirror up to nature and you get – sex and politics. (moonlight is extra, but always in request)...

Well, we don't mind a little sex, sir, providing it's treated in a light, aphrodisiacal manner and provided there's a high moral tone prevailing throughout. Nothing the public likes better. But – no politics! No, siree. Keep politics out of literature.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter, 'Red Music in the Second City', continues in such a vein for another four pages as it depicts city streets emptied of motor vehicles and commercial life – but instead filled with the sounds of those who might (potentially) enact revolution. The march is a plethora of anonymous voices, voices whose position as internalised or externally projected are not explicated, and whose subject matter is not constrained by divisions between elite and mass artforms. Moreover there are song lyrics, ribald or invented, and approximations of musical notes: 'toot-toot, toddli-toot...'. In totality these noises become Barke's 'red music'; and his narrative-based artform aspires to such a condition because such music is posited as an all-encompassing mode, diagnostic for a collective consciousness; such a consciousness is shaped by capitalist culture yet also by anger – from the marchers – and their desire for change. Naming such meaningful discord as 'red music' is an attempt to replicate and politicise on the written page the nascent technologies of audio field recording, recording which could capture,

simultaneously, a plethora of different kinds of sounds; sounds which could be manipulated and analysed later in a studio.<sup>ii</sup> Barke's simulacrum of a sonically immersive situation owes as much to his engineering background and interest in emergent technologies as it does to his reading (and veneration) of the author who created Marion Bloom.<sup>iii</sup> For as well as the capture of politics in sound there is also a politics *of* capturing sound – and then, subsequently, of depicting or reproducing it in another medium. If recording devices, such as the primitive reel-to-reel recorders available by the late 1930s, started to allow the absorptive nature of actuality-as-reportage, they also immediately brought with them the problem of saturation and undifferentiation. Indeed the noise-to-signal ratio was, for outdoor analogue technology, foreboding at best – until the idea came that an excitingly saturated texture of multiple and conflicting sounds might be *the* point of trying to record. Moreover if the eerie absence of traffic (and traffic noise) is synecdochical for potential revolution in texts depicting the General Strike of 1926, as has recently been shown, Barke was interested in something rather different: depicting the replacement of the motorised commercial traffic of the streets with the equally sonically totalising, but politically orientated, sounds of mass protest.<sup>iv</sup> Tracing how artworks could move beyond realism, in depicting why commercial everyday traffic could be usurped by political marches, matters for both the artworks themselves – but also for a more nuanced history of representation and mediation as compositional strategies in the 1930s.

Thus this chapter will show how depicting the sounds of the city, and especially those of mass political demonstrations, was both complex and ideologically crucial to British writers of the 1930s – and to analyse such matters this chapter will contrast Barke with John Sommerfield. They are different in tone and mode, but are both writers of political commitment, with ideological positions becoming subject matter; moreover, they have remained critically neglected, even now in the era of all-inclusive 'late modernism'. They are writers who, in pursuit of capturing political tumult, try to find analogies in prose for the absorptive power of early recording technologies; but in some of their works they also move further, attempting not just to represent noise but rather to re-create it as an overtly political act. It matters that these experiments occurred not just at the level of reproduction in another medium (as typographical shrieks or *mise-en-page* tricks on the printed page); but that these writers also took on the complexity of reproduction in near-mimetic terms, as sound *itself* in other artforms: theatre for Barke, film for Sommerfield. Questions of how such sounds fill the spaces of the city as traffic is replaced by marchers, and how this might be mediated, brings problems of the efficacy of language and form to the fore; but it also creates conditions where a reader might newly understand a metropolis.

## James Barke's 'red music'

The recovery of James Barke (1905-1958) for histories of twentieth-century Scottish literature has been partial; he has been more quoted in extracts than read in totality, and much of the engagement has been with his re-imagining the life of Robert Burns in his quintet of novels *Immortal Memory* (1946-54). But recent work means that Barke is now notable among scholars of the Scottish Renaissance and acknowledged among theorists of city literature.<sup>v</sup> *Major Operation* (1936) was Barke's fourth novel, following three sagas of families amid industrial change. It is a departure both in its overt politics but also its formal structure: a five-hundred page synoptic view of Glasgow with specific focus on two individuals: the middle-class businessman George Anderson teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and cuckoldry; and working-class Jock MacKelvie, a Communist dock-worker. Anderson and MacKelvie meet while in hospital, each waiting for their own medical operations – and also the political operation Barke sees as necessary: the painful removal of Anderson's false consciousness. Politicised medical metaphors abounded in the period, but Cecil Day-Lewis poem *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933) spells out the task: 'it is now or never, the hour of the knife, / the break with the past, the major operation'.<sup>vi</sup> The didactic potential of *Major Operation*, especially noticeable in the expository dialogue, becomes apparent from such a summary. But what Barke attempts is not only a tutelary novel, full of parallelisms and moral choices, but also an experiment in how far a Joycean mode could be imported to Glasgow as a way of depicting the complexity of collective action in a metropolis.<sup>vii</sup> Barke's interest in Joyce began in 1934-5, and he was subsequently sent a copy of the 1936 Bodley Head edition of *Ulysses* by a Soviet admirer with whom he had corresponded about its filmic potential.<sup>viii</sup>

An organising principle for Barke's own work, and the most perceptive insight into what it attempts, is captured in a phrase from his *Land of the Leal* (1939). This is a saga of poverty among farm-labourers who move to the city looking for work, and amid pathos there are sharper points of structural critique. Barke's rationale for why he had chosen to represent multi-stranded and intergenerational clashes was that it was 'historic discord'.<sup>ix</sup> His choice of the aural metaphor here signifies more than an impressionistic attempt to give form to such overpopulated novels – and yet it is even more pertinent to *Major Operation* than *Land of the Leal*. For while *Major Operation* sprawls in a cinematically-informed mode of dispersed narration, it is a novel which offers sound, not sight, as the key sense. Moreover, it places the understanding of speech, cries and sounds as a kind of music, in a category of prime importance for the possibilities of a revolutionary consciousness, but one which will *only* emerge in 'discord'.

This hierarchy of importance is not apparent at the start. *Major Operation* begins at dusk, and it appears that the dominant sense will be the visual; spectacle with interpolated commentary:

The sun set over the Second City. The Second City of the Empire on which the sun never sets. It was an orange, blood-orange sunset, and its effect was registered all over the city [...] It gave a revolutionary, end-of-the-world effect to the Great Western Road, where people never think of the end of the world and dread the word revolution. (13)

The colour symbolism segues into 'effect' and then artifice, 'the overlong exposure evaporated it [the sunset] completely, the smoke of the City reduced it to a faint and disgusting smudge' (13). Yet as the sun sets on chiaroscuro-rendered industrial modernity other senses begin to dominate. Firstly the olfactory: compound-reeks of poverty act as odoriferous synecdoche: 'the identifiable odours of cats' urine: decayed rubbish: infectious diseases: unwashed underclothing intermingled with smells suggesting dry rot' (7). Another sense returns as night falls, and the section headed 'Erotic Nocturne over the Second City' begins. The meat-market of humanity is set out, with recoil and prurience: 'hot flesh, sweet flesh, young flesh, sweating, smelling flesh, dirty flesh, washed fleshed, healthy flesh and diseased flesh came together in contact. Mutually attracted: mutually repulsed' (115). Against such senses covering multiple plot strands, and encompassing the massed ranks of the unnamed characters as well as the parallel protagonists, it seems as if *Major Operation* could continue indefinitely in naturalistic investigations.

Yet all changes with 'Red Music in the Second City' (121-25). This starts as a record of the passage of a political march: 'the flutes sounded shrill and distinct. The noise of the drums, flung back from the walls of the tenements, gathered in force and rhythm. Shopkeepers came to their doors, windows were flung up, children ran' (121). But the section, quoted at the start of this article, then dispenses with any narration, instead becoming a raucous polyphony of sounds, the most Jocyean of all parts of *Major Operation*. Indeed Mollie Bloom is juxtaposed with Mae West, ostentatiously showing how Barke's technique, drawn both from 'listening-in' anthropology and a modernist mode of connection, can mix fictional and non-fictional characters, as well as aesthetic worlds. The voices are not just bringing realistic scraps of speech; they also give a near-Doppler effect of movement, and concomitant incompleteness, as the march passes. Valentine Cunningham has explicated the importance of the 'Red Music'; its fecund variousness is useful to him as a refutation of the myth that British politically-committed 1930s writing took nothing from modernism.<sup>x</sup> The passage closes with a didactic aside, analogous to a knowing nod to the reader, one that places them in a state of expectation – and yet also acknowledges the cacophony might not have had an easily interpretable purpose: 'So that's what all the noise was? Well, see you later: also hear' (125). Such a note matters: the 'later' (in the rest of the text) will not just be a matter of sight; it will be vital what is heard. Yet what Cunningham does not comment on is what happens in this 'later'; just *how* the rest of *Major Operation* is altered by what he

terms, rightly, the ‘compound of realistic proleterianising intent and modernistic textual interiority’, in this central passage.<sup>xi</sup>

Mae West does not feature accidentally in the ‘Red Music’ section; and, as indicated, recent scholarship has proposed Barke as a fundamentally cinematic writer, one whose writing came through a relation to both popular and more experimental forms – as a member of the Film Society of Glasgow in the 1930s.<sup>xii</sup> But Barke had a set of (mainly Marxist) prejudices about the stupefying effects of the cinematic which were also of their time, reflected in moments where *Major Operation* seems a version of MacNeice’s ‘Bagpipe Music’ (1938) in a mix of cultural critique and fatalistic melancholia: ‘[a] sixpence gets a packet of fags and leaves enough for a seat at the cinema. There the wise-cracking of Hollywood gets into the brain and the blues rhythm gets into the blood for there’s nothing else to keep them out. So America becomes the cultural centre of the world’ (108-9). The cinematic is also key to the class-prejudices of Mabel, George’s cliché of an upwardly-mobile wife; especially as she watches everything unpleasant (fat proletarian hikers) or artistically arranged (nice vistas of Lochs) from her car; the physical isolation afforded by Plexiglas turning everything into a ‘scene’ but also allowing swift onward movement.

The critique of cinema becomes structural when the idea of a projected but transient image is set in overt opposition to linguistically-based consciousness. When Anderson is admitted to hospital in agony he is tormented by ‘nothing solid, nothing fixed anymore [...] anything more than a momentary flash of recognition as the broken fragments of an image flashed past (149); and it gets worse, when conscious in the ward he sees all through ‘[t]he carriage window of his mind’ (193). But, as he recovers, he escapes such solipsistic barriers through discussion of politics with the other men in his ward. All patients have curtains around their beds – but these screens, in hospital green-cotton blankness, perform a withholding rather than illuminatory function. So to overcome them the auditory overwhelms the visual: those in the beds, invisible to each other, talk *through* such screens.

Such dialectics of the recovery ward do not last: both MacKelvie and Anderson are discharged into a Glasgow ripe for revolution. In the final section, ‘Freedom of the City’ (474-7), a day of protest has marchers converging on the city centre. No speeches or slogans now accompany them, just potentiality in their reclaiming of commodified tunes: ‘revolutionary music throbbled through the City. Even American crooning songs were being adapted and transformed to revolutionary ends’ (474).<sup>xiii</sup> And it is only with the march that Anderson becomes convinced that his intellectual conversion ‘to the workers’ has been correct and necessary:

[...] then he heard a band playing *Red Weddin* and saw a section of the red bannered army. His blood leaped to the music of the flutes and the crashing of the drums. God, what music! He

had been thrilled in his day by the grandeur of Beethoven and the delicate flame of Mozart. But never had his spine shivered to music as it did now to this march of the Berlin workers. The throbbing pulse of the drums was terrific, irresistible: the clash of the cymbals a frenzy: the surging sea of banners a victory... At the street junction another contingent was approaching, the band playing *Rebel Song*. [...] the song crashed on his brain. (484-5)

This is heady stuff: a moment of bodily cognition where the dividing line of self from mass is eclipsed; indeed it is the drums which have a 'throbbing pulse'. But it is also proleptically sinister, for the song is a precursor of the actual crash – of an iron-shod policehorse-hoof – into Anderson's brain a few minutes later, the moment of his sacrificial courage in the midst of a cavalry charge. The marchers fight the mounted police and Anderson, in a moment of bravery, rescues MacKelvie – but is then trampled to death. Thereafter the march breaks through the cordon, and fills the city: 'from a thousand throats liberated with a sense of victory the words of an impromptu song crashed and spumed against the grey buildings' (490). The cult of the heroic victim, the self-sacrifice which lends itself to a martyrology, is then literally played out at the following graveside scene. For the committal of Anderson's body to the accompaniment of the *Internationale* links back to the actions which Anderson took in the midst of the march: the music justified action then, and now will justify a form of remembrance, one which will, itself, become a rationale for action. Barke's model of sound, and the apprehension of sound, is not only constitutive of revolutionary experience, but also becomes the mode of stimulating praxis.

Five years after writing *Major Operation* Barke was involved in re-working it; adapting it for a medium where sound would not be a force translated through a typeface – but would rather be a violently active part of the politico-aesthetic experience. The history of London's Unity Theatre in the 1930s is one which dominates narratives of left-wing theatricality in Britain, but this narrative neglects how other areas of Britain also had significant workers' theatre movements.<sup>xiv</sup> In Glasgow in January 1941 five companies, including the Glasgow Worker's Theatre Group of which Barke had been a member, came together to form a Unity Theatre, which in the autumn of 1941 staged a reworking of *Major Operation*.<sup>xv</sup>

The Unity production of *Major Operation* was heavily dependent on pre-recorded voiceovers; this was both an alienation device and also a mechanism to allow characters to express unspoken feelings or hesitant states of interiority.<sup>xvi</sup> Such use of near-acousmatic language, that is language without an apparent source, is one removed from visible speakers; and it served to counterpoint the decisiveness of the extra-linguistic revolutionary urges expressed through the music. Albeit such urges, intentionally shared with the audience to unify stage and auditorium, were then 'framed' by cries of affirmation from the characters on stage. This process reaches a height in Act 4, Scene 4. Here, initially, the play appears to aspire to the cinematic in effects (split screens, non-diegetic sound). But the possibilities which actually emerge are not so much those of the singular voice-over or the commentary on the tableau –

but rather the stereophonic, the multiplicity of sound sources (from different parts of the auditorium and stage) simultaneously acting to render not only a mental state (interiority) but also, within a longer and more classical tradition, the different forms of temptation, the beckoning towards very different paths of action:

The room is in darkness, and a pencil spot of light shines down on Anderson. He is pale and in obvious mental distress. From his left comes the Voice of Jock MacKelvie, as if projected from Anderson's mind. [...] All the voices are recognisable; but they have undergone certain modifications, and the tone is rather more indicative of poetry than of prose.<sup>xvii</sup>

This was now a key scene, replacing the 'Red Music' sequence as the moment of greatest sonic complexity, and it was recognised as uniquely powerful by contemporary reviews: 'the play reached its magnificent best in the dream scene...the tortured soul of a human being, beset by all kinds of problems, was revealed'.<sup>xviii</sup> But such a staging also allows for the complexity of sound as being found, fundamentally, in already-knowable voices which belong to recognisable individuals (even if they have to be attributed *post-hoc* to them). This version of sound as a vehicle of possibility encompasses something more akin to a moral dilemma; rather than, as with the original 'Red Music', the potentiality of a collective consciousness mixed from experimental method and the cultural detritus of the present. The rapid growth of available technologies enabled such experimental effects in theatres, drawing from film, in the 1930s. Across Britain some exemplars might be the gold-painted concrete cyclorama of the Festival Theatre in Cambridge or Unity Theatre London experimenting with tracking-spots, gauzes and distortions.<sup>xix</sup> But the value of *Major Operation* as a play is the knowingness with which it conscripts sound in the message it is attempting to create. Indeed the climactic scene (the death of Anderson) contains no speech at all until the very end: it is solely composed of the sounds of the street, heard at one remove, and rendered through bricolage. The stage directions threads song, and the noise of violence, into an implicit narrative:

Suddenly the full light of day streams into the room. Simultaneously with this comes the sound of a Fife and Drum band marching along Buchanan Street. The Fife band stops playing 'Jenny's Bawbee' and another band strikes up with 'The Rebel Song'. It has not got far with this tune when there is a sudden break and a chorus of shouts. Then follows a birling of police whistles and the clatter of horses' hooves on the asphalt. There are more shouts and another clatter of hooves. (88)

Obeying classical precepts violence happens off-stage, and the rest of the scene is a near-silent tableau: Anderson's body is brought in to a slow march, shrouded in the red flag made redder by his blood. The

surviving characters (and audience) are then engulfed by a ‘swelling’ performance of the *Internationale*. This communality of sound is markedly different from the ending of the novel – for there Rowett, watching the ceremony, observes the mourners and their bands marching away. The play is starkly systematic in the ordered sequence: discord of sounds; shocked silence with reverberations; unifying music: or, as it could be understood, thesis; antithesis; synthesis.

In *Major Operation* as a novel the ‘Red Music’ section used the literary inheritance of modernistic fragmentation, but also the anthropological desire to ‘listen in’ to actual cacophony, to mould a form which would serve two distinct purposes: firstly it would redefine what music was, within the bounds of the novel; but it would also sensitise the reader to audibility, and the sonic force of another artistic form, as a condition for revolutionary consciousness. When adapted into a play *Major Operation* has to use, despite the estranging complexities of stereophonic effects, or even the voiceover, the actuality of audible sound. For theatre sound has to portray revolutionary sound through its own sonic medium. Thus the potentialities of ‘Red Music’ as *writing*, and as a digressive way to consider consciousness from which revolution can spring, are replaced by something more starkly (or effectively) didactic but also transient. Barke’s later works for the theatre, including *The Night of the Big Blitz* (1942), experimented further with discordant sounds, especially as catalysts for collectivity. But such political lessons become harder aesthetically if the discord is produced by apparently omnipotent aerial attack: the non-musical nature of the original ‘Red Music’ from the novel remains a high point of sound as an idea.

### **John Sommerfield: rhythms of demonstrations, war, and feet**

John Sommerfield (1908-91) fought in the Spanish Civil War, helped organise Mass-Observation, and wrote over twenty books across multiple genres. *May Day* (1936) is still his best known work, a collective novel which fuses structural elements of city symphony films with agitprop iconography: the raised fist, the chalked slogan, and the factory machine; visibility apparently dominant in every aspect.<sup>xx</sup> It presents London as a city ripe for revolution, ‘a big change’,<sup>xxi</sup> by focusing on a factory in the East End, and a complex woven mesh of interrelations – even down to repeated spider’s-web metaphors – which connects them all.<sup>xxii</sup> Yet Sommerfield’s mode is also a critique: the dominance of the visual in the text, and the repeated use of aeriality-as-estrangement, is supplanted by another, newly alerted, sense: the audible. Then the role of the characters, and the readers, in discerning rhythms begins to matter ideologically as well as aesthetically.

The initial emphasis on perspectives matters, for there is a symbolic entry to the city (comparable to the rail journey which opens Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*), but before even this there is

a vertiginous view: 'geometries of telephone wires and tramlines, traffic lights flinging continuous coloured fireworks in the air, a hundred thousand motorcars and buses [...] Railways writhe like worms under the clay, tangled with spider's webs and mazes of electric cables, drains and gaspipes. Then there are eight or nine million people' (25-6).

This is spectacle with the city as display, and such an aerial perspective is one where sounds from the scene sprawling below cannot be heard. The *locus classicus* of such potent estrangement in 1930s literature is still the opening of Auden's 'Consider this and in our time' (1930), although rivals might come with Graham Greene's *The Bear Fell Free* (1934), or even the 'lone airman' sequence in Malcolm Lowry's *In Ballast to the White Sea* (1936). For such a view of a hawk or helmeted airman, even if augmented through optics, is a silent one. Tellingly when sound is finally depicted in Auden's poem it is of a band broadcasting on radio, of being amplified and 'relayed': that is specifically modified to travel distances beyond earshot through the air.<sup>xxiii</sup> Initially in *May Day* aeriality also cut out sounds:

The red-hot worms of neon bulbs squirmed and wriggled. Searchlights, big guns bombarding the air with rays of absinthe green and rose-pink projected the names of automobiles and film stars onto a moving screen of clouds. The whole sky glowed with a dull red heat from the violence of the electric blows that were showered upon it. Ten thousand feet above, a flock of aeroplanes scattered themselves. (189)

These 'worms [...] wriggling' might just have come all the way from Woolf's essay 'The Cinema' (1926), the frenetic blot on the frame of *The Cabinet of Dr. Cagliari*, but as part of the explosive neon hieroglyphs of London they are more familiar from novels such as Gerald Kersh's *Night and the City* (1938). Yet this passage is rather different from either Woolf or Kersh: the illuminatory 'bombardment' upwards from the signs reverses the practice-run of the bombers which look down on them as an ersatz-aiming-point. *May Day* may open with aeriality, but the grounded experience of sound-in-the-streets is where history, and revolution, can be tracked. For the build-up to the May Day march itself is not only depicted through plans and conversations, it is also portrayed through *how* sounds fill the space of the city. This is the way a contingent of the North Kensington Communist Party go to a meeting:

The tramp of feet, the sound of marcher's songs and slogans lapped on the sides of the houses like waves of a rising tide, shot up in a spray of sound and rattled on the windowpanes, beat upon eardrums and echoed in minds that remembered the rain of leaflets, the slogans on the walls, the rough voices forcing their way through the microphones... (110)

It is not just the associative trails that lead from one sound to another, it is the way in which the elemental force of the sounds are rendered more significant because they carry no direct content; they

are as powerful sonically as the rising tide. They need to do this because the world of mechanised labour is also cacophonous: 'the morning's awakening machine-gun rattle of typewriters has risen and swelled into a barrage [...] a million tapping keys beat out a tremendous rhythm, spattering a record of life' (134-5).

How might the demonstrators break such a totalising 'rhythm' of labour? The denouement in *May Day* starts with an all-encompassing aerial view, seemingly similar to the one which opened the novel (25-6), or the one of the bombers over London (189). Yet now it is different: aeriality aligns the reader's position with the observing police:

A thousand feet above the contingents a police gyrocopter, its windmill sails flickering lazily in the blue air. The observer, looking down, saw the marchers, a long black snake, a slow-moving black river winding along the channels of the streets [...] it meanders like some caterpillar crawling across a map of London, its head a mile away from its tail, its red spots the colours of banners (210-11)

The people marching are part of a biological force which has triumphed over industrial servitude; they are thus now part of a natural mass – but also under observation. Moreover they are both an extraordinary sight *and* one which is only comprehended in visual terms, as the aerial viewpoint allows for such aestheticisation *because* it is a place of silence. In such a way this passage is part of the 'high-sublime', a trope within the more aerially-intoxicated parts of modernism which includes the reveries of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in *Night Flight* (1931); or Virginia Woolf's early-1930s essay 'Flying over London', where an aestheticising observer 'fell into fleeciness, substance and colour; all the colours of pounded plums and dolphins and blankets and seas and rain clouds crushed together'.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Sommerfield's marchers from this height appear to be 'clustering together, breaking apart, drifting through the streets like wind-driven autumn leaves rustling along dried-up ruts of woodland cart-tracks' (211). Such a non-individuated populace has made the mercantile city into an organicised scene; one where the will of the people, likened earlier to a tide, now takes on a force as unstoppable as the seasons. There is no commentary (apart from the shocked grunts of the police pilots) and the primacy of spectacle seems assured. Yet the next paragraph drops the narration, and the reader, decisively back onto the ground amid a cacophony: 'drumbeats mark the time of their marching feet and make a rhythm for the slogans that rush echoing down the narrow chasms between the sides of houses' (211). Moreover the text directs a reader's attention to follow the 'hollow echo of the voices booming down the street' (214).

The novel, in almost exact parallel to *Major Operation*, ends with a march, an attack by mounted police, an account of confused street-fighting, and a sacrificial death under 'frenzied hoofs' (237). The

marchers then surge on and even a journalist watching is ‘caught up with the rhythm of the marching feet, he is filled with strength and with gladness that he has thrown in his lot with their class and their party’ (240). A second, more cynical, journalist watches too: “‘Let them have their shout,’” says Sloane. “‘Put ‘em in khaki and have a different sort of band at their head and they’ll go off singing ‘It’s a long way to Tipperary’ with equal zest and discordance”” (240). The final paragraphs, chastened, give rather ‘a revolutionary song to a funeral beat’ as the marchers surround the police control point on top of Marble Arch. Here, again, the language of the sublime is invoked; but now the workers ‘seethe around the base of the Arch like an angry sea’ until ‘the noise comes up to the men at the top like the sound of a storm’ (240).

Sommerfield fought in the Spanish Civil War in one of the first International Brigades from 1936-7, and published an account of his experiences within a few months of returning to Britain. The violence in *Volunteer in Spain* (1937), written only a year after *May Day*, is of a different magnitude and takes place in a very different terrain from that of the London marches, but it also shows the difficulties involved in explication by sound. Sommerfield’s account begins with a compressed journey to the conflict, with order-in-noise a commentary to purposefulness:

The crushing rhythm of the engine wheels that pounded out the passage of the English miles had sounded again in the rumbling of turbines [...] in the undeviating music of the dancing pistons we heard only the sound of our own impatience.<sup>xxv</sup>

But the pace of the war, with false starts, confusion, and boredom, is alien to the use of rhythm in the translating of experience. Sommerfield might wish to explain that the conflict could be knowable, that being under fire is akin to: ‘a sound like huge sheets of calico being torn’ (107-8) but, as James Purdon notes, this merely gives rise to the ‘anxiety that war-writing might in the end be limited by such communities of experience’.<sup>xxvi</sup> Indeed later in the book the sonic becomes decidedly phantasmagoric, shellfire comes as ‘strange singing overhead, strange rushing and commotion, ghostly aerial concerts, shrieks and howls sounding from clear skies’ (101). However this was not the end of Sommerfield’s engagement with sound. His Second World War work with Mass Observation culminated in the vast classic of anthropology-at-home: *The Pub and the People* (1943). This volume recorded how the people of ‘Worktown’ (Bolton) related to pubs – through their drinking, talking, games and rituals. The term ‘observer’ initially seems to afford a primacy to the attentive eye; but it also relied upon the transcription of speech and non-verbal sounds.

Moreover Sommerfield did manage, a few years later, to test out how the sounds of lived experience, the quotidian audible, might directly affect an audience. He scripted a thirty minute documentary film, *Waverley Steps* (1948), without any conventional commentary or dialogue; the title cards at the opening

proclaim: ‘This is a film about Edinburgh, a glimpse into the lives of a few of its citizens between 5 o’clock one Sunday afternoon and late the following night’.<sup>xxvii</sup> Such a timeframe, and the mode of following a cross-section of these citizens (plus a visiting Scandinavian seaman) to show how they spend their time, connects *Waverley Steps* to its antecedents in classic city symphony films.<sup>xxviii</sup> Moreover it also makes some ideologically acute juxtapositions, again taken from the traditions of Ruttmann and Vertov. For performances which convey state or institutional power – such as speeches in the lawcourts, a lecture in the dissecting theatre, and debates in the University – are juxtaposed with domesticity and street scenes. The artifice of these visual displays of power – and the reactions they provoke, especially the eye-rolling of the prisoner about to be sentenced – makes for a telling piece of ideological work, giving a value to the contingent moments of life seen in parallel: those which are unorganised, unobserved, actually being lived.

How such lived experience is actually portrayed shows just how misleading the initial title card is, but there seems no equivalent term to ‘glimpse’ in the audible sphere. For it is the non-verbal sounds, which Sommerfield decided upon in the process of scripting the work, which provide both a texture and the organising principle of the film. These sounds range in timbre, duration and significance, but they collectively overlay diffident and muffled fragments of language. Even speech is immediately submerged by music: ballet, jazz, bagpipes or the radio. As a viewer realises how far sounds dominate, and how they are not merely the framing device or the setting of a scene, a different mode of apprehension (involving listening as much as viewing) becomes vital.

In the acoustic choices made by Sommerfield one particular noise becomes discernable and then dominant: the repeated insistence on the sound of feet. They are there on streets, floorboards, and cobbles – whether shuffling, running or striding. They are a central visual and then sonic motif, and so unify, in however transitory a way, a disparate population. Indeed *Waverley Steps* as a title might initially appear to refer to a fixed locale, the stairway down to the railway station; but it also becomes, in its subtle plurality, a way of holding the multiple characters together: they are all making their own identifiable steps (actual and metaphoric) around Waverley. This sound-from-life approach might initially appear to be the ideological disavowal of aesthetic mediation in favour of reportage-as-immediacy; for the soundtrack is not composed of non-diegetic effects added in but rather the apparent gathering authenticity of actuality, the real percussive footsteps growing and fading. Yet what is happening in the film is the *performance* of mediation on just another surface, the realisation that an artwork can use, as an instrument, the (potentially sonorous) materiality of its setting.



A pause in a stride. *Waverley Steps* dir. John Eldridge, script John Sommerfield (1948)

The intercutting of these sounds of high-heels, of brogues, of children's boots, shows that the director, John Eldridge, a veteran of the Crown Film Unit, had understood the framework of those who had commissioned the film for the first Edinburgh International festival.<sup>xxxix</sup> For he wished to eschew a 'touristic' narrative, and the European model he chose after a visit to Stockholm was Arne Sucksdoff's *Rhythm of a City* (1946), a commentaryless, ground-level documentary which nonetheless won an Academy award after a US release in 1949.<sup>xxx</sup> It is notable for an awareness of its antecedents within a genre of City Symphonies, with the camera-action giving moments of mechanisation as characters re-cross each other in differing modes of transport; but *Rhythm of a City* was primarily animated by the mass-walking rhythms of relatively egalitarian city. Sommerfield similarly made use of perambulation for an ideological purpose in *Waverley Steps*, a purpose becoming most apparent in the last three minutes of the film. As night settles upon the city, it is accompanied by a renewed sense of potentiality: kisses are heard, feet are stamped, footsteps change as lovers wait for each other. This is not a humanist paradigm of the private realm but rather an attentiveness to how lived experience, foot-traffic beyond language, could be worth acknowledging, perhaps as a last redoubt of what Nick Hubble terms Sommerfield's resilient post-war 'genuine idealism',<sup>xxxi</sup> which outlasted the 'Communist Romanticism' of *May Day*.<sup>xxxii</sup> Other projects, such as Sommerfield's draft script *The Voice of London* (1947/8),<sup>xxxiii</sup> remained unrealised; but the very nonchalance with which *Waverley Steps* constellates experience, and its belief in sound as constitutive, is radical and remarkable.

### **Alick West: stylisation, rhythm and value**

Indeed Barke and Sommerfield were not alone in their 1930s impulse to depict the sounds of demonstrations – and draw political lessons from such sounds. Others include Jack Lindsay in *1649* (1937) with his re-imagining of mass protest (and its suppression) in the aftermath of the English Civil War. But in terms of sound and reportage Frank Griffin's *October Day* (1939) is most vivid. It depicts London on 4 October 1936, from early morning until midnight, through the disparate characters involved in Oswald Mosley's attempt to march through Cable Street, and the counter-demonstrations which opposed him. The first moment of overt violence, while minimal, is symbolic for narrative possibilities as well as the fate of individual characters. This is a moment of jammed traffic (as synecdoche for jammed politics) being ruptured. What it is ruptured by is sound as an invasive force as well as a vehicle for language. At a junction the Communist cadre of marchers surge forwards, the police hold them back, and a procession of vehicles slowly attempts to pass as if unspooling across a silent screen:

The long lines of cars and buses and lorries and cycles got on the move again, creeping forwards a few inches [...] Buses filled with people who stared from the windows, some of them waving their clenched fists. Boys on bicycles. Baby cars with fat round faces [...] Then a polished black limousine with an angry-faced lady sitting bolt upright on the cushions, staring at the crowd.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

But Elsie – a key character in the crowd and now stirred by their collective chanting – recognises the 'angry-faced lady' as Lady Stroud: her former vindictive employer and an armaments profiteer. Her rage quickly rises, and another nameless 'old woman', seeming not so much a character as an imported leitmotif from Soviet revolutionary cinema, flings a stone. The windscreen of Lady Stroud's car had allowed the mediation of spectatorship, as it had in *Major Operation*. But it now shatters. Mrs Stroud is vulnerable in what was her secluded bubble: no longer watching all action while 'sheltered' from 'this howling mob'.<sup>xxxv</sup> She is vulnerable because the opacity of the newly crazed, punctured glass blinds the occupants but lets in the shouts of the crowd. Thus it is sound, rather than vision, which presages violent change in that moment – and subsequently the rest of the novel.

More than Griffin, both Barke and Sommerfield matter because they both created works which did not just depict sound, but rather *used* it to attempt to create ideological spaces from physical locales. Thus analysis of their texts, and performances, now comes into dialogue with more theoretical practices concerned, either bio-mechanically or philosophically, with the audible – approaches more recently grouped together as sound theory.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Yet I do not want to use contemporary sound theory as an explanatory tool for analysing Barke and Sommerfield's practices; especially because their work is awkwardly placed for such a manoeuvre, being both highly historically contingent (anathema to much universalizing sound theory) and acutely aware of emerging from a specifically literary tradition, even as

it surfaces most noticeably in films or plays. But, as Douglas Kahn writes, sound theory might well be advantageous more as a prompt than as a template in wider traditions of cultural analysis, and a form of stimulus in its own right.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Here it might send a reader back to those critics and philosophers who, in the late 1930s, were trying to produce theories of culture and politics, and who were themselves using the possibilities of sound, and the idea of sound, as a key concept for both understanding what literature might be used for – and how it might have come about at all.

Might there be a theory from *within*, one written contemporaneously with the texts and performances of the long-1930s, including those of Barke and Sommerfield? This approach yields a number of disparate names but one of particular interest is Alick West (1895-1972). West's writings from the 1930s, especially *Crisis and Criticism* (1937), published in the *annus mirabilis* of British Marxist criticism are of their time: diagnostic, crisis-focused, and enthralled by models of interconnectivity – in West's case, theories of language acquisition.<sup>xxxviii</sup> But West's works have also recently begun to be re-examined, starting to overturn the critical orthodoxy which held him to be of only marginal interest in a history of Marxist criticism, too much a generalist to be pertinent. This last critique has been usefully dealt with by Patrick Deane, who shows that West's style is itself mediating between Communist Party pressure, the residues of his own Christianity, and his desire to 'reconcile the Kantian idealism of Coleridge with the Hegelianism of Marx'.<sup>xxxix</sup> No easy task. Indeed, according to Arnold Kettle's attempts to situate him, West had 'a certain suspicion of the kind of 'ideological' criticism found in the work of continental Marxists';<sup>xl</sup> and this shows in his chapter on 'Rhythm and Language' in *Crisis and Criticism*. This builds by accretive anecdote, offers counter example as well as substantive proof, and digresses both historically and spatially. Why then is it useful? It is because West's version of 'sound' extends *beyond* the literary, although literature is a perceptible beneficiary. For his main point of changing an understanding of sound is to demonstrate how it is stimulated by action and physical movement. West revels in this as he writes of contemporary (mid-1930s) linguistic theory:

The first [major idea] is the abandonment of the conception of language as being originally a means of the expression of thought, and having developed out of intellectual processes. Instead language is now realised as inseparably connected with action, both in its purpose and its origin.<sup>xli</sup>

Language in this analysis is not only a result of the sounds, and actions, of movement; it also *produces* artworks and performances which reflect back upon origins – and on the problems of individuated selfhood:

Thus the rhythmical stylisation of language [in texts and performances] continues the functions of language itself. It is the means whereby a social stimulates and organises the energy of the group as a whole and the individual members of it, and directs it to a particular activity.<sup>xlii</sup>

Aesthetic value can be found in the pleasure the work can give through transmitting rhythms, but also, vitally, in the way those rhythms encode potentiality in the world. This potentiality can seem instrumentally linear: an artwork originates in the sounds and rhythms of a language system and then, through performance, can again be expressed in forms of ‘rhythmical stylisation’.<sup>xliii</sup> Such performances can themselves stimulate a notion of collectivity. Moreover, West’s tripartite schema of culture and its uses – from sound and rhythms, through texts, and then back again to sounds and rhythms – begins to echo what Barke attempted to work with in his theatrical version of *Major Operation*, or Sommerfield in *Waverley Steps*. Sounds and rhythms are taken from the contingent experience of the world, modified and edited into artworks, and are then performed – audibly – back into that world. Such an analysis allows a theoretical effort to be understood not by its diagnosis; but by its status as a response to the same historical and material conditions which created, in parallel, creative works which followed a similar pattern. This should not however negate the differences between the writers, whether in medium or in temporality. For example, the sounds in the theatrical version of *Major Operation* (performed in 1941) are based on what Barke heard on the streets of Glasgow in 1934, while the rhythms of feet in Edinburgh in *Waverley Steps* are from actual street life, selected via Sommerfield’s storyboard, in the early autumn of 1947 and subsequently performed (or displayed) in 1948 when the film was released. But it is important that the *potentiality* in sound that Barke, Sommerfield and West all recognise shows how an appeal to one sense, the audible, might also be an appeal to a radically different way of understanding and organising society.

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i

□ James Barke, *Major Operation: a novel* (London: Collins, 1936), p.122.

ii

□ See Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio* (London: Faber, 1937), for a what might be possible in terms of recording vs. live transmission.

iii

□ Barke’s work in the early 1930s included installing radio equipment in the Clyde shipyards.

iv

□ See Charles Ferrall and Dougla McNeill, *Writing the General Strike: Literature, Culture, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

v

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- Typified by, respectively, Keir Elder's PhD on Barke (University of Dundee, 2013), and Lara Feigel in *Literature, Cinema and Politics, 1930-1945* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
- vi
- Day-Lewis, *Complete Poems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p.162.
- vii
- See Keith Williams, 'Symphonies of the Big City: Modernism, Cinema and Urban Modernity', in *The Great London Vortex: Modernist Literature and Art*, ed. Paul Edwards (Bath: Sulis Press, 2003), pp.31–50.
- viii
- Elder, p.220
- ix
- Barke, letter to Collins Publishers, dated 6 December 1938. Elder, p.80.
- x
- Valentine Cunningham, 'The Age of Anxiety and Influence; or, Tradition and the Thirties Talents' in *Rewriting the Thirties, Modernism and After*, eds. Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (London: Longman, 1997), pp.5-22.
- xi
- Ibid, p.15
- xii
- Elder, pp. 205-225
- xiii
- See *The Left Song Book*, eds. Alan Bush and Randall Swingler (1938) and its attempts to offer substitute words for popular tunes.
- xiv
- See Colin Chambers *The Story of the Unity Theatre* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), esp. ch.2-4.
- xv
- Chambers, p. 305.
- xvi
- Keith Williams, *British Writers and the Media, 1930-45*, (London: Palgrave, 1996), p.120
- xvii
- James Barke, *Major Operation: The Play of the Novel* (Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1943), p.81.
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- Jack Jones, 'Glasgow Jottings', a review of the stage play of *Major Operation*, undated. Elder, p.245.
- xix
- Respectively, Chambers, p.113-5; Paul Cornwall, *Only by failure: the many faces of the impossible life of Terence Gray* (Cambridge: Salt, 2004), p.107.
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- See James Purdon 'John Sommerfield', in *Oxford Handbooks Online* (forthcoming, 2016); and Nick Hubble, 'John Sommerfield and Mass-Observation'. *The Space Between: literature and culture, 1914-1945*, 8 (1), 131-151. [2012].
- xxi
- John Sommerfield, *May Day* (London: London Books, 2010), p. 41, p.241.
- xxii
- David Trotter, *First Media Age*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp.210-12.
- xxiii
- See Rod Mengham 'The thirties: politics, authority, perspective', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-century Literature*, eds. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 363-64.
- xxiv
- Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays* ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford, 2008), pp.207-212, (p.210).
- xxv
- John Sommerfield, *Volunteer in Spain* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937), p.11.
- xxvi
- Purdon, n.p.
- xxvii
- It is viewable on <http://player.bfi.org.uk/film/watch-waverley-steps-1948/>
- xxviii

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- See David Bruce, *Scotland the Movie* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), pp.110-11.
- xxix □ Bruce, p.110.
- xxx □ It was re-titled 'Symphony of a City' for the US release. <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1949>
- xxxi □ Hubble, p.149.
- xxxii □ Sommerfield, 'Author's note for the 1984 edition', reprinted p.243-44 (2.43) of the 2010 edition.
- xxxiii □ MS873: Papers of John Sommerfield, University of Birmingham
- xxxiv □ Frank Griffin, *October Day* (London: New London Editions, 2011), p.114.
- xxxv □ Ibid, p.116.
- xxxvi □ For a history of sound theory as a mode and confluence see Connor 'Acousmania', <http://stevenconnor.com/acousmania.html>
- xxxvii □ Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (London: MIT Press, 1999), pp.18-19.
- xxxviii □ David Margolies, 'Left Review and Left Literary Theory', in Jon Clark, ed. *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), p.72.
- xxxix □ Patrick Deane, intro. to extracts from Alick West, *History in Ours Hands* (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), p.131.
- xl □ Arnold Kettle, 'Forward' to Alick West, *Crisis and Criticism & Literary Essays* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), p.3.
- xli □ West, *Crisis and Criticism*, 'Rhythm and Language', pp.75-80, (p. 75).
- xlii □ Ibid, pp.79-80.
- xliii □ Ibid, p.79.