Media theorists have long argued that an intrinsic connection exists between modern warfare and its media forms. For Friedrich Kittler, war can even be considered the “father of all things technical,” because, he argues, it has been decisive in the formation and development of technical media—from telegraph systems to typewriters and computers.¹ Yet, in arguing for the relations between war and media, war has been principally discussed in relation to its visual media. In Paul Virilio’s memorable phrase, “war is cinema and cinema is war.”² This emphasis on the visual media of war has not, however, been limited to discussions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century wars. Media theorists remain conscious of longer histories behind the emergence of these latter visual-media forms. Kittler, for example, has drawn attention to how such early modern media as the lanterna magica can be viewed as “by-products or waste products” of military research.³ More recently, scholars have focused on the particular importance of the Romantic era in the formation of modern media environments of war, insisting that our contemporary experience of watching war derives from the mass media surrounding the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars at the end of the eighteenth century.⁴

One effect of this concern with war’s visual media has been a limited attention to the role of sound in mediating war. Manuel De Landa has offered one of the few such accounts in his study of how radio transformed warfare during the Second World War. The technical capabilities of

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two-way radio, he argues, were crucial in the development of modern network warfare, because they allowed dispersed forces to concentrate their actions through what was, in effect, a “wireless nervous system.” A longer history of how sound has been used and weaponized in war has also been undertaken by Steve Goodman and Juliette Volcler. Yet, while both of these authors—Goodman in particular—consider the relationship of war and sound through key moments in history, stressing in particular sound’s relation to fear, their concern with war and sound has not been widely taken up. Neither have they, nor other theorists of war’s medial forms, been concerned with understanding war and sound in the long eighteenth century.

Even a very brief survey of military writing from the Romantic era, however, serves to demonstrate that the conduct and experience of war were inseparable from questions of sound and noise. If this period gave rise to modern mass media environments, it can also be situated at the origin of contemporary military thought through a burgeoning military literature and the writing of such military theorists as Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini. Two figures who fought in and wrote about the Napoleonic Wars, their writing continues to underpin military strategic thought. The media environment that developed at this time was as crucial for establishing our contemporary theoretical modes for understanding war as it was for their public dissemination.

Engaging with this body of military writing, this article examines military theorists alongside military dictionaries, memoirs, and semiautobiographical military novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as some of the most central ways that military thought and the experience of war were explained or mediated to the reading public. Drawing out key questions of sound and noise, it locates military writing in relation to similar concerns with noise, sound, and orality that have concerned recent scholarship on Romantic print as a media form. It argues that while this writing exposes how war demanded a highly regulated and correct use of sound and silence, it equally shows that war persistently threatened to collapse back into noise, as it comes to be associated with fear, panic, wounding, surprise, uncertainty, and even the voices of those who attempt to speak about it. By turning to Jean-Luc Nancy’s elaboration of an ethics of listening, this article concludes by questioning whether we might see an alternative view of war in this discussion of war’s noise. Placed beyond the expert or eyewitness—and his or her association with presence, experience, comprehension, and the control of media communication—war’s noise can point to an uncertain yet open and shared engagement with a history of war.

THE NOISE OF BATTLE

Among the most frequent references to sound in Romantic era military writing were discussions of martial music. Such music has been a neglected topic in studies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musical culture, but as Trevor Herbert and Helen Barlow have argued, it

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exerted enormous influence over music more generally during this period. While there is a long history behind the use of music in war, military bands were officially incorporated into the British army by the 1770s, with musicians achieving full military rank. The army and navy thus became by far the largest employers of musicians in Britain. 10 Music served several military purposes. Most notably, it could be used to rouse soldierly emotions, working in the manner that Charles James attributed to Phrygian music, as a “martial sort of ancient music, which excited men to rage and battle.”11 Music also served to mediate between the army and the public. Among the most striking and well-attended public events of the era, the performances of military bands were central to recruitment practices and the maintenance of public order. 12 As Nancy argues, music has been crucial to directing and giving form to military sentiments. 13

Martial music was also central to the ways in which soldiers were commanded. Each company of infantry in the British army, for example, included two or more drummers, whose drum beats were used not only to signal commands but also to help maintain the tempo of the carefully choreographed and drilled marches conducted by formed bodies of soldiers. 14 In this way, music overlapped with the oral commands that were crucial to the operation of drilled companies of soldiers. Sir David Dundas developed a standardized approach to British drill routines at the end of the eighteenth century, which he published as Principles of Military Movements in 1788 and which was adopted as the official set of drill regulations for the British army several years later. 15 An adaptation of Frederick the Great’s drill routines, it became the central work of British military drill during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. It conceptualized discipline in a markedly theatrical manner as a choreography of voices and bodies. His drill routines operated by breaking all maneuvers into eighteen basic choreographed movements and then prescribing precise vocal commands for the officers to perform, such as “Right face” and “March,” in order for each movement to be conducted by the soldiers.

In his military novel The Youth and Manhood of Cyril Thornton, Thomas Hamilton explains how these vocal commands worked in practice as he describes his eponymous character’s experience at the battle of Roleia (the novel was in large part based on Hamilton’s own experiences of war). While Hamilton limits our view of the battle to Thornton’s immediate surrounds, he nonetheless highlights the clarity of spoken orders and addresses to the soldiers, commands that “pealed loudly through the welkin.” 16 In A Short Essay on Military First Principles, Thomas Bell emphasizes that vocal commands represented a continuation of classical traditions of war—all

11 Charles James, A New and Enlarged Military Dictionary, in French and English. In Which are Explained the Principal Terms, with Appropriate Illustrations, of All the Sciences That are, More or Less, Necessary for an Officer and Engineer. In Two Volumes. By Charles James, Major in the Royal Artillery Drivers, Author of the Regimental Companion; Comprehensive View; Poems, 3rd ed. (London: T. Egerton, 1810).
12 Herbert and Barlow, Music and the British Military, 53.
13 Nancy, Listening, 52–57.
great soldiers in the classical era were great speakers.\textsuperscript{17} Conversely, there was also a need for maintaining silence within military formations in order for discipline to be effective. As Michel Foucault has observed in his discussion of disciplinary military practices, discipline demanded instant and unquestioning response to words of command and thus required a constant suppression of noise.\textsuperscript{18} In military drill, the officer may have been identified as a voice (albeit a highly regulated one), but the soldier was typically presented in graphic terms, as an abstract line or rectangle, his silence a critical factor in his capacity to operate as part of a mass formation.

If the soldier was to emit sound, it was meant to be only in a highly controlled and disciplined manner. Unregulated noise, in contrast, was linked to a disruption or even collapse of military discipline. In his semifictionalized memoirs, \textit{The Subaltern}, George Gleig describes an engagement between French and British infantry as though sound, noise, and silence were the principal weapons. As they closed with the French, the British soldiers advanced in a solemn silence, while the French set up “discordant yells” as each soldier raised his voice independently of the others. When the British soldiers finally cheered in unison to announce their charge, the French fled in panic.\textsuperscript{19} The regulation of sound and silence appears in the anecdote as a powerfully effective mechanism for attaining tactical advantage. The coordination of the British voices established their superior discipline over the uncontrolled and irregular noise of the French, “a sort of shout, in which every man halloos for himself, without regard to the tone or time of those about him.”\textsuperscript{20} If this emphasis on voice seems curious in an age of firearms, James noted in \textit{A New and Enlarged Military Dictionary} that what he termed “war whoops” were still used by all armies, despite being “a barbarous habit” originating with savages.\textsuperscript{21} However, he also condemned the habit, proposing that, in modern war, soldiers must fall silent in order to respond effectively to the word of command.

So while the control of sounds can direct them into a weaponized noise like a war whoop, noise is repeatedly identified in military writing as a source of disorientation and disorder. The \textit{News-Readers Pocket-Book} even proposed that alarm in war is principally caused by “some noise,”\textsuperscript{22} while James proposed that panic stemmed from the god Pan having commanded the soldiers of Bacchus’s army to shout in order to surprise their enemy.\textsuperscript{23} Military theorists often expressed their fears that the noise of war could cause battles to dissolve into meaningless or ineffective affairs. Maurice de Saxe noted that musketry could be useless in battles, as small arms often created “more noise than they do execution.”\textsuperscript{24} Dietrich Heinrich von Bülow similarly remarked that the

\textsuperscript{17} Thomas Bell, \textit{A Short Essay on Military First Principles} (London: T. Becket and P. A. De Hondt, 1770), 220.
\textsuperscript{19} George Gleig, \textit{The Subaltern} (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1825), 102.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{21} James, \textit{New and Enlarged Military Dictionary}.
\textsuperscript{22} The \textit{News-Readers Pocket-Book: or, a Military Dictionary. Explaining The Most Difficult Terms Made Use of in Fortification, Gunnery, and the Whole Compass of the Military Art. And a Naval Dictionary; Explaining The Terms used in Navigation, Ship-Building, &c. To Which is Added, a Concise Political History of Europe. With the Genealogies and Families of the Several Emperors, Kings, and Princes, Now Reigning; and Some Account of the Religions They Profess} (London: J. Newbery, 1759), 2.
\textsuperscript{23} James, \textit{New and Enlarged Military Dictionary}.
\textsuperscript{24} Maurice, comte de Saxe, \textit{Reveries or Memoirs Concerning the Art of War: By Maurice Count de Saxe, Marshal-General of the Armies of France. To Which is Annexed His Treatise Concerning Legions; or, A Plan for New-Modelling the French Armies. Illustrated with Copper-plates, Together with Letters on Various Military Subjects, Wrote by the Marshal to Several Eminent Persons and the Author’s Reflections on the Propagation of the Human Species. Translated from the French. To Which is Prefixed an Account of the Life of the Author} (Edinburgh: Sands, Donaldson, Murray, and Cochran, 1759), 27.
noise of soldiers’ shooting could drown out commands, thus making it impossible for officers to control their soldiers or direct the battle.\textsuperscript{25} Clausewitz describes the confusion experienced by a novice at war principally by listing the innumerable noises of battle—from the “thunder of the cannon,” to the “noise of our own guns” and the “hissing” of the bullets overhead.\textsuperscript{26}

Admittedly, battles in the Romantic era were not yet as loud as those of the First and Second World Wars. The First World War in particular has begun to be viewed as an aural war, because the advent of machine guns and high explosives saw battle devolve into trench warfare that made it extremely difficult, and dangerous, to visually witness any fighting.\textsuperscript{27} What rose to the fore for the soldier was the loudness of war—its pervasive, deafening, and terrifying torrent of noise. Noise is referred to consistently by novelists of the war. Erich Remarque frequently describes the experience of being shelled in \textit{All Quiet on the Western Front}, describing how “above our heads the air is full of invisible menace, howling, whistling and hissing,”\textsuperscript{28} while Edmund Blunden likewise repeatedly draws attention in \textit{Undertones of War} to the “deafening noise” of the “shrilling,” “screeching,” and “clashing tides” of shells.\textsuperscript{29} Loudness could nonetheless be a feature of Romantic era battlefields. Gleig noted that the most “awful” noise he ever heard was the sound of a mine exploding at the siege of Saint-Sebastian, a noise so loud it seemed to stupefy the combatants on both sides so that they temporarily suspended hostilities.\textsuperscript{30} Attacked by cavalry, Gleig observed that they came on with a noise “like thunder.”\textsuperscript{31}

Earlier accounts of war also share with those of the First World War a concern with describing the wounded soldiers’ cries, which often served in these texts as the starkest and most chilling revelation of war’s suffering. Remarque repeatedly writes about the cries of the wounded after battle, even relating a story of a wounded soldier stranded in no-man’s-land between the trenches whose screams lasted for two days until finally fading to “groans” and a “gurgling rattle.”\textsuperscript{32} Writing of the aftermath of battle around the French city of Bayonne, Gleig similarly found himself appalled by the cries of the wounded:

\begin{quote}
In the meanwhile six or eight spring-wagons arriving, such of the wounded as were unable to crawl to the rear were collected from the various spots where they lay mingled with the dead, and lifted into them, with as much care as circumstances would permit. It was a sad spectacle this. The shrieks and groans of many of these poor fellows sounded horribly in our ears; whilst the absolute silence of the rest was not less appalling, inasmuch as it gave but too much reason to believe, that they were removed from the field only to die in the wagons.
\end{quote}

Pierced by the horrible sounds of shrieks and groans, even the soldiers’ silence appeared to Gleig as a foreshadowing of their imminent death. Gleig’s fellow memoirist, Moyle Sherer, similarly

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Dietrich Heinrich Freiherr von Bülow, \textit{The Spirit of the Modern System of War}, ed. and trans. C. Malorti de Martemont (London: C. Mercier, 1806), 120.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Clausewitz, \textit{On War}, 159.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Erich Maria Remarque, \textit{All Quiet on the Western Front}, trans. Brian Murdoch (London: Vintage, 1996), 41.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Edmund Blunden, \textit{Undertones of War} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 41, 104.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Gleig, \textit{Subaltern}, 54.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 188.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Remarque, \textit{All Quiet on the Western Front}, 86–87.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Gleig, \textit{Subaltern}, 183–84.
\end{itemize}
registered the suffering of war as a disturbing noise. He recounts his memories of the battle of Talavera in his *Recollections of the Peninsula* by describing how “the trampling horses, the shout, the cry, the prayer, the death stroke all mingled their wild sounds on this spot.” In its aftermath, this chaos of noise gave way to a silence punctuated only by the cries of the wounded, becoming “but for a few fitful and stifled groans, as silent as the grave.”

A concern with noise also, however, works at a figurative level in military writing of the Romantic era. The term “noise” described those who spoke or wrote about war but who lacked an authoritative military knowledge. *A New and Enlarged Military Dictionary* includes references to a “puppy,” “quizzers,” and “military coxcombs,” all of whom are described as individuals who make a “noise” because they lack a formal or properly educated understanding of military operations. The military coxcomb or fool is even associated with the “grave doctor of the university,” who is similarly seen to offer merely an uninformed commentary on war. Sounds might be weaponized—but only through strict control and in relation to the rigid maintenance of silence. Military theorists still saw sound as an archaic device. Noise is viewed as something that falls outside, or that might even threaten to upset, a carefully controlled modern military order. Set against the military’s institutional authority, noise is even that into which military order might collapse.

THE “NOISELESS HARMONY” OF MILITARY SCIENCE

A number of Romantic scholars have begun to approach the period’s print as a distinct media form, doing so in ways that have raised specific issues of its relationship to sound and noise. Building on the earlier work of such media theorists as Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan, a primary concern has been to understand how print came to be naturalized during the Romantic era and thus served to displace or remediate a traditional oral culture. Celeste Langan, for example, proposes that Sir Walter Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel* marks a point at which a traditional oral poetry emerged as the content of a new prose-like poetics of blank verse. This remediation of the sound of ballads as the content of modern poetry identified with the printed page, Langan argues, can be viewed as a spectral poetics of silent reading in which the reader is invited to conjure audiovisual hallucinations out of the descriptive effects of Scott’s poetry. In this she follows the work of Kittler, who views Romantic poetics as, in effect, an effort to redirect the noise of the world into the interiorized silence of writing and meaning. Like Kittler, Langan views this process of silent reading in terms of the physical materiality of books that underpinned Romantic forms of imagination and subjectivity.

Kevis Goodman and Mary Favret have proposed, in a related manner, that Romantic poetics can be understood, at least in part, as a noise that accompanies the mediation of history into print. Responding to Jerome McGann’s assertions that Romantic poetry displaces history into idealized or spiritual terms, they read that history as a dissonant affect, discomfort, or

35 James, *New and Enlarged Military Dictionary*.
cognitive noise that accompanies poetry and other cultural forms. They propose that, as critics, we can regard this uncertainty or sense of discomfort as alternative structures of feeling that brush against the grain of a national history, seeing that history as a “noise that refuses to settle into stillness.” Such concerns with Romantic poetics are admittedly somewhat distinct from my discussions here. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Favret believes that the dissonant affects or noise she associates with Romantic poetics are principally affects associated with war.

The term “noise” is used by media theorists to refer to disruptions or entropy produced by the physical medium of an act of communication. Kittler argues that noise, in this sense, is principally related to the emergence of “indexical media” in the twentieth century that register the imprint of the physical alongside the information that they communicate. The gramophone, for example, reproduced the sound of the human voice alongside the hiss or crackle of unfiltered noise, producing an effect that Kittler likens to the irruption of the Lacanian real into the symbolic realm of language and thus a fundamental disruption of the earlier Romantic belief that writing represented a pure emanation of the soul. Both Goodman and Favret have, however, aligned the operation of noise with Romantic print by drawing on longer histories of media forms that both recognize the physicality of print and expand the use of the concept of media to more adequately account for print forms. For example, in examining the genre of the georgic as a key site for early modern theorization of media, Goodman argues that we can see noise as an excess of idea or meaning within writing rather than simply an indexical record of physicality. Such excess, or “noise,” is produced by words that lack or trouble ideational content and that thus complicate communication by producing, instead, a feeling of dissonance or painful discomfort.

The era’s military writing can, in a similar manner, be thought of in relation to the dissonant affects or unsettling noises that accompany the mediation of war. Foucault argues that military science itself took shape at the juncture of “war and the noise of battle” and the “order and silence, subservient to peace,” reminding us that military thought is as much bound up with the operation of discipline, control, and reason as with the violence of weapons and combat. But, to follow Kittler, we could see Romantic military writing as working by mediating battle’s unsettling noise into the authoritative silence of print. A chaotic noise of voices, drums, guns, war whoops, alarms, shrieks, groans, military fools, and coxcombs was remediated into a modern military disciplinary knowledge based in the silent reading of print. A military literary world emerged by the end of the eighteenth century that had developed and expanded modern disciplinary knowledge about war, as a mass of reading and writing redirected an earlier understanding of war as bodily chaos into an activity, principally, of the mind.

Reflecting on such questions of war’s relation to meaninglessness, Nick Mansfield argues that the Romantic era’s most significant theorist of war, Clausewitz, developed his thought in relation to Kantian aesthetics in ways that register this basic conversion of meaningless noise into a form of meaning. For Kant, art allows the “meaningless to become meaningful,” because it

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39 Favret, War at a Distance, 57.
40 Kittler, Discourse Networks, 219.
41 Ibid., xvii.
43 Goodman, Georgic Modernity, 63.
44 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 168.
45 Favret, War at a Distance, 180.
brings forth a feeling of knowledge without actually providing knowledge in the form of a defensible truth. It provides “the sense of the ecstasy of insight,” but without furnishing meaning with a stabilizing “doxa or content.” Clausewitz’s writing on war is certainly replete with references to the aesthetic genius of generals and even descriptions of war as an artistic form. Explaining, for example, how a general’s genius resides in the overall coherence of a military plan rather than in developing a novel strategy, Clausewitz offers an understanding of war that uncannily resembles this aesthetic reading of Romantic poetics as a processing of meaningless noise:

A Prince or General who knows exactly how to organize his War according to his object and means, who does neither too little nor too much, gives by that the greatest proof of his genius. But the effects of this talent are exhibited not so much by the invention of new modes of action, which might strike the eye immediately, as in the successful final result of the whole. It is the exact fulfilment of silent suppositions, it is the noiseless harmony of the whole action which we should admire, and which only makes itself known in the total result.

The inquirer who, tracing back from the final result, does not perceive the signs of that harmony is one who is apt to seek for genius where it is not, and where it cannot be found.

War operates here with an almost organic totality of effect, a result of genius and talent that demands from its audience merely admiration. For a prince or general to wage war is likened by Clausewitz to the construction of a work of art. War even seems to be equated with the writing that gives it shape, its silent supposition only fully realizable or discoverable to an inquirer who is able to reflect and track back to see the results.

Yet even as he insists that the “greatest proof” of military genius works through a silent harmony of operations, Clausewitz also intimates that a noise nonetheless surrounds any effort to achieve military authority and precision. A failure to fully understand war from a military theoretical point of view would be to be distracted and confused by its noise. Or, as Clausewitz argues, the correct operation of military critical thought works to protect “the silent sentence of higher authority from the noise of crude opinions.” Clausewitz’s contemporary, Jomini, for all his emphasis on the science of strategy, similarly saw war as a “sublime art” requiring “special talent” or the “sublime character of a great general,” because military theoretical principles must be deployed “amidst the noise and confusion of battle.” For both thinkers, war is an art that works both with and against the noise of battle in order to disclose its essence and to produce its meaning. But what their comments also reveal is an anxiety that the border between military authority and noise may be unstable, that only through special talent and genius can even the best general’s efforts rise above noise. As Clausewitz expands his thought, however, even the silence of authority itself begins to lose its sense, appearing as “a deep mysterious relation” that is not disclosed in any “visible form” and that “human sagacity cannot discover.” As with the Kantian aesthetic, war for Clausewitz seems to have a meaning that is nonetheless incapable of expressing itself as content or a defensible truth; it resides simply as the impression of meaning, a

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47 Clausewitz, On War, 242.

48 Ibid., 228.

49 Jomini, Art of War, 344.

50 Clausewitz, On War, 228.
paradoxically silent harmony that the inquirer is liable to be unable to detect or is liable to imagine that it lies elsewhere than it really does. Even Jomini concedes that quite possibly “no book” can inform the general of the principles that allow him to rise above the noise of battle.51 However much military thought strives to push war toward “the silent sentence of higher authority,” it appears to be inherently haunted by noise.

LISTENING TO WAR

Noise consistently appears in military writing, then, as a form of disorder or incoherence; it could even be suggested that noise is the most definitive marker of disorder within such writing. As military authors describe the noises of war, they turn their readers’ attention to a dense field of uncertainty and confusion that military writing is always striving to render into sense. War’s literal noises, its wild, mingled sounds, seem to leave an almost indexical trace upon military writing, such noises embedding themselves, to adapt Goodman’s terms, as a painful discomfort or affective dissonance that resists the idea and meaning of military thought.52 But military writing is not only situated at the juncture of silent sentences and a perplexing and confounding noise but also appears curiously aware of itself as being so located. It remains confounded by the possibility that it might not be able to transcend this noise—that discourse on war might itself produce only so much more noise. The general might be left expressing the noise of a military coxcomb.

Always at stake in war are questions of how abstractions are to become real. For war to have any rationality, the brute fact of injuring must be made to serve military policy. Jan Mieszkowski contends that war thus always exists in a twilight of materiality and discourse:

War’s uniqueness among human endeavors has to do with the way in which it demands a new understanding of the concrete consequences that abstractions have in the physical world. Warfare constantly imposes rapid modulations between ideas and reality, between intelligible visions and sensible phenomena; at the same time, a military program unfailingly presents itself as a straightforward means to an end, ostensibly indifferent to the violent conflation of the physical and the metaphysical it demands. War seems to necessitate a reconsideration of every standard and measure of cost-benefit analysis, leaving some observers incredulous as to the madness of its existence, others relieved, if not pleased, by its practical utility. War creates a vexed relationship between actual and imagined violence.53

War might be viewed as an absurdly pointless physical contest of bodies and injury and yet equally as a clear and rational mechanism of policy, even a form of language or intercourse between states.54 To wage war means literally entering a field of battle at the same time that it means producing and framing ways of reading and mapping out a field of knowledge—print, as much as muskets and artillery, served as a vital medium of combat in the Napoleonic era.55 Jean Baudrillard contends that because modern visual technologies are fundamental to the waging of war, so war today has merged with its media forms.56 If, however, we follow recent scholarship

51 Jomini, Art of War, 345.
52 Goodman, Georgic Modernity, 36.
53 Mieszkowski, Watching War, 144–45.
54 Clausewitz, On War, 402.
55 Mieszkowski, Watching War, 5.
to recognize the importance of earlier print forms to the mediatization of war, we can also see a longer history to this entanglement of media forms, information, and physical conflict.

If the concept of noise reminds us of how any form of communication is entangled with its concrete media substrate, noise might, then, be seen as an inherent quality or by-product of mediated war. Noise at the broadest level is entangled with questions of how any abstraction, such as a military plan, will function in the physical world.\footnote{Kittler, Discourse Networks, xiv.} Read as a form of affective dissonance within the authority of military writing, war’s noise could be seen to operate as something akin to Clausewitz’s concept of the fog of war. Clausewitz uses the phrase “fog of war” to conceptualize the inevitable friction that accompanies any military action, as plans and strategies come up against the exigencies of the battlefield. The concept of the fog of war points to an underlying disjunction between military theory and its manifestation in battle, a friction that Clausewitz argued can never be entirely eliminated and that constitutes the real element in which war is waged. Mieszkowski explores how this key phrase in Clausewitz’s thought is curiously positioned at the juncture of the figurative and the literal: fog on a battlefield will literally create a fog of war as much as fog figuratively refers to the effects of confusion in military strategy. Fog attempts to give an abstract form to that which is, by its very nature, formless.\footnote{Mieszkowski, Watching War, 20. On Clausewitz’s discussion of fog and war as a medium, see also Thomas H. Ford, “Narrative and Atmosphere: War by Other Media in Wilkie, Clausewitz and Turner,” in Ramsey and Russell, Tracing War in British Enlightenment and Romantic Culture, 183–86.}

The noise of war similarly lies at the boundaries of war’s figurative and literal levels. It embodies the physical confusion of battle as much as it refers back to the possibility that military science will offer nothing more than confusion, the term itself suggesting a slippage between the battlefield and its abstraction. But if war’s noise resembles its fog, it also demands to be seen as a concept with a contrary operation. Where the concept of fog takes us to a strategic reflection on uncertainty as a closing down of knowledge, noise takes us in the opposing direction—to a certain opening up of war. Rather than the fog of war as mechanical friction that impedes military planning, noise is a nondirectional and unformed effluvium that always suffuses and yet escapes war. The philosopher of noise, Michael Serres, even proposes that noise “dispenses with weapons,” because it “occupies space faster than weapons can.”\footnote{Goodman, Sonic Warfare, 105.} To think in terms of noise could be seen as one way of imagining access to war, a proliferation of uncertain knowledge and crude opinions with all their uncomfortable and dissonant affects.

Writing on war ordinarily operates at either end of two distinct poles of a spectrum: of strategic abstraction, on the one hand, and sense datum, on the other.\footnote{Fredric Jameson, “War and Representation,” PMLA 124, no. 5 (2009): 1547.} War either fades into the pure abstractions of military theory and principles or presses to a closeness that defies vision altogether and produces, instead, stories of soldiers’ personal experience and suffering that can be described only as what Yuval Harari terms “flesh witnessing.”\footnote{Yuval N. Harari, The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450–2000 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 7.} One effect is that war is left as something either too obvious to require explanation or too obtuse to ever be explained. Described through the abstractions of military thought, war can present either a clear and simple operation of military policy or, alternatively, an impenetrably dense field that can be deciphered only by the general’s sublime genius. Described as sense datum, a reader either is left resigned to
an ironic reflection on suffering that we all know only too well or is otherwise held at bay from understanding war because it can be experienced only as a trauma that not even those who were there possess as conscious memory. Either way there is no room for comment on war—war is silenced into imaginary visions or pained physicality.

Military writing operates in a manner, then, that resembles how Nancy sees martial music. Expansive and invasive, such music seeks to overwhelm, capture, and penetrate identities as though enacting a territorial conquest of subjectivity. Military writing similarly strives to impose its sense upon the noise of battle and so direct its readers’ attention and feeling into its silent authority. War is, in effect, pre-scripted by its media forms, which are as much about waging as watching war. To view war is to not only be held at a distance but to be effectively enlisted within war’s totality. But could an audience invest its attention, instead, into the discordant noise that inevitably accompanies this scripting or sense making of war? A noise that might demand we listen rather than watch war? Nancy’s proposal that we turn to listening rather than hearing and understanding as a way of affectively engaging the world might, therefore, be one way of rethinking our habitual deferral to either abstract rationalization of war or an ethics of presence and bodily suffering as a source of war’s truth. Listening would be to introduce what Nancy views as a “distance” between sound and sense that military writing, like martial music, seeks to collapse. Listening represents an effort to strain toward meanings that are not yet accessible or comprehensible.

At the very least, listening might be seen as a motif that had some currency in the Romantic era, as authors found themselves at a remove from distant wars yet nonetheless straining to listen. In A *New and Enlarged Military Dictionary*, James observes just how far the noise of war could travel by noting that guns in Holland during one battle of the Nine Years’ War were heard in Wales. It is hard to credence this exactly: noise appears in the story to escape the bounds of reason or actuality by opening up war to uncertain knowledge. A similar sense of uncertainty can be found in accounts of listening to the distant artillery of Waterloo in William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* or François-René de Chateaubriand’s *Memoirs* or of the rumors and stories of war, a figurative noise, circulating in newspapers and social circles that suffuse Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* or William Cowper’s *The Task*. Gleig describes the horrifying scene of the aftermath of Saint-Sebastian as “a concert” that demands such listening:

> The ceaseless hum of conversation, the occasional laugh, and wild shout of intoxication, the pitiful cries, or deep moans of the wounded, and the uninterrmpted roar of the flames, produced altogether such a concert, as no man who listened to it can ever forget. Of these various noises, the greater number began gradually to subside, as night passed on; and long before dawn there was a fearful silence. Sleep had succeeded inebriety with the bulk of the army,—of the poor wretches who groaned and shrieked three hours ago, many had expired; and the very fire had almost wasted itself by consuming everything upon which it could feed. Nothing, therefore, could now be heard, except an occasional faint moan, scarcely distinguishable from the heavy breathing of the sleepers; and even that was soon heard no more.

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65 James, *New and Enlarged Military Dictionary*.
66 Favret, *War at a Distance*, 23, 162. See also Mieszkowski, *Watching War*, 43, 56.
Placed at what Favret describes as a middle distance from war, he finds himself listening to an incoherent yet unforgettable noise that lingers on into a “fearful silence,” the moans of the dying fading into the oblivion of those who sleep. To speak of listening to war’s noise might be to continue to indulge fantasies that we can as observers assume a power and control over war. But it might also mean stepping back from media forms and their coordination of war, to see war not as a totalizing force but as an unstable, inexplicable, and open realm of competing voices, noises, and concerns—as discord or dissonance that works within and through war’s media channels and that even leaves its mark on silence.

68 Favret, *War at a Distance*.