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Fractured Surveillance: PJ Harvey's Shaken England in Sound and Image

Christoph Reinfandt

Christoph Reinfandt (Tübingen) seziert in seiner Kolumne die aktuelle CD von PJ Harvey, *Let England Shake*, und eine darauf basierende Videoreihe von Seamus Murphy.

"The West's asleep. Let England shake, / weighted down with silent dead." These are the opening words of one of the most critically acclaimed albums of 2011, PJ Harvey's *Let England Shake*.¹ How can you shake when you are weighted down, a pedantic listener may ask, but shaking off the silence surrounding the cost of wars past and present and putting them into perspective is exactly what the album proceeds to do, so much so, in fact, that *New Musical Express* critic Mike Williams suggests in a rare 10 out of 10 review that "Francis Ford Coppola can lay claim to the war movie. Ernest Hemingway the war novel. Polly Jean Harvey, a 41-year-old from Dorset, has claimed the war album."² By now, this war album has been supplemented with twelve short films by war photographer and film maker Seamus Murphy, which were first screened in mid-2011 at various film festivals in the UK and finally released on DVD in December. *Let England Shake* thus provides a highly interesting example for a multi-media take on history, employing sound, words, and imagery both verbal and visual.

England Aslant

The design of the CD cover by Michelle Henning from the Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England in Bristol provides a first visual clue with regard to the observational stance adopted on the re-

cord: Based on drawings by PJ Harvey herself, the black-and-white front cover indicates an explosion in black at its centre into which the title is embedded in white letters (see Fig. 1). On the margins of this explosion, however, birds in flight are scattered and set free, while the cd itself depicts a larger and



Fig. 1: PJ Harvey, *Let England Shake*, CD front cover

a smaller bird of prey sailing in the air. This ambivalence between serene detachment and aggression (the bird may swoop down at any moment to hit a target) can also be found in the lyrics, which oscillate between an acknowledgement of death and decay on the one hand and an aching nostalgia for an innocent England gone that can still be experienced in nature on the other. The album-opening title song, for example, acknowledges that "England's dancing

days are done" because "indifference won," but then the singer invites Bobby, one of the many characters in the songs who remain more or less anonymous, to an outing: "Pack up your troubles, let's head out / [...] / & splash about, swim back & forth / & laugh out loud, / until the day is ending, / & the birds are silent in the branches, / and the insects are courting in the bushes." This would be perfectly innocent, were it not for the fact that the destination is "the fountain of death" and that "by the shores of lovely lakes / heavy stones are falling." Similarly, the album's second track, "The Last Living Rose," begins with an ironical attack on England in its current state with its Europhobia and social decay ("Goddam' Europeans! / Take me back to beautiful England / & the grey, damp filthiness of ages and battered books, / fog rolling down behind the mountains, / & on the graveyards, and dead sea captains. // Let me walk through the stinking alleys / to the music of drunken beatings, / past the Thames River, glistening like gold / hastily sold for nothing."), only to conjure up an idyllic England at its end ("Let me watch night fall on the river, / the moon rise up and turn to silver, / the sky move, / the ocean shimmer, / the hedge shake, / the last living rose quiver.") While the war theme has not been introduced at all at this point, it hits the rural idyll with a vengeance in the third song, "The Glorious Land," an angry



Grande hazaña! Con muertos!

esweems.com/goya

Fig. 2: Francisco Goya, *The Disasters of War* (1810-20), plate 39: "Great Deeds"

anti-war cry drawing its inspiration from Russian folk lyrics³ which exposes rural England as a myth camouflaging the emergence of England as a nation in a process of perpetual war. Clearly including herself among the inhabitants, the singer asks questions ("How is our glorious country ploughed? / [...] // How is our glorious country sown? / [...] // How is our glorious land bestowed? // And what is the glorious fruit of our land?"), rejects the conventional answers ("Not by iron ploughs / [...] / Not with wheat and corn"), and provides new ones ("our land is ploughed by tanks and feet marching, // [...] // Its fruit is deformed children, / [...] // Its fruit is orphaned children.") Here, the singer is clearly detached from what can be directly seen and observed, and the experience of nature provided by England that was so highly valued in the two preceding songs is unmasked as an illusion. In fact, England and its seemingly independent Englishness are part of a global setting, as the call and response vocals interspersed between the stanzas of the song illustrate by pitting "Oh America!" against "Oh England" (sung in an act of phonetic defamiliarization as "Oh, In-ger-land" while 'America' seems to receive a Spanish/Latin American inflection).

After this, many songs of the album

clearly adopt soldiers' perspectives. The album credits acknowledge that the lyrics to "All and Everyone" (track 5) and "The Colour of the Earth" (track 12) were inspired by the writings of Australian popular historian L.A. Carlyon (*Gallipoli*, Doubleday, 2002) and the words of Vic Nicholson in *Voices of Gallipoli* by Maurice Shadbolt (Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), and even without reading the album credits, the Gallipoli campaign in World War One can clearly be spotted in references to two of its main theatres, Bolton's Ridge (in "All and Everyone") and Battleship Hill (in the eponymous sixth song, more about which at the end of this column) as well as to an Anzac trench (in which the speaker has witnessed the loss of his dearest friend Louis in the last song, "The Colour of the Earth"). "Written on the Forehead," the penultimate song of the album brings this forward by being obliquely set in Iraq through its reference to dinars and belly-dancers at its beginning.⁴ "The Words that Maketh Murder" (track 4), on the other hand, provides a more general angle ("I have seen and done things I want to forget") which evokes Francisco Goya's apocalyptic series of prints *The Disasters of War* (1810-20, cf. Fig. 2: "arms and legs were in the trees") and ends in despair ("This was something else again. /

I fear it cannot be explained") before it escapes into bitter hilarity by establishing a catchy hook on the words "What if I take my problem to the United Nations?", which turn out to be, again explicitly acknowledged in the album credits, taken from Eddie Cochrane's "Summertime Blues" from 1958, at the height of the Cold War. Two more songs provide less subjective angles on the soldiers' experience, one ("In the Dark Places," track 8, again acknowledged to be inspired by Russian folk lyrics) by moving from the soldiers' perspective ("We got up early, / washed our faces, / [...] // and some of us returned, / and some of us did not.") to a general meditation ("In the fields and in the forests, / under the moon and under the sun / another summer has passed, / and not one man has appeared, / not one woman has revealed / the secrets of this world.") and on to the home front ("So our young men hid / with guns, in the dirt / and in the dark places), the other one (track 10) by describing a soldier, James Walker, "Hanging in the Wire" in a WWI no-man's land between life and death where "[t]here are no birds singing / 'The White Cliffs of Dover'" because "[t]here are no trees to sing from."

The two remaining songs of the album clearly revert to the outside/inside observer position of the first three songs. "Bitter Branches" (track 9) tries to find an image for the ultimate reality of history as war which nevertheless links it to nature – here the poetic imagination is acknowledged as a medium which enables us to see what is not immediately present ("Hold up the clear glass to see. / Hold up the clear glass and look through; / soldiers standing in formation"), and the image of the branches links up with both "The Word that Maketh Murder" and "Hanging in the Wire". The programmatically titled "England", on the other hand, reflects upon the inside/outside ambivalence of the singer with regard to her sadness and bitterness about England's irreparable dirt and stagnation on the one hand and her inevitable belonging on the other ("I live and die / through England / [...] // I cannot go on as I am. /

I cannot leave. // [...] // Undaunted, never-failing love for you, / England, / is all, to which I cling.”)

Soundscapes

Like the lyrics, which turn out to be drawing on a huge variety of sources while avoiding more obvious ones (the poetry of World War I, for example), the soundscape of *Let England Shake* avoids self-evident generic frames of reference like acoustic protest songs from the folk tradition or rock grooves which would literally perform the title's suggestion to let England

shake. Instead, the music produced for the album by PJ Harvey and her long-time collaborators John Parish, Mick Harvey and Jean-Marc Butty on a variety of instruments⁵ seems to be slightly makeshift, an effect probably created by the near-complete absence of bass lines (frequently replaced by somewhat hollow sounding bass drum sounds) and the fact that some of the drumming by Jean-Marc Butty was only added later to the tracks which had been recorded mostly live by the other three at the deconsecrated St. Peter's Church in Eype near PJ Harvey's hometown Bridport in Dorset, black-and-white photographs of which are featured in the CD booklet. The original music recorded for the album sounds artificial and 'electric', but it retains some connection to the folk tradition through its formal simplicity and frequent reliance on strummed guitars and the autoharp played by Harvey herself (cf. Fig. 3) as well as the occasional lilting handclaps and call and response patterns between Harvey's lead vocals and the male chorus of her bandmates or what sounds like a children's choir (but is not explicitly credited as such in the booklet). It moves away from these sources, however, in its very flexible use of stanza patterns and its avoidance of clearly marked refrains, in its addition of keyboard and piano as well as plaintive saxophone (Harvey



Fig. 3: PJ Harvey recording live with autoharp in St. Peter's Church, Eype

herself) and trombone lines (Parish), its use of electric guitars, and, most strikingly, in Harvey's slightly overstrung but at times virtuosic singing. In an interview for her hometown's newspaper, Harvey has commented extensively on the recording process, pointing out that she "couldn't sing in a rich strong mature voice without it sounding completely wrong. So I had to slowly find the voice, and this voice started to develop, almost taking on the role of the narrator," thus testifying to the medium in which the various perspectives of the songs come together.⁶

At the same time, the integrative potential of voice and idiosyncratic soundscape is decentred by the highly creative use of sampling techniques, quotations and allusions, and it is here that the actual rhetorical centre of *Let England Shake* lies hidden.⁷ The very first bars of the opening title song, for example, introduce a xylophone melody and a swing rhythm which the album credits identify as "adapted from the song 'Istanbul (Not Constantinople)', a 1953 hit for the Canadian group The Four Lads written by Jimmy Kennedy and Nat Simon, which musically resembles Irving Berlin's "Puttin' on the Ritz" (1929) and can be read as a response to the blandly commercial and sentimental "C-O-N-S-T-A-N-T-I-N-O-P-L-E" by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra

(1928), thus decentring the album's notion of England in a post-imperial and post-colonial fashion from the very beginning while acknowledging the power of popular music in spite of its frequent complicity with these dominant ideological agendas. Similarly, "The Glorious Land" takes some rhythmic cues from a sample of "The Bed's Too Big Without You" by The Police (1979), but is much more strikingly dominated by the intrusion (rather than inclusion in this case) of a bugle call from a "Regimental March" performed

by HM Irish (!) Guards, again indicating England's imperial and colonial legacy.⁸ While the adapted quote from "Summertime Blues" in "The Words that Maketh Murder" again nods to the tradition of popular music, the programmatic "England" presents itself jarringly against the sample of a Kurdish Song, "Kassem Miro", by Said El Kurdi, recorded in the late 1920s in Baghdad by "the Gramophone and Typewriter Company (later EMI) on a talent-spotting trip to the British Mandate of Mesopotamia just a few years before it became independent Iraq in 1932,"⁹ again indicating the colonial heritage, while on the other hand PJ Harvey has insisted on the private or even existential resonance of a "woman singing to her beloved" which crosses cultural divisions.¹⁰ And finally, "Written on the Forehead" relies heavily on a sample of "Blood and Fire" by Jamaican reggae producer and singer Winston 'Ninety the Observer' Holness (1970), thus indicating the postcolonial aftermath.

With all this, *Let England Shake* turns out to be a multi-layered sound sculpture with educational as well as artistic ambitions. "All of the samples I used add meaning to the song, and the lyrics I'm singing," PJ Harvey insists in an interview,¹¹ and she certainly does not think of herself primarily as a musician:

"I have never felt like a musician, whenever someone has asked me what I do, I have stumbled on the word. I feel like an artist. I feel like a painter more than a musician. I paint with words and sound. [...] I throw things at a canvas and see what works, and I do it with music and words. [...] Yes, I paint with singing and words."¹² And on this note, what ends up on the acoustic canvas in the case of *Let England Shake* "is perhaps not so much [...] war as modes of representing war, and what they tell us about the endless, bloody cycle of history"¹³ and its invisible presence in the present.

Visualized Soundscapes

Given these concerns, it does not come as a surprise that Harvey sought out war photographer Seamus Murphy after visiting his exhibition "A Darkness Visible" about Afghanistan between 1994 and 2006.¹⁴ Murphy agreed to film accompanying videos for each song on the album and set out on a road trip across England to gather images, moving and still, from its (then) present state. As an Irish person living in England, he felt himself well-placed for the (post-)colonial slant of the album, and, taking up the singer's suggestion to "avoid the bleedin' obvious", he decided to focus on melody and sound, "the spirit and feel of the track" rather than the lyrics as cues for his visualisations.¹⁵ The result is slightly unsettling for the viewer, as the war theme foregrounded on the album has been clearly relegated to the background in the films, surfacing only intermittently as "a view of a colour contact sheet, through a magnifying loupe, of fighters on the plains outside Kabul" in "In the Dark Places," or in images of "hands with roses and [a] man's hand comforting a woman" from a "funeral at Wootton Bassett of a British soldier killed in Afghanistan" in "Bitter Branches," or in in-

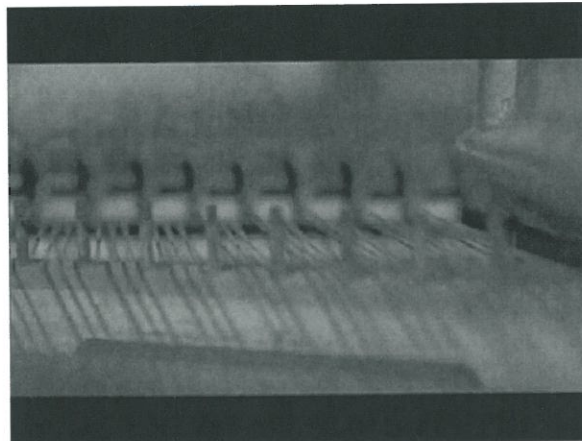
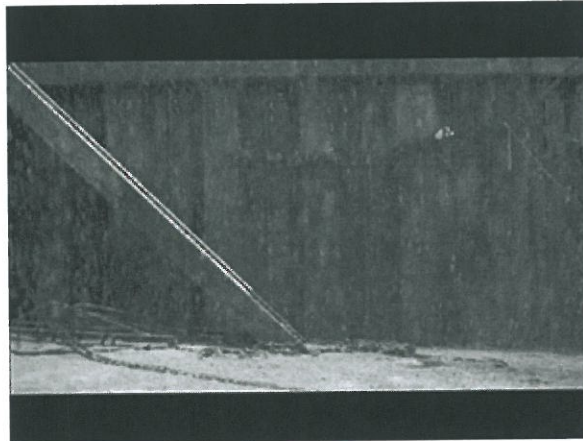
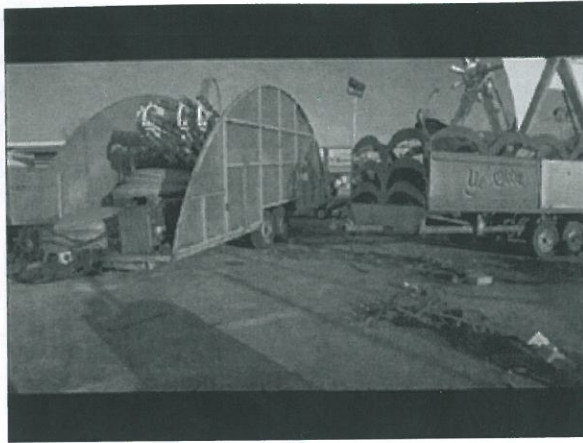


Fig. 4-7: "Let England Shake" (film still), "All and Everyone" (film still), "Hanging in the Wire" (film still), "Bitter Branches" (film still)

terspersed "black and white photographs [from] conflict zones" with "scenes of quiet desperation of England" in "Written on the Forehead."¹⁶ Instead, images collected on the road trip illustrate the soundscape of the recordings in a freely associative and clearly unscripted manner, while the link to the words is maintained through the device of letting people ("characters one could meet on travels around England") "speak the first few lines of the song that follows," including the lyrics to "Written on the Forehead" spoken in Arabic (with English subtitles) as "shot in a pub on the Portobello Road," the lyrics to "On Battleship Hill" recited by a German (Murphy's assistant's stepfather) in Berlin because "I liked having a German reciting the opening lines to a song written from, and about, the other side of the trenches" (again, somewhat hilariously, with subtitles in spite of fairly adequate pronunciation), and the lyrics of "In the Dark Places" recited by a young Londoner "the same age as the soldier whose lines he recites."

Despite Murphy's protestations that while he "set out to shoot most of the films as stills, with occasional pieces of moving footage [...] the reverse happened," the overall impression of his films is static, with only the cuts from image to image loosely following the flow of the music and from time to time movement (a boat setting out to sea, a bird flying, flowing traffic) in otherwise static shots. Broadly speaking, the images cued by the music tend to work very much like the lyrics: Oscillating between random impressions of land and people and more symbolically charged images indicating nostalgia and decay on the one hand (a derelict fairground by day in "Let England Shake", cf. Fig. 4; an illuminated one by night; a "suitably dark" Punch and Judy Show "with overtones of domestic violence;" an

old-style ballroom with a Wurlitzer and fairly old dancers; old ladies in a bingo hall) and an idealized maritime and rural England on the other (captured in many stills from Norfolk, which Murphy deems “an inspirational place”). Forays into the real present of tankers potentially colliding in the Thames estuary and city dwellers getting on with their lives only surface sporadically, on the other hand. Some of the images seem to have a more direct link to the lyrics and become highly resonant, such as the red roses fixed to a chain on a pier in Southend in a snow storm set against the omnipresence of death in “All and Everyone” (cf. Fig. 5) or the interior of the piano used for recording mirroring the barbed wire of “Hanging in the Wire” (cf. Fig. 6). This kind of symbolism is frequently used for framing tracks and marking transitions, such as the exhibit of a skeleton in a glass case in “Let England Shake”, the shift from a tree with leaves at the beginning of “The Glorious Land” to a tree without leaves at its end, or the image of a hill with some scattered trees with the ‘empty’ sound of wind caught by a microphone at the beginning of “On Battleship Hill.” The self-referential dimension indicated here also comes to the fore with the motif of the road map actually used by Murphy in “The Last Living Rose”, in the driving motif in “The Word that Maketh Murder” (hands on the wheel, oncoming headlights) and in the footage of trees shot through the open car roof while driving as employed in “The Glorious Land,” which in turn prepares the ground for the abstraction of the branch structures in “Bitter Branches” (Fig. 7).

What all this amounts to, finally, is a series of fractured poems consisting of images. As Murphy comments in the liner notes to the DVD, “[s]hooting pictures makes you observe in a detached way, whether in the West Bank, Mogadishu or London’s Waterloo Station. Afterwards you try to make sense of them; they will mean something uniquely personal to everyone.” It is this process that his 12 short films engage with, and it is up to every individual viewer whether they are will-

ing to let themselves be drawn into this particular game.



Fig. 8: PJ Harvey, *Let England Shake: 12 Short Films by Seamus Murphy*, DVD front cover.

Fractured Surveillance

Between themselves, PJ Harvey’s *Let England Shake* and Seamus Murphy’s 12 short films establish a fractured mode of surveying contemporary England – fractured, that is, between past and present, between insider and outsider observer positions, between words and music on the one hand and pure visuality on the other. The one thing that holds this fractured surveillance together is its insistence on a subjective agent – singer/artist or filmmaker, in short: an author – who makes use of all opportunities offered by today’s media for recording and collating modes of representing reality (and history) in order to create a work (or, more neutrally, a ‘text’ in the broadest sense of the word) that integrates all the processed viewpoints, intertextual and intermedial references, genres and conventions. These can then be decoded again with varying emphases by the audience. In both cases, there is a deft negotiation of Romantic and Modernist dimensions of authenticity. While the first is clearly anchored in the staging of authorship – PJ Harvey strumming the autoharp and laying down the basic tracks live in a

disused church, implying sincerity and directness and a certain degree of continuity with past musical styles; Sean Murphy going on a road trip through England, recording natural sounds and ordinary people and sights – the second is clearly crucial for the end result: The overall soundscape of *Let England Shake* is clearly more artificial than natural, it does not shy away from crass juxtapositions (such as the samples of the bugle call and the Kurdish singer jarring micro-tonally with the foregrounded vocal performance); and the visual landscape of the 12 short films is one of discontinuity and montage, constantly running against the grain of expectations and occasionally lapsing into a kind of media-induced surrealism. Due to the singer’s presence as voice, however, the integration of the disparate constituents works better on the album than in the films, where the filmmaker remains largely absent in spite of shots of his hands on the wheel and of his road map, and where the camera induces a sense of detachment in spite of its basically subjective handling by the author-filmmaker. So perhaps the dispersal of the one prominent bird of prey on the CD into a number of birds in flight on a film still on the front cover of the DVD (and the DVD itself) is also significant in that it suggest just this transferral of artistic vision from one person to another and from one medium to another with very different conditions of production and reception (cf. Fig. 8).

At any rate, at its centre, which is shared by the geographically decentred “On Battleship Hill” and the sonically decentred “England”, the album offers a rare moment of intimacy unmatched in the films. “On Battleship Hill” begins with a fairly nondescript but swinging chord sequence which then slows down for the opening lines, sung in an extremely high and fragile fashion by Harvey: “The scent of Thyme carried on the wind, / stings my face into remembering / cruel nature has won again / cruel nature has won again.”¹⁷ Given the album’s overall theme, the opening line may as well be heard as “The scent of time carried on the wind,” and the song proceeds to describe a present-day

visit to “Battleship Hill’s caved in trenches” (cf. Fig. 9), where “a hateful feeling still lingers, / even now, 80 years later.” While it picks up its original lilting rhythm in the process, the extraordinary range of the folksong-like opening melody is never re-established in the rest of the song and merely lingers on. Nature, which, in its English variety as a nurturing and benevolent realm, has been partly deconstructed in some of the other songs, emerges in “On Battleship Hill” as what it really is, i.e. not at all concerned with human concerns: “The land returns to how it has always been. / Thyme [Time] carried on the wind. / Jagged mountains, jutting out / cracked like teeth in a rotten mouth. / On Battleship Hill I hear the wind, / Say ‘Cruel nature has won again.’” This intensity finds its visual match only at the beginning of the accompanying film with its haunting image of a windswept hill accompanied by

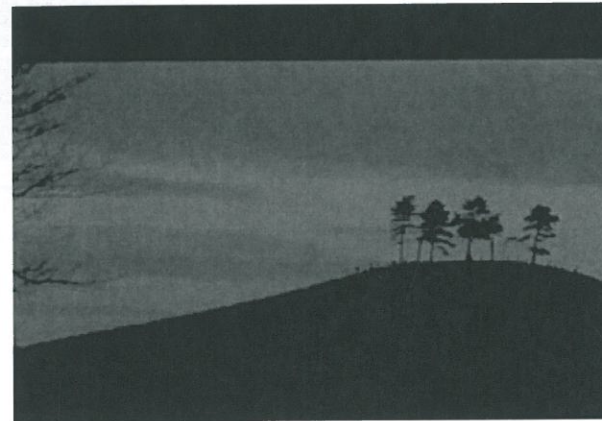


Fig. 9 and 10: aerial view of trenches on Battleship Hill, October 1915; “On Battleship Hill” (film still).

what seems to be pure wind as caught by a microphone (Fig. 10, again with the visual leitmotif of branches on the left). After this, however, the film descends into fairly random footage of old women in a bingo hall (inspired, according to Murphy, by the “rockabilly/skiffle sound at the beginning of the track), photographs from the WWI era (but not of actual battles), faces of anonymous men and boys from the present, and finally an illuminated ferris wheel which points back to “Let England Shake,” where it also occurred. Astonishingly, the film does not even react to the striking musical cue of Harvey’s intense singing of the opening lines and lets the bingo ladies go about their business undisturbed by the striking change in the soundscape. Here, the film falls short of the ultimately romantic vision of the album which indicates that it will ultimately not be human “indifference” that has “won,” as the title track has it, but rather “cruel nature.” And while this “can be interpreted in so many ways,” Harvey herself points out that “it’s actually quite romantic too. It’s al-

most this idea that whatever happens, nature is going to keep going.”¹⁸

Notes

¹ Cf. <http://www.metacritic.com/feature/best-albums-of-2011> and <http://www.metacritic.com/music/let-england-shake/pj-harvey>, last accessed August 1, 2012. The album went on to win the prestigious Mercury Music Prize in September 2011 and the *Uncut* Music Award in November 2011 as well as numerous nominations for album of the year. Lyrics are quoted as printed in the CD booklet with occasional modifications and additions in the light of what is actually sung.

² <http://www.nme.com/reviews/pj-harvey/11841>, last accessed August 1, 2012. In fact, Harvey put forward the claim herself in an interview with her hometown newspaper: “And that actually grew from my research, looking at officially-appointed war artists and war poets, and thinking “where are the officially-appointed war song writers?” Cf. http://www.bridportnews.co.uk/news/localnews/8813041.Bridport_Local_rock_star_PJ_Harvey_talks_to_the_News/ (January 26, 2011), last accessed August 2, 2012.

³ This is explicitly acknowledged in the album credits, citing Roberta Reeder’s collection *Russian Folk Lyrics* (Indiana UP, 1992) as a source.

⁴ Dorian Lynskey points to *New York Times* reporter Anthony Shadid’s *Night Draws Near* (2005), an account of everyday life in occupied Iraq, as a source. Cf. <http://33revolutionsperminute.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/pj-harvey%E2%80%99s-universal-soldier/>, last accessed August 2, 2012.

⁵ PJ Harvey: vocals, guitar, auto-harp, saxophone, zither, violin; John Parish: guitar, drums, percussion, trombone, rhodes, mellotron, xylophone, vocals; Mick Harvey: guitar, bass, drums, percussion, bass harmonica, piano, organ, Rhodes, xylophone, vocals; Jean-Marie Butty: drums, vocals.

⁶ The quote continues: “I could visualise the action taking place on the stage, and the narrator’s on the side relaying the information of the action. I had to find the right voice to carry out the action as if I were the voyeur, and had to relay the story.” Cf. second reference in note 2.

⁷ The best discussion of this dimension with links to source material can be found in Dorian Lynskey’s blog *33revolutionsperminute* (cf. reference in note 4).

⁸ Filmmaker Seamus Murphy comments succinctly in his liner notes

to the DVD: “I loved this track, and for me the bugle blast and where it comes in is truly a glorious thing. It has the courage to be discordant and barking mad but perfect on its own terms, surely a quality of great art?”

⁹ Dorian Lynskey (cf. reference in note 4).

¹⁰ Cf. second reference in note 2. The song has recently been made available on the album *Give Me Love: Songs of the Brokenhearted – Baghdad 1925-29* (Honest Jons/Indigo, 2008).

¹¹ Cf. reference in note 4.

¹² Cf. second reference in note 2.

¹³ Dorian Lynskey (cf. reference in note 4).

¹⁴ Cf. <http://adarknessvisible.com/> and, for an overview of his work, <http://seamusmurphy.com>, last accessed August 3, 2012.

¹⁵ An instructive interview with Seamus Murphy can be found on <http://icelandchronicles.com/2011/09/riff-2011-day-3-let-england-shake-seamus-murphy-meets-audience/>, last accessed August 3, 2012. The DVD also comes with extensive notes of each track by Murphy himself.

¹⁶ Liner notes to *PJ Harvey: Let England Shake. 12 Short Films by Seamus Murphy*. Subsequent quotations about the films are from these unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁷ The booklet actually prints the less intimate “The scent of Thyme carried on the wind, / stings your face into remembering / that nature has won again.”

¹⁸ Cf. second reference in note 2.