
Senior Projects Spring 2022

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2022

Tarrare

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Recommended Citation

O'Sullivan, Shawn Devin, "Tarrare" (2022). *Senior Projects Spring 2022*. 271.
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Tarrare

Senior Project submitted to the Division of Arts of Bard
College

By Shawn O'Sullivan

Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

May 2022

Who is Tarrare? We all are, of course. It was clear from the onset of this endeavor that I am Tarrare. But as the work progressed, it became clear that you, too, are Tarrare. In each of us there is a gnawing, unceasing hunger, a ravenous void unquelled by the rituals of our daily lives. Outside of us is a world which mandates this endless consumption. *Tarrare is everywhere.*

But who *was* Tarrare? Fiction is plainer than fact. Tarrare was an 18th century French showman and soldier who was afflicted with an inexplicable and insatiable hunger. Belying his pale and gaunt physique, he was known to consume inordinate quantities (and qualities) of food; live snakes, corks and stones, and entire feasts fit for a party. In desperate moments he would prowl the streets, scrounging offal from gutters. Post-gorging, Tarrare's abdomen would inflate like a balloon, and he would become lethargic, emitting a foul odor. As a soldier, his unique gifts were put to use smuggling secret documents across enemy lines. His military career was cut short, however, as he was ejected from service after having been accused of eating a toddler. On his deathbed, suffering from tuberculosis, he bemoaned a golden fork that he'd eaten as the cause of his ailing. He died after a bout of exudative diarrhea. What a grandly abject figure! He was like a real-life Alfred Jarry character.

A few words about myself – the me who is not Tarrare – are called for. I was initially enrolled at Bard College from 1999–2004. As an Integrated Arts student who was interested in electronic music, video art, and media theory, I struggled in an academic setting. I left the school in '04 having fulfilled most of the graduation requirements outside of the completion of my Senior Project. In the nearly 20 year interim I have worked as an indexer while developing my musical craft, focusing on the live and improvisational use of electronic instruments. Working with esteemed record labels such as Minimal Wave/Cititrax, L.I.E.S., and Avian, I've released albums in genres as diverse as noise, experimental techno, synthpop, and house. I have toured in bands and as a DJ and solo performer, playing everywhere from large clubs and festivals to

squats and gallery spaces. I return to Bard as a music major, presenting an album inspired by the weird life of Tarrare.

My exploration began with the conceptual framework of Tarrare as a figure of excess and consumption, one finding resonance with our current historical juncture. Tarrare could be conceived of simultaneously as the neoliberal subject, forced to joylessly consume, and as capital-itself, an anti-human force for which excess knows no bounds. Employing field recording, contact microphones, processed loops, and modular synthesis-driven feedback, I developed a musical lexicon for the expression of Tarrare-ness. Through these techniques, I found my attention shifting subtly from questions of *excess* to ones of *embodiment* and *environment*. The process of field recording is a meditative experience that situates the recorder as both object and subject, as documentarian and documented. As I recorded a variety of spaces (Prospect Park, Brooklyn streets, Kaaterskills Falls, a butchery session conducted by Schuyler Wayne), an overall sense of slipperiness – between the electronic and the organic/acoustic, between the incidental or environmental and the composed – came to the foreground of the project.

This project is also intended as a tribute to my initial time at Bard. While working with Matt Sargent as my advisor, he pointed me to some of Richard Teitelbaum's works, which brought back many memories. As a student of Richard's in the electro-acoustic ensemble, we were instructed on how to perform along with natural environments. This became a central tool for my exploration of Tarrare. I also utilized the Serge synthesizer on campus – the same magical and inscrutable instrument that I learned on over two decades ago (and one which I am much more proficient with now), renowned for its flexibility and unpredictable nature. The iconic Kline kitchen served as an additional point of inspiration, and after a lengthy chain of emails, I was able to obtain access to record the facilities. With the guidance of adviser Sarah Hennies, I collaborated with fellow student musicians Jonah Knapp-Wilson (saxophone), Matt Macari (double bass), Vigil Brandon (trumpet), and Madeline Money Penny (voice). The expressivity of

these acoustic instruments brought a new depth to the project, and working with current students facilitated a kind of cross-generational Bard solidarity.

This album contains three pieces. "The Feast" is an investigation of the sonic synergy between waterfalls and the frying pan, and evokes Tarrare's slowly gnawing hunger. "The Street" uses recordings of bread, singing bowl, and a busy Brooklyn intersection, which capture Tarrare's delirious prowling for scraps of offal. Lastly, "The Golden Fork" employs environmental and contact microphone recordings from Kline kitchen as well as percussive textures coaxed from acoustic instruments and natural environments in order to channel Tarrare's grotesque demise.

Thanks to Matthew Patterson Curry, William Selman, Chris Miller, Schuyler Wayne, Phil Moffa, Vigilance Brandon, Jonah-Knapp Wilson, Madeline Moneypenny, Matt Macari, Claire and Bill Keighley, my partner Katie O'Sullivan, and my parents Shawn and Marian O'Sullivan.