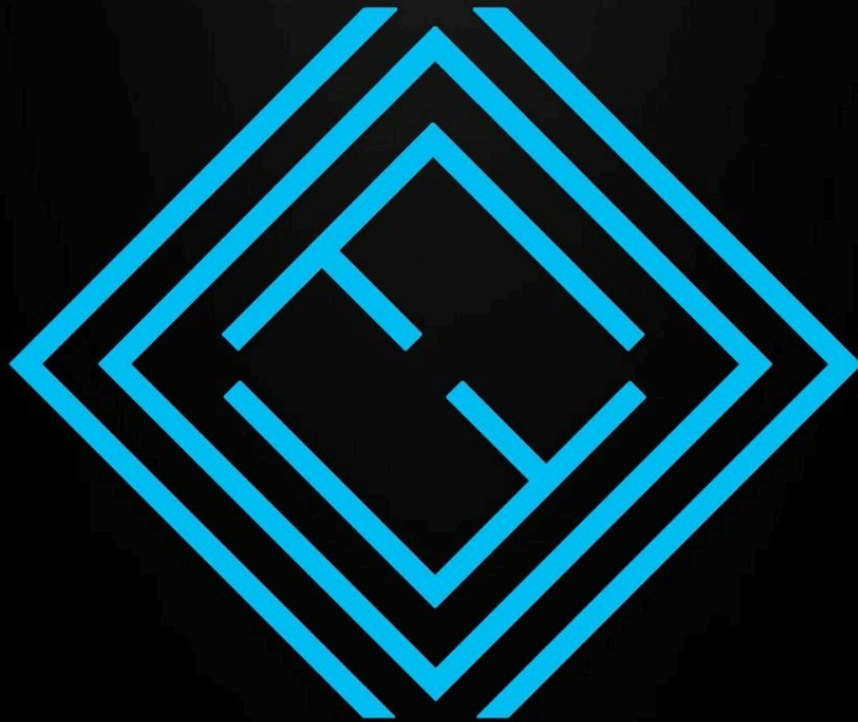


# THE COMMAND TO HEAR

USING WILLIAM MORTENSEN'S COMMAND TO  
LOOK FOR SONIC CREATIONS



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RANDOM TRANSMISSIONS #1

*Random Transmissions* is a sporadic digital publication for presenting random thoughts, research, and interviews created or facilitated by Cygnus Onyx Flame of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

*Random Transmissions #1* is dedicated to:

- Everyone who has had the audacity and curiosity to purchase a synthesizer without having a clue how to use it. Bonus points if you are also a drummer in another band.
- Everyone who makes synthesizers their primary tool for artistic creativity AND still have savings.
- Everyone who has the courage to make their music and sound art available online or through live performances.
- The folks at Feral House for re-releasing *The Command to Look* back into the world.
- Adriana Ciccone and her tireless work with Ottawa Experimental Music and her show on CKCU Hexon Bogon.
- Topon Das and Apartment 2 Recording for just being straight up awesome. \m/

LK/COF, June 2020

Please note: I present several links to tracks on my Bandcamp page. These tracks are presented in the context of this document and are all free for download. This isn't a Cygnus Onyx Flame advertisement.

## Who?

William Mortensen (1908-1974) wrote the strange and wonderful book *The Command to Look (CTL)* in 1937. You can find a new edition/version of this book at [Feral House](#). This is the version of the book that I will be citing in this document. The Feral House link also has a Vimeo video about Mortensen which is worth the taking the time to watch. *The Command to Look* isn't a technical or "how to" manual for photography. Rather, it is a call to arms for photographers to move away from the purism of representationalism and embrace and cultivate a pictorial view of photography. For Mortensen photography wasn't about capturing that perfect moment of day to day life (as if somehow that would be possible given all the manipulation the photographer and the photos go through in the even of taking the photo) it was about presenting a story. Stories need structure, format, roots but they don't need to present a *pure* representation of reality.

Source of image



Before introducing the reader to his method, Mortensen states:

“But, before you continue, be sure you understand this point: We are not now saying anything about the subject matter or the picture or what the picture represents. We are at this time concerned only with the *pattern of the pictures*, the conformation of black and white blobs-the first thing that catches our attention, before we recognize anything in the picture.” (Mortensen, *CTL*, 47)

Mortensen is looking to educate the photographer on how to engage and work with what he perceives to be primal/primordial fears and the various structures and shapes that reflect those fears. These fears and their corresponding shapes would be used to instill an immediate, and generally unconscious, sense of fascination in the viewer. He was looking to embed a “command to look” in viewers. That command to look would need to be created by the photographer as an artist rather than the photographer as “recorder”.

My intent with this document is to relate how I *play* with Mortensen’s ideas in my own “music” creations as Cygnus Onyx Flame. I doubt Mortensen would agree with what I’m writing but that’s fine. He’s dead.

Larry Lytle discusses Mortensen’s book *Monsters & Madonnas* in his preface to *The Command to Look*. The “monsters” in this case are machines (gizmos) and the “Madonnas” are representative of innate creativity. Mortensen was critical of the next big fad or next neat gadget surfacing in photography. He wanted photographers to focus on the creative process rather than get caught up in gizmos. When I read Lytle’s words I thought of my own *relatively* mild addiction to bleepbloop machines and I thought of the “syntheads” I have come across over the years (that is to say synthesizer aficionados not smokers of synthetic cannabinoids....the things you learn from the interwebz). Summarizing Mortensen’s position, Lytle states:

“A photographic artist must therefore give himself or herself over to creativity, as opposed to fretting about the next new piece of equipment that will enhance the picture-taking experience” (*CTL*, 19)

That’s my approach to my own creations and my emphasis in this document as well.

## Who Too?

Before I dive into my use and abuse of Mortensen’s ideas I’ll give a little background about my own artistic expression. I am an amateur in pretty much every way imaginable when it comes to creating digital music/sound art. Amateur in the sense of “one who cultivates and participates (in something) but does not pursue it professionally or with an eye to gain”. I believe it is important to be realistic about one’s abilities and skills. Honesty does not detract from one’s accomplishments; it contextualizes them.

I’ve been creating what I now call Dark Ambient Ritual Sound Art (DARSA) for about 15 years. DARSA may sound like an inflated term but this is the only way I can describe what I do. I don’t create music *per se*. I know very little about music theory, I can’t read music, I don’t really care about harmonics, song structure, or timing. I use sound to reflect something I’m thinking about or experiencing. I adopted the term “sound art” as being more aligned with what and how I create. Similarly, depending on how one defines “ambient music”, I may, or may not, fit under that specific categorization. My creations are often quite “dark” and “ambient” though so those adjectives fit. My

creations are inspired by and/or created for, experiencing moments of the deep presence of Self. The pieces are meant to be *spiritual* in a psyche-centric way. I use the term “ritual” to reflect that *spiritual* and *sacred* aspect of self-exploration. As we will see below, this would fall under Mortensen’s heading: *Wonder*.

Over time, I have created my own palette or lexicon of various sounds or layers to symbolize certain things. For example, if I want to reflect a deep sense of the abyss/the unconscious/the universe I will use my Eventide *Space* pedal with a fairly wet setting. It doesn’t matter to me what note or chord I am playing because it won’t sound anything remotely like the initial tone. It would be like taking the time to layer colour after colour from the primary colour wheel going from red to red in order to get to black. The process of doing that may have meaning to the artist (and that is a perfect reason for doing it!) but the end result will still be “just” black. I noticed, too, that I would often think of Mortensen while composing or making notes about a project. Like, what would a Dominant Mass sound like here? What would reflect Wonder in this track? Since Mortensen managed to weasel his way into my creative process, it made sense to me to write about it and try to articulate it in a meaningful way to others.

## The Four Fears and Four Sound Patterns

Page 47 of *The Command to Look* presents Mortensen’s Four Picture Patterns. I’m just going to summarize him here and substitute “sound terms” for “picture terms” as applicable. Mortensen identified four basic fears fostered since the beginning of humankind:

1. Something that moves swiftly through out hearing field. We may not know *what* it is but we know it moves and with swiftness and determination.
2. Something that approaches in a slithering, furtive fashion.
3. The threat of *sharpness*, whether tooth of blade.
4. A massive stationary object that blocks our path. It may be man or beast or just an inanimate object, but it is compact and formidable and indomitably awaits our coming.

There are four basic “Picture Patterns” that correspond to the four basic fears. Once again, I’ll be looking at these from the perspective of sound by substituting sound terms for image terms as applicable. I’ve added my own contributions in [square brackets]:

1. The Diagonal: Diagonal movement- Lightning flash [and the sound of *thunder*]
2. The S-Curve. Serpents, tigers slinking through high grass, hidden enemy
3. The Triangle Combination: Sharpness represented by triangles
4. The Dominant Mass which has the following sub-attributes:
  - a. Unity
  - b. Cohesion
  - c. Isolation

- d. Contrast
- e. Size
- f. Stability

At this point in my play with Mortensen's ideas, I don't see a connection between all of the patterns or fears and my own creations but I'm still actively working with them. I sometimes use the fears or the shapes along the lines of Brian Eno's Oblique Strategies cards to stimulate creativity. Keep in mind that Mortensen highlighted the fact that there can be interaction between these four within a composition. The composition need not be arranged solely with one of the Patterns.

Here are some of my current and very preliminary notes:

### **1. The Diagonal:**

- Filter sweeps.
- Overdriven filter that gradually builds to a squeal.
- Using a saw tooth wave. Perhaps not for the sound of the waveform but the symbolic shape.
- Rumbling sounds like thunder (which corresponds to lighting but can be felt deeply when heard).

### **2. The S-Curve:**

- LFO undulation that influences other sounds or notes. May not be heard but will be "felt" and symbolically relevant.
- FM synthesis using sine waves to modulate the carrier. Sound wise it would be hard to apply S-Curve to typical FM synth sounds but symbolically it fits beautifully.
- Perhaps the pure, *fundamental* tone of a sine wave may be disconcerting for some as it has no harmonics or structure to hold on to. It simple *is*.
- Some pads.

### **3. The Triangle Combination**

- Traditional orchestral "stabs".
- Sharp leads rather than pads.
- Sharp "squeals" through filter/cutoff manipulation (MicroBrute is great for this).
- Triangle wave. Perhaps not for the sound of the waveform but the symbolic shape.

### **4. The Dominant Mass**

- Huge reverb through effects/effects pedals. MORE REVERB. Delay doesn't work with Dominant Mass as it will provide points of *difference* where the sound (specifically the attack) is repeated violating 4. a, b, and e above.
- Layering detuned voices.
- Low, heavy drone or simply a low latched note.
- Square/Pulse wave. Perhaps not for the sound of the waveform but the symbolic shape.

On occasion, I will apply a sound not because of the actual tone that can be heard but because of the symbolic shape, like a waveform, or the numeric correspondence, like 666 Hz (which is not as exciting as you might think). This isn't done for musical purposes but for *artistic* purposes. Slamming and holding all the keys on my KeyStep with a long attack and release can be as much as a Dominant Mass as a one sustained note through my Space pedal but they will be very different with regards to aesthetic quality. There is a great deal of room for experimentation within these Patterns.

For some introductory information on wave forms, if needed, see Natalie Robehmed's wonderful article: [SINE, SQUARE, TRIANGLE, SAW: The Difference Between Waveforms and Why It Matters](#)

## Sources of Emotional Appeal

Mortensen has the photographer reflect primordial fears in the arrangement of elemental structural shapes in compositions. This takes place before the actual image itself is created. The next line of pre-image planning is working with the "three principle sources of subject interest in pictures":

1. Sex
2. Sentiment
3. Wonder  
(CTL, 54)

My creations with Cygnus Onyx Flame are almost exclusively under the heading of *Wonder*. The problem isn't that synth driven music can't be sexy (I mean good god look at Kraftwerk!) or invoke sentimentality (dare we forget SSQ's *Synthicide!*?) but they aren't the "subject interests" that interest *me*. I won't go into a great deal of detail but the the entire process of inspiration, research, planning, experimenting, and recording a project is, for me, a sacred act. I feel a sense of Wonder (numinous, *melammu*) to varying degrees throughout every project. Some will be more intense than others of course. I'm not obligated to create because I'm not a professional musician. I don't have to create in order to wow myself or the world with my command of musicianship. I create because there is a deeply felt *need* and that need is generally associated with a sense of gravitas. The creative impulse, lets get all poetic and artsy and call it a Flame of Creativity, burns in me as I know it burns in others who travel a similar path. I can often see it in their eyes and in their voice and in their creations. To me all of that speaks to a dark, deep, sense of *Wonder*. Very little makes me happier than that experience and expression of Wonder.

## Where Mortensen and I Part Ways

Mortensen was writing for photographers. A photograph, or other forms of visual art, needs to literally grab and command the viewer otherwise they will just pass the image by. Mortensen's method is to load the image with a largely unconscious pull...the curve

of a sensual body of a woman holding a delicate antique handkerchief (S-Curve and Sentimentality) or a dark image of small chapel set before a majestic mountain range (Triangles/Dominant Mass and Wonder). I don't need to worry about someone *seeing* my creations.

DARSA requires that the listener to *close* their eyes. There is no need to touch, taste, see, or smell anything in the objective world. The listener can turn inward to the imagination and the subjective analog of those senses. The tones and sounds have been created, for the most part, to provide the listener the opportunity to immerse themselves into the landscape of their own imagination.

As an example, my track *For the Mass of Tiamat* (2018) starts off with roughly 5 minutes of rather chaotic and frenetic sounds. There are sharp, triangular and metallic sounds. These 5 minutes symbolize the restlessness and noise of the younger gods from the creation story the *Enûma Eliš* (circa 1900 – 1600 BCE). The old gods just wanted peace and quiet and these young jerks just keep partying (I won't say I can't identify with the old gods!). At about 4:22 the track peaks with a synth roar and deep scream. The remaining 40 minutes or so represent the deep and dark essence of the Mother of the gods, Tiamat. This would be before she goes out to fight Marduk. While not as thick as I would make it now, the dark ambient sounds reflect, for me, a Dominant Mass. There isn't much more of a Dominant Mass than Tiamat. The whole track reflects a sense of Wonder *for me* and for a few others I have heard from. Of course a command of music theory and a robust musical palette could enhance my ability to communicate that to the listener but I create for me and my needs not for others. The track *Tiamat* off of my Drone Day EP: *Offering to Self* continues the same *theme* as *For the Mass of Tiamat* but with a different interpretation of Dominant Mass and of Wonder. Some hear crushing drone while others hear mystery. The important thing is that they are able to sit quietly, undistracted, and take time to just be and to listen and experience what may surface from the depths of their own psyche.

## So What?

Mortensen didn't have me in mind when he wrote *The Command to Look*. He wasn't thinking how his models could be applied outside the artistic confines of photography. However, that doesn't mean that his writings, or the writings of any other artists in any other media, can't inspire us in our own creations. Mortensen didn't want photography to be about technological innovation or about attempting to be the unicorn of humanity: the objective observer. Mortensen wanted to see photography continue as a form of *artistic* expression. It should tell stories. Granted, Mortensen can be seen as dated but his intent is timeless and close to my own heart.

Mortensen instructs the photographer to avoid unnecessary realism. I would translate that into avoiding unnecessary musicality. Experimental music should be about artistic expression in whatever way makes the most sense to the artist. That may include a deep knowledge of music theory but it doesn't have to be "musical" at all. Finding



physical spaces to perform such sound art isn't as easy as promoting other forms of music but it's not impossible to find like minded or open minded people that are willing to provide you an opportunity to play live. Ottawa is fortunate to have some great venues. However, there is *nothing* stopping us from recording our sound art and sharing it on the internet. Platforms like Bandcamp or Soundcloud are, for me, a temple of sound art. I don't charge for my tracks (because I don't need to) but people will often pay for tracks anyway. I turn around and use those funds to buy tracks of artists who create sound art/music in a similar vein to what I do. It isn't much but it's something. If each of us takes a moment to kindle that Flame of Creativity and if each of us encourages others to do the same, we could have a world populated with individuals who spend more time creating and less time destroying.

## **Random Transmissions to Come**

My intention is to have future issues of *Random Transmissions* explore how various sound artists and musicians are inspired to create experimental and ambient music. What inspires them? What is their process for creating? What does the act of creating these pieces *mean* to them? These are important questions to me. There will be, at least initially, an emphasis on artists from the Ottawa area.

Until the next issue, thank you for reading and keep the Flame of Creativity burning within you and around you!