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## Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts

by Douglas Kahn.

MIT Press: Cambridge, Mas. 1999.

ISBN 0-262-11243-4.

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What exactly defines the impact of sound in twentieth century arts and where is its place in the avant-garde? And what is the meaning of sound in correlation to music as a traditional art form and also in relation to quotidian, ordinary and surrounding noise? Is there a specific set of characteristics that qualify sound or is sound in itself a shifting parameter according to specific practices and technologies of the auditive at a given time? Interestingly there is not much scholarly research and writing done that reflects the introduction of noise into music. Nor is there much work that deals with the categorisation of sound and music with regard to extra-musical or musical qualities in "new" sounds that surround us in the electric and electronic age that would help us to analyse how the novelty of "resident noise" and "significant sound" were introduced in the systems of previous arts.

In stark contrast to theory, in practice artists working with new visual media have constantly been interested in crossing the boundaries between hearing and seeing. Notably the film pioneer Germaine Dulac conception of "composing" film like a visual symphony. In the seventies the video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka also developed computer tools in order to explore a new vocabulary and directly manipulate music and image and transfer sound into visuals, whilst at the same time Jean-Luc-Godard experimented with his "son/image" productions with video as a medium to dissociate and recombine ordinary sounds and images. More recently, composer Michel Nyman has worked towards an intermediate image-sound relationship in co-operation with film-maker Peter Greenaway and discusses common structuring principles in his theoretical considerations on "Hearing/Seeing".

Film-makers, painters and writers not only have applied musical patterns but, as the avant-garde exemplifies, have

also been interested to structurally compare image, sound, and text and think about the specificity of a single medium in relation to the interplay between the senses and the different modes of visual, aural and tactile perception. In the same way the audio arts in twentieth century show an emerging concern with extra-musical elements that fundamentally change the idea of music through the introduction of machine noises or the sounds of the siren. Enlargements in the sound arts are also seen in vibrations of the text and in the Dadaist "simultaneous poem", in voices that articulate the actual and/or textual body and generally in all sounds that always surround us. This brief overview may demonstrate that the multiplicity of audio arts mirrors an increasing complexity within the development of artistic practices where multimedia and intermedia approaches bring together elements of sound, image and text. Given the diversity of crossing, we may conclude that there is no absolutely single media, but always interference and a tendency to synesthesia. With Douglas Kahn's historical survey on sound, music and noise in the age of electric machines and electronic media we finally enter the discussion of the development of acoustic concepts that obviously interrelate very strongly with similar ideas in the visual arts but also have a history of their own.

In introducing this complex, and under-researched, topic Douglas Kahn's investigation into the history and theory of sound outlines significant lines of development in his argument that thoroughly explains the meaning of the differences between noise and music, and those between sound and music. The understanding of these crucial paradigms is also set out in relation to the debates on sound as an internal or extra-musical quality of "aurality in itself" which also reflects upon the invention of machines for reproducing and recording sound. In this comprehensive survey Kahn points to the most prevalent technological approaches that expand music and sound into "all sound" (based on the invention of the phonograph) and further discusses the transposition from "all sound" to "always sound" that as made initially by John Cage after his experience of listening "sound" (the tones of the nervous system and of blood circulation) in the anechoic chamber. Finally the book gives a close "reading" of artistic practices that have shaped the idea of music on the whole, and in a very precise and staged argument describes the interplay of sound and technology, namely "inscriptive practices", in an historical view.

In addressing the history and theory of sound from late nineteenth to mid twentieth century Douglas Kahn starts with the assumption that "none of the arts is entirely mute" and that the phenomena of sound enters the world of music through the emergence of "inscriptive techniques" that are based on the invention of the phonograph by Thomas Edison. Edison became better known for his invention of the Kinetoscope but also conceived the idea of a machine connecting sound and vision that was not built (although of course WKL Dickson did indeed make a working prototype as early as 1894). The phonograph, a technological device to record and reproduce sound,

foreshadows a major shift from a single sound to a world of all sounds as exemplified in the development of radio and sound film. As Kahn states throughout the book it is the artistic avant-garde that strategically responds to the technological challenges to introduce sound and so-called extramusical elements with the intention of expanding traditional art forms and produce a fusion between sound, music and extramusical noise. Two movements especially, the "simultaneous poetry in Dada" that qualifies noise in bruitism, and the Futurist statement on "The Art of Noises" (1913) by Luigi Russolo (who in contrast and response to Hermann Helmholtz - rejected the distinction of sound and noise) have, in parallel, appropriated noise as an element of music. These moves finally cut the ground from the earlier positions in nineteenth century that divided sound and music.

In his reflections on two major historical development that divide sound, music and noise, Kahn stresses the attribute "Western". While the first refers to graphic - inscriptive practices, the second development is a conceptual one that involves an avant-garde that crosses the borders that were set up in 19th century. In this he particularly highlights Luigi Russolo's concept of a "resident noise" as a turning point that dissolves the nineteenth century demarcation lines between music, sound and noise. As much as reproduced sounds and machine noises changes the sounds of the avant-garde arts, it is Russolo's idea of "resident noises" that introduces "wordliness" into the realm of sound and music. The dissolution of the difference between sound and music leads to "significant noise" and signifies a major breakthrough that finds its counterpart in the attempts lead by John Cage to reduce sound as much as possible to achieve both "inaudible sounds" and "small sounds". Cage's central idea that all sounds could be music becomes a guideline throughout the argument of the book in particular where Kahn's discussion of "always sound" involves the history of complexity in music that is highlighted in the theories of cluster and glissando as conceived by Henry Cowell. The conception of sound and the notion of noise as an abstraction of sound accumulate in the development of noise as sound and the density of sounds in clusters that are epitomised by the avant-garde in the "wordly" sound of the siren.

However, aside from this specialist discourse, Kahn's study will also interest readers who have a broader interest in the development of various arts practices and the emergence of intermedia features that relate to performance, happening, fluxus and theatre. In particular Kahn's discussion of hearing and music draws many lines to similar and parallel approaches and experiments in the visual arts. Generally speaking the approach of the book lies in its strength to address major shifts in twentieth century arts in the rather neglected view of sound so that well known features in the visual arts appear in a "new" light and in a different, rather unaccustomed context. As a consequence we gain greater insight in the understanding of art in radical modernism and also in the consideration of

aesthetic features that are specific to audio arts. This confirms the relevance of Kahn's research, that, without doubt, reaches further than merely writing a "history of sound in the arts". This is because the stress on the complexity of aurality counters the prevailing orthodoxy of maintaining the visual and visuality as the dominant expressive forms of media in the age of modern technology that begins with photography and film.

The specific focus of Douglas Kahn's writing should also be read against the background of the timely debates on the interrelationship and convergence of various media. Regarding the interplay of music, text and image this study provides a fresh impulse by shifting the perspective strategically from image to sound so that Kahn consequently explores the conceptualisation of sound in itself and further explains how technological requirements such as recording help to develop a notion of hearing. The book draws upon a historical line of technical and technological requirements that at a given time allow to actually realise certain audio concepts and at the same time the technical/historical knowledge as described helps to build up a memory of the book's argumentation. This allows for a better understanding of the more complex chapters that unfold specific moments and movements in the history of sound, such as the idea of "significant noises" which is radicalised in Futurist music through Luigi Russolo's machine based "art of noises". The study also convincingly accentuates the aspect of war noises inherent in the idea of noise at the beginning of twentieth century and connects these ideas to a more general approach to immersion. Proceeding from this and on a comparative level the book positions the notion of "immersed in noise" that there is always sound and not silence. By giving a skilful contextualization that considers synesthesia and intermedia as driving forces in the development of new musical forms, the reader who is not an expert in the field will have no difficulties to understand the impact of Cage's conclusion that silencing means to hear the sounds of silence as music. Throughout the book it becomes evident that certain moves in the audio toward compression, reduction and reproduction, and to the openness and fluidity of sounds are closely connected to approaches in the visual and the textual arts that expand and extend the limits of one single medium or art. This is attributed to the introduction of new techniques such as simultaneism, bruitism and noise, as well as the dissolution of single elements in glissando and "Lautgedicht", and the interchangeability of inside/out, small/large, textual/musical, visual/musical: in short dissolving the intersection of body and sound or through a concentration on concepts of "flow".

The book also explores neglected areas of research in particularly focusing on the flow and flux of sound in parallel to the fluidity of water. With intriguing insight, Kahn compares Jackson Pollock's painterly drippings and pouring paint on canvas to John Cage's water sounds, Yoko Ono's "waterpiece", George Brecht's "drip music" and more generally to the introduction of actual water in

percussion music in such ways that the use of water as a compositional device clearly marks a larger shift or move towards happening art, performance and theatricality that - as the author states - has already been carried out by Pollock. Where the use of water for "tuning percussion" stresses a contemporary concern with ephemeral qualities in Western music (that has its precursor in Erik Satie who "was the wettest composer of the time") the last section of the book rather connects to physicality and to the interrelation of the body and the voice in western culture. By engaging with timely debates on embodiment Kahn, carefully suggests Roland Barthes' consideration of the voice as expressing the body so that the metaphor of "meat voices" helps to approach different but related artistic practices of "embodied voice". In particular Antonin Artaud's ideas of the "phantasmatic body" in a therapeutic and trance setting, and the poetry of Michael McClure, that speaks a "beast language", suggests the idea that the voice of the body speak anything else but the body. The example of William Burroughs and his association of the body with virus also fosters a view on the relationship of human body and textual body where essentially the body is seen as meat. While Kahn is interested in tracing the audible in the written word, in the speech and in the body as meat, the expressiveness of "meat" itself can be taken further with regard to the contemporary debate on cyberbodies.

After reading through the book, one is even more surprised by the major blind spot of the history and theory of sound direction in the overriding debates on contemporary arts and media. This discourse predominately deals with vision and visuality to the extent that it stresses visual aspects even when dealing with audiovisual media. While at the same time the parallel history of sound is touched upon only occasionally with regard to the avant-garde's idea of synthesis between all arts (such as music, dance, painting, photography and kinetic). This deficit is also evident in relation to discussions of cinema that has appropriated devices of sound and music, most strikingly in the use of interval (that defines a temporal distance) and the cluster that signifies the fusion of tones in the - by definition infinite - line of glissando and thus produces spatial density at the place of fusion. This may be the legacy of the overriding discourse on arts and artistic practices informed by statements of cultural critics such as BÚla Bal½zs and Georg Simmel who asserted that twentieth century means the age of the eye and of visual technical media, namely photography and film. Strikingly and in contrast to early film theory that had imagined the possibilities of sound film (for example Munsterberg and Arnheim) most contemporary film theory hardly considers voice, music and sound as if film were solely visual. Moreover, the crucial critical imbalance between hearing and seeing has its parallel in perception and cognitive theory that also privileges visual topics such as the "intelligent eye" or "eye and brain" (Gregory). Kahn's book makes a timely and valuable contribution to closing this deficit in the way that sound has been something of a neglected orphan in the larger considerations of twentieth century arts.

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Updated 7 February 2001.

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