

NOISE WATER MEAT: A History of Sound in the Arts

Douglas Kahn, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001)
Average Price: \$37.95. 455 pages, paperback.
Reviewed by tobias c. van Veen

literary review

Whereas visual art, theatre, and music have all been implicated in the rise of social movements and politics—be it the anthem to a generation or its propaganda, agitprop or the expansion of various ideas through aesthetic realms, such as the practical détournement of the Situationists—the use of sound (one could say in and of itself) has long suffered a degree of neglect.

This is not because sound has lagged behind the arts. In fact, as Douglas Kahn's book shows, sound in all its forms has been one of the driving forces of the 20th Century. From the early work of those interested in the technological developments of the phonograph, radio, and amplification to the development of DADA nonsense sounds, the Futurist glorification of militarized noise, Musique Concrète, John Cage's exploration of all sound, the sound-events of the '60s, William S. Burrough's virus-sounds, Michael McClure's beastly sound-poetry, and Antonin Artaud's corporal Theatre of Cruelty.

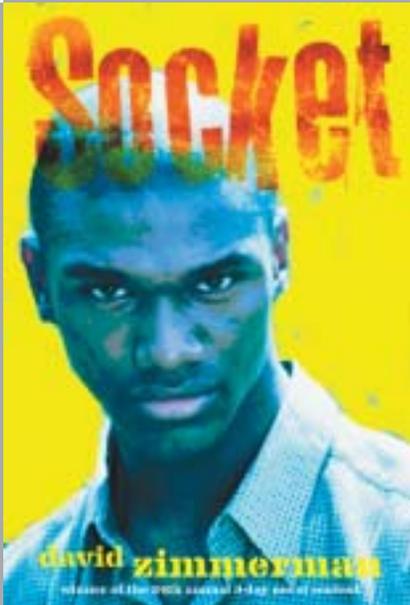
That much of these "new currents" of sound are in fact philosophically and ideologically indebted to Eastern and ancient Greek thought is not lost on Kahn. Kahn draws connections from Pythagoras, Zen thought, and Aristotle, right up to Edison and Cage, while balancing the mind-matter with detailed descriptions of the technology employed in the attempts to revive and perform some of the most archaic of human sounds—such as the "music of the spheres" or the grunting of the beast—as well, construct newer ideas concerning silence, noise, and the unconscious, from Burrough's cut-ups and schlupps to Cage's impossible inaudible.

By situating the three thematics—Noise, Water, Meat—as the guide to the text, Kahn is able to trace the development of movements not only "within" "Western Art Music" but the historical moments where such notions of inside and outside begin to break down as high-art and the reign of modernity enter the postmodern. From the inclusion of noise to the exclusion of pure silence, from the flowing sounds of water to fluidly conceptual

sound-scripts, from the recognition of the body to performing upon the corpse of the soul, Kahn actively interprets the major concerns of early to mid-20th Century sonic practices, and where they collided and colluded with larger political and philosophical concerns and artistic movements.

While utilizing post-structural thought and often writing with an ear to the performative sound of his prose, Kahn situates Noise Water Meat as a historical text that does not require an extensive knowledge of either 20th Century art movements or their philosophical counterparts. By taking the time to often casually explain the movements themselves and their ideas and by interweaving the main personalities throughout the text—such as Cage, Burroughs, and Russolo, among many—Kahn creates a compelling read that calls the eyes and ears from chapter to chapter, always flowing, always moving. As a narrator and selector of history with a critical ear, Kahn positions himself as an "active listener" to the rivers of sound that drift from one artistic movement and personality to another. At times cutting and deconstructive, and never afraid to squarely remind the reader of the patriarchal and Eurocentric bias that informs much of the 20th Century's "Western Art Music," Kahn also prods us to chuckle at some of the crazy, and sometimes politically disturbing, ideas of the avant-garde, while making us appreciate the radical thought and incredible creativity these artists called forth.

While remaining theoretically precise and performing a thorough critique of its subject matter, Kahn's engaging prose is "readable" in the sense that it does not overtly challenge the reader to call forth a dedicated interpretation of the text in order to catch its drift—which does not mean that Kahn negates to leave behind a multitude of baits and hooks to hang upon and debate the reverberations and silences of this acoustic text, a text that will no doubt echo for quite some time in the 21st Century.



SOCKET

literary review

David Zimmerman (Vancouver: Anvil Press, 2002)
\$11.95 CDN. 119 pages.

Reviewed by tobias c. van Veen

Winner of Anvil Press' 2001 3-day novel writing contest, *Socket* is a desperate and depressing account of a life going from bad to worse, relentlessly dragging the mind deeper into the pit of corruption and brutality which envelops David Zimmerman's vicious and foul depiction of modern-day Ethiopia.

As soon as Ronald Percy, an international aid worker, arrives in Ethiopia, he encounters corruption. Searched by police, held for interrogation, he eventually finds the office of the "Africa Development Organization" only to find that they have no knowledge of his arrival. His contact, an increasingly suspicious Dr. Cavarri, has apparently returned to Italy in some haste, and it is when Percy is given Cavarri's compound-house to stay in that hell opens its maw. Discovering a decomposing body of a child in an upstairs bedroom, and making the brutal mistake of involving the local police, Percy is "bottled"—sent out to die in a mining work camp, which has all the faint trappings of a multinational operation. Beaten and branded, Percy is lucky to meet a Dr. Tesfaye who speaks English. Both get a chance at life by being assigned to the kitchen, where they boil insects, dirt, and refuse into a stew for the doomed prisoners. After witnessing a few vividly brutal punishments, Tesfaye and Percy decide the whims of the desert are better than the certain savagery which will eventually befall them in the camp.

Written in a first-person narrative with patient and incisive descriptions, *Socket* relies upon the brutality of its story to further its reflections. One can easily guess the turns of the plot once the narrative unravels, and the plan for escape is a blatantly obvious tool to move the plot along. However, the realist depictions of various tortures manage to sickeningly disrupt this very criticism, for what else is there to tell but the chance of escape? The choice the author must make at this point—remember this is written in three days—is between killing the narrator in the camp in an existential turn or motion towards an exit. The direct style never wavers, and so Zimmerman does not have the opportunity to end the novel in hallucinatory writing or

fantasy (although slowly morphing the writing might have been an interesting move). The point here is reality—a reality which is significantly altered by the end of the text through the subtle interweavings of thematic elements (which I will leave unmentioned for the inquisitive reader). And to his credit, Zimmerman does not fall into the trap of making the escape a final return, an American Ending. Instead, the reader is left in a dizzying ambiguity as to the fate of Percy.

Although the style of the narrative gives us hope that the story is being retold to us at a later date, and in fact, it is this hope which I force into my mind, for otherwise, the novel is an abyss of blackness, a moment which does call into question the telling of the story leaves the state of the narrative indeterminate as to its conclusion. This crucial moment hinges upon Percy relating how he lost his eye as a child. First, he tells a romantic lie of losing it in childhood; then, after his lie is revealed by Tesfaye, he relates the ugly truth. *Socket* as a novella hinges upon this reading, for this is not the romantic lie, however dark, of Kurtz's Africa. *Socket*'s blatant depiction of the worst of Ethiopia—without hope for depiction of a saving grace save for thieving-nomads, about which there is something to be said on a theoretical level—leaves one caught in the imbalance of the story and yet feeling the necessity of its violence.

That said, it is difficult to call this novel insightful, for as much as it condemns the state of affairs in much of the "Dark Continent" (and I use this with all sarcasm), it provides no vantage point to critique the representation being written for us through the eye of the narrator—which is not necessarily a negative critique. For indeed, it is the single eye of Percy and the absence of the other that forms the metaphorical object of the gaze for *Socket*. We are not meant to see this story, it would seem, with a pair of eyes, for two eyes would allow us to attempt a balancing of vision. Instead, we are given one eye to experience nothing but the horrors of the "Third World" as imagined from the vacant socket of a pitted white skull.