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Eldritch Priest

EARWORM AND
EVENT: MUSIC,
DAYDREAMS AND
OTHER IMAGINARY
REFRAINS

Duke University Press, 2022.

As I am writing these first lines of the book review, I am listening to Arthur Russell's *Instrumentals Vol. 1* from 1974.² These short tracks are recorded excerpts taken from a larger project that Russell had intended as a 48-hour long performance. The ambitious performance never materialised and yet the slowly wavering variations that we get to hear on the album "First Thought Best Thought" still carry a sense of imagined meandering. The music does not strive for structural development, but rather revolves around simple melodic motives. A refrain weaves through the ten tracks, gathered by the loose and intimated improvisations of percussions, a guitar or

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two, one of them occasionally twanging, a trombone, trumpet, flute, clarinet, sometimes a saxophone, sometimes keys and cello.

Arthur Russell's *Instrumentals* provides a soundtrack to my reviewing of Eldritch Priest's new book—I wanted to be distracted and distanced from the daunting focus that writing often affords. This is music that grants itself to drift and wander and it is one that in response allows its listeners to engage in a similar activity of aimless contemplation.

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Earworm and Event: Music, Daydreams and Other Imaginary Refrains is an imaginative rumination and speculative contemplation on the obsessiveness of earworms. Eldritch Priest is obsessed with the “loopy performance” of songs that are stuck in one's head, a refrain whose “ending is at the same time its beginning.”³ Priest plays catch up with the earworm's wanderings and is interested in its affects and the question how such a non-sounding, unactualised musical bug can be thought.

Priest is cautious to not only discuss the earworm's reveries in theoretical terms but also enthusiastically channels its “ludic operation.”⁴ Consequently, the book can be read from both ends or both beginnings. The *Earworm* side is more theoretical, discusses research in the neurosciences and positions the earworm in process philosophy, affect and media theories, while the flipside *Event* follows the earworm's “dreamlike logic that draws out certain lyrical and rhythmic aspects of repetition and obsession.”⁵ The book is most sumptuous and entertaining when Priest allows himself to be “driven by the sheer enthusiasm of contemplating” and when his writing approaches the stream-of-consciousness idea of “thought in the act.”⁶

Throughout the book, the earworm is conceived as a musical refrain.⁷ It is a phenomenon beyond or before acoustics that has more in common with reveries and daydreams than with conventional notions of sound as vibrational matter. As such, it occupies “a strange ontological station”—it is imaginary, virtual, abstract and thus akin to thought.⁸ While his theoretical discussions do not follow any particular argumentative arc—Priest describes his methodology as “patches of thought” and a

² Arthur Russell, *Instrumentals Volume 1*, recorded April 1975, tracks 1-11 on *First Thought Best Thought*, Audika, digital release, accessed June 2, 2022, <https://arthurrussell.bandcamp.com/album/first-thought-best-thought>.

³ Eldritch Priest, *Earworm and Event: Music, Daydreams and Other Imaginary Refrains* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2022), *EW*, 49. In the following, *EW* refers to the *Earworm* side, whereas *EV* refers to the *Event* side of the book.

⁴ Priest, *EW*, 59.

⁵ Priest, *EV*, 2.

⁶ Priest, 37. The book is published in the series entitled “Thought in the Act,” edited by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, and published with Duke University Press.

⁷ On page 29, on the *Event* side of the book, Priest quotes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's description of refrain: “We call a refrain any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs.” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 376.

⁸ Priest, *EW*, 28.

“hodgepodge of theory”—Chapter 1 on the *Earworm* side, nonetheless, presents a very thought-out discussion of music as a particularly “vital activity.”⁹ By way of Susanne Langer’s philosophy of virtuality, Priest understands music as a semblance of feeling. Music reveals the feeling of feeling because of the “abstract similarity between musical forms and other forms of vitality.”¹⁰ The earworm’s abstract virtuality invites Priest to further ask if music, just like the earworm, can be “felt as thought.”¹¹ Music, he argues, “is already a lived abstraction.”¹² And from the ‘perspective’ of the earworm, music, “relieved of listening,” “becomes pure technics.”¹³ The earworm reveals how music cannot only be understood as a particular arrangement of musical sounds but “felt as thought,” too. It is important to note that Priest, similar to Langer, is interested in probing the thinking of thought and feeling as such. Music here functions as a gateway into the more general philosophical questioning of feeling, thought and affect. The argument is that music is such a unique case in thinking thought because it is a “nondiscursive mode of expression [that] can [...] express the sense and thus the feeling of what livingness is like.”¹⁴

I concur with Priest and Langer’s idea that music reveals particular forms of vitality but I am sceptical of the role music receives in philosophical arguments, particularly when music—whatever that may be—substitutes for metaphysics. Lydia Goehr reminds us of exactly this when she argues that music cannot function as an answer to the limits of philosophy.¹⁵ However, Priest’s focus on unconscious, imaginary or inattentive listening sets the stage for theories of otherwise listening modalities and aesthetics. *Earworm and Event* will be a thought-provoking read for sound, music and affect scholars alike and also offers a welcome introduction of Susanne Langer’s work into music and sound studies. Because the book’s prose consciously inhibits a containable theory of the earworm, there are plenty of tangents that can be tracked by scholars interested in the intersections of sound, music, attention, distraction, affect, dreams and liminality.

Why and how did Arthur Russell find his way into this review? I remember that I was bugged by “the refrain of a melodic shard” of one of the tracks, silently playing (or not playing?) in my head.¹⁶ The notion of play bears a critique of Priest’s work. Is there not a problem in bracketing out the aspect of performativity and its material constitutions by converging music with thought? Does *Earworm and Event* risk undermining music’s and sound’s performative play and its call to participate by giving too much thought to thought itself? In other words, Priest’s invitation to think

⁹ Priest, *EW*, 53; 10. Chapter 1 has previously been published, see: Eldritch Priest, “Felt as thought (or, musical abstraction and the semblance of affect),” in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, ed. Ian Biddle and Marie Thompson (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 45-63.

¹⁰ Priest, *EW*, 10.

¹¹ Priest, 8.

¹² Priest, 39.

¹³ Priest, 52.

¹⁴ Priest, *EW*, 21.

¹⁵ Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice: Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 18-19.

¹⁶ Priest, *EW*, 29.

about the imaginary dimensions of sound and music is intriguing, novel and exciting, but I am also interested in how these imaginary refrains are materialised again. Although Priest argues that there is a “ludic gesture” in thinking-feeling and that it is “absolutely one with doing,” I would particularly like to know how this doing can then be thought.¹⁷ What is the relation between thought and action? Is there a way to think musicking in concert with this idea of the earworm and daydreaming? Would it be possible or desirable even to broaden the notion of musicking to include such not-yet-actualised imaginations of musical thought? That is to ask, how does an imaginary music not only become and then remain thought but how can it be thought with and against performance, politics and musical play?

Earworm and Event churns up more questions than answers. Can music be imagined, dreamed or thought? And if so, how? The problem partly sits in the question and in Priest’s title, that is, the reliance on the ocularcentric vocabulary of the image. By following the strangely winding and endless worm-like refrains of songs that are stuck in one’s head, Priest dreams of a thinking with, in and of sound that listens away from the image and opens thought towards music’s fictions. □

¹⁷ Priest, *EV*, 17.