

## Vaster than Empires: Maeve Brennan, *Listening in the Dark*

In one of the most famous essays in late twentieth-century analytic philosophy, Thomas Nagel ponders the question of bat consciousness. Although it is a mammal, the perceptual apparatus of a bat is so radically different from ours that even though we may be able to understand through scientific experiment how a bat apprehends and navigates the world, it seems impossible for a human being to properly imagine the subjective experience of being a bat. Nagel's essay decentres – it momentarily shifts the question of consciousness away from humans and towards what he calls a 'fundamentally *alien* form of life' – and subtly tests and probes the claims of philosophical understanding: the inaccessibility of bat consciousness to human beings acts as a thought experiment undermining some of the pretensions of a physicalist solution to the mind-body problem.<sup>1</sup>

Maeve Brennan's *Listening in the Dark*, commissioned for Jerwood/FVU Awards 2018: Unintended Consequences, similarly uses bats to decentre and probe human understanding. The discovery of dead bats at the foot of wind turbines, the result of lung explosions caused by a pressure drop behind the turbine, begins an excursion through natural history, geology and technology. If our usual conceptions of the environment and nature are implicitly or explicitly oriented around the fixed, stabilising standpoint of humanity, *Listening in the Dark* proposes the bat (significantly discovered *behind* the wind turbine, hidden from view) as another position, one around which understanding can be reoriented. The film re-reads and re-maps natural history and ecology around the figure of the bat.<sup>2</sup>

For humans though, painfully dependent on sight, to be 'in the dark' means to be without a clue, unknowing. Is the film's decentring of the human therefore a declaration of the inevitable inability of our species to comprehend the world, an undercutting and thwarting of the pretensions of scientific understanding? Indeed, *Listening in the Dark*'s sombre motif of agitated waves against a rocky coastline resonates with two works where this is the case. In Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film *Solaris*, the distant churning currents of the oceanic planet, an utterly alien form of intelligence gazed upon by the scientists in their spaceship, signify the limits of human understanding and knowledge. In like manner, a roiling sea appears in Stéphane Mallarmé's cryptic modernist poem 'A Throw of the Dice'; through its imagery of the dice, the sea and the wrecked technology of a ship, as well as its semantic instability, the poem begins with an affirmation of uncertainty (the chance that cannot be abolished) that will only become a completed utterance near the end of the poem:

A THROW OF THE DICE

WILL NEVER

EVEN WHEN LAUNCHED IN ETERNAL  
CIRCUMSTANCES

FROM THE DEPTHS OF A SHIPWRECK<sup>3</sup>

Later, a patriarchal character called ‘the master’ finds himself trying to cope with forces beyond human control, tossed about on the waves, shaking his fist at nature, the univocal, singular, universalising horizon broken up and skewed:

from this conflagration	formerly he would grasp the helm at his feet from the unanimous horizon
that there	is readied tossed about and mixed in the hand that would clasp it
as one shakes one’s fist at	a destiny and the winds <sup>4</sup>

Yet despite its production in a context of catastrophic environmental damage, all of whose many complex ramifications are not clear (though their scale is obvious), the film balances asseverations of human finitude and limitation with the suggestion of the possibility of steadily, slowly gathered awareness and knowledge, increment by increment. One can and must listen, despite being in the dark – an act of perceptual engagement beyond the usual human ocularcentrism. Hence the importance of sound: *Listening in the Dark* is as much an audio as it is a moving image work (the high frequency clicks on the soundtrack remind me of ‘Turning Point’ by Kevin Drumm). Similarly, the repeated shots of two people walking through darkness (among trees at night, or in underground caves), their torches momentarily lighting up corners of the screen, is not an image of disorientation but of scientists patiently collecting information on bat activities. They are literally in the dark, but not clueless. *Listening in the Dark* affirms the instability and partiality of knowledge without concluding that non-human existence is always already beyond comprehension. It has an optimistic perspective on the human capacity for understanding the world, and perhaps productively intervening in it, as long as there is an effort to think beyond the narrow frame of what is apparently given as human.

Despite its concern with ‘nature’, *Listening in the Dark* is more a history film than a landscape film. Three times structure it. First, the *longue durée* of geological time. Second, the medium term of natural history, as in the parallel evolution over millions of years of bats and moths. Third, the comparatively short span of modern technological advances by humans. The film traces the feedback and parallelism within and between these levels. Fossilisation enables living creatures of the past to be collected and examined. Wind turbines become part of an ecosystem, conditioning the lives or deaths of bats and seals. Human technology unwittingly finds solutions already present in the natural world: the modern invention of sonar resembles the spatial positioning system existing in bats for millions of years. Bats and moths are constantly changing pieces of technology, evolving in concert with one another as predator and prey. The model here is of constantly unfolding interactivity, connectivity and mutual causation, in which the animal, vegetable, mineral and technological can have the status of an actor as much as the human.<sup>5</sup>

Cinema is uniquely placed to represent such a conception of the world. Its processes of observing and recording mirror the careful collection of data and preservation of specimens by scientists, as André Bazin’s famous simile of the photographic image preserving objects like insects trapped in amber indicates.<sup>6</sup> The essay film form that Brennan takes up allows the presentation and contextualisation of archival footage and diagrams from scientific books, obliquely cataloguing, comparing, analysing and producing histories – echoing the way the staff at the National Museums Collection Centre in Edinburgh are filmed drawing specimens from their vast, ordered repository of archival materials relating to the natural world, in order to comment on and explain their significance.

Finally, *Listening in the Dark* makes cinematic montage – the art of constructing, joining, associating – integral to its theme. Speaking in a discussion with Donna Haraway, a thinker cited by Brennan, David Harvey calls Haraway’s writing style ‘a wonderful way of talking that acknowledges that, if everything is related to everything else in the world, then we must create sentences that reflect that fact’.<sup>7</sup> In the same way, montage as employed in *Listening in the Dark* makes visible environment and ecology by finding

unexpected connections; at one point, for example, it links a bat preserved in a German tarpit, to a specimen of oil in a jar, to the production of energy through fossil fuels, to the renewable energy of wind turbines, to bats again via the pressure drop that turbines produce. The version of natural history that emerges here is akin to Esther Leslie's description of the latent potentials of certain Enlightenment texts on natural history, the possibility of 'co-articulation, a space sharing', less a 'practice of domination' than an 'expression of connectedness'.<sup>8</sup> Rather than hierarchical structures and instrumental reason, a different potential in science is highlighted in *Listening in the Dark*: patient, rigorous but flexible, ambitious but humble, tracing interactions between a multiplicity of actors in all their unexpected directions, learning from and with nature rather than dominating it.

Aside from Haraway, the other recent thinker this vision resembles is Ursula K. Le Guin. Although Brennan's film is strictly earthbound (in its concern with the oil and rocks that make up the very matter of the planet, with the structure of a bat's wing or the functioning of its echolocation system) in contrast to the enormous cosmic reaches of Le Guin's Hainish cycle, both share a conviction that scientific method can be emancipatory as much as imperial, though it always has to reckon with these twin tendencies. Hence the title of one of Le Guin's stories, in which a crew at the far edge of the universe is confronted by an immense, arboreal consciousness, also applies to the spiralling zoological complexities and geological timelines of *Listening in the Dark*: 'vaster than empires and more slow'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Nagel, 'What is it Like to Be a Bat?', *Philosophical Review* 83:4 (October, 1974), p. 438

<sup>2</sup> George Vasey makes similar points in his essay accompanying the exhibition

<sup>3</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, 'A Throw of the Dice', *Collected Poems: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 124 and 126

<sup>4</sup> Mallarmé, 'A Throw of the Dice', p. 130

<sup>5</sup> My thinking here is influenced by Michel Callon's claim that the scallops off the French coast merit the status of actors in his essay 'Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay', in Mario Biagioli (ed.), *The Science Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 67-83

<sup>6</sup> André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Cinematic Image', *What is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005), p. 14

<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway and David Harvey, 'Nature, Politics, and Possibilities: A Debate and Discussion with David Harvey and Donna Haraway', *Environment and Planning* 13 (1995), p. 508

<sup>8</sup> Esther Leslie, *Derelicts: Thought Worms from the Wreckage* (London: Unkant, 2013), p. 122. Leslie is referring to Oliver Goldsmith's *An History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, begun in 1774. *Listening in the Dark* quotes a contemporaneous work, James Hutton's 1788 *Theory of the Earth; or an investigation of the laws observable in the composition, dissolution, and restoration of land upon the Globe*

<sup>9</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow', *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* (Toronto, New York, London: Bantam Books, 1976)