

From biophilia to bibliophilia.....

and then back again. █

Contextualising *The Ocelli* within ecological and archival discourse.

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Cinema often uses very specific narrative tropes to describe humanity's relationship to the natural world. The apocalypse narrative has been popular of late, perhaps galvanised by civilisation's precarious and sometimes threatening relation to its natural environment and the spectre of climate change. In Lars Von Trier's recent film *Melancholia*, a cataclysmic collision takes place between the Earth and a mysterious planet. The catastrophe is prophesied by a female protagonist, who is engaged in a unique psychic bond with the natural world. Her character represents a biophilia that is openly ridiculed by the film's more pragmatic characters, building an allegory around discordant relations between the human race and other universal ecologies. *Melancholia's* apocalyptic narrative might be interpreted as a descendant of the historical discourses of romantic painting, that depicted lone figures dwarfed by threatening natural landscapes or ships cast adrift in tempestuous storms.

Human relations to the natural world are an on-going concern in the films of the ARKA group. Their 2011 work *EXTRAMISSION* recounted one biology professor's enamourment with exotic landscapes and his attempts to commit the perfect portrait of their topography to film. As a consequence of his obsessive quest to capture ideal nature, he descends into frustrated insanity. Likewise *The Ocelli* tells of a man who becomes infested by the spores of *Armillaria*, a three-mile wide mushroom composed of a web of rhizomatic white fibres. Based on the cordycep mushroom that penetrates the skin of insects and sprouts through their skull, *Armillaria* bewitches and consumes the body of the unnamed male protagonist, enveloping human flesh with her fungal form. Her level of agency in this process is difficult to read, for we are made to understand through the film's narration, that *Armillaria* is slowly becoming sentient.

In his essay *Robinson in Ruins: New materialism and the archaeological imagination* Paul Dave draws on new materialist philosophy to expose alternative paradigms for the depiction of the non-human in film; that often specifically address the issue of distributed agency. He is concerned with "mutual entanglement between nature and human life"¹ as an alternative to conventional dichotomies that tend to embody hierarchical or emotive constructs of civilisations under threat from vengeful nature. This equivalent distribution of agency suggests a point of biophilic contact that might recall *Armillaria's* fibrous intertwining with flesh. It is the viral spread of an ecology that draws together human and non-human matter as co-dependant agents. The film's male lead appears so enchanted by the glistening black objects that *Armillaria* deposits at the surface of the soil, that we might imagine his integration into this conjoined ecosystem as the merging of two complicit parts. According to new materialist philosopher Timothy Morton's vision for the future of interspecies relations: "being a person means never being sure that you're one. In an age of ecology without nature, we would treat many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas about what counts as people."² *Armillaria* is a porous and prolific natural form that expresses a base material contingency between human and plant matter.

It should not escape our attention that Paul Dave's essay on new materialism in film takes Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Ruins* as his primary case study. Keiller's sedate narratives and predilection for long static shots dampened by melancholia have been hugely influential on the filmmaking of the ARKA group. Stylistically *The Ocelli's* mellow trajectory and disembodied narrative voices are used to conjure

the same dreamlike state of detachment that is so integral to Keiller's cinematic oeuvre. While *The Ocelli* is laden with found imagery and sounds from diverse cultures appropriated from external sources, *Robinson in Ruins* is an exercise in methodological realism that takes a singular approach to a specific perspective on British culture. This divergence of approaches underlines *The Ocelli's* status as a complex assemblage of overlapping meta-narratives that breaks with the linear forms of more traditional filmmaking.

Fundamental to the ARKA group's approach to film is a desire to implicate their audience as active participants in the process of constructing meaning. The central narrative of *The Ocelli* is interwoven with footage collected from the archives of the now defunct charity *Sightsavers* and closely cropped shots of a group of school children exploring the *Sir John Soane's Museum* in London. As with all archival collections, these materials represent subjective spaces where information is collated in order to advocate a predetermined point of view. *Sightsavers'* depictions of adults and children enduring blindness, photophobia and cataracts would have been generated as fundraising tools to galvanise a perspective of Otherness and encourage sensations of pity and fear. As an archive they perform the function of an instrumentalist body of knowledge that Jacques Derrida referred to in *Archive Fever* as: "a single corpus, in a system or synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of the ideal configuration."³ While working with the archive, the ARKA group occupy a place within this hermeneutic manipulation of subjects. Yet the pictorial body of *The Ocelli* is regularly punctuated by cavernous black gaps where no images appear. From out of these empty spaces a disembodied narrator reminds the viewer that: "you are present and active, in fact you play a larger part in your experience than anything you will see on this screen."⁴ Using the power of suggestion, *The Ocelli* seeks to position the viewer as sensorial and critical collaborator in the creation of meaning. In doing so it attempts to flatten the hierarchies of knowledge interpretation and to redistribute agency between artist and audience. Recalling *Armillaria's* voracious webbing with human flesh, the film returns to the theme of cohesive joining.

In spite of this commitment to usurping the principles of knowledge, it is easy to identify a scholarly love of research and a bibliophilic engagement with the minutiae of scientific meaning in *The Ocelli*. The narrative is densely packed with informational addresses to the viewer such as "the area that your nail covers is the same size as the central point of focus on the back wall of your eye."⁵ Indeed the ARKA group often collaborates with scientists, psychologists and experts in other disciplines during their working process. This parasitic borrowing of formalist and positivist knowledge is part of an open-ended and organic process that characterises the ARKA group's dialogical approach. Yet their primary concern is not with information itself, but with creating a framework for the viewer to reassemble the material on their own terms.

When watching *The Ocelli* you are invited to become part of a circular conversation; to reconfigure the beautiful and surreal images that are imparted to you as they dance against the back of your eyes.

- .1 Paul Dave, 'Robinson in Ruins: New materialism and the archeological imagination,' *Radical Philosophy* (Sept/Oct 2011) pp.31
- .2 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010) pp.8
- .3 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (University of Chicago Press, 1996.) pp.10
- .4 Quote from the script of *The Ocelli*
- .5 Quote from the script of *The Ocelli*

