

Satellites Programme

Alison Scott

An echo: Magnetic attitudes

A response to Becky Šik's film *Mercury* (Satellites Programme 2020, Collective) by Satellites participant Alison Scott.

Sitting with Becky's work and delving into her research—letting it soak through the surface of the screen, onto my skin—this text is something of an 'echo' itself, a reflection of and on her work and thinking. As *Mercury* tells, not all of an echo bounces back into legible space: the way it behaves depends on the surface that it meets. Some of Becky's complex work is still being absorbed: *'It takes time to comprehend it'* (quote from *Mercury*). What I echo back of the script is marked by my own reading: amplifying aspects and lines from its script that, magnet-like, pull me in or push me back (you may be drawn differently).

The push and pull of attraction and propulsion oscillate through *Mercury* as dual forces, held in tension. Like a magnet flipping its poles over and over, the film moves the viewer between dualisms—drawing looping circles between them and making visible the fields they create. Energy is created: between the stories of the amateur satellite tracker and hobbyist magnet fisher, the visible and invisible, centre and the periphery, looking and understanding, apparent poles of light and dark, alive and dead, science and magic.

As such, the film's many subjects resist surfacing completely from the intertwined loops they sit within—'the spinning and turmoil of connected bodies'. Their stories are mirrored and pulled through one another. Watching *Mercury* as a viewer is to spend time and dwell, grasp and release as subjects and figures come in and out of focus—flicker across the screen, hum with activity. The experimental homemade magnetic instruments that make up the soundtrack are

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not seen—but their personalities build the sonic atmosphere of the work.

The character of the hobbyist magnet fisher has found a niche activity, and occupies a peripheral geography: the canal and its pathways are a sliver of civic space looping the city. We hear of a black box dredged up that when opened contains two stopped watches and two old passports—objects that are (usually) held close to the body. Junk released from watery graves flash on the screen like scans: images from the dead. Similarly, the amateur satellite tracker bases themselves in a forest on the edge of town, while the territory—the expanding boundary of the planet—they sift through above is afloat with dead messengers: orbiting satellites and space-junk launched by various agencies. These enthusiasms, bring up questions of ownership—*'It's deceptive how hard it is to find things only just lost'*. These night time and marginal activities of probing confront aspects of stealth, scavenging and (counter) surveillance. Becky tracks these activities—following and gathering stories from them—adding the loop of her own night-time bat detecting and filming at the graffitied edges of public space. Amplified bat calls mix with audio from a kit-theremin, and stark black and white images of a dead, ossified bat flare into life on the screen.

Mercury shares an enduring concern that flourished with the technologies of radio and telegraphy of the 18th and 19th centuries. This fascination with unseen physical forces, bodies and objects which could be rendered visible or audible through electromagnetic technologies to evidence the thickness and fullness of the earth and its atmosphere. Ideas and metaphors of magnetism are tied to the history of therapeutic mesmerism that Becky points me to. Franz Anton Mesmer's vitalist theory proposed the existence of a natural

energy transference occurring between all animated and inanimate objects, naming the theory ‘animal magnetism’, practitioners of which were ‘magnetisers’. The craze for mesmerism found a healing quality in electromagnetic forces and ideas of interconnectivity, and in public displays of trance, therapy and ‘magnetic spirits’, the border between physics and psychology was blurred¹.

In the film’s voiceover we hear of boundaries broken, rippling, between spaces: ‘*The surface is mercury, air and water, the messenger*’. Astronomers mirror the sky with telescopes to see deep into space utilising the seemingly magical, vital quality of mercury—or ‘liquid-mirror’—‘that strange semi-liquid medium that in the eighteenth century still preserved (after Pliny’s *argentum vivum*) the evocative name of quicksilver, or ‘living silver’. In vitalist, material metaphors of the psyche, whereas the ‘magnetic personality’ describes someone charismatic, the ‘mercurial personality’ was well known in the 18th century, with women usually considered the ‘primary embodiments of mercuriality—witnessed by their purported fickleness, emotional variability, and susceptibility to hysteria.’² I find that the element mercury took its name from the Roman god who was the ‘messenger of the gods and conductor of departed souls to the underworld.’³ Quicksilver has always had associations with movement, change, and transformation.

What is it to have a hobby if not to be mesmerised by, attracted to, or in love with it, as a way of passing time? For Karen Barad, ‘the electric field is a desiring field born of charged yearnings⁴, linking electromagnetic realities with the language of psychology. Maya Deren writes that the amateur: ‘from the Latin amator, ‘lover’—means one who does something for the love of the thing rather than for economic reasons or necessity⁵. Being an amateur affords freedom from seeking monetary reward for the labour of the hobby, which allows the love of it to flourish—‘*the face is calm*’. For Roland Barthes the amator is ‘one who loves and loves again’⁶: repetition

and desire key to their pursuit. The amateur learns keenly but not possessively: grateful for every transient epiphany, knowing whatever lures or animates us may also tie or engulf. There is no claim, just ‘*a clanking attraction, a brutal attraction*’.

NOTES

- 1 - Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria*, Oxford University Press, 2006, pg 253
- 2 - Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, Oxford University Press, 1995, pg 25
- 3 - *ibid*, pg 216
- 4 - Karen Barad, *TRANS*/MATTER/REALITIES AND QUEER POLITICAL IMAGININGS*, GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Duke University Press, 2015, pg 395
- 5 - Maya Deren, *Amateur Versus Professional*, Movie Makers Annual, 1959, pg17
- 6 - Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (trans. Richard Howard), University of California Press, 1977, pg 52

Alison Scott is a Glasgow-based artist and writer who often works with other artists. Her work is research-led and driven by interests in expanded performance and writing practices, and speculative approaches to knowledge production. Alison recently completed the MLitt in Art Writing at Glasgow School of Art. Recent presentations and residencies have taken place at Glasgow Women’s Library (2019), The Poetry Club (2019), Glasgow Project Room (2018), Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (2017), Timespan (2017), Edinburgh Art Festival (2017).

Satellites Programme is is Collective’s development programme for emergent artists and producers based in Scotland. The 2020 participants are Alison Scott, Kirsty Hendry, Sulāiman Majali, Holly McLean and Becky Šik.