

PADRAIC BARRETT

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enginee
ring of
consent

Words by Laurence Counihan

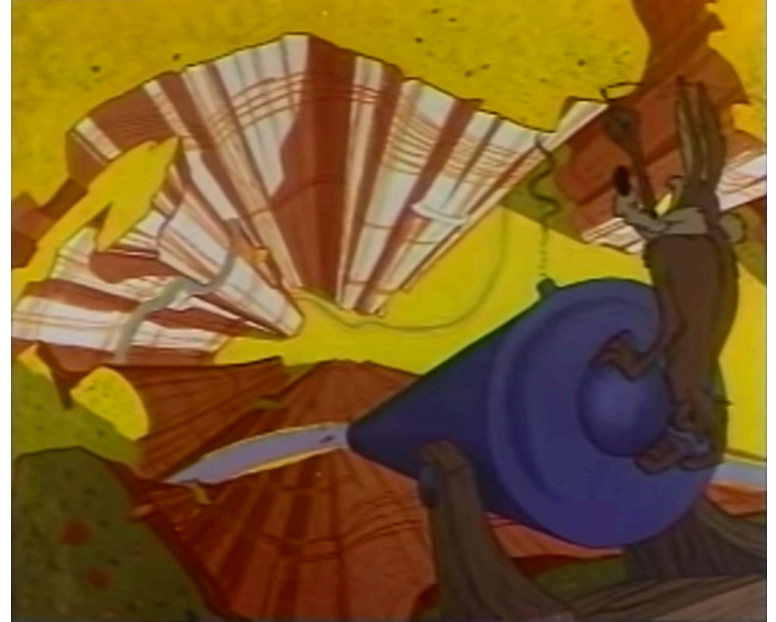
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At the turn of the century, cinema and aviation seemed to form a single moment ... it was becoming one way, or perhaps even the ultimate way, of seeing.

—Paul Virilio¹

On the 11th of December 2013 the user *ssnacksss* uploaded a video to Youtube with the title 'BEEP BEEP. BLOOP BLEEP. Switched On Road Runner and Coyote Cartoon'. Over the course of 5 minutes and 11 seconds this experiment in foley sound design submits Chuck Jones' classic cartoon to an auditory reconfiguration consisting of electronic crashes, whirls, granular decompressions and liquified synthetic tones. The soundscape is stripped and reanimated so as to become machinic, with the output providing a novel and viscerally affective experience for the audience. Like clockwork mechanisms, it is innately satisfying to observe a series of cause-and-effect procedures, and, herein, the sonic articulations, that usually fade into the background as the natural *respondent* to the visual, perform a crescendo that draws focus to the artificial interrelationship of sound and moving image — Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner's wind-up actions are subsequently transformed into cogs that trigger the hysterical vocalisations of a machinic other.

Through this integration as a function into the audiovisual assemblage, the protagonists of the show effectively become machines themselves, and iconic symbols are rerouted into cybernetic operators. At one point, roughly halfway through, Coyote has arranged a trap involving a rope, magnet, and a pile of bird-seed intended to lure his prey. Road Runner takes the bait, stops along the road, and before devouring his feed, turns to the virtual camera, and, instead of uttering the famous 'beep beep', or 'meep meep' as I always heard it, opens his beak to let out a stabby pulse-wave screech that emphatically announces his robotic form. (Coyote's gambit, as per usual, failed, and this time he



finds himself electrocuted as he lowers the rope and magnet onto a power-line — his own robotisation mirrored as the electrification of the body.)

I first came across this video several years ago, but was reminded of it when recently confronted with the work of artist Padraic Barrett. Formally speaking, the sonic remix via modular synthesis of the *ssnacksss* video ostensibly appears worlds apart from Barrett's much cooler and austere performative reflections on the protocols of contemporary surveillance capitalism. A bright and vivid cartoon-imaginary colour palette is contrasted against earthy-concrete tones that seem to yield their hue from a drearily dystopian future. Acoustic battalions resonate and launch inorganic volleys from the one whilst the other is arresting in its muteness. The first is analog and bears the residue of that artifacting and the following is digital, clinically-smooth with the detached veneer of a simulation. However, notwithstanding these formal oppositions, a formidable connective current runs through both, coiling itself fiendishly around two main lines: (i) the mapping of the body as that which is simultaneously a machine, and also a function integrated into systems of machinic operation, and; (ii) warfare built upon the logics of reconnaissance and extraction of the military-entertainment-complex.²

In our contemporary landscape the condition of the second has already been radically implicated into the first, with such a transition diagrammed in Gilles Deleuze's late essay 'Postscript on the Societies of Control'. Following Michel Foucault, Deleuze asserts that the *disciplinary societies*, which engulfed the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were characterised by a series of discrete enclosed structures, or institutions, from which the subject continually passed into: "first, the family; then the school ...; then the barracks ...; then the factory; from time to time the hospital; possibly the prison".³ However,





Deleuze reminds us that each society was always in a state of transition; outrunning the previous whilst thrusting for the future. The administration of power is a process that is continually in flux, and, so, by the 1990s, Deleuze, the great philosopher of intensities, identifies that his culture was at another break-point. A phase-shift wherein the old institutions of enclosure were succumbing to new models that enacted “ultra rapid forms of free-floating control”.⁴ It is this new, at the time, scenario that Deleuze gives the moniker of the *societies of control* — a networked world of seamless and inescapable interactions of open environments that supplant the closed-systems of before.

Earlier, Donna Haraway had already sketched a similar scenario, highlighting the societal shift from the *organics of domination* to the *informatics of domination*. *Representation, organism, depth, reproduction, and mind* all belong to the former, whilst the latter category is inhabited by *simulation, biotic component, surface/boundary, replication, and artificial intelligence*.⁵ It is worth clarifying that Haraway does not intend to set up these terms as binary oppositions, but rather draw attention to the ways in which the *informatics of domination* “subverts” the “naturalistic coding” of the originary taxonomy. Thus, the strict divide between *nature/culture*, emblematic of the *organics of domination*, is short-circuited by *fields of difference* that perform an erasure on the very concept of binary itself. These *fields of difference* are instantiated by an epistemological shift that propagates on the doxa by which everything is reduced to the universal ledger of information: “*the translation of the world into a problem of coding*”.⁶

Haraway categorically situates the development of advanced technologies in the second-half of the twentieth-century along an axis that bonds computation with warfare. This is the terminal insanity of contemporary machinic logic, as the origins of its fitness function are foundationally bootstrapped to the annihilation of the human. Orders



proceed from coercive reconnaissance operations that seek to analyse the subject as a composite energy resource; finely tuned to the delirious expansion of capital. The axiomatics of surveillance establish an asymmetrical relationship between the surveying-one and the surveyed-other. At a formal level what conditions this power imbalance are the discrete material technologies that reside at the intersection between these two poles, which necessarily implicates that any form of resistance to the rationale of surveillance must be aimed not only at the eye, but also the machine through which it looks.

Both Road Runner and Barrett find themselves navigating fictional dimensions wherein they are observed by forces that would wish their demise. Although the mechanisations of their evasions are inherently different, due to the category of observation techniques they are submitted to, there exists a similarity grounded in an *indifference* to the event of being watched. For what establishes the comedic tension between Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote is the fact that the former always seems to effortlessly elude the cunning traps plotted by his hopeful assailant. The narrative here is one of the natural world triumphing over a technology that has not yet caught up — we might say that Coyote is a strategist whose plans find themselves tactically disrupted. This is the logic of Bentham's Panopticon, wherein the *disciplinary schemata* is unable to sufficiently track the movements of its subject. Barrett too is observed and codified by a strategic system — the machinery of surveillance capitalism that emerges from the planetary-scale stack of computation⁷ — but one which is now materially bound to the *societies of control*. Whereas Road Runner's listless attitude is formulated as a response to the inefficiency of Coyote's capture models, Barrett's ploy pivots on the seeming impossibility of ever outrunning a machinic-eye whose gaze transforms everything within its remit into block of extractable information. This is the spectre of Mark Fisher's *capitalism realism* or Franco 'Bifo'

Berardi's *absolute capitalism*⁸: you can keep on running but there is no escape.

Resistance in this instance takes the form of a performative indetermination of the body, or its *suspension* from the system of control that it appears always-already entangled within. The human subject, its gist and substratum, exists here as already anterior to the machine, with this pre-machinic condition summoned through a series of ritualistic manoeuvres that would seek to establish a possibility space outside of capitalism itself. Thus, the intention is not so much to *escape capture*, but rather to *exit* from the axiom that announces that *everything can be captured*; or, to say it another way, to challenge the assumption that everything which *is*, can be *represented*.

In Barrett the exit strategy is hatched by first short-circuiting the economic legislation of physical site, deploying the archetypal tool of contemporary surveillance, Google Maps, in order to identify suitable plots for the staging of aesthetic rupture. Adopting a video format, wherein the materiality of the art object itself is reducible to a series of virtual zeroes and ones, the artist seeks out and uncovers disused and derelict locales that are to be performatively reanimated. Such a strategy shares a genealogy with the emergence of site-specific art, wherein the logic was to escape the nexus of enclosure that is the white cube, by effectively rooting the work of art to an offsite locale in order to sever the links to the so-called objectivity provided by the gallery space. Herein, the site-specific work was physically grounded within a geo-spatial context that existed outside the borders of the institutional artworld. But whilst the target of critique in those instances was the social institutions of the artworld, Barrett's aim is directed at the broader spectrum of visibility and mapping as decreed by the contemporary field of surveillance capitalism.





Google Maps is just one arm of Alphabet Inc. (the name of Google's conglomerate holding company as of 2019), whose mission statement is "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful".⁹ From a strict ideological perspective, the social good of pursuing such a democratisation of information does not need to be questioned in-and-of-itself, however, what should be the object of inquiry are the material and formal technologies by which said information is gathered, organised, and distributed. The technology behind Google Maps, which makes possible the automatic delineation of space, is based upon the latest advancements in OCR (Optical Character Recognition) and computer vision, wherein analysis is based upon massively, and endlessly expanding, datasets that are used for comparison.¹⁰ Unlike previous mapping endeavours throughout history, Google Maps represents a discrete cybernetic system which constantly updates itself in accordance with new incoming streams of information. This map is also an interactive atlas which does not restrict itself simply to classical cartographic models. At any moment I can choose to select a point and retrieve information on its coordinates through the labyrinthian archive that is Google Search. And with each click in my attempt to gather more data, I unknowingly become an object of information, as my habits and movements are relentlessly tracked; the intention being to construct a quantifiable map of the human, not as an individuated subject whose existence would precede the limitations of the capitalist system, but rather as a dataset whose software protocol can be rerouted for the benefit of economic growth.

Although the dissolution into algorithmic logic signifies a retreat from the realm of visuality, the fact remains that much of our contemporary engagement with networked technologies are still predominately mediated through visual processes. The cartographic model provided by Google Maps in Barrett's work is similar to that algorithmic spectre which recedes into the background. The chosen sites, initially



identified through recourse to a rigid computational system, are lonely and depeopled, and when presented to visual perception in the form of video their specificity is made anonymous. This is nowhere, places of ruin with machinic remnants hinting at a prior existence as engines of economic prosperity. The works are given to the viewer as visual objects — as I write I'm rewatching them through my laptop screen — but something is missing, some aspect here feels as if it has been voided from perception.

Maybe it's the silence. I watch a nude figure running. And they're running and running, movement here seems constrained by the physical environment. Trajectory is modified as a wall is encountered, the body slightly slows its gatch as it approaches a change in terrain. And the body keeps on running, entrapped within this artificial space until it fades to black, only to then repeat the cycle. Elsewhere, the same figure lays motionless atop a steel girded tower, as its lifeless form is menacingly surveyed by a circling drone. I think of warfare, automated bombings and dead bodies, but am interrupted by the brief and sudden appearance of a train in the background. This mechanical sign of life punctuates the atmosphere, offering the possibility of exit; but an exit which is already contained within its own discrete technological enclosure.

And perhaps this is the point. Meaning, or function, halted and subverted — via occultic postures and articulations — in order to confuse the various systems of observation that the body is subjected to. The self presented as a maelstrom of conflicting noise, that simultaneously offers itself up and retreats in the same instance, in order to resist its discrete quantification into circuits of information. Consent, herein, would be reengineered as that which would seek to defy its mapping by an external system of representation.

Notes:

1. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, Verso, 2009, 22.
2. Steve Goodman uses this term in order to describe the redeployment of military technologies within the entertainment industry. See: Steve Goodman, '1933: Abusing the Military-Entertainment Complex', in *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, MIT Press, 2010, 31-34.
3. Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', in *October*, 59, 1992, 3.
4. *Ibid*, 4.
5. Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Manifestly Haraway*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 28-30.
6. *Ibid*, 34.
7. Benjamin Bratton refers to the contemporary "nomos" — the infrastructural of the Earth across "land, seas, and/or air and now also the domain that the US military simply calls "cyber" — as *The Stack*. His conceptualisation of an auxiliary *Black Stack*, whose symbolic operation bears a number of similarities with Barrett's aesthetic practice, is described thusly: "The Black Stack, then, is to the Stack what the shadow of the future is to the form of the present. The Black Stack is less the anarchist stack, or the death-metal stack, or the utterly opaque stack, than the computational totality-to-come, defined at this moment by what it is not, by the empty content fields of its framework, and by its dire inevitability. It is not the platform we have, but the platform that might be. That platform would be defined by the productivity of its accidents, and by the strategy for which whatever may appear at first as the worst option (even evil) may ultimately be where to look for the best way out. It is less a "possible future" than an escape from the present." See: Benjamin Bratton, 'The Black Stack', in *e-flux Journal*, 53, 2014.
8. See: Mark Fisher, *Capitalism Realism*, Zero Books, 2009, and;