

Kate Bush: Ontological Strangeness, Autonomy and Magic

Wow. Unbelievable. A Kate Bush conference. What an honour to be here.

Thanks to Jonny and Glyn for organising and inviting me to give the introductory keynote at the *first ever* academic conference dedicated to the work of Kate Bush, an artist I imagine we all hold deep affection for and have thought a great deal about.

I am incredibly excited to hear from the diverse range of scholars and practitioners over the next few days and learn from their engagements with Bush’s music.

In 2004, when I started my PhD – pre-Aerial – very little academic work had been produced on Bush. An article here and there, a few lines amid general surveys about women and popular music, but nothing sustained. It felt like an open field in which I was free to experiment and think with her music, an intellectual gift I was delighted to embrace.

Drawing on my academic training in Literary and Cultural Theory, my reading of Bush’s work was empowered by Roland Barthes’s idea of ‘death of the

author was the birth of the reader’ and inspired by French feminist theories of sexual difference. From these materials I invented a shape-shifting figure – the Bushian feminine subject – to explore the multiple subjectivities and characters present in the song worlds of Kate Bush.

It was stimulating, fun and enormously generative to think with Bush’s music in this way, which is saturated with meaning and invites the listener to make their own sense from it. It comes as no surprise to me that artists draw on Bush’s musical catalogue and staged personas as inspiration for their own creations.

Pretty soon into my PhD *Aerial* was released, breaking her 12-year silence, kickstarting an re-assessment of Bush’s music within journalism and academia. In-depth studies like Ron Moy’s *Kate Bush and Hounds of Love* was published in 2007, followed by Graeme Thomson’s seminal biography in 2010. Bush’s career itself became more active in the 2010s, as we know, which brought with it further journalistic surveys and appraisals, confirming Bush’s status as an enduring figure of fascination.

There is still much to be done, however! Bush is a multidisciplinary and eclectic artist whose career spans periods of almost constant change within the music industries of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Technological

innovations have re-shaped the production and consumption of music impacting on aesthetics, cultures of valuation and the social contexts in which music is made, performed, listened to and enjoyed.

Bush's career also shadows a dramatic chapter in the history of capitalism, with widening financialisation influencing the financial reorganisation of the cultural industries at large. Despite these varied and profound disruptions, Bush has uniquely managed to retain business and creative control, or autonomy, over her work. This is part of what makes Bush such a remarkable artist, as I will go on to elaborate later in this talk.

As well as attending to the social, cultural and historical contexts that unfolded alongside Bush's career, and in which she is situated, there is also so much to say about the music and performances themselves and I really excited to see this process in action throughout this conference in dialogue with composers, artists, historians, biographers, musicologists, literary, dance, film, visual and pop music scholars.

My contribution to our conversation begins with a discussion of the apparent ontological strangeness of Kate Bush in the late 70s, relating it to the ontological strangeness of the autonomous Woman who became visible, for the first time in history, during this era. I then go on to talk about Bush's autonomy as producer and businesswoman before closing with some thoughts on how that

autonomy enables Bush to practice her own kind of magic as an artist who creates contexts that support audiences to imagine different worlds and dream different realities through the fabric of her compositions.

Kate Bush and Ontological Strangeness

How people talk about their first experience of hearing Kate Bush singing her ‘unusual’ song, ‘Wuthering Heights’, is remarkably similar:

Feminist critic and photographer Pam Isherwood, writing in *Spare Rib* in 1978, describes when: ‘Drifting out of windows for the past month or so, the strange sound of Kate Bush’s Wuthering Heights...sufficiently different from yer average pop single to merit a second ear. Then after the initial “Whaattt?” the irritatingly compelling chorus “Heathcliffe, it’s me, Cathy, come home” sticks in the brain, they are sounds not words’.

More recently, in his introduction to Bush’s 2018 lyric collection *How To Be Invisible*, novelist David Mitchell recalls the impact of the

‘swooping, delirious, octave straddling voice that I’d never heard’

‘she mimed the words in a stylised mime-artist manner I’d never seen before’

And the questions:

‘Why did she dance like that?’

‘*Who* was she?’

‘*What* was she?’

Such accounts have almost become cliché when talking about Bush’s cultural impact. Even so, I think it is important to take seriously how these accounts register Bush’s singularity and strangeness, and how the sensibility of her *initial* appearance within culture has endured, rather than diminished, over time.

Bush’s music was clearly disruptive to the untrained ear. It jarred in an embodied and also psychic sense – Isherwood’s ‘Whaaaaat?’ leaps off the page to suggest as much.

She also made some journalists suspicious because they could not figure her out; her sound so different it could not be real, only possible because she was a technological construction. A commentator, writing the Daily Mail, believed Bush would ‘find it impossible to recreate on stage the distinctive and often

bizarre sound of her records. In the studio, she has modern technology to help.’

In real life, this critic speculated, she would be revealed to be a ‘real fake.’

Pendennis, writing in *The Guardian* in November 1978, stated ‘No one seems able to decide whether she’s a genuine innocent or a pretty hard-nosed cookie’ wrote ‘Her face can appear angelic, or throw out a look to give Lady Macbeth the odd shiver. She shows no side but takes to being swanned around in Rolls Royces as a duck to water. In the middle of it all, it’s easy to forget that she can write very good songs. Young she may be; lacking in self-possession she is not’. Bush was perplexing, for this author, because she could not be fixed inside the angel/whore dichotomy used to squander independent, self-authorising women in the patriarchal imaginary. Her intelligence, song-writing skill, beauty, comfort with luxury - her self-possession, her autonomy – spilt over.

‘Who was she?’

‘What was she?’

These are ontological questions.

Who and what was the strange being of Kate Bush, as she appeared in front of a shocked public in the late 70s?

This strange being, outside the parameters of the “normal”, exceptional – a form of existence that is noticed but not recognised; gawped at, struggled with, sometimes admired, but someone, something – what *is* that? – that needs coming to terms with, that has to be integrated, demands its own space and claims the time consciousness of the listener/viewer in a singular manner.

Bush’s individual strangeness converged with a wider change in the status of womanhood in Britain from the late 60s onward. Landmark legal changes relating to Abortion and divorce, as well as the wide availability of birth control technology, changed conditions for women and girls and opened up new life course possibilities. While such opportunities were not distributed evenly to women from all races and classes, or across all geographical locations in Britain, many young women growing up in the ’70s had opportunities to do something that no women had arguably ever been able to do across the history of civilisation: choose when and if they were to have children.

This new, precious, autonomy was given political and cultural expression in the women’s liberation movements that became active toward the end of the 60s and raged throughout the following decade. Cultural activism was a huge part of the movement, from grassroots to the mass-market. The logo of feminist publishers Virago Press and the name of magazine *Spare Rib*, demonstrate how feminists reclaimed engrained symbols that have justified women’s oppression

for centuries – the bitten apple, Adam’s spare rib – and reclaimed them within a public sphere undergoing subtle reformulation due to a widely circulating, vernacular understanding of women’s liberation. This, alongside other demands of the movement, which included an end to the legal and financial dependence of women on men, inscribed in Beveridge’s post-war breadwinner social policy reforms, helped carve out an environment within which Woman with a capital ‘W’, Woman as autonomous being, could crawl out, make sounds and searing, political statements. Autonomous yet still strange, unfamiliar and experimental. And this woman, if she was to have a particular image looked, of course, nothing like Kate Bush.

Few people do.

Nevertheless, Bush, as a cultural figure, burst onto the world stage at a historical moment when the ‘genre’ of the Human, in Caribbean literary theorist Sylvia Wynter’s terms, was undergoing profound, epochal change. It was a time when ‘Woman’ or, more specifically, white, heterosexual woman, instilled with new autonomous powers, gained access to Humanity as such, she came to be viewed, in other words, as a human being in her own right.

We can see this situation – Woman as genre - reflected in discourse about popular music in the late 70s, which suddenly seemed awash with female voices.

Writing in the *Daily Mail* on 31 March 1978 Thomson Prentice suggested, evocatively, that ‘if you tune into pop on your radio this morning, you will detect a few more curves on the airwaves and a little more charm in the charts’, noting the prevalence of artists like Bush, Suzi Quatro, Rose Royce, Donna Summer, Debbie Harry, Samantha Sang and Elke Brooks whose vocal presence were re-shaping the material contours of pop. Even today ‘Women in music’ have struggled to shake off their ‘genre’ status, whether they are a female solo-artist, lead singer in a ‘female-fronted band’ or part of an ‘all female rock band’, a point that demonstrates the continued novelty and hypervisibility of women musicians and how woman, as a genre of the human, retains an unsettled status vis-à-vis dominant cultural representations.

As Bush’s career evolved, she has been understood not simply as a solo woman artist, but an autonomous one; not solo as in *alone* but autonomous as defining her own fate – self-authorising.

And it is this autonomy – the historical eruption of Woman as autonomous being, as new genre of ‘the human’ – that Bush’s performance derived its initial, ontological strangeness for viewers. How she moved, how she sounded; she enacted the spectre of a visible and sonically perceptible Woman acting out as a fully-formed gendered and sexual being, without men – or at least not reducible, or appended to them. She resounded as something new, something unusual.

It was something culturally new and unusual but not necessarily “other worldly”. Rather, it emerged from the conditions present in the cultural context that enabled some women, the most privileged, to access historically unique forms of sexual, legal, financial, social, cultural and technological autonomy. This is what the singularity of Kate Bush gave form, movement, words and sounds to, albeit in an idiosyncratic way – she contributed to the configuration of Woman, with a capital ‘W’, whose resonances can be especially heard and felt on *The Kick Inside*.

As Bush’s career developed, her ontological strangeness was augmented through the embrace and demonstrable mastery of writing and production technologies. The late 70s, Samantha Bennett argues in her book *Modern Records Maverick Methods*, signified a ‘musical “fork in the road”’ between records featuring live, acoustic and electric instrument performances and those

featuring music heavily “constructed” from programmable devices’, and Bush was at the forefront of this discernible musical and cultural change. Such tools were not, however, available to every pop star; her use of the Fairlight CMI, which cost around \$25,000-\$36,000 [lowest end around \$78,000 in today’s money] in the early 80s, put her in an elite category.

The glass smash sample on ‘Babooshka’, its high-camp artifice and irreverence ramped up in the music video, was one of the first times the Fairlight could be heard on a commercial, popular recording, and likely contributed further to Bush’s own novelty in the ears of the listening public. Writing about sample-based music production often reference the supernatural, magic and alchemy. In Bush’s case, her skilful manipulation of cutting-edge sampling technologies demonstrated mediumship as much as musicianship, a (un)canny ability to bring these new sonic materials under her control, adding percussion, texture and ornamentation to songs and, later, constructing ambitious soundscapes and compositions. At the same time, the publicity photos of Bush sat, “home-working” at her Fairlight could be seen as a symptom of the feminisation of craft labour in an age of accelerating computerisation, simultaneously an alluring image of futurity and cutting-edge experimentation *and* threat to traditional musical skills and training, cloaked in the aura of an increasingly reclusive pop star.

Autonomy

Bush’s unique autonomy as a female artist is most often recognised through her role as a producer. Through production, Paul Hegarty and Martin Halliwell argue, Bush ‘grasped the means of production by building [her] own studio [..] in the country,’ a move that signalled her complete transition to the ‘autonomous realm,’ normally conceived as ‘the preserve of the male musician’ (216).

Around the time of *The Sensual World*, experimental musician and writer David Toop interviewed Bush for his 1995 book *Ocean of Sound*. During the poorly recorded interview, now archived at the British Library, they discussed the politics of recording technology and express mutual surprise at how Bush was one of the few musicians working in the late 80s, male *or* female, who had been able to exercise control over the production of her records:

‘I’m very lucky to be in the position I am in, creatively’, Bush reflected. ‘I have a tremendous amount of creative freedom and although I’ve had to fight for that I find it quite extraordinary now, especially the more I talk to people, that I’ve managed to do this really’.

Toop then asks Bush *why* she has been able to retain such control. Was it simply luck?

And Bush replies:

‘Some of it’s luck yes. I suppose in some ways it’s probably linked to a *kind of fate thing* as well. But it’s *very much to do with song writing as well, that’s the core of everything I do*. If it wasn’t for that I wouldn’t play an instrument. I certainly wouldn’t produce if it wasn’t for the writing of the songs. It’s only because I wanted the production to be as much a part of the song writing which I feel it is, for me it’s all the same thing. The arrangements go on part of the song, are part of the song, it’s not a separate thing. The song writing – you know every sound that goes on that track, the mood that’s created, it’s all part of getting the lyrics across and the emotion, so it’s been a gradual extension coming off the song writing. *The more I was experimental in my work the more I realised I couldn’t work in commercial studios, they were just costing so much money* and I’d get very nervous because there’d be people around, strangers popping in, lots of distractions, *I didn’t feel as relaxed as I wanted to and it was getting really prohibitively expensive*. So, getting my own studio together was probably the best thing I’ve done, creatively. *It completely changed everything, it gave me tremendous creative freedom*, it all comes from that, really. *I’ve relaxed so much more that I’m happy to experiment*. It’s good to be more relaxed. I don’t really function very well when I’m nervous. *I think I am really*

lucky, and I’m really pleased to be in this situation. If no one wanted to buy a record I made, I’d still have my own studio and all I’d have to do is have enough money to buy some tape or I could even go over me old tapes and I’d be relatively self-sufficient, which is a wonderful thing.’

Kate Bush interviewed by David Toop, 1989/90, David Toop Collection, British Library [C1579/213](#)

While Bush’s answer begins with a meditation on fate and, later, production, she goes on to be quite specific about the interrelationship between financial, creative but also spatial autonomy, especially for the commercial pop artist of the early/mid-80s, where time to experiment in the studio was prohibitively expensive.

Bush’s control over her career has been possible because of her financial and technical autonomy. Nevertheless, while Bush is now routinely celebrated for her mastery of the studio and songcraft, movement and musicianship, we rarely glimpse a portrait of her, the artist, as a businesswoman.

Bush is (or at least has become) a businesswoman parallel to her work as a songwriter; the director of her own music publishing company and producer of her records, performer and administrator. Catherine Bush – as she is presented on Companies house - currently presides as Company Director and Secretary of

Nobel & Brite Ltd, Nobel & Brite Holdings Ltd and Kate Bush Music Ltd. How easy is it to associate Catherine Bush the businessperson with Kate Bush the artist and performer?

It is true that Bush has not always occupied these executive positions.

On 8 April 1992, Catherine Bush became Director of Nobel & Brite Holdings Ltd [previously Chargechoice Ltd 13 Sep-31 Dec 78; Novercia Holdings 31 Dec-16 Mar 2006];

And became Director of Kate Bush Music Ltd [briefly Merirhode Ltd 3 Jan-31 Dec 78] and Director of Nobel & Brite Ltd 18 March 1992

Nobel and Brite Ltd and its holding company was previously Novercia Ltd 28 Apr 76-16 Mar 2006.

She also became Secretary of Nobel & Brite Holdings Ltd on 1 Aug 2003;

And of Nobel & Brite and Kate Bush Music Ltd on 31 July 2003, the day after ‘Katemas’.

We can see that Bush is pretty much in charge of all her business affairs and it has been this way for the majority of her career. Such involvement can’t be underestimated, either – these are not small-scale endeavours but dynamic, profitable companies, operating within music industries that are constantly changing according to consumption trends, new legal frameworks, revenue generation practices and technological transformations. And while Bush likely does not handle her business affairs alone, she clearly assumes an executive role within these companies; any decisions made about the business would be done so on an informed basis.

At the level of pure administration, running a business is time-consuming work. Going concerns the size and scope of Bush’s companies rarely just ‘tick over’, especially when companies are redefined, as Bush’s were in the mid-00s, in response to the disastrous takeover of EMI by private equity firm Terra Firma, and subsequent establishment of her own label, Fish People.

Even before she became Director and Secretary, Bush retained majority shareholder control in the companies; the ‘family cottage industry’ that insulated Bush from the abuses of the music industry is relatively common knowledge. The legal skills and publishing knowledge of her brother, John Carder Bush and the accounting aptitude of her father, Dr Robert John Bush, is viewed as pivotal. As Graeme Thomson has observed, one of the few commentators to narrate the business angle of Bush’s history, ‘the way the Bush

family handled her career, the way they advised her, protected her, cared for her, loved her and fought for her artistic integrity [...] was remarkably effective’. Prudent financial management of the companies, including sensible pension provisions, has been central to this familial care and support. Yet Bush, herself, has had a key role in the businesses too, a point that is perhaps less emphasised or understood.

Of course, it makes total sense that Bush is Director and Secretary of her music publishing companies; it is normal for inventors to claim ownership of and receive financial benefits from the ‘property’ they create. Even so, her success as a female entrepreneur in male-dominated business worlds is equally important as her cultural achievements as a pop star. Indeed, they are thoroughly entangled, although one aspect is clearly more visible than the other. We prefer to see Bush on stage, listen to her music or watch her videos rather than experience her career through Companies House doppelgängers. And I imagine Bush strongly feels that way too! If we want to do the latter rather than the former, perhaps she has failed as an artist to preserve a potent illusion.

Like other progressive musicians of the post-68 era, Bush’s music is anchored in the idea that popular music can support spiritual awakening and, perhaps, facilitate wider shifts in consciousness and through that, larger social and political changes. Her unique mastery of the legal, financial and

technological infrastructures of the late capitalist present – her ability to control her work and function autonomously within the reality settings of that world – have enabled her to consistently produce culturally ambitious work in the progressive mould.

Bush’s post-*Aerial* offerings – *Director’s Cut*, *50 Words for Snow* and *Before the Dawn* – differ from her earlier work in that they seem to respond directly to the dominant conditions in which popular music is consumed in the early 21st century; re-using and recontextualising older recordings, constructing situations in which the listener can experience her music. While diverse in approach, an interest in temporality unites Bush’s offerings of the past decade – *Director’s Cut* disturbance of the listener’s existing song-memories; *50 Words for Snow*’s marathon durations and *Before the Dawn*’s use of live performance to cultivate the presence and attention of the audience. Primarily they are concerned with holding and stretching out the audience’s attention, with reclaiming a sense of time as uninterrupted and unfolding, an experience of sequence that is central to Bush’s sonic storytelling and most successful conceptual compositions.

My final section focuses on how the live temporality of *Before the Dawn* created a magical container in which Bush’s transformative storytelling could be rooted in space and unfold in time. When Bush made her ‘comeback’ with *Aerial* in 2005, the social contexts in which her audiences listened to music had

changed dramatically to the early 90s, the halcyon days of CDs, and even more so to the era of the vinyl LP in which she emerged. Ian Penman, writing in the *London Review of Books* in 2014, points to how Bush had simply not caught up with the times – ‘on the tiny sticker attached to the CD of *Aerial* it’s referred to as “the new double album”’ he commented, haughtily, ‘*as if* we were still in the gatefold 1970s, not the digital download 2000s’.

Since *Aerial*, music consumption has become more fragmented and heterogenous. Much media and cultural noise has been made about the ‘vinyl revival’. While 2019 saw LPs outsell CDs for the first time since 1986, they still only account 4% of overall revenues, with paid subscription services accounting for 62%, signalling a victory for algo-curated music selection, often played back on sub-optimal sound devices, such as phones or computers.

Within a culture where listening spaces have become apparently fractured and disinterested, Bush harnessed the live encounter to reclaim a marginalised and endangered temporality. In the communal live situation constructed by *Before the Dawn*, paying close attention to the sonic storytelling was the *only available option* for audiences as the concert established a circuit of participation between artwork and audience. Media and Technology theorist Bernard Stiegler argues ‘the relationship between the work and the audience is transductive’, meaning that it is constituted by the dynamic transfer of energy between artist and audience, ‘the circuit formed is the ensemble of all these

relations, but worked over by a *difference* which is the *time* during which the work *opens up* its audience’. So, time is needed to create difference, to open up the audience to possible interpretations, to nurture their imaginations.

When media technologies such music, film, television, radio, the internet and so forth are weaponised by marketing and capitalist forces, he argues, they capture and nullify the time consciousness of individuals, they extinguish our ability to dream. When the unknown and unexpected is suppressed we remain insulated from transformation, protected from chaos or revelation, operating at the level of mere stimulus, reaction, response. In this sense, at a very elemental and technical level, media forms territorialise time itself and inhibit access to a portal of temporality that enables one to lose a sense of existing in time, within an artwork or activity. This is what at stake in Bush’s construction of the circuit; to constitute conditions, of worldly coordinates, where the audience can be opened up, energy exchanged, where it becomes possible to dream.

<https://youtu.be/aZ9dQ4u-og0?t=1347>

It is a magical act. The claiming of time and space through ritual, of asking for protection, inviting the audience to be present, dislocated from intrusions of hyper connection. No mobile phones – being part of the event rather than reproducing it is as meaningless spectacle. A means to change together, throughout the circuit, what Ferderico Campagna, in his 2018 book *Technic and Magic* calls, the dominant ‘reality-settings’ of the world within

which ‘we implicitly define what is possible and what is impossible within our world,’ the context in which we can ‘decide what *is* our world’.

While clearly still operating within capitalism’s cultural industries – and, we might add, the 21st century boom of the live music industries - *Before the Dawn* aimed to preserve the conditions in which the ‘autonomous design of new forms of life’ can remain imaginable, where the imagination remains active, furnished with capacities of what Arturo Escobar calls ‘autopoiesis, or the self-creation of living systems’ in the face of what seems like ‘the inescapable techno-economic mediation of [our] worlds’. Inside the concert’s time/space such autonomy is in itself contingent, heterogeneous and not likely experienced by all, yet the *design* of the space is intended as such that alternative compositions might emerge among the brush strokes of the ‘Architect’s Dream’, compositions in Jacques Attali’s sense of a ‘different system of organisation, a network within which a different kind of music and different social relations’ become possible.

It is a time/space in which to grapple and confront the contrasting ‘reality-systems’ of Technic and Magic. Campagna ascribes Technic and Magic specific geographies – or what he calls imaginative cartographies. While Technic is a ‘Northern force’, a reality-system responsible for the degradation of lived experience in the advanced capitalist countries, resulting in a ‘crisis of imagination’, Magic, the therapeutic path, belongs to the middle world, a

Mediterranean ‘vast area of the spirit [...] an area of migration and contamination, where sunlight doesn’t merely reveal the qualities of thing and their productive categories, but primarily their ineffable dimension. Like the midday hour in summer, it is haunted by an unnameable temporality, beyond the measure of clocks and of history books’.

<https://youtu.be/aZ9dQ4u-og0?t=240>

The song suites performed in *Before the Dawn*, *The Ninth Wave* and *A Sky of Honey*, present the audience with a cyclical rebirth journey. In the case of *The Ninth Wave* it is based on the ‘Hero’s Journey’, a figure who is called to adventure and breaks through the threshold, experiences death, rebirth, reconciliation and return; in *A Sky of Honey* the journey occurs in the apparently quotidian cycle of day to night. The song cycles offer structure and materials from which the audience may undergo their own journey, perhaps re-calibrate their own ‘reality-settings’. Drowsy states that push at the borderlines of un/consciousness and return to the crossroads where our path meets the palm of the pre-capitalist world, where the terror of misogyny, drowning and persecution is confronted and perhaps healed; where duets with birds and meditations on changing light provoke revelation about one’s co-existent position in a world populated by diverse and constantly evolving human and non-human ‘life’. These ambitious compositions are offered by Bush, magical practices that aim to facilitate the imaginations of others, and in them different

realities and different worlds are called into being; and, if they can be imagined,
one day they might exist.