



Gareth Evans

13 Ways of Thinking Through Her 'Conscious'

And you may ask yourself, "What is that beautiful house?"

And you may ask yourself, "Where does that highway go to?"

And you may ask yourself, "Am I right? Am I wrong?"

And you may say to yourself, "My God! What have I done?"

- Talking Heads from *Once in a Lifetime*

I was of three minds,

Like a tree

In which there are three blackbirds.

- Wallace Stevens from *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*

1

The title, it's borrowed, of course; or adapted – translated – informing – inspiring. Homage or influence, or both; which is to say, it is: something that *already* exists, that might help; a point of reference, of departure. I was conscious of it, had read it many years ago, and then it came to me, in the dead of night, as a possible way *in*, a break in the trees, a door in the wall. It was in the hours around me and it landed as both path and vehicle.

Don't we always need a frame, a limit, a structure, architecture; something against and within which we can press, test, question, and proceed? Isn't this what consciousness is? Pattern recognition; knowing there is one, and choosing it, or not.

2

Etymology can help, *sometimes* (and sometimes very much not, as is clear below in one startling case). It is the root system of language, the mycorrhizal association that seeds and nurtures sound into meaning. The radical possibilities of words, the meanings abandoned or never fully realised, are hiding there, in plain sight – or should that be in hearing / speaking / writing. We've always got one, two, three, four, five senses working overtime.

Conscious (adj.) c.1600, "knowing, privy to" (poetic), from Latin *consciūs* "knowing, aware;" the sense of "knowing or perceiving within oneself, sensible inwardly, aware" is from 1630s; also compare the Latin sense evolution in *conscience*.

Conscience (n.) c.1200, "faculty of knowing what is right," later "sense of fairness or justice, moral sense." It is from the Old French *conscience* "conscience, innermost thoughts, desires, intentions; feelings" (12c.) and directly from Latin *conscientia* "a joint knowledge of something, a knowing of a thing together with another person; consciousness, knowledge".

Dementia (n.) is an "extremely low condition of mental function, mental incapacity," 1806, from Latin *dementia* "madness, insanity", literally "a being out of one's mind".

Hallucinate (v.) is "to have illusions," 1650s, from Latin "wander (in the mind), dream; talk unreasonably, ramble in thought," probably from Greek *alyein* "be at a loss, be beside oneself (with grief, joy, perplexity), be distraught. The Latin ending probably was influenced by *vaticinari* "to prophecy," also "to rave." Older in English in a rare and now obsolete transitive sense "deceive" (c. 1600).

Memory (n.) late 13c., "recollection (of someone or something); remembrance, awareness or consciousness (of someone or something);" meaning "faculty of remembering; the mental capacity of retaining unconscious traces of conscious impressions or states, and of recalling these to consciousness in relation to the past," is late 14c. in English. Meaning "length of time included in the consciousness or observation of an individual" is from 1520s. Meaning "that which is remembered; anything fixed in or recalled to the mind" is by 1817.

3

She has chosen multiple approaches to this enquiry (or did they choose her, carrier frequency, host?), and she has expressed her findings in the widest range of media. How could it be otherwise? Art is conscious that it can only approximate. It gets as close as it can, and then tries again to get closer. In this instance, it circles the abyssal mystery, views from various angles, from micro to macro, from keyboard to drone.

This is not a story that can only be told in one way, one medium, one manner, on one platform. Here, at the edge of the map, nudging into Ultima Thule, art can only propose. One might expect the system to be nervous - given the subject, the stakes – but it's all surprisingly calm. She takes her lead from her protagonists. It's a gamble (hence the playing card prompts, perhaps) but one the payoff of which the viewer – with their own perspective, position, history, experience so important to all of this – will decide on.

4

Susanne Langer knew, and so much. Why is she not a given? Perhaps she is, in certain circles, or are there simply too many men in the way? Art and mind, meaning making, the priority and promiscuity of symbols, virtual experience – how the art makes its own world, how there exists a virtuality inside *and* outside of the conscious perception perceiving it. This is intrinsically itself, apart and discrete from its surroundings (the architectural for her *primarily* a space to perceive, more than to dwell or reside within). The meaning of a given situation derives from the triangulation of the individual, the social and the discourse, as it is understood in that context. This can change, and does.

5

Isn't all reality virtual when it comes to it? A constructed agreement that this is *how it is*. Are the children burning?

Is the coffin full of rocks? What is suitable, or appropriate, or bearable to the conscious? If the mind makes space and time, or at least believes that they *are* – and if ‘place’ is time operating in space, or space as experienced within time, then, when the fog billows out like a dress in the wind, it is clear that the mind might be distressed, unravelled even. Let’s listen to Cat Stevens:

Trouble

Oh trouble set me free

I have seen your face

And it’s too much too much for me

Trouble

Oh trouble can’t you see

You’re eating my heart away

And there’s nothing much left of me

Here the affliction itself can view its own undoing actions, even if, with fog present, its recipient can’t. When things stop making sense, home becomes uncannier than it already might be. The cupboards require their own images impressed, just to remain cupboards. But home is not just the domestic. It’s the planet entire. When the fog (within and without) threads itself through the miserable moment, people become separated from each other – and so from themselves – and women, are they most prone to this, given the alienations of the social order? In Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Red Desert* Monica Vitti’s character certainly feels that, caught as she is on multiple thresholds, between land and water, gender and role, occupancy and distraction, sanity and something altogether else...

6

Timothy Morton’s ‘strange stranger’ might well be out there in the milk-dense morning: the more-than-human entity, part of the ‘mesh’, which is his network of interconnection, where equivalence, not hierarchy, is the organising intelligence. In Morton’s reading, these beings – organic and not – become even stranger once they’re better ‘known’. The uncanny remains and digs in. Cezanne’s apple sits in the bowl, Cezanne’s mountain presides.

Intimacy with something that is not us can conceal the underlying distance and puzzle of things. When the conscious starts to slip, skid, flail, this cover is blown and the undeniable ‘nature’ of the world is fully apparent. We can all appreciate a little what this *might* feel like, when applied to our ‘everydayness’, if we try fully to conceive of any one of the ‘hyperobjects’ Morton has identified. The mind starts to buckle, as if a great pressure is being applied to it. Is consciousness a hyperobject too? Is it an equal meeting...?

7

Scale matters: that much is evident (Pegeen’s eyes are dazzle planets of wonder, while Wendy’s are resolved landscapes). She zooms in, she draws back and out, just as the conscious

does. At certain points on the spectrum, we might feel that we are becoming marginally un-conscious (the parameters harder to measure) or even a-conscious. We find a cave formation in a cell, a seam of marble in a continental view. Does it all ‘know’? We’re nudging into animism, towards panpsychism, and why not? Is it any less believable than that a woman was made from a rib? The question of the conscious is *what* the conscious is. It is indivisible from its own interrogation; hence its unceasing fascination, as much for itself as for us. It’s a ‘strange stranger’ looking on itself in the bathroom mirror, wondering out loud...

8

So she sends across the cards: *An individual honeybee is not conscious but the swarm might be* (Chris Frith). Just after I receive them, I am mailed a portfolio of the winners in this year’s World Nature Photography Awards. Conflicts of every kind apart, still the world goes on, as László Krasznahorkai reminded us, slow-slow-quick-quick-slow. The octopus re-purposes our plastic waste on the churned sea floor. It’s not over *yet*.

In Second Place (Behaviour—Birds), a flock of red-billed Queleas takes flight in Tanzania’s Selous Game Reserve. They become their own tree for a turning few seconds, growing in the air itself, branching out from their own motion into further movement: a form of murmuration, beauty out of function, purpose in the beauty – one and the same – complex joy in their wondrous ‘being able’. “Nothing is less isolated or more social than a tree”, Richard Powers observed.

9

Bee and hive, bird and flock, fish and shoal, tree and forest: should we try to converse in their language, however we might define that? Or more, seek a form of conscious becoming that expresses our intent but transcends language... We can’t, but sometimes we try a little *better*, just a little, even briefly: Nan Shepherd with *The Living Mountain*, say; or J.A. Baker’s *The Peregrine*; or Charles Foster and his serious play at *Being a Beast*. These are approaches that immerse and hold back simultaneously, voices that speak in tongues and attend beyond only hearing.

Importantly, they appreciate that it is not just what is said or done, but it is also the time in which the meeting unfolds. Experience of duration is perhaps the widest chasm to cross. The temporal life of a tree, a hawk, a mountain – how to inhabit that? The first step is to stop, and from there, perhaps, a species of realignment can begin.

What trees remind us so profoundly is that identity is edgeless, spilling, founded on hosting and being nurtured; in relation to, not exclusive *from*; part of the greater and distinctive within it.

Autumn eats its leaf out of my hand: we are friends.
From the nuts we shell time and we teach it to walk:
then time returns to the shell.

- Paul Celan from *Corona* translated by
Michael Hamburger

10

She has been long interested in the traditions of sacred geometry - the material patterning speaking to something that cannot be held by hands. Establish, repeat, extend: so the conscious hive, so the fractal face of Earth itself, so the universe. Asymmetry often plays a part in the spiritual expression; a deliberate glitch in the design, to remind the maker and their audience that they're only human, after all. It's the divine priority to claim infinite formal consistency.

But surely the mystery - the miracle even - lies in that deviation, in the fact that the arrangement can hold, can incorporate it, might actually be changed and redirected by it. Difference, variety, co-existence: it comes by the names that it comes, a multiplicity, fecund.

11

Two sugars? Look, there are the teacups on the tablecloth, a car-boot corralling, a mandala of mend. 'Belong Care Village' sounds appealing. Isn't that what we all want in a way? The cups might seem banal, daily, as (increasingly) regular as dementia, but they're far from passive. They're also our strange strangers, considerably more than just the holder for a cuppa. Sounding the voices, they're conscious witnesses to history - personal, social, capital and colonial; evidence of extraction, labour and service; sites of confessional; solitary and collective hearths; and business for the hands, that otherwise twitch restless in the lap, stretch and flex, featherless, trying for the air, lifted by ideas, emotion, and remembrance.

12

We're "wired for rupture", Marlon James reports; but wait, we're also ready to repair. In Meso-American lore, the world is a flowered, clay vessel over-rimmed with waters. Judaism's tikkun olam suggests world repair, social justice and a Kabbalistic restoration. Clay's moment is now. As the earth is threatened, so the elegiac appeal of earthenware. Kintsugi gifts its conscious gold to the vessels' almost fatal cracks; such marks betoken survival. We came through. Do our scars bless us?

The photographs hang like leaves in the room's afternoon, an almost stationary flock. The screen curtain breathes slowly. The tension in being lies in navigating the territory between surface and depth. From a great height, we see the countries as constellations of energy; a density of pulses along certain routes, while all around the silent darkness sleeps.

"I am grown old and my memory is not as active as it used to be. When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it had happened or not; but my faculties are decaying now and soon I shall be so I cannot remember

any but the things that never happened. It is sad to go to pieces like this, but we all have to do it."

- Mark Twain from *Autobiography* 1924

13

The last things we do and the last time we do them; in the not knowing when lies their conscious grace. Imagine the pressure - literally momentous - if we knew, and so the moment's gone. Each time an action's undertaken, it closes and initiates at once. There is no truly final action. Memory and dream carry their own weight, texture and heft. They are not the empty coffins of experience.

It is said that we encounter three deaths; the stopping of our heart and breath, our burial or pyre, the last time our name is held in mind. In older, surely wiser ways, and in the 'new' physics, there is only energy, neither created nor destroyed, but transformed (while our bodies' dissolution continues for thousand of years, joining the great throng). We become a part of all we sense. We always were a part, and never were apart.

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.

- Raymond Carver
Late Fragment

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Cover: **Suki Chan**
Individual bees are not conscious but the swarm is
2021 digital C-Type print

Suki Chan *CONSCIOUS*
18 March - 7 May 2022

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