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What he heard

Joshua Lobb

University of Wollongong, jlobb@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

'What he heard' is a creative exploration of Jacob von Uexküll's concept of Umwelt. von Uexküll posits that the earth comprises 'unique worlds with equal completeness' and that 'the first task of Umwelt research is to identify each animal's perceptual cues among the stimuli in its environment and to build up the animal's specific world with them' (von Uexküll 1957, 13). The three animals in the story perceive the world in markedly different ways. The first animal, the dog, perceives his environment as an olfactory space. He configures the world into a series of 'scent lines': the bushland becomes a 'familiar pathway' of action to take and obstacles to avoid (von Uexküll 1957, 50). The second animal, the human, follows a different line of perception. His 'relations of meaning' (von Uexküll 1957, 40) create an atmosphere based on his own psyche, even his own physicality. Trees become emaciated bones; roots become knuckles. Most importantly, the sounds of the bush become human breath and human agony. This presentation of the human Umwelt is influenced by current philosophical attempts to describe our world: in particular, the notion of the Anthropocene. Stiegler notes that the human vision of the Anthropocene is 'global', a discourse of domination over our environment. It is, he writes, 'a massive and high-speed process ... operating on a planetary scale' (Stiegler 2015, 6). Beck confirms this: he writes that the identification of 'our' time as Anthropocene in some ways an attempt to claim the earth as an artefact of human 'posterity' (Beck 2014, 405). Even though there may be 'little time to ponder upon death', there is 'time enough to report the fact' (Beck 2014, 406). In other words, we are at least able to create a story about ourselves, even if it is a story about a cry of anguish and fear. The third animal's Umwelt, hidden until the end of the story, presents a different 'relationship between a living subject and its object' (von Uexküll 1957, 11). Oblivious to the human psyche, the animal nevertheless takes human experiences and incorporates them into his own melody. The human vision of the Anthropocene may be global, but there may be another ways to engage with the world, 'manifold and varied as the animals themselves' (von Uexküll 1957, 5).

What he heard

Joshua Lobb

University of Wollongong

Abstract: *‘What he heard’ is a creative exploration of Jacob von Uexküll’s concept of Umwelt. von Uexküll posits that the earth comprises ‘unique worlds with equal completeness’ and that ‘the first task of Umwelt research is to identify each animal’s perceptual cues among the stimuli in its environment and to build up the animal’s specific world with them’ (von Uexküll 1957, 13). The three animals in the story perceive the world in markedly different ways.*

The first animal, the dog, perceives his environment as an olfactory space. He configures the world into a series of ‘scent lines’: the bushland becomes a ‘familiar pathway’ of action to take and obstacles to avoid (von Uexküll 1957, 50).

The second animal, the human, follows a different line of perception. His ‘relations of meaning’ (von Uexküll 1957, 40) create an atmosphere based on his own psyche, even his own physicality. Trees become emaciated bones; roots become knuckles. Most importantly, the sounds of the bush become human breath and human agony. This presentation of the human Umwelt is influenced by current philosophical attempts to describe our world: in particular, the notion of the Anthropocene. Stiegler notes that the human vision of the Anthropocene is ‘global’, a discourse of domination over our environment. It is, he writes, ‘a massive and high-speed process...operating on a planetary scale’ (Stiegler 2015, 6). Beck confirms this: he writes that the identification of ‘our’ time as Anthropocene in some ways an attempt to claim the earth as an artefact of human ‘posterity’ (Beck 2014, 405). Even though there may be ‘little time to ponder upon death’, there is ‘time enough to report the fact’ (Beck 2014, 406). In other words, we are at least able to create a story about ourselves, even if it is a story about a cry of anguish and fear.

The third animal’s Umwelt, hidden until the end of the story, presents a different ‘relationship between a living subject and its object’ (von Uexküll 1957, 11). Oblivious to the human psyche, the animal nevertheless takes human experiences and incorporates them into his own melody. The human vision of the Anthropocene may be global, but there may be another ways to engage with the world, ‘manifold and varied as the animals themselves’ (von Uexküll 1957, 5).

He was walking with his dog on the domed hills above Wombeyan Caves. They were following a sort-of track along the ridge: made by wombats, probably, or from the last time they'd walked this way. The rise of the ridge was clear of trees, just an occasional bony bush, or quartz boulder unearthing itself from the hill. He stopped and took in the view. The hills across the gorge were thick with grey and khaki trees. In the fuzzy winter light, the trees blended into the charcoal sky. The air was sharp. He trudged on.

The dog was tracing a line of scent with his nose. The thread would wriggle off the wombat track for a moment, then veer back, twine around an ossified rock, or thicken at a clump of grass. The scent was leading the dog — well, the man and the dog — to the eucalypts at the top of the hill. The dog reached the threshold of the trees, looked back insistently, and disappeared into the bush. The man followed.

The broken leaves of the undergrowth crunched underfoot. He was careful to sidestep the knuckles of eucalypt roots. He could hear the dog, still sniffing, in the semi-darkness. He wasn't sure if he was still following the wombat track, or the line of scent, or charting his own way between the thin trees. Their bark was smooth, mostly: lavender-grey with purpling bruises. Every now and then his hand would brush against the rougher, splintery skin of an ironbark. The treetops creaked in the rasping breeze.

And then he heard it. An oozing, matted sound. Plods of noise, like snoring. No, like sobbing. The dog lifted his nose as if the scent had become airborne. The sound was too incoherent to be nearby and yet it felt close, like a heartbeat, thumping. Man and dog stood in the gloom: listening, sniffing. The sobs coagulated the air. Then the sound changed: from sobbing to wailing. No, one long wail. Shrill and jangling, it slapped against his skin. His instinct was to flee, to scamper over the dirt and to leap out into the light of the open hill. It was only the dog's growl and poised upraised paw that made him stay. Whatever was wailing was in pain. It needed his help. He listened to the shriek more carefully. He knew now what it was. The wail was coming from a child.

He stumbled forward, following the call. Although louder than the sobs, the wail seemed further away. Even the dog seemed uncertain of its trajectory: darting first over a termite mound, then scabbling under a thorny bush. He clambered after, ripping his hand on ironbark. The howl persisted. It was always too far away, just beyond the next clutch of trees. It

was definitely a child's voice. A girl, maybe? Was she lost? Had she tripped in the darkness and broken a bone? Where had she come from? There were no houses nearby. His nearest neighbours were on the ridge across the gorge. There were no children for miles. The only other structure was the old schoolhouse, a gold-rush structure, just over the ridge. But that had been abandoned years ago, a half-collapsed shell of pockmarked stone. The wail intensified: a long sireny scream of agony. He tumbled over a protruding rock. The thump of his knee in the dirt scattered the dry leaves. He lay on the earth, trying to catch his breath. The dog trotted back, licked his dusty face. He listened to the bawling cry in the distance. Yes, it was definitely coming from the schoolhouse.

He made his way through the talon-scratched trees, listening to the lament of the child. It was difficult to know what it wanted. Sometimes it sounded like it was pleading, begging for something, or for something to stop. Sometimes it was the sound of deep sadness, the clamour of loneliness, the ache of fear. The wail was as abandoned as the schoolhouse, as beaten as the fallen stones.

And there it was. The ruined schoolhouse. On the edge of the copse of trees, looking out over the ridge into the expansive gorge. The wail was definitely coming from inside: sharp and urgent, yearning and terrified. He was compelled to step through the hungry space where a door used to be. But the dog hung back, shivering.

It was a cramped, shadowy space. Most of the rusty corrugated roof was still there, but there was a large gap above the doorway through which he could see the blackening sky. The floorboards had rotted, or had been carted away for firewood. The ground was gravelly. In the doorway, the dog gave a few furtive sniffs but did not come in.

There was nothing there. Even the wail had stopped.

Then, just as they were about to turn, it began again, sharp and stinging. It was coming from one of the dingy corners. He couldn't move towards it. He wanted to call out to it, but his throat had seized and his saliva curdled.

Then he saw the creature stepping out of the darkness.

It was beautiful. The arc of downy back was cinnamon and silver, with a streak of charcoal following the line of the wing. It was a lyrebird. The tail was down, coiled under a round torso, but as the bird poked forward, the tail fanned upwards, forming a halo of grey and stripy brown. The lyrebird gave a tilt of the head, the beak opened, and the wailing noise warbled out. The bird paused, a lidless eye staring at the intruder. Then, tilting the head the other way, the beak opened and the peep of a whipbird syrped out. The man knew that lyrebirds were imitators, that they mimicked the sounds of kookaburras and cameras and chainsaws. But he'd never heard it in such close quarters. The bird seemed eager to perform. The beak produced another whipbird, then the wail, then the murmur of a currawong. Then, the creature returned to the sound he'd first heard through the trees: the murky, sobbing sound. The lyrebird gave three short sobs. Then another three. Then the wail again. The sound now seemed melodious: a warm line of music echoing in the stone room.

The man watched and listened for a few minutes, mesmerized by the tiny beak opening and shutting, the quiver of the bird's throat. Then he tiptoed out of the ruined building. The dog, tail down, clung to his leg. The man offered his hand to the dog. The dog licked and wagged.

They found their way through the bush. They could still hear the wail in the distance, fading away. It was almost comforting. They stepped out of the bushland on his side of the ridge. It was now night and a few stars were surfacing from the blue-black sky. He took in the night, still thinking of the beauty of the bird, and the melody of the wail.

Then he realised. Lyrebirds are mimickers. They hear the shriek of a chainsaw in the bush, or the buzz of a tourists' camera: they listen, and repeat. But there has to be a logger or a tourist. The noise must be made by someone. As he made his way down the ridge, he pondered on this. There must have been a child in pain, once. Someone, at some time, made that coagulating wail. But when? And how long ago?

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There's an epilogue to this story, one that has nothing to do with the man or the dog. The lyrebird is scratching the dirt in the gravelly corner. He lifts his head. His larynx vibrates. Out of his beak comes three short notes. The second is microtonally higher than the first and third. This is followed by a long high trill. The noise he is making is not full of sadness or pain. The lyrebird is not thinking about lost or abused children. His head pivots. The dwindling light points out a speck in the dirt. The lyrebird pecks and then he sings his song again.

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