

“How do we know? ... No human has ever been at the surface of a star... Yet we see those cold dots in our sky and know that we are looking at the white-hot surfaces of distant nuclear furnaces. Such ideas do not create themselves, nor can they be mechanically derived from anything: they have to be guessed.”¹

David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations That Transform the World*

In February 2017 when Lucy McKenna’s exhibition *Astronomical Mashup* opens at The Lab, Dublin, Mars will just be visible in the night sky. It can be seen, when things are clear and bright, as a small twinkling dot. The red planet will appear just after the sun sets and hang there, tentatively, above and between a waning moon and the slightly brighter light of Venus, the Evening Star. Its presence is relatively modest but it’s not too hard to spot if you know where and how to look.

Mars drifts in and out of view at various times and with different rhythms. Over two or so years it gets closer and brighter and then fades. 2018 will be its bright time again. But the push and pull of its prominence is also reflected in the waxing and waning of the legibility of Mars as a metaphor. At various times it has served as a tabular rasa that bears the marks of the fantasies and anxieties that are projected onto its implacable red surface. So, despite its distance and fluctuating visibility, how or what we think of Mars gives us another way of thinking of how or what we think about ourselves, individually and collectively.

Frequently it becomes the focus of apprehension. In *War of the Worlds*, for example, HG Wells used the alien invaders to express a particularly British unease over colonialism at the end of the 19th century. That this century had already seen challenges to generations-old understandings of what a human is from both Darwinism and the technological developments of the industrial revolution can only have contributed to the general sense of existential dread that Mars embodied. The various updates of Wells’ story have subsequently used the planet as a screen to project social fears onto. Orson Welles’ radio broadcast of 1938 gave voice to American concerns over the coming war; whilst in 1953 these fears were now directed at Communism and nuclear annihilation via the Byron Haskin directed movie. Elon Musk is currently fixated with Mars as a response to a contemporary concern that is as old as humanity: that the world is about to end. Just a few months ago he launched his current bid for his company SpaceX to “make life interplanetary” and have humans on Mars by 2022.² His stark warning was as apocalyptic as anything found in science fiction. Humanity faces, he argues: “two fundamental paths ... One is that we stay on Earth forever and then there will be an inevitable extinction event ... The alternative is to become a spacefaring civilization, and a multi-planetary species.”² There is a theme that is woven throughout all of

¹ David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations That Transform the World*, (Penguin Books, 2011), p. 3

² Elon Musk, keynote speech at the International Astronautical Congress in Guadalajara, Mexico, (Tue. Sept 27th Sept. 2016)

these different expressions of culturally and historic specific anxiety: Mars is a metaphor for human finitude. That is, Mars offers a narrative counterpoint to the Copernican Revolution by which the centrality of humans in the cosmos was irreversibly revoked.

David Bowie was someone else drawn into space and frequently within the metaphorical orbit of Mars. Space appears throughout his entire career not only being the home of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars but also the location from where he sings the heartbreaking plea of: “Look up here, I’m in heaven” from his final album *Blackstar*. But for him space travel was less a way to give voice to collective panic but rather a means to imagine a journey of isolation, introspection and creativity. In 2002 he gave this explanation for his preoccupation with space travel:

“Well, it’s an interior dialogue that you manifest physically. It’s my little inner space, isn’t it, writ large. I wouldn’t dream of getting on a spaceship, it’d scare the shit out of me...I’ve absolutely no interest or ambition to go into space whatsoever. I’m scared going down the end of the garden.”³

His Major Tom of *Space Oddity* is cut adrift, helpless and lonely in his “tin-can” where “planet Earth is blue and there’s nothing I can do.” Whilst his *Life of Mars* begins with the “goddawful small affair” of the “girl with the mousy hair” who seems isolated in a parochial landscape as she “walks through her sunken dream.”

Like McKenna, Bowie recognised the potential of travelling beyond the horizon of the earth to work as a metaphor for aesthetic exploration. But there is another reason Bowie is a relevant reference point here. It’s suggested by the title: *Astronomical Mashup*. His album *Hunky Dory* had been influenced by William Burroughs and the cut-up technique for writing that Burroughs worked on with Brion Gysin. The oblique lyrics to *Life on Mars* are a product of this technique lending snippets that feel like they were drawn from everyday newspaper reports an otherworldly, alien poetry. In an interview between Bowie and Burroughs for *Rolling Stone Magazine* (1974) Burroughs explained the creative and aesthetic seduction of space:

“You see, the advent of the space age and the possibility of exploring galaxies and contacting alien life forms poses an urgent necessity for radically new solutions. We will be considering only non-chemical methods with the emphasis placed on combination, synthesis, interaction and rotation of methods now being used in the East and West, together with methods that are not at present being used to extend awareness or increase human potentials.”⁴

Martian themes appear throughout *Astronomical Mashup*. Data from Google searches on Mars and extra-terrestrial life have been visualised by the artist and printed on wallpaper. Here the patterns that accompany words like “NASA”, “Mars Rover” “SETI Institute” reveal a collective fascination with the mechanics

³ John Wilson talks to David Bowie, *Front Row* (BBC Radio 4: June, 2002), available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0160y7f> (accessed 10th Feb. 2017)

⁴ Craig Copetas, “Beat Godfather Meets Glitter Mainman: William Burroughs, say hello to David Bowie”, *Rolling Stone*, (Feb 28, 1974)

and institutions of space travel. But look again and you can see some of the weirder concerns of the global collective subconscious reflected in searches for: “UFO”; “Mars Bigfoot” and “NASA finds bible on Mars.” Elsewhere other beautiful images are created from observing Pleiades a star cluster 444 light years away. Using anachronistic techniques at the Armagh Observatory the skeins of starlight have been captured on exquisite glass globes. Here the almost unthinkable vastness of space is collapsed into something delicate. The unimaginable becomes tangible; the cosmic hand-held.

One starting point for the exhibition is the Irish Astronomer Charles E. Burton who McKenna has described as being in a kind of collaboration with. Burton undertook exhaustive visual observations of Mars and was the first person to see the canals there in the 19th Century. If they are collaborating in a type of preposterous, posthumous relationship then it is by virtue of a shared sense of fascination in both the scientific and aesthetic potential of the red planet. Another starting point is *War of the Worlds* where Wells described a Red Weed from Mars colonising and choking the English landscape. Here its twisted forms have been re-imagined as an intricate mass that hangs over and threatens to overwhelm the other work. In juxtaposing Burton and Wells McKenna suggests that the narratives generated by science and fiction might sometimes overlap. Her stated method of “mashup” is in “putting things together that don’t necessarily go together... and using systems in a wrong way to see what happens” in order to explore: “how the universe can reveal itself in weird and beautiful ways.” If art and science do share a sensibility, if not a method, then it’s in the search for underlying structure, meaning and systems or what the philosopher Nelson Goodman called *Ways of Worldmaking*.⁵

For McKenna Mars is sublime. It is a focus of amazement and wonder. It becomes equally a synecdoche for the cosmos and a metaphor for a work of art. The practices of cosmology and art both provide ways of thinking about the world and our place in it which are, at heart, aesthetic. And yet the reason that Mars is such a potent metaphor is that it, ultimately, lies beyond our horizon. It pulls us towards its atmosphere and surface, but threatens to kill us should we ever arrive. This is its beautiful but terrifying affect. Paradoxically, it is also not a metaphor at all but an implacable, mesmerizing lump of rock that for all our dreams and plans no human has set foot on. It has its own orbit with its own alien systems and it hangs there in the sky like an intergalactic sculpture without a plinth.

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www.alittletagend.blogspot.com

www.thelab.ie

⁵ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, (Hackett Publishing Company, 1978)