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Beastly Effects: Soundscapes in Nigel Kneale's Beasts (1976)

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Nigel Kneale's *Beasts* is a mostly overlooked short telefantasy series, produced and broadcast by ATV in 1976. Finally gaining a DVD release after over 30 years in the wilderness, the limitations of the low budget productions are evident, but they are transcended by the strength of the performances, the downright weirdness of the stories, and their unsettling ambience. Notably, it's the use of sound which is integral to creating the genuine sense of menace which is present in *Beasts*. Almost every episode is reliant on sound effects, rather than music score, in order to generate disquiet.

This paper then will focus on the importance of sound in *Beasts*. It will also contextualise the series in relation to two other earlier TV works written by Kneale for the BBC - *Quatermass and the Pit* and *The Stone Tape* – by showing how sound was always a crucial element in making Kneale's vision successful.

Kneale's contribution to telefantasy cannot be underestimated. An extremely prolific writer, he is probably best remembered as the creator of Professor Bernard Quatermass and the groundbreaking BBC TV serials from the 1950s. Catherine Johnson in her book *Telefantasy* writes about the Quatermass productions, noting that “horror and fantasy plays were seen to offer the potential for stylistic innovation.” Although Johnson goes on to consider the aesthetic potential of TV during this period and claims, quite rightly, that the Quatermass productions changed the TV aesthetic by creating spectacle and moving away from the intimate nature of the medium, surprisingly she does not include any discussion of sound. Yet, this is one of the most important elements of Quatermass and the Pit – prefiguring how crucial sound would be for *The Stone Tape* and later *Beasts*.

Quatermass and the Pit of course, revolves around the discovery of an alien spacecraft and how the unearthing of its long dead Martian occupants triggers a return to their hive mentality, programmed into humans millions of years earlier. The serial made extensive use of sound effects and electronic music in order to create its creepy and disturbing atmosphere. The soundtrack was created by the newly formed BBC Radiophonic Workshop and became a renowned piece of work establishing their reputation. Sound becomes increasingly important as the serial progresses – key moments being the use of the borazon drill on the craft which makes no impression, but provokes intense vibrations which affect those nearby; the sound of the earth moving under the workman Sladdern's feet; the craft itself beginning to glow and vibrate; and most chillingly of all the screams and howls of animals and humans being killed in the streets, off-screen, during the return of the Martian wild hunt. None of these scenes would be as effective without the superb soundscape created by the Radiophonic Workshop, as much of the unsettling tone of the series is generated by the electronically created sounds of throbbing, humming, and droning.

Similarly, The Stone Tape , a scientific ghost story, uses sound effects as its primary weapon for generating scares. It not only features sound effects by the Radiophonic Workshop as a key aesthetic device, but sound is also a fundamental element of the plot itself. Tape has been pronounced dead by Peter, the head of a team attempting to create a new recording medium. Their experiments are being carried out in an old mansion house and it soon becomes apparent that it's haunted . As events run their course it's notable that there is a layering up of sound details both narratively and aesthetically, for example: the initial electronic bleeps, groans and echoes during the credits; Peter's attempt to record the sound of the ghostly footsteps and screams as a “mass of data”; the fact that the hauntings have been mostly sound related; the old room bombarded with high frequency electronic sound resulting in intense vibrations; and of course, the highly imaginative concept of the “stone tape” itself – that the stone walls themselves have somehow recorded past events and then effectively “play back” the sounds and images through anyone who

happens to be in the room. This combination of sound at the core of the plot, and sound as an aesthetic device, is extremely effective.

Similarly, *Beasts* utilises sound effects in a highly imaginative and effective way. Each story has a beastly angle – *What Big Eyes* is about a man attempting to turn himself into a wolf; *The Dummy* features an actor's descent into madness after being typecast as a movie monster; *Buddyboy* revolves around a ghostly dolphin; *Special Offer* charts a girl's infatuation with her supermarket manager resulting in telekinetic outbursts; the discovery of a weird mummified creature in the walls of a house leads to an unforgettable ending in *Baby*; and a horde of super rats invade a middle class couple's rural home in *During Barty's Party*.

Beasts is a perfect example of the necessity of invention borne out of a low budget. Shooting on video which has a lack of depth and presents a rather flat image, serves to create the claustrophobic feel of the series, which is further reinforced by the use of limited sets and a small cast of actors. However, the aspect of *Beasts* which I find most interesting of all is the use of sound. Sound has a key role to play in the creation of mood, tone, and atmosphere on-screen, as well as being able to suggest horrors that lie mostly unseen and off-screen – and of course, it is usually cheaper to create sound as opposed to visual effects. In regard to *Beasts* I am not going to try and explain HOW the sound effects were created, but rather to comment on how the soundscapes are an integral part of the series, and the way in which the sound effects are a key device for both disturbing and scaring the audience.

Although *During Barty's Party* and *Baby* place most emphasis on sound as a terror technique, the other episodes also take advantage of the power of sound in reinforcing or enhancing the strange events taking place. Indeed the importance of sound is apparent when we consider the opening sequence of each episode, wherein Kneale's concept of beastly behaviour, from many of the

characters, as well as the actual beasts themselves, is flagged up immediately by what we hear and see. In *What Big Eyes* the first sound is the chatter of an unseen chimpanzee, before the camera pans across to a caged cheetah, growling as the letters B-E-A-S-T-S appear on screen. As the story unfolds all is not as it seems – a man does NOT actually turn himself into a wolf, despite the implication throughout, and yet the end credits are underscored by the faint howling of a wolf, the use of sound thereby maintaining the ambiguity of the story.

In *The Dummy*, the device of silence is as important as sound. The credits simply show Clive Boyd, having his monster costume – known as *The Dummy* - touched up with snot and slime, as the letters of BEASTS appear on screen. There is no music and barely a sound. Boyd is a tortured soul who eventually loses his sanity and actually becomes *The Dummy*. This loss of identity is presented most effectively through his loss of speech, as well as the deafening silence in the evacuated studio set before he begins to growl, snarl and hiss as he did when playing *The Dummy* on film. Ultimately, Boyd becomes one with the monstrous *Dummy* and even when he finally removes the costume and strangles his rival, he maintains the inhuman sounds of the eponymous beast. After Boyd is led away by the police, the end credits, as in most of the episodes, appear over silence.

Buddyboy, is the only episode to use music, but the score is presented in such a way that it functions more as sound effect. Again the opening credits are significant – an image of dolphins swimming is underscored with fractured, unsettling, atonal music played on woodwind, brass, plucked strings, marimba, percussion, and an echoing vibraphone. As the title *Beasts* appears on screen the dischordant music continues, it is overlaid with dolphin sounds – familiar whistles and clicks – but made strange by using percussion, strings and electronics to mimic the sounds. This opening sets a tone which is maintained throughout. The notion of a ghostly dolphin haunting his captor, amongst others, could be laughed off as silly, and yet the score used as soundscape helps to make it an

extremely effective and eerie tale. As dolphins are noted for their sensitivity to sound, it is even more appropriate that the score should be used in this way, and throughout *Buddyboy*, the music and the whistles and clicks, are used to suggest the presence of the ghost in the abandoned dolphinarium and elsewhere. Rather than attempting to present some sort of ghostly figure using dodgy visual effects – the sound and music serves the purpose much better.

Special Offer may be considered equally bizarre and yet, like *Buddyboy*, it manages to work due to an excellent performance by a young Pauline Quirke, and its clever use of sound. As the title *Beasts* appears on a blank screen, all we can hear is a sort of scurrying and scratching which sounds like a small animal inside a box. It echoes loudly until we see a shot of a supermarket mascot, *Briteway Billy* - a stylised cartoon drawing of a squirrel. This is a distinctive way of foretelling what is to come – an effective technique used in each episode. Plain, clumsy Noreen works at *Briteway's* mini-market and is infatuated with the store's manager, Mr Grimley. Grimley has no time for Noreen, and as she becomes more frustrated due to his flirting with another checkout assistant, she creates, as it were, a telekinetic manifestation of *Briteway Billy*. Each time “Billy” is about to appear, Noreen's frustrations are represented as a loud humming sound before the telekinetic outburst. This is followed by the sound of tiny footsteps, scratching and nibbling as “Billy” makes his presence felt! As Noreen's obsession grows, so does the havoc that her telekinesis causes – bottles burst, cereal boxes, sugar bags and frozen peas explode, and cans leap from shelves. Eventually, after Noreen is sacked, she unleashes her anger at Grimley one last time, and he is battered senseless by everything in the store and then the end credits roll silently. Although there are visual effects at work here, yet again it is sound which functions to create a truly believable beast!

Just as these episodes begin with a conspiratorial nod towards the premise of the story, similarly the opening of *Baby* gives an indication of the horrors to follow. Again sound takes precedence over image - the sound of a crow cawing loudly accompanying a shot of addled birds eggs on the roof of

an old farmhouse. The letters B-E-A-S-T-S appear one at a time on screen, each letter accompanied by a loud caw – reiterating the title as well as the importance of the sound. This cawing of crows – which by the way are never seen – is ever present in the background. Considering that the collective noun for a group of crows is 'a murder', and crows have also been regarded historically as 'harbingers of death', this use of the cawing sound is immediately unsettling, and it becomes progressively more so as the story unfolds.

Baby revolves around a young couple – Jo, who is pregnant, and her husband Peter, a vet. They have just moved from the city to the countryside for Peter's new job. The focus of the story however, is the discovery of a weird, mummified creature in the wall – seemingly a monstrously deformed baby animal. The discovery confirms Jo's misgivings about the move - something is clearly not right. Their cat runs off howling as soon as he is released in the farmhouse, the surrounding fields are empty because of cattle brucellosis (which causes spontaneous abortion), and one of the builders tells Jo that she should burn the creature, as a thing like that “could only have bad purpose”, although Peter foolishly hides it in the half-finished nursery room unbeknown to Jo.

When Jo tries to find the cat, she discovers a stagnant pond in the woods. Imagining that an object in the water is the cat's body, she leans to check. A dark shadow crosses the water coupled with a frightening sound – a deep cawing noise, but louder, more guttural, and certainly unnatural. Terrified, she runs away, but the horrible sound seems to pursue her.

Afterwards Jo keeps hearing noises inside and outside the house – she also sees the empty rocking chair moving in the living room and catches a glimpse of a black robed figure moving up the stairs. The overall atmosphere is cloying and heavy, and we sympathise with Jo's unease. The sound functions to create unbearable tension, because so far nothing has really been revealed, but we can feel that something is wrong.

The eventual revelation in *Baby* is notorious in the minds of those who did actually see it in 1976, and with good reason! One night, hearing something moving in the nursery next door, Jo gets up to check on the noise. Finding the cupboard door open, where Peter had hidden the mummified body, she sees a torn bag on the floor. Slowly descending the stairs, she hears a faint sort of suckling sound. Turning towards the rocking chair in the living room the full horror is unveiled – a black clothed, hooded figure, with a dark face and sightless eyes, which sits suckling the now animate, revolting creature from the wall. As Jo screams, the small creature mewls at her and the dark figure opens its mouth, emitting its guttural caw. Indeed, it's more like a grim, wordless incantation – remarkably appropriate considering that it's now apparent that this is an ancient witch and its revolting familiar. As Jo continues to scream and cry she clutches at her stomach and collapses on the floor. The addled eggs, the brucellosis, the hideous 'baby' familiar from the wall were all omens foretelling this terrifying conclusion– nothing normal can be born here. As the camera pans across to the now empty rocking chair, the end credits roll in ominous silence.

Last, but certainly not least, *During Barty's Party* revolves around the middle class Truscott's rural home being invaded by rats, and was apparently inspired by Hitchcock's film *The Birds*. Although it is easy to see the resemblance – nature turning the tables on humankind – there is a notable difference due to the low budget. Hitchcock had the budget for special visual effects to show the bird attacks, whereas Kneale's story relies on sound effects to generate terror. However, Elisabeth Weiss (*The Silent Scream: Alfred Hitchcock's Soundtracks*) has noted that, in fact, sound is most important in *The Birds*, functioning as a form of “aural intrusion” . This ensures that the vulnerability of the human community is emphasised by the lack of music score and a playing up of the sound elements. Weiss also notes that in *The Birds*, “the enemy is most threatening when invisible” and this is certainly the case in *During Barty's Party*. Like the other episodes, the opening credits are significant – shots of a seemingly abandoned car and a close-up of a skull

keyring are followed by screams emanating from a nearby field. Cut to a woman awaking from a nightmare as she hears the screams in the distance. Unsettled by the nightmare, as well as something else in the house, she plays Lulu's pop record 'Shout' extremely loudly – the word Beasts appears on screen. As the episode progresses, the word 'Shout' is revealed as prescient, as well as the volume level it is played at. The build up is slow – a single rat scratching under the floorboards, then two, making the aural intrusion more insistent – a gradual layering up of sound details. The different timbres of scratching, scabbling, gnawing, and squealing intensify until the sheer level of sound indicates that an entire rat colony has invaded the space. Approximating a music score, the dynamic range shifts from the mere irritation of one rat scratching in pianissimo, to the fortissimo explosion of noise made by seemingly hundreds of rats. This highly sophisticated use of sound raises the tension to a fever pitch, and yet, not one rat is ever seen! The incessant noise is juxtaposed with the titular 'Barty's Party' radio show playing inappropriately light hearted pop music and jokingly ruminating on reports of a migration of “super rats” in the countryside. During the climax, the noise recedes as the Truscott's neighbours return from an evening out. Believing the rats have left as suddenly as they arrived, the couple are hugely relieved. But, as they shout to the neighbours, a wave of off-screen sound – the squealing and rushing of hundreds of small, furry bodies – is punctuated by screams as the neighbours are attacked. The rats then return to the Truscott's to finish them off, as Barty's Party blares obliviously on the radio.

Beasts then, was able to use its low budget to its advantage. The combination of Nigel Kneale's remarkable imagination and the frequently inspired and inventive use of sound, have ensured the series a well deserved place in the history of British telefantasy.

