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Ghosts of The Machine:

Mysticism, Technology and Resistance in the Work Of Deborah Stratman

In the opening shot of Deborah Stratman's *The Name is Not The Thing Named* (2012), the camera drifts slowly down a river towards an oncoming tunnel. As we enter the tunnel, the image becomes completely engulfed by darkness. Sirens are sounded somewhere far in the distance. Suddenly, we are thrown back to the beginning of the sequence as it repeats again and again in loop. We are forced to relive this ominous descent into the abyss of nothingness. Every time we expect to emerge on the other side of the tunnel, we are placed back at the beginning. Just as we begin to accept this endless cycle, the film cuts to another image, liberating us from this experience and forcing us to question our own expectations. This sequence is highly illustrative of Stratman's radical worldview and artistic practice. Stratman typically conceptualizes her ideas in geometric form. In this sequence we are presented with a few shapes and geometric patterns which commonly recur in her work. The first one being a *loop*. The looping form represents a cycle, a circular movement that Stratman commonly refers as a *circuit*. Stratman likens the loop to a state of paranoia; constant thoughts of fear and doubt cycling endlessly with no endpoint or resolution. This metaphor can also be understood in terms of non-linear time, both on a micro and macro-cosmic scale. This points to a larger theme in her work; cyclical and histories. In this sense, the looping

form can be seen as a symbol of oppression, both psychological and political. It represents the cycles of power and abuse which repeat themselves ad infinitum over centuries, and in turn it demonstrates how these forces are internalized and play out within our own psyche. As the camera enters the tunnel we are presented with another geometric idea. This is not so much a shape as much as it is absence itself, the space that exist between things. The tunnel represents the bridge between two worlds, two planes of existence. If we extend the metaphor of the loop in this case, the other end of the tunnel may represent a liberation from the cycles of oppression and fear. However, in order to attain this state of freedom, we must enter a void; a state of emptiness. Stratman's work invites us to dwell in this undefined nether space that exists between things. This journey can be likened to ideas of nothingness, death and rebirth which have existed in many forms throughout history. It bears connections to the concept of *Samsāra*, the on-going process of death and re-birth, an idea which is fundamental to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. It also has traces of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and it's trajectory of descent and re-ascent. For Stratman, in order to attain true freedom, some kind of transcendence is necessary. The title of the piece itself refers to the gap between reality and language and the failure of language as a tool to describe true experience. The phrase *The Name Is Not the Thing Named* comes from occultist Alister Crowley's 1918 translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. This idea of emptiness is further articulated by this passage of the Tao Te Ching, quoted by Stratman in a 2014 lecture:

“Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;

It is the center hole that makes it useful.

Shape clay into a vessel;

It is the space within that makes it useful.

Cut doors and windows for a room;

It is the holes which make it useful.

Therefore profit comes from what is there;

Usefulness from what is not there.” (Lao Tzu, Chapter 11)

These ideas form the basis of Stratman’s worldview and approach to filmmaking. Cinema, more so than any other medium, has the power to overstimulate the senses. It could be said that the tradition of Hollywood filmmaking embraces this sort of stimulus, where everything is shown and revealed to the viewer. Stratman can be placed within an opposing cinematic tradition, most typified by Robert Bresson, who once said “hide the ideas, but so that people find them. The most important will be the most hidden” (Bresson, 32). In this tradition filmmakers choose to evoke and suggest rather than reveal. Stratman’s films exist within the negative space, within the gaps of knowledge and human understanding. Where other artists may choose fill this void with a mass of material, Stratman chooses to embrace the openness and ambiguity that stems from the state of being *in-between*. This state provides a vantage point for Stratman to view her subjects free of the limitation of conventional systems of thought. Stratman commonly refers to the void or “the interval” in terms of multiple dichotomies. *The gap* could refer to the gap between: time and space, sound and image, reality and perception, virtual and material. Stratman views these distinctions as political problems, and her solution is anarchistic. She chooses to tear down the barriers between them in order to destabilize the focal points of power. Much of her work can be defined by a paradoxical approach which is simultaneously both mystical and rigidly materialistic.

Stratman grounds her esotericism in real spaces and events. For Stratman, politics are metaphysical and vice versa. Her work creates conditions which allow the banal elements of reality to become supernatural, or *hyperreal*. The concept of hyperreality was first articulated by Jean Baudrillard, who declared that “what was once projected psychologically and mentally, what used to be lived out on earth as metaphor, as mental or metaphorical scene, is henceforth projected into reality, without any metaphor at all, into an absolute space which is also that of simulation” (Baudrillard, 128). This could describe the space inhabited by Deborah Stratman’s films. In her vision of the world, the real and imagined share a symbiotic relationship. Landscapes reflect metaphors and ideas, and physical materials reflect our thoughts and desires. Collective memories and histories can be buried within any physical element of the world. Stratman’s methodology involves seeking knowledge by engaging in the most direct possible way with these physical elements. This could mean simply inhabiting an environment, or in the case of her installation work, building the elements which create (or re-create) them.

In her adolescence Deborah Stratman was highly drawn to science and mathematics, and was considering a career in engineering. Yet she became disenchanted with the field when it dawned on her that her skills could inevitably be used by the military for means of violence and oppression (La Rance, 2). This critical vision of technology has informed her approach to filmmaking. Stratman recognizes that any form of technology has the potential to be used as a tool either to enforce and resist systems of power. Her work often re-appropriates military and government technology and by doing so symbolically disarms those forces of power, putting the tools back into the hands of the people. She views both sound and image as tools of this nature, which

have been used historically to silence and oppress resistance. In her work she attempts to disable these methods that allow cinema to seduce, manipulate and enforce ideologies. This often involves disjuncting the sound and the image. She does this by making the viewer actively aware of these forces which quietly seek to control them.

This understanding of power and resistance permeates every element of Stratman's universe. Stratman does not limit her conception of oppression to the social and political realm. Rather she equates political struggle with the greater clash between humankind and the natural world. For Stratman, the laws of nature represent another force of oppression to overcome. Therefore complete liberation can only come from transcending the physical world; going from the real to the supernatural. This commonly takes the form of levitation, which appears in various forms *Immortal*, *Suspended*, *Illinois Parables*, *O'er The Land*. Stratman has a fascination with arcane technology. She views the history of technology in terms of humanities continuous attempts to control and overcome the bonds of nature. Her 2011 short film *These Blazing Stars...* studies humanities fear of and fascination with comets throughout the ages. Images of 15th century astronomers are juxtaposed against NASA jet propulsion footage. The benign act of star-gazing is equated with a desire not only to understand and probe the cosmos, but to battle its potentially threatening forces (i.e incoming comets). Stratman's worldview is more akin to paganism, wherein which nature is neither good nor evil but an entity subject to the same follies and desires as man. Throughout Stratman's work we see both mankind and nature destroying and creating at the same rate, often in tandem with another. It is also very common for her work to collapse and merge different periods of history. This is an act of symbolic resistance against yet another

form of oppression; time. By collapsing different moments in time, she effectively highlights the cycles of history and combats the mythologies of linear progress. Technology provides an interface for humankind to access the infinite. In *These Blazing Stars*, Stratman films the images of 15th century astronomers through a telescope, thereby likening the subject to the act of filmmaking itself. This synchronicity of form and content is common in Stratman's work. In the words of Marshall McLuhan, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 15).

This re-enforces the notion that to "record" anything is to distill a singular moment in time, thereby achieving a form of immortality. Her 2005 film *How Among the Frozen words She Found Some Odd Ones*, adapts a fragment of François Rabelais' 15th epic *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, where "the cries and clashes of a past battle are concretized over the Frozen Sea, their clamour released when they are plucked from the air and melted on the deck of Pantagruel's ship." (La Rance, 3) Rabelais allegory anticipates by a few centuries the act of audio recording, the idea of locking time and sound onto an inanimate object. The themes of time, technology and transcendence are perhaps most clearly delineated in Stratman's 2013 short film *Immortal, Suspended*. The film consists of a single hovering crane shot, shot at the Conservation Department of the Smithsonian Museum of Asian Art. The camera slowly drifts around the room, we hear cut up fragments of audio clips invoking the concept of levitation. As we reach the center of the room the camera stops to hover over *The Thatched Hut of Dreaming of an Immortal*, a 15th century hand scroll from Ming Dynasty China. After this short pause the camera continues its path to the other side of the room and the image slowly fades to black. This film likens the act of preservation to levitation; a suspension of time and

mortality before inevitable onslaught of decay. Stratman's ideas are also mirrored by the cinematic form; the camera movement embodies a feeling of weightlessness and of time suspended.

This calls to mind filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, who sought to eliminate ideas of linear time by making the viewer aware of time's elasticity. He sought to capture time as a single eternal state rather than as a series of chronological moments. In his book *Sculpting in Time* he writes "History is still not Time, nor is evolution. They are both consequences, Time is a state: the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul" (Tarkovsky, 57). In her film *It Will Die Out Of Mind* (2006). Stratman borrows dialogue from Tarkovsky's 1979 Sci-Fi masterpiece *Stalker*. Both Stratman and Tarkovsky are concerned with the nexus and transcendence of art, science, spirituality and politics. The title of Stratman's film comes from a passage of Fyodor Dostoevsky *The Possessed* in which two characters are discussing time after the apocalypse, and one says to another: "Time isn't a thing, it's an idea. It will die out in the mind".

Film, the quintessential time-based media, represents a perfect summation of Stratman's interest in time, technology and human perception. For Stratman, technology is an extension and a reflection of human desire, yet it is also a force within itself, whose influence becomes internalized by the human psyche. In her work the mechanical and organic elements of the world share a symbiotic relationship. It could be said our perception of time as we understand it is a result of technology. Concepts of night and day may be determined by the rise and set of the sun for millennia, yet our perception of time as a series of increments, of hours and seconds comes from technological developments such as hourglasses and pendulums (the pendulum clock, first

developed by Christian Huygens in 1658, became the world's first standard timekeeper and was used for almost 270 years) (Milham, 330). In cinema, filmmakers have the power to manipulate the viewers sense of time by use of editing. In a lecture, Stratman once described the experience of cinema as "totalitarian"; in that she is imposing her own subjective sense of time upon a captive audience.<sup>1</sup> This is why she occasionally opts to make participatory and installation based work, allowing the audience to enter a space freely, bringing their own sense of time to the material.

Stratman's body of work can be connected to a few convergent cinematic schools. While she shares affinities to the ascetic mysticism of Bresson and Tarkovsky, much of her work can be placed within a tradition of the experimental documentary, or more specifically the *essay film*. This tradition can be traced back to Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera*) and Jean Vigo's (*A propos de Nice*) yet was probably most solidified as a form by Left-Bank filmmakers Alain Resnais (*Night and Fog*) and Chris Marker (*La Jetee*). These films do not follow the syntax of conventional documentary and narrative forms, but rather merge elements of the two, allowing ideas to dictate the overall structure. These films seek to pose questions rather than answers. Often this entails blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction by consciously manipulating the reality being filmed. This could mean incorporating staged sequences seamlessly alongside documentary sequences, without clearly signally which is which. Notable examples include Orson Welles *F or Fake* (1975) or Abbas Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1976). These films often hint at their own manipulation, and by doing so reveal the deception inherent to the medium of the documentary. They show us that any conceit of

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture was given in 2014 as part of the Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival, it can be accessed here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eefY0Eg0zcM>

objectivity is by its very nature a lie. This connects to another tradition essential in understanding Stratman's work: experimental ethnography or *entho-fiction*. This style was first pioneered by director Jean Rouch, who applied these same docu-fictional techniques to highlight the fundamental prejudices inherent to the field of cultural anthropology. Rouch shot many of his films in Nigeria, and would often use staged sequences and documentary elements to demonstrate the dynamics of colonialism. Another key influence for Stratman would be the work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, as well the work of her personal mentor James Benning. Both figures possess a similar ability to discover secret histories of power and oppression in landscapes, often conveying these ideas in the simplest possible means. Their approach involves engaging (often in long duration) with physical environments to seek out hidden or distilled metaphors. Particularly in the work of Straub and Huillet, history is seen as an endlessly cyclical force. The past continually haunts the present. Collective memory is equated with personal memory and just as with personal trauma, environments and images may function as a trigger for collective suffering. With these conditions in place, a simple shot of a river or a mountain may invoke a century of genocide. It is clear that Stratman's understanding of memory and landscape has heavily shaped by the work Straub and Huillet. These various influences lay the groundwork for Stratman's cinematic style. In her work we can see traces of the essay films of Marker and Farocki, the ethno-fiction of Rouch, the political landscapes of Benning and Straub, as well as an added layer of paranoia and psychedelic hyperreality that has more affinities with horror, science fiction and cyberpunk.

Stratman's work can be roughly classified in the following categories: essay films/ experimental documentaries shot on 16mm, more conventional documentaries shot on digital video, more staged tonal pieces shot on HD, and sculptural and installation based work. She has said that she adjusts her methodology depending on the idea and the subject matter. More challenging ideas are typically shot on 16mm, as the slow pace of the process gives time to digest and comprehend the material. The work shot on digital video is freer and more spontaneous, allowing for a more intimate relationship with her subjects. Yet her interest in memory, technology, power and resistance permeate her work across the board. Two of her digital video documentaries, *The BLVD* and *Kings Of the Sky*, involve marginalized groups who push themselves to great physical extremes. In both cases, this is equated to an act of political resistance. *The BLVD* chronicles the drag racing culture of Chicago's underprivileged west side. The subject fits in perfectly with Stratman's conception of technology (in this case auto-mechanics) as a means for physical and political transcendence. In *The BLVD*, technology functions as an extension of the human spirit. The film represents the fusion of organic and mechanical elements, a major theme for Stratman. *Kings of the Sky* follows a tightrope artist Adil Hoxur as he and his troupe travel in China's Taklamakan desert. Hoxur and his troupe are part of an oppressed ethnic group known as Uyghurs: a Turkic Muslim people seeking religious and political autonomy. The film is founded on a poignant metaphor; tight-rope walking as the transcendence of both physical and political oppression. As Adil gracefully glides over miraculous heights, he is rising above both the gravitational and political forces that bind him. The subject is very much in keeping with Stratman's ongoing obsession with suspension and levitation.

Stratman is interested in how memories become embedded in time, whether it be physically or abstractly. Much of her work deals with how historical traumas are memorialized in culture by way of rituals and mythologies. This is the subject of film *O'er the Land*, described by Stratman as "A meditation on the milieu of elevated threat addressing national identity, gun culture, wilderness, consumption, patriotism and the possibility of personal transcendence". The film chronicles the various manifestations of military culture in American society. The film interweaves various portraits of American sub-cultures. As typical of Stratman's essay films, the structure is not dictated by a conventional logic but rather by an intuitive flow of ideas. The sections merge seamlessly into one another without any signifier. The film begins with a footage of a Civil War reenactment. Stratman frames each composition with a detached formalism, offsetting the sensationalism of the violence allowing us to recognize the absurdity of the ritual. In one of the film's most jarring moments, the sound of rattle in gunfire is mixed perfectly with the drums of a high school marching band. Suddenly the images cut and we see that we are in a stadium watching a high school football game. This subtle manipulation of sound points to things. Firstly, we are forced to understand the two images in connection to one another; to see cultural phenomenon football as another ritual of military violence. Secondly, become aware of the power of sound to manipulate our perceptions. Sound is decentralized and therefore stripped of its authoritarian power. This is a very important idea for Stratman and something that she continuously returns to in her work. The film continues by juxtaposing various forms of violence (real and re-acted) with the more banal forces of American life. Through these images we are invited to complete the competing tandem forces of destruction: humanity, technology

and nature. We are shown gun fanatics firing high powered automatic rifles through a dense forest. The bullets ripple across the surface of a swamp, bombs burst and emit lush plumes of smoke into the air. This is edited alongside images of firefighters extinguishing a wildfire, which is further complicated by the end of the film when we are shown what appear to be arsonists igniting flame throwers. In these sequences, all of the elements are in play. Human destruction becomes indistinguishable from the earth's natural purge (wildfires), and technology functions as the intermediate for these struggles. From this chaos comes an undeniable beauty.

This paradoxical conception of natural destruction reinforced in Stratman's in her 2014 installation *The Swallows* which she converted a gallery into a museum of sinkholes. Sinkholes, (the sudden collapse and erosion of the earth) like the fire in *O'er The Land* can occur both naturally and artificially. Sinkholes are usually caused by the chemical dissolution of carbonate rock known as the *karst process*, yet can also occur as a result of groundwater pumping, construction projects, sewer pipe collapses or main breaks (Lard & Hobson, 23). This connects to Stratman's interest in geothermal energy, the energy stored within the various layers of the earth. Like in the looping descent of *The Name is Not the Thing Named*, life and death are blurred as are destruction and creation.

Amongst the various scenes of ritualized violence in *O'er The Land*, two separate sequences disrupt this pattern and re-enforce the film's central themes. One of the segments focuses on a border patrol unit along the southern border of the United States. We see images of a craning surveillance camera hovering over a river stream, we see patrol officers pacing back and forth alongside the border. A voice (presumably

an officer) explains the various functions of the surveillance technology, which detect subtle shifts in heat and movement with astonishing accuracy. This sequence serves to highlight the paradoxical ideas of freedom, safety and fear which permeate American culture. The various rituals continually assert the mythology of “American values”: freedom and independence. They attempt to continually replay manifest destiny, the basis of American mythology. Yet this idea of freedom is negated by the ominous presence of state authority, surveillance and border control. By sequencing the film in such a way, Stratman reveals the underlying hypocrisy of the American ethos. The film presents an image of Americans who are undisturbed by guns and explosives yet live in fear of an abstract enemy (immigrants, terrorism). This fear gives way to a complacent ideology which allows the state to further increase its authority. Stratman also offers us a different, more abstract view of freedom. This occurs half way through the film when we are told (in his own words) the story of Col. William Rankin, who was forced-ejected from his F8U fighter jet at 48,000 feet, and was subsequently caught in a massive thunderstorm. The wind was so powerful that he was suspended in the air for 45 minutes before his inevitable descent, which he miraculously survived. In this story, Rankin is failed by the technology which is supposed to enable his freedom, yet from this he is forced to experience a true freedom; a freedom from the laws of nature; a transcendence of death. This returns us to Stratman’s continual metaphor, spiritual, political and physical transcendence in the form of levitation.

For Stratman, surveillance represents the ultimate example of how moving image technology can be used to assert power and control. The paradoxical forces of fear and safety occupy the focus of Stratman’s film *In Order Not To Be Here* (2005). Stratman is

particularly interested in how these forces manifest themselves within different environments. Here Stratman turns her lens on white-collar suburbia, which in its very architecture, represents the ultimate symbol of safety and comfort. Yet upon further probing she reveals the cycles of fear and paranoia produced by these environments. She begins the film with found footage, shot aerially from a helicopter of two suspects being apprehended by the police. The footage is shot with a thermal camera adds to the feeling of paranoia. Thermal camera's presents the idea that technology can overcome the basic laws of time and nature by turning night into day. After this sequence we are shown a series of suburban and corporate landscapes. These images are shot at night and are almost completely devoid of human presence. The compositions are fixed, offering a neutral perspective. As the droning soundtrack waxes and wanes, these seemingly banal environments become increasingly ominous and menacing. We begin to doubt our role as passive observers and as the landscapes become cold and alien, we are slowly made to feel like an unwelcome intruder. We are briefly shown an image of a young girl sleeping inside a suburban home. Our voyeuristic guilt is echoed by the constant lingering presence of surveillance. As the film continues, we see different forms of surveillance technology. A cop car casually drives by, then suddenly we are shown slow motion granulated footage of a police attack dog. This violent imagery is juxtaposed with the following shot: a surveillance camera slowly panning on it's axis. Stratman toys with our notions of fear and safety and by doing so demonstrates the cycles of paranoia. By presenting the hollowness of 21st century comfort, she evokes a feeling of detachment and alienation. However when this alienation occurs, forces that allow for comfort become the source of our fear. The final sequence is meant to echo

the opening, except this time the footage is shot and staged by Stratman. An aerial, thermal camera follows a man as he runs frantically through the landscape of suburbia. We are not given any context. He appears to be running from something, perhaps he has done something horribly wrong. Yet, like in a Hitchcock film, we can't help but root for him as he successfully escapes authority. Almost every Stratman film follows the same basic pattern: cycles of oppression and at some point, a hope for transcendence. In this case the transcendence is not levitation but in fact the opposite. The running man dives into a river, escaping the banality of suburbia and immersing himself in the organic elements of the earth. By doing so he escapes the forces of authority and oppression.

In *In Order Not To Be Here*, the audio oscillates between found recordings, radio frequencies and composer Kevin Drumm's grinding, droning soundtrack. This creates overwhelming sensory experience which truly evokes an altered or paranoid state of consciousness. Stratman uses sound design very sparingly, yet when she does she employs it with an awareness of its awesome power. For Stratman, sound is the great manipulator. Sound, more so than image, grips our imagination and controls our emotions. Much of its effectiveness lies in its covertness. When watching a film, one is often so pre-occupied with the image and content that we take the sound for granted, so much so that often our brain gets tricked into conforming what we hear to what we are shown. Stratman is interested how sound is used as a form of both emotional and political control, and by subverting the sound/image relationship she symbolically resists these forces of power. This is perhaps demonstrated most succinctly in her 2012 short film *A Village, Silenced*. The film appropriates a fragment of Humphrey Jennings 1943

propaganda film *The Silent Village*. The original sequence (staged by Jennings using real Welsh coal miners) re-enacts the Nazi invasion of a Czech mining village. A car bearing massive siren blares violently as it drives through the town. We see the villagers come to halt as they are entranced and silence with fear of their own annihilation. Stratman lets this 3 minute segment play out as is. It then jumps back to the beginning and plays again, except this time the image is silent. By doing this she demonstrates how sound is used as a mode of social control and effectively disarms this weapon from the forces of power.

She expanded this idea to a physical dimension in her 2012 installation *Tactical Uses a Belief Unseen*. For Stratman, sound is inherently bound to space. This is literally the case, as cognitive perception of sound is dependent upon variables in the spatial location of both the sound source and the sonic environment (Cariani & Mitcheyl, 355) Just as it could be said that sound is created by space, it can in turn be said, as Stratman puts it, that sound “both creates and destroys space”. For *Tactical Uses*, she installed raised floorboards in which formed angular patterns. Underneath the floorboards she placed a series of subwoofers, programmed to play a looping series of found recordings consisting of tank maneuvers, explosions, earthquake frequencies, helicopters, and other military technologies. These recordings were run through a filter which compressed the sound waves down to the lowest possible frequency. Therefore, the sound could not be heard, but only felt as participants walked over them. On the wall of the gallery, Stratman hung drawings she had made of primitive military sound-based technologies including acoustic mirrors (World War I era parabolic structures used to monitor enemy planes) and diagrams of sonic boom shock wave progressions.

She also included a brief text on military acoustic psychological operations, such as *sound curdlers*, also known as “people repellers”; a tool used by the Audio Harassment Division during the Vietnam War. These devices would emit deafening wails that could be heard for miles. The curdler would be mounted onto helicopters and flown over enemy territory, causing mass panic and hysteria (Goodman,41).

Stratman has often been fond of re-appropriating military technology as a means of resistance. In one of her most radical works 2003's *Power/Exchange* she literally built a 55 ft high fully functional radio tower. This tower could be user operated via a notch dialed operations kiosk. Participants were invited to switch between 10 different bands, all of which emitted signals that comment upon regional culture in some way. Stratman sees airwaves as its own form of space, which is subject to the same forms of colonialism and occupation. By creating this tower she is effectively re-claiming the air waves as public space, taking the tools of control out of hands of those in power and into the people. The same concept was applied to her 2012 *Polygonal Address System* (March 20- April 29, 2012). Which was a pentagonally shaped floating platform rigged with an amplification system. This device was designed to float down the Washington Channel, (a federal waterway) emitting speeches by figures such as Abbie Hoffman, Cesar Chavez, Angela Davis, Dick Gregory and Malcolm X.

Stratman's interest in sound manipulation, cinema, surveillance, technology and hyperreality all converge in her 2014 film *Hacked Circuit*. This film consists of one 15 minute long tracking shot. The shot opens to an image of a street corner in Burbank, CA. We hear the sounds of cars as they drive by the screen. The camera then begins to slowly move forward, around the corner of the building, then down the street. It then

turns towards a doorway and proceeds to enter into the building. As the camera continues to slowly track into the room, it is revealed that we are inside of a *foley* recording studio as they are recording a sequence.<sup>2</sup> First the camera tracks into the sound engineer's booth, then into the recording space. We slowly come to see they are in fact recording for a sequence in Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation*. The film stars Gene Hackman as Harry Caul, a surveillance expert who becomes engulfed in a murder mystery. The particular sequence involves Hackman's character in a frantic and paranoid state, ripping apart his apartment in search of hidden surveillance devices. The film clip stops and starts as the foley artist and engineer communicate directions to one another. The foley artist then pauses the sequence to go fetch another instrument he feels would work best for the sequence, the camera then follows him into a back alley. He finds the tool he wants and goes back into the studio, yet the camera continues track out of the alleyway, into the street, and back around the corner to the its original destination, thus completely a full circular motion, or *circuit*. This seemingly simple piece, under Stratman's eyes, becomes charged the layers of meaning and resonance. Foley art is based on sense-based trickery, deceiving viewers into merging the sound and image. As we reenter the "real world", we suddenly become aware the forces which may be manipulating our senses. We begin to subtly doubt whether or not the car sounds we hear are perhaps artificially constructed, and by extension question we grow to doubt the very nature of or reality. This represents a distillation of Stratman's

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<sup>2</sup> The program description for the film defines Foley as: "the art of reproducing sound effects for cinema in real time. Its purpose is to complement or reproduce sounds created on set at the time of filming (aka field recording)...While watching a film clip, the Foley artist produces incidental non-dialogue sounds in sync with the action, e.g. footsteps, keys dropping, fabric rustling, glass breaking, doors closing, etc. The work of a good Foley artist goes undetected by the audience." (Stratman)

philosophy and process. Stratman seeks to uncover the forces which go unseen and by doing so, break the viscous cycles of power and control. These hidden forces could exist within any element of the material or virtual world, silently and innocuously wielding their power. Events from the past could be embedded within landscapes and systems of thought. Yet this universe is also compromised of powerful tools, which could be used either to oppress or to resist. The tools of one's bondage could also be the tools of one's liberation, and vice versa. The question is whether we, both individually and collectively, will continue down the same endless loop, or free ourselves by hacking the circuit.

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*\_Note: All of Stratman's work, along with synopsis and program notes written by Stratman herself, was accessed either through the streaming platform [dafilms.com](http://dafilms.com), or through her website, [pythagorasfilm.com](http://pythagorasfilm.com)*

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Deborah Stratman's Films:

- From Hetty To Nancy*, 1997, 16mm, 44 minutes
- The BLVD*, 1999, video, 64 minutes
- Untied*, 2001, 16mm, 3 minutes
- In Order Not To Be Here*, 2002, 16mm, 33 minutes
- Energy Country*, 2003, video, 14:30 minutes
- Kings Of The Sky*, 2004, video, 68 minutes
- How Among The Frozen Words*, 2005, video, 44 seconds

*It Will Die Out In The Mind*, 2006, video, 3:50 minutes

*The Magician's House*, 2007, 16mm, 5:45 minutes

*The Memory*, 2008, video, 2 minutes

*O'er The Land*, 2009, 16mm, 51:40 minutes

*Kuyenda N'kubvina*, 2010, video, 40:00 minutes

*FF*, 2010, video, 2:45 minutes

*Shrimp Chicken Fish*, 2010, video, 5:13 minutes

*Ray's Birds*, 2010, 16mm, 7:07 minutes

*...These Blazing Starrs!*, 2011, 16mm, 14:16 minutes

*Village*, silenced, 2012, video, 4:55 mins

*The Name is not the Thing named*, 2012, video, 10:30 mins

*Musical Insects*, 2013, video, 6:30 mins

*Immortal, Suspended*, 2013, HD video, 5:50 mins

*Hacked Circuit*, 2014, HD video, 15:05 mins

*Swallows: Subsurface Voids*, 2014

*Second Sighted*, 2014, video, 5 mins

*"The Illinois Parables"* 2016, 60 minutes