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# Moving Images, Autonomous Sounds

Heike Baranowsky's Brief History of Cinema

Heike Baranowsky is not a film-maker. Her medium is not celluloid but digital data, her venue not the theatrical space of the cinema but the white cube of the gallery. Yet her work over the past decade and a half has consistently investigated the basic formal conditions of cinema: the frame, the shot, movement, the unfolding of time, the relationship between document and artifice, and other fundamental conditions of the cinematic arts. In this sense, her work shares more with pioneers of film (Marey, Muybridge, and the Lumières) than it does with pioneers of video (Paik, Viola, and the Vasulkas). While the latter were concerned with exploiting the potential of the electronic signal and simultaneous transmission, the former were concerned with the peculiar ways in which moving images capture space and time. Indeed, Baranowsky's work can be read as a recapitulation of three major transitions in film history: the initial move from photography to moving pictures, the shift from silent film to sound cinema, and the transition from analog film to digital video.

## I. Still/Moving

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Personal communication  
with the artist by email,  
October 2007.

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Baranowsky's  
*American Skies* series  
(*Blown in the Wind*,  
*Shape Shifter*, *Out of the*  
*Blue*, etc.) suggests  
another connection with  
Muybridge, who began  
his career photographing  
the landscape of the  
American West.

The first of these took place in the last decades of the 19th century, when Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey introduced motion into photography via series of nearly-instantaneous photographs that closely tracked the movements of bodies. This "chronophotography", as Marey called it, was a key link between the by-then-established art of photography and the emerging art of film.

Baranowsky's videos consistently examine this borderline between still and moving images. Her work often takes the form of a sort of animated photography that, echoing Marey, she calls "time-based photography".<sup>1</sup> Baranowsky is fond of the static shot and the long take that establish a stage for the unfolding of action, which usually takes the form of some small, simple alteration of the initial frame. *Blown in the Wind*, 2002, for example, presents a still desert landscape across which a lone tumbleweed bumbles into the distance.<sup>2</sup> In *Gras*, 2001, Baranowsky trains her camera on a tangle of reeds that sway in a wind-driven choreography. The camera in *Mondfahrt 2001*, 2001, seems to bounce frenetically, until we realise

that its movement – and the drama of the piece – is caused simply by the rocking of the boat deck on which Baranowsky and her camera are firmly planted. Her most recent film, *Barometer (i)*, 2012, consists largely of static shots of an indoor gymnasium in which a collection of weather balloons hover and drift in and out of the frame.

Film analysis often describes such static shots as *objective*. But Baranowsky's work undermines this description. Though her camera frequently plays the role of a neutral observer, her videos regularly highlight the spatial, temporal, and mechanical manipulations of which film and video are capable. As swarms of starlings pass in and out of the frame, *Ballett*, 2002, draws attention to the limitations of the static shot, its inability to capture off-screen space. *Schwimmerin (1:24)*, 2000, is meticulously edited to produce an impossible and uncanny movement: an endless loop in which a swimmer perpetually moves through the water without taking a breath. *Pêche*, 2009, restages the Lumières' documentary short *La pêche aux poissons rouges*, 1895, for 2-channel digital video. In two different settings – the artist's studio and a Berlin park – Baranowsky holds her 13-month old daughter, who dips her hands into a large goldfish bowl and splashes around. Both versions are shown in black and white, except for the bright orange goldfish in both versions and some vividly green trees in the park. The park version more closely mimics the Lumières' film; but in the studio version the action is subtly manipulated, running both backward and forward. Where the Lumières' film appears as pure documentation, Baranowsky highlights the technical artistry at the heart of every film or video. If they are not *objective*, equally, such static shots are not *subjective*. They do not underscore the camera's or the artist's point of view but celebrate film and video as technologies for producing perceptions and movements. *Producing*, and not merely *recording*. For Baranowsky shows that films and videos do not represent the real, but create a distinct ontological domain irreducible to so-called natural, unmediated experience.

Henri Bergson famously argued against Zeno and Parmenides that real movement is a continuous, fluid whole and not an accumulation of static segments.<sup>3</sup> Only this latter (false) supposition could lend credence to Zeno's paradoxes – for example the famous paradox of the tortoise and the hare, which proposes that, if the tortoise is given a head start, the hare will never surpass it, since the hare must first reach the tortoise's starting point, which the tortoise will already have passed. Bergson is right, of course. But film and video can produce such movements, as Baranowsky shows in her *Radfahrer (Hase und Igel)*, 2000.<sup>4</sup> Three projections present the same loop of a bicycle race. But the loops run at different speeds, so that the fastest cyclist never seems able to overtake the slowest.

This same set-up is revisited in *Racetrack*, 2010, a three-channel installation centred around the mysterious "sailing stones", chunks of rock that, over the course of many years, travel inexplicably across the flat expanse of Racetrack Playa in Death Valley, cutting lines into the brittle earth. The piece charts multiple registers and scales of time: the changing light and shadow of a single day; the glacial pace of the stones' movements; and the deep, geological time in which these stones, the dry lake bed, and the surrounding mountains were formed. The title of the piece refers at once to the slow crawl of the stones and to the rapid movements of the camera, which circles around the rocks like the cyclists in *Radfahrer (Hase und Igel)* or the hands of a clock fixed to a still center. Yet, thanks to a trick of

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See Henri Bergson: *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson, New York: Harper & Row, 1960, pp. 112ff., and *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, New York: Zone Books, 1988, pp. 191f.

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*Der Hase und der Igel (The Hare and the Hedgehog)*, is the Brothers Grimm's version of Zeno's famous paradox.

mechanical perception, this perspective is sometimes switched so that the stones appear to race across the landscape like animated cars, their movements captured by a fixed camera. Moreover, as in Marey's "chronophotography", the movement in the piece is not actually continuous but composed of thousands of still images spliced together to form a continuity. Yet, whereas Marey aimed to capture the movements of bodies and analyse them into parts, Baranowsky's stop-motion animation sets still bodies into motion. In short, all the illusions of time and movement are on display in this dizzyingly gratifying installation.

Despite the circular movements of our clocks and calendars, and the planetary orbits they chart, we generally experience time as linear and unidirectional, relentlessly pressing into the future and leaving the past behind. But Baranowsky's *death/breath tomb/womb evil/live*, 1998, allows us to experience an alternative temporal scheme, in which the same sequence is played simultaneously backwards and forwards, crossing paths at the mid-point. *Schwimmerin (1:24)* shows us a perpetual present in which time passes as pure repetition without the alteration or novelty characteristic of lived time. *Barometer*, too, takes place in what seems like a moment frozen in time, in a low-pressure training facility built by the GDR during the Cold War but long since abandoned, a chamber in which the clock on the wall has stopped even as the balloons rise, fall, and drift, registering forces that are as invisible as time itself. The chamber's design marks it distinctly as 1970s; yet Baranowsky's film shows that it is fully operative in the present and suggests that its utopian promise is as yet unfulfilled.

Baranowsky consistently shows us that such temporal and spatial disjunctures are most powerful and uncanny when they occur in settings that are not fantastic or dramatic but as close as possible to documentation. Mimicking the deadpan, *objective* form of a documentary, they show us that these temporalities and spatialities are indeed real – that is, possible to experience cinematically or videographically.

## II. Image/Sound

Baranowsky's work also conjures a second transition in the history of cinema: the transition from silent film to synchronized sound. The introduction of sound into film practice at the end of the 1920s presented film-makers with a choice. Sound could be bound to image (and could suture images one to another) in the cause of a cinematic illusionism; or sound and image could form parallel streams that converged and diverged to aesthetic ends. While the former became the dominant choice, the latter was investigated most fully outside of cinema by the proponents of *musique concrète*, notably by Pierre Schaeffer in the late 1940s.<sup>5</sup> Schaeffer resolved to treat sound the way cinema treats images, subject to rapid cuts, superimpositions, and temporal-spatial dislocations. He began with documentary sources – recordings of train whistles, the clatter of pots and pans, canal boats, footsteps, and the like – which he artistically altered by way of montage, layering, reversal, speed manipulation and other means, creating a composite that later advocates of *musique concrète* would call "cinema for the ear".<sup>6</sup>

If Baranowsky's earlier work recapitulates the transition from still photography to moving images, her more recent projects reanimate the shift from silent cinema to

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In cinema, this path was followed by the Soviet avant-garde film-makers Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov, whose 1928 *Statement on Sound* rejected the naturalistic illusion made possible by sound cinema and instead endorsed a "contrapuntal" and "asynchronous" use of sound. See Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov, *Statement on Sound, The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896–1939*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 234f.

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For example, the *cinéma pour l'oreille* series issued by the French record label Metamkine, which includes recordings by Schaeffer's former assistant and artistic heir Michel Chion.

sound film. Baranowsky's initial body of work was "silent", content to investigate and manipulate space and time by way of image alone. Since 2006, however, she has begun to explore the ways that sound can intensify and amplify these uncanny experiences. Not surprisingly, this work follows a Schaefferian path. This is most evident in *CUE 1*, 2006, a 4-minute loop. The piece appears to document everyday life on a street in China. But, as in so much of Baranowsky's work, *CUE 1* is infused with subtle artifice. A brick wall runs across the image like a stage set for the projection of action. At first, this stage is visually empty, occupied only by the roar of an off-screen train that seems to be approaching but fails to materialise as an image. A covered motorcycle eventually crosses the screen from the right, followed by a bicycle from the left. The sputter of the motorcycle fades more quickly than it should, while the bicycle passes in total silence. Off-screen voices and construction noise quickly rise in the mix over the image of the blank wall. A boy skipping rope suddenly appears mid-screen with synchronized sound. For a moment, the video seems to have shifted into documentary mode. But then the soundtrack is overtaken by the frenetic pounding of gongs as two boys jump rope on screen. When the gongs abruptly stop, the boys mysteriously vanish.

Like Schaeffer's *musique concrète*, *CUE 1* employs documentary elements to unsettling effect. Baranowsky's static, neutral camera and non-narrative, quotidian subject matter establish the look and feel of documentary. But what the piece essentially presents is a heterogeneous and artful assemblage of images, sounds, times and places strung together by a stable backdrop (the brick wall) that provides visual and temporal continuity. Sound and image are conjoined and disjointed; and diverse visual and auditory moments and locations are superimposed upon one another.

Baranowsky has cited Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, Antonioni's *Blow Up*, Coppola's *The Conversation*, and Michael Snow's *Wavelength* as influences on this more recent work.<sup>7</sup> Each of these films explicitly investigates the basic features of the cinematic medium (images and sounds) and puts into question the veracity of documentary evidence. In *The Conversation*, for example, an audio surveillance expert is hired to produce a clandestine recording of a conversation in a public square. Over the course of the film, he realises that he is unable to deliver a pure document, that the sense of the conversation – and the lives of the central characters – depends on what filters and other auditory devices are used to render it. As in Baranowsky's videos, the point is not that photography, film, video and sound recording produce inadequate representations. Rather, it is that they are creative; productive rather than merely reproductive.

This auditory ambiguity is at the heart of two other pieces from 2006, *Intervall* and *CUE 2*. In the former, the camera slowly zooms in on a megaphone placed on a chair in the middle of a pedestrian plaza. The megaphone barks out phrases in Chinese as passers-by carry on with their business without taking notice. It is not at all certain that the people on screen hear what we hear. In any case, the zooming camera seems intent on investigating this sonic mystery, albeit via the wrong sensory modality (vision) and medium (photographic film). Again, sound and image are subtly but powerfully disjointed.

*CUE 2* intrigues and puzzles in a different way. This brief (minute-long) video presents a kind of glitch or wrinkle in ordinary experience. The piece begins in a

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See <http://heikebaranowsky.de/daten/File/Looming,%20artist%20statement.pdf>

standard documentary mode, the video camera pointed out of a car window toward the smog-laden skyline of downtown Beijing. A Chinese radio announcer is heard from inside the car as it slowly rounds a traffic-lined rotary. Gradually, in competition with the car radio and the din of traffic, another voice rises in the mix: the voice of a Chinese woman reading a passage from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the passage in which several apparitions prophesy the title character's fate. We search for the source of this voice and gradually focus on a figure that has been in the frame all along, a young woman sitting on a concrete wall, reading aloud amidst this traffic. As the camera approaches her, the woman's voice comes to dominate the mix. Once the car has passed her, the screen is filled with tall pine trees that obscure the buildings behind. All other sounds have faded as the woman intones the final ominous coda: "Who can impress the forest, bid the tree / Unfix its earthbound root? ... Rebellious dead, rise never ... ". Within a single minute, the video has shifted from a tourist document to a full-blown allegory on the theme of empire and globalisation, generating a symbolic field that relates East to West, past to present, forest to city, document to theatre, book to video, etc. Much of this is accomplished through sound and, especially, through the relative level of the woman's voice in the mix. Where *Intervall* tried visually to zoom in on a sound, *CUE 2* does so auditorially, gradually amplifying a sound that fundamentally alters the sense of the piece. The woman's place in this scene is visually odd; but it is auditorially impossible. Her voice would never be audible amidst this noise. But, insofar as it is, we become aware of the fact that we have shifted domains from the natural to the supernatural, from the ordinary to the aesthetic, the woman herself appearing as a visual and auditory apparition in this otherwise mundane urban landscape.

### III. Film/Video

As early as 1907, Bergson criticized cinema for being, essentially, *digital*: that is, for reconstructing movement from discrete samples (frames) that are imperceptibly conjoined to produce the effect of continuity.<sup>8</sup> Baranowsky's work reflects on this cinematic anticipation of digital media and on the latter's ability to recapitulate the history of the former. It thus ceaselessly crosses and re-crosses the divide that marks the third major transition in the history of cinema: the material shift from photographic emulsion and celluloid to computer chips and hard drives. I began by noting that Baranowsky is not a film-maker. But this is not quite true. Her most recent work, *Barometer (i)*, is not a video loop for gallery presentation but indeed a film, or at least what passes for film today, that is, an hour-long HD video with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Once distinct, the histories of film and video have become one and the same.

The disassociation of sound from image, the exploration of simple movements in the frame, the production of subtle spatiotemporal paradoxes: these are the objects of Baranowsky's videographic/cinematographic investigation. Were they not so playful and sensually rich, one might be tempted to call them methodical or formalist. In any event, Baranowsky's recapitulation of key transitions in film history draws our attention to the basic elements of cinematic form and reminds us that these elements do not so much reconstruct or represent ordinary experience as create uncanny new worlds that operate according to different laws of sensation, space, and time.

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See Henri Bergson: *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, New York: Modern Library, 1911, chapter IV, especially pp. 331ff.