

# The Illinois Parables

Deborah Stratman In Person

June 29, 2017 at 7:30pm — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

presented in association with

Headlands Center for the Arts, Canyon Cinema Foundation and Light Field

**Hacked Circuit** (2014) by Deborah Stratman; digital video, color, sound, 15 minutes, exhibition file from the maker

"A single-shot, choreographed portrait of the Foley process, revealing multiple layers of fabrication and imposition. The circular camera path moves us inside and back out of a Foley stage in Burbank CA. While portraying sound artists at work, typically invisible support mechanisms of filmmaking are exposed, as are, by extension and quotation, governmental violations of individual privacy. The scene being Foleyed is the final sequence from *The Conversation* where Gene Hackman's character Harry Caul tears apart his room searching for a 'bug' that he suspects has been covertly planted. The look of Caul's apartment as he tears it apart mirrors the visual chaos of the Foley stage. This mirroring is also evident in the dual portraits of sonic espionage expert Caul and Foley artist Gregg Barbanell, for whom professionalism is marked by an invisibility of craft. And in the doubling produced by Hackman's second appearance as a surveillance hack, twenty-four years later in *Enemy of the State*. These filmic quotations ground *Hacked Circuit*, evoking paranoia, and a sense of conviction alongside a lack of certainty about what is visible. The complication of the seen, the known, the heard and the undetectable provides thematic parallels between the stagecraft of Foley and a pervasive climate of government surveillance." (Deborah Stratman)

"One of the ways in which Stratman helps her students understand the importance of the Foley artists work is by taking them to a Foley sound stage as a workshop. 'They're always so floored by this crew of people who collect these objects because they have this frozen sound potential,' she says. 'Foley artists don't look at these objects as a janky dollar store doll or piece of plastic, they collect these things because of their sound potential.' Foley artists and sound technicians have what Stratman describes as an appreciation for the 'double parallel' nature of the objects in their studio, 'Everything to them has another face—a sonic face.'

"Stratman explains that sound informs us about our environment more than we realize. Because it's all around us, all the time, sound, rather than sight (which is in 'one direction' as she notes) gives us a better sense of the landscape around us and therefore we rely on our ears heavily, even if we think our vision is tantamount to our awareness. For this reason, sound can fool us much more than our eyes. 'Sound has been this huge part of the military industrial complex, there's been a long history of different military divisions using sonic surveillance, sonic camouflage, because we're so easily fooled by it.'

"And this is the same exact reason, Stratman says, that sound designers love using sound in film to put the audience in a place. 'It's so much easier for a filmmaker to put the audience in a place sonically, because you're in the world, you're not in front of it. It's not visual, where it's over there and you're looking it...with sound, you're suddenly in the middle of it. So there's this implicit trust that's great, because it's what allows the audience to get emotionally moved, it's how they really feel things in cinema. It's not so analytic, it washes over you and it effects you.' Whether it's the creaking of stairs in a horror film as a babysitter foolishly descends a darkened basement, or that odd clicking sound the Predator made when he was close by (but invisible), Stratman says that the Foley artist has an incredible power over the filmgoer because we use less of our critical faculties to hearing than we do to seeing.

"This notion also leads Stratman to the point that if sound can so easily fool us, it can be used in some pretty nefarious ways. This is why she chose scenes from one of the great sound-centric movies of all time, *The Conversation*, as her film for *Hacked Circuit*.

[...] "Stratman explained that she was both sculpturally interested in the location of Foley and what the objects look like and how they have this frozen sound potential, but also drawn to the power dynamics of how sounds control us. 'Even though the film takes you in this loop, and you go three-hundred and sixty degrees outside to inside and then back outside again, and you've been made aware that this is how the sounds are being made, and that you're being manipulated, when you come back out you *still* get swept right back into it again. Even though we're critically aware of the mechanism of manipulation...we have that Pavlovian response to sound. We can't turn it off. We can't not feel it.'

"The circuit the film makes, in this singular 15-minute tracking shot, is designed by the brilliant Stratman to represent a sonic Russian nesting doll. 'I wanted the film to keep revealing its levels like that, so you don't know what to trust.'" (Bryan Abrams: "Sonic Manipulation: Deborah Stratman on her Foley Artist Doc *Hacked Circuit*" [www.wheretowatch.com/2014/02/sonic-manipulationdeborah-stratman-on-her-foley-artist-doc-hacked-circuit](http://www.wheretowatch.com/2014/02/sonic-manipulationdeborah-stratman-on-her-foley-artist-doc-hacked-circuit))

***The Illinois Parables*** (2016) by Deborah Stratman; digital video, color, sound, 60 minutes, exhibition file from the maker

"An experimental documentary comprised of regional vignettes about faith, force, technology and exodus. Eleven parables relay histories of settlement, removal, technological breakthrough, violence, messianism and resistance, all occurring somewhere in the state of Illinois. The state is a convenient structural ruse, allowing its histories to become allegories that explore how we're shaped by conviction and ideology.

"The film suggests links between technological and religious abstraction, placing them in conversation with governance. Locations are those where the boundaries between the rational and supernatural are tenuous. They are 'thin places' where the distance between heaven and earth has collapsed, or more secularly, any place that bears a heavy past, where desire and displacement have lead us into or erased us from the land. What began as a consideration of religious freedom eventually led to sites where belief or invention triggered expulsion. The film utilizes reenactment, archival footage, observational shooting, inter-titles and voiceover to tell its stories and is an extension of previous works in which the director questioned foundational American tenants.

The *Parables* consider what might constitute a liturgical form. Not a sermon, but a form that questions what morality catalyzes, and what belief might teach us about nationhood. In our desire to explain the unknown, who or what do we end up blaming or endorsing?" (Deborah Stratman)

"The Illinois Parables," Deborah Stratman's hourlong essay film, arrives at just the right moment. A meditation on history and landscape, it has the power both to soothe complicated feelings about America and to inflame them. Alongside pastoral images of natural beauty — Indian burial mounds; deciduous forests; fields of corn and soybeans seen from the air — is a chronicle of violence, dispossession and disaster, stretching from before the European settlement of the continent to the political turmoil of the 1960s.

Organized into 11 chapters (or "parables"), the film is partly an anthology of things that happened in Illinois, and of responses to those events. Passages from the writings of Jacques Marquette, Alexis de Tocqueville and Ralph Waldo Emerson are interwoven with eyewitness accounts and archival audio. Some of the historical episodes may be familiar from textbooks: the expulsion of the Cherokee and other Indian tribes along the Trail of Tears in the 1830s; anti-Mormon violence in Nauvoo in the 1840s; the Manhattan Project at the University of Chicago during the Second World War. Others, like the flourishing of a utopian sect known as the Icarians and the catastrophic tornadoes of 1925, are less well remembered.

But Ms. Stratman's oblique and moving collage argues that all of them are part of a collective memory that seems to reside not so much in human consciousness as in the lore and topography of places. There is more to history, she suggests, than a simple record, even if that record — writings, monuments, scraps of film and tape — is all that physically remains. "The Illinois Parables" is not, strictly speaking, an educational film, but it conveys a unique and precious kind of knowledge." (A.O. Scott: "Review: *The Illinois Parables* Soothes and Inflames Feelings About America," *The New York Times*. [www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/movies/the-illinois-parables-review.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/movies/the-illinois-parables-review.html))

**Deborah Stratman** is a Chicago-based artist and filmmaker interested in landscapes and systems. Much of her work points to the relationships between physical environments and human struggles for power and control that play out on the land. Recent projects have addressed freedom, expansionism, surveillance, sonic warfare, public speech, ghosts, sinkholes, levitation, propagation, orthoptera, raptors, comets and faith. She has exhibited internationally at venues including MoMA NY, Centre Pompidou, Hammer Museum, Mercer Union, Witte de With, the Whitney Biennial and festivals including Sundance, Viennale, CPH/DOX, Oberhausen, Ann Arbor, Full Frame, Rotterdam and Berlinale. Stratman is the recipient of Fulbright, Guggenheim and USA Collins fellowships, a Creative Capital grant and an Alpert Award. She lives in Chicago where she teaches at the University of Illinois.  
[www.pythagorasfilm.com](http://www.pythagorasfilm.com)

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