

# FICTION LOOP/TIME IS SOMETHING: CORRESPONDENCES WITH THE RECENT WORK OF SARAH JANE GORLITZ AND WOJCIECH OLEJNIK

BY PATRICK HOWLETT

*Not knowing when the dawn will come  
I open every door  
Or has it feathers like a bird,  
Or billows like a shore?*

-Emily Dickinson<sup>i</sup>

## Not knowing when the dawn will come

According to Henri Bergson, we grasp the world in two ways: through measured analysis, which posits reality as stable, predictable and spatially knowable; and with intuition, through which we experience and understand growth, novelty and duration.<sup>ii</sup> The notion of duration in particular is central to Bergson's solution for Western philosophy's failure to deal with Time. Our experience of time is not analytical but creative. Making a distinction between the possible and the real, Bergson shows how repetition measures 'duration,' but is itself an abstract concept. That which is 'repeated' is some aspect of reality that the intellect singles out for future comparison. But in real time, everything is novel: «the living being...has duration precisely because it is continuously elaborating what is new and because there is no elaboration without searching, no searching without groping. Time is this very hesitation, or it is nothing...time is something.»<sup>iii</sup> The loop will never be seen the same way twice by the living spectator who intuitively experiences duration.

## Not knowing when the dawn will come

There is no dawn in Borges's *Library of Babel*. «Light is provided by some spherical fruit which bear the name of lamps...the light they emit is insufficient, incessant.»<sup>iv</sup> The library, with its (perhaps) infinite number of hexagonal galleries, is the universe. It is a metaphysical construction where the center is everywhere. The library in Gorlitz and Olejnik's *Enclosed* (2009) shares some qualities with those of Babel. Both serve as architectural models without exteriority and therefore become metaphorical structures of a severe interiority. In *Enclosed*, the spectators' subjective experience of the library is mediated by the mechanic hums and haws of the soundtrack being synchronized with the movements of the camera. As with the narrator-librarian in *Babel*, a place is being described for us. Nonetheless, this objectivity, repeatedly experienced, takes on a subjective character as clues to the model's construction and scale are intimated. For Gorlitz and Olejnik, the subjective revelation of public space is an inspirational dynamic.

## I open every door

In Ovid's account it was a moment of wonderful freedom that led Icarus to soar higher and higher, 'drawn to the vast heaven', but we are not told exactly why. It took only an instant for his wings to melt and then we have an image of his beating arms 'taking hold of nothing' before he fell to his death.<sup>v</sup> Robert Graves writes that in other accounts, Daedalus actually invented sails instead of wings and that Icarus drowned after steering their boat carelessly and causing it to capsize. Others think he just fell into the sea, as they were about to disembark at a small island and drowned uneventfully.<sup>vi</sup>

## I open every door

The space in Gorlitz and Olejnik's *Icarus' Dream* (2010), while still architectural, is experienced differently from that of *Enclosed*. The space in this work is shallow, and could be compared to painting. The space of painting, of course, is an imaginary one, posited on a flat plane. While this is also the space of photography and film, animation must make a much more conscious use of the still image than film or video, whose recordings are continuous. An animation is constructed from single images and this is a fact that Gorlitz and Olejnik allow to be revealed. Contemplating space in a painting is to identify some kind of representation, usually an imitation or resemblance, but also symbols and systems. To be modern has been to make the structures of representation somehow present for the viewer.

## I open every door

Viewers of *Icarus' Dream* may see visual and thematic

similarities with Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) or Richard Serra's *Color Aid* (1970-71). In each of these works the experience of the pictorial becomes, to some extent, the experience of the screen. Neither structuralist nor performative, *Icarus' Dream* creates a narrative of focal reverie that intensely condenses an experience of interior space. If Snow's *Wavelength* can be seen as a metaphor for conscious intentionality—a metaphor for the mind<sup>vii</sup>—*Icarus' Dream* is a reflective and critical metaphor for the viewer's dematerialization in front of the moving image (something that concerns Hal Foster as it did Walter Benjamin<sup>viii</sup>). While the title indicates a warning, the animation invites us to contemplate it like a painting's surface. Science fiction is invoked as well, as the viewer faces a monolith/colour field, rhythmically approaching only to perpetually face another field. The reflected light suggests that space is behind the camera, outside of the viewing experience. It could be the dawn, or it could be an «insufficient, incessant» source of light, or it could be the sun.

## Or has it feathers like a bird

Soundtrack proposal for *Through the Window* (2010):

(Animal chatter in background), Zarathustra:

*Up abyssal thought, out of my depth! I am your cock and dawn, sleepy worm. Up! Up! Here is thunder enough to make even tombs learn to listen. And wipe sleep and all that is purblind and blind out of your eyes! Listen to me even with your eyes: my voice cures even those born blind. And once you are awake, you shall remain awake eternally.*

(Animal chatter gets louder)

*...chatter on like this and let me listen. It is so refreshing for me to hear you chattering: where there is chattering, there the world lies before me like a garden.*<sup>ix</sup>

## Or has it feathers like a bird

«I think photography is less about representing than constructing its objects.»<sup>x</sup> Similarly for Gorlitz and Olejnik, the material construction of models, objects and images, and the techniques and tools used to animate them, have a crucial, meaningful role in the development of each work. They share with Demand the practice of staging an illusion, where manipulations of scale and context create a believable but not perfect scenario. *Through the Window* (2010) is such a work, in which the illusion is also a revelation. 'Mimesis,' the Greek word used by Aristotle to describe the imitation of nature, has been a preoccupation of painting and sculpture as long as their documented histories. Aristotle saw the imitation of a thing, person, or object as a way of understanding those things, as a pedagogical tool.<sup>xi</sup> Plato of course, was more skeptical.

## Or billows like a shore?

We are shown a place but we are not inside it. It is inside us. Walter Benjamin distinguished the space of painting as one of contemplation: «the spectator can abandon himself to his associations, (but) before the movie frame he cannot do so.» The magician-painter maintains a distance from reality while the surgeon-cameraman penetrates into its very body through its operation.<sup>xii</sup> But Benjamin points out that within the surgeon lie traces of the magician. The techniques of animation bring some of these hidden qualities to the surface, particularly in the work of Gorlitz and Olejnik. Although animation, like cinema, is created out of «multiple fragments assembled under a new law,»<sup>xiii</sup> the still images the artists create may also be seen as 'total' in the same sense that Benjamin refers to in painting. The moving picture then, looping after a relatively short duration, can be viewed as an accumulation of 'total' images.

*When the Horizon...Shore* (2010) appears as photographic impressionism, techniques of collage and stop-motion combining to animate a still image of the sea. Not in a way that attempts to create an illusion of the re-animated sea, but through the creative interpretation of a cycle that seeks to be played out

infinitely. Various manifestations of animation, of course, preceded that of cinema and in the recent work of Gorlitz and Olejnik we see an older mode of the moving picture embraced, one whose narrative goals are less about the shock of the edit and more about how the moving image might be absorbed by us. They don't use animation nostalgically; it is used because the distance the magician requires for her illusions still allows for wonder.

## Or billows like a shore?

*To an unknown recipient* (1885)

Dear Friend, I thank you with wonder. Should you ask me my comprehension of a starlight night, awe were my only reply, and so of the mighty book. It stills, incites, infatuates, blesses and blames in one. Like human affection, we dare not touch it, yet flee, what else remains?

But excuse me—I know but little. Please tell me how it might seem to you.

How vast is the chastisement of beauty, given us by our Maker! A word is inundation, when it comes from the sea,

Peter took the marine walk at the great risk.

-Emily Dickinson<sup>xiv</sup>

## Notes

- i Emily Dickinson, *Selected Poems & Letters*, Anchor Press: (New York, 1959)
- ii Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, Random House: (New York, 1944)
- iii --, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison, The Wisdom Library: (New York, 1946), pp.188-93.
- iv Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel* in *Labyrinths*, New Directions: (New York, 1964), p. 51
- v Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries, Indiana University Press: (Bloomington: 1955) pp.188-189
- vi Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Penguin/Folio: (London: 1996), p. 292
- vii Annette Michelson, as referenced in *Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art*. *October*, 104, Spring 2003, MIT Press., pp.84-85
- viii Foster brings up Benjamin's «orchid in the land of technology» to describe the «experience of spiritual immediacy effected through intense media immersion» in contemporary media culture and worries that projected images have a similar effect. In *Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art*. *October*, 104, Spring 2003, MIT Press., pp.80-81
- ix Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. W. Kaufmann. Viking Penguin: (New York, 1968) pp. 327-329
- x Thomas Demand, as quoted in *Art Now*, ed. B. Riemschneider & U. Grosenick, Taschen GmbH: (Cologne, 2001) p. 34
- xi Aristotle, *The Pocket Aristotle*, trans. W.D. Ross, ed. Justin D. Kaplan, Washington Square Press: (New York, 1958), pp. 344-345
- xii Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books: (New York, 1968) pp. 232-233
- xiii Ibid. p. 234
- xiv Dickinson; pp.328-329

**PATRICK HOWLETT** is a visual artist currently based in London, Ontario. He has exhibited his work nationally and internationally and is represented by Susan Hobbs Gallery (Toronto), where he will exhibit in the fall of 2010.

## **SARAH JANE GORLITZ & WOJCIECH OLEJNIK**

**OLEJNIK's** collaborative work has been presented in solo exhibitions at Eyelevel Gallery (Halifax), Struts Gallery (Sackville), Neutral Ground (Regina), Optica, Centre D'Art Contemporain (Montreal), and Kapital-istischer Realismus (Berlin), and in recent group exhibitions at The Soap Factory (Minneapolis), 6 Picoles Cycliques (Lyon), Kunstverein INGAN (Berlin), and Truck (Calgary). They have received funding from the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Arts Council and in 2008 were awarded the Joseph S. Stauffer prize for emerging artists.

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