

Space Beyond:
The Hyperreal Landscapes of Rosa Barba's *Somnium*

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“I am interested in finding the boundaries and connections and intersections between things... I find where these forms come together and then I try to open up the in-between spaces.”¹ Rosa Barba is an artist that evades easy classification. Her practice, while undeniably rooted in film, touches on a wide variety of things—of media, of genre, of facts and fictions. The work, both defined by and expressed through film, is never satisfied by the quick consumption of images on a flat screen, but rather demands an attention to space and landscape. Barba’s art can best be understood through two categories: the physical, in which film is understood as an object engaged with machinery and light, i.e. “sculpture” (Fig. 1); and the conceptual, in which film is a projected sequence of images, i.e. “movies” (Fig. 2).

Yet even these two categories are never absolute, for Barba’s interests lie in expanding our definitions of space. In her dissertation, Barba presents her work as part of an on-going project “that regards cinema in an architectural sense but also as a tool. Here, the environment, the screen, and the projection can be combined or pushed forward to create another spatiotemporal dimension that is concurrent with and beyond the context of interior or exterior space. Uncertainty and speculation exist within this expanded space.”² Thus, her films must be understood as equally concerned with the physical space of the celluloid and projector as with the conceptual space of the filmed image itself, and even with the imagined spaces which exist between and beyond them.

For the purposes of this paper, however, I will endeavor to limit myself to the “movie” side of Barba’s work—the cinematic side, or perhaps more adequately what is filmed and how it is presented. Barba’s interest in the liminal spaces of cinema means that her films are uniquely situated within the architectural imaginary. She employs with great craft a variety of techniques—including genre, narrative, audio, and editing—which reposition the filmed landscape from a landscape of reality to one of fiction, or perhaps even hyperreality. *Somnium* (2011), a film which simultaneously engages the documentary and science fiction genres to this end, can be considered a primary example.³

¹ Rosa Barba, interview by Robert Enright, “Tracing meaning from Scratch: An interview with Rosa Barba,” *Border Crossings* 38, no. 1 (March 2019): <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/tracing-meaning-from-scratch/>

² Rosa Barba, “On the Anarchic Organisation of Cinematic Space: Evoking Spaces beyond Cinema,” 22 ed. (doctoral thesis, Malmö: Malmö Faculty of Fine and Performing Arts, Lund University, 2018), 10, [https://portal.research.lu.se/portal/en/publications/on-the-anarchic-organisation-of-cinematic-spaces\(6305d53f-ccc8-40a8-9994-6d18d1cb2bf8\).html/](https://portal.research.lu.se/portal/en/publications/on-the-anarchic-organisation-of-cinematic-spaces(6305d53f-ccc8-40a8-9994-6d18d1cb2bf8).html/)

³ *Somnium*, directed by Rosa Barba (2011), 16mm film transferred to video.



Fig. 1 — *Spacelength Thought* (2012); Kunsthaus Zürich, 2012; Photo: Jenny Ekholm © Rosa Barba



Fig. 2 — *Time as Perspective* (2012); Kunsthaus Zürich, 2012; Photo © Rosa Barba

The techniques used in *Somnium* can be found throughout Barba's body of work; specifically, the interplay of documentary and fiction is perhaps best exemplified in the earlier *Outwardly from Earth's Center* (2007).⁴ Similarly to *Somnium*, this film employs techniques of the documentary genre to build a fictional narrative about an island which is in danger of drifting away. To save it, the population has determined to tether the island, and are shown dragging heavy ropes across the landscape to secure it (Fig. 3). Throughout the film are interviews with locals simply identified by their positions (Lighthouse Keeper, Politician, Architect, etc.) who explain the predicament, its urgency, and their perspective on the solution. Archival footage of unclear origin is also included, taking on the role of historical evidence.



Fig. 3 — *Outwardly from Earth's Center* (2007); Film still © Rosa Barba

Mixed up in this fiction is the factual reality that Gotska Sandön, the real Baltic island on which this film is shot, is gradually drifting away from the continent, and that real archival images Barba allegedly uncovered demonstrate ropes being used in the same way.⁵ Writing for

⁴ *Outwardly from Earth's Center*, directed by Rosa Barba (2007), 16mm film transferred to video.

⁵ Robert Enright, "Tracing meaning from Scratch."

Artforum, Henriette Huldish notes that *Outwardly from Earth's Center* blurs the line between document and fiction and “sounds themes recurrent in Barba’s work: the contingent nature of historical truth, the divergent methods of inquiry employed in the production of knowledge, and the nature of time.”⁶ Not only has actual archival footage been included within a fictional present (eg. fishing boats recontextualized as working towards the tethering project), but it is interspersed alongside fabricated footage as well, “a few faux-vintage prints intermingled, pointedly undermining the authenticity of the whole.”⁷ It is also notable that Barba rarely if ever employs professional actors in her films, with *Outwardly from Earth's Center* making no exception. While Gotska Sandön currently has no inhabitants, the islanders being interviewed are not actors but locals of the region; in a further blurring of fact and fiction, the experts are merely playing in the film the roles they fill in actual life.⁸

The documentary is found throughout Barba’s work, even where it is not employed as genre, demonstrating Barba’s keen interest in time. Indeed, artifacts of all sorts—whether they be a text, a photo, or an entire landscape—populate her films and introduce new perspectives on the spaces filmed. “There is a temporal element to a document or history,” Barba writes, “which we can observe or enter, and in my films historical data is often transposed into a subjective voiceover.”⁹ This subjective voice gains the most agency in a film like *Outwardly from Earth's Center* where objectivity and fact are what is being examined. The “subjective voiceover” takes the form of the actual voices of the experts, as well as of the archival images, and the performance of the locals. By presenting fact and fiction on equal footing, attempting to obfuscate what is fact and what is fiction, Barba produces an imaginary space for her audience. In *Outwardly from Earth's Center*, the fiction is so absurd that one could hardly be convinced it was the truth. Yet the full employment of the documentary genre to deny this fiction, to present the fiction as fact while simultaneously introducing fact as part of that fiction (i.e. by having the experts play themselves, by recontextualizing actual historical footage rather than fabricating it) allows the audience to embrace both the fact and the fiction in wholly unique ways.

⁶ Henriette Huldish, “Unmoored Future,” *Artforum* 52, no. 1 (September 2013): <https://www.artforum.com/print/201307/henriette-huldish-on-rosa-barba-s-outwardly-from-earth-s-center-2007-42637/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rosa Barba, “On the Anarchic Organisations of Cinematic Space,” 95.

This method is not entirely unique to Barba, and is used towards different ends by different filmmakers. In her dissertation, Barba claims to have taken inspiration in small part from artist Robert Frank's *Me and My Brother* (1968), which similarly interweaves actual footage of Allen Ginsburg, Peter Orlovsky, and his brother Julius Orlovsky within the fictional framework of a film within a film featuring Christopher Walken in the role of director. Barba comments that the film is "constantly delineating real and imaginary situations" and "blends fiction and reality to create a disorienting trip in which the idea of documentary 'truth' is constantly being called into question."¹⁰

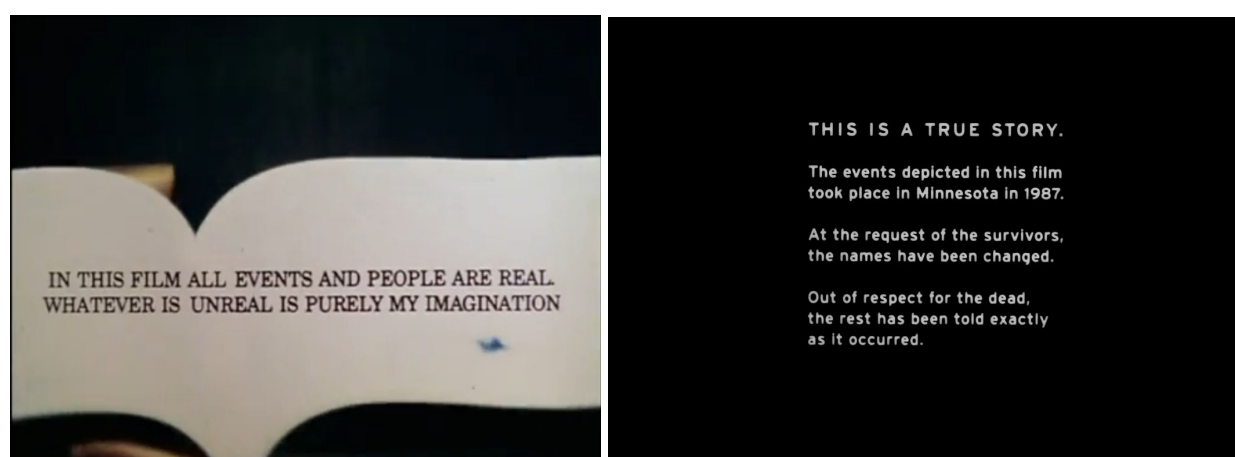


Fig. 4 — Disclaimers from *Me and My Brother* (1968), left; and *Fargo* (1996), right; images from web.

Similar effects have been attempted in popular Hollywood films as well, such as the Coen Brothers' *Fargo* (1996), which famously begins with the entirely dishonest "This is a true story" (Fig. 4).¹¹ The film itself makes no further efforts to present the story as real, does not introduce the documentary techniques of *Me and My Brother* or *Outwardly from Earth's Center*, yet it still achieves a similar goal in repositioning the audience within this initial framework. A viewer who has no prior concept of the Coen Brothers' work, or of *Fargo* itself, have no reason to consider otherwise—at least until the absurdity of the story makes the fiction obvious. By this point, the viewer has already been firmly established within the imaginary world, however, and even knowing it for fiction will continue to view the comedy in an entirely different position than had the disclaimer not been there. While Barba has shared more ambitious intentions with her

¹⁰ Rosa Barba, "On the Anarchic Organisations of Cinematic Space," 102.

¹¹ *Fargo*, directed by Joel and Ethan Coen (1996), Netflix.

work, *Outwardly from Earth's Center* can be understood to similarly direct the viewer. Even within the absurdity of the narrative, the documentary technique encourages the viewer to consider something beyond entertainment.

Predating all of these films is the literary tradition, which of course includes Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges, but perhaps begins with the astronomer Johannes Kepler. In his story *Somnium* (Barba has borrowed the name in reference), Kepler recounts a dream about a mother and son who visit the moon.¹² Despite beginning quite fantastically, it quickly becomes an exercise through which Kepler explains Copernican astronomical ideas. What at first grips the reader as a sort of fairy tale is actually a device to convince the reader they are on the moon; once there, Kepler can explain, quite scientifically, what that would be like. In fact, despite writing it as early as 1608, Kepler never published the work in his lifetime, but spent the majority of his life appending notes to it far in excess of the original work because he was determined that the fact and fiction of the work should be clear.

In the works of Borges, the author makes great use of realism against fantasy to explore philosophical questions. “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” for example, is formatted as a critical piece on the fictional author Pierre Menard, whose intention to translate or reproduce *Don Quixote* as authentically as possible demands that he literally become Cervantes and write the work from scratch.¹³ Borges’ fictional reviewer, after listing off dozens of other fictional works by Menard, goes on to list *Don Quixote* as his best and far-exceeding the original Cervantes, despite being word for word identical. By doing so, it creates a robust commentary on how we define and value authorship and originality that couldn’t quite be made without a framing of false realism.

Rosa Barba’s *Somnium* can be understood much in the same way as these texts, and her reference to the Kepler story by way of a shared title should make the intention clear. *Somnium*, the film, is shot at a landfill project for a new harbor in Rotterdam, and depicts the construction machinery operating in a snowy landscape nearly devoid of human life (Fig. 5). The film employs similar documentary techniques as *Outwardly from Earth's Center*, pairing the strange

¹² Johannes Kepler, “Somnium,” trans. Rev. Normand Raymond Falardeau, *Frosty Drew Observatory & Science Center*. Accessed December 16, 2020. <https://frostydrew.org/papers.dc/papers/paper-somnium/>

¹³ Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” *Ficciones*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 88-95.



Fig. 5 — *Somnium* (2011); Film still © Rosa Barba



Fig. 6 — *Somnium* (2011); Titles over an aerial landscape; Still from TAAK.

industrial landscape with overlapping narratives to relocate it firmly within science fiction. Unlike Kepler, however, Barba's engagement with science fiction is not a device for presenting scientific fact, and thus has no interest in separating the two. More like Borges, *Somnium* attempts to engage reality as a device for presenting fiction, and uncover the deeper spaces that lie beyond.

Somnium begins with an aerial view of the site in black and white, over which the title appears. Aerial views "of landscapes and their inscriptions" are an important part of Barba's work, used not as typical establishing shots but in some ways the opposite, to deny scale and "to create a new independent layer, disconnected to direct references and suspended in a space made up of many time layers."¹⁴ These aerial shots turn present fact into timeless fictions and "massive construction zones, filmed from high above, become slightly curious, near-archaic artifacts... as if archaeological fragments from a distant past—or perhaps an unknown future."¹⁵ The strange aerial shot in *Somnium* serves this purpose to relocate the audience not in any real space, but in an imaginary space; the actually mundane landscape of the site, through its strangeness, becomes a sort of lunar landscape—and lends this reading to the footage that follows it.

As the film continues, the industrial machinery is shown against two voiceovers: the first belonging to an adapted version of J.G. Ballard's "The Cage of Sand," and the second belonging to locals interviewed, as is characteristic of much of Barba's films. The Ballard story is "a point of departure to continue with her own fantastical narrative," in which the Rotterdam project is represented as the setting of the science fiction story.¹⁶ The story itself is about a landfill project on Earth which uses soil from Mars, causing unforeseen environmental disaster, and is modified only slightly to relocate the narrative from Mars to "the planet Somnium." As unfamiliar as some of it may be, the Rotterdam landscape is not especially strange, yet when something as simple as a crane or a quarry is viewed under this science fiction narrative, it begins to acquire new spatial and architectural readings as part of the fiction itself.

The interviewed voiceover meets a similar purpose. It is unclear what belongs to the original interview, and what like the Ballard story has been modified (the speaker at times refers

¹⁴ Rosa Barba, "On the Anarchic Organisation of Cinematic Space," 82.

¹⁵ Henriette Huldish, "Dark Matter and Deep Time: Rosa Barba's Uncertain Landscapes," *Rosa Barba: The Color Out of Space* (New York: Dancing Foxes Press, 2017), 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

to the quarried stone as “energy blocks” without elaboration). Just as in *Outwardly from Earth’s Center*, the interviews are from actual local residents of the site, but unlike that film, the interviewed figure is never shown. In fact, no human figure is shown in *Somnium* except for a single beekeeper, who is introduced as protagonist of the Ballard narrative and discussed by the interviewed voice (“and of course, you know, he’s losing his bees”). The beekeeper never speaks himself, and is shown only briefly. In one of these scenes, he is shown outfitting himself in his apiarist gear and attending to his bees (Fig. 7). Although a completely believable and ordinary scene, its relocation within a science fiction narrative recontextualizes the beekeeper and his shed, such that in the mind of the viewer, the apiarist suit begins to resemble an astronaut suit and the snow a lunar landscape. The result is that the shed, a totally mundane, functional, vernacular architecture does not break the immersion, but strangely begins to acquire science fictional qualities itself.



Fig. 7 — *Somnium* (2011); different depictions of the apiarist; Film stills © Rosa Barba

These two narratives, of the overarching science fictional setting and of the local perception of it, are presented through actual voiceover and recall what Barba says about documents presenting themselves as subjective voiceover.¹⁷ While *Outwardly from Earth’s Center* used expert and local voices to impose reality onto an absurd fiction, *Somnium* attempts to disguise its reality as science fiction; thus, the speakers cannot be seen and their words must be decontextualized and recontextualized alongside other narratives and the strangeness of the imagery. “Words and themes can modulate a word so that it means something else when it reaches another method,” Barba writes.¹⁸ By overlapping these two narrative voices, by

¹⁷ Rosa Barba, “On the Anarchic Organisation of Cinematic Space,” 95.

¹⁸ Ibid., 115-16.

presenting a real yet unfamiliar landscape simultaneously with these fictional narratives, and introducing other techniques of editing, cinematography (e.g. the aerial shot), and even sound—the film makes great use of ambient noise and subtle sci-fi sound effects—the individual parts begin to build on themselves, and the composition as a whole acquires an entirely new meaning. In this way, the architecture of *Somnium*—the machine landscape and the imagined society around it—does not remain in reality, nor is it firmly refounded within its fiction, but instead rests uneasily in the spaces between them.

The way Rosa Barba talks about cinematic spaces, and the uncertain space that is achieved in *Somnium*, seems to enter into Baudrillard's understanding of hyperreality in science fiction. "The language or method of science fiction is non-hierarchical in terms of time," Barba claims, continuing, "It is a time-neutral space of language which gives me the opportunity to work with historical facts and lead them to fictional ideas."¹⁹ In his analysis of Philip K. Dick, Baudrillard expresses a similar sentiment, that in hyperreal science fiction "the reader is, from the outset, in a total simulation without origin, past, or future—in a kind of flux of all coordinates (mental, spatio-temporal, semiotic)."²⁰ With this understanding of science fiction, *Somnium*, like the works of Philip K. Dick, might be considered hyperreal. Despite displaying only the well-established facts of the present (i.e. footage of the Rotterdam project), Barba's blurring of the documentary and science fiction genres removes *Somnium* from any position of certainty, existing in constant flux between reality and fiction. Baudrillard argues that in science fiction it "is no longer possible to manufacture the unreal from the real, to create the imaginary from the data of reality. The process will be rather the reverse... to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because the real has disappeared from our lives."²¹

Somnium is best understood in this framework. While Barba is certainly concerned with the (physical) data of reality, *Somnium* does not attempt to push its narrative entirely within the imaginary. After all, it is common enough for film to transform real landscapes into fictional ones, even fantastical ones (i.e. "shooting on location"); what makes *Somnium* special is its determination not to be totally converted. *Somnium*'s use of documentary technique constantly

¹⁹ Rosa Barba, et al., *Rosa Barba: Time as Perspective* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013), 9.

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Science Fiction," trans. Arthur B. Evans, *Science Fiction Studies* 18, no. 3 (November 1991), 311.

²¹ Ibid.

reaffirms its reality, even as its narrative progresses further towards fiction. As Henriette Huldish concludes of *Somnium* among other recent pieces, “Barba’s uncertain landscapes of filmic time may provide us with another, no less plausible, way of imagining the unimaginable. Science is fiction and fiction is science.”²²



Fig. 8 — *Somnium* (2011); a still featured alongside the Bruno quote. Still from TAAK.

Somnium concludes with lingering shots of the landscape at night, presented simultaneously as the strange machinery of reality and the indecipherable objects of science fiction (Fig. 8). Over these, the narrative concludes with a quote by the Copernican theorist Giordano Bruno, a heretical figure who declared the Sun was one of many stars surrounded by planets:

This star from time to time renews itself by changing and altering all its parts.
There is no absolute up or down, no absolute position in space; but the position of a body is relative to that of other bodies. Everywhere there is incessant relative change in position throughout the universe, and the observer is always at the centre of things.

²² Henriette Huldish, “Dark Matter and Deep Time,” 52.

This quote, an early idea of relativity, is fitting not only as astronomy, or as a bookend to the Kepler reference in the title, but by its declaration that the observer is always at the center. As noted earlier, Barba's work is concerned with space in a multitude of ways, not content to limit itself to physical or filmic or imaginary spaces, but to evoke all of them at once. In this endeavor, the audience is necessarily included, situating the conceptual spaces of what is filmed and physical spaces of the projection within the minds of the audience. Thus, Barba's concerns with time and space, document and history, human and environment, fact and fiction, are tied together neatly. *Somnium* engages the space that exists only through observation, the space beyond the physical, the conceptual, or the imaginary, the spaces that exist only between all of these spaces and the observer at the center of things.

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