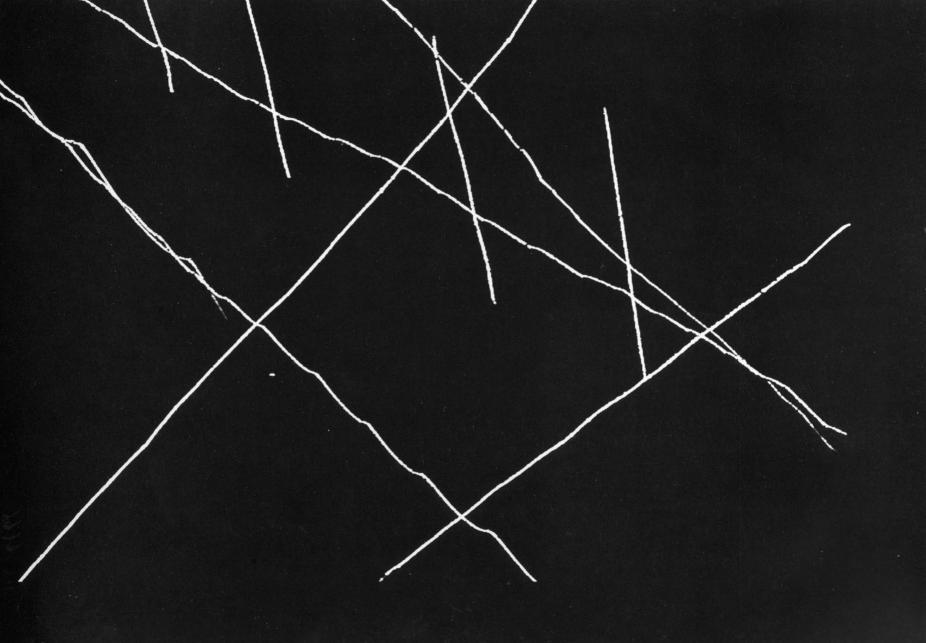
like a dream that vanishes the films of barbara sternberg





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Karyn Sandlos

Larissa Fan

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Robert Everett-Green

Mike Hoolboom

Tim Dallett

Barbara Godard

Jeffrey Lambert

James Baker Hall

Rae Davis

Maria Ramadori

Gerald Saul

Barbara Goslawski

Janine Marchessault

like a dream that vanishes: the films of barbara sternberg

Edited by Mike Hoolboom





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acknowledgements

like a dream that vanishes: the films of barbara sternberg, has been a project of significant research and discovery. This catalogue is the outcome of our desire to assemble a collection of writings on the evocative works of Barbara Sternberg. This collaboration between Pleasure Dome and The Images Festival of Independent Film and Video (which also includes the premiere screenings of a national tour of Sternberg's films) would not have been possible without the creative energy and editorial efforts of Mike Hoolboom. Considerable thanks must go to all the contributors, both to those who allowed their previous writing to be brought forward to a new readership, and to those who wrote anew under such tight deadlines. Thanks to Scott McLeod for his detailed and sensitive copy editing, and to Franci Duran for her care and commitment to the exquisite design of this catalogue. Finally, to Barbara, who has shown the utmost patience and willingness to let others construct a history which we hope gestures toward the poetics of her films.

Tom Taylor for Pleasure Dome

introduction

dear Barbara,

One of the things I hoped for in your "retrospective," this looking back, was to clear a new vantage from which to gain insight into your practice. I alluded to this in our interview when I spoke about makers working on two events at once. The first is the object at hand – the film, poem, painting, whatever. All of these gestures of making require framing; they necessarily exclude more than they include. (How could you make a painting about everything?) But more than this ... it's my belief that the excluded – those qualities, features, attentions and subjects not present in a maker's work – also have a shape. That artists make two objects at once: the film they're working on and the film they refuse. Both films possess patterns of attention. Both exhibit a visual signature. Somehow they rely on one another, make one another possible, though only one will gain entry into public memory.

This catalogue (and the associated screenings) narrate the manifest aspect of this making. It deals with the objects you've made which exist in the world.

It's my hope that some of your deliberations may be tuned to this other aspect of your making. This negative zone. This blind spot.

Mile Hoolbrom

January 1, 2000

i can see your history in the way you move: at present

Karyn Sandlos



The scene opens with a storm followed by rain with no hail. There was expected to be a windstorm. But even so there would be a little coldish air but not at present wind. They were quietly expectant but a little irritable. Gertrude Stein, History, or Messages from History

Silence

A man surveys the landscape from the doorway of the house he has built. The boards that frame him are freshly cut and unpainted. It is cold. He folds his arms in a gesture of satisfaction. A woman sorts through fragments of glass; her hands a small study of danger's seduction. She buries the roots of a plant in soil, tending to the edges where earth meets pot. Another man seated at a table rolls cigarettes and smokes, slowly, methodically. The strike of a match momentarily illuminates the otherwise dimly lit room in which he broods. A woman pushes a broom across a wood floor, her arms and shoulders etching a rhythmic pattern against the pale light of a sunless afternoon. There is a sense of a day with no plans, of tasks accomplished, of people filling the emptiness of time.

The first movement of Barbara Sternberg's *At Present* [1990] is preoccupied with interiors, both physical and psychic, and with the minute details of the present moment. Responding to films made by men on the subject of love, Sternberg aims to strike a different chord within a gendered discourse. Parables read over the solitudes of the four domestics suggest a new truth to be found about love or the application of a moral remedy. Yet the parable's paradox is that the specificity of its meaning lies in the universality of its embrace. Love, although housebound, resists confinement.

Cliché

If only everything could fit under the tongue. Anne Michaels, Fugitive Pieces

At Present opens with a silent cry; an image of a man recovered from a time long past. His mouth makes the shape of a sound in formation, but the sound itself is lost. In this silence, an analogy is made between language and love which becomes thematic. Words both make and isolate meaning.

Of course, it's difficult to say anything new about love. In keeping with the Western middle-class tradition, I learned that life's quest is to find the perfect other who will make me complete. With this union comes property, children, and summers at the lake. A simple recipe for contentment. But this lesson is fraught with contradiction, because desire fulfilled brings disillusionment. Maybe that's why some of my favorite love stories are about what gets in the way of love. This affinity for desire thwarted is more than a cynical inclination. For me, optimism comes with the realization that, while words can be persuasive and desire seductive, it's as if love and language meet their respective limits in mutual necessity. There are always more ways to want than words can say.

At Present is a film in which history complicates desire and sets language in motion. Here, the past haunts the present with a persistence that can be observed in the body's most intimate gestures; in the private rituals of grooming, in love and in lovemaking. In love, the body has its own cadence. But like brushing your teeth, desire can become a habit, a necessary routine, an empty gesture.

Chorus

She is not recording the history of a love affair but the instant of desire.

Ann Carson, Eros: The Bittersweet

"What is involved in love?" A narrator poses this question with a pragmatic insistence. "Is it all the same stuff? Power, control ...? Is that what we are talking about?" That which can be named can be measured, predicted, controlled, perhaps even repaired. Hence the contemporary flood of self-help literature on relationships that reads like a library of "how-to" manuals. If I can fix my car, I can fix my heart. Right? If I can figure out what went wrong last time, I can do it differently this time. Can't I? "What is involved?" he asks repeatedly, while the film's trajectory shifts from the domestic scene to the street, and from the bathroom to the public beach. Women's laughter, gentle at first, but becoming increasingly derisive throughout the film, suggests that we've got it all wrong. There is no instructional manual available here, rather, a sense of the strange time of desire. I have a history of past relationships of which I can speak, yet I carry this history in my body and into each new relationship. The body writes its history in the awkward contiguity of relationship. In the way I stumble into you, I speak of where I have been.

Combustion

Language makes desire feel like a form of compliance. To know what one wants one has to play the game. Adam Phillips, Terrors and Experts

The expansiveness of a wheat field sweeps the threshold of an open sky. A small, winding procession moves across the landscape. Up close, they are seen making preparations for the seasonal ritual of burning and

regeneration. The small flame of an earlier match strike becomes a raging inferno. The fire-makers wander through black smoke, their clothing blown wildly by wind. This clearing of old growth is allegorical, for the body brings its effects, its accumulation of practices, into relationship. Up against one another, our ways of being collide, scatter, make way for an uncultivated articulation. Each new encounter invites a new conversation. From the seared ground emerge sharp green shoots.

In this final sequence, the rhythm of *At Present* changes, marking a kind of regression. A pulsing, staccato scene of a dimly lit living room replaces the camera's graceful circulations through domestic interiors. Images of men posing in various states of arousal punctuate the narrative of a film in which Sternberg herself can't figure out how to strike the right seductive pose. How do you want me? Do you want me like this? This chair, this room, this picture doesn't fit. And these men are burning. Women's laughter reaches a crescendo, and with it the narrator's agitated interrogation persists: What is involved in love? What is involved? Amid this cacophony, an interminable question. Remnants of the past strain toward the silence which follows a storm. The muted immediacy of the film's final frame feels like a beginning.



At Present

100

opus 40

Larissa Fan

Always repeating is all of living. Gertrude Stein, The Making of Americans

Completed in 1979, Barbara Sternberg's early short film *Opus 40* [1979] incorporates themes and techniques that we have since come to expect in her work: a thoughtful examination of daily life and the world around us, the reworking and manipulation of images through superimposition and split-screens, and a love and respect for the texture and beauty of film as a medium. *Opus 40* is a study on the theme of repetition, which makes rhythm and music out of the material of our daily lives. It is built on a few simple elements: images of workers in a foundry, interviews with the workers about their jobs, the ambient sounds of the foundry, and excerpts from the writings of Gertrude Stein. Through their combination, these elements are transformed into a poetic meditation.

In voice-over, the filmmaker asks a mould-maker of twenty-five years how he deals with the repetition of his job. The footage shows men in the foundry as they go about their work, the images appearing full-frame and then in split-screen, the same image multiplied or different images paired

together. The repetition of this work is surely a horrible weight, a deadening burden. But as we continue to watch, the repeated motions of the workers become a kind of dance. The split-screen images form different patterns and combinations; the same footage is played against itself in the manner of a round. There is a timeless, even serene quality to the scene.

The filmic devices of superimposition and multiple images are no mere trick employed to please our wandering attention spans, but integral to the structure and theme of the film. They draw our attention to other facets of repetition, its role in pattern and music. In its construction, *Opus 40* is like a piece of music, a theme and variations, developing its basic statement with increasing complexity. Both image and sound build to a crescendo, the images becoming blurred, layered and distorted; the sounds a cacophony. In the closing refrain, the film returns to the quiet of the previous scenes as the voice-over intones: "This is now a description of such a way of hearing, seeing, feeling, living, loving repetition...."

We are left with an ambivalent response to the idea of repetition which hosts the dual possibilities of monotony and beauty. Sternberg suggests that each of us makes a choice at each moment of our living; that our participation in the ever-repeating rituals of life may be crushing or may offer dignity and clarity. The invitation to dance is ours to accept.

"If they get deadened by the steady pounding of repeating, they will not learn from each one, even though each one always is repeating the whole of them." Gertrude Stein, The Making of Americans

transitions

Mike Zyrd



Transitions [1982] is the most dreamlike of Sternberg's films. It centres, as its lone visual text tells us, on the "purgatory" between sleeping and waking, that interstice of the conscious and the unconscious most vivid for the insomniac. Superimposition is the main filmic device, allowing for a dense but delicate layering (sometimes as many as four superimpositions at once) over the recurring image of a woman, dressed in white, laying down and sitting up on a bed. This stream of the film is looped and manipulated, sometimes superimposed over itself, with what could be called a nervous rhythm – in subtle contrast to the gentler motion of accompanying shots of a snowscape, train tracks, waves at sea. Some images, like the sudden intercuts to a swarm of bees, are disturbingly surreal.

This urge to mimic the suspended time of insomnia is underscored by the soundtrack. It begins with the sound of wind, growing progressively louder, then fading to silence, followed by a growing host of women's whispering voices. These voices, like ripples on the surface of a pool of water, both amplify and cancel each other out; their quality as sound is as important as the meaning of the words they carry. We catch snippets of sentences; some cast as a refrain ("I've got to go to bed."; "Change, change."), some shooting through with resonant clarity ("When I dream, there are no gaps.") These musings are alternately quotidian and philosophical, fascinating for the conceit that a meditation on time can inspire a loss of our ability to order and control our experience of time.

Excerpt from "Barbara Sternberg" in Recent *Work from the Canadian Avant-Garde* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Jonasson/Shedden. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1988.

a trilogy

Andre de Palma



A Thilegy 1985

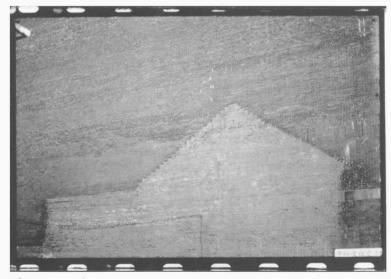
A leitmotif: the progress of a man, running through the countryside, towards his destiny. The rhythm of his gait is in harmony with that of our hearts, and the days which follow one another. Yes, life evolves as an irreversible but repetitive process: the right foot following the left, day after night, death after birth. The running of the man shows us the drama of our world. This is the beginning and the end of the movie, the first movement of a symphony. This theme never really disappears, but returns in various guises. It discovers itself in a succession of morning scenes; sometimes in the form of a young boy rolling down a hill, sometimes even in the duplication of the emptiness into life and death.

This multimedia movie is also a book, an album of pictures, a radio broadcast, a symphony, a hallucinogen. It proposes stories – various independent themes which are in conflict with one another and yet form a complete whole. The author communicates metaphysical doubts regarding the world and her place in it. How does her alienation relate to the repetitions of daily life, as opposed to the sacred repetition of ritual?

The answers come in images – unique, mythical, attaching the disorder of our emotions to the past. The film speaks to us of "primitive" rituals and shows us our modern ones, which are no less astonishing. Then the running changes into a pursuit, a flight away from the past towards the unknown, always accompanied by the silent and forceful message of nature's forces. To run this lonely path, in the shadow of our destiny, abducted by the time which carries us towards death, a time which measures and reassures us, shaped by Nature but at the same time outside of it, this is what the film leaves us with. Everything.

tending towards the horizontal

Robert Everett-Green



Tending towards the Horizontal 1988

Tending Towards the Horizontal's [1988] footage consists of tracking shots of houses and other buildings, a horizontal movement that has considerable symbolic resonance for Sternberg. A train is described in the voice-over as "moving horizontal through the darkness," after which the same voice remarks that "light is new, darkness is old." Several of Sternberg's house images display light as an obscuring element, bleaching out the forms and colours. Sternberg is on the side of darkness, the old, original matter of life. Nature, the oldest of old things, is personalized, while the human figures of the voice-over are neutral: "she" and "the person." Somewhere in between are the houses, appearing at times like Heidegger's metaphoric house of being, at others like objects for serialist manipulation, the leavings of someone else's experience. A voice-over narrative describing a woman in a library explains: "She reads only what others have left behind."

Its feminism is subtle – indeed it seems hard to believe that a film dominated by housing facades could be feminist at all. Yet the feminist theme of bodily reality is present nonetheless, so that when an image of the body finally appears, it seems almost a relief. The world, the house, the body – it's difficult in this scheme of things to decide where the boundaries should lie.

Excerpt from "An act of fearless self-exploration," The Globe and Mail, November 17, 1988.

transitions:
sternberg in the eighties:
an interview

Mike Hoolboom

Barbara Sternberg: I never thought of myself as an artist because I don't have that kind of background. The only work I'd made was very personal, and I never thought about it much beyond giving it to the people I'd made it for. I made things for anniversaries and birthdays. I made books for my parents which used photos and texts in ways that are pretty similar to the way I work now. But because it was for the family, I never ... I just liked doing it.

The first film I made was with my father's 16mm camera. My husband at the time didn't have any home movies and barely any photographs from his growing-up; so I wanted to make him this home movie, to create a past for him. But I never thought of it as filmmaking or art or anything. He was a football player, and I would watch the games and sit through these boring halftime shows. So I came up with some ideas to make them better and wrote a script and approached a television station, which bought it. I couldn't believe it. But when they aired it, they showed the usual visuals, which made the whole thing boring again. I decided to go to Ryerson Polytechnic to learn how to make films so I could tell people more clearly what I wanted them to do. But once I was there, I didn't think at all about industrial film; I just started making stuff in a way I would later learn to call "experimental." It was the way I worked, the way I think. I didn't want film to be just a recording mechanism, simply translating literature or theatre.

Mike Hoolboom: And when you left school ...

BS: I was committed to film on some level but left without the confidence to make work. I was a non-person there; no one ever looked at my stuff.

So when I left, I just went back into myself. I think it was good in a way. I turned to super-8 instead of 16mm because I didn't take myself seriously as a "filmmaker." I went back to teaching high school. I made little super-8 films which often involved my son and my husband because they were around. I made my own motorcycle film à la Kenneth Anger, and a karate film – small editing exercises which were never shown.

The marriage ended and I moved to New Brunswick. I was teaching at a community arts centre, and started making little things in super-8 with the boats, the shapes of the waves, the rhythms of the water. Just to do it. Then I made *Opus 40* [1979]. It was about the people in the foundry there. Then I made *Transitions* [1982]. David Poole saw them. He was working at the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. He said, "Why don't you distribute this?" But I never thought that I was making them to show others. I think I do better that way. The first film I got a grant for was *A Trilogy* [1985] and I felt watched, like there were expectations, that it should be something people want to see. I think it tightened me up. Even now I feel better when no one knows I'm doing anything.

MH: Tell me about Opus 40.

BS: The arts centre where I taught had a goal of using the arts to help students think creatively, and to involve them in an artmaking that made sense with their living. One of these projects brought us into the foundry. There were two main employers in Sackville – the foundry and the university. Often at school, the foundry kids seemed divided from their family life. So we went to the foundry altogether as a school. There were two parts to the

foundry – an old one and a new one. The old one made moulds out of earth imported from France. They would pack the earth down and pour molten iron over it which hardened to form parts for wood-burning stoves. The modernized foundry made electrical stoves, but we were interested in the older foundry. It had used the same process since 1837, and the men who worked there thought of themselves more as craftsmen than the assembly line workers in the modern plant. So we brought the kids in and they drew the men's gestures, or made rubbings, or sound collages with interviews of their parents. All the material was collected from the life that was there.

I liked coming into the foundry and wanted to ask the men about repetition and, finally, to make a film about it. I was thinking about habit, ritual, the sun rising daily. Both the building and the work it contained were very repetitious. So I made a plan on paper and interviewed the men. Opus 40 isn't my fortieth film; it's a reference to their forty-hour work week. It starts out as if it's going to be a documentary. The camera moves into the factory cinéma-vérité style, and you hear a voice asking, "How long have you been working at the foundry? Which area do you prefer?" And then the film begins to perform its own form of repetition - the image divides and divides again. Then the interviewer asks, "How do you handle the repetition?" But there's no answer on the soundtrack. You don't hear the voice-over again until the end. The film cuts to an image split in half, with the workers on the top and black on the bottom. I thought of the black part like a bass rhythm in music. My plan was to show a single man working in both parts of the image, top and bottom, only shot at different times. It would be the same gestures, only making different moulds. So it wouldn't be a strict repetition,

but almost. This was all done in-camera. I'd borrowed a Fuji super-8 camera, which allows you to rewind. I'd rigged up a matte box and stuck paper in it to block out parts of the image or introduce coloured filters. I wanted to embody the process of repetition in my gestures, so it wouldn't be as if: oh, they do that, and I make films. Because film is founded on repetition. The claw runs up and down, the shutter goes round, and I'm moving these filters in and out of the box. I never used the best footage I shot - the pouring off of the moulds in the afternoon – because it didn't fit my plan. It was too beautiful. That's one of the differences in the way I work. I don't like to use images that are monumental or create a sense of awe in the viewer. I think the first time it clicked in me was seeing a Herzog film which just reeked of the Beautiful. I was so impressed. It was about filmmaking and power on a big scale, and about what he had to go through to get these shots. But there's a certain contrivance which ensures that everything in the frame is a carefully made image. I feel better keeping things smaller and rougher. My stuff works through an accumulation of the everyday, more through a glance than a look, less a controlling gaze than an observational one.

What you hear is the sound of the foundry slowly giving way to the sound of the projector. Then I took the split image and shot it off the wall to create further repetitions in the image, and this move is followed on the soundtrack where the sound is channelled through an echo machine where it's made to double on itself. The image becomes more fraught, as if all the days of their working were happening at once. Then I repeat the question, "How do you handle the repetition?" And the man answers, "What do you mean?" [laughs] It's so wonderful. He says, "I come in every day. I have so many

moulds to make and I do this task." He's been here for twenty-five years, and for him the work doesn't have the negative labels we might attach to it. Gertrude Stein wrote that the history of each of us comes out in our repeating. Repetition can become deadening when you don't notice all the small differences in it. I thought the workers might complain, but they didn't.

Opus was invited to a MayWorks screening which annually celebrates labour in art. All of the films in the program were documentaries complaining about working conditions. Except mine, which was experimental. Some people were angry, saying, "How dare you make a film that accepts this? Why aestheticize this experience?" I didn't take the opportunity of filming to help change conditions at the foundry. Whether a film could really change them or not is another issue. I felt if we could come back to being connected with our labour, we would be more human. The film is an experience of repetition and not finally about their work. The film is not about something; it is something.

Opus came out of notions of repetition that were more intellectual than lived. In *Transitions*, I wanted to make something more personal. I always felt there was a timelag between events and their recording, that events in film were inevitably a re-creation. Film suits memory very well: its making is always a going back. But I wanted to make something that wasn't over before I made it. I wondered if I could make a film about the present – a perceptual documentary, perhaps. I would recognize things I saw as "right" and film them – the evidence of wind on snowbanks, or water, or hay, for instance. But, again, I didn't want to shoot it like Nature Beautiful. No capitals. You write in your journal, you collect bits of film, you talk to people

and, at some point, it comes together enough to think: oh, this is a film. I was thinking about a state of transition which is characterized by the fact that nothing is singular or clear. I felt there should be a lot of motion, that the film should never rest so you couldn't make easy orientations. I wanted to layer images for the same reason; so you can't just make out a single moment – the way your mind works. When you're agitated, the past, present and future, if there are such divisions, are going on at the same time. So I had these fragments and some ideas about how to treat them. But I needed something to unify the material. So I made a narrative ground. I shot a woman in white on a bed, who's sleepless and agitated. There are other images of her as well – walking on a river bank with a guy, someone touching her face, her in a restaurant, sitting in a chair with her knees up. But I worried that the central image of her in bed would overdetermine the other images, that they would be read as her dreams or something like that.

MH: There's a very brief shot of her walking with a man and, all of a sudden, the whole film aligns itself around this image. There's been a relationship, but now she's alone and can't sleep. Obviously they've broken up. Why? She's having nightmares; something about her past. And I wondered at how little it takes to make a story, and how much it takes to conjure something else.

BS: *Transitions* came out of waking up afraid every day. Terrified. That's what occasioned the film. I wondered why we had to get up, to face every fucking day. Some societies create this feeling of disorientation and fear and confusion as part of an initiation rite which provides passage from one

state to another. For me, it was something else. The soundtrack consists of two voices whispering. The difference between the two is that one is talking about personal things taken from my journal, while the other is quoting from a physics text. The journal stuff talked about the face of my mother. One day I just realized how long I'd spent looking into her face so I wrote about ...

MH: How much of her life was in her face?

BS: How much of her face was in my life. [laughs] Later, the same voice describes a conversation where my mother says, "He's your husband. Do what he says – it won't hurt you to meet his parents."

MH: This track is a lot more buried than the other one. I've never heard any of this stuff after seeing the film a dozen times or more.

BS: I was more concerned with having a personal tone than having details spelled out. A friend of mine felt the film was about the space women occupy between mother and husband – neither is tenable. She described the film in terms of a power relation I hadn't thought of. The woman in the film wants to live in the present without the expectations of the future or the visitations of the past. To be awake to life – not back in the womb or sleepwalking. Sometimes the voice carries minute descriptions of physical activities – walking, for instance – to try to get the mind to focus completely on the sensations of the present. The last line asks, "Do we have to be aware of every moment?" In all my work, I feel it's too dishonest to provide a resolution – as if I have the answers. So she stays on the edge of the bed. The film whites out and leaves us with the question and her with the choice.

MH: I felt the two voices come together in the line that asks, "What more frightening thing could there be than there is a present moment?" I understood this as the possibility of an infinite present, that the next instant I could think or do something that might continue for the rest of my life, that the images we make constitute a place of perfect memory, where we can return to these consequences, where we can learn to travel in time.

BS: Yes, the clearest memories I have are in photographs. This film, like *Opus 40*, is also about repetition. What's memory if not the order of our repetition? Or history? Or identity?

MH: Let's talk about A Trilogy [1985].

BS: It's framed by a woman at the edge of a pool. It opens with her about to dive in and closes with her dive. The second shot of the film runs eight continuous minutes and shows a man running along a dirt road. The road is tree-lined and narrow, so it's as if he's traversing this passageway. The camera tracks alongside him. A male voice-over recites fragments from a story: "Duration didn't come into it." Or just: "Time. Water." Things like that. There's suggestions of death. I actually asked him to talk about what it would feel like to drown and cut his response into fragments. A scrolling text follows which lists historical events. Then there are six kitchen scenes that show a couple in the morning before they go off to work. You hear bits of dialogue about whether the repairman is coming, or who's driving whom to work. Then a baby carriage is introduced, and a baby which each of them take turns feeding. Meanwhile, news reports relate an airplane crash at sea. A second text follows. This time, instead of a list, it takes the form of a narrative which relates the initiation rites of an African tribe. In order to

prepare him for adulthood, a boy is circumcised while the villagers mourn him as if he had died. He is cast out and goes through this harrowing experience; then is renamed and told about the existence of the Tree of Knowledge. The next section follows a young boy running up Silbery Hill in England, which is a neolithic mound, a fertility symbol. Like *Transitions*, this section is pictured in layers – images seen in superimposition. So we see the boy on the hills rolling through images of water, and volcanoes erupting, and a pregnant woman – archetypal images. This sequence culminates in the cutting of the umbilical cord.

MH: Doesn't it suggest that each separation replays this initial loss of the mother?

BS: It's cyclical. We've been listening to letters from the mother to the boy which lead us to the cord's cutting and then we hear the boy's voice for the first time. He's talking about his choices for the next year, his subjects at school. I thought it would be too utopian to show him being free. He comes into his own, but he does so inside a system. The world is organized into subjects of knowledge – geography, history, math. A third scrolling text follows with a list of questions. Then the three stories – the man running, the couple in the kitchen, and the little boy – all find their endings. The man runs up a hill, and the camera stops and lets him move towards the horizon. The couple is always seen in the morning; but today is Sunday, so for the first time they're not getting ready for work. You can see the backyard, and she takes the baby in her arms and goes out of doors. The boy runs up the hill and rolls down without the intervention of the other image layers. The woman dives into the water and the film ends. Over the closing credit, a piano is heard, practising scales, continually missing and beginning again.

MH: The film brings different people together with experiences that they've either forgotten or never learned how to remember. It seems especially directed towards the males in the film who are always running, unable to look back and take account of what's passed.

BS: I was thinking of the running as "living" – for which we can't know the beginning or end. Five years after I finished the film, I read *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. The author posits that the male world of work and enterprise is based on two things. First, to create a world distinct from the mother who provides our first experience of ourselves when we're powerless. We escape this lack of power by latching onto the "not-woman" – the man. The father doesn't remind us of this period of helplessness. The male world of work is founded on signing, on creating identity, and an important aspect of that is to control women, to exert power over them. Second, the world of enterprise is part of our denial of death. Even when women enter that world, they do it vicariously through the achievements of sons or husbands. Or they do it in support – the women behind great men – as secretary or nurse. So they're allowed in, but only beneath men. Her thesis is that until you have both men and women nurturing children through that helpless stage of the first couple of years, this will continue.

MH: But aren't these polarities drawn together through memory? To remember or bring back again is an acknowledgment of death. Because going back always returns to the acknowledgment of those already dead.

BS: The child dies to become an adult, but the mother dies also. The rituals that remain to us negotiate this passage between states. These old rituals of earth mounds and fire and water aren't active for us anymore. Even as I

put them in the film, I did it with the understanding that they weren't the same for us as the builders of mounds or carvers of rock. But there's something that remains, and these traces are felt in our everyday life. We don't have to go somewhere else to find the mystery of that connectedness. It's always there. We have flashes of it – some image, some moment that stays with us. Unaccountably.

The couple who appear as if out of an advertisement for the desirable life are finally animated by the presence of a child. It's not the only signal of life's mysteries, but it's an obvious one. We don't have many rituals. We have habits. But a child brings us closer to something else. I wanted to fill the film with the mystery of the everyday, of those moments which we haven't learned how to attach words to yet, when you feel everything is different but you don't know what it is – like the hair on the back of someone's neck or a young girl running across the road. You feel something, like memory, or the understanding of those already dead.

MH: I felt that the camera pans over Silberry Hill and the child's rolling ascents and descents marked a reinvention of ritual. The camera passes over this landscape again and again. Your son finally appears inside these pans, as if lured by this rhythm, and the two of you begin a kind of dance. You have flown across the world to bring him to this hill, to a place where you can impart some last understanding – the memory of your time together; that night of nine months. He shows in his rolling over earth that he remembers the unmistakable connection between the two of you, and understands also that it is time for him to leave. It's a remarkable section.

BS: It's as if the hill is trying to reclaim him, as if he's trying to be free of it. The woman's voice is trying to hold him at the same time, and then he has to let go. Separate.

MH: Did you get any kind of support for this work?

BS: I got money for the first time – my first grant. I came to Toronto late in 1984, just after I thought the film was finished. I had a fine cut and was ready to mix. Then I found out all my tracks were no good because they'd been transferred improperly. I thought I would die. So I retransferred the sound, cut it back again, and started making changes. Then I started changing the picture again, redid the mix, and finally released it the next year.

MH: It's a film that's done very well.

BS: In terms of experimental film, I've been fortunate. But the fact that it's been programmed doesn't necessarily give me confidence that people think a lot about it.

MH: Why is it being selected then?

BS: Moving to Toronto introduced me to the politics of exhibition – how and why certain works get picked. A lot of it is who gets chosen. I think my early films were considered good apart from the identity of their maker. There wasn't as much consciousness about being a woman artist. Now we're in a very self-conscious phase of change. Because my work was

taken up by a largely male faction, I was ignored by feminists for a time, as if I'm part of a male thing. Or perhaps my films aren't as "feminist" in subject matter. There are also considerations of race. All this helps to open the canon up, remove its stronghold, but it's complicated. The danger, of course, is "political correctness" being adhered to mindlessly. I see other filmmakers much more active in getting screenings for their work, but I haven't done that and I don't care to. Some people are smarter about distributing their work than making it. There's a lot of energy that goes into seminars and posters and distribution these days.

MH: Does this focus on distribution signal a shift?

BS: The equation of money with value predominates and that's a problem. I'm not trying to romanticize poverty, but does money make the art better? Give it more substance and impact? The sense of surface and advertising that permeates our world is also permeating our work. Which is not to say we should live in shit, but this feeling that making slicker work makes us better artists is not necessarily true.

MH: Do we need an audience for this work – do numbers matter? Is there a certain point where public attention wanes so completely that you have to say: okay, let's pull the plug on this. What if no one comes?

BS: That's fine. Then I'll make it for myself. I think the work has an effect nonetheless. Things exist in the world. Look at Gertrude Stein – she was forced to publish most of her work herself. And her writing continues to be felt. I don't think its implications have yet been realized. But the fact that

she wrote what she did, when she did, changed everything. Which is not to argue for dead authors. But if she'd made the decision to stop working based on her audience, she never would have written anything.

MH: Why is it important to make fringe film?

BS: Why is it important to do anything? I just do it. What sustains public attention isn't necessarily good. It's better for me to make this work than do horrible things to people. If the role of art is to ask us to go deeper, to remember certain things, where else is it going to come from, apart from art? Is it going to come from a film that supports the status quo even as it's attempting to critique it? Even if it's against the Gulf War, for instance, but takes shape as a sponsored television documentary, this work still supports the system. It begs certain questions the filmmaker can't afford to hear because finally their work needs to sell.

MH: Tell me about Tending Towards the Horizontal [1988].

BS: I was in Moncton, New Brunswick, walking past houses, and there was that moment, you know, of looking up when something just clicked, and two years later it was *Tending*. Around that experience, I began to collect material about houses and bodies, reading books that seemed to relate. I didn't want to use images as symbols the way *A Trilogy* did. I wanted the image to be more incidental, to cast away the signifier. I wanted to communicate something else. I didn't want someone to view the image as a series of identifications of words – house, person, car, building. I didn't want someone to read the film; I wanted someone to see it. So I was col-

lecting images I knew I had to have without quite knowing why. Then I met the Acadian writer, Frances Daigle. She had seen some of my films and said she'd like to work with me. I thought this would be a good way to allow the words and pictures to become more fully themselves – to let her write the words for the soundtrack, and for me to make the images.

The film pictures houses, initially presenting them as they are, and moving to a point where they become light, shadow and colour. For their occupants, these architectures mean "home" but for a passerby, they remain a divide – a line between inside and out. Something is going on in there, but I'm out here, and the structure that's holding us apart is endless and immovable. So I took the light of the window, the orange light, and allowed it to fill the whole frame so that we could see the scene inside out. The film describes the dissolution of these rigid structures until they become alternating passages of orange and blue light. The substantial and permanent is subject to change and transformation. These are the two colours natural to film, so the film's end signals a return to materials.

MH: On a scientific level, it would be that moment where you experience a table as a bunch of atoms. Was the architecture important?

BS: When a child draws a house, she or he makes a rectangle with a triangle over the top. The opening houses look like that. In the middle section, I wanted houses that were increasingly covered by foliage and vines, that showed some merging of architecture and surround. A newspaper reviewer wrote that they were "middle-class" homes, but I wasn't thinking about that. I was simply thinking "house." But in Toronto now, everything recalls class, race and gender.

MH: Throughout *Tending* I felt we could be looking at anything. The show of houses was immaterial. This seemed the real aim of the film – to do away with the fact that the image "stood for" something. Maybe we could say that the film is crafted out of a certain kind of knowing, a way of living in the world. It's like the woman described in the voice-over who sits in the library reading any book. She doesn't care which one, because the feeling she carries is already there. How did you arrive at the title *Tending Towards the Horizontal*?

BS: At a certain point, I'd shot footage that had a split image, like in *Opus 40*, but now split horizontally and vertically. I was trying to choose between the two and finally discarded them both. But before I did, I remember saying to a friend, "Oh, I think I'm tending towards the horizontal." And she said, "That's the title of your film." [laughs] I don't give a lot of time to titles. For some people, the title is the work. Some people's titles are so fabulous, I don't need to see the films.

MH: You called your new film At Present [1990]. How did it start?

BS: I was teaching, so I didn't have a lot of time to work on film, but I wanted to keep my hand in. I had this footage I liked and wanted to make something with. I kept seeing all these male Toronto filmmakers making work about love. So my film is a response to these films. It has three sections. The first shows four individuals in four settings – two men and two women. All four are framed by houses – a man in a doorway looking out of the house he built; a man smoking; a woman who alternates between picking through broken glass and potting flowers; and a woman sweeping a studio floor. The soundtrack over each relates a parable. Then there's a

House Beautiful-type of apartment, and I run into the shot because one of the features of these male films is that they would always appear in their own films, so I thought I had to show myself somehow. So there I am primping in a chair, trying to fit myself into a life where I obviously don't belong. In the course of making the film, I interviewed a number of men about love. One voice-over begins with an evocation of media clichés – he talks about falling in love in Paris, about the Hollywood romance contained in *Casablanca*, and about his childhood in Niagara Falls, which remains the honeymoon capital of the world. Then there's a chorus, or middle section, where another male voice asks, "What's involved in love? Is it power – is that what we're talking about?" With a single exception, all the voices in the film are male because I wanted to make a film about love that men would hear. If I had women talking, men would think it's a woman's problem.

MH: So this is a film addressed to men?

BS: Well, both men and women really, but for men to hear better, they had to be addressed in their own voice. As the voice-over continues to speak about the body and its traces, the images change. They move outside now. They're not so enclosed, and you don't see as many couples. People are in more contact with their environment. We see people setting fire to a field and a woman's voice reciting from R.D. Laing: "They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I know the rules, they will punish me. I must play the game of not showing I know how to play the game." Another male voice begins, more tentative than the last, accompanied by the rising sound of women laughing. The burning field is superimposed on a number of naked men taken from pornographic maga-

zines. Another voice intercedes. It says, "Love, hate, he, she – it's all the same, isn't it?" The images of fire return to the apartment with a series of snap zooms which break open the space so that the house structure, which is the support structure of this coupling, opens up to another formulation of love which is more encompassing. The film turns to light and the talking becomes laughing. The beginning of the film shows an Aboriginal man opening his mouth as if screaming or calling, and the last shot shows a contemporary – an older man from this society – again in silence, and he's looking out at the audience, and then he makes this little smile. This smile is really the beginning.

MH: To risk an obvious question: why an Aboriginal? He feels like the image equivalent of "once upon a time" – a kind of prelude to this male intercourse. His silent shout evokes a flash of light which lands us inside a Toronto living room. At present.

BS: I remembered that shot from a television documentary I saw in Saint John eight years ago. I didn't know why, but I knew I had to have that shot – it was the only one I took intentionally for the film. So I tracked it down and shot it off the Steenbeck. It was important that it was a shout and that you heard nothing, that there's an expression coming from the mouth that wasn't words – because the rest of the film was full of words. It comes before the title because it's before language, in a way, like laughter is before or beyond words. What did you think of the film? You're in it.

MH: It's your best work. The light is clearer and the montage is lovely and always unexpected. I could move alongside the changes without feeling

either that I was being hijacked or completely disoriented. It struck a number of very different emotional registers and managed to negotiate them with a real elegance. It also has the angriest section I've ever seen in your work, which you pointedly ignored in your description of the film – a section which plays over my voice-over. It shows a number of gay porn images of men – naked, erect and burning; mutilated by fire.

BS: Or "on fire," "burning," "hot." The fire theme was introduced with the burning fields, which are set ablaze every spring to burn off old grass and supply nutrients for new growth. This burning field footage was actually from an artist's [Bill Vazin] site piece. Art, fire, spirituality ... layers of meaning. As to the choice of male nudes, I wanted to show men what it was like to show their bodies, so I put their bodies up there. As if they're images of love, or whatever the excuses are for always doing that to women. As if they were about anything but power. The film is moving toward a more open and encompassing view of love which is no longer oriented to some exclusive "I love you." This section marks a regression. It speaks of division and the objectification that comes out of fear. But there's a lot of laughing in the film, even in that section. So you could say that women have the last laugh.

MH: And the title?

BS: I was going to call it "Love Me." [laughs] I called it *At Present* because it's like the end of a sentence – the way we are at present. This is sort of where we're at, a news report on the state of love. It's also a questioning of where the present is. Is the present the Aboriginal image that opens the film or the apartment that it moves to? Which are we present to?

MH: People are usually featured in *At Present* moving in a directionless isolation, like much of your previous work. *Tending* is a road movie – going where? Your son is running up the hills of England only to roll down again. The sleeper in *Transitions* never leaves the bed, though there's a constant flow of images. The worker in *Opus 40* is always in motion but always appears to be doing the same thing.

BS: But that's all there is. There's no place to go. I make films that I wouldn't like as a viewer. I wouldn't go to my own films. The stuff I like is not the stuff I make. I like Snow's work. I like conceptualist, minimalist work. And yet my work is multi and messy and accumulates meaning through fragments which are layered and more personal. Seeing work and making it are two entirely different things.

MH: Do you think criticism is important for film?

BS: Because film exists only in the time of its projection, it's crucial that there be writing. Writing endures. It gives work continuity. Many more people have read about Mike Snow's films than have actually seen them. It's given that work an existence it wouldn't have otherwise. But who will write? Maybe criticism should come from other filmmakers – but the way we show our work is no good for discussion. And filmmakers don't speak to each other about their work. We're afraid. People work alone. Personally, I get confused by other people's opinions while I'm working. Painters make reams of work that never gets seen. But that's a weakness in film; if you make it, it has to be seen – with a poster and press and stuff. I think we shouldn't worry about it so much. There's lots of work and what's good will stay around somehow. And if not, so what?



perception through process

Tim Dallett



Through and Through 1992

Through and Through [1992] reflects on the nature of perception and its relationship to film as a medium intrinsically in motion. The filmmaker has said she is concerned with how we situate ourselves in perception: her films aim to be "true" to the human process of seeing. And they are.

The very real achievement of *Through and Through* is its construction of a completely original equivalence of image. In Sternberg's films, sequences of images are given life and reality through specific strategies of motion, layering, montage and repetition. Images never crystallize into static, precious compositions, but rather change and overlap in response to an intensely physical sense of rhythm. This strategy puts an image's "informational" content to one side, rendering it in visual terms. This "rendering visual" defers, rather than denies, an image's availability for metaphoric or symbolic interpretation by the viewer. Such "evenness" and "visual equivalence" is all the more surprising and refreshing since it is achieved entirely outside the bombastic nihilism of 1980s discourse on the profusion of equivalent (and equivalently meaningless) images in contemporary culture.

Sternberg's work is typically "Canadian" – diffident, hesitant, restrained. It reworks familiar themes of Canadian culture – landscape, visual perception (particularly in relation to the film apparatus), memory and identity with a diligent, ethical intelligence that gathers authority as the film builds. The work emerges from a rigorous understanding of the potential and authenticity of film as a medium, but its ultimate significance seems to me to lie in its proposition of visual "truth" as something indirect, provisional, and subject to revision – yet also urgent, necessary and valid.

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living the everyday as history

Barbara Godard



Transitions 198

In the six films she has publicly shown to date, Barbara Sternberg has pursued a self-reflective exploration of the filmic medium, of the properties of light (the camera as "pencil of light") and movement (images repeated in series), in tandem with a meditation on the quotidian in both its evanescence, scarcely graspable, and its repetitiveness, possibly deadening yet with the potential for ritual. An emotionally evocative image from daily occurrences or familiar objects is seen in a glance, uncomposed, unlit, "de-aesthetic" – a sort of "reality principle" according to Sternberg. At the same time, by repetition, this image is an abstraction, subject to treatment, to superimpositions of images or combinations with sound-images in a layering or cumulative effect that shifts the relations for the image, opening new possibilities for something beyond. Images are gathered like leitmotifs and replayed in different combinations under different lightings, emphasizing the role of composition as selection, distribution and ordering. Like music, Sternberg's films affect through their rhythmic pulse.

Rhythm is central to Sternberg's project, orchestrating her editing. Rhythmic, rather than informational, concerns determine cuts. In fact, rhythm is what she shoots – people moving, waves lapping, light flickering – and is foregrounded in the way she shoots, in her camera action, differences in camera movement and framing, constituting the difference between the segments structuring *A Trilogy* [1985], for example, or the focus on horizontal movements in *Tending Towards the Horizontal* [1988]. What this highlights is the interconnectedness of themes and material treatment in Sternberg's films. Form is content, content is form. An angle of the camera is a take on the world. As Sternberg says, in film "(w)e observe and

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in observing shape. That's what cinema does well, shifting the angle of vision as the camera moves around an object getting at different angles of it which a still photo can't get at. ... In film you can bring all of these different angles of vision or perspective together, spread over time. And of course, the reality is shaped in this constructing."

In this consideration of the way in which the object is modified in relation to the angle from which it is viewed may be recognized Sternberg's perennial concern with repetition. Her interest in the process of representation in relation to a concern with what is represented, with the work of repetition and the repetition of work, emerges as early as *Opus 40* [1979]. This film begins as a documentary about work in a foundry; then, when it starts repeating as the screen splits, the film loops, moves into a concern with the medium of representation itself, the twenty-four frames per second of projection time. The sound is no longer the factory noise, nor a voice repeating the words of Gertrude Stein about repetition as knowing about the world and the importance of perceiving subtle variations and distinctions, but the projector itself. Attentiveness to the differences between the separate frames makes one aware of movement, of change, while the extent to which they are the same, combining to make a shot, produces continuity.

Through this investigation of repetition, Sternberg engages in an extended meditation on temporality. Most visible in the title of *At Present* [1990] and in one of the voice tracks of *Transitions* [1982] which quotes from a physics text on time and motion, this is not a concern with metaphysics but rather with embodied time: time as it is lived and felt in bodies, both those of actors and spectators; time as rhythm. These may be variously the rhythms of anxiety and ambivalence in *Transitions* or the gendered differences

between the single travelling shot of an adult male runner and the multiple exposure of image fragments of a young boy, close still to the feminine, in *A Trilogy*. Through the concern with layering, with the simultaneity of multiple images, of multiple angles on images, of non-oppositionality, through an awareness of the complex process of assemblage and the arts of combination, there is a reaching toward something larger than the self, something Sternberg qualifies as "excess," a contemporary mode of the sublime. Here, differences no longer divide but intersect, generate. Any transcendental strains in this embracing of the whole are undercut by Sternberg's insistence on everyday detail and on processes which do not incorporate, exclude, but exfoliate, transform. As Sternberg pithily says: "I shy away from the monumental."

"It is composition," writes Gertrude Stein (a writer often quoted in Sternberg's films), "that changes from generation to generation." The transformative possibilities when one thing begins to move into another are what interest Sternberg in the filmic medium; play with twice-told tales, shifting perspectives, the generation from one print to another print that produces slippage, blurring, change. In this way, Sternberg, as she says, makes "home movies," as conceived by Jonas Mekas, mov(i)es to bring the spectator "home, where the soul resides," to an awareness of perception and framing, of how different stances on the world in/form differences in perception. Changing the emphasis, insistence, or composition, in Stein's terms, or shifts in perspective and syntax, implicate political questions, especially those of gender. As Stein suggests about her own role, she was able as a woman to do the "only real literary thinking" of the century, because she related not to a historical tradition but "to a particular way of seeing."

Sternberg's project has been to explore the particularities of her way of seeing - her femaleness, her Jewishness, her Canadianness - living at a specific moment in history. Specifically, in *Through and Through* [1992], she is concerned with the complexities of living fully in the present while also living historically. Her engagement with temporality has affinities with the temporal modalities Julia Kristeva notes in Women's Time [1981] as measures apt for female subjectivity, notably those of "repetition" and "eternity." Differentiated from the linear conception of time, time as unfolding, as project and teleology, articulated as departure, progression and arrival - time as history, moving towards death - are "monumental temporality." which is all-encompassing and eternal, linked traditionally to the maternal in the figure of the Virgin Mary, and "cyclical temporality," the rhythmic recurrence in nature whose "regularity" connects to cosmic time, "occasioning vertiginous visions" (Kristeva). Here, as Kristeva points out, the concerns of feminists rejoin the discourses of both mystical inspiration and contemporary science with their concept of a space-time in infinite expansion. This latter mode of temporality is most akin to Sternberg's concern with repetition and pattern: the rhythms of nature - cycles of blossoming and decay, of life and death, of birth, growth, and separation - order her films cyclically, especially Through and Through and A Trilogy. The latter film specifically reorders the linear male quest narrative, moving from manhood in the first section back to childhood, to birth, in the third, where there is an intimate contact with the earth and the mother established through the boy's rolling down the prehistoric mound of Silberry Hill.

However, it is less cyclic time than the more random processes of relativity, the ordering of association or contiguity, that inform Sternberg's perception

and framing. In this third part of the trilogy, the layering of multiple exposures, the juxtaposition of photographic stills, home movies, and the repeated take of the boy rolling on the green grass, develop a model of the mind working, combining, in a fluid, all-encompassing movement that is both her most characteristic filmic mode and a way of seeing marked by the feminine, framed here by the image of a woman swimmer plunging into the water. Such an economy of fluids is articulated by Luce Irigaray in This Sex Which Is Not One [1985] as the historically under-read with respect to a dominant economy of solids; an attention to objects and object relation, particularly to the phallus as object of desire; an insistence on thinking the symbolic as unity in the selfsame that has resulted in the exclusion of women. The flowing, the fluctuating, the blurring, the mixing, is always "in a relation of excess or lack vis-à-vis unity" and is concerned less with objects, with entities and identities, than it is with relations. Rather than focusing on reversible transformations in a closed circuit or repetition of a state of equilibrium that discounts the variable of time and sets up boundaries between entities, between subject and object, to form a subject within the borders of the selfsame, the economy of fluids overflows boundaries, unsettling them, establishing new connections, transformations, forcing open and depropriating in a focus on entities-in-relation, subjects in contingent relations, not self-contained and singular, but multiple, heterogeneous, not metaphysical but bordering on, touching on.

Such a subject-in-relation emerges in two different modalities in *Transitions* and *Through and Through* – films made almost a decade apart, though as their titles convey, concerned with the in-between. *Transitions* came out of Sternberg's waking with feelings of terror. It centres on the "purgatory"

between sleeping and waking, a trope suggestive of many power relations. A woman in white, sleepless and agitated, alternately lying on a white bed then perched on its edge (it is uncertain whether she is trying to get up or go back to sleep), is the recurring shot - looped and superimposed on itself in an increasingly jumpy rhythm - over which are layered as many as four superimpositions at once, a slower flow of images of nature (train tracks, waves, a snowscape, a swarm of bees) and of the woman (someone touching her face, her in a restaurant, sitting in a chair, walking on a riverbank with a man). Fragments of narrative not yet ordered as story, memories, imaginings, this web of images enacts the mind's work. When agitated, Sternberg suggests, past, present and future are jumbled in the same moment: no single thing can be distinguished. This is the formal trope that Stan Brakhage called, in relation to Transitions, "eidetic-beseeming-superimpositions," underlining the detail and precision of visual memory manifested in the images, their epiphanic intensity reinforced by the patterns of colour, shifting in increasingly rapid rhythms between blue and red and white. Refusing closure, the film circles back on itself, then whites out to suggest simultaneously the whiteness of the full spectrum of possibilities and the promise of yet another sleepless night. The spectators are left with a question, the woman with a choice. Will she be able to live fully in the present, awake to life, without ransoming the future or being haunted by the past? The last line asks, "Do we have to be aware of every moment?" The woman stays on the edge of the bed throwing the work of meaningmaking to the spectator as the screen goes white. Repetition in this film evokes constraint and transformation simultaneously. The complex texturing of the soundtrack underlines this ambiguity in its two whispering voices one quoting from Sternberg's journal about her mother's face, the other

quoting a physics text. The difference between subjective and objective time is accentuated in the end by the voices being moved slightly apart so they are heard as a tick-tock. Paradox further underlines the mechanics of force and motion when the voice-over alternates like a refrain between "It's windy. I think I'll go to bed." and "I must get up ... feel the wind." Disquietingly, this repeated contradiction enacts the push-pull, the feeling of being in transit, in movement between being and non-being, between past and future, between mother and husband; a woman caught in a power struggle, paralyzed by indecision.

While the final question about the present remains unanswered in Transitions, it is taken up once more in Through and Through. Indeed, "working through" is one of the possible meanings in the suggestive title that Sternberg activates to explore the problematic of simultaneously living totally (through and through) in the present moment (which is living "the eternal" and living historically as "of our time") and with a sense of our life as "(hi)story" - "through" understood here as both "repetition" and in relation "with." These latter connotations are important in Gertrude Stein's fiction Ida about the emergence of "I" in relation to "she," a working out of identity in the feminine as relational, processual, from which the title phrase is quoted. The citation is written on the screen in black on white in the opening and closing shots, circling back for a second run through: "Ida is her name. She was thinking about it she was thinking about life. She knew it was just like that through and through." Drawing on images from what is around, suggestive of this and any time, frame by frame, Sternberg interrupts them with speaking, filmed interchanges where the dialogue highlights conflicts and fears at this moment in time in order to address the question of how

we are situated. How does the perspective from which we live affect how we can live in our bodies within subjective and historical constraints?

Central to this constitution of a subjectivity-in-relation with the contemporary feminine is the printed line that appears on the screen in black and white in the latter part of the film: "Anne Frank died in March 1945. I was born March 24, 1945." Race is significant for this woman, facing the fears of death, of extermination, that shape the traditional Jewish narrative of slavery, exile and promised land in the specifics of the Holocaust's systematic genocide. That "I" can live is determined by the 1945 birth date. That such extermination might come again is entertained in the dramatic sections with dialogue. One features a man at a computer with his young son nearby, eventually trying out a typewriter, talking about his sense of responsibility to history, of how hundreds of other people are living their lives through him so that "at times my life seemed not to be my own." In a second sequence, he speaks of the daily horrors on TV which he cannot associate with the Holocaust, with what happened to his parents. This remains for him an unspeakable event, something that "should never happen again." His parents living through him, he living through his child - the effects of the epochal event of the Holocaust are measured in the lives and bodies, in the generation(s) of a particular family. Private and historical time intersect in another "interview" segment where a young woman comments on her difficult relations with her mother, the mother charging her with being just like her grandfather, a high-ranking Nazi, and heading for punishment. The girl responds angrily that she is tired of being blamed for starting the war, tired of bearing the burdens of the German past living through her. Other fleeting images show young people running in front of a sign on which is visible

the Star of David, evoking the many acts of anti-Semitic vandalism currently occurring in many countries, making real the threat of a repetition of past horrors.

On the question of gender, too, Sternberg examines all sides, looking at the different ways in which men and women struggle, the different rites for heroism. A list of women who died early of breast cancer appears in black and white on the screen, the verbal representation of this particular fear for contemporary women contrasting with the visual representation of brightly coloured, clear images of men engaged in a tug of war, a traditional ritual of masculine valour. It is through an earlier generation of women writers and feminist pioneers, many of them Jewish, that Sternberg herself is enabled in her creative struggle to make sense of the world. A succession of sepia still photographs of such notables as Amelia Earhart, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, offers a genealogy of creative women through whose work on the quotidian and the continuous present or epiphany Sternberg's films may be seen to have come into being, as a gesture toward the future. Situated as a woman, Sternberg creates the history of women's art that Virginia Woolf declared necessary in order for women to make art. Inventing a usable past involves seeing one's own life as history.

Moving around, breaking through, these meditations on human relation to events is a flow of silent images evoking a relation to nature, to cyclical and cosmic forces. Two types of imagery contrast: single shots in bright colours of leaves, flowers, stream, hill, rocks, etc. refilmed and developed to a fine-grain clarity, articulated in different rhythms following the cycle of the year from spring blossom through autumn leaf and snowy ground back to the

same bright forsythia blossoms, are intermingled with another set of images - some black and white, others coloured, both with a grainy texture and grayed colour as metonymy of the roughness of the lived - edited with smoothness to produce the effect of a pan or travelling, moving horizontally through an unpeopled landscape, ice flows, waves, into which people come briefly, as walkers and observers with binoculars and cameras. Self-reflexively, this underlines the camera's work as mediation, a way through to something else. These images convey both the ways in which humans are cut off from nature and the ways they seek to integrate with it. This tension is played out in the technique of shooting itself, the single frame giving rise to an epiphonic instantaneity and immediacy yet connecting discrete segments/moments to suggest a union with place, a simultaneity, in contradistinction to the fear and disjunction expressed by the narrative segments. Moreover, this technique produces a flickering or pulsing effect where the active energy of the projector's light is made visible. Sternberg refilms this footage in order to transmute the frenetic energy of the singleframe shot into a slower motion, akin to holding one's breath or entering a dreamlike trance. The cycles of nature interact with the momentariness of the single shot through the manipulation of the film to produce an illusion of the cosmic and counteract the loss and struggle of the evenemential. From these counterpointed movements come what Sternberg qualifies as the film's themes: awe in face of the world that goes on with or without us; power in the struggles against death or the buds on the tree against the wind; and love, as power from the recognition of being a part of something beyond the self. Fear comes in the absence of relation, from isolation and impermanency.

These epic gestures emerging from a meditation on the quotidian are nonetheless effects of surface, of work, both light and motion, on the raw film to produce this opening to the cosmic from the momentary. Meditating on "through" as both the relations (race, gender) ordering perspective and the material means (film) in which they are produced leads Sternberg to consider multiple connectors or the series. Serialism is a kind of indefinite experimentation that dismantles arrangements, an intensification producing a resonating disequilibrium that becomes an active force of undoing and recombining within social protocols of representation, derailing a system. This forces a reorganization within a regime of sign, realigning the networks, instituting transformations of the language acts that allocate subjects and signs their positions within an order of social obligations, within specific relations of law and desire, to introduce lines of variation, a dispersion of points of "subjective" observation throughout images of movement. Lines of escape in which may be ordered a virtual woman.

Barbara Sternberg makes films that set in place many complex networks, films that touch, that move, working to change perceptions, to reorder a world.

beating

Jeffrey Lambert



BEATING 199.

Sight and sound are central components of memory, and likewise of the cinema. With Beating [1995], Barbara Sternberg challenges our understanding of the relationship between memory and cinema by orchestrating a highly controlled flow of images and sounds that collide, fragment and flicker, creating a landscape of impressions that are both mystifying and provocative. At the same time, she deals with issues that are by no means easy to grapple with. Images of Nazis, sexual organs, lynched Jews, and a couple that appear to be involved in a dance that evokes a sexual struggle are just a few of the powerful images that stay with one long after the film is over. Sternberg's film has a twenty-five-part structure that at times hardly seems to exist because of the fluidity and purpose with which each shot meets the next. The depth of the filmic text (which borrows from texts of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Hélène Cixous and Hannah Arendt) is matched by the intricate depth of the projected images (many of which have gone through generations of optical printing) and sounds. The intellectualizing here never veers into pure abstraction; it is always grounded in the world, whether through the evocation of memory or through the images from nature. These moments of natural beauty and repose both contrast with and provide a reprieve from the density of the text itself; this repose, however, is one of continuous movement. While that may seem paradoxical, one must recognize that, although the film is never far from the beauty and colour of its sensuous imagery, it is also never far from its scratches; its black-and-white negative photography; and finally, the spectre of Nazism and the danger of forgetting the patriarchal seeds which bred it. Ultimately we are forced, through the strength of the images and the intensity of Sternberg's vision, to remember what we have seen, what we have heard, and what we have lived through in time.

Originally written as a Program Note for a San Francisco Cinematheque screening, March 14, 1996.

a letter to barbara sternberg

James Baker Hall

Dear Barbara Sternberg,

I'm one of those two you didn't know in the audience at your Millennium Film Theatre screening the other night in NYC, the older man directly in front of you as you spoke. I didn't come up afterwards because I wasn't sure what I wanted to say, and knew that whatever it was I didn't want it all mixed in with others listening and the awkwardness of maybe having to identify myself, etc. I hope it was just me, but I found the encompassing situation all too painful and sad, so few there to see this exceptional film, and those (it seemed) teachers. (Where for Godsakes were some students, at least?! I mean, the screening wasn't in Sadieville, Kentucky!). Beating [1995] is for real, an extraordinarily ambitious and ripe piece of work, deeply deeply seen. I was in town only for a few days, and considered myself quite fortunate indeed to have happened in on such a passionate and assured film, and ahh, such a lush and intelligent one. Some of the most cherished nights of my life have been there at the Millennium and the old Anthology Film Archives and the Collective for Living Cinema, back in 80-81 when I was living in NYC, and here and there since whenever I can create the chance; and your film had the strut and magical intensity that made those experiences so special, of something really and truly seen, with the ongoing

surprise of a genuine artist at work, and a real filmmaker. It struck me that you took your literary experience into the mix with uncommon savvy, and your politics as well, as recurring motifs in a song, or more exactly, a meditation. Bless you and that wisdom. I left thrilled, especially by where you brought the piece out, loosening and then loosening again its allegiance to its pain and to history, and finally erasing even forgiveness itself.

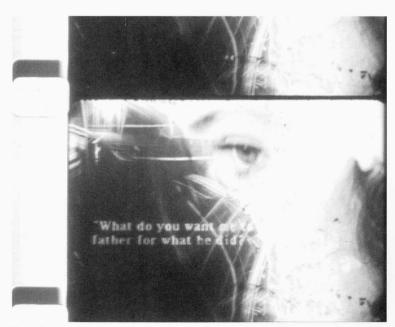
On the way back home, my wife and I went through Buffalo to check out CEPA (where I've got some photographs in the *Return to the Pleasure Principle* show) and met Larry Brose. When I found out he was a filmmaker, I related my Millennium experience and was delighted to discover that he understood exactly what I was describing, right down to the inflected nuance, and that his familiarity with *Beating* was so immediate, and his regard for its qualities so close to my own. I wish I could have seen it on that marvellous Eastman House screen, and in the sway of a few to share my reactions! We caught him and Robert Hirsch at the end of a work day, and could talk only too few minutes about too many things, but what a thrill to meet someone who knows who Bruce Baillie and Stan Brakhage are, and the beauties thereof, and who could leave me with the sense that Barbara Sternberg and her work are not quite so unappreciated as I thought the Saturday before. I hope to see *Beating* again some day and your other films.

In gratitude,

James Baker Hall Sadieville, Kentucky

panorama: four films by barbara sternberg

Rae Davis



BEATING

1995

Recently I spent time re-viewing films by Barbara Sternberg, films that I had seen over a period of years. I wanted to refresh my memory because we are working together on a collaborative project and because she's asked me to be part of a show of hers where she'll show her films and a work of mine that relates to them. We recognize in each other affinities of interest. I looked at *A Trilogy* [1985], *Tending Towards the Horizontal* [1988], *Through and Through* [1992] and *Beating* [1995].

A bird's-eye view

The maker of these films is tormented by questions about identity, time, justice, victimization, violence, love. When I say "tormented," I mean to suggest the emotional depth and psychological cost of the probing, the need to embody ideas in a context made vivid by feeling, the anxious urge toward resolution, the frustration of coming up short. Sternberg's films are films of passion, hope, love and despair.

Words that describe the films: dense, full, seething, explosive, pushing the edges of the frame. In a way, it often seems that images are not selected, but caught, implying a world much bigger and infinitely more complex than what the eye of the camera can see. There is the knowable (or seeable, touchable) – specific, fleeting, electric with moving light and shadow – and the unknowable – all that lies beyond, around and under what is seen momentarily.

When I suggest that what is outside the film is palpable in a way that affects your experience of it, I don't mean to say that the films are

haphazard and anarchic. Not at all. But Sternberg constructs her films in a deeply intuitive way, and the viewer is left to roam around in them until areas of interest and overlapping themes emerge. Like all works of art of enduring interest, a Sternberg film presents fields of force and energy, of multiple possibilities. It's a question of sinking into it, absorbing it viscerally, soaking it up intellectually and emotionally. A whole body/brain response. Nothing less.

The embattled intellectual and emotional ground of the films and their often hectic imagery is informed by two important facts: Sternberg is a feminist and Jewish. Both states of being pose intractable problems in specific ways related to personal experience. But what is important is that the paradoxical nature of these problems is intrinsic to all human experience. Sternberg is driven to confront the world from an informed place, her own, but that place contains us all. Her films go searchingly beyond a narrow focus.

Prominent in Sternberg's films is a formal presentation of language – sentences printed on the screen – as opposed to language as dialogue, description, personal letters, etc. (also present in equal measure and readily accepted by the viewer). The former is noticeable by its difference; it gains weight, as if, through metaphor or some kind of synthesizing statement, light will be shed, a definitive word will be given. But even though these statements – quotations from artists or thinkers (often on feminist issues) – seem to function as intellectual context or ballast, I tend to see them as part of the conflicted energy so prevalent in Sternberg's films. As much emotional as intellectual elements. Often the viewer has time only to scan the quotation, picking up fragments.

The quotations and statements promote the overt recognition that language is power. It will persuade, it will convince; certain statements seem to be, and are, points of illumination. There is a wish to trust language, even when (or especially when) poetic, as a rational way to communicate. But what the films do is different: they present a world so slippery, so filled with gaps, so basically resistant to measured phrases, that language is subsumed in the restless imagery and rhythms of the ongoing time and space of the film. It becomes part of the general sense of yearning – of longing to show and to know – that is palpable in the films.

Sternberg's rhythms, important to the experience of each film, are what I would call "questing." Their pulse, change and thrust reach for the viscera. Stillness and rest occur particularly to frame a speaker (*Through and Through*) or a situation (the kitchen scenes in *A Trilogy*), often as a recognition ("This is it.") or a conclusion (final image of a house framed by a tree branch in *Tending Towards the Horizontal*); but these restful moments are transitory. The camera is always on the move. It functions as searcher (What's here? Have I seen it all? e.g. the image of viewers with binoculars in *Through and Through*; the doorways and roofs of *Tending Towards the Horizontal*), coming back to the beginning and starting again, retravelling the same path but with a change in scale, direction, colour. Your body goes with it. You, too, wish for binoculars.

Our eyes shift, veer and select from their environment, always failing to see it in its entirety. We experience these often violent shifts unconsciously as flowing and seamless, creating our ordinary view of the world. In the time span of Sternberg's films, the shifts and leaps are made conscious and

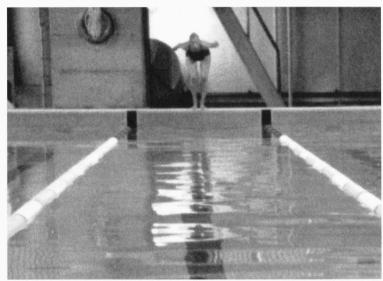
palpable. We are made aware of the search and selection involved in seeing, and of its incompleteness. This phenomenon is important to the vital thrust of the films and lends poignancy to the effort: the need to know. The camera also functions as architect or builder, amassing a pileup of images (e.g. the houses, trees in *Tending Towards the Horizontal*), all different, all the same, until the accumulation suggests something beyond the material presence of the images (e.g. in *Tending*, a merging of the natural and built worlds, the amber glow of houses lit in the dark suggesting a primal hearth in a black forest, a retrieval of our lost, intimate spaces, an emotional return to the origins of shelter, comforted by the warmth of the home hearth, but also exposing our vulnerability. What first appeared as stone fortresses, substantial houses, safe homes, melts into the edgeless dark where only the hearth fire burns).

Spatially, the overwhelming impact of the films is one which opposes far and near, veering from one to the other, with much less interest in the middle distance. The close-up, near, often highly activated surfaces invite examination and questions. They demand attention in the present moment. Time is collapsed. Views in the distance are more relaxed; "far" somehow allows more time for reflection. But these more ample spaces can also be agitated (e.g. in *Beating*, the turning bar over the landscape and setting [or rising] sun).

I think of "breathing" spaces. The close, unroomy space is like the indrawn breath, which can even be a gasp or constriction; it has tension. The far, open space (the view at the other end of the binoculars), like the exhaled breath, releases tension, creates time. The spatial "feel" of the films (always

tied to movement and rhythm), as I see it, fits exactly the larger architecture which sets out opposing forces which, in turn, are indelibly intertwined, parts of the same organism.

In fact, to move to a smaller scale and a different analogy, Sternberg's films constantly remind me of the human body where all the parts can move in different ways and at different speeds, where the mind questions, seeks direction and yearns for: what? Resolution, insight, justice, love – all as transitory, changeable and flickering as the film's frames moving through projected light or the dancer moving through space with the goal of moving through space.



A Thilegy

1985

Close-ups

First, a swimmer ready to dive; then, a runner on a country road begins and (almost) ends *A Trilogy*. The camera follows him, varying the angle of viewing; we understand him as goal-oriented, pursuing a horizontal path in a defined direction. You wonder if this is a life path; if so, it is anxious and difficult. You realize that the film medium can keep him running forever. The rhythm is regular, though coloured by the strain of the run, heavy breathing and footfalls. Time is present tense.

Then, there are kitchen scenes where two people – a man and his pregnant wife – are observed in their morning rituals over a period of time, until at last the baby appears in a high chair. Architecture here is more complicated than in the long opening scene of the runner. The place doesn't change, but movement within it, though predictable, is more varied. The mix is more complex. There is dialogue; clothes change; objects in the environment change place, appear and disappear. The radio news relates details of the ongoing Air India disaster and other calamities. Birth, separation and death emerge as significant themes.

The third set of scenes involves a young boy, about twelve, investigating ancient English burial mounds, rolling down a hill and climbing up. Separated from his mother at boarding school, he writes to her and she responds, missing him. But now, the mix has become much more volatile and potent, driven by a fierce energy. Images of birth, water, blood, of the ancient mounds, of the boy reduced to a silhouette (echoed in the last phase of the runner as he becomes a blur at the top of a hill) – all of these and more are

layered and folded into one another. The mound – a death monument – looks like a breast or pregnant belly. The boy repeatedly rolls and rolls, his spiralling motion conjuring up the image of a life force that is almost uncontainable. A coiled spring. A whirlpool. A vortex. The history of humankind is before our eyes in the primal rituals of birth and death, made to exist with and inside each other.

Experiencing this film is much richer and more mysterious than any description can suggest. It shifts from line to fold and twist and back again. It carries all with it, almost breathlessly, increasing in complexity on all levels – rhythm, images, sound/language, themes – and then exhales in the steady pace of the runner who disappears in a blur. And then, a long series of questions rolls up – black words on white ground. The austere format – a surprise – demands mental effort. The questions, formally arranged and presented in list-like formation, strike out in all directions. So many concerns, so much to solve, so much to learn.

Is this list another model of complexity, layered like the imagery of the body of the film? Is it a statement about the familiar sanity of language, even in the interrogatory mode? Is it there to encourage an intellectual interpretation of the film we've just seen? Is it some kind of coda which gives a final twist to the whole emotional experience, as if it had a flip side composed of articulate questions without answers? Is it there, so close to the very fast cutting and framing of the earlier parts of the film, in the hope that the questions get coloured by the visceral drive of what we've seen, thereby going beyond the confines of language? In other words, does the list imply that consideration of these questions deserves the same kind of energy and passion, a

whole body energy, not just intellectual investment? Or is the list a combination of these? Or something else altogether? The overwhelmed viewer is left with a potent puzzle – direct and indirect at the same time.

Through and Through seems to me to be about wounds, pain and guilt. As if the body were pierced through by an outside force or attacked from within by exploding killer cells. Woven through and around this painful core, but never guite containing it, are scenes of exploration - people at the ship's rail scanning the barren Arctic landscape with binoculars. The camera's choreography again brings emotional force to these themes. All through (except for some staged scenes), it moves this way and that way and the other way - up, down and sideways. Space expands (out to water and land) and contracts (in tight focus, a pair of red stiletto heels turning on a small square) and we see, as if through the changing focus of the binoculars, far out and close in. In one sequence, we are hearing about breast cancer; we are seeing skiers in a snowy landscape moving in opposite directions. Jump-cutting emphasizes the pulling away from each other. The surface scene is colourful, attractive, but the movement, combined with the text, has the emotional feel of tearing or rending. There is a lightness about it - the sunny day, the snow, the graceful slides of the skiers in their brightly coloured gear. But darkness is there, too, under the surface, folded into the scene, expressed through movement and rhythm, as well as text.

The struggle embodied in the skier scene is confirmed with another of a tug of war where young men strive mightily against each other with no resolution in sight. All the energy and struggle brings only an impasse. And in one of *Through and Through*'s most prominent scenes, characterized by violent camera movement, two young people, male and female, disagree and fight

angrily. It's nighttime; the Jewish star is seen (a reminder of the earlier Holocaust scenes where guilt, denial and pain are expressed by two present-generation young people); the light suggests fire and burning. Faces, arms, bodies flash before our eyes in a whirl. Conflict and pain are highly visible. Not only that: new wounds are being inflicted.

Compared to the earlier films, *Beating* turns up the heat in every way. It's as if the third part of *A Trilogy*, with its volatile mix of images, rhythms and thematic concerns, had been subjected to much more pressure and emerged as a higher density film altogether. *Beating* begins with thunderclaps. War, competitiveness, grief, self-questioning are introduced immediately. Silent statues – representations of conflict and conquest – and an opposing set depicting the female body are animated by screams, drums, cheers and shots on the soundtrack. A particularly resonant sequence involves the stone monument of a stag (a sculptor's symbolic vision of male beauty and power) attacked by the camera – rising, falling, lurching, veering – as if the stag were trampling someone or something to death. Or as if the stag itself were being hunted and killed, writhing in turbulent death throes, backed by the loud, victorious drum beats of the conquerors.

Shortly after these passages of orgasmic fury are brief passages of release – a sunflower, a colour sequence of flowers, light, a bee. Then, renewed passages of tension and rage. Cunt, bitch, bastard. The surface of the film is scratched. We hear a violent exhalation, the heavy breathing of orgasm, and yells of fear and anger. And following that, a calm passage (with dark undertones) of an eclipse before other angry passages about the oppression of women and patriarchal tyranny.

Beating exists as a fluctuation of layers moving in, out and around each other in a loose and unpredictable pattern of tension and release. The metaphor is one of mounting sexual excitement, orgasm and release. Beating suggests not only the gestures of sexual stimulation/masturbation and the themes of torture or conquest, but also the vital energy of the life force, blood coursing through the body pumped by the beating heart.

Beating attempts to represent the enigma of the life force in all its intensity and mystery. A particularly poignant and powerful image occurs near the end of the film. Water courses to the right and, through the middle, another finger of water penetrates it, coursing to the left. Positive and negative exposures are involved – a note of melancholy. Here, the opposing forces are part of each other; at the same time, they are separate. The penis penetrates the vagina in an act of union, the vagina enfolds the penis. But each is, always, a separate physical entity. In many ways, the image of the forward/backward, aggressively flowing water embodies Sternberg's vision of the world, a vision represented in all her work.

Through the binoculars

In constantly presenting the struggle of opposing forces, Sternberg treats them not so much as polarizations, but as inextricably mixed, parts of the same continuum. This becomes truer with each succeeding film. Clash and closeness. Sternberg's complex investigation of this mystery, its endless repercussions and variations, is challenging and revelatory. The films are coreless. You don't go to the heart of the film; you swim in it.

Sternberg's films convey urgency. It's as if we lived in a world we haven't even looked at; as if, in an important way, we haven't even experienced its beauty and pain. I like to think of the films as dances, potently gestural – muscular – the body moving, totally engaged with its own effort, creating areas in space that are filled with human energy – changeable – pierced by light and colour, clothed in darkness and shadow, questioning sequences already created, reworking, informed always by a depth of curiosity and commitment that is somehow graspable in the ephemeral moment of its passing.



Through and Through 194.

between the eyes: human vs. techno

Maria Ramadori



A phenomenology of film locates its vision in the progressive and continuous passage of one visual instant into another, and in the interlocking of these moments in time.

Barbara Sternberg's film midst [1997] re-energizes and rehearses our visual experience. It shows us the brilliant cities, communities, contrasting images of young and old, day and night, and the merging of the four seasons. Each view changes according to the camera's speed and angle, the lighting and the filmmaker's careful editing. As a silent film, midst speaks to the body through a visuality that infuses viewers with a sense of their own vision. The mechanics of vision are mimicked by the film; each of its many formal strategies demonstrates our own visual rhetoric.

The tension created by the changing speed and direction of the images affects one's ability to see clearly. Despite the characterization of vision as atemporal and stable, the eye functions most optimally when in almost constant motion. As a result of this motion, vision defies patterns of organization and fixity. For example, the eye may move across a visual field and/or jump from one briefly fixed point to another. Rapid movement and flux within a film characterize the physical and theoretical understanding that our vision is in constant motion. It shows us an eye making contact with the world; it is not just a screen on which things are projected.

Barbara Sternberg's midst depicts this most eloquently. As a silent film, midst is a wholly visual experience that ignites one's senses and triggers one's imagination. The film combines fast-moving montage with slower, close-up pans across landscapes and bodies.

In one scene, the camera moves quickly across the landscape, from images of trees to shots of quickly alternating leaves and branches. midst utilizes a flicker effect to infuse a sense of hallucination in the spectator. The viewer responds to the film bodily through the tension and anticipation left by the onslaught of visual information. The flicker effect is important in creating tension between nature and technology, between the human eye and the technological eye. While the repetitiveness of the leaves, trees and branches makes contact with one's visual senses, the speed at which they occur allows for only a brief encounter with the film's content. The structure of discontinuity created by this guick montage effect also reflects the flux and movement with which the viewer experiences the world. The spectator's ability to capture the experience of this landscape scene and to attain a full understanding of it is questioned by the rate at which Sternberg is able to edit her shots together. The most dramatic shift in these scenes is the speed at which the images change colour. The colour moves in and out of the landscape at a faster rate than the images appear onscreen. The result is a continuous change of the seasons, as viewed through the landscape. Although this manipulated time warp lasts for just a few moments, it touches you. It makes contact with your eyes. The spectator's eyes become an extension of the camera. You see and feel the leaves as the colour washes through them.

One's eyes are not simply the "site of vision." They stand for a part of the whole, a synecdoche. Our bodies, our vision and our knowledge of the world provide us with an ever-changing and reciprocal surrounding that allows for the potential of an embodied film experience.



midst

midst

Gerald Saul



midst

1997

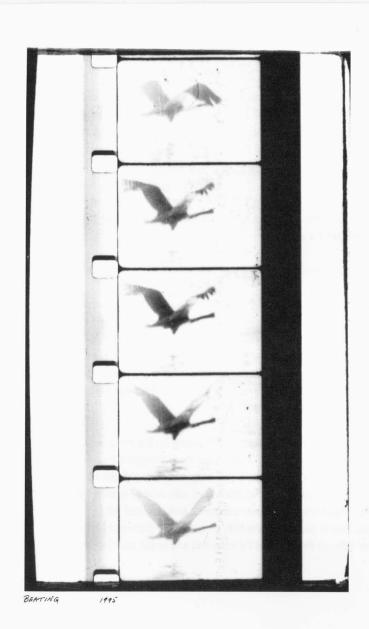
Barbara Sternberg's new film is a beautiful collection of light and colour and shape which flows effortlessly from the screen to the soul. It is full of iconic images which refuse to be icons. With scenes captured on beaches through the lounging filmmaker's feet, the film creates a new set of metaphors while utilizing familiar imagery.

Sternberg uses the camera to study the most intimate part of our body: our hands. We use our hands to express ourselves in so many ways, many as silent as this film. While they age and wither, they are increasingly important in the creation of beauty.

With *midst*, Sternberg is a part of the environment rather than, as with many of her other films, an agitated outsider. This film appears to mark an ideological change for Sternberg in which she seems to have come to peace with the world around her. Much of the film is shot outdoors, utilizing a large range of landscapes. This is familiar territory for Sternberg, and she is in top form. The soft images and haunting colours recall the Group of Seven as the camera grabs sketches from the living air.

Furthermore, like looking at paintings in a gallery, the images stand on their own without audio accompaniment. Regarding this, Sternberg explains that she had music composed for the film, but that the images were never enhanced by the combination. Her film is a poem of light, speaking loudly with its silence.

Originally written as a Program Note for a Sackatchewan Filmpool screening, Regina, December 4, 1998.



pecking: sternberg in the nineties: an interview

Mike Hoolboom

Mike Hoolboom: The last title in *Through and Through* [1992] reads: "Anne Frank died in March 1945. I was born in March 1945." Why?

Barbara Sternberg: There are a number of photographs of women shown in the film: Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Anne Frank; then others not as famous – friends who died young of breast cancer. As I read their work I identified so strongly it's as if I were them, or they were me. The proximity of Frank's death and my birth made this connection personal. I am connected to this line of women. Virginia Woolf talks about thinking back through our mothers in *A Room of One's Own*, a book which asks why there are so few great women writers. You can't be who you are without the efforts of those who have gone before. She wrote on the backs of women, many of them anonymous, who might have written a poem and stuck it in the attic; and after a time, all those poems made Virginia Woolf possible. It's the same for me. Without these women, I wouldn't have made this film.

If Virginia Woolf had been a filmmaker, she would have made my films! [laughs] She wrote about ordinary daily events: the light shining on a cupboard was as much an event as someone walking through a door. She used the ellipsis a great deal, leaving phrases open. Memory doesn't belong only to the past but, as an "arrow of sensation," is past and present. She writes of events or objects surrounded by blurs, or covered by a veil, which seemed to me filmic. In *The Waves* she writes about drops of time, the impact of the present moment drops.

MH: The film also includes a series of texts about breast cancer, listing the names and dates of women who have died young.

BS: There's trepidation and fear you live with every day. At least in my life. In *Transitions* [1982] this was expressed as a fear of living, of wanting to go back and pull the covers over one's head and be unaware. Fear of living or of dying, it's the same in the end. I feel lately that I'm obsessed with death – well, not obsessed, but it certainly figures in my conversations a lot. When I was a kid I was afraid of dying, and not just for myself. I was afraid of anyone's dying! And if something went badly I'd want to go back and have that time again. I would get so upset because now that time was ruined and I couldn't get it back.

MH: Through and Through looks different than the work that came before it.

BS: The film was shot one frame at a time. I'd been editing pictures closer and closer together in previous films, joining moments shot at different times. I wanted to push that further, to connect discrete moments to achieve a simultaneity. So while there is fear, it's set within the big picture, the eternal. There's an equally strong sentiment that the world is amazing. That beauty and terror are part of the same thing. Beyond the meaning of any particular shot, I wanted to transmit this energy.

I had been collecting a lot of feminist writing and writing on the Holocaust. Although I wasn't there, it affects me greatly, hurts me. I thought if I could make a film about it, I'd be done with it! I read interviews with children of Holocaust survivors and Nazis, as well as interviews with women interned in mental institutions. These interviews were excerpted and collaged into scripts for the sync-sound sections in the film. Originally, I'd planned to have a lot of voice-over from all this material I'd collected and loved, and then I

made the decision to separate the sound and image. In place of voice-over, I wanted to relocate language into the mouths of speakers.

Jean Marc Larivière played a child of a Holocaust survivor. Maighet Pugen played a girl placed in a mental institution because her mother couldn't control her. She also played the grandchild of a Nazi executed after the war. They had certain themes in common. Secrecy. The burden of history. And control. Jean Marc talked about his parents, their fear of losing control. They would get upset if they saw their kids expressing anger. In another segment he says that he doesn't have a life of his own, that thousands of people live through him. The incarcerated woman also raises issues of control. As women we have a very limited band of acceptable behaviour. I read about a woman married to a minister, a man of the cloth, and for a while she wasn't keeping the house clean. When she stopped doing the dishes, he had her put away. I felt it was appropriate to put these problems of power in language. Because language distinguishes, between cup and table for instance, and insofar as it distinguishes, it divides the world. With division comes conflict. So while the images in Through and Through worked to bring things closer together and eliminate boundaries, language shows places of conflict and difference.

The film is structured around a series of journeys which go further afield. There's a trip to Montreal on a train, another to Algonquin Park. Going to the Arctic is the ultimate trip. A quest for origins or authenticity, perhaps. The furthest you could go. The footage in the Arctic bookends the film. I often do that, because it suggests a spiral, a cycle. When we arrived at the Arctic, the first thing I saw was everyone else with their cameras, so I

started filming them filming It. The Land. The Amazing. The Source. What we all came so far to see, to be wowed by. Initially, the land is shown only peripherally. In the end people get out of the boat and onto the land. They were filmed to minimize the distinction between figure and ground. It's black and white, often a bit blurry, highlighting shapes and outlines. The figures often look like an extension of the rock. The boundaries between people and things are dissolved. The film is about these boundaries, or lack of them.

MH: Beating [1995] takes up many of the same themes and problems.

BS: All the unused voice-over material for *Through and Through* haunted me. In a way, it spawned the two films which followed. The brief, syncsound sections in *Through and Through* speak of oppression, identity (I/we), and the pressures of history on the present. *Beating* takes up these issues up again, seeing history through the personal, expressing the anger, fear and pain suppressed in the denial of oppressive situations. *Beating* looks at the parts of ourselves (myself) hidden in shadows. The existence of evil and horror. Questions without answers.

Beating is filled with voice-over which provides the context for the images. Like Laurie Anderson says: "This is a record of the times." It's the thinking, the issues, the terms, the "where-we're-at" in terms of social history. The film uses black and white, hi-con footage, both negative and positive, bleached, scratched, and sometimes bi-packed together. So positive and negative are there visually as well as symbolically: good and evil are two sides of the same coin. As much as I want it, I can't only have good.

There's bleached footage of a young girl primping, innocent yet sensual, with the words "cunt" and "bitch" scratched on her; a newspaper photo of Syrian Jews hanged, abandoned with placards around their necks, and a series of supers moves over them – time, history, our lives – whose story becomes history, is real?

The film was edited in sections internally cohesive in terms of content and treatment. From section to section repetitions occur, connections are made, reminiscences, equivalences between different images achieve the feeling or recognition that everything is related, everything exists in each moment — it is all there all the time.

In my previous films I moved towards the light. But in this film I thought: okay, Barbara, fess up. Can I reveal my anger? Am I brave enough? So I decided to show it. I made a large voodoo-type doll of Hitler, a primitive-looking doll with a photo transfer of his face. I wanted to film myself shitting on him, like when one says "Shit on this." meaning "I'm through with it." Diminish him. The camera ran out of film before I could poo but I did get to poke out his eyes and cut off his little penis. This was all done in my kitchen, in a domestic setting; because I live these big historical events in my apartment, which is where I like to work. I film the shadows on the wall of the neighbouring apartment, or shoot my mother or son or whoever's around. Issues of power and seeing are played out in daily life.

MH: Your mother's in this film. She's lying in bed, eating toast and reading the newspaper. She's shown in close-up, where you focus on the wrinkles of her face.

BS: It's the view you would get only if you were her daughter snuggling up close on her, which is what I would do when I was little. An intimate bodily experience. These and the next images of Jim McSwain (a friend) who is sitting chewing his nails, fingering his toes, and eating grapes mean: somebody actually lives all this. History is not abstract, but embodied. These shots are rests, still points in the film.

MH: Most of the voice-over text is quotation, but some of it is yours.

BS: The one passage I wrote is repeated in the film by both male and female voices. This makes ambiguous whether it marks a response to the pain of a woman or of a Jew, or for that matter anyone else. Viewers can fill in their own painful situation. It says: "I want revenge, I want you to know how it feels ..." and then, "I want you to say you're sorry so I know you're sane, we're the same ..." It's something I wrote a long time ago to my husband. My then husband. My no longer husband. While making the film I felt I also wanted to say that to Germans, or to Germany – if you can say something to a nation.

MH: Tell me about the title.

BS: "Beating" suggests the thing and its opposite. The sun beats down and warms us but it can also burn. The wings of a bird beat and so does one's heart. At the same time a beating is a fist fight, or you beat yourself up with these issues. The myriad of positive/negative associations from the word "beating" make it a good entryway into the film. There are many beating images in the film. Like the birds.

MH: Why so many birds in the film?

BS: Maybe they're us, maybe they're me. The birds are pecking, being frightened and fluttering up in the air, then settling down again and eking it out. Surviving.

MH: The voice-over ends with a joke whose humour gestures towards reconciliation. Can you tell it?

BS: A man is walking down the street and a car pulls up beside him. Who should get out but Hitler. He stops the man saying, "You're Jewish – what are you doing here?" There's dog shit on the curb so Hitler puts a gun to his head and tells him to eat it. The car jumps and Hitler drops the gun. The Jewish guy picks it up and says, "Okay, now you eat it." He runs home to his wife and says, "Honey, you'll never guess who I had lunch with today!"

The film does move; it doesn't just stay in anger. Anger is the release. The last image of the film is text which mirrors the beginning text-on-screen "SOB/S.O.B." It says: "I forgive myself. I forgive you." Maybe only in forgiving will I be able to let go, be freed from the bonds of the past. I don't know if I'm there yet!

MH: Most of your work in the nineties is characterized by a very gestural camera style reminiscent of abstract expressionism.

BS: I want the film to accumulate in you as experience, and later you can reflect on its particular images. Each experimental film creates its own diction which the viewer has to pick up on, figure out what language they're in. Learning this language is the key to understanding experimental film; it's what viewing entails.

My shooting doesn't hold onto its subject, or study it. Instead the experience flickers past in light and dark and energy. I've been searching for ways to move the image – not to deny its specific meaning, but to add to it, and make equivalences. There might be shots of flames and leaves fluttering and water splashing, but because of the movement you experience them in an equivalent way. We apprehend the world bodily. This kind of camera work is less about composition than about an embodied seeing, a felt perception. The images register between abstraction and representation. The camera glimpses. Time passes, is elusive and can't be held. The camera sort of swipes at the subject, takes stabs at, approximates. There's an energy in the movement. It's like a speech rhythm or rhythm of a written line, going back to the diction analogy.

MH: Tell me about midst [1997].

BS: *midst* is about seeing and light as energy. It was a reaction to the previous two films. I wanted to focus more on the formal or material properties of film.

MH: Why is that valuable?

BS: It may be important, even desirable, after the period of political work that's been championed. Work dealing with presence and seeing has been ignored. Abstraction has been considered self-indulgent or old-fashioned. But our understanding is deeper than language. For me it's not either/or. The politics in my films have been seen within a larger picture and the universal concepts have been grounded in here-and-now particulars.

MH: The film is silent.

BS: That came partly out of my appreciation as a viewer of Brakhage's silent films, this beam of light connecting you directly, powerfully to the screen. Language activates a different part of the mind; it distances you from the image. So I decided in *midst* the challenge was: yes, Virginia Woolf made wonderful books, but they don't have to be in my film! I can trust the images alone.

MH: How did you structure the film?

BS: One basis is an art history of colour and perception revisited through film and video. It begins with a painter speaking. Though we don't hear the words, we see his hands moving, and his work. Then he paints directly on film, showing three primary colours on clear leader. The following section acts out Goethe's colour theory. He says that the red robes of a Cardinal will appear differently in sunlight and shadow; it washes out or darkens. Seen against different backgrounds, even the same swatch of material changes. Is the colour objective or subjective? How do we know "red"? Memory tinges events, images fade. Our perception of the world shifts with

our frame of reference, when seen through different filters, different lights. The world accumulates meaning through this multiplicity.

The midsection of the film is the most abstract. I was thinking of Cezanne, father of Abstraction, whose landscapes were composed of patches of related colours. I shot farm fields in super-8; then, at the Experimental Television Centre in New York, added new colours to the footage – artificial colours that don't exist except in video circuitry. The frame is fragmented with multiple images forming an abstracted landscape which vibrates and pulses with light.

Then the film moves to the beach with repeating shots in changing (video) colours. Repetition is a feature in all my films because it's how we experience life. Each summer suggests summers past, all summers. The minute you dive into the water, it's like every time that's ever happened. There are kids playing in the water, a close-up of hands rubbing, a woman swimming. Many find the woman swimming entrancing, calming ... It's here the film comes out of its abstracted self into a more emotional or narrative mode.

Finally the video passages end and turn into film. We see flowers, bright vibrant colours in a flicking camera motion, so you just have to be present with it. There's nothing to think about; you're just with this liveliness.

The film ends in black and white, as it began. White is all light, black is the absence of light. The imagery is superimposed waves on a beach and then a man's chest breathing. Sources of life. How can we say where we stop and the world begins? Breath connects us physically – the space in us to the space outside – doesn't it?

As usual I had trouble with the title! At one point Rae Davis suggested "Belonging" which fit but perhaps told people how they were supposed to see the film. The word "midst" came from Agnes Martin, a minimalist painter whose writings I related to strongly. One of her essays was called "In the midst of reality responding with joy." Hence midst. In the middle temporally and spatially. In it, not looking on from a distance. Contiguity. Connectedness, Silence.

MH: Tell me about C'est la vie [1996].

BS: Increasingly, my films are made out of footage I already have. I have a bank of images at home which, for now at least, are enough. I almost don't need to shoot anymore; whenever I think of something, I already have an image of it. The man running down the road, or the man walking against the wind is our struggle, our daily lives, our doing of something while we're here. It doesn't matter if you're a truck driver or an artist or a welder or whatever. So I don't have to shoot something else. C'est la vie begins with a series of still photos taken on the beach. There's an old couple, a dog, and someone's footsteps, ripples on the sand which evidence the action of wind and water, the passage of time and repetition. There's a woman rotating - a dancer - and then meteorological footage of the world rotating. There's also darker images of bats in a cave and animal bones lying out in the sun. And there's a swan, its huge wings slowly and powerfully moving up and down. During takeoff there's a mad kicking and flapping before it moves serenely through it all. One day I watched birds pecking and it dawned on me that they're not thinking. They're just eating. Pecking. That's it. There's no mystery to solve; it's all right there in front of us.

All of the footage was stuff I already had which I bleached afterwards. I took the workprint and put it in a tub of Javex, which removes parts of the image. With colour film the top red dye layer is bleached away first, leaving the image green; if you leave it in longer, the second dye layer bleaches away and you get yellow. Black-and-white footage becomes fragmented and harder to see. This obscuring and tearing apart is how the world is; it's not just laid out for us, you have to look through it to see where you are. So the movement over the surface of the film is as much its subject as anything shown. It also unifies the diverse footage.

MH: Tell me about Awake [1997].

BS: The soundtrack is from Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*. I used a passage on aging and disillusionment, which Stein doesn't see as negative. Being old means understanding that no one will ever understand or agree with you completely. When you're younger it's different. You try and fail, but age brings the knowledge of how things really are. Her text is read as voice-over and mixed with sounds taken from a girl's track-and-field meet. You hear the crowd urging on the racers, the screams to win, to participate in the race that life's become. Stein's text, by contrast, is reflective and internal, awake to what reality is, instead of being a sleepwalker. It's all edited in-camera and shot in my bedroom. It shows a lightbulb, curtains, and the television is on. My company. The camera allowed me to rewind and make superimpositions, so the pans in my room are seen at the same time as tree branches and a series of titles: "win win win" and "time space." The superimposition in sound and picture shows layers of reality, different times which converge in the mind.

My new film is called *Like a Dream that Vanishes* [1999]. The title is from a Jewish prayer which likens our lives to grass that withers, dust, fleeting shadows, a whole string of ephemeral things, and the last one is "as a dream that vanishes." The kind of shooting I do expresses the ephemeral nature of events; we get a little bit and then it's gone. I wanted to make a film entirely out of leader. Bits of colour with maybe a frame of an image, just these little splashes of colour at the end of a roll. But of course it didn't end up that way. I think I keep making films because I've yet to make the one I see inside.

I wanted to create a visual space that would blur distictions and boundaries. To move between form and formlessness, creation and dissolution. To conjure this place of dis/appearance, I wanted to use the beginning and ends of camera rolls where the image emerges from or dissolves back into pure light. I think of the emulsion of film as analogous to the "stuff" or sea of life.

While I was working on this film, I met Rae Davis's husband, John – a retired philosophy professor. To make overt the philosophical interests that have been below the surface in a lot of my work, I decided to interview him. He begins with Hume and the question of miracles. Is human testimony sufficient to prove the miracle of Christ rising from the dead, for instance? Then the use of language in our attempts at making meaning, understanding it all. Then he comes to Goertl's Incompleteness Theory which accepts that truths can be provable but contradictory, an almost irrational position. The film alternates between quick snippets of fast camera and blur and leader and sync-sound passages of John sitting in a chair. Out of this leader emerges something like a narrative, a chronology. You see a young

child, then a four-year-old running and falling, which might be read as "the fall into the world." Then people on a ferry (the ark – if you stretch), adolescents on a porch hanging out, jabbing, poking, drinking. Then individuals doing daily things, a woman combing her hair, contemplative, aware of herself. There's a sax player, a girl alone on a bridge, a guy playing tennis. All of these images are the lived drama of the world. While shooting, I was thinking of Shakespeare's seven stages of man.

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women, merely players
that have their exits and their entrances
and one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant
Mewling, and puking in the nurse's arms ...
Last scene of all,
that ends this strange eventful history
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

By the end of the film, John's speaking and the gestural footage draw together. He suggests that philosophy has returned to its roots in wonder and adds, "The world isn't a very tidy place. We think it is, but it isn't. It's a very messy place." And then he laughs.

re: surfacing

Tim Dallett

The following comments are based in part on my experience working with Barbara Sternberg and Rae Davis on their collaborative exhibition *pulse.scan.fold.*, presented at Gallery 101 in Ottawa in 1996. That project, which combined film, video, photography and paper media in an installation environment, has already been the subject of an intense and sustained meditation by Barbara Godard¹. What I would like to do here is not to echo Godard's description and careful analysis of that project, but rather to speculate about film projection in contexts other than the cinematic, and to relate these reflections to Sternberg's body of work, including the film-related installations she has produced in collaboration with Davis.

My first exposure, in the early nineties, to Sternberg's work did a great deal to shape my awareness of film as a visual medium. I was particularly impressed by what I took to be the visual ethic underlying her approach. As a viewer who had no formal film training, but who had studied as a painter and designer, I was drawn to her films as examples of a process of working on the film image as a visual artifact. Her work seemed to directly address the film image as a material surface, and to resonate with a profound sense of freedom in the temporal organization of image relationships.

Her very real achievement in films like *Through and Through* [1992], and more recently, *midst* [1997], has been to construct a highly original statement about the equivalence of images. Through progressions and juxtapositions of landscapes, people and memories, both abstract and concrete, Sternberg reflects on the nature of perception and explores its relationship to film as a medium intrinsically in motion. Images in her films are given a sense of reality and urgency by specific strategies of repetition, layering and transformation, yet their reality is always conditioned by the rhythmic flux in which they are embedded. The notion of image-rhythm, of a basic unit of visual pulsing which organizes a progression of diverse, yet interrelated imagery, seems to play an essential and vital role in her work.

The sense of rhythm as the basis for her films' composition seems to situate its aesthetic centre somewhere outside the visual itself. At a significant remove both from artistic traditions based on static, formal "quality," and from the perceptual principles of monocular perspective, Sternberg's work on rhythm liberates image from the legacy of visual composition as a determining or confining frame through which movement is forced to pass. Images of all kinds – recognizable, abstract or associative – maintain their dignity and fascination as sensuous objects without the sense of being subordinated to either static compositions or narrative exigencies. Her rendering of the visual as an expression of abstract, yet somatically concrete temporal rhythms, defers and delays meaning, yet ultimately empowers viewing, making images available for interpretation by the viewer in ways which are simultaneously personal, flexible and respectful of autonomy.

This space of autonomy enables the viewer to construct his or her own sites of meaning – perceptual landscapes assembled and unfolded over the time of the film. The positioning of the viewer as observer-builder has several spatial implications. Some of these implications relate to the viewer's access to optical space within the projected image. Through movement, transformation and fracture of objects in the film-plane, paradoxes of looking into flatness and onto depth are advanced, worked over and held up for scrutiny, only to be dissolved and replaced by another cycle of rhythms. A further aspect of the films' spatial implications for the viewer is the interdependence of temporal and spatial sensations. These affect perception – as embodiment – over and beyond an apprehension of complex spaces within the film image itself. Embodied perception is stimulated not only by the manipulation of visual space on screen, but by the rhythms through which Sternberg's films orchestrate that space's evolution over time.

In a different context, spatial features of her films intersect with an abstract notion that, as a medium, film is situated on a continuum between site dependence and site independence. An example of independence from site is found in the ideal concept of the exhibition print – a particle circulating freely and fluidly between an arbitrary series of viewing situations. At the other end of this imaginary continuum is a scene of radical contextualism bearing on all aspects of the projection scenario, from screen reflectance to room acoustics to program length. In such a setting, conceptual, experiential and technical factors influence the presentation of film in different ways than they do in a straightforward screening. Standard 16mm projectors offer no practical way to repeat a projection without interruption, nor to alter its duration. Continuous or repeated projection calls for varying degrees of

mechanical modification, supervision and maintenance. The general evacuation of tactile-technical competence from daily life and social contexts further reinforces a widespread (but not entirely universal) reluctance on the part of arts administrators and curators to accommodate film in gallery contexts. These factors – further overshadowed by cultural rhetorics concerning the anachronistic materiality of celluloid itself – articulate a particular kind of tension between a film and the varying spaces of its appearance.

Yet the flexible temporal and material logic of Sternberg's work makes possible a reading of it as a sequence of images, a vast archive of visual material which has definite organizing principles, but no controlling script. Already the films' sense of the fragment, their sense of the working up of units of image-movement into rhythmic blocks suggests the idea of spatializing these blocks, of deploying them in varying ways on the continuum of filmsite relationships described above. As an object that might exist in the world, how could one consider the image itself, the film projection, as a spatial event? Beyond the banal metaphor of the projected image as a "window" into an "alternative world," what are the possible spatial consequences of projection as a temporal event which interrupts or inflects the spatial reality around it?

In my conversations with Barbara Sternberg leading up to the presentation of *pulse.scan.fold.* at Gallery 101, we returned frequently to this idea of a continuum of film-site relationships and how it could relate to a presentation of her practice as a process. How could the exhibition both make evident the character of process found in the film work itself and explore other aspects of Sternberg's aesthetic in ways which would work with, rather than

struggle against, the spatial frame of the gallery? In parallel to Rae Davis's restructuring of the relationship of the gallery's rooms as an eloquent dialectic of siting and seeing, Sternberg's contribution to the *pulse.scan.fold.* installation could be thought of as an unfolding of her film practice in space, an application of her image-making and image-assembling processes to the space of a room rather than to the film frame.

The exhibition was conceived around the use of a large, darkened gallery accommodating a number of media installations and regularly scheduled projections of Sternberg's films over a three-week period. This space was linked and juxtaposed with a smaller, brightly lit gallery where Rae Davis's paper works could be viewed both directly and from a number of different angles through a tapered viewing slot conceived by Davis and built into the wall separating the two rooms. Sternberg's strategy in her own interventions was to engage the notion of the image-sequence-fragment, constructing a series of viewing situations which, while discrete, suggested and encapsulated the sense of temporal stitching evoked by her films.

Freely excising short elements from various films, Sternberg transformed them into mini-installations using continuous video playback on two intimate viewing stations with chairs and headphones. At these stations, one could approach a cinematic fragment in a different way than one would if watching it in a longer, continuously evolving film, in a distinctive combination of the familiar, shared viewing situation of the TV set and the private, contemplative listening space of the headphone-bubble. In another part of the gallery, and at a larger scale, a continuously repeated sequence, taken from *Beating*, showed waves advancing and receding. This was projected as a

large-scale video image which acted as a link with Rae Davis' nearby components of the installation. Still other spatial translations of Sternberg's films took the form of individual 16mm frames enlarged and rendered as computer-processed still photographs, and a slide projection with an accompanying text. As a pendant to, and at the opposite end of the gallery from, Davis's folded-paper works, pages of Sternberg's script-drawings — palimpsests of notations and sketches — were laminated to a wall behind the surface on which her films were projected.

The ensemble of these "fragments" seemed to invoke the sense of a number of simultaneous ethical and experiential scenarios articulated, both gently and passionately, through visual gesture and auditory repetition. The multiplication of access points – standing, walking, watching a film, casting a shadow in front of a video image, sitting with others to see and hear up close – moved Sternberg's filmic elements away from their usual context of directional film-flow into a space of tangential and multivalent address. In *pulse.scan.fold* concepts of rhythm, flow, opacity, transparency and depth in Sternberg's work found new and different means of expression, both through the media environments just described, and in relation to the echoes and metaphoric linkages set into motion by the textures and careful placement of Rae Davis's paper constructions.

Davis and Sternberg have continued their work together, building on *pulse.scan.fold* to develop *Surge* – an installation exhibited at the Art Gallery of Windsor in 1998 and at Articule in Montréal in 1999. This ambitious project continues to explore their concern with "way(s) of being in the world – layered, shifting, expandable, unresolvable,"² through a combination

of film and video projection, sculptural objects and spatial relationships. The continuing evolution of Sternberg's collaboration with Davis on installation projects suggests new ways of looking at ideas of space and viewership in her films, whereby images travel, on a number of literal and metaphorical levels, from the world to the screen and back and forth in flexible cycles of exchange and transformation.

Notes

1. Barbara Godard, "Theatres of Perception: The Filmworks of Barbara Sternberg and the Paperworks of Rae Davis," in Tim Dallett, ed., *Image/Duration: Installations of the Moving Image* (Ottawa: Gallery 101, 1999), pp. 47-79.

2. Barbara Sternberg and Rae Davis, unpublished artists' statement.

It Richards - Rhetoric [consent]

glimpses and glances: the search for meaning in barbara sternberg's films

Barbara Goslawski



A Thilegy

Despite his many insights, philosopher John Davis could not possibly have realized the full implications of his remarks in Barbara Sternberg's latest film Like a Dream that Vanishes [1999]. He elaborates a concise philosophical history of miracles, relating our attempts to make sense of the incomprehensible. He closes by saying that "the world isn't a tidy place - nature is thought to be, but it isn't; it's pretty messy." Here Davis illuminates a key element of Barbara Sternberg's work: an almost exhaustive struggle to make meaning against all odds. Like a Dream that Vanishes, infused with a sense of well-earned wisdom and inner peace, finally realizes what has been evident throughout her films - that questions outpace answers. And that answers, when they arrive, are often fleeting, as ephemeral as the film's title would suggest. Previous films have been marked by intense personal struggle, both literally and metaphorically, occasioned by an endless longing to understand the world at large and her place within it. Looking back on her career, it is clear that she has been engaged in a guest which has reached a conclusion of sorts in Dream.

Sternberg's relentless need to interrogate lies at the heart of her process. In *Opus 40* [1979] she questions her subjects on the subject of work and repetition. In *Transitions* [1982] persistent overlapping voice-overs weave questions alongside conjectures and thought fragments. In *A Trilogy* [1985] a long list of questions scroll by in a philosophical inquiry. In *Beating* [1995] Sternberg scratches questions into the emulsion. Even in *Tending Towards the Horizontal* [1988], where direct questions are absent, her repetitive camera movements – panning continually across housing tracts – enact a form of searching. Regardless of her method, Sternberg consistently reveals this act to be needful and irrepressible.

Fully aware that concrete answers rarely come, Sternberg nevertheless plays off our desire to know. Her work often originates with impulses shared by traditional documentary film practice, a genre usually devoted to objectivity and the search for the truth. Without fail, however, she then proceeds to subvert and/or manipulate our resulting expectations. What she ultimately reveals about this approach is its limitations. In *Opus 40*, a film about foundry labourers in the town of Sackville, New Brunswick, she asks the men about repetition and the nature of their work. Not content to provide a simple, recorded portrait, Sternberg opens the factory to a poetics of repetition using Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*. The men's responses join with the rhythm of the film, which is further accentuated by its visual strategy of doubling and repeating its images. Ultimately, *Opus 40* reveals repetition to be a pattern that underlies all of our lives. The specifics of the men's experiences form just a part of the overall shape of their experience. And of ours.

In *At Present* [1990], Sternberg determines to find the true nature of love and, in so doing, uses one of the foundations of the traditional documentary to underline the futility of this quest. Woven between the personal stories and philosophies on the soundtrack is a bona fide voice of authority attempting a definition of this most indescribable of emotions. She deliberately undermines this voice by providing him with one question after another, eventually cutting him off mid-sentence. The film ends with the image of an old man in close-up who smiles knowingly, but says not a word.

Like a Dream that Vanishes offers an alternative to this need to know; to grasp, contain and illuminate everything. In this film, Sternberg accepts the

act of questioning as an end in itself. John Davis, our expert interview, is quite logical in his discussion of miracles, an authority in his own right. The difference between him and the voice of authority in *At Present* is that he acknowledges that every answer is contingent, that words are only a description of the world we live in. He explains that, having passed through a skeptical phase in philosophy which required sensory confirmation as proof for any theory, we are now ready to return to a point of view held by the ancients: "philosophy as beginning in wonder." As he says this, Sternberg focuses on a series of close-ups of a child's face, smiling. As opposed to the wisdom of experience suggested in the image of the old man smiling at the end of *At Present*, Sternberg offers the perspective of unadulterated innocence, an approach to the world inspired by the wonder of a child.



At Present

1990

For Sternberg, this realization has come only after much struggle. Viewed together, her three long films in the nineties, beginning with Through and Through [1992], chronicle her journey from inner turmoil to serene acceptance. Correspondingly, these films also feature a shift in her aesthetic strategies. Having examined the limitations of objectivity in her films of the eighties, Sternberg turned towards an even more personal approach in the next decade. In the nineties her pictures are invariably hand-held and moving, and never one to beautify, they appear increasingly underlit, overlit or downright blurry. Deploying this new mode of shooting, the artist suggests that almost-clumsy eagerness to catch a moment, where the emotional response to the object under scrutiny is the impetus to film it. The imperfections in these images make them ring true. Commenting on her disinterest in setting up technically perfect shots, she admits: "For me, somehow, it would feel dishonest if I were to do it." Besides, if the images were perfect, they'd suggest some kind of answer. Always refusing definitive establishing shots, choosing instead to work with close-ups which are taken and retaken like the brushstrokes of a painter, Sternberg's images underline John Davis' statement that life is "messy."

Sternberg's increasingly staccato shooting style typifies her subjective approach. Sequences materialize in quick bursts, images of leaves, trees, clouds and waves appear for only a few frames at a time, presented in rapid-fire succession. Passing too quickly to register on any level but the visceral, these sequences replicate an experience of perception as opposed to providing information. Sternberg states: "One of the main things I'm trying to do is allow for an experience of the footage rather than an interpretation or a reading of it".

In *Through and Through, Beating* and *midst* [1997], Sternberg increasingly relies on this mannered camera rhetoric, reminiscent of abstract expressionism. While highlighting a radical subjectivity, it also serves to deepen her sense of struggle, of isolation and agitation.

Repetition is a theme which runs through all her films, and has moved her to use the same shots in many different works. Their meaning changes according to their placement in the montage, however, as she explains: "I think that's because the images, to some extent - although they're left in their everyday context - are not isolated out and beautified and put in a blank environment. They still have their context but they're ambiguous enough so that it allows them to function differently in different films." In both Through and Through and Beating - films that analyze twentiethcentury Jewish experience, these impressionistic bursts of imagery invoke intense emotions and the experience of struggle. This is particularly evident in Through and Through. Featuring two interviews, each offering opposing views of the legacy of the Holocaust, Sternberg plays off the notion of the interview as a source of information. These two angry people are revisited throughout the film, providing the only sound in an otherwise silent film. Between their speakings, the impressionistic sequences are darkly grainy and often shown in negative. In addition to agitated moments of the natural world, Sternberg interweaves images of animals struggling, with each other and with themselves. Coupled with the palpable fury of her two subjects, this becomes a very disturbing experience. Beating features a similar struggle, while the struggle in *midst* is more muted and esoteric. This struggle with the world-as-picture turns, at last, towards resolution in Like a Dream that Vanishes.

The main reason for this difference is the fact that this film is shaped by John Davis' sgentle and benevolent tones. He adds a note of calm to a film that already acknowledges the end of a search. Throughout the film, Davis reminds us of the universality of our struggles - how every culture has struggled to "make sense of it all." The rapid-fire sequences in this film feature images that are brighter and clearer than her previous work, and the camera diction is markedly slowed down. There are also many images of people - involved in discussions, in the midst of crowds or just sitting peacefully in parks. Whatever the setting, they are together and engaged. Most of them, like John Davis himself, seem somehow content, and at peace with themselves. In this context, the bursts of imagery take on a wondrous quality, like a moment of insight during an everyday routine. Using these sequences, Sternberg confirms that, while these insights may be fleeting, they are nonetheless deeply satisfying. As she herself muses: "In this [film], it was the ephemerality, the temporality - we can't hold on to it, it goes by, we really only get glimpses and glances."



Like a dream that vanishes 1999

like a dream that vanishes

Janine Marchessault



Like a dream that vanishes 1999

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, The evidence of things not seen. St. Paul

Community simply means our endless connection with, and responsibility for, each other. James Baldwin, 1985

Like a Dream that Vanishes [1999] juxtaposes three interrelated puzzles: miracles, cinematic ontology and human experience. The film opens with scratched emulsion, a house at night, a woman swimming, flickering colours, a baby on a beach, roads – all marked by a beautiful and abstract materiality. We cut to John Davis, philosophy professor at the University of Western Ontario, who lays out the film's central problematic with the eloquence and passion that comes from a lifetime of contemplating paradoxes: Do you believe in miracles? Divided into seven short parts (a reference, no doubt, to the myth of Creation), this question is refracted across the film.

Miracles

In the eighteenth century, Scottish philosopher David Hume set out to explore the plausibility of miracles. In his essay *Of Miracles*, he challenges the belief in miracles; in so doing, he threatens the foundation of all organized religions, and most especially Christianity, for which the founding miracle is the resurrection of Christ. Hume does not deny that miracles ever happen; he ponders the nature of the evidence upon which we believe that miracles occur. A miracle is "a violation of the laws of nature, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent." With this definition, he finds that there is in fact no physical evidence for miracles beyond human testimony (which is

itself unreliable and contradictory). This philosophical attack was part of the Enlightenment challenge to all things supernatural.

The argument against the belief in miracles sought to direct attention away from mystical sources, to focus attention on society rather than God, as a means to understand human misery. Hume's materialist attack was devastating to organized religion. And even today, it continues to function as a model for legal reasoning and for the evaluation of evidence. It is Sternberg's great talent as a filmmaker to bring this argument to film form. For the cinema, founded upon the violation of natural laws, is nothing if not miraculous.

Film

Popular responses to the first film screenings at the turn of the last century characterized cinematographic spectacle as modern miracle. Moments long gone could be made to come alive once more. Like its predecessor, the Phantasmagoria, early moviegoers described the cinema in terms of resurrection. (Perhaps this is why some of its most astute commentators have been Catholic.) This kind of description would grow into what film historian Noel Burch has called the "Frankensteinian" tradition. By this he means a way of seeing and understanding images in terms of their relation to reality, either as ontological proof of a past event and/or as something real in and of itself.

In the one-hundred-year history of the moving image, film has been employed both to document and create realities. While the cinema grows

out of the positivist and rationalist tradition that Hume helped to establish – a tradition intent on making visible all things hidden, on bringing to light – it has also worked to create a whole phenomenology of aesthetic experiences that depend on the hidden and invisible.

What would Hume say of the cinema? Could it supply him with the kind of empirical evidence he claimed was lacking to support belief in miracles? Since film can be used to both create and document, Hume's answer would be "no." Like human testimony, film is unreliable; we cannot wholeheartedly believe in the empirical reality it projects. Yet, as we watch Sternberg's montage of movements, the argument against miracles is reframed in a blinding flash of light: a white lamb, lightening bolts, sun reflecting off of water, light streaks across emulsion.

Sternberg cuts back to philosopher John Davis throughout the film; his presence and words inflect our reading of the images. An old man at the end of his life, he looks shyly towards the lens, speaking to the filmmaker directly as if in conversation. Each time we return to him, the argument and the debates that ensued from Hume's famous challenge to religious belief are clarified in greater detail; possibly the definition of miracles was not accurate enough, perhaps we don't know enough about the laws of nature, leaving the very character of a miracle inconsonant. As the film unfolds, the argument against miracles appears increasingly incomplete, unresolved. Is it simply a word game or can it tell us something about the world we inhabit?

In the juxtaposition of those small, everyday gestures so familiar in Sternberg's films – film scratches, emulsion flares, Niagara Falls, children

playing, teenagers drinking beer and smoking hash, a lake seen from a boat, two women in loving conversation, more children, the sky, the wind in the trees, light on water, old men debating in a town square, a woman blowing out a birthday candle, more children's parties, a man running on a dirt road, a young woman leaning over a bridge, a woman swimming - there is something present. In these images, silent for the most part, cut rhythmically to create a collage intensified by the contemplative music of Rainer Wiens, Hume's argument is displaced by the filmmaker's sense of wonder. Located in and through the connectedness of things, people and nature, the film sculpts a profound invisibility that reconfigures the rationality of logical argument. It lays it to rest on the brink of uncertainty. The image of a birthday candle about to be blown out recurs throughout the film and is one of its central picturings: children blowing out candles, opening gifts; a woman leaning over, eyes closed, breathing, a wish out into the darkness. Such images speak to being human: hoping, wishing, innocent faith in the future.

Experience

John Davis died shortly after Sternberg filmed the interview with him in 1998. This brings an added dimension to his reflections and presence in the film. Towards the end of the interview, he tells us that every culture has built into its very structure the need to understand "what it's all for," a need to make sense of the universe. Yet no one has solved the riddle, and the world is filled with contradictions and inconsistencies. Philosophy, he feels, has come full circle, is moving back to its origins of "beginning in wonder." He continues: "The world is not a very tidy place; in fact, it's pretty messy."

He leans back in his chair and gives Sternberg a beautiful, mischievous smile. This is the last time we will see him.

The film does not resurrect anyone from the dead, nor does it promise a miracle. What it conveys, however, is the mystery of life itself. This mystery is contained in the very materiality of the life-world, in social rituals and languages, in the communication between people. The two, lengthy, syncsound sequences in the film concern communion: two East-Asian women sitting across from one another at a table, discussing a map, laughing, gesturing, engrossed in each other's directions. And teenagers hanging out on a front porch, drinking and smoking to pass the evening hours. The camera does not intervene or pass judgement in either case; it simply captures at some distance the communication and sharing that exists between people. These social exchanges are grounded in gestures, words, clothes, meaningful glances; that is, they are in the cultural fabric that binds communities. The final sequences of the film record communities in movement (marches, parades, and celebrations of solidarity), communal identities (Chinatown, Caribana, Gay and Lesbian Pride Day) and communication.

The very last image in the film returns us to the black-and-white sequence of a young woman blowing out a birthday candle. It brings us to the wish and, crucially, to the gift. It is fitting that Sternberg ends the film on this image, for gift-giving is perhaps the oldest of social rituals, initiating and maintaining personal relationships. It is a gesture that is undoubtedly at the root of community. The gift is held out not as actuality but as potentiality, tied to the wish that disappears into darkness. It is this darkness, this invisibility, that the film insists upon, and like a dream that vanishes, we are left with rich uncertainty ...





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list of works

films

Like a Dream that Vanishes [40 mins., 16mm, 1999]

midst [70 mins., 16mm, silent, 1997]

Awake [3 mins., super-8, 1997]

C'est la vie [10 mins., 16mm, 1996]

Beating [64 mins., 16mm, 1995]

Through and Through [63 mins., 16mm, 1992]

At Present [18 mins., 16mm, 1990]

Tending Towards the Horizontal [32 mins., 16mm, 1988]

A Trilogy [46 mins., 16mm, 1985]

Transitions [10 mins., 16mm, 1982]

(A) Story [15 mins., super 8, 1981]

"... the waters are the beginning and the end of all things"

[7 mins., 16mm, 1980]

Opus 40 [15 mins., 16mm, 1979]

A Study in Pink and Blue [3 mins., super-8, 1976]

The Good Times [10 mins., 16mm, b/w, 1974]

All films are in colour with sound, unless otherwise indicated.
For information regarding Barbara Sternberg's films contact CFMDC 416.588.0725
www.cfmdc.org

other media works

Off the 401 (7 mins., video, 2000)

Surge (1997)
installation [films, videos, sculptural element]
in collaboration with Rae Davis

Past/Future [14 mins., video, 1997] in collaboration with Jeannie Mah

Rubber Stamp Project [1997] mail art

What Do You Fear? [5.5 mins., video, 1996]

pulse.scan.fold [1996] installation (videos, stills, slides, text, films)

Hollywood [1993] hologram

Let Us [1991] continuous-play videotape from found 16mm TV footage

The Habit of Freedom [1990] installation (slides, bookshelf, transcribed court testimony)

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS
CULTURE IS NOT BUSINESS

Rubber Stamp Project 1997

Women and Violence [1990] photo-transfer on fabric with embroidered text

Violence Against Women [1990] banner in collaboration with P. Stewart, N. McCormack

The Cuten Spoilers [20 mins., video, b/w, sound, 1979]

A Space/A Time [1979] video installation

Views from a Train Window [1978] installation (continuous-loop film, slides, silhouette)

performance art *

Resurfacing Dinosaurs II [1983] Resurfacing Dinosaurs [1983] Forming/Unforming IIIB [1982] Forming/Unforming III [1982] Forming/Unforming II [1981] Forming/Unforming [1981]

biography

Barbara Sternberg has been making (experimental) films since the mid-seventies after graduating from Ryerson Polytechnic. Her films have been screened widely at such venues as Cinematheque Ontario and Pleasure Dome in Toronto, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris; and are in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Sternberg has also participated in gallery exhibitions with mixed-media installations and performance art. She has been a visiting artist at a number of Canadian universities, as well as the Université d'Avignon and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is co-founder of Struts gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick, a founding member of Pleasure Dome: Artists Film Exhibition Group in Toronto, and has taught in the Film and Visual Arts programs at York University. She has been fighting the good fight for Canadian culture and film in countless meetings and writings, and says that she is now working at becoming enlightened or a hermit crab, whichever happens first.



^{*}The performance works were collaborations with Dyana Werden.

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Barbara Godard teaches Cultural Studies in the programs in English, Women Studies, and Social and Political Thought at York University, Toronto.

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Janine Marchessault has published widely on film and video in such journals as CineAction, Public, New Formations and Screen. She is the editor of Mirror Machine: Video and Identity (YYZ Books, 1995) as well as co-editor of Gendering the Nation: Canadian Women's Cinema (UTP, 1999). She is currently the Director of the Graduate Program in Film and Video at York University.

Maria Ramadori is a graduate student at Carleton University. She is working on a thesis with the working title "Sensible Bodies: Feminist Experimental Cinema and Embodied Subjectivity."

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Front Cover: Frame enlargement from midst

Inside Cover: Transparency from Views from a Train Window Page 4: Frame enlargement from Through and Through

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Back Cover: Still from Like a Dream That Vanishes

Pleasure Dome

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Pleasure Dome is a year-round film and video exhibition group dedicated to the presentation of experimental film and video by independent artists. Pleasure Dome has been committed to exhibiting local, national and international film and video since 1989. Programs often feature works of shorter length and smaller format. Pleasure Dome also publishes critical texts on media artists and their work. Pleasure Dome acknowledges the support of our members, the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts – Media Arts Section, the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council, the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre and V tape.



The Images Festival of Independent Film and Video

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The Images Festival is a ten-day culture jam showcasing indie work from around the world. Now in its 13th year, it remains the largest festival in the country devoted to the exotic delicacies of fringe making. Installations, new media, conferences and publications are also part of its activities. The Images Festival gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council for the Arts – Media Arts Section, the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council, Telefilm Canada and our generous sponsors and patrons.

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