

STUDY GUIDE

BARBARA STERNBERG SPOTLIGHT SERIES

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BARBARA STERNBERG: FILM BEGINS IN WONDER

“Philosophy begins in wonder,” reflects John Davis near the end of Barbara Sternberg’s film, *Like a Dream that Vanishes* (1999). Wonder for Descartes is foremost among the passions. A response to what is novel and surprising, wonder arouses curiosity, stimulates understanding and heightens memory. A passion for the unknown is the motivating force behind all mobility, all reaching out, concurs Luce Irigaray. Wonder resists the assimilation or appropriation in a return to the same as it marks the advent of the other, the beginning of a new story in an opening to the becoming of the self-with-the-other. And it lies at the heart of all creativity, as well as ethics, especially at the point of encounter between the physical and the metaphysical (Irigaray 84) so pivotal in Sternberg’s work.

The “urge to understand the whole thing” has animated Sternberg’s filmmaking for more than thirty years, as she ponders the mysteries of human existence and the creative power of the cinematic medium to make the invisible visible with its properties of light (the camera as “pencil of light”) and movement (images in series). With her more recent films, however, the endless longing to make sense which has animated her on-going concern with perception, temporality and that “excess” of the contemporary sublime, has become more overtly philosophical, reaching its most explicit in the dialogue about miracles with philosopher John Davis. With the wisdom of age and experience he speaks serenely about the unsolvability of paradoxes and the uncertainty of truth when questions always outpace answers. “The world is not a very tidy place,” he concludes, “in fact it’s pretty messy.” The film cuts then to a child’s face laughing as, emerging through blurred green images, he reaches his arms out and looks up at someone off screen. Circling back through this moment to the film’s first clear image, that of a child on the beach, the film recommences its contemplation of the seven ages of man or the seven days of creation through a child’s sense of wonder, as a woman blows out a birthday candle for the world.

Images of children’s faces—of children playing on the beach, in the water, at the playground—abound in Sternberg’s films. A lively curiosity has informed her meditation on the quotidian in both its evanescence, scarcely graspable, and its repetitiveness, possibly deadening yet holding potential for ritual. An emotionally evocative image from daily activities or familiar objects surprises when caught in a glance, at an oblique angle, uncomposed, unlit—“de-aestheticized.” A sort of “reality principle,” according to Sternberg, the image through the repetition of film becomes an abstraction, subject to treatment, to superimpositions of images or combinations of sound layered for a cumulative effect that shifts relations for the image, opening it up to new possibilities, to something beyond. The images are replayed like leitmotifs in different combinations within a single or across many films—under different lightings, in different film stocks, and with different

optical printings—emphasizing the role of composition as selection, distribution and ordering. Like music, Sternberg's films affect through their rhythmic pulse.

Rhythm indeed is central to Sternberg's project, the vital downbeat of her lyricism. Rhythmic rather than informational concerns orchestrate editorial cuts to shape units of image movement. Rhythm is also what she shoots—people moving, waves lapping, leaves trembling, light flickering or flashing—and is foregrounded in her camera action. Changes in camera movement and framing constitute the difference between the segments structuring *A Trilogy* (1984), or the focus on horizontal movements in *Tending Towards the Horizontal* (1988). In *Like a Dream that Vanishes* (1999), the tempo shifts between the frenetic coloured leaders, scratched or blurry images, partial glimpses of clouds moving, lightning striking, trees blowing, waves breaking, clothes swinging on a line, cats creeping over the snow, people walking, a woman swimming, fleeting glances of body parts—the familiar repertoire of Sternberg's imaginary—and a series of more clearly discernible images of solitary everyday gestures: a man running on a road, a woman brushing her hair, a young woman leaning over a bridge, a child on the beach, a man playing a saxophone, a woman blowing out a candle. In turn, this flux is interrupted by slower-paced montages of group social activities: children at a birthday party, two women engaged in loving conversation, young people smoking hash on a verandah, a ghostly tennis game shot in high-contrast black-and-white, people sitting and moving through a park, and old men talking in a town square. All silent, except for the soft chimes and occasional whispered chant of Rainer Wiens' minimalist score, these fleeting images contrast markedly with the long close-ups and sync sound which register the tired face and slow voice of John Davis as he expounds Hume's argument about miracles, which turns upon a question of sensory evidence. Sternberg's vast archive of visual material offers such evidence of the senses, encompassing all the elements, seasons and ages and so playing with our desire for totality. However, any illusions of coherence or omniscience are undermined by the hand-held fabrication of the images and John Davis' gradual revelation of the uncertainty of knowledge. We don't even know enough about the world to know when the laws of nature are being broken. "Well," says Davis, accepting the possibility of chaos. To which Sternberg acquiesces.

What this film 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 perspective on the world. As Sternberg says, in film "[w]e observe and 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" (Godard 62).

In this reflection on 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 and series. Her interest in the process of representation in relation to what is represented, with the work of repetition as the repetition of work,

emerges as early as *Opus 40* (1979). The film begins like a documentary about work in a foundry in Sackville, New Brunswick. But then the *cinéma vérité* images of the workers and interviews with them about their work shift abruptly from full-frame to split-screen. The film starts repeating the action with a slight difference in upper and lower halves of the screen as the camera doubles back on itself, filming over the shots. As the image divides and divides again, the pace quickens and the cacophony of the foundry intensifies, drowning out the answer of the worker to the interviewer's question: "How do you handle repetition?" Above the black line on the screen, the workers become figures on a ground, variations in gesture within the continuity of the line. The film shifts then to a self-reflexive analysis of 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 Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, but the projector turning. Halting rather than concluding, the film returns to the voice quoting Stein: "More and more I understand it always more and more and I know." It is through the slow accumulation of such repetition that our individual and collective histories are made. "Always repeating is all of living," the film quotes Stein as she cautions, however, that such repetition might "deaden" with the "steady pounding of repeating." Stein herself shows how, in making subtle variations and distinctions perceptible, repetition may be radically transformative. Attentiveness to the differences between the separate frames brings awareness of movement, of change, while the extent to which they are the same, combining to make a shot, produces continuity.

"Composition," Stein writes in "Portraits and Repetition," is what changes from generation to generation, making visible incremental differences as movement. Relations are composed through succession and intensity. Composition is what distributes and orders our perceptions for us. 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—that produce slippage, blurring, change. In this way, Sternberg says, she 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 inform differences in perception and feeling. Changing the emphasis, insistence (composition, in Stein's terms), or shifts in perception and syntax all entail political questions, especially those of gender. As Stein suggests about her own role, she was able to do the "only real literary thinking" of the century, because as a woman she related not to an 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 in the last half of the twentieth century at a specific historical moment. Living fully in the present while also living historically has been a shaping force in many of her longer films, especially *Through and Through* (1992) and *Beating* (1995). In the first of these films, the cycles of blossoming and decay, of life and death and, in the second, the negativity of lack and violence are structuring movements through which to examine the Holocaust and the shadow it cast over the twentieth century. The linear male

quest narrative of *A Trilogy* is inverted and opened up to contradiction when both separation from the mother and linkage to her occur in the third and final section. Like *Tending Towards the Horizontal*, with its alternation between birds in flight and houses in ambiguous states of de- or re-construction (evoking the wandering of exile and return), the mythic tendencies are held in check by the sensory materiality and manipulation of the images. In all these films Sternberg questions the linear temporality of history. In her earlier work she avoids its monumentality by exploring the cyclical temporality of a rhythmic repetition which connects the quotidian to cosmic time. Increasingly, with films such as *Like a Dream that Vanishes*, random processes of relativity serve as ordering principles through the associative operations of chance and contiguity.

An extended meditation on temporality is at the centre of most of Sternberg's films, even those such as *midst* (1997) which, in the absence of any sound, appears to be an exercise in colour and perception. With its landscapes composed of patches of colour that change across its three sections, its process resembles Monet's successive paintings of Rheims Cathedral modulating as the day passes, or Virginia Woolf's serial verbal accounts of the changing colour of water below shifting rays of light. A veritable poem of light, this film was created during a period of intense reflection on Woolf's novel, *The Waves*, which also inspired Sternberg's installation, *Surge* (1997), a collaboration with Rae Davis. Like Woolf, Sternberg is searching for a new and more complex way to render reality, attentive to the flux of the instant. Language, she feels, distances the image. A beam of light connects directly with the viewer for greater immediacy in the process of looking. While the title *At Present* (1990) foregrounds Sternberg's concern with the instant and the film poses the question "Which image is one present to?", it is *Transitions* (1982), with one of its voice tracks quoting in a whisper from a physics text on time and motion, that most complexly engages with temporality as embodied time, lived and felt in bodies as anxiety and ambivalence.

Transitions was created out of Sternberg's experiences of waking full of terror. It centres on the "purgatory" between sleeping and waking, a situation suggestive of many power relations. A woman in white, sleepless and agitated, alternately lies on a white bed then perches on its edge. It is uncertain whether she is trying to get up or to go back to sleep. The few audible phrases on the sound track maintain the ambiguity by insisting both on the need to concentrate thoughts and on the boundlessness of dreaming. Over this recurring image, which is looped and superimposed on itself in an increasingly jumpy rhythm, are layered up to four superimpositions at once: a slower flow of images of nature (waves, a snowscape, a swarm of bees, train tracks) and of the woman (in a restaurant, sitting in a chair, someone touching her cheek, walking on a riverbank with a man). Fragments of narrative not yet ordered as story—memories, imaginings, dreams—this web of images follows the workings of the mind. When agitated, Sternberg suggests, past, present and future are jumbled in the same moment; no single thing can be distinguished in the layering. This is the formal trope which Stan Brakhage, referring to *Transitions*, called "eidetic-beseeming-superimpositions," with its detail and precision of visual memory manifest in the images that call for intense perception rather than interpretation. Their epiphanic intensity is reinforced by the patterning

of colour which shifts in increasingly rapid rhythms between blue and red. Refusing closure, the film circles back on itself, then whites out to suggest the openness of the full spectrum of possibilities and, simultaneously, 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? Will she remain in the in-between state of reverie, or respond to Virginia Woolf's demand to "never cease from thinking"? The last line asks, "Do we have to be aware of every moment?" The woman stays on the edge of the bed, leaving the work of meaning-making to the spectator as the screen goes white.

Repetition in *Transitions* evokes both constraint and transformation simultaneously. The complex texturing of the sound track reinforces this ambiguity in its two whispering voices, one quoting Sternberg's journal about her mother's face, the other quoting a physics text. The difference between subjective and objective time is accentuated at the end by the slight separation of the voices so they are heard as an echo effect, like the tick-tock of the clock marking time passing. 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. With this exploration of liminality, Sternberg breaks down the duality between inside and outside, between self and other, producing a subject-in-relation. The fluctuating, blurring, floating rhythm of her images exceeds any unity, unsettles boundaries and establishes new connections.

Between her longer works, Sternberg has made many short films and videos. *Burning* (2002) stretches the mythic impulse in her work in its subject matter, evoking the signs of deliverance revealed to Moses in exile. However, with Sternberg's customary irony, the burning bush that is not consumed takes the familiar form of the trembling red maple leaves of a Canadian autumn. Light, like time, is one of the basics of the filmic medium. So, in its ontology, film already deals with the issues of human life in the world. But Sternberg's interrogation of cinematic ontology emphasizes the immediacy of the medium in *Burning*, a film which engages light in its purest and most intense form. Moving from pure red to pure red, on which title and filmmaker's name are handwritten in flickering gold, the colours alternate between reds and blues, as the film reflexively reveals its own emulsion and the images that emerge from and disappear into its two extremes of daylight's blue hues and indoor light's tungsten orange tones. From the wide-open eye filling the first shot, *Burning* stresses perception as the process linking inside and outside through a dialectics of colour. The red slash of setting sun between dark earth and sky brings the contraries into closest proximity. Campfires blazing, tail lights red in the gloaming, street lamps glowing at nightfall, windows gold against black—these images of light promise comfort and protection. In other shots, the reddish glow of flesh on swimmer's toe, newborn baby's body, sunbather's face, lover's torso and the red of photographers' jackets and dancer's shoes link the energy of light to the pulse of living. But red is not only positive

energy fending off the terrors of the dark: large stop signs utter warnings and gigantic fire balls explode into the air. Trickster-like, fire's gifts also include massive destruction. The blue of waterfalls, waves and sky with their life force shift into ominous blood red seas as the kaleidoscope turns and burns. Weather and violence in their unpredictability touch on the sublime. Any hint of the sacred is contained, however, in the small everyday gestures and the dancing leaves which are given the most extended treatment in this film. Any Apollonian omnipotence is tamed in the candle flame flickering as the film ends. A paean to light, the film speaks loudly in its silence.

Drawing on these images and others in her archive, Sternberg makes new optical printings in *Surfacing* (2004) whose watery world in tones of green, layers of images and scratched emulsions counterbalances the clarity and intensity of *Burning's* red. Insistence, then, in the generation from one print to another in Sternberg's serial process of composition, yields glimpses of other states. Changing the emphasis in *Tabula Rasa* (2003) involves a shift to video, a medium with which Sternberg has been experimenting in the last few years. Prophecy and prediction are also recast in this work which juxtaposes sacred and profane within separate boxes on a single plane rather than in the subtle modulation of *Burning* from the vision on the mountain into the turning of the seasons. The video returns to the concerns of *Through and Through* in its reflections on what it means to live fully in the present which is simultaneously living the eternal and living historically in our time. Like the earlier film, *Tabula Rasa* focuses on the emergence of "I" in relation to "she," working out identity in the feminine as relational. Nonetheless, the tone of the video has changed to one of wry wit as Sternberg questions how she is situated as a woman in a culture that splits the metaphysical from the physical.

Not the luck of birth after the Holocaust, but life under the shadow of the Virgin Mary as ideal feminine is the socio-historical situation Sternberg examines in *Tabula Rasa*. Images of polychrome Madonnas from Toronto churches, with expressions of surprising variety and beauty, are framed in a box in one half of the screen. These collide on the surface with a framed box in the other half which surrounds images of velvet skinned fruit or soft human flesh, their tactile sensuousness contrasting sharply with the stiff Madonnas. Beneath and surrounding the boxes as frame are various reports or images from a range of diagnostic techniques, stretching from the serious—emergency room record, MRI—to the ridiculous, with a fortune teller or palm reader's list of lottery numbers to try. The great variety of technologies creates a collage of Woman/women. Many different angles or ways of viewing converge on this composite figure, giving an assessment of a woman's situation at present as well as forecasting her future. The scrolling words and manipulated images of Xrays and MRIs with their evidentiary status foreground the dialectic of nature/technology in respect to embodied identity and the contrasting metonymic and metaphoric aspect of the images in the boxes. The physical trumps the metaphysical in these secular prognostics. Prediction may be a way of analyzing and controlling outcomes. But the psychological reports on the subject emphasize her "independence" linked to the feminine as lack in a symbolic system

which values the ineffable Madonna. “Wanted lovers,” we glimpse on the screen, in all its ambiguities.

Independent indeed. Sternberg’s aesthetic, with its non-oppositionality and subtle art of assemblage and combination, tends to excess, and so has long challenged a logic of binaries, of presence/absence predicated on lack. Working to incorporate, exfoliate, transform, Sternberg’s films enact a becoming otherwise. Driven by her curiosity for the unknown, ever open to the other, her films are resolutely experimental. The future is unpredictable, except in Sternberg’s continuing sense of wonder and dedication to film as art.

Barbara Godard

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Descartes, René. *Les Passions de l’âme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1649, 1988.

Godard, Barbara. “Shifting Realities: An Interview with Barbara Sternberg.” *Tessera* 13 (1992): 44-63.

Irigaray, Luce. “L’Admiration: Lecture de Descartes Les passions de l’âme, art. 53.” *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*. Paris: Minuit, 1985. 75-84.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the ways in which *Opus 40* is structured like a musical piece. How is this structure related to the themes of the film?
2. Discuss the role of repetition and superimposition in *Transitions*. What does it do to our experience of time in the film?
3. Barbara Godard describes Sternberg’s work as a “meditation on the quotidian.” What is the role of the quotidian in Sternberg’s films? How is it related to her exploration of time, repetition and ritual?
4. How would you describe the camera movement and editing in *Like a Dream that Vanishes* and *Beating*? What effect do they have?
5. Godard identifies images of children as one of the recurring motifs in Sternberg’s films. Identify two other recurring motifs in Sternberg’s work. How are they used? What might they represent?
6. Can Sternberg’s filmmaking be considered to represent a particularly “female” way of seeing?

FILMOGRAPHY

Time Being I — IV, 2007, 16mm, silent, 8 min.
Once, 2007, 16mm, silent with sound preface, 3 min.
Praise, 2005, 16mm, silent, 24 min.
Surfacing, 2004 16mm, 10:30 min.
Burning, 2002, 16mm, silent, 7 min.
Like a Dream that Vanishes, 2000, 16mm, 40 min.
midst, 1997, 16mm, silent, 70 min.
Awake, 1997, Super 8, 3 min.
C'est La Vie, 1996, 16mm, 10 min.
What Do You Fear?, 1996, 16mm (released on video), 5:30 min.
Beating, 1995, 16mm, 64 min.
Through and Through, 1992, 16mm, 63 min.
At Present, 1990, 16mm, 18 min.
Tending Towards the Horizontal, 1988, 16 mm, 32 min.
A Trilogy, 1985, 16mm, 46 min.
Transitions, 1982, 16mm, 10 min.
A Story, 1981, Super 8, 15 min.
"...The Waters are the Beginning and End of All Things", 1980, 16mm, 7 min.
Opus 40, 1979, 16mm, 15 min.
A Study in Pink and Blue, 1976, Super 8, 3 min.
The Good Times, 1974, 16mm, 10 min.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Toronto filmmaker Barbara Sternberg has been making films since the mid-1970s. Her films have screened widely across Canada as well as internationally at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, Kino Arsenal in Berlin, and The Museum of Modern Art in New York. In Toronto, her films have been seen at venues including the Toronto International Film Festival and Cinematheque Ontario. Her work is in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada and is distributed by CFMDC in Toronto, Canyon Cinema in San Francisco, and LightCone in Paris.

Sternberg has been active in a number of fronts in Toronto, teaching at York University, working for the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre, serving on Toronto and Ontario Arts Council juries and committees, assisting in the organization of the International Experimental Film Congress (May, 1989), and helping to found Pleasure Dome Artists' Film Exhibition Group. She recently organized the "Association for Film Art" (AfFA) to actively support and promote awareness and appreciation of film art.

She has been visiting artist at a number of Canadian universities and galleries, including University of Guelph, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and Dunlop Art Gallery, as well as internationally at the Universite d'Avignon and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Sternberg wrote a column, "On Experimental Film," for several years for *Cinema Canada*, and has written on artists and filmmakers such as Michael Fernandes, Rae Davis, Kika Thorne and Phil Hoffman.

For more information about Sternberg, please visit www.barbarasternberg.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Godard, Historica Chair in Canadian Literature at York University, has written extensively about Canadian and Quebec cultures, translation and feminist theory. Among her recent publications are *Re:Generations: Canadian Women Poets in Conversation with Di Brandt*, 2005, a revised version of her translation of *Picture Theory* by Nicole Brossard 2006 and “Trees, Looking,” catalogue for the traveling exhibition “Forest for the Trees” (www.rhen.com/icc/index.html).

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