Time Being: the films of Barbara Sternberg

Adam Pugh

Descartes was wrong.
The decision to sing is
the first note of the song.

—R.F. Langley, *Touchstone*

Existing in suspension, Barbara Sternberg's work plumbs the fathoms that separate the conscious and unconscious, the abstract and representational. Neither surfacing nor sinking, the central tension in her films is that of an unfulfillable quest, stalking the invisible and unnameable: unfulfillable, and all the richer for it, offering a glimpse of the essential and elemental in the way that matter describes the antimatter of a black hole.

Eschewing any desire for fixity or completeness - to capture and collect the definitive image of a thing - her films instead search for the thing's essence. The uncomplicated planar stare of the surveyor, with its promise of an exact description bounded by a frame, is traded for mere glances at, glimpses of, an untameable wilderness, dwelling in fleeting moments – but these briefest periods of knowing are nevertheless richer than the panoptic vision of the survey can ever attempt. In so doing they begin to transcend themselves, which is perhaps the starting point of any thing which hopes to become art.

Sternberg's search for the kernel of what it means to exist is resolutely worldly in its subject matter, having no need of the outwardly exotic or miraculous and preferring instead the immanence in the everyday. Her body of work fluctuates between the representational and near-narrative to the more broadly abstract, yet each influences the other, is permeable, and even those films which seem to function as pure abstraction are invariably grounded by a particular enquiry, semantic structure or symbolic motif. Where the second programme presented here looks at this ostensibly more abstract work, the first focuses on the former.

Opus 40, one of her earliest films, offers a portrait of foundry workers. Shot in the Enterprise Foundry in Sackville, Canada, a cavernous, cacophonous place, the same in 1979 as it was presumably a hundred years before, the film strays from its documentary-like opening gambit to become less about the specific work undertaken at the foundry to think rather about repetition and rhythm more generally. Formalist visual elements – half-frame, matted images – collude with quotes from Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* to underline this. Yet despite nods to both, *Opus 40* dodges full-blown structuralism and Marxist-materialist approaches alike. While apparently different in tone to much of Sternberg's later work, here already her singular direction - too interested in the material world to become fully abstract, too concerned with its lack of depth to move towards the documentary image – is clear.

Made three years later, *Transitions* is somehow softer, and while employing

various formal devices to layer and fragment the image, its overall timbre is more fluid, arriving at a more personal emotional register. Occupying the space between repose and wakefulness, the image flits between existence and denial, a fractured shoreline awash with doubles and shadows; the soundtrack a sea of voices, of whispered entreaties and secrets. Foregrounded by the figure of a woman caught between the poles of consciousness, the film maps the gestures of discontent of a body at sea, restive and conflicted.

The body is central to much of Sternberg's practice, manifested most often in a strong sense of the gestural: a corporeal presence summoned by both the image of gesture and those gestures of the film itself, in-camera and in processing or editing. Hers is a sensual regard, a glance that glances against, touches, breathes; and this haptic line of communication not only distinguishes Sternberg from many of her (invariably male) peers and forbears, but advances the works' experiential enquiry. In *At Present*, it appears again, where alongside a narrative of love and togetherness, a pair of hands reaches for pieces of a broken vase, tending and turning over earthy fragments. The hands' gentle movement against the violence of the shards of glass describes a poetics of care, of tenderness.

Tending Towards the Horizontal, closing the programme, stands in some ways in counterpoint to the others: longer, quieter, its structure - via an epistolary exchange with the poet France Daigle - markedly different. An almost serial engagement with rows of houses, the film opens as a seeming typology. Considering interiors and exteriors, it concentrates on the thresholds that houses contain within and without, as Daigle's correspondence with Sternberg unravels: 'I feel old inside me… outside all is new'. Those images made manifest by Sternberg's camera are in counterpoint to those latent in Daigle's allusions; their collaboration, and indeed Sternberg's wider practice, perhaps defined by the poet's suggestion that 'poetry is not simply a matter of words, it is but a spectre behind words.' In this way, her films continue the quest for this spectre, this black hole, there in the dark, a negative space illuminable only with the raking light of one who knows how to search.

Arriving with nothing but voice and closing with nothing but light, *Once,* opening the second programme, begins with a recitation of an excerpt from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Ninth Elegy*, and, like the poem, diffidently suggests that that which is momentary may yet offer as much as that which endures.

A totem of sorts for Sternberg's work, *Once* is immediately more abstract than what precedes it in the first programme shown here; and this move against figuration also pervades the next two films. In the *Time Being* series (of which there are a further two films not shown here), though still working with representational images alongside more outwardly abstract passages, the sense is of those representations becoming more and more symbolic, not least because Sternberg's optical printing wrests abstraction even from those most quotidian images until all becomes play of light alone, the merest flashes of the material world now transfigured. Time, too, is stretched and compressed to create alternating staccato and slurred rhythms, and recurring motifs from across Sternberg's work – here, a bird in flight – return estranged. Though silent, the rhythm of the *Time Being* films is so strong as to almost deafen.

In *Burning*, images of arriving and leaving are struck by light: light as fire, light

on warm skin; and in the film's heart, a stop-frame frenzy of figures, leaves, water falling, of originary births and deaths. *C'est La Vie*, by contrast, is slower, its images stiller, more mysterious, photographs subject to a layered conflagration as if memories dissipating with time; those motive images struggling against their own weight.

'The world isn't a very tidy place;' the philosopher John Davis offers in *Like a Dream That Vanishes*, 'nature is thought to be, but actually it's pretty messy'. And in some senses this stands also as an epigraph for Sternberg's body of work: while it betrays an interest in rhythm and repetition, this is no structuralist's experiment. Her films are too human, and in search of human conditions, to sacrifice the disorderly plurality of being-here for the singular purity of meter and pitch that such ascetic experiments might bring. Neither do they seek the sublime, or easy charm: though they offer beauty, it is in the unlikeliest of places. Nevertheless, *Like a Dream That Vanishes* is cinematic in a way that the shorter works are not able to be, emerging from a portentous introduction of bowed bass notes and flashing, scratched and clouded emulsion to the respite of bell tones, and then back to a pulsing bass.

As a coda, this longer and consequently more multivalent work contains within it the very heart of Sternberg's quest for the illimitable and ineffable. Structured in part by spoken sections featuring Davis discussing the chapter *Of Miracles* in David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, it brings together the two wider themes of, respectively, the wonder in the everyday and the fleeting nature of existence - and, crucially, the impossibility of ever fully grasping either.

Despite Sternberg's distance from the high modernism of some of her peers in cinema, her work finds assonance in many writers of the period, not least Stein, but arguably also H.D and Clarice Lispector, whose esoteric, mysterious prose particularly finds purchase against Sternberg's films. As Joana asserts in Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart,* 'If the twinkling of the stars pains me, if this distant communication is possible, it is because something almost like a star quivers within me.' If to try to articulate the pain of that star seems a quixotic endeavour, it follows that just as being able to fix and record all that is merely physical is no reason to do so, not being able to describe something literally is not reason enough to leave it unturned. Barbara Sternberg's films embark upon that quest, and make possible that distant communication.

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