Like a Dream That Vanishes

Barbara Sternberg has tackled some of life's larger questions in her more than 20–year career as a filmmaker. Her latest film, *Like a Dream That Vanishes*, marks a crucial turning point. Infused with a sense of well–earned wisdom and inner peace, this film realizes what has been evident throughout her work: that questions out–pace answers. The answers, when they do come, 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. Shaped by philosopher John Davis's insights into our age–old fascination with miracles and our attempts to make sense of the incomprehensible, *Like a Dream That Vanishes* features an optimistic tone absent from much of Sternberg's earlier work.

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 truth. Without fail, however, she then proceeds to subvert and/or manipulate our resulting expectations. A case in point is *At Present* (1990) where Sternberg is determined to find the true nature of love. In doing so, she 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. Sternberg deliberately undermines this voice by providing it with one question after another, eventually cutting it off mid–sentence. The film ends with the image of an old man, who smiles knowingly but says not a word.

Like a Dream That Vanishes offers an alternative to this need to know, to contain and to illuminate everything. In this film, Sternberg accepts the act of questioning as an end in itself. John Davis, our expert interviewee, is quite logical in his discussion of miracles and is 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.

For Sternberg, this realization has come only after much struggle. Viewed together, her three long films in the 1990s, beginning with *Through and Through* (1991), 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 1980s, Sternberg turned toward an even more personal approach in the next decade. In the 1990s, her pictures are invariably hand–held and moving and, never one to beautify, they appear increasingly underlit, overlit or downright blurry. At the same time, 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.

Repetition is a device that runs through all her films, and has moved her to use the same shots in different works. The shot's meaning, however, changes according to its placement in the film. The struggle with the world featured in the previous films turns at last toward resolution in *Like a Dream That Vanishes*. The main reason for this difference is the fact that this film is shaped by John Davis's gentle 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 the film feature images that are brighter and clearer than her previous work and the camera movement is markedly slowed down. There are also many images of people: involved in discussion, 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 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."

Barbara Sternberg's work will be showcased during the Images Festival of Film and Video, April 13 to 22, 2000. The spotlight is co–presented with Pleasure Dome.