

Video Parables
Sally Berger

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Shelly Silver is a peripatetic videomaker, roving from subject to subject, genre to genre and place to place. She is a good match for these itinerant and unsettling times. As she attempts what she knows to be an impossible task, to capture the world in all its contradictions, her work confounds, impresses, imposes and seduces. Ranging in length from tantalizingly short fragments to feature-length dramas, and with equal parts humor, openness and aggression, her videotapes prod, query and confront the way we construct our world and ourselves.

Silver's work reflects deeply on who we are at particular moments, both quotidian and historic. Two documentary-based works, *Former East/Former West* (1994) and *37 Stories About Leaving Home* (1996) seek to capture a distinct moment in time and space. *Former East/Former West* is made up of hundreds of interviews conducted on the streets of Berlin two years after the reunification of East and West Germany. These interviews are edited together in gripping, machine gun style, to arrive at an understanding of how Berliners perceive this momentous historical juncture. Their responses, grouped around specific topics, reveal a vast array of viewpoints, life experiences and contradictions.

The Berliners define 'Heimat,' that which makes one feel at home, in a myriad of ways. Heimat to one is a specific and divided place (Berlin as two separate Germanys), to another, Heimat is a feeling of contentment (having to do with closeness to water). And to the question, "What has changed?" the responses range from "Nothing" to "Everything." A complex picture emerges, at times resembling a slow motion car crash, of a population grappling to redefine ideas of self and country, ideologies and boundaries that are usually taken for granted.

In *37 Stories about Leaving Home* (1996), Silver's view becomes intimate and lyrical, as she creates a portrait of a group of mothers, daughters and grandmothers living in the Tokyo area. These women encompassing three generations, recount childhood memories, dreams and the small daily moments that make up their lives, to build a picture of the strong and complex relations existing between mothers and daughters. Silver, in typical fashion, layers the narrative by weaving in fiction with the documentary material in the form of a traditional, but shocking Japanese folktale of a mother and daughter caught in the grasp of an awful Oni, an ogre who is half-human, half-monster.

Under Silver's direction, video becomes a tool to ponder life's meaning, to create parables about the conundrums of existence. Many of her shorter works, including *getting in.* (1989), *We* (1990), *April 2nd* (1994) and *small lies, Big Truth* (1999) address seduction and control, voyeurism and the gaze; boldly representing sexuality and desire. These works strive to circumnavigate, undermine and reconfigure gender specificity. The videotape *We* addresses these issues by looking at what takes place in private and in public spaces.

The images in the four-minute long *We* are placed on a split screen: on the left, people on a crowded city street, shot in black and white, walk in slow motion towards and away from the camera. On the right, in a full-color extreme close up from a pornographic film, a man

masturbates, his hand moving slowly up and down, up and down. Henry Mancini's orchestral *Floating Pad* wafts over us. Cutting across the center of these juxtaposed scenes of private and public everyday activities a text in graphic white letters against black rolls by. It is a paragraph from Thomas Bernhard's novel *Correction*: "We mustn't let ourselves go so far as to suspect something remarkable, something mysterious or significant in everything and behind everything. Everything is what it is, that's all...."(1) The juxtaposition of repetitive, compulsive actions that take place in a crowded street and alone behind a closed door promotes the sense of solitariness and yearning and denial, deeply hidden behind the facades of the everyday. The viewer is caught between 'reality,' 'fantasy' and the spaces in between.

In *We*, as in all her works, Silver makes inscrutable the reading of any one piece of source material. She combines and fragments text and image, live and found footage, or documentary and fiction elements to confound any single interpretation of a narrative. Silver can be a trickster with a fox's sense of cunning humor. She entraps without giving anything away, and employs constant irony in her inquiries into human perception. Nowhere does this entrapment work so shamelessly well as in Silver's video *Meet the People* (1986).

In this work, fourteen people look directly into the camera, set against a dark background in discrete portrait. Each subject/character first introduces him or herself by name, then talks about what they do in life and how they feel about various broader topics such as success, ambition, wealth, marriage, family, as well as more specific stories ranging from existential moments of angst to cab drivers' reluctance to drive to Brooklyn. The panoply of people: a businessman, a nightclub dancer, a military man, a real estate broker, a housewife, a cab driver, a psychologist, create a pseudo-representation of 'types' that make up the American populace. The work compels the viewer to personally experience and examine how mass media represents reality, and how our own individual narratives draw us in, propel us along, and envelop us in illusions.

There are all sorts of clues that this is not a documentary, although the talking head style interview, popular with documentaries shot in the 1980's, gives the suggestion that these profiles are definitive. But the 'people' are exaggerated stereotypes, wearing their professions and class-like uniforms, speaking with heavy colloquial accents, and breaking out into song. As the subjects tell their stories they act out the various character types, caricatures of the 'average' that they portray, and yet the way they imagine their desires and how they want to be seen by their partners, family and the outside world, make them fragile and real.

Like the protagonists in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's seminal film *Chronicle of A Summer* (1961), Silver's fictional characters slip between media awareness and deer-caught-in-headlights honesty, bohemian romanticism and down-to-earth everyday boredom and lassitude. In *Chronicle of a Summer*, a group of young socialists ask people on the street 'Are you happy?' and examine the quality of life in Paris as the end of France's occupation of Algeria nears. Representing a later generation, Silver's work continues questioning, 'What is it you want from life?' 'What are our hopes and expectations?' 'Am I in control of my destiny?' 'Do I dream?'

Silver's longer narrative works take shape in another permutation of different forms. Silver uses the mediated environment that surrounds us -- news and game shows, melodramas

and billboard advertisements to reveal how this environment both informs and reflects us. She borrows freely from the history of literature and cinema, extending her dialogue to encompass discussions with living and dead philosophers, writers and image makers.

Perhaps her most quote-stealing, genre-borrowing work is *The Houses That Are Left* (1991). This is the story of two friends in their mid-thirties who are trying to sort out the meaning of their lives (shot in black and white film). At the same time they are being watched on television by a group of deceased people (shot on color videotape) whose job it is to monitor who lives and who dies. The women take jobs as market researchers, and their interviews, made up of actual street interviews done concurrently with the film shoot, make up a third 'reality.' To this story, trapped between the living and the dead, soap opera, drama and marketing interviews; or seen in another register, vacillating between the absurd, the more absurd and the divine, Silver adds black and white intertitles. This adds another level of experience, that of reading, to this seam-bursting, overloaded tale of death, fear and television. The intertitles allow everyone from Kafka ("a bird went in search of a cage") to Flaubert ("life, life, to have erections") to the director (cautioning viewers to "pay attention") to comment freely on the action.

A scene towards the beginning of *The Houses That Are Left* captures the wistful magic that underlies much of Silver's work. After a character finds out that she is indeed, irrevocably dead, and before the two main 'living' protagonists gaze out on the murk and beauty of the East River to talk of risk and change and being stuck, a phrase flashes on the screen: "Because the possible has become impossible, I allow myself to believe that the impossible must become possible."

Silver's most current piece, a feature-length work-in-progress entitled *suicide*, tells the story of a filmmaker who travels the world, ruminating on a series of failed relationships, solitariness and the world around her. Silver plays the character in the videotape, but while the main character bears a resemblance to the real Silver (a filmmaker who travels), the heroine is an allegorical construct for the complex identity of a person who voyages far from home. As she moves from place to place, this "failed filmmaker" unabashedly watches the people around her through her camera lens. At the same time, in a voiceover that combines solitary ruminations, assorted quotations and insane rants, she exposes her vulnerabilities and desires.

As the protagonist finds herself on dark, empty streets surrounded by massive modern buildings, in overlit train stations filled with a dizzying parade of strangers or on a dusty road surrounded by oversized palm trees, the mediated landscape of Germany, Japan and Costa Rica peer down at her; billboards filled with beautiful faces and idyllic landscapes that promise paradise. One night, on a street in downtown Osaka, an enormous electronic billboard captures the protagonist through a surveillance camera. She waves both at her own image and at 'We, the Viewers.'

One is reminded of a short paragraph in Kafka's *Third Notebook*, dated January 22nd, 1918:

"Art flies around truth, but with the definite intention of not getting burnt.

Its capacity lies in finding in the dark void a place where the beam of light can be intensely caught, without this having been perceptible before."(2)

We may not be able to look into a crystal ball to tell the future, but Silver's videotapes give us a lens to look more clearly at our current reflections in a media saturated environment and to question what it is we see. The open-ended nature of her work leaves wide the possibilities of becoming something new all the time.

Sally Berger

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1) Thomas Bernhard, *Correction*, The University of Chicago Press, 1979, pg. 125

2) Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, Schocken Books, Inc., Cambridge, MA, 1954, pg. 39

Sally Berger is an Assistant Curator in the Department of Film and Video at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City (from 1986 to the present). She is a video, film, and new media curator, lecturer, and writer, specializing in the areas of experimental video and non-fiction media. At the Museum she plans video and new media exhibitions and co-organizes the weekly "New Documentaries" series. She was Executive Director of International Film Seminars, presenters of the Robert Flaherty Seminars, from 1989 to 1994.