

Barbara Albert Reflects on Her Film Practice

Interview by Jyoti Mistry

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70733/1v38ebredjh7>

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Film can be a mode of critical enquiry, in which the camera functions as more than simply documenting or producing evidence, but draws us closer to the tensions between representation and utterance where “a world is constantly invented in the enunciation”, as described by Walter Mignolo.^[1] Dance, fine art, theatre and performance have been at the forefront of artistic research in which the proposition of enquiry can be expressed through the artwork itself. Knowledge expressed through various art forms offers an opportunity to expose the fault lines of traditional epistemologies, which makes artistic research increasingly urgent, especially because of the political potential it offers. It provides a framework to explore and interrogate what constitutes knowledge, for whom that knowledge feels relevant, and how its expressive forms (as art) circulates in society and can bridge epistemological divides.

How images world us and how the world is increasingly communicated in images is central to how we connect to each other as humans. Images, on the surface at least, perform the indexicality of human emotions, through the characters that we identify with and, through the stories that we connect to on account of universe themes.

Spanning a career of over 20 years; working with short films, occasionally documentaries, but primarily feature-length films, Barbara Albert’s oeuvre captures the complexity of the human condition through myriad political and historical periods with keen forensic observation. Albert’s focus is on capturing the inner lives of women, where her stories are penetrating, as she looks daringly at their experiences across generations, social and political classes and reveals the unexpected the capacity for humans to surprise themselves (and each other), often defying social expectations. And yet, her films champion women’s resilience and their ability to find solidarity in ways that challenge our perceptions of gender and class stereotypes.

In this reflective contribution, Barbara Albert offers an overview of seminal moments in her career and connects some events and influences that drew her to particular subjects and the stories explored in her films.

Jyoti Mistry: How would you summarise your approach?

Barbara Albert: I concentrate on the physical, on bodies in space and their framing in which I try to touch a metaphysics. I have always been interested in opposites or “the antagonist” in physics. I am most fascinated by the bodies and faces and how to frame their form.

Jyoti: Your first feature film, *Nordrand* from 1999, left a deep impression on me. The very intimate struggles of

working-class women in Vienna has a rawness that shatters a lot of the preconceptions about women and their bodies by how you frame and show their bodies in the story you tell. How did you start developing this film?

Barbara: *Nordrand* is a film about war, the state, nationalism, foreigners and I explore these themes in relation to roots and origin. It is told from the perspectives of Jasmin and Tamara, two young women in their early twenties. The very first character I had in mind was Jasmin, played by the talented Austrian actress Nina Proll. She brought a strong physical presence to the role and we worked on the character together to strengthen this aspect in the story.

Jyoti: You are interested in the physical aspects of the character. Could you expand on why there is such an importance on the physical, the body in your films?

Barbara: I see the human body struggling its whole life with the burden and the pain of living, but also the delight, the desire and the lust for life. When I see bodies in the frame of a film, I often associate or think of newborn babies swimming in water. Reaching out for the boundary of their own existence, for the touch of someone, but also reaching out for movement and freedom. I see these actions as inspiration these actions of human bodies and the characters in my films or in anybody's films is the gesture reaching towards a human, bodily connection.





Figure 1-3: Stills from Nordrand, 1999, film, 1 h. 43 min.

Barbara: Our main character, Jasmin is very strong but also a broken angel for me, a kind of tumbler. Some scenes show this quite obviously, for instance when Jasmin doesn't say "no" to men who wants to abuse her, when she wants to please her ex-boyfriend and father of her child, although he is not interested in her, etc. I even dared to compare her with a "real" angel, as seen in some later images. In the images above (Figs. 1-3) you can see her physical longing to blow up the frame, when she is literally falling out of it.

Jyoti: There is a strong sense of observing characters in their situations or in their habitus in *Nordrand*; how did you come to such a keen observation of the characters?

Barbara: There was an important process towards the research of the film. In March 1996, only a couple of months after the peace treaty of Dayton, I went to Sarajevo together with Christine A. Maier the cinematographer I had been working with and who has since become an important collaborator in my film-making. We wanted to shoot a short documentary in this city to explore the experiences of people living with

post-traumatic stress disorder in order to better understand one of the characters I had written into the screenplay of *Nordrand*. I filmed it at the end of 1998. We met a young film-maker in Sarajevo, Jasmila Zbanic who in 2006 won the Golden Bear in Berlin with her drama *Grbavica: The Land of My Dreams*. In her interview for my documentary, Jasmila shared the following with us:

(We see images of Jasmila Zbanic, walking through Grbavica, a destroyed part of Sarajevo):

"Right now I think, I am so glad that I was here, I am so glad. I mean, I don't know if I would say that if I would be without legs or if I am an invalid, but right now I can say that. I think before the war I was stupid, 'cause I could not see the very roots of things. And now I think that... it's complicated, I think, that I met the core of humanity.

It's no problem for me if I give you half of my food, when I have enough. But if I don't have anything and I got one can, and if I share that with you, that tells a lot about me... You have to go through a lot of extreme situations to really meet somebody.

You can be hurt by a word in a letter or you can be hurt of not getting letters from somebody. Really in that kind of situation it is so, so powerful. The same is, with what somebody gave to you, if somebody thought of you, calls you, whatever, you will remember it for whole your life."

(After this interview, we listen to an artist, who is traumatized and who was fighting in the war, but still believes in it. After him we see an American Soldier, putting the camera on us, talking about himself "shooting" with his camera images of post-war Sarajevo).

Barbara: This experience of working on the documentary as a kind of war tourist in Sarajevo left me feeling very ambivalent, and I immediately wanted to quit making documentaries. I only returned to filming another documentary in 2000, when the political situation in Austria demanded a reaction, but what I experienced in Sarajevo was the feeling of exploiting people and stealing images. All these people taking pictures, we met them constantly, every day, every hour, nearly every minute, and I was one of them. In these moments I felt my own limits of film-making. For me, film is and has always been an exploration kind of the opposite of exploitation. I wanted to explore the human mind, body and soul through images.

Jyoti: What inspires your process? Is it the need or desire to explore a human condition, like in the situation of post-traumatic stress syndrome, or the political urgency in your documentary *State of the Nation: Austria in Six Chapters*, completed in 2002, or the stories you want to tell?

Barbara: Often a film starts with one simple image, an image that asks questions, like the image of an almost frostbitten girl I found with my friends on the ice of the frozen Danube in 1987, when I was 16. The image had burnt itself into my memory and was the beginning of the exploration of a deep friendship between two women, very different from each other and a group of refugees and foreigners, stranded in Vienna in 1995. The beginning of everything is an image.







Figure 4-8: Stills from Nordrand, 1999, 1 h. 43 min.

Barbara: I like foiling, I love contrasts. The woman between pregnancy and work, the factory, working-class women. And I very soon realised that I was interested in using symbols. I can explain it like this: working with symbols often sounds reductive or one-dimensional or easy or even like a cliché. Like I used the butterfly for freedom, or the angel for the idealised woman, the princess, bride or Holy Mary just to show different varieties of a woman in film. Motherhood was also an important motive in the film. So, on the one hand, I believe that symbols help to focus in a film, to bundle and to understand coherence, but on the other hand, I always observe reality, where symbols aren't too easy to find. In reality I find vitality. That's why next to symbols and a poetic way of telling stories and depicting characters, images shot in a documentary style are sometimes used next to the more stylised moments. For instance, when Jasmin is walking through the factory after having watched the fairy tale with her mother and sister: when I tried to find symbols and images to illustrate the different personas or the roles of woman in society, I missed the authentic, free woman. In the last minutes in *Nordrand*, the shot of our main character was an attempt to bring the symbolism of autonomy and solidarity together.







Figure 9-13: Stills from Nordrand, 1999, 1 h. 44 min.

Barbara: At the end of the film I connect all the characters, where I worked mainly with the symbol of the butterfly kite, also shown at the very beginning of the film, when Jasmin flies the same kite and Tamara looked at her from a distance more passively.

Jyoti: You have described film as being a movement or its opposite. What do you mean by this?

Barbara: Characters can be stuck in the frame as well as in the world. After *Nordrand*, I wanted to make a film about that. About the rigour and the numbness of the world in which my characters somehow tumble and stagger. These characters needed to break out, in which I didn't give them too much of a chance to succeed.



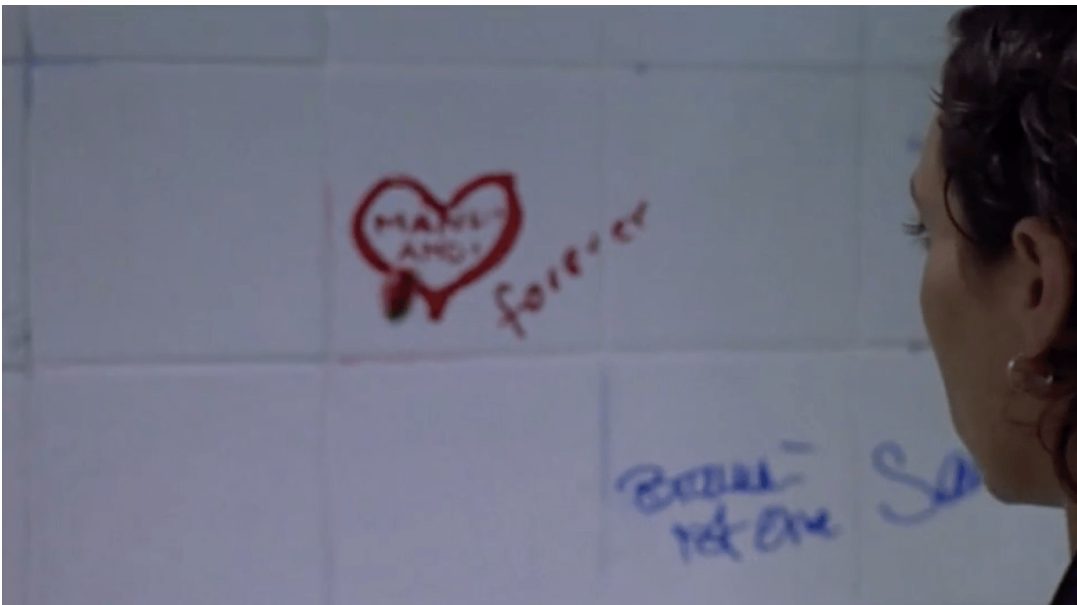




Figure 14-18: Stills from *Free Radicals*, 2003, 2 h.

Barbara: The heart is a strong symbol and sometimes the desperation of the characters move, dance and run against mortality. They sometimes even fight with the borders and boundaries of their lives, which traps them in the frame. With film I can overcome space and time. For me, film is about immortality. It is why we collect images, because we want to stay, to make ourselves immortal through the image. We don't want to die and we erase mortality through film. The title of my thesis was "Overcoming Death in the Movie", and one of my first documentaries was about physical immortality, and again it was about the body. But when showing the body, why not show the body the way it is? In all its diversity. I concentrated on the body, on the lying, dancing, running body, or on the injured body with *Free Radicals* (2003), sometimes even showing the violence on the body.





Figure 19-22: Still from *Free Radicals*, 2003, 2 h.

Barbara: As a director and with a cinematographer, I was enthusiastic about the faces and bodies of the actresses and actors I was working with. *Free Radicals* explored intimacy, unusual tenderness and positive sexuality (although it doesn't look like it on the surface) are shown in different female bodies in the frame.

Jyoti: Your next film *Falling* (2006) returns to an investigation of mortality-immortality, but unlike *Free Radicals*, which you have described as dealing with the fear of sudden death, in *Falling* it is death that brings a group of women together and you explore their connection with each other in poetic ways, moving away from the brutality you explored in the earlier film.





Figure 23–26: Stills from *Falling*, 2006, 1 h. 28 min.

Barbara: After all the metaphysics, the science, the thoughts about mortality and infinity, for me film is not about understanding, it offers no solutions. It is about pure being. The filmmaker is an observer, like a kid observes its surrounding. In the end the little girl just watches. She observes. She is sitting in the rain, she exists. With the gaze of the girl everything ends and starts with looking.





Figure 27-29: Stills from *Falling*, 2006, 1 h. 28 min.

Barbara: One of my student films dealt with the perspective of a young girl under the influence of the Catholic Church. A very subjective, poetic as well as cryptic view on the world. The film is about the conflict between the body and the metaphysical.



Figure 30: Still from *Falling*, 2006, 1 h. 28 min.

Barbara: The girl in the beginning of the film looks out of the frame, which represents her longing for something, maybe something she doesn't know or understand yet. A motive that I repeat and reused, especially in *Nordrand*, where the characters often look and long for something beyond the frame. In her fantasies she is able to run on her ceiling, similar to the main character in *Free Radicals* in the discotheque, she is trying to blow up or break out of the frame. But then the gaze of a dark male character brings her back to reality.

Jyoti: In your most recent film, *Mademoiselle Paradis* (2017), which is a period piece, you deal again with the

human body through sight and non-sight.

Barbara: The film is about blindness, but also very much about the gaze. Working on this theme was challenging. The main character does not lead me through the film through her gaze, but it is a film about the image itself, which was enlightening, especially for the cinematographer Christine A. Maier and for myself.

Jyoti: There is a strong sense of offering a comment about women's place in society at this time in history and how the body of Maria Theresia Paradis, who is the lead historical figure in the film, is subjected to incredible pain in order to have her conform to the expectations of society.

Barbara: Yes, and I wanted to let the viewers feel this tension and narrowness physically. The oppression of the female body not only during that era, but as it is still practised in so many societies and countries today, and which has such an impact on the whole of society. *Mademoiselle Paradis* is so much about the lack of human contact, lack of human empathy and lack of humanity.

1. Gaztambide-Fernández, Rubén. „Decolonial options and artistic/aesthetic entanglements: An interview with Walter Mignolo“. In *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. Vol. 3. No. 1. 2014. 2014. pp. 196–212. ¹