



O'ER THE LAND | DIR. DEBORAH STRATMAN
(2009 True/False Film Fest)

Synopsis

A meditation on the milieu of elevated threat addressing national identity, gun culture, wilderness, consumption, patriotism and the possibility of personal transcendence. Of particular interest are the ways Americans have come to understand freedom and the increasingly technological reiterations of manifest destiny.

While channeling our national psyche, the film is interrupted by the story of Col. William Rankin who in 1959, was forced to eject from his F8U fighter jet at 48,000 feet without a pressure suit, only to get trapped for 45 minutes in the up and down drafts of a massive thunderstorm. Remarkably, he survived. Rankin's story represents a non-material, metaphysical kind of freedom. He was vomited up by his own jet, that American icon of progress and strength, but violent purging does not necessarily lead to reassessment or redirection.

This film is concerned with the sudden, simple, thorough ways that events can separate us from the system of things, and place us in a kind of limbo. Like when we fall. Or cross a border. Or get shot. Or saved. The film forces together culturally acceptable icons of heroic national tradition with the suggestion of unacceptable historical consequences, so that seemingly benign locations become zones of moral angst.¹

¹ The film synopsis and photo for *O'er The Land* is courtesy of [Pythagoras Film](#).

WHAT DID I JUST SEE?

*"Deborah Stratman is at the top of her game here, fashioning a Martian-eye view of an America built from a robust, and absurd masculinity. A rich soundtrack layers and juxtaposes diegetic sound -- musket fire, birds chirping etc. -- with a sci-fi soundscape of droning synths, enhanced helicopters and much more. The similarly rich visual palette takes us on an overheated (thematically) and strangely still (visually) 16mm tour of men and their toys, from a shooting range to firemen in a rural town. All this is presented without commentary, only an occasional foray into disembodied voices talking about RVs or patrolling the border or most strangely, a guy reading Lt. Colonel William Rankin's first-person account of surviving a plane crash. Near the end we're introduced to birds fluttering into their cages while being monitored and golden, gorgeous shots of men stoking a fire at night, in the aftermath of some senseless firepower. What does it all mean? Why does this work so well? It's hard to say for sure, but the important thing is that in Stratman's masterful, intuitive hands, we ask this question throughout her non-narrative. A great bookend to Now is the Future of the Past, and almost like the Great Lost Experimental Classic of the Early '70s."*²

—Paul Sturtz, Co-Conspirator, True/False Film Fest (2009)

EXPERIMENTAL FILM

Q: *What do you want audiences to feel after they experience your work?*

A: *"If some of my films could let people feel that you can have intellectual ideas without language, without spoken words, that would be really great".*³

—Deborah Stratman, during an interview with Indiana University Cinema

While definitions may vary, and the genre of experimental film is quite expansive itself, it's generally agreed upon that experimental film is non-narrative, and utilizes a variety of filmmaking techniques that "explore the human condition, nature, or fantasy in ways that haven't been traditionally explored before"⁴. This often involves experimenting with the form of film itself. Examples include choosing not to include dialogue / using language and speech as background noise, overlaying multiple shots on top of each other, including a series of jump cuts, etc.

²The film review for *O'er the Land*, provided by the one and only Paul Sturtz, was retrieved from <http://www.pythagorasfilm.com/oertheland.html>

³ Question and answer excerpted from IU Cinema's exclusive interview with Deborah Stratman: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pR2lrQkoe8>

⁴ Shim, M. (2013). *How to Talk Experimental Film: A User's Guide*. The Independent. https://independent-magazine.org/2013/03/01/minhae-shim_defines_experimental-film_avant-garde_video-installation/

A RESOURCE FOR A DEEPER DIVE

- Interested in taking students further down the (film) path less traveled? If so, we recommend checking out this relatively brief—but no less thorough—article by Jason Morrow from No Film School that offers readers a clear path through the history of experimental film. Included are videos (and in some cases, short films) along the way that offer additional context.

[*A \(Very Brief\) History of Experimental Cinema*](#) | No Film School

POST-FILM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Using two sentences or less, describe what you think this film is about. Is there a central theme or message the filmmaker is trying to communicate to the audience? What is it and what evidence from the film supports your hypothesis?
- Are there certain groups of people predominantly shown in the film? What types or groups of people are noticeably missing (not represented)? Why does this matter? How does this choice by the filmmaker (either consciously or subconsciously) affect the film's tone and message?
- How did the various scenes throughout the film relate to each other? Taken together, can you find a common theme or thread that weaves them together?
- Let's talk about sound! With the exception of excerpts from audio recordings, and Rob Kelly reciting Lt. Col. Rankin's account of ejecting from a fighter jet at 48,000 feet, there isn't any narration or very much in the way of spoken word. What was your experience like viewing this film? Did you find it difficult to follow along or concentrate? How might a lack of language / spoken words enhance the images on screen, making them more impactful?
 - How did the use of ambient sound (Airplanes! Helicopters! Birds in cages!) affect how you experienced each scene?
- Why might watching film credits be important? In addition to recognizing the many people, businesses and organizations it takes to make a film, what other information can the audience learn from watching them?
- After the credits, the audience is shown behind-the-scenes footage of an interaction between Stratman and some of the war reenactors. Why do you think Stratman decided to include this footage? Are there any connections between the footage and the film itself? If so, what are they?

- Can you think of any other art or forms of media that focus on one human sense (hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, tasting) over the others? For example, how does your experience with this film (mostly images, very little spoken word) compare to when you listen to a podcast (all audio, no visual images)? How do these experiences differ?



DEBORAH STRATMAN: IN HER OWN WORDS

A hallmark of the True/False experience is watching a film and having the immediate gratification of asking questions / getting answers from the filmmaker(s). While the below resources aren't IRL, they nonetheless can provide students with insight into Stratman's filmmaking process, sources of inspiration, and how those things and more result in what we see on screen during *O'er The Land* and beyond.

VIDEO: [Deborah Stratman: An IU Cinema Exclusive](#) | Indiana University Cinema

ARTICLE: [Interview with Deborah Stratman](#) | with Julie Perini for *Incite!*

Also, be sure to check out our interview with Stratman, available to view during the Hindsight screening window for *O'er The Land* (April 11-18th)!

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: HEROIC INTENTIONS

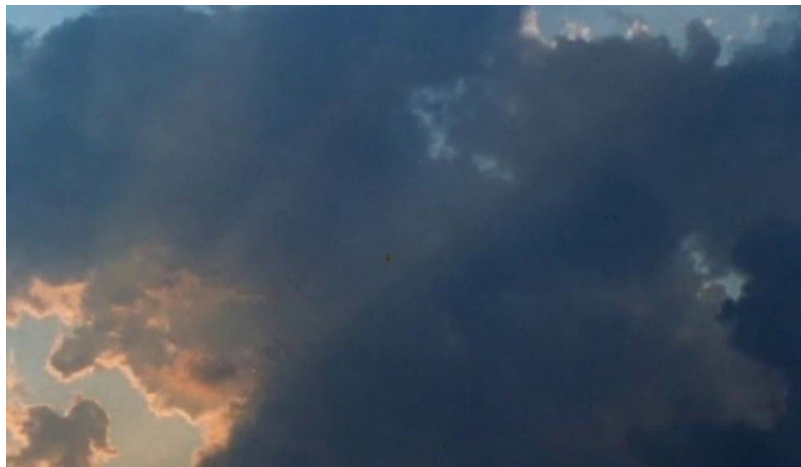
"I have never believed in heroes, or hero worship.

I do not believe that anyone becomes a hero by choice.

We are, by circumstance, sometimes thrust into situations which may leave no alternative but daring or prodigious effort.

If my battle to survive a unique challenge had called forth 'superhuman' effort on my part, it was nothing more or less than that which could have been expected from many other men trained like myself."

—Lt. Col. William Rankin



DISCUSSION

- Provide students with a handout of the above quote from Lt. Col. William Rankin. Read Rankin's quote aloud as a class.
- Ask students to offer a definition of what a hero is, and create a list of heroic characteristics as a class.
- Briefly pose and discuss the following questions:
 - What are the potential reasons behind why Stratman decided to not only include this quote in her film, but use it as the film's opening?
 - After reading the quote, what was your initial impression of what the film was going to be about?
 - How did we see this quote referenced, emphasized, or challenged during the film?

DEBATE

- Randomly divide the class into three groups. Using Lt. Col. Rankin's quote as reference, assign Group 1 students the task of representing his stance of not believing that anyone becomes a hero by choice, that many heroic actions are merely a fight for survival. Ask Group 2 students to present a case for the opposite; that some people choose to become heroes, that they willingly position themselves to be in situations that advance the greater good. And finally, Group 3 will be the audience who votes on which group they felt presented the most compelling case.
- If time and class schedule allows, provide students with the rest of the class period to build their case, and strategize their approach to the debate (Groups 1 & 2), and for Group 3 to begin to think of questions for each group.
- During the beginning of the next class period, flip a coin to see which group goes first. Ask each group to designate a spokesperson for their group, who will represent their argument in the debate (Note: While providing fellow group members the ability to "tag in" is optional, it is a super cool move).
 - Ask group members to include at least two specific references to *O'er The Land* during their argument
 - OPTIONAL: Time permitting, after Groups 1 and 2 present their case, both groups can respond to each other's arguments.
- After each group makes their case for heroism (altruistic vs. self-preserving), Group 3 has the opportunity to ask each presenting group the questions they came up with

during the last class period (as well as those that arose during the debate), before making their decision on which group presented the strongest argument.

- Activity debrief: As a class, discuss this experience, using the following optional questions as a guide:
 - For those students in Groups 1 and 2 who believe the opposite of the group they were assigned to, how did it feel to have to debate for something you don't agree with?
 - Did the debate change anyone's mind?
 - As much of life is not lived in absolutes, is it possible for heroic actions to be *both* altruistic and self-preserving? Why or why not? Can anyone think of any examples?

FILMOGRAPHY + T/F OFFICIAL SELECTIONS

A complete list of Deborah Stratman's films from 1990-2019 can be found on her website, [Pythagoras Film](#).

In addition to *O'er The Land*, two of her short films, *Verver (for Barbara)* and *Hacked Circuit* screened at True/False in 2019 and 2014, respectively.

Her 2016 feature film, *The Illinois Parables*, also screened at True/False, around which time she was interviewed by T/F programmer, Pamela Cohn. The interview was later included as an episode in the True/False Podcast, produced by KBIA, and found here: [Replay: Voice with Deborah Stratman](#)

RESOURCE LIST FOR *O'ER THE LAND*

Film Information, Definitions, & Photos

Morrow, J. (2013). *A (Very Brief) History of Experimental Cinema*. No Film School:
<https://nofilmschool.com/2013/09/brief-history-experimental-cinema>

Pythagoras Film: <http://www.pythagorasfilm.com>

Shim, M. (2013). *How to Talk Experimental Film: A User's Guide*. The Independent.
https://independent-magazine.org/2013/03/01/minhae-shim_defines_experimental-film_avant-garde_video-installation/

Torino Film Festival:

<https://www.torinofilmfest.org/en/27-torino-film-festival/film/o%27er-the-land/8560/>

Interviews

Indiana University Cinema. (2019). *Deborah Stratman: An IU Cinema Exclusive*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pR2lrQkoe8>

Perini, J. (2011) *Interview with Deborah Stratman*. INCITE!:
<http://www.incite-online.net/stratman.html>

True/False Podcast. (2016). *Replay: Voice with Deborah Stratman*. Produced by KBIA.
<https://www.npr.org/podcasts/515587390/true-false>