In Memory of Lesley Stern, 1950-2021

Lesley Stern died on January 29, 2021. Her unique contribution to film studies is marked by a motif that animated her career: a fascination with and questioning of borders. While she herself crossed a number of national borders and her positioning within academia spanned various disciplines, her written work too refuses easy categorization. While she was most certainly a scholar, more than that she will be remembered as a writer. Whether her subject was cinematic bodies, violence in movies, an actor's performance, objects in the cinema, gardening or raising chickens, her words conjure images and generate significance in a style uniquely her own.

Lesley was born and raised in colonial Rhodesia, where the political turmoil and authoritarian education system informed her resolute spirit and her later activism. She studied English at University College of Rhodesia (now University of Zimbabwe) in Salisbury (now Harare) and went to graduate school in Glasgow to study film, while also working for some time as an assistant at the BFI in London. In 1976, before she had completed her PhD, she accepted her first professorship in Media Studies at La Trobe in Melbourne, Australia. She worked there for several years, helping to build a new cinema program, and later completed her PhD through the University of Sydney. She left academia for several years to take up freelance writing. During this period, she studied Japanese cinema, living for a while in Japan, and she also tried her hand at script writing and filmmaking, reigniting an earlier love of fiction writing. Returning to academia, she taught at Murdoch University, the University of New South Wales, and UC Irvine, and spent a year in Los Angeles as a Getty Scholar before taking up her post at UC San Diego in 2000. Throughout these many twists and turns, she sustained a passion for merging the lofty discourse of high theory with a fiction writer's attention to vivid detail, a characteristic that distinguishes her memorable body of writing.

Her book *The Scorsese Connection* (BFI, 1995) is at once the study of an auteur, a theoretically-informed exploration of the phenomenology of film experience, and personal memoir. It marked her commitment to writing about the cinema cinematically, refusing the dominant discourse of academic film studies in favor of an experimental approach that always engaged not only the abstract socio-historic significance of movies, but also the concrete ways that movies move us as individuals. In *The Smoking Book* (University of Chicago Press, 1999) Lesley continued to practice a hybrid form of writing—personal, historical, theoretical and cinematic—that proved deeply influential in the emerging field of autofiction and more experimental academic writing. She published a number of essays that similarly engage how movies transgress the social, the political, and the personal, focusing often on the particularities of cinematic performance and objects. Those essays appear in journals including *camera obscura, Critical Inquiry, Paradoxa, Trafic, Senses of Cinema, and The Cine-Files*, as well as numerous book chapters. With George Kouvaros she co-edited the book *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Power Publications, 1999) and in 2012 published *Dead and Alive: The Body as Cinematic Thing* (caboose), which is as much an extended essay as it is a perfect little book, a kind of microcosm

of her scholarship writ large and small at once. In late 2020, she published *Diary of a Detour* (Duke University Press), a memoir of living and traveling with chronic lymphocytic leukemia that is marked by the continued presence of a cinematic orientation, even when the subject is not the cinema. Donna Haraway wrote of *Diary of a Detour*, "She outlines the stakes of learning to live and feel in the grip of inescapable finitude and mortality, together with others of many kinds and species, but also alone, as irreducibly this vulnerable person and no other."

Lesley taught in the Department of Visual Arts at UCSD from 2000 until 2013 when the CLL necessitated her departure. She and her partner Jeffrey Minson made San Diego their home, and Lesley delighted in putting down many literal roots, channeling her lifelong passion for plants into a remarkable garden of her own. She traveled often to Mexico, engaging with many projects that explored how the land itself bears the forces of personal, political, and historical memory. Her long-term book project, *Gardening in a Strange Land*, remains unfinished.

If you ever had the pleasure of hearing Lesley present a paper, you witnessed her own love of performance. Her strong, clear and exuberant voice conveyed not only the import of her ideas but also her own disposition toward the material, which was animated by a fathomless curiosity, a passion for justice and a love of aesthetic experience. Her vigor, her warmth and her extraordinary brilliance will be missed.