

Department of the Interior

by Lynne Sachs

There is a shadow cast across Nina Fonoroff's *Department of the Interior*. It is the shadow of the Founding Fathers, those luminous figures to whom we give credit for creating our laws, our language and our rational mode of thinking. Much to their possible chagrin, however, this office of the Executive Branch (which is given the responsibility of maintaining public land) is no longer completely intact. Instead, the irrationality of the Mother and the child has begun to take control.

Whether a relic of the state or the family, Fonoroff's white wood panel suburban house leaves us with no more than a skeleton of a way of life. Through the apparatus of the camera lens, this sign of stability, propriety and happiness is read but never understood, visited but never entered. Time after time, I-as-a-spectator am brought to the front door of this house. Yet I am excluded (as a woman?) from the very place I was told was mine to shape and to manage. I am left outside with my memories and my dreams.



The hysteric, whose body is transformed into a theater for forgotten scenes, relives the past, bearing witness to a lost childhood that survives in suffering.

(from *The Newly Born Woman*
by Helen Cixous and Catherine Clement)

Department of the Interior unravels like the telling of a dream by one of Sigmund Freud's screaming, ranting hysterics. Through the voice of a female (or androgynous male) opera singer, we are able to extract a few very telling phrases. "They keep asking me questions . . . Don't bother me . . . Why should I believe you? . . . Let me stay a little longer." In real time, the sacred session between the doctor and his patient lasts a full fifty minutes. Here, only eight.

Over and over again, we are reminded of this passing of time. As if we were gazing at a clock face submerged under water, we witness a small circle floating back and forth across the screen. Tick tock tick tock. The process of hypnosis begins. Early in the film, a brief shot of trees viewed from a speeding car is accompanied by the strange, disruptive sound of a tape recorder at high speed. Conventional film watching wisdom encourages us to hurry by this inconsequential moment. Trees along the roadside, what could it mean? We abandon this haunting scenery and return to the house, for it is here that we find the crux of "the problem", and the beginning of pain.

Department of the Interior is full of repetitions, reinterpretations of the same shot of a building, a parking lot, a female mannequin — sometimes a realistic black and white positive image and sometimes a stark, artificial negative. The film reflects the human tendency to reevaluate a moment, a place or a person from the past with a different point of view each time it is remembered. Today I reflect on the happy days of my childhood at home. Tomorrow I'll concentrate on the heart break, the family fights, the death. Each image triggers an uncontrollable emotion.