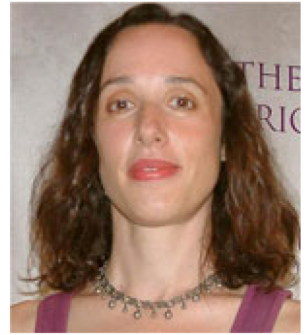


Elida Schogt speaks about "nothing"

Two days prior to the world première of ZERO the inside story at the 2004 Toronto International Film Festival, JWR caught up with its director, Elida Schogt, to chat about her fascinating vision of "nothing."



One of the most intriguing elements of *ZERO* is its rhythm, from the narration to the music to the tableau. How deliberate was that?

I was very conscious of creating a pace, both horizontally and vertically. I knew there would be music, but left it to my collaborators to sense where and when to add their colours. Mike Filippov's sound design and the recordings of Ravi Shankar and Philip Glass effectively underscore the opening and closing sequences and Tom Third's compositions are also sensitive to my overall concept.

Projects like these take time to evolve. Where did this one start?

In 1999 I read a review of some books on the number zero. I knew right away that I wanted to embark on a journey. I later realized my search for the origin of zero would be the basis for my emotional narrative. My research drew me to India, but I didn't realize how important it would be until arriving there for the shoot. While I knew the general direction of the film, it wasn't until we began editing that much of the writing took place. The first part of the film focuses on the void as described in Western math and science, but in India I looked more closely at the spiritual origins of the number and its relationship to everything ("one") with results that I hadn't anticipated.

Coincidentally, I'm reading James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* and am intrigued with his many references to emptiness, inner void, and internally buried human terror. *ZERO* builds to a deeply personal confession, how does that relate to the mathematical discourse?

In the film, we repeatedly encounter a woman trapped on a perpetual upward climb. But, the woman's journey is more than climbing the stairs. She's always half way to the top, even though the distance is shorter with each step, theoretically she we'll never arrive. Finally (after counting from one to ten), she speaks her truth aloud, releases her secret, breaking the containment that has been her emptiness since childhood. Once out, she never has to say it again and her search for truth, dogged by the paradox "I must speak, I cannot speak," is resolved. Those lines couldn't have been written without my two weeks in Varanasi watching so many in the "City of Light" bathing in the holy Ganges river, trying to release themselves from the torment of the cycles of life and death. The intense setting of Varanasi, India helped me bridge the woman's narrative with the larger context of human suffering, the human condition.

There is rich visually imagery throughout, including many extreme close-ups of the human mouth, a zero in its own right?

The film delves into many questions. Early on in my research I was intrigued with the paradox of the infinite space within the symbol for zero and the infinite space beyond its "ring." Mathematician Trueman MacHenry helped my thinking with his explanation of an empty set, the possibility of something holding "nothing." Symbols for zero are everywhere but the understanding of its properties and what it represents can be as difficult to grasp as the woman's understanding of herself.

What do you want to take on next?

I'm hoping to produce a gallery installation as an offshoot from the film where I'll focus on related objects and scale: large and small. And then a film about Berlin and Brasilia—such a wonderful metaphor as a starting point for memory and consciousness juxtaposed on the Brazilian capital, built in the '60s from nothing—a city without a past, this intrigues me. Like *ZERO*, I imagine it will be a combination of documentary, narrative, essay and poetic expression, but that approach to creativity makes it all the more challenging to secure the funding—they'll have to take a chance.

Given the remarkable achievement of *ZERO*, we're glad the funders did and hope they will again see the wisdom of jumping on board for another excursion into the fascinating subtext of human existence. JWR