

SARAH PUCILL – A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF HER FILMS (1990–2010)

Dr Margherita Sprio

Sarah Pucill's work covers the terrain of experimental feminist film practice along side contemporary artist/filmmakers such as Aila Syd (Eating Grass, 2003) Sarah Turner (Perestroika, 2010) and Clio Barnard (The Arbor, 2010) amongst others. Female subjectivity and time are the primary concerns of Pucill's work and these ideas are underscored through a repetitive use of the filmmakers' own body, mirrors and other 'feminine' and feminist codes of being. There are some interconnected repetitive themes that are covered in this essay but it is intended that each film should be seen as an entity in itself.

Sarah Pucill studied Creative Arts (Theatre Studies and Visual Art) at Manchester Metropolitan University (1987) and then at the Slade School of Fine Art (1990). It was at the Slade School and under the guidance of filmmakers Lis Rhodes and Joyné Parker that she began formulating her own voice. Her Slade graduation film was *You Be Mother* (1990) which went on to form part of a body of three subsequent films that can be grouped together – *Milk and Glass* (1993), *Backcomb* (1995) and *Mirrored Measure* (1996). All of these four films are shot in close-up and take place within the sphere of the home. The confining of space enable still life properties to co-exist with the female body, which in turn creates a stark sense of claustrophobic interiority. These films tap into the inner workings of the psyche where borders of separation between self and other are destabilised, as are the animate and inanimate. It is in this body of early highly textured films that Pucill begins her journey of a rupturing of a settled relationship between inner and outer worlds.

In *You Be Mother*, the Surrealist take on an act of banality (a hand pouring out tea from a teapot and into teacups) is an initial venture into what then becomes a dream like journey into conflicting symbols and facial expressions. The sound that accompanies *You Be Mother* enables the reality of pouring, drinking, slurping, and all other bodily movements to be contemplated. The scraping of tea saucers against softer materials such as the table or even its accompanying tea cup, makes for uncomfortable viewing and necessary acts that are ordinarily taken for granted, are starkly focused upon here. The politics of the gestures of mothering and enablement are directed in such a way that the film is both poignant and amusing. The most English of expressions, you be mother has its roots in the dissection of women's labour whereby nurturing has been assigned its own particular gender preference. In her next film, *Milk and Glass*, Pucill uses colour film to full effect where the interiority of the female body is scrutinised via a range of mirrored subjectivities. The camera is utilised in such a way that the closeness of the facial features of a woman are disconcerting in their construction and the milky fluids on display (one of Pucill's trademarks) are sexualised and ritualised in a manner that is familiar to us in other films by the filmmaker.

Pucill's subsequent film, *Backcomb* underscores some of these initial earlier concerns by playing with notions of femininity in an overt and disturbing manner. The film focuses on the act of embroidery and women's hair at the same time. Both symbolic orders are interchanged so that the spectatorial experience is consumed with both ideas of disgust and the

object properties of women's lives and works. This strange and sexual experience functions as a constant reminder of how the properties that make up 'femininity' simultaneously invite and repulse the viewer. Strands of long hair erupt and motion across a table entering into all manner of vessels and holes. The strangeness of the image leaves questions of order and revolt hanging in the air so that the spectatorial experience is bemusing and disconcerting – the uniqueness of this very experience stays with the viewer long after the images have faded. This idea of femininity is further alluded to in *Mirrored Measure* where a woman is ritually preparing the dinner table. Her actions are marked by the repetitive abundant way in which she keeps on smoothing down the fabric of the table cloth and the nurtured space of sustenance is tainted by the power relations inscribed in femininity. The empowerment that sustenance presumes is hindered by the ritualistic play on tradition and chore. Water glasses and a jug full of water become categories of symbolic ordering of power and submission. Glasses are passed around and accepted – water is sipped and consumed accordingly. The witnessing of these power relations allows the spectator into a world of intimacy that is one of Pucill's trademark qualities.

There then follows a formal shift in *Swollen Stigma* (1998), whereby Pucill utilises colour (16mm film), black and white, and sound through which to convey ideas of displacement and lesbian sexuality. In this and her following film *Cast* (2000), she introduces the human figure and performance, along with a wider lens where highly constructed sets and costumes, are staged for the camera. These two Surrealist dreamscape films take further her early more abstract experiments with body 'parts' by shifting the focus into the wider field of the relationship between two women. Both *Swollen Stigma* and *Cast* also mark the beginning of Pucill's concern to construct a lesbian gaze. In *Swollen Stigma*, Pucill explores the form and function of hair as a mode of understanding the complexities that surround the female subject.

From the outset of the film, a woman works her hand through her hair and enters into a world of illusion and memory. Nostalgic intent frames experiences as a disordered play of reminiscence. Probable lost lovers are hinted at as a way of characterising hetero-normative modes of being that exist outside of the realm of this woman's world. Absent lovers appear and then disappear as memory connects and disconnects itself from lived reality. Blood and water collide and the materiality of women's flesh is constituted through absence and presence of an unusual nature. *Cast* however, is a distinctly unsettling film and Pucill purposely plays with queer codes of behaviour throughout. A feminist intent is vocalised (both literally and metaphorically) in the use of life like dolls ordinarily seen in children's (girls) hands. The dolls resemblance to real women is uncanny and the materiality of motionless beings left on windy English beachfronts gives the film its ghostly presence. Pucill's trademark use of mirrors confronts the self-reflective quality of the female bodies as we the spectators' watch them perform. Periods of silence are underscored with hindering sounds of recognition and it is this aspect of the film that remains constantly apparent as it is experienced. The use of the black and the white gives the film its semblance of historical data and its haunting documentary-like essence encourages the spectator to place it both in the moment and in previously past moments too.

In *Stages of Mourning*, (2004) perhaps Pucill's most poignant of films, the filmmaker reflects upon bereavement and loss and there is a rather dramatic formal shift. There is both a direct inclusion of the autobiographical and the foregrounding of the filmmaking process where the stage sets are made apparent, and the highly constructed sets are gone. As a consequence of the sudden death of the filmmaker's lover, the breaking apart of the inner world by the reality of the outer world is brought home and is laid bare where the materiality and mortality of both the filmmaking process and her life become the stage she sets for the camera. The film utilises a