

**'On female presence and the act of seeing: The haptic gaze in the films of Sarah Pucill' by Gloria Morano, Paris 2010**

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If this body, then, has always suspended essence, if, in order to speak it, we have to do away with the terms in which the Same sounds forth, it is because it escapes conceptual grasp, constantly turning presence into absence. It is never where it is sought, for it is not somewhere, it lives substitution.

Catherine Chaliier, *Figures du féminin*

The film work of British artist Sarah Pucill (born 1961) to date comprises ten films, all on 16-mm, ranging in length from 6 to 35 minutes. These are relatively short visual essays, of dazzling rhythmic intensity, working with images in a way that sits within the English-speaking structuralist tradition.<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on the haptic correlation they create between the camera, the filmed body and domestic space through an elementary, minimalist *mise en scène* which, taken to its limit and thus derealised, transformed into pure abstraction, is then returned to its factual context.

Fragmentation of the female body, and placing it in relation to everyday objects, is a recurrent element of Pucill's work. From her first shorts (*You Be Mother*, 1990, 7 minutes, black-and-white and colour; *Milk and Glass*, 1993, 10 minutes, colour; *Backcomb*, 1995, 6 minutes, colour; *Mirrored Measure*, 1996, 10 minutes, black-and-white) to her more recent films (*Taking My Skin*, 2006, 35 minutes, black-and-white), the insistent emphasis on the face through the constant use of close-up, combined with a continual fragmentation of the face, is designed to highlight its nakedness. As Jacques Aumont notes: '[...] the face is the most naked

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. S. Pucill, "The "autoethnographic" in Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*, and an analysis of *Almost Out* and *Stages of Mourning* (available on line on Pucill's website, <http://sarahpucill.co.uk/texts/texts-the-autoethnographic.php>). In this text Pucill, relating her own work to that of Chantal Akerman and Jayne Parker, constructs a reflection on the British structuralism initiated by Peter Gidal and Malcolm LeGrice, and its influence on feminist thought.

part, the only essentially naked part of the human body.'<sup>2</sup> Here the naked face is defined as material surface (its effect heightened by the grain of the film) on the basis of which it is the act of seeing itself that is laid bare.

Whether she is exploring the female face in a formal, visual dialectic with domestic objects (*You Be Mother, Milk and Glass, Mirrored Measure*) or examining it on a more personal level, through the subjective and affective experience of the gaze (*Taking My Skin*), the desire is consistently to 'remove from the face the possibility of being the visible exterior of an invisible interior, making it a surface of material inscription, able to be sensed by something that meets it as if from outside, by a text'.<sup>3</sup>

In *Taking My Skin* – in which Pucill performs alongside her mother – the device of filming in the mirror manifests all the complexity of a gaze that literally paralyses, a double, or even multiple gaze. Through an intense articulation of image and discourse about the duration and reciprocity of the gaze, it investigates the potential for the camera to touch upon presence, in a way that complements Pucill's earlier work in her films of the 1990s.

Mother and daughter film one another,<sup>4</sup> rediscovering their bodies, and particularly their faces, in the lens of the 16-mm camera, and talk to one another about, among other things, their reactions to this experience.<sup>5</sup> For example, when the mother asks: 'Why do you want to film me so close? Why do you want to come in so close?' Pucill responds: 'I want to see what happens.' Then she says: 'I'm very close in with the camera, but I'm not physically close... Just with the lens.' Then, 'I want to look through your eyes... Does it feel uncomfortable?' And her mother answers drily: 'No, it's boring.' Later, when mother is filming daughter, Pucill asks: 'What does it feel like to come in so close?' – a question to which her mother replies: 'Something you've never... you don't see you like this otherwise.'

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<sup>2</sup> From Jacques Aumont's essay 'Face', in *op.cit.*, p. 399.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Aumont, *Du visage au cinéma*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1992, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> This reciprocity often operates simultaneously through the use of mirrors, so that the image of the woman being filmed also reflects the image of the other behind or beside the camera.

<sup>5</sup> The exchange of immediate impressions alternates with a dialogue around motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship.

This convergence between the visual and reflection in words (the dialogues are dispersed, spread over the length of the film) is poetically and theoretically immensely rich: through use of this device, Pucill explores what Jacques Aumont calls “*the difficulty of thinking corporeal presence in the cinematic image*”.<sup>6</sup> As Aumont goes on to say:

“Close-up” and “face” are therefore interchangeable, and their common root is the operation that produces a surface that is both sensible<sup>7</sup> and legible at the same time, that produces what Deleuze calls an Entity.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere, and following Deleuze’s contention that “the close-up is the face”, Aumont argues:

If the close-up tends to produce everything it represents as fundamentally strange, by enlarging too much, getting impossibly, inhumanly close, it is also, simultaneously, the instrument that renders over-familiar, that facialises, that physiognomises what it frames.<sup>9</sup>

Sarah Pucill clearly engages with the familiarity of the gaze, first by filming her own face, with a powerful urge to make her own image confront objects and the camera, and then by setting up a reciprocity of seeing between herself and her mother. And even when she works with bodies that are more anonymous for the viewer, the face remains the most insistent element in her film explorations.

While in *Taking My Skin* faces are confronted by the reciprocity of the gaze and its dialogic doubling through mirroring (producing of a constant reflection that engages the viewer, who thus reactivates her participation in this act of seeing), in Pucill’s early films the material inscription on faces is constructed as a struggle

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Aumont, *Du visage au cinéma, op.cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> In the sense of ‘able to be sensed’ [trans.].

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Aumont, *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Jacques Aumont’s entry on ‘The close-up’, in Alain Bergala et al., *Une encyclopédie du nu au cinéma*, Brussels, Yellow Now, 1991, p. 187. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, in the chapter entitled ‘Year zero: Faciality’, Deleuze and Guattari offer this definition of the face: “The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code – when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be *overcoded* by something we shall call the Face.” (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, London/New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 195).

with objects, an endless dialectic between human and non-human, between opposing forms, textures and consistencies which alternately meld in geometric harmony and clash with one another. In each film the human face (always female) is thus subjected to an imagistic tension which Pucill painstakingly manipulates in order to disrupt the gaze, deprive it of all blatancy, all phlegmatic fluency. Physical presence is constantly manifested through a fragmentation of the face, a dialectic articulation of its multiple correlations with objects. At once condensed and amplified by the appearance of the female face and by Pucill's working almost exclusively with that face, this presence constitutes a second layer of formal construction of the gaze.

In *You Be Mother*,<sup>10</sup> an apparently mundane, anodyne action is laid bare, revealed to the senses through the shift in texture and sound from one object to another, and their interaction. The filming of the face frames a second gaze within the image itself, a gaze that becomes an object among other objects. A gaze that is thus both impassive observation (because the gaze is fixed and impenetrable) and a thing that can be modified and visually fragmented. This gaze at the objects and their movements doubles and unbalances the external gaze of the viewer witnessing the succession of images.

When Pucill's films are viewed one after the other, this gaze – at once *at* and *in* the scene – remains glued to the viewer, even when the eyes do not appear or appear only briefly in the images: in *Milk and Glass*,<sup>11</sup> the eyes are the first

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<sup>10</sup> *You Be Mother* opens with a 15-second close-up of a liquid, apparently water, being poured from a jug into a cup. The sound of the pouring liquid is amplified, enabling us to perceive that the jug and cup are ceramic; the use of 16-mm film brings out the grain of the image. When all the liquid has been poured, the experience is repeated, this time with milk. In the background, the still image of a female face in right-hand profile, that of the filmmaker herself, appears projected on the wall. The slow movements of a carafe fragment the face and highlight the diagonal leading from the eye to the nose, then from the eye to the mouth. The screen goes black for a few seconds; we hear the sound of cutlery, and then the sources of this sound appear, this time in colour: a spoon stirring a liquid in a cup, on which the image of a mouth is precisely aligned. When the cup is slowly lifted the projected image of the red lips is split between cup and saucer, and the mouth seems to open and close again. Later in the film, through stop-frame animation, the objects on the table come to life and seem to embark on a sort of rebellion. The rapid, disordered movements of the objects repeatedly fragment the different parts of the face, whose gaze remains fixed and unmoving.

<sup>11</sup> In *Milk and Glass* a brush alternately *liberates* the fixed image of a female face from a black mirror surface, and draws lips and flowers on that same surface; then this fragmented human face is covered and once again partially erased by cotton wool, until finally, at the end of the

elements *liberated* from the black by the brush, but the mouth soon acquires a decisive value in the play between the visible and the concealed. And yet this mouth, so full and alive, never ceases to remind us that its autonomy as a fragment never implies a negation of the first images, in which looking eyes organize the scene through the act of seeing.

The complex play of images developed through Pucill's work makes visual and auditory connections between pictorial matter – water, household utensils – and the image of the female face, sometimes projected, at other times placed directly on the surface of the mirror. This alternation serves to further destabilize the viewer and her grasp of the action, as the utensils alternately reveal, fragment or conceal the human face. As in *You Be Mother*, the surprising, disturbing intermingling of animate and inanimate elements, of liquid and solid forms, of transparent and opaque surfaces, of moving objects and fixed images establishes a haptic tension through an imagistic rendering of a gradual blurring of the boundaries between corporeal elements and pictorial substances.

Throughout *Milk and Glass*, as in *Backcomb*<sup>12</sup> and *Mirrored Measure*,<sup>13</sup> a sort of retinal persistence – a gaze that paralyses even when it is not present on screen – creates and maintains a level of anxiety in the viewer. While in *Backcomb* the eyes are never shown, and remain hidden behind the back of the head from which the octopus-hair descends, in *Mirrored Measure* the shining eye that appears in the film's final images unleashes the power of the connection circulating between the two women and the water.

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sequence, only the lips, perfectly distinct, can be seen in the mirror. In the second part of the film these lips, their surface now turned horizontally, are traversed by a flow of water that pours out of a bowl, the curved surface of which also reflects the image of the mouth.

<sup>12</sup> On a table immaculately laid with plates, cutlery and cups, a profusion of black hair suddenly erupts like an irrepressible octopus, and embroidering the tablecloth, eventually tips over all of the objects and draws them along with it. The materiality of the images is amplified by the hyper-real excess precision of the sounds, which results in a kind of *derealism*. The hardness and thickness of the locks of hair are perceived visually and acoustically, and these attributes heighten the viewer's sense of anxiety aroused by the uncontrollable destructive animation of the hair.

<sup>13</sup> A carafe rotates for several seconds, the transparency of the water it contains, and the reflections in it, silently exposed to observation, until a glass is brought to a woman's lips. When the mouth begins to drink the water, the gesture is suddenly underscored by an unreal, high-pitched sound. The action of drinking, repeated several times and accompanied by this same high-pitched sound, is performed by two women of different ages (one young, one old).

As in Pucill's earlier films, the image builds an increasingly violent tension, within which objects and the gestures that move them are gradually overturned, disaggregated (glasses begin to tip, the two women's gestures become increasingly awkward), breaking up the spatial organization and well-constructed logic of the beginning. This disintegration brings the pure materiality of the objects, their precarious and unstable connections with the human element, powerfully to the fore. The act of vision performed by the viewer is thus, once more, subjected to an intense and complex synaesthetic experience.

In film after film, the echo of Merleau-Ponty's reflections is striking in the presentation of this play of the gaze:

Now that I have in perception the thing itself, and not representation,<sup>14</sup> I will only add that the thing is at the end of my gaze and, in general, at the end of my exploration. Without assuming anything from what the science of the body of the other can teach me, I must acknowledge that the table before me sustains a singular relation with my eyes and my body: I see it only if it is within their radius of action; above it there is the dark mass of my forehead, beneath it the more indecisive contour of my cheeks – both of these visible at the limit and capable of hiding the table, as if my vision of the world itself were formed from a certain point of the world. What is more, my movements and the movements of my eyes make the world vibrate – as one rocks a dolmen with one's finger without disturbing its fundamental solidity.<sup>15</sup>

Sarah Pucill institutes a strange haptic experience which is both subtly fascinating and profoundly destabilizing, through a series of image-correspondences – localised, rigorous and immediate, presented absolutely

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<sup>14</sup> A little further on Merleau-Ponty corrects and refines his argument: "Already my body as stage director of my perception has shattered the illusion of coinciding of my perception with the things themselves. Between them and me there are henceforth hidden powers, that whole vegetation of possible phantasms which it holds in check only in the fragile act of the look." *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 7.

undemonstratively – between everyday objects and gestures, and the parts of the face.

[...] since vision is a palpation with the look, it must also be inscribed in the order of being that it discloses to us; he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at. [...] It suffices for us for the moment to note that he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*, unless, by principle, according to what is required by the articulation of the look with the things, he is one of the visibles, capable, by a singular reversal, of seeing them – he who is one of them.<sup>16</sup>

Pucill's films encourage the viewer to step back from the most everyday objects and thus establish a new relationship with the bodies that manipulate those objects, to relearn how to observe filmed faces. These are precious, constantly surprising films which delicately, subtly lay bare the act of seeing and encourage us to consider the gaze. While they can be read as a reflection on female sexual identity,<sup>17</sup> at the level of image, they avoid any simplistic use of symbol, any overly direct or conventional correlation between sign and signification. Visually, aurally and rhythmically, they establish a sensorial and discursive world within which the interaction between domestic objects and the different states and fragmentations of the female body open onto a broader reflection on the act of seeing.

Sometimes the metaphorical references to the conflict between masculine and feminine are obvious and immediate (*Backcomb*). However, the social symbols do not seal in the underlying political discourse, but are used as image: they enrich and are enriched by the formal and haptic work with the image.

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<sup>16</sup> *Op.cit.*, p. 134-135.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Darke, in his article "Textual analysis: *Back Comb*", notes: "Using domestic objects, photo-montaged into a self-portrait, the film looks at a woman's struggle to free herself from an imposed role (that) of woman as provider, giver and container of milk and child." 1997 article written for the London Production Fund, available online on the Luxonline website at [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/backcomb\\_darke%281%29.html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/backcomb_darke%281%29.html).

The insistence on a specifically female face<sup>18</sup> points to a consistent underlying attention to the sexual nature of human presence, to a social problematisation of the representation of the body, which is inscribed and emerges, it seems to me, from a deep and broader investigation of the image's potential to make visible the materiality of the body, to establish a communication between this materiality and the gaze of the viewer.<sup>19</sup>

Through a rich and powerful formal construction that makes use of the infinite possibilities of the images, Pucill's films go beyond a restricted feminist reading based on identity, and allow the observer to bring her own perception into play, to integrate the social symbolism, the discursive element around the question of gender, into a penetrating visual structure: the political message becomes authentic filmic form.

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<sup>18</sup> In this sense, *Backcomb* stands out among Pucill's films: the explicitly gendered positioning is established by the choice of placing this wealth of black hair, which becomes a disturbing subject of destabilization and destruction of the domestic space, at the centre of the image.

<sup>19</sup> This sexual nature of female presence is articulated more broadly in Pucill's films since 2000, which I shall analyse in a future article. Some of Pucill's films can be seen online on the artist's website (<http://sarahpucill.co.uk/>) and on the Light Cone website (<http://www.lightcone.org/fr/cineaste-1151-sarah-pucill.html>). Both of these sites also give a full list of Pucill's films.