'The Treatre of female points of view'
Swollen Stigma, *Cast*, *Stages of Mourning*, *Phantom Rhapsody*'
by Gloria Morano November 2010

As analysed in the article *On Female Presence and the Act of Seeing*[0], Sarah Pucill's *Early Shorts*[1] and her more recent *Taking My Skin* are characterised by rich and complex Structuralist experimentation with the representation of the female face. By bringing together liquids and solids, bodies and inanimate objects in every film, she transforms the face into an acute study of the act of seeing and its inherent hapticity.

From the late 1990s, she continued to develop these themes as part of her filmic research, whilst tackling issues of lesbian and feminist identity more openly.

In *Swollen Stigma* (1997, 20 minutes), *Cast* (1999, 17 minutes), *Stages of Mourning* (2004, 17 minutes) and her very recent *Phantom Rhapsody* (2010, 18 minutes), the sexual character of the female presence takes on a fundamental pre-eminence. This is key to the development of an investigation into the intimate experience of desire and the subjective repercussions of one's own image and comparison with the female body and image of others.

Swollen Stigma opens with the image of an eye in extreme close-up[2]. The viewer realises immediately that ocular perception and the act of watching will once again be at the centre of the filmic construction.

It is followed by the appearance of two armchairs in a domestic interior, lit by a large window. The close-up of the eye is repeated, this time filmed from the side, followed by a return to the frame of the sitting room where a woman now appears, seated in one of the armchairs, restless and melancholy. Images of the woman alternate with other subjective shots in which we see the opposite

armchair through her eyes, while hyper-real sounds (her fingers as she runs them over her eyebrows and through her hair) intensify this subjective perception which involves the viewer in the sensations of the main character. With a montage evocative of Surrealism, especially the atmospheres created by Maya Deren, we witness the appearance of another woman who moves enigmatically.

Sarah Pucill thus stages the tension between presence and absence, the desirous images of memory transformed into a phantom presence. The actions of this second imagined and desired woman are indecipherable and disturbing, like in a bizarre dream: she appears head down at the end of a hallway wearing a long white dress, head down once again on the armchair in a loose garish dress, as her feet toy with the curtains at the window, then lying on the ground, with her eyes open, surrounded by flowers (this image, the first in a significant series, appears in colour).

The obsessive desire that the first woman experiences for the latter is then developed through an interplay of appearances and disappearances of two female bodies. While the movements of the main character are sometimes composed of a sequence of sophisticated double exposures, in the following sequence the legs of the desired woman are outlined in the main character's action of opening and closing the doors of the kitchen cupboards. From this moment on, the images exude a dreamlike sensuality, created by means of bodies visually present for a few short instants or objects which suggest bodily forms: memory and desire combine with the suffering of the main character in a dreamlike physical contact. The boundaries of her subjectivity become blurred, infiltrating every domestic object and every habitual action, allowing desire to take subtle possession of every image. The bodies, their movements and their spatiality are transformed into a complex evocation desirous of the absent woman.

As the minutes pass, the colour scenes recur more and more frequently. The

gentle, otherworldly luminosity of black and white is opposed more and more forcefully by the realist nature of colour, which, paradoxically, is also used in the dreamlike images of the desired woman. Red takes on a fundamental symbolic meaning, with the dress and stockings she wears in one of the scenes becoming liquid that, mixed with water, drips into the sink.

Every return to black and white becomes a breath-stopping moment of irrealism, causing the loss of orientation in space and time, with this effect being strengthened even further by the colour sequences. The viewer finds him or herself suspended in an increasingly complex state of perception, in which the distinctions between the domestic actions of the main character and the indecipherable actions of the female phantom become blurred, with the former seeming almost more mysterious and abstracted than the latter.

Within this profoundly dreamlike formal construction, the passage which associates the flame of the hob with the pistil of a flower and the eyebrows with roots in the ground creates an aesthetically rich and intense erotic imagery: the presence of the desired and absent female body pervades every action and leads to progressively more erotic images.

The highly erotised nature of the images takes the creative comparison between the domestic actions and objects and the female figures to extremes. This same comparison permeated the *Early Shorts* in the form of a sophisticated geometric study. The haptic dimension is tackled here by visualising the desire of the main character. Sensuality is directed towards the succession of flowers in the images, which are observed, washed, caressed, cut with a knife and eaten from a dish set at a laid table. The eroticism of the images examines touch, sight and taste in a synaesthetic dimension which is elaborated extensively in the work on the duration and pace of the images and on the subjective assignment of sensations and fantasies. In the closing minutes of the film, this culminates in the action of the desired woman as she swallows some flowers immersed in a bowl of milk.

As the film-maker Sandra Lahire[3] states in a masterly article on *Swollen Stigma*:

The woman's lips and tulips display an osmosis between their insides and outsides as if their skins were turned inside out. The private becomes public in a turning inside out, or eruption, in an on-going scenario. The viewer oscillates between joining her point of view and seeing her in full shot as if her mental furniture has seeped out of her.

Our need for a tangible unified subject is dissolved into layers of possible differences or identities. Both the woman and film surface itself 'feel' what the body, hand and objects are tracing. Film and skin are fused. Drops of water glide down a luminescent white bowl, as if expressed from a nipple[4].

The originality and profound interest of the work of Sarah Pucill lies in the complex link between formal experimentation with the materiality of the image (the materiality of the film strengthens and adds to the work on the surface of the body) and the reflection on the possible representations and relationships between different female subjects. The investigation into female and lesbian subjectivity and the relationship between different female points of view is formed within the images in the fragile boundary between figuration and abstraction, visibility and touch, and objects and bodies. The concepts and representations of identity and otherness are problematised and made figuratively complex.

According to the analysis of Sandra Lahire:

The film refuses to lead the viewer through a 'realist' story, thus implying the

question, 'whose realism?' Instead we draw ourselves along to confront the mechanism of narrative itself. Voyeurism is denied in favour of the viewer's mirror identification with the entranced woman whose past passion insistently flares into the moment[5].

The female and lesbian dimension observed in *Swollen Stigma*, as in *Cast, Stages of Mourning* and *Phantom Rhapsody*, is also apparent in the sophisticated formal work on the flow of perceptions and on an intentional disorientation between different subjects by means of effective ambiguity, built upon sounds, movements and actions, spaces and colours. The symbolic elements which refer to the lesbian dimension (for example, the flowers and blood through the use of the colour red) are introduced into the images in a dreamlike, disturbing atmosphere marked by changes in pace. The symbolism used here is free from pre-established theoretical dogma. It is interwoven into a meaningful creative work which does not overlook the complexity and paradoxes of intimate experience, which, in the case of *Swollen Stigma*, is an experience of memory and desire.

Cast delves further into the potential ambiguities in the figure of the desirous female subject. In this short, images of girls, dolls and women alternate with images of objects and human subjects, in growing confusion. The film highlights the problem of figuration, the fleeting and multiple nature of the reality underlying the images, thanks in part to the use of faces reflected in mirrors (a process that will be used again in *Taking My Skin*). What is real? What is image? What is reproduction and semblance? As in her earlier films, Sarah Pucill displays a particular interest in the representation of faces and the circulation of gazes. At times, the faces of the dolls appear more expressive than the human faces, which are extremely made-up. In *Cast*, the ambiguity and complexity lies in the disorientation created by these shocking, dreamlike images, aided by a very slow and hypnotic pace. Suddenly, halfway through the film, this atmosphere of mystery is broken abruptly by the sound of breaking glass and a radical change

of setting. We move from a domestic interior to a beach[6], where a number of motionless women-dolls are lying.

As Sandra Lahire emphasises once again in one of her texts:

In Pucill's film there is a nexus of gazes between women of different ages and sizes, and between their own body casts as well as dolls. A seamless pan joins dolls being pulled out of a drawer with the women made up as dolls, lying on a beach by the sea's immensity. The film asks how, within the nature of film, a spectator can travel visually in a different body or into a different scale of space. As each woman sits in the other's lap, their distinct eye views of their own bodies become 'fused/ confused'. There is a little death of each self[7].

Sarah Pucill's far-reaching work takes a creative approach to the concept of the circulation of subjective female point-of-view shots, through the mise-en-scène of different female bodies and dolls and their continuous contrast with their own reflection in a mirror.

This visual proposal regarding the complexity of the image evokes Frédéric Neyrat's interesting reflection:

...the ghost of subjectivity, which is our multiple being, that which envelops the primary duality of the image. The originating power of the image, its infinite plastic *telos*, mutters behind its primary speculative dimension. It presents the power of the multiple peculiar to subjectivity, which no subjectivisation can, nor will, definitively unify [8].

In *Stages of Mourning* (and later in *Taking My Skin*) Sarah Pucill creates a direct relationship between her own autobiographical experience and her creative research into the presence of female bodies, reciprocal gazes and the circulation of subjective point-of-view shots.

While, as was analysed in the previous article, *Taking My Skin* investigates the reciprocal gaze between the director and her mother, *Stages of Mourning* is constructed as a meditative and mournful process involving the body of the artist and the images of her late partner Sandra Lahire. Sarah Pucill immerses her own image amongst photographs and recorded footage of her former partner. She herself performs as she observes and edits them, developing a *mise en abîme* created by different layers of meaning and movement. The various frames, initially disorienting at times, gradually reveal all the photos of Sandra Lahire, often in the company of Sarah Pucill, and show their shared work on the human body, the use of mirrors and reciprocal gazes.

Sarah Pucill adds these significant lines as the film opens:

A document
from work and from life
tracing the surface
I put you together
to put myself together
in the grain of the pixel
for a bit of you
out of time

Her personal work on bereavement and memory therefore fits in with her creative reflection on the circulation of gazes through images and the meditative wealth that this creates. The power of these images lies in the vitality of the balance between appearances and disappearances, the thin line between documentary elements and dreamlike components generated by her desire for the presence of her lost partner and the reality of her absence. The music and silences add to the intensity of the meditative dream of *Stages of Mourning.*

Sarah Pucill's most recent film, *Phantom Rhapsody*, is surprising due to the great irony used by the film-maker, who makes some of her actresses act awkwardly and clumsily. By proposing a highly theatrical black and white mise-en-scène, with the staging and changes continuously on display[9], the director takes up the classic images of the female nude, reviving the renaissance iconography of Venus in a critical manner and associating it with the world of silent films and magical effects.

Four women alternate in the roles of the magician, the nude model and the director, staging the preparation of a scenic pose each time. As ever, the mirror is used within the shot. Therefore, the image is always doubled, calling it into question and stripping it bare.

With *Phantom Rhapsody*, Sarah Pucill compares the pictorial, the theatrical and the cinematographic space. At the heart of this creative study is the representation of the female body, the circulation of roles, gazes, and desires. In an interplay of ever tighter focuses (the camera shot, then the physical frame and, lastly, the mirror), the director investigates the fascination of preparing a scene and holding a pose. However, in the last instance, she primarily uses an interplay of double exposures and appearing and disappearing bodies to examine their visibility and the ephemeral nature of images.

The great innovation of this last short by Sarah Pucill is the irresistible comic quality of the actresses: their energetic clumsiness, the intensity of their actions, the power of their reciprocal gazes and their gazes into the camera suggest a turnaround in the cinematographic art of the British film-maker. The ironic construction of the performances provides an illuminating insight into the figurative examination of female bodies. *Phantom Rhapsody* creates an atmosphere which is both tense and liberating, a dynamic balance between mystery and comical strangeness which lead to the intense and joyful participation of the viewer in the various actions of the actresses. This seems to us to be a significant innovation: her work on the circulation of subjective female

point-of-view shots seems to have given way to a different experiment with the presence of the bodies in the scene; a burlesque experiment which toys with the visual codes of female figuration and disarranges them with humour and creative wealth.

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[o] *La furia umana*, No. 5, summer 2010.
[1] *You Be Mother*, *Milk and Glass*, *Backcomb*, *Mirrored Measure*.
[2] *Mirrored Measure*, the film immediately prior to this, ended with a close-up of a moist eye, whose brightness concluded the intense circulation of water and glass between the two female presences.
[3] Sarah Pucill's partner, who passed away in 2001. The film *Stages of Mourning* focuses on her mourning for the deceased. Sandra Lahire participated in the creation of *Swollen Stigma* as photography and sound assistant.
[4] « The Fairies *Banquet - A visual fugue of eye, tongue, fingers,* Sandra Lahire on *Swollen Stigma* », in *Coil Magazine* No. 7, 1998.
http://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/fairies_banquet%281%29.html
[5] *Ibid*.
[6] The clear reference to Deren is repeated here (*At Land*, 1944).
[7] « Little Deaths » in *Make* magazine special issue on the Miniature, 1999.
http://sarahpucill.co.uk/films/cast-texts.php

[8] *L'image hors-l'image*, Editions Léo Scheer, Paris, 2003, p. 20.
[9] Sarah Pucill moves the lights, opens and closes the curtains and thereby changes the scene before the viewer's very eyes. This is the same device already used primarily in *Blind Light* and *Fall in Frame*, which study space in relation to the bodies that occupy it.