

Sarah Pucill: Between Mirrors

by Helena Reckitt

Tropes of reciprocity and collaboration have been central to Sarah Pucill's work since she starting making films in the early 1990s. Grounded in encounters between women, her films have traced where one person ends and another begins. In her films, the process of being seen, reflected and represented by another is presented as fundamental to how intimate bonds are formed and sustained, and of what Pucill has called "bleeds of identity."¹ This concern with boundaries and thresholds has also extended to an exploration of relationships between the inside and the outside, the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead.

Pucill's longstanding interest in encounters between women also underpins *Magic Mirror*, 2013, a film that both draws on and departs from the words and images of French artist Claude Cahun (b.1894, d.1954). The film borrows and plays with the nine chapter headings of Cahun's 1930 book *Aveux non Avenus* (Confessions Cut Off), so that chapters become scenes in a play. Incorporating performance, animation, music and sound, as well as spoken and written language, the film operates across several formal and sensory registers. Discussing how she sets one element of Cahun's work against another in *Magic Mirror*, Pucill has spoken of it as "a restaging of the image with the 'Voice' (not written word) of her writing."² Shot in 16mm black and white, at 75 minutes *Magic Mirror* is Pucill's longest film to date, and by far her most ambitious. Drawing on Cahun's photographs and collages as well as her writing, the film takes Cahun's

¹ Helena Blaker, Sarah Pucill, LUXONLINE, undated, unpaginated [www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/sarah_pucill/essay\(5\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/sarah_pucill/essay(5).html), accessed 14 September, 2013

² Email correspondence with the author, 12 September, 2013

work apart and reassembles it in new form.³ This process of cinematic bricolage echoes Cahun's collage aesthetic in *Aveux non Avenus*, a book which adopts a range of voices, styles and stances and references personal sources (letters, journal entries, poems, memories, dreams, dialogues real and imagined) as well as mythology, literature, religion, science and art. The only official female member of the Surrealists, and deeply engaged with developments in psychoanalytic thinking, Cahun pursued principals of free association and radical juxtaposition in her work. Formally and thematically, Cahun is a fitting subject for Pucill's posthumous collaboration. Teasing out resonances between her work and Cahun's, Pucill expands her longstanding interest in the imaging of gender through motifs of illusion and disappearance. This inter-subjective approach chimes with both artists' understanding of the self as porous and relational.

Although Cahun never made films, her photographs have a strong cinematic quality. They were often staged in series and, rather than reflecting the search for a fixed, pristine image, they embody a playful spirit of experimentation. In her writing Cahun references and evokes the grammar of cinematography. *Magic Mirror* teases out these latent filmic aspects. In one scene, the sound of a manual typewriter is accompanied by collages of performers who mimic Cahun that are framed in hand-held mirrors. The mirrors echo the shape of a camera lens, while the portraits move to the staccato rhythm of the typewriter. Both mirror and camera close in on a face as it's made-up. At one point the lens of the eye reflects that of the camera. The voiceover describes the action: "The lens tracks the eye, the mouth. The lines skim the skin's surface. The expression on the face is fierce, at times tragic. At last calm, with the carefully constructed knowing calm of an acrobat. A professional smile. And voila!" The camera beat and the click of the shutter run into the rhythm of the text, the full stop; the motion of the panning camera echoes that of the sentence. Pucill draws inspiration from the synaesthetic spirit of Cahun's work. Describing this aspect of Cahun's art and

³ Pucill bases her collages on those made by Cahun's lover, the graphic designer Marcel Moore, "after designs by the author" for *Aveux non Avenus*.

writing Pucill has reflected on her creation of “a word-sound-image movement relationship in which words are expressed through sound and image,” which “plays with the grammar of the image, with the camera and the word.”⁴

Incorporating characters of Cahun’s drawn from literature, myth and fairy tales, *Magic Mirror* has a sense of being out of time, which is reinforced by the circular merry-go-round structure of both book and film. Tableaux are staged against a black backdrop, framed by drapes, curtains opening onto curtains. The haunting sound of a single drawn-out piano note, fingers running over the rim of a glass, a distant bell, add to this dreamlike mood. Throughout the film there is a play between stillness and mobility, writing and speech. Each section opens with a written quotation, borrowed from Cahun’s faceplates, and an animated photo-collage. Performers behave self-consciously, alternating between posing and moving, as if aware of their object-like qualities. Pucill has long juxtaposed fixed and mobile images in her work, including in her first film, *You Be Mother*, 1990, where a slide of a woman’s face is projected onto crockery while tea is poured. *Stages of Mourning*, 2004, also presents a conversation between filmed, photographed, projected and reflected images, as Pucill and her lover, the late filmmaker, Sandra Lahire, hold photographs of themselves and each other, and Pucill mimics recorded footage of them both.

Pucill’s interest in the latent movement in photographs as well as in moments of stasis in film resonates with curatorial premise the 1990 exhibition of still and moving artists’ images, *Passages de l’image*. The curators wrote of “a double tension” in the work they had assembled, that wavers “on the one hand, between immobility and movement; on the other, between the analogical representation and what suspends, destroys, corrupts it”. They suggested that it is within “this chain of passages, this intertwining, that the image finds its proper place today, its fullest and newest value as an enigma, in a suspended infinity of movements and movements in time, which always stand out as single elements but

⁴ email correspondence with the author, *ibid*

nevertheless belong to an overall view in which they have a place.”⁵ Their conception of images circulating in an intertwined chain finds echoes in *Magic Mirror*'s conception of Cahun's work as an archive to be sampled and reimagined.

One way that *Magic Mirror* explores Cahun's collective resonance is by casting multiple performers to play her. Three strikingly charismatic women perform as Cahun, in addition to one as her lifelong lover and creative collaborator, Marcel Moore. Pucill herself acts in one scene, in the guise of make-up assistant and prop mistress, appropriately enough. This figure restages a picture made by Cahun after she had disguised herself as an Aryan widow to avoid arrest by the Nazis. Pucill sports a bright blonde wig, versions of which have appeared in previous films including *Swollen Stigma*, 1998, *Cast*, 2000, and *Phantom Rhapsody*, 2010. Pucill's is also one of several female voices in the film. Sometimes they speak together, sometimes alone, capturing the idea that subjectivity and authorship are dispersed and shared. This is relational aesthetics, but not in the sense that curator Nicholas Bourriaud intended.

Magic Mirror starts with a focus on self-scrutiny, with Cahun surveying her double as if stalking prey. A bald, lipsticked Cahun stands apart from her reflection, staring with detached fascination. At times the two Cahuns draw close as if to kiss, at others they overlap, merge or swap places. Being photographed and mirrored are presented as different kinds of trap. “The blade of a window. Where shall I put the silver? On this side or that? In front or behind the glass? In front. I imprison myself, I blind myself.” Silver liquid is applied thickly to a glass surface, a motif that recalls Pucill's 1993 *Milk and Glass*, in which silver painted over black glass reveals the projection of a female face. In *Magic Mirror* this trope is reversed. A restaged portrait of Cahun is placed beneath glass and the application of paint obscures, rather than reveals, her likeness. Meanwhile, a different hand, moving and reflected underneath the glass, corrects the portrait's

⁵ Raymond Bellour, Catherine David and Christine van Assche, 'Preface,' in *Passages de l'image*, Editions du Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1990, p. 14

make-up: one illusion atop another. Chiming with Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, the search for a stable reflection is thwarted.

Identity is fractured. The self becomes its own object. "Divide myself in order to conquer myself. Multiply myself so I can make a mark. So I can impress myself." A succession of Cahuns takes the stage. A wind-up doll divides at the waist, restaged and animated from a photograph by Cahun, evoking a Siamese twin; a bald monk-like figure with eyes painted on closed lids reveals false vampire's teeth. Several androgynous figures appear, including one who rotates a crystal ball and lifts it so that it reflects her face, a be-suited dandy – based on Cahun's father – and a sailor. An effete weight lifter, painted dots designating nipples, bears the phrase "I AM IN TRAINING DON'T KISS ME" across her chest. We hear the start of a piano lesson – "Girls," calls out the teacher – and the woman strikes a series of balletic poses, underscoring the reference to training. ("Training for what?" the art historian Tirza True Latimer has asked of Cahun's picture. "Training to become a woman ... or to un-become one? Training to be a lesbian?"⁶.) Elsewhere games of chess and cards, where one player/dealer wears a mask with blanked-out eyes and another player wears a single leather glove, underscore the idea of existence as a game of chance.

Yet where the search for a reassuring mirror image and identity is elusive, the mutual regard of female lovers yields something potentially more sustaining. *Magic Mirror* offers a feminist/lesbian twist on narcissism. Rejecting its conventional associations with female vanity and passivity, it reconfigures narcissism as an active and reciprocal process between women. A pale Narcissus contemplates her reflection in a glistening black pool, the sound of cicadas and the remote ring of a bell creating a sense of lushness. A shadowy scene, in which one barely-glimpsed figure fastens wings to another (an illusion to the indeterminate gender of angels), initiates an erotic encounter. We hear the

⁶ Tirza True Latimer, 'Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore,' in *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, ed. Louise Downie, Tate Publishing/Jersey Heritage Trust, London and St Helier, 2006, p.63

muffled noise of birds in a coop, evoking the sounds of bird's wing in *Swollen Stigma* that accompany the protagonist's shift from stasis to action. Spades dig into earth; a fire crackles.

As in *Stages of Mourning*, where the process of mutual filming and reflection is central to the women's sexual and artistic bond, photographs mediate a lesbian union. "The moment when our two heads, our hair becoming inextricably entwined, bent over a photograph, a portrait of one or the other, our two narcissisms drowning in it. It was the impossible realized in a magic mirror." Linking cinema projection to its roots in the oldest forms of optical illusion, a candle is extinguished and the shadow of two matted manes of hair is cast against a wall. "Our hair became so entangled so intertwined that night, that in the morning to cut through we had to shave our heads." A pair of scissors, representing a punitive threat to sexual fusion, snips the hair in two. Seen in this context, Cahun's baldness is recoded as both a symptom and a sign of lesbian identification and desire. The shaving of women's heads as well as eyebrows has a long association with stigma and was a punishment for female prostitutes and vagabonds in sixteenth-century France. Pucill has explored the subversive connotation of hair in several earlier films. In *Backcomb*, 1995, for example, black hair grows across a table, causing crockery to smash and milk to spill, weaving into fabric like thread. This eruption in domestic space signals the threat of the feminine and lesbian merger.

The motif of doubling and fusion emerges even more dramatically in a scene choreographed from portraits that Cahun and Moore took of each other standing before a mirror. In Moore's photograph, a bronzed Cahun sports cropped blonde hair and a harlequin jacket. Instead of looking into the glass, Cahun faces the viewer/photographer. She does not need to contemplate her own likeness, Pucill suggests; her search for self-reflection is satisfied in the returned gaze of the photographer/lover. In the picture of Moore, she faces the glass directly. Moore is also dressed androgynously, in v-neck white sweater and knitted-cap. Yet her

fuller figure, coupled with the smile playing on her lips, makes her stance less confrontational than Cahun's. Pucill highlights the importance of mutual mirroring for the women, of seeing and being seen by and in relation to each another. Their hands meet on either side of the glass's surface. Where Narcissus reached in vain to grasp her reflection, Cahun smashes through the glass to reach her lover on the other side.⁷ Pucill links the mirror's frame to that of a window. "More easily than I would have thought possible and without leaving a trace I pass my fist through the window. Drunk, with new extraordinarily harmonious sensations, I was crossing a beach the colour of wing dust, no sooner touched than tarnished. I couldn't find the shape of my own steps any more." Yet, as in *Stages of Mourning*, the ecstasy of reciprocal reflection and merger is haunted by the specter of loss. "Life, death, ageless sisters. And yet you are the younger. You are bound together. You cannot wipe her out without annihilating yourself."

The preoccupation with being seen in Cahun's work is poignant, given the lack of attention she received during her lifetime. Although prominent Surrealists including Henri Michaux, René Crevel, Robert Desnos, and even the notoriously homophobic André Breton, admired her work, Cahun was not widely known or celebrated. Her best-known publication, *Les paris sont ouverts*, a 1934 defense of non-didactic poetry's political potential, was widely considered the work of a man. Outside the collages in *Aveux non Avenus*, only one self-portrait was published while she was alive and many of her pictures were destroyed by the Nazis on Jersey. Admittedly Cahun was not the best advocate for her own work. She adopted pseudonyms, including Claude Courlis and Daniel Douglas, that

⁷ This photographic pendant has been the basis for feminist arguments about Moore's role as co-author and vital collaborator with Cahun. Feminist commentators including Laura Cottingham, Marsha Meskimmon, Jennifer Shaw, Abigail Solomon-Godeau and Tirza True Latimer have also pointed to Moore's collages, which she made as faceplates for *Aveux non Avenus* "after designs by the author," and to her role as photographer of portraits credited to Cahun. Not all commentators on Cahun share their opinion. James Stevenson, in his essay in *Don't Kiss Me*, and Jennifer Munday, in her notes for the English translation of *Aveux non Avenus*, both dismiss these theories. Pucill in *Magic Mirror*, while very attentive to the erotics of reciprocity in Cahun's work, does not position Moore as her artistic collaborator.

obscured associations with her famous literary family, and she disliked the socializing that is the unacknowledged part of an artist's work. Yet the lack of recognition nonetheless stung.

In vain in *Disavowals* I tried through black humour, provocation, defiance to shake my contemporaries out of their blissful conformism, their complacency. Ostracism was more or less the general response. Aside from silence, the book was met with the basest insults. This is how 'literary criticism'... sought to welcome the 'prose-poems' of this unwanted Cassandra.⁸

Perhaps Cahun had an inkling that her work's true audience was yet to come. In her post WW2 memoir, *Confidences au miroir* (Confiding in the Mirror), she claimed:

The main reason for my writing thus is that some of those scattered friends may turn up after all and be curious of my thoughts and behaviour during this universal illness (which will turn out to be childbearing, let us hope). Or that some unknown but kindred spirit amongst your countrymen may be curious about 'the spiritual franc-tireurs' of Jersey."⁹

The rehabilitation of neglected female artists has of course been a tenet of feminism, and one that would have influenced Pucill as an MA student of the filmmaker Liz Rhodes in the late 1980s. Rhodes' 1979 essay *Whose History?* was written to protest the paucity of women in the Hayward's *Film as Film* exhibition. Noting that the research into female filmmakers carried out by herself and others in response to this omission "should not be seen as illustrating a particular concept of either feminine or feminist filmmaking" Rhodes clarified that

⁸ Cahun Claude, *Disavowals*, trans. Susan De Muth, London, Tate Publishing, 2007, p. 16

⁹ Claude Cahun quoted in Claire Follain, 'Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe – Résistantes,' in *Don't Kiss Me*, *ibid*, p.94

“the presentation is as much concerned with the women researchers and their attitudes as it is with the subjects of their research, women looking at their own history.”¹⁰ This emphasis on the subjectivity of the artist/researcher chimes with Pucill’s encounter with Cahun. She hails Cahun as an enabling precursor for herself and other queer, feminist artists, whose impact and relevance only emerged after her death. “I feel that she couldn’t be heard or seen *in her time*,” Pucill has said, and that “she’s heard and seen *now*.”¹¹

Despite the relational spirit within which *Magic Mirror* was conceived, it nonetheless raises questions about the practice of restaging the work of an artist who has no say in the matter. Pucill herself has speculated on whether some might consider her approach “dangerous or disrespectful to a major artist.”¹² Certainly any viewer of *Magic Mirror* who is not very familiar with Cahun cannot know where her ideas and imagery end and Pucill’s begin. This porous relationships between Pucill and Cahun’s work is of course part of the point. In staging an active conversation across the two bodies of work, Pucill does not want a conventional subject/object dynamic. Instead, by developing her own associations and concerns in relation to Cahun’s, Pucill blurs the boundaries between them. “All of my films are quoted in this film,” she has said.¹³

Pucill’s referential approach in *Magic Mirror* is fitting, given Cahun’s propensity for what she called the “dreadful mania of citation.”¹⁴ An admirer and defender of Oscar Wilde, Cahun shared his appreciation for the dandy, a figure “without original” which “reproduces, renews itself, through emulation as opposed to procreation.”¹⁵ Photography and film are of course arts of replication. *Magic*

¹⁰ Lis Rhodes, ‘Whose History?’ in *Film as Film: Formal experiment in film, 1910-75*, exhibition catalogue, Hayward Gallery, London, 3 May-17 June, 1979, pp.119-120

¹¹ ‘I Am Ready for My Close-Up,’ Diana Mavroleon and Sarah Pucill, Resonance FM, May 31, 2013, <http://resonancefm.com/archives/12819>, accessed 5 September, 2013

¹² Lucy Reynolds, ‘At Least I Will Know My Face,’ *Vertigo*, Issue 31, Winter 2012

¹³ ‘I Am Ready for My Close-Up,’ *ibid*

¹⁴ Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick and London, 2005, p. 68

¹⁵ True Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart*, *ibid*, p.55

Mirror draws analogies between the reproductive functions of photography and sight, including collages of a foetus rotating inside an oval that evokes an embryo, a camera lens, a pupil and an eye, and a reference to “the astonished diaphragm of my eyes.”

For Cahun, the artwork was generative. “Open and someone will knock. Anyone who has been unhappy with their role on earth, God puts before a review panel. I’ll provide the theatre. You choose your plots, your character, your plots, your make-up. But the false notes struck on stage will be forever reproduced.” Pucill places these words at the beginning of *Magic Mirror* to signal the staging of a life, and the hope for a receptive audience. In today’s Internet context, the notion that artworks and other artifacts generate their own remakes has been dubbed ‘versioning’ by Artie Vierkant.

Nonetheless, for all that it draws from *Aveux non Avenus*, *Magic Mirror* is not a remake. All images that come from Cahun are meticulously reconstructed and restaged, and many scenes and images are devised that have no original visual referent in Cahun’s oeuvre. Pucill also develops links between Cahun’s art and writing, practices that are typically viewed in isolation. Teasing out associations between her own and Cahun’s iconography and ideas, Pucill enacts what she calls a “side-by-side relationship”¹⁶ in which “the things Cahun was trying to say, I wanted to say with her.”¹⁷ Here Pucill draws inspiration from Lahire’s ideas about posthumous creative alliances: Lahire saw her cinematic trilogy *Living on Air* as an act of collaboration with the late Sylvia Plath which made use of Plath’s “voice that Hollywood couldn’t get hold of.”¹⁸

Choreographing Cahun’s work has also had pedagogic dimensions for Pucill. She has spoken of learning from her in the course of recreating her tableaux. “All these subtle but complex questions actually start to find meaning: why has she

¹⁶ ‘I Am Ready for My Close-Up,’ *ibid*

¹⁷ email correspondence with the author, 12 September, 2013

¹⁸ ‘I Am Ready for My Close-Up,’ *ibid*

done this, why was that shadow there?”.¹⁹ This sense of learning-by-doing chimes with Henri Lefebvre’s observation in *Rhythmanalysis* that in order to understand something you have to practice it on a proprioceptive level. “To grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it. One must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration. Like in music and the learning of a language one only really understands the meanings and connections when one comes to produce them.”²⁰

Immersing herself in Cahun’s images and writing has also played a self-reflexive role for Pucill. It has enabled her to see her own work in a new light. Having been introduced to Cahun in the late 1980s by Sharon Morris, who was writing a PhD on her work, Pucill acknowledges that Cahun had probably influenced her unconsciously before she was aware of it. *Cast*, for instance, with its exploration of female mutuality and regression, features several Cahunian tropes: a doll-like woman asleep in a chest of drawers; castaway female forms on a shore; and a scene through the looking glass followed by footsteps on a beach. It is as if in the process of passing *by* Cahun’s images, they passed *into* Pucill. The discrete categories of artist, artwork and viewer are thus confused, becoming unstable energies in a mobile field. “Images are in the air, we’re sharing them,” Pucill has noted. Once you have authored something, it can become shared to the point where you can’t say who the author is, “even when it’s supposedly your image.”²¹ *Magic Mirror* is grounded in this understanding of authorship and interpretation as porous.

Pucill’s response to and departure from Cahun’s work bring out many aspects that exhibitions and catalogues of her art obscure, from the importance of Cahun’s literary output to the provisional quality of photographs that she made and showed in private. Cahun guarded her status as an amateur fiercely, fearing

¹⁹ ‘I Am Ready for My Close-Up,’ *ibid*

²⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Continuum Press, London, 2004, p. 20

²¹ ‘I Am Ready for My Close-Up,’ *ibid*

that specialization and professionalism led to stagnation. Yet there is no mistaking the care and attention that went into her make-up and staging, which are central to the photograph's uncannily persuasive evocation of multiple personae. In this way, too, Pucill's working methods have an affinity with Cahun's. With its carefully staged and lit sets, its dramatically made-up performers, and its minimal visual aesthetic, *Magic Mirror* creates much with limited means. It creates a tension between spectacle and intimacy, drama and the handmade. Following Cahun, Pucill combines a rich and provocative repertoire of images and poses with a disdain for high production values, a provisional approach that "mixes rough and smooth".²²

The curtain has been a key device in Pucill's films, and central to her staging of gendered subjectivity. Humble and homely, it demarcates theatrical space, and creates a sense of anticipation. Pucill has explained that her use of these drapes marks "the relationship between a private domestic space and a public space, a gallery or a theatre, the desire to expose as well as to hide. It is a way to abstract the space from being autobiographic to being supposedly objective."²³ The curtains in Pucill's films resonate with those that Cahun used as a backdrop in her home studio, which evoke the intimacy and privacy of what she and Moore called their "bedroom carnival."

Magic Mirror begins with a curtained stage-set, the sound of a finger running over glass, and an anxious address to an imagined audience: "Dear strangers, be sure to keep your distance. You are all I have in the world." An artist's mannequin stands beneath a bell jar, poised to move, as light rises on the patterned curtain behind it. The fear of rejection, and of playing to an empty house, remains to the film's end.

²² Email correspondence with the author, 18th September, 2013

²³ Email correspondence with the author, *ibid*

As soon as I come out of my dreams and imagine making my entry into the world I hear doors slam shut. The curtain was raised five times, maybe six, but in the end it stayed down on the actor. I remain alone with my prey, quivering, about to escape from my grasp. Alone in a crowd that is blurred spreading out into the distance, pouring over a problem of insufficient gifts.

In the final scene of *Magic Mirror* another curtain lifts and descends on an illuminated stage floor, then falls to meet its own shadow, a final image of doubling and encounter, rendered with almost corporeal tactility. Light seeps beneath the fabric in a thin, sinuous strip. Suggesting a world beyond the set's confining interiors, it is an apt analogy for the reciprocal process enacted by the film. This suggestion of call-and-response highlights Pucill's understanding of the relational nature of subjects and subjectivities. It points to the generative after-effects that the work of one artist can have on another.

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