

Sarah Pucill: A cinema of attraction

by Sebastien Ronceray

*Seven shorts films by British filmmaker Sarah Pucill have just been released on DVD. To mark the launch of the DVD, Pucill was invited for two screenings in Paris in March 2011, hosted jointly by Braquage, Light Cone and the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts. **Bref** took the opportunity to talk to her about her films.*

Sarah Pucill has made eleven films since 1990, all on 16 mm. Her work centres around intimate memory, projection, subtle compositions of images. Pucill, who is also a photographer and lecturer, studied fine art (sculpture, painting, photography, film), and is thus highly aware of the issues of autonomy in the making of her films. Working independently, she operates the camera, acts and composes the music for the majority of her films, and likes to work with independent production organisations such as the NowHere Lab in London. Her work is distributed by the Lux (London) and Light Cone (Paris), and has been presented at many festivals.

Despite the difficulties currently faced by British filmmakers still working on film (particularly the problems at Deluxe Soho Film Lab, one of the largest in the UK), Pucill is committed to continuing to use 16-mm, and even feels that it is essential to maintain this practice at this difficult time. The unique nature of the medium, and the tactile contact it gives her with the film, mean that she has a compulsive relationship with the film stock; she is inspired by the materiality of silver printing, the texture of the images it produces.

A work of composition

Sarah Pucill's films are imbued with a logic of sensation, inviting us to enter a world of representation: presentation of bodies, light, objects and gestures. The sets are minimal:

small stages draped with fabric, bare spaces where each object carries its own significance. As if the site of the images had to be composed like a dream, a mental projection. Each of Pucill's films gives the impression of having inhabited a place as one might wish to enter the body of the other, immerse oneself in her gaze, in her field, come even closer to see more, be included in her image. In *Stages of Mourning* (2004, 17 min), Pucill comes face-to-face with images of her dead lover. In *Backcomb* (1995, 6 min), a table is laid for breakfast, a number of white objects placed on a tablecloth, weighted with the constraint they evoke, and a woman appears. Gradually, her hair begins to invade this territory of domestic nightmare, mixing with the cups, the glasses, even the embroidery of the tablecloth, until the woman withdraws, dragging the paralyzing objects with her (like the lover held back by the donkey, the piano and the priests in Buñuel and Dalí's *Un chien andalou*). While undoubtedly feminist, Pucill's work is also close to that of the Surrealists: inventing magic out of memories of the real, out of lived sensations and remembered dreams, and inhabiting compositions that address their own representation. The character in this film is like an adult Alice who is still not quite sure where the boundaries between the everyday and the unfathomable imaginary lie.

Pucill readily acknowledges the influence of Jan Svankmajer, whose film *Alice* her films echo, with their humdrum mixture of roughness and caress, jolts (of sound and image) and the alternation between the close (sensation) and the distant (representation). This Alice figure also appears in *Cast* (2000, 17 min), a film structured around the boundary between animate and inanimate. In *Cast* Pucill also comes close to the aesthetic of another of her influences – the films of Maya Deren (in particular *Meshes of the Afternoon* and *At Land*, see *Bref* No. 29). What links Svankmajer and Deren, and inspires Pucill, is the composition of planes. Pucill often uses plays of mirrors, reflections, cutting into frames, multiplying the spaces in the image. This work of composition, which sets up images that transform our relationship to everyday spaces, corresponds to the relationship Pucill perceives between magic and cinema: disguise, doubling, bringing memories and past times back to life, speaking with the dead (through the intermediary of sound and image).

Female bodies and fantasy

In her films, Pucill often chooses to shoot from the front, in the studio, against a neutral background, enabling her to bring gestures, objects, plays of light to the fore. This practice is reminiscent of the films of Georges Méliès, their seriousness, their creativity, and also their innocence (notably in her most recent film, *Phantom Rhapsody*, made in 2010, 19 min). But while the cinematographic tricks devised by Méliès are primarily concerned with time, and generate magical gestures (a jump cut or pause in shooting allowing for substitutions and disappearances), in Pucill's films it is space that undergoes metamorphosis. Through very precise use of frames and montage-collage, she places female bodies at grips with their fantasy, their mental projection, their place in a space and in relation to objects, in order to make them act, emerge and disappear, in a celebration she compares to a sort of witchcraft.

Méliès' practice of using a single set (either throughout a film or in the various tableaux that make up the film) is also a feature of Pucill's work, but she fragments her sets, separates them by varying the frame of shooting, including mirrors in the image (thus bringing into being other images, but also other gazes on femininity, magic, and physical and optical relationships with the space). These fragmentations present the body and the objects filmed in different ways; the sequence of them over the film explores a new form of "the cinema of attractions", to use the phrase coined by André Gaudreault and Tom Gunnings in relation to early cinema. Méliès' films ("those filmed fantasies turned nostalgically towards their own past, whose archive they aim to preserve and whose story they seek to invent", as Philippe-Alain Michaud describes them¹) sought to invest time, duration with fragmentation and the illusion it produces.

¹ Philippe-Alain Michaud, "L'appareil du réel" ["The device of the real"] in *Sketches. Histoire de l'art, cinéma* [*Sketches: History of art, cinema*], Paris, Kargo & L'éclat, 2006, p. 69.

The mental and sensual gap

Pucill's films approach fragmentation and attraction through the relationship between spaces; they are anchored in a domestic world, but one derived not from observation, nor from enclosure (psychic or spatial). Rather, they present space as a film set, the source of a topology of the everyday revisited through the filter of relationships between women, objects, surfaces and images. An inner landscape conceived as a theatre of filmic objects (a chamber of curiosities of the unconscious from which traces emerge, as in *Milk and Glass* in 1993, 10 min), these films invite us to a threefold meeting between mirror, camera and viewer. Like the filmmaker Guy Sherwin, Pucill invents projection devices, concealing, unveiling, opening breaches for new images that haunt the white surfaces of our memory-screens.

The obsession with the frame, in which the composition (and the montage) skirt round the everyday to create a mental and sensual gap, brings zones of projection and fantasy into being. An attraction towards bodies, fragmented, shimmering and sensual, which enables Pucill's films to transform the real into a space of play (ludic and critical), setting up relationships between caresses (of bodies, of image, of light) and suspense (of gestures, of memories, of duration).

Like a trance of weightlessness, articulating our relationship to place without the constraint of time, Pucill's films unsettle our relationship to space, to the projection, and make clear that the cinema is indeed haunted by questions of affect, celebration and composition.

Sébastien Ronceray

Sarah Pucill, Selected Films 1990-2010, DVD issued by Lux and Arts Council England, available from www.lux.org.uk