

TITLE ARTISTS

DETAIL

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Little Deaths

Sandra Lahire on Sarah Pucill's *Cast* and her own *Johnny Panic* for a *Make* magazine special issue on the Miniature, 1999

Orgasms owe their name to the Greek 'oragao' meaning 'swell'. Dilating rings of sensation are held in by the fragile frontiers of a being. So swelling becomes intensity, just as the sun's rays may be focussed by a lens to form a point of burning, of fire eating air.

In *Lady Lazarus* (1991), a film inspired by Sylvia Plath's poetry, the woman is a phoenix and a resourceful survivor who squeezes through the fire and ash of death itself - to make a theatrical comeback, to come. On the soundtrack, Sylvia Plath describes a poem as a vortex of the vast:

"you've got to go so far, so fast, in such a small space that you've just got to burn away all the peripherals... as a poet one lives a bit on air."

A poem, a short gallery film or an expanded cinematic moment... each may resonate far out of its small space. The Greek 'poiesis' means a 'making' rather than a representation. In the poetics of film, the disembodied camera-eye acts like Sylvia Plath's spirit - Ariel. She is an incorporeal 'I': a quicksilver shapeshifter darting into all things, even the micro-organisms of decay. She can feast on the void and swell erotically out of constriction. Ariel is the horse that fuses with her as she rides suicidally straight into the 'eye' of the sun. Plath's poetics could be used to inform filmic perspectives such as the microcosm of the frame and the spaces it implies outside its boundary. Her voice is a sound miniature, framing the 'moth-breath' of her baby waking her ears to the 'far sea'.

In the chapter 'Miniature' from *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard writes: 'the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world'. A lens and a montage of lensed images acting as this 'narrow gate' and as Plath's intensified 'I/eye'.

If you try to film mercury globules, when they are projected on the big screen they become white-hot milky ways and cosmic collisions. At the level of poisoning our fingers they are ungraspable mirror balls that ping off tiny reflected worlds and wiggling selves.

In a search for 'a poetics of film', I will look at filmic scale, lenswork, mirrors, mercury and blood in two contemporary short films.

The first of these is *Cast* (2000) by Sarah Pucill, a title with a multiple explosion of meanings. It is a site where creamy fluid hardens. Light is cast making a giant shadow from a tiny doll, someone is cast in a role. I see *Cast* from the personal viewpoint of having made films out of anorexia. Like a hollow cast of herself, the anorexic embodies the abyss that food and language conceal. Feasting on film or mirror images of herself, she fasts her way into the fragility of a bone china doll. Making a bone miniature of herself, she becomes incorporeal and flies out of the power systems that code her body.

In *Cast* the child's concentration causes her doll to expand her gaze. The doll looks back, enlarging the child. The doll is charged with affectivity for different beings. The bond with the mother is replayed; this 'poesis' or 'making' moves beyond a straight reflection of physical objects in space, beyond conceptual thinking. As a practising poet, Plath saw how the power of a poem comes through a tiny physical space. A door opens and closes. The glimpse in-between swells into a psychic landscape.

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.

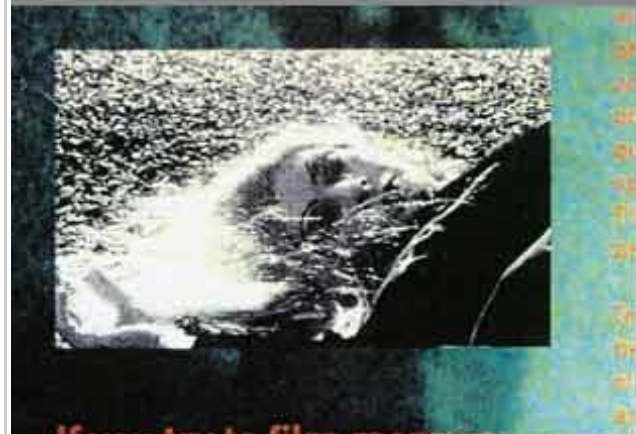
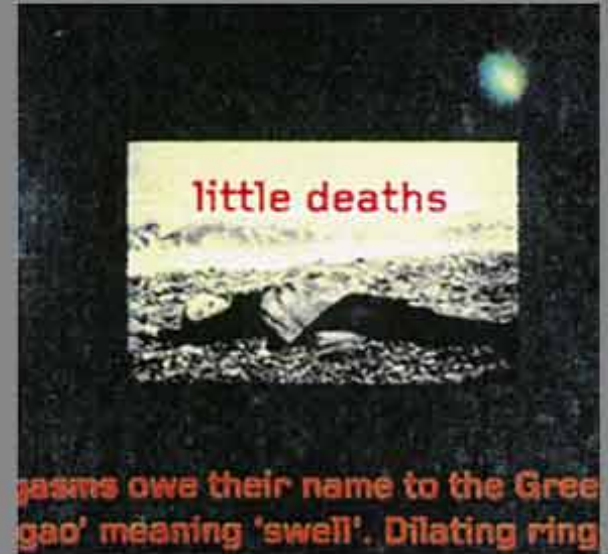
Two rocking chairs re-occur in *Cast*. They are mini and life-size. They sometimes rock empty, or they bear two women who are by turns together and apart, living and hollow. The rocking cradles the child and the woman in a suspended animation. This is a pivot between one time and another... waking and sleeping... between the tangible, the projected image and the mirror.

In the looking glass, the film journeys from the child's scale and time to the adult continuum. Like film itself, the mirror divides spaces and times; but it also fuses child and adult. In Plath's poem *Mirror* she gives voice to the mirror: The woman often comes

"searching my reaches for what she really is... In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman... Rises toward

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her day after day..."

In *Cast* the mirror also serves to fuse an erotic gaze between two women. The beach scene at high tide pinpoints a site of buffeting between those ultimate masses of solid and liquid. At low tide, this expands to a sheeny intersoaking of sand and sea... an ungraspable mirror that condenses the sun into a small disc wobbling in water. Here is an ejaculation-as-microcosm...

Johnny Panic is one of Sylvia Plath's selves. S/he sits on her like the dummy of a ventriloquist. S/he is the elusive smile of a Chesire cat who sparks off her sexual perversity in the body of language. My film *Johnny Panic* (1999) is a collaboration with Sylvia Plath's story of that name and with her related poetry, in particular *The Bell Jar*.

The film *Johnny Panic*, adds panics and dreams to the case histories kept by Sylvia Plath when she was a secretary of the mental hospital where she had also been a patient. Plath believed 'one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying - like madness, being tortured...' In her own subjection to Electro Convulsive Therapy she found herself in the eye of an electrical storm - of an atrocity that both spins out and implodes. The American electrocution of the Rosenbergs is concentrated into the microcosm of her cauterised braincells.

Defying the aims of Freudian doctors, with their studies on Hysteria, she serves solely as secretary to her alter-ego, Johnny Panic. Together they funnel the case histories of patients like her from all over the city into their 'Bible of Dreams'. Her dream 'thefts' are a scaled-down parody of the paranoia around the miles of files under MacCarthyism. Through one long night she says; 'page by page, dream by dream, my Intake books fatten'. In her own dream of dreams she is up into the glass belly of a helicopter. This glass belly beams into her an infinite semi-transparent lake where all the dream props of all the dreamers of the world are sogging around.

Lenses used include fish-eye, anamorphic, shallow depth of field and deep focus. The film set is formed of a hinged hexagon of mirrored or clear white hospital screens. The screens contain live action as well as projections of film. So there are mini-actions vignettted within the whole camera framing. The set becomes: the secretary's office; a surgeon's operating theatre; a circus tent for stunts of knife-throwing and ventriloquism; an ECT chamber; a psychiatrist's cubicle; and even a cell in a beehive. It also forms a lifesize version of the Bell Jar into which the woman feels sealed. Into this Bell Jar, as if into the pinhole camera of her brain, converge New York viewpoints from helicopter to subway. Inside the giant Bell Jar is a 'normal' Bell jar containing a foetus in formaldehyde. Inside the fragmented reflections in the wriggling mirror screens are seen the mini-worlds in the mercury globules. Through a peephole the woman is surveilled by the Clinic Director. At the same time in her Bell Jar, the Phallus is scaled down to 'turkey neck and turkey gizzards'.

At the 'climax' of the film, the Director of the Clinic catches her stealing his case-histories. She is strapped down for ECT. But instead of being cauterised, her mind is fused in high voltage with Johnny Panic, in a paroxym of clarity. She is examined with a beam of light pointed into her eye. Physical eyesight begins and ends in an iris, but the immensity of the imagination is not depended on eyesight.

The poet/patient further splits herself into a surgeon's viewpoint. She carves open her own abdomen and is dwarfed by her own garden inside: 'I am so small/In comparison to these organs!' After her subjection to ECT, her body and language appear to shrink. She becomes the person in the Bell Jar, blank and stopped as a foetus. Confusing the limits between her innards and her surroundings she is both all-mouth and maggot, speaking and shrinkwrapped.

The mercury globules and blood corpuscles appear as both the quick and the dead. As decay, the dead are the dazzling mutations of myriad micro-organisms. The worms on *Lady Lazarus* are shown as orgasmic 'sticky pearls'. Like Sarah Pucill's mirrors, this body-as-garden is a microcosm for embodiments to go and come....

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