

*A Dialogue with Claude Cahun:
Between Writing, Photography and Film in Magic
Mirror and Confessions to the Mirror*

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This text will examine the dialogue that my films *Magic Mirror* (2013) and *Confessions to the Mirror* (2016) create between the photographs and writing of Claude Cahun and my own practice as a filmmaker. What unites my 16 mm work from the past three decades is a concern – born out of experimental film practices – for the primacy of the image, and for it to speak without the guidance of text. My filmmaking began in 1989 with projecting images on to objects, creating Surrealist juxtapositions through in-camera photomontage in the films *You Be Mother* (1990) and *Milk and Glass* (1993). This language of superimposition evolved in later work in different forms, which included split frames in mirrors, performing with photographs, animation mixed with live action, and film projection mixed with live action. The films have been mostly shot in an intimate space, and many of these works incorporate a *mise en abyme* reflexivity. Part of the intimate language arises from the fact that the camera and artwork are not separated – both are handled by the filmmaker. A particular quality of my cinematic language is the creation of ambiguity in what the viewer sees on screen, where spatial orientation is rendered uncertain through the indeterminacy between photograph, performance and film projection. Visual disturbance between what is body and what is reflection or paper is explored with an unpredictability of what physically moves. Independently moving objects alternate with movements of the body, and still and moving image projection intermix with live action. In *Stages of Mourning* (2004), I filmed myself performing to camera with large and small photographs, a 16 mm film projection on a wall, and seated at a desk with an image of my late partner, Sandra Lahire (1950–2001), displayed on a computer screen. I then restage earlier photographs of myself with my absent lover, juxtaposed with the originals of myself when she was alive. My next film, *Taking My Skin* (2006), explores the mirroring and inhabitation of a close female other, as I film my mother, who at the same time films me. A spoken dialogue between us narrates the experience of both filming and being filmed, as well as my mother's pregnancy with me and my bereavement of my lover. The question

of how to locate self or other, as image or as voice, and of which experiences are separate and connected, is enmeshed with a desire for closeness and separation between a mother and daughter who physically hold each other's image in a mirror as they speak. Tropes of self-splitting in visual reflections and projections, and the creation of unclear boundaries between subjects and between a body and its representation, anticipate the thematic concerns and filmic language in my two films inspired by the French Surrealist artist Claude Cahun (1894–1954). It is the disturbance caused by the bleeding of a feminist and queer subjectivity in Cahun's photographs that drew me to her work and has held me captive since. Her gaze in frozen black and white was an invitation or call to arms to join in some way the imaginative world and struggle she shared with her partner, Marcel Moore (1892–1972).

Cahun made small black and white self-portrait photographs, in which she masquerades as fictional and actual others, including her father, her uncle, Bluebeard's wife, a Buddha and an angel. These photographs, which have been a long-standing influence on my filmmaking, were made in collaboration with Moore. Cahun was a member of the Surrealist group, and whilst she is best known for her photographic work, she was also a writer of essays and creative texts and performed in avant-garde theatre.¹ The indeterminacy of her self-portraits that are simultaneously portraits of others is commonly discussed in relation to their destabilisation of subjectivity; however, much less discussed is the transgression of the boundaries between photographic genres in her work. For example, the photographs entitled *auto-portraits* lie between portrait and self-portrait, as they are also masquerades of someone else. Other photographs, her miniature still lives or *objets trouvés*, suggest a surrogate self, stretching the categories between self-portrait and still life. And in many of her photographs, Cahun appears too far in the distance of a landscape for the image to be read ordinarily as a self-portrait.

Described as a 'Surrealist anti-autobiography',² Cahun's major Surrealist text, *Aveux non avenues* (1930), which I explore in *Magic Mirror*, brings together different types of text, such as personal letters, diary writing and poems, which are presented alongside a series of ten photogravures drawn by Moore. *Aveux non avenues* is a creative examination of a self that is fictional and portable, dissected and split. This division between voice and image, and the concomitant genres of autobiography and self-portraiture as assumed offerings of truth, lies at the heart of the book. *Aveux non avenues* translates as 'Confessions Unmade': a gesture to tell a truth that is withheld. The writing offers a way to think the self not as autonomous, self-knowing or unchanging, but as fluid, interconnecting, intersubjective and metamorphosing. My films respond to Cahun's critique of the aspiration for and pretence of a true expression of oneself in self-portraiture or autobiography by creating a dialogue that

reaches for collaborative authorship in the plural (including Marcel Moore and others³) across different time frames and media.

Both *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions to the Mirror* re-enact photographs by Cahun in the form of *tableaux vivants*. Overlaying these reinterpreted tableaux are voices reading two of Cahun's major texts: *Aveux non avendus* in *Magic Mirror* and *Confidences au miroir* (1945–52) in *Confessions to the Mirror*. Shot on 16 mm in an interior domestic space, the films employ an experimental film language that in parts shows the location of filming and the performance of making up faces. The props and set are handmade or improvised to mimic the artwork in the photographs. The interpretation of the photographs as living tableaux creates a relationship between the photographic and written *œuvres* of Cahun. I selected most of the photographs because of their connection to Cahun's writing and, in other instances, because of their relationship to my previous films. The text was also selected because of its connection with Cahun's photographs or my films, and to highlight what I felt was of most interest or importance in the respective manuscripts written by Cahun. My own body of work and that of Cahun are connected by shared tropes and themes that include: Surrealist-inspired language of juxtaposed contradiction; split and multiple female figures through projections and reflective surfaces; and intersubjectivity between a lesbian collaborative couple.

The films interweave multiple representations of a metamorphosing self, inspired by Cahun's photographs. Each photograph is a new masquerade, and sometimes two performers inhabit the same costume in the photograph. Different voices read lines from Cahun's text translated into English, sometimes together, sometimes alternately and sometimes alone. Whilst there is fluidity between the voices and faces, a separation is enunciated in the non-synchronisation of voice that always speaks over the image. The disconnect between one's outer image and what is felt underneath the image surface is a recurring theme in Cahun's *œuvre*, as well as in my own. It is highlighted in both *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions to the Mirror* through the text and images selected and through the absence of synched voice. Through Cahun's text and photographs, my films interrogate the relentless emphasis on a woman's image in Western culture. I also draw inspiration from the idea of femininity as a masquerading image, theorised by Cahun's contemporary, the psychoanalyst and early translator of Freud, Joan Riviere, who states:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it – much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods.⁴

Many of Cahun's most striking and well-known images show her wearing a mask of make-up, and in others an actual mask covers the eyes. For Cahun, this mask is not literal, the skin being the most effective of masks. She writes 'the carnal mask and the verbal mask are worn in all seasons', and explains that she prefers the non-commercial strategies of masking (through flesh and word).⁵ In *Magic Mirror* a quotation from Cahun is combined with a surrogate Cahun putting on a mask from an image where many masks hang off a large black cloak that covers her body. In this moment that reimagines the photograph, we hear Cahun's words 'Why do I unravel the moment I close my eyes?'⁶ When she closes her eyes, her self-image disappears and her voice speaks of the split between inside and outside. I read from Cahun's text, here, that the image a woman might construct for herself begins when she can no longer be seen; when the imagination takes over, the image is created or voiced.

The *tableaux vivants* in the film connect Cahun's text and photographs, which often express the same idea, though in a different medium. Through this connection, points of convergence in Cahun's oeuvre become apparent. In many examples, such as the masked image mentioned above, a space is opened up between the *tableau vivant* and the related text, that allows us to interpret both the text and the photograph further. This montaging of text and photographs from the same author (albeit with Moore's contribution) combines research into Cahun's oeuvre with a creative interpretation of it through cinematic language.

Magic Mirror encompasses the earlier part of Cahun and Moore's life, which was spent in Paris. The photographs from this period are mostly self-portraits shot indoors, including some of Cahun's best-known photographs. A couple of the restaged images in the film show Cahun and Moore standing separately but positioned in the exact same space, in front of a mirror looking back at the camera and at their own reflection. This reveals an intersubjectivity that underscores much of my own practice, as well as that of Cahun and Moore. Cahun moves through the mirror to inhabit the space behind it with Moore, a Surrealist trope that also figures in an early film of mine, *Cast* (2000).⁷ Many of the *tableaux vivants* add a mirror or reflective water that either is not present or is suggested only in the original, thus making more explicit an interconnectivity that can cut through time.

The Cartesian examination of consciousness, where we are both subject and object of our body, underlies much of the writing in *Aveux non avenue*. In *Magic Mirror*, the photographic and drawn images of body parts are taken from the photogravures in Cahun's book.⁸ I recreate these images as two-dimensional animation and accompany them with early fairground music and voices speaking from Cahun's writing. The film explores magical effects,



Figure 14.1 Cahun and Moore in the mirror, film still, *Magic Mirror* (Sarah Pucill, 2013).

utilising the Bolex 16 mm camera technique of duplication, where one half of the frame is exposed, the film is rewound and the other half exposed. This process can create the illusion of the same person appearing on both sides of the frame at the same time. It is employed in two key scenes where the performer splits between left and right of the frame, both of which restage photographs that mimic Cahun's duplication technique in her works *Que me veux-tu? (auto-portrait double)* (1928)⁹ and *Auto-portrait as Elle in Barbe Bleue* (c. 1929). In my *tableau vivant* of *Que me veux-tu?*, two identical bald heads face and look at each other, and in my *tableau vivant* of Cahun performing Elle in *Barbe Bleue*,¹⁰ the reimaged figure has two upper torsos that split apart as she bends to the right and again to the left.

A later scene in the film explores Cahun's rewriting of the Narcissus myth from a female perspective. Cahun's text casts a positive light on the relationship between Narcissus and the artist figure, as the vision Narcissus sees



Figure 14.2 Bluebeard's wife, film still, *Magic Mirror* (Sarah Pucill, 2013).

reflected in the water is a vision of a better world. A voice (Helen MacGregor) reads from *Aveux non avenue*:

Our mirrors are almost perfect. We still suffer from their vertical position. The beautiful child was able to draw the infinite from his reflection while we remain, always the same, unable to go further. But what makes Narcissus despair is not being able to drink himself . . . He sees enough of his ideal to be disgusted by the rest of the world.¹¹

If *Magic Mirror* is inspired by Cahun's and Moore's earlier life, *Confessions to the Mirror* takes its title and spoken text from Cahun's posthumously-published memoir *Confidences au miroir*, written after the war and shortly before her death. The text for the film was selected for its connection to the photographs, and to cover the salient events in Cahun's life that appear in the memoir: narratives from her childhood, Cahun and Moore's resistance during the Nazi occupation and imprisonment on the island of Jersey, and post-war reflections on the loss of family and friends. In many *tableaux vivants* restaged photographs are collaged with the text, whilst in others the text functions as a starting point for the images.

Ágnes Pethő's writing on *tableaux vivants* in film as 'the most debated intermedial image type'¹² is useful to elucidate how the reimagined photographs create a tension between media, where uncertainty and indeterminacy are brought to the fore. Pethő describes the importance of a *tableau vivant* as figuring a complex intermedial relation derived from the memory of the painting that is represented in film.¹³ In *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions to the Mirror*, the 'ghost' of the original photograph overlays the re-enactment performed in film. It is this ghost image that creates a sense of undecipherability



Figure 14.3 Narcissus, film still, *Confessions to the Mirror* (Sarah Pucill, 2016).

between the earlier black and white photograph and its mimicry as a filmed performance held still. By directly incorporating Cahun's text into the film and referencing the photographs, the film co-joins different time periods, art forms and authors. The referenced image is endowed with sound, the original performer becomes a surrogate, the black and white becomes colour and the still image moves. The reworking of photographs in film undoes certainties that might be fictions, such as the linearity of time, or the separation between self and author, or between media and material. The film becomes a vessel to create a dialogue between Cahun's work and my own.

What is it to inhabit another person, transforming a small black and white photograph into a performance that breathes life into the work, be it through feathers waving or the performer breathing? There is something in the making material from the immaterial. Obscured detail in the small black and white photographs needs to be imagined in order to be materialised. The materiality of being present emerges in the inhabitation of pose as a performance that restages what is seen in the photograph. In the act of fabricating sets, props and costumes, the making material excites the imagination and the lived moment breathes life into the recalled photograph. The gesture of inhabiting the physical body of Cahun (and sometimes Moore) is a summoning of that which was material for the couple. Playing roles that shift between performer and filmmaker, I ventriloquise Cahun's voice and image. This role-play satisfies a fantasy to cross time, to lose oneself in the inhabitation of another, and to embrace an artist who was struggling with

issues that strongly resonate in our contemporary context: nationalism, far-right politics, patriarchy, racism, homophobia. It speaks to those artists who continue to make work from the margins. But maybe, most importantly, the work I have done in *Magic Mirror* and *Confessions to the Mirror* extends what Cahun was doing. My filmic adaptations resituate the original photographs by adding movement, colour and sound. Lines taken from Cahun's writing are put in dialogue with her visual work, acquiring a new meaning within the context of my own filmmaking. The films navigate a space between that which is interpreted and that which is recreated. They embody a dialogue between artists of different times: Cahun speaks to me through her writing and photographs, and in turn I respond in cinematic language. Authorship and time periods both conjoin and separate.

NOTES

1. Claude Cahun performed as Le Diable, Le Monsieur and Bluebeard's Wife in the avant-garde theatre company 'Le Plateau', directed by Albert Birot between 1930 and 1939. See Louise Downie (ed.), *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore* (London: Tate, Hersey Heritage Trust, 2006).
2. Tirza T. Latimer, "Le Masque verbal: Le travestisme textuel de Claude Cahun", in *Claude Cahun* (Paris: Jeu de Paumes, 2011), p. 81.
3. The collaborators working on the film, including the performers.
4. Joan Riviere, 'On womanliness as masquerade', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 9 (1929), pp. 303–13 (p. 306).
5. Jennifer L. Shaw, *Exist Otherwise: The Life and Works of Claude Cahun* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), p. 78.
6. Translated by Rachel Gomme from Claude Cahun, *Aveux non avenues* (1930), in *Claude Cahun Écrits*, ed. by François Leperlier (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 2002).
7. *Cast* (2000) incorporates a very similar scene of a lesbian passing through a mirror that smashes and was inspired by the aforementioned photographs of Cahun and Moore.
8. Each chapter in *Aveux non avenues* begins with a photogravure designed by Cahun but drawn by Moore. In the film, these collages are reconstructed from imitative photographic photomontage. The image is simplified, but each is rephotographed, printed as a photomontage and then animated.
9. The title translates as 'What do you want from me?'
10. Cahun performed as Bluebeard's wife (Elle) in the experimental theatre company 'Le Plateau', directed by Pierre Albert-Birot.
11. Translated by Rachel Gomme from Cahun, *Aveux non avenues*, in *Claude Cahun Écrits*.
12. Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-between*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), p. 44.
13. Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality*, p. 44.

