

Phantom Rhapsody: Smoke, Mirrors and the Spell of Cinema

By Lucy Reynolds

The first images of *Phantom Rhapsody* frame the drapes of a closed curtain, arousing the expectations of spectatorship familiar to any theatre or cinema audience. But where the curtains of conventional drama might swing apart to reveal an establishing scene, deploying the device of 'exposition' which will allow the audience to embark on their narrative journey, Pucill's curtain does not open upon the fictional décor of *mise en scene*, but onto the dimmed space behind the theatre flats, and the sounds of shuffled footsteps as a glimpsed figure (Pucill herself) arranges the set. The revelation of this shadowy interstitial space between performer and spectator functions as *Phantom Rhapsody's* opening prologue, establishing for us the filmmaker's intention, which is not to create a convincing and seamless space of cinematic fiction, but rather, to invite the viewer to participate with her in an investigation into the fundamental nature of cinematic illusion itself. As if we have trespassed onto the wrong set, lost between the scenery, Pucill confounds the promise of fiction, by revealing those hidden aspects and activities of the stage set responsible for the construction and maintenance of theatrical illusion. As *Phantom Rhapsody* unfolds, so too does this recurring theme of revelation and concealment, which alludes to the showmanship of the magic act in which cinema has its roots.

An exploration of filmic illusion informs all of Pucill's films. It is seen in the interplay of animate and inanimate in early works such as *You Be Mother* and *Backcomb*, or alternatively, in the filmmaker's intense study of the perceptive mechanisms of the camera eye in the more recent work *Blind Light*. Pucill's desire to disclose the material truths behind the cinema's narrative projections echoes the intent of other film avant-gardes, from Dziga Vertov's 'Kino Eye' to the so-called 'Structural' experiments explored at the London Filmmakers Co-

operative during the 1970s. But where Vertov or Peter Gidal were vehement in their distaste for the narrative codes imposed upon film by theatre and literature, associating the devices of cinematic fiction to the political and economic structures of Capitalism, Pucill's study of illusion is more nuanced. Operating as subjective dialogues with the apparatus of filmmaking, her films display as great a fascination with the inherent illusions and transformations available through the camera, as she is keen to unmask them.

This difference of emphasis, which questions the conditions of cinema through a singular process of engagement rather than an 'anti-narrative' position, is rooted in the specificities of filmic time and space, recalling Walter Benjamin's observation of cinema's 'unconscious optics', where 'a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye.' (Benjamin: 236)¹ Pucill's cinema is permeated by an awareness of this transformative gift of the film medium, where, on the other side of Alice's looking glass, the camera renders strange the familiarities of time and dimension. Instinctively comprehending how Benjamin's 'optical unconscious' ushers in an experience of the uncanny, she orchestrates her performers through unnatural shifts of scale and space. Seen in her film *Cast*, for example, the body crosses from the shrunken scale of a dolls-house, signifier of the narrow horizons and confinements of female domesticity, to the open perspectives of the sea shore.

These impossible traversals between interior and exterior space evoke Maya Deren's earlier explorations of film's temporal/spatial dynamics, where the movement of bodies function as conduits, transported

¹ Writing in 1936, Benjamin is referring to the uncharted fields of temporal/spatial perception revealed by the camera's mechanisms: from the close-up and aerial visions of the camera-eye, to its ability to arrest, slow and speed up time; where slow motion, for example: 'not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones.' (Benjamin: 236)

between disparate filmic spaces through the gestures of dance. Indeed, the beach in *Cast* is also the central motif of Deren's film *At Land*, where it provides the threshold from which the protagonist voyages to other spaces, her body serving, as Deren puts it, 'as a transcendent unifying force between all separate times and places.' (Deren: 126)

Not only in *Cast*, but also in other works such as *Swollen Stigma* and *Stages of Mourning*, the motif of the threshold reoccurs in the forms of mirrors, curtains, doorways and empty picture frames. Significantly, these portals offer access to places of photographic actuality, such as a beach, as well as to spaces of a more overtly staged and theatrical nature, alluding, like *Phantom Rhapsody*'s opening stage flats, to a narrative space of fiction and artifice. The agents of 'unifying force' that move between these spaces are always female; their movements not only counterpoints of temporal and spatial change, but also suggestive of narrative causalities. However, there are no plots to the narratives they play out, which remain a series of enigmatic encounters with objects and spaces rather than story lines.

Like the stage sets through which they pass, the protagonists of *Swollen Stigma* and *Cast* have an appearance of heightened theatricality: their faces whitened with make-up, wearing wigs and clad in dressing-up box garb. Their accentuated costume presents another aspect of the filmmaker's dialogue with cinematic illusion, seeking to dismantle the artifice of theatrical role-play by accentuating its disguises; investigating, at a more profound level, the ambiguous slippages of identity performed in theatre: as real and imagined personas overlap, dissolve into, and reflect each other. As Deren often did, Pucill also plays protagonist in her films, slipping between the roles of filmmaker, and orchestrator of scenario and action, to performer in front of the camera. The latter role extends her dialogue with the apparatus of filmmaking into subjective, even

autobiographical, territories through her own on-screen visibility: as the camera passes between herself and her mother in *Taking My Skin*, and as she revisits images of her former lover, now passed away, in *Stages of Mourning*.

Whilst *Phantom Rhapsody* continues Pucill's engagement with questions of illusion and artifice, any intimation of the latent narratives, biographical or imaginary, of her earlier works is stripped away. Although the context remains theatrical, the set is minimal, a shallow performance space before a black curtain, that never opens to reveal a space and scenario beyond, denying the film's suggestive opening sequence. Emptied of conventional narrative structure, Pucill's film portrays the trappings and supports of theatrical illusion rather than the fiction itself. In a further denial of our narrative expectations, the theatrical artifices of costume and character in *Phantom Rhapsody* are reduced, quite literally, to the point of disappearance. Attired in black leotards, the performers seem almost to blend into the black curtain behind them, presenting an elusive rather than an emphatic presence.

However, the fugitive nature of their appearance extends beyond costume, touching more profoundly on the filmmaker's enduring, and intertwined fascinations with both the ambiguous interplay of on and off screen identities, and the potent temporal/spatial play of the film medium. The four performers in *Phantom Rhapsody* dematerialise in conjuring acts of temporal/spatial disjuncture, which recall the earlier cinema of Georges Méliès alongside that of Deren, reappearing in different spaces, poses and guises of cloak or wig, so that their different identities become interchangeable, indistinguishable, disorientating.

For rather than the stage play, *Phantom Rhapsody* evokes the ancient theatrics of the magician, whose conjuring acts are opened out in a

gestural flourish of performance, instead of being contained within the codes and devices of fiction story-telling. The playful casting of spells in *Phantom Rhapsody* stresses the close and seldom acknowledged bonds between the illusions of the magic show and those of cinema's 'natural magic,' which were later suppressed in mainstream cinema's drive for on-screen semblances of reality.² According to Laura Mulvey, the early cinema 'concentrated into itself a range of these pre-existing forms of illusion and entertainment,' (Mulvey: 2006:41) and so, through its ability to bring movement to the inanimate, and to conjure images, gave rise to what she refers to as a 'technological uncanny...a collision between science and the supernatural,' which 'made visible forces that existed, hitherto invisible, with the natural world.' (Mulvey: 2006:43)

Phantom Rhapsody celebrates this convergence of the old and new technologies of illusion where, according to Tom Gunning, 'The spectator does not get lost in a fictional world and its drama, but remains aware of the act of looking, the excitement of curiosity and its fulfilment.' (Gunning: 1995: 221) This experience of complicit incredulity is closely related to the reception of a magician's sleight of hand, a knowing suspension of belief, aware of the illusion and the trickery of the trick, yet marvelling at its dexterity: 'Far from credulity, it is the incredible nature of the illusion itself that renders the viewer speechless.' (Gunning: 1995: 118)

Phantom Rhapsody echoes Pucill's own fascination with cinema's 'technological uncanny,' where, as she puts it: 'the represented image is celebrated merely for its capacity to appear and disappear...so that

² 'Natural magic' refers to forms of occult practice arising from organic rather than ceremonial sources, such as astronomy or alchemy, a term that could equally be applied to pre-cinematic visual entertainments, such as the magic lantern show or the phantasmagoria, which used complex optics and technologies rooted in science to evoke experiences of the uncanny.

the wonder of being here or of not being here, the wonder of cinema and the wonder of life can be felt to the full without the interruption of deferment that narrative and the build up of knowledge takes you to.’ (Sprio: 2010) Furthermore, the oscillating interplay between the viewer’s knowing complicity with, and incredulity at, the spectacle of the illusion, functions as a form of visual titillation, so that the games of concealment and revelation apparent in the film’s dematerialising and materialising bodies, take on a playfully erotic character.

Pucill’s illusory games also mix the pleasures of cinematic sleight of hand with more charged questions of representation, where the disappearing bodies on-screen allude to the invisibility of lesbian representation in mainstream culture. Her fascination with the fugitive female image is already apparent in *Swollen Stigma*, where, according to Pucill, magical materialisations signify the protagonist’s own imagination and desire: ‘[T]he protagonist conjures images from her memory/imagination, her desire is active in the images she creates and desires. I was thinking of lesbian desire as something that is spontaneously created and not learnt or passed down, not something she has been taught to see, but rather something she has created.’ *Phantom Rhapsody* employs the devices of magic showmanship found in early cinema to assert not only a lesbian identity, but a profound re-thinking of female representation: alluding to woman’s magical ability to conjure other bodies through child birth, as well as the historical archetype of the witch. In relation to the longstanding engagement with shifting subjectivities and identities that can be traced throughout Pucill’s body of films, the figure of the sorceress in *Phantom Rhapsody* performs a potent role. Simultaneously plural and singular, her magic embodies the assertion of female agency: to disrupt the gaze of patriarchy and challenge its models of female representation.

As well as being endowed with magic powers, Pucill’s performers are also subjects of, and subjected to, the power of the gaze. By turns

they assume the postures of Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus*, Botticelli's *Venus* and Bronzino's *Allegory of Love and Time*, as Pucill playfully appropriates the theatrical device of the tableau, designed to bring to life the two dimensions of painting. Turned away from the camera, their identity is obscured as they hold poses of passive stillness. However, the pleasurable gaze of the spectator upon their idealised bodies is ruptured by abrupt cinematic vanishings, by the trespass of an ambiguous exchange of genders and identities. This spell of looking is cast and broken through the magical agency of the sorceresses: one intervening as a female cupid to kiss the object of her desire; adjusting her wig, another holds a mirror to reveal the visage of the stilled model. Like Méliès they perform the magician's conjuring gestures, accompanied by drum roll and cymbal clash, as a simple act of cinematic dematerialisation occurs behind the shake of a cloth, or flick of a wand.

Appropriating the language of early cinema, *Phantom Rhapsody* reflects instead the oscillating rhythms of theatre's titillating games of disclosure, in front of and behind the curtains, which become – like the magic cloth responsible for the film's on-screen dematerialisations – symbolic of the obfuscating devices of cover-up which determine Western representations of the female body. Whilst Pucill's project entails a serious investigation of these tactics of suppression and disguise, at the same time her film is joyous and celebratory of female power and sexuality, expressed through the determining figure of the female magus, whose multiple presences and shifting identities both define and exceed female power in patriarchy. And in her continuing dialogue with illusion, Pucill addresses the natural magic of cinema's optical unconscious, employing the temporal/spatial disjunctions understood by Deren as well as Méliès, to perform a cinematic trickery which, unlike the concealments of narrative cinema, remains full of wonder, even as it's sleight of hand is revealed.

Phantom Rhapsody marks a different mood in Pucill's filmmaking: an assimilation of the codes and constructions of illusion which is both provocative and also playful, inserting another look upon the fugitive bodies of her on-screen protagonists, who evade the gaze of patriarchy through their dematerialisations, disguises and their magic powers. For, as Gunning stresses, the cinema of attractions was constructed as a series of discreet 'displays, of magical attractions' (Gunning: 1990: 58), rather than a developing scenario. Not yet subsumed into the covert scopophilic gaze of narrative cinema, the on-screen body in early cinema thus confronts the viewer in a direct address of acknowledgment and reciprocation. As Gunning notes: '[T]he scenography of the cinema of attractions is an exhibitionist one, opposed to the cinema of the unacknowledged voyeur that later narrative cinema ushers in... These early films explicitly acknowledge their spectator, seeming to reach outwards and confront.' (Gunning: 1990: 58)

Pucill's appropriation of the language of display in early cinema thus allows her to redirect the gaze of patriarchal cinema, to reclaim the pleasure of looking as an experience of wonder and magic: an 'aesthetic of astonishment' based on the simple, but profound, 'harnessing of visibility.' (Gunning: 1990: 56) Where, in an echo of Méliès' tableaux of fairies and demons, appearing and disappearing in hand tinted flames and puffs of smoke, the on-screen body in *Phantom Rhapsody* is conjured in the stilled posture of a tableau, displayed in readiness for the magic act of cinematic disappearance, with which she will elude cinema's objectifying gaze.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, first published New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968, Schocken paperback edition, New York, 1988

Deren, Maya, (1960) 'Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality,' McPherson, Bruce (ed) *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film by Maya Deren*, Kingston, New York, 2005

Gunning, Tom, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,' in William Linda, *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, Rutgers University Press, 1995, originally published in *Art and Text* 34 (Spring 1989)

Gunning, Tom, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,' Elsaesser, Thomas (ed) *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, BFI, London, 1990

Mulvey, Laura, *Death 24 X a Second*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006

Sprio, Margherita, 'In Conversation with Sarah Pucill', *Sequence Magazine*, Issue No 1, Summer 2010.
sarahpucill.co.uk/texts/texts-phantom-rhapsody-interview-with-margherita-sprio.php