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**Mourning, materiality and the feminine: Sarah Pucill's films
2004-2010**

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MOURNING, MATERIALITY AND THE FEMININE:

SARAH PUCILL'S FILMS 2004-2010

Sarah Pucill

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
the University of Westminster for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy**

May 2014

Mourning, materiality and the feminine:

Sarah Pucill's films 2004 - 2010

List of Films

Stages Of Mourning, 16mm, col, 17min, 2004

Taking My Skin, 16mm, b/w, 35min, 2006

Bind Light, 16mm, col, 22min, 2007

Fall In Frame, 16mm, col, 19min, 2009

Phantom Rhapsody, 16mm, b/w, 19min, 2010

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Introduction

Background to my films 1990-2013

I am an artist filmmaker who has been making films since completing a postgraduate study at the Slade (UCL) in 1990. My tutors Lis Rhodes, Jayne Parker and Chris Welsby have been influential to my practice, though it is the latter two who are mentioned in this commentary.

My twelve films to date are all shot on 16mm celluloid. Coming out of a context of avant-garde experimental film, which emerged before films began to be shown in galleries, I was and continue to be involved in all aspects of making the film, from camera to editing and sound. Although the films offer different concerns and languages over the twenty-four year period of my filming, there are at the same time ideas and methods that persist.

The films selected for this PhD commentary represent the period between 2004 and 2010. Coincidentally (because the dates chosen are prescribed by the University), the first film *Stages Of Mourning* marked a significant change in my filmmaking method. This was because it was made during a time of unexpected bereavement following the loss of my partner (filmmaker Sandra Lahire)¹. As a life-changing experience, it affected how I approached making a film. Although all my films adopt a different language, there is a sense that they follow on from one another, sometimes literally starting with an image reminiscent of the end of

¹ Sandra Lahire, 1950-2001, experimental filmmaker.

the previous film. For example the opening shot of *Taking My Skin* is similar to the end of *Stages Of Mourning*, which is a window in a domestic interior, and *Blind Light* also starts and ends with a window. *Stages Of Mourning* focuses on the relation between a performing filmmaker and her recently deceased lover; *Taking My Skin* stages a relation between a performing filmmaker and her mother, and *Blind Light* stages a relation between filmmaker as performer and the sun that pours into an empty space. In the final scene of *Stages Of Mourning*, where daylight overpowers interior light, the former becomes the subject matter for *Blind Light*. Both *Stages Of Mourning* and *Taking My Skin* progress towards water.

Fall In Frame and *Phantom Rhapsody* both depart from the rationale that unites the aforementioned three films, mainly because the personal is entirely absented. Both explore examinations of framing and aspects of reflexivity that play with narrativity and ideas of re-staging. *Fall In Frame* re-stages earlier films of mine: *You Be Mother* and *Backcomb*. *Phantom Rhapsody* re-stages canonical Western paintings of naked Venus figures; this film can, with hindsight, be seen as preparatory work for the re-staging of Surrealist artist Claude Cahun's photographs that I undertake in *Magic Mirror*.

Films 2004-2010 as selected for the PhD

This analysis will provide an examination of each of my five films made between 2004 and 2010. Each of the three sections provides a means to understand particular underlying threads from three specific points of view for each film.

The first section explores the films from the perspective of cinematic space and point of view. This section allows for a discussion of the formal language of filmic space and the properties of the film structure, in particular in terms of the relationship between camera and performer, which interchange in most of the films. A characteristic of my films in general is the extensive use of close-up and macro shots as well as the use of interior domestic space, many of my films being staged within a single interior room that becomes the fabric from which the performances are generated. This section considers the use of camera frame, edit and the use of time through pacing and edits as they work with these internal spaces that carry the realm of the psychological.

Section two analyses the films mainly in terms of the artisanal quality: a hands-on approach to 16mm camera and celluloid. Attention is drawn to abstract qualities that operate in excess of figurative or literal meanings, where texture, light and sound speak through ambiguities. Shot on 16mm film, it is critical that at the time of writing celluloid is becoming obsolete, and thus it is in the context of the non-tactility of the digital age that the materiality of the haptic is being discussed. This section focuses equally on the aural in addition to the visual as haptic experience of the films.

The third section questions how the female body, female gaze and lesbian sexuality operate across the films in ways that assert a female-to-female discourse. An important inspiration that underpins the films is the writing of Luce Irigaray, in particular *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*. The films attempt to work with the female-to-female relation both

behind and in front of the camera frame. For example, the mother-daughter and lesbian lovers are situated both within the frame as subjects being filmed, and also as functioning as a female-to-female relationship outside the film. Because the films are to varying degrees autobiographical, a feminist queering of the gaze turns also into a gaze that focuses on mortality – in one instance, a deceased lover. For the sake of this PhD commentary I have made repeated specific reference to the writing of Irigaray, which reflects a genuine engagement I have had with her writing during the period of making these films. However, it should be understood that my films emerged also out of a wider frame of reference that engages with feminist debate more broadly and with postmodern theory, as indeed also does Irigaray. Similarly, I have pinpointed key filmic references for the films and yet there are many other filmic and wider artistic references unmentioned.

Both the work of 1940s experimental filmmaker Maya Deren and Claude Cahun's photographs from the 1920s and 1930s, as independent feminist figures, provide important roots for my filmmaking. It is the incorporation of their own 'selves' in their filmmaking (for Deren) and photography and writing (for Cahun) that is key to the value of their disturbance to their male-dominated environment, and that has given a context for my films. This subjective-objective disturbance addresses questions that are as much philosophical as gender-specific. Whilst women filmmakers are not the sole source of inspiration, feminist work by women constitutes the major influence on the films discussed here. My feature-length film *Magic Mirror*, which re-stages photographs and writing by Claude Cahun, could not be included due to its date of publication. However, I hope that

the discussions of the earlier films will resonate in meaningful ways in relation to *Magic Mirror*.

Section 1: Experiments with cinematic space and point of view

A key concern in the films discussed in this section is the use of space in relation to the performer and camera. The influence of 1970s Structural Film is evident in the use of a static camera that is often reflexively made present, and the live sound of the filmmaking process where a consciousness of the space both within and outside the camera frame is felt. The proscenium arch of film language, which in mainstream cinema divides the space in front of and behind the camera, is here opened into a contiguous space that is more three-dimensional, where a multiplicity of points of view can be held.

Stages Of Mourning

After the sudden and unexpected death of my late partner, the filmmaker Sandra Lahire, in 2001, the methodology in the films changed. Instead of fabricating staged set-ups where the actual location of filming was absent, I began to incorporate, either partially or wholly, the actual space that was being filmed, which happened to be my home. I felt a need to expose the 'truth' of what lay beneath the artificial stage set, that being the actual space where the filming took place, i.e. the pro-filmic. Sets continued to be staged so that the fabrication of a space was revealed in moments where, for example, a white or black curtain would become visible as hiding the background. The re-staging of photographs I had made with and of my late partner and myself are performed to camera as a form of ritual to bind the otherwise painful dividing moments in time. The film alternates between an abstracted blacked-out space and the specifics of the

domestic location. The incorporation of the actual space of filming became a widening of the frame to bring in something of the autobiographical. This became the start of a methodology adopted in the following two films *Taking My Skin* and *Blind Light*, which examine cinematic reflexivity alongside cinematic illusion. For example, the illusion created from a re-staged photograph fractures as the camera zooms out to show the domestic space behind the once blacked-out 'set'.

As part of the 'staging' of the filmmaker's journey of mourning, performing to camera her relationship with photographs, video, and 16mm projection of her recently deceased lover, the film examines the connections between the psyche's capacity to believe in the persistent presence of the recently deceased and the illusion of believing in the presence of the cinema screen phantom. The word 'stage' in the title pinpoints a key tenet of the film, which is to connect an idea of an internal journey as a psychical process with the idea of a theatrical stage, staged for a public audience. Still image photographs are re-staged as a performance to camera. In this way the private and the public are conjoined, through the staging of mourning of a lover.

Stages Of Mourning opens with images of the filmmaker quite literally incorporated into photographs of her and her late lover. The photographs are life-size and the film is in black and white, so the demarcation between the filmmaker 'then' in the photograph, with her partner, and 'now' as she films herself alone lying on a floor with a mass of life-size photographs, becomes for the viewer indistinguishable. There is a continuous alternation between

stepping in and out of illusive worlds of the frame. These images, in particular the photographs, create an intersubjective blur between the boundaries of skin between the filmmaker and late lover, where the splitting or doubling of the self is examined through mirror reflections.

Most of the film takes place in a confined space that appears to be the home of the filmmaker. Although the camera is not reflexively shown in the frame, there is a sense that the performer is alone with the camera. Only in a couple of moments does the performer/filmmaker look at the camera, which are pivotal reflexive moments that draw attention to the static camera in the confined space. The suggested absence of a camera operator becomes a stand-in for the absent, recently deceased lover. The point of view is a camera placed by the bereaved filmmaker, which, in the absence of an operator, becomes an objective eye. This objective watching speaks of the impossibility of witnessing another person's grief; in exposing this gap the film both affirms it and at the same time impossibly attempts to bridge it. There is release from the claustrophobic space as the camera films the filmmaker's feet lying by the side of the newly marked grave, followed by a point-of-view shot of her feet walking through water towards land.

An important context for the film, discovered only after making it, is *What These Ashes Wanted* by the Canadian experimental filmmaker Phil Hoffman, which explores the sudden death of Hoffman's lover. A long sequence that resonates with ideas in *Stages Of Mourning* is of time-lapse photography of window shadows slowly turning in unoccupied rooms in his home – now empty of life.

Mortality is our movement through time, and cinema has a distinctive capacity to express this through the cuts of different times in the same place, where the beloved is and then is not. This idea lies at the heart of both *What These Ashes Wanted* and *Stages Of Mourning*.

Stages Of Mourning creates a continuous dynamic between the space depicted in the photographs and the same space as it appears in the 'three-dimensional' space of the film, which we assume to be the filmmaker's home. Whilst this is ostensibly a concern with the ghost of the recently deceased, the film mixes up time and space through the illusive worlds of photography, both stilled and moving, which circulate around two bodies, one still breathing whilst filming.

In the final scene, the ghost image of the deceased lover spinning on a beach crosses a divide of spaces between sky, land and sea. Reminiscent of the ritual of the whirling dervish to overcome mortality, this dance between the heavens and the earth is redoubled as an imprint on celluloid film that re-animates the dead, or momentarily appears to collapse the gap between the living and the dead.

Taking My Skin

Following the journey of a bereavement that is performed in *Stages Of Mourning*, *Taking My Skin* stages a journey of separation between the filmmaker and her mother. The cinematic imaging of space is critical to the idea of close and far, which is explored through actual space (the couple move around each other whilst swapping chairs or later walk along a river tow path) and the virtual space

of the lens. The film attempts to bind the physical and virtual through an exchange of speech and camera operation. The chronology of the edited film maps the chronology of the process of filming, so the relationship between the couple relaxes as the film progresses. The physical close-ups at the start expose moments of emotional distance, and towards the end of the film, where the camera frame has progressively widened, a more relaxed relationship suggests a closer connection between the couple.

Taking My Skin is a feminist filmic response to the patriarchal failure to acknowledge the mother as discussed in Irigaray's writing, where she critiques the "institution of psychoanalysis for having a phallogentric bias that is elevated into a universal value."² She writes:

Woman as body/matter are the material of which the mirror is made, that part of the mirror which cannot be reflected, the tain of the mirror for example, and so never see reflections of themselves. ³

The film attempts to shift the feminine from predicate, from the unsymbolised to the symbolised, to contest male ownership of the container or mirror, and to give woman her space ⁴

² Luce Irigaray quoted in Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 31.

³ Luce Irigaray quoted in Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 34.

⁴ Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, p. 161.

Taking My Skin was inspired by two films in particular, Jayne Parker's film *Almost Out* and *A + B In Ontario* by Joyce Wieland and Hollis Frampton. In *Almost Out* the filmmaker films herself and her mother naked in a video editing suite as they discuss the performance of video filming as well as their biological relationship. *Almost Out* examines, through the pro-filmic space, the relationships between the female body and the camera, its equipment and language. Over the durational period of time that the viewer 'sits' with the mother and daughter, difficulty is felt in the oscillation between intimacy and distance that is drawn out in an endless journey of no destination. In this way the video weaves a symbolic connection between close and far that pertains as much to the audio-visual technology of video as it does to the mother-daughter relation. As in *Taking My Skin*, the discussion in *Almost Out* is live in exploring the performance of the camera actions and the couple's mutual feelings and thoughts on being filmed. Both films enable a discussion of proximity and distance in terms pertaining to both the bodies of the dyadic couple and the camera gaze. *Taking My Skin* is however distinct from *Almost Out* in the way that the nature of 16mm black and white film is self-reflexively 'shown'. There is no precedent for an artist film shot in black and white 16 mm that creates a composed dialogue between cinematic space and psychic space articulating a journey of separation between a mother and daughter, at once symbolic but also reflecting the journey of the filmmaking process.

The inspiration from *A+B In Ontario*, which was edited by Wieland after Frampton's death, is the focus on the couple's swapping positions between camera operator and camera subject. *A+B in Ontario* is a simple but very

effective composition of the two filmmakers filming each other in many different open spaces, camera in-hand obscuring the face, as filmmakers, performers, artists and lovers in equal measure.

Normative cinematic relationships of the space behind and in front of the camera are challenged through the swapping of the camera (and therefore point of view) between the couple both in *A and B in Ontario* and in *Taking My Skin*. In both films the act of filming each other with camera (or mirror in *Taking My Skin*) disrupts the visual separation of camera operator and performer typical of mainstream cinematic language. Yet *Taking My Skin* develops this further by adding dialogue, which develops the context of the couple's relationship as well as the act of filming and being filmed that becomes part of their live dialogue.

The progression over time in *Taking My Skin* evolves from tight macro shots of the couple's face to full-length shots of the same as they film each other. The nature of the space changes from a non-specific space of abstraction that evokes reference to the couple's early dyadic relationship. The film shifts from this blacked-out backcloth at the start, to the revealing in camera of the living room midway through. And later, from this interior space, the couple point their cameras (the mother speaking the instruction she is receiving) out of the window as they film the garden, discussing 'where' they are as they attempt to trace each other's gaze through the camera frame. As they ask each other 'where are you?' they are referring to the image within the frame, which in terms of their body is 'over there'. In this way their camera prosthetic is projecting their sense of self and sense of place into the framed vision of the camera 'over there',

and through this camera dialogue, they trace each other's projected self into the cinematic field of vision that will be 'over there'. In the final scene by the river they continue to film each other, exploring distances between the virtual distance of a lens that draws the subject closer or further away, alongside their actual walking away from each other.

The use of their voices as they are filming and being filmed cracks open the fissures usually hidden in traditional mainstream cinema. In this way, point of view multiplies between voice and camera, and between mother and daughter so that the subject or object of camera operator or filmed speaker or listener flips between one and the other. Neither mother nor daughter are fixed in their roles, but are in perpetual movement, in their looking, filming and speaking and their swapping of these roles. Do we witness 'her' by seeing her camerawork, hearing her voice or watching her face as she listens? A multiplicity of focus breaks apart a unified viewing experience where the spectator can claim a relationship between camera spectator and performer. Point of view splits instead between the voice and camera of the one, with the splitting and doubling between the mother and daughter who make images *of* each other whilst at the same time being made images *for* each other. Between being and making and their accompanying dialogue, any fixed viewpoint or, one could say, 'identity' is infinitely dispersed. This idea of multiplicity is reminiscent of Irigaray's writing on the repressed female imaginary, which I return to in Section 2 where she

describes the women's sex organ as plural and where there is "no possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched"⁵.

In comparison to previous films, *Taking My Skin* is more durational in its expansion of time through long camera takes, where at a critical point just over halfway into the film both mother and daughter hold up an oval mirror to each other as they discuss the daughter's birth and their past intimacy. The camera is left without an operator for ten minutes. The slowing of the pace enables room for contemplation and engagement that is experienced as both reflective and emotional. The dialogue, whilst intense, leaves long durational pauses between each question the daughter asks and the mother's answer. This non-space of no sound in particular and no action in particular creates a space for meditative reflection. The ten-minute take where the couple hold the mirror for each other signifies as an act for the performing couple, but the holding of the mirror, which now acts as a camera, is also for the spectator. As the couple sit still, time rolls on; there is time for the spectator's imagination to wander, to wonder about their own relationship with their mother, their birth and mortality.

Blind Light

The film opens with a very long take, a slow zoom out to reveal a window. The camera is static. Time slows down as subtle changes in light impact on the image. This unfolding of time lays emphasis on the pro-filmic space, which is the

⁵ Irigaray, Luce, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 26.

domestic studio. The action is the performer-filmmaker moving the aperture and blind and the movement of clouds passing over the sun. Space is conveyed through sounds of the inside and outside of the room that are filtered through the opening or closing of the window. Incidental sounds explode in value, for example camera operations, the breathing of the filmmaker waiting, or the birds outside as the window is opened. Edit cuts are minimised so temporal space is given to waiting, to witnessing real time of sound and light in the space.

Questions of space are central to *Blind Light* which breaks down the (mainstream) normative separation of the space in front of and behind the camera through a journey of long fixed camera takes where in terms of performed action nothing happens. Typical of the self-reflexivity of 1970s Structuralist film, actions to the lens such as applying filters and turning the aperture to let in more or less light become the drama of the film that would in mainstream cinema instead be created by the plot the actors perform. The soundscape provides an awareness of the body of the camera, lens and fixtures, as well as the interior room, and the space outside. Phenomenological awareness of light and space, and the shutter of the camera, window and clouds are counter-posed with a voice-over describing an equivalent shutting out of eye or emotion.

The film was inspired by Michael Snow's seminal Structuralist film *Wavelength*, which is structured around a single zoom from one side of a roof loft to the other. Space and time constitute the material and concept of the film that Snow describes as a "statement of pure film, space and time, a balancing of 'illusion'

and 'fact', all about seeing".⁶ Through the zoom the room gradually closes up its space as the zoom nears the back wall and the final image of a photograph upon it – a photograph of waves.⁷ *Blind Light* follows a similar camera trajectory but rather than a single zoom, a 360-degree turn is made around the loft which ends where it starts. A key difference is that the journey around the loft includes several edits, as opposed to being one continuous movement. Sometimes the camera is literally dragged from one window to the next. In the final part of the journey the camera pans from one window to the next.

In *Wavelength* human presence such as a phone call, a couple talking and a murder are marginalised as insignificant detail. As such it stands in diametric opposition to the Hollywood privileging of human presence and human action. Whilst making invisible and unconscious dynamics of camera and celluloid 'action', the 'action' of the film is the filters mounted onto the lens and changes between day and night-time. In *Blind Light* human presence is represented in odd moments at the side of the frame, as a hand, or a voice, or a figure that moves the tripod and opens the blind. But as the film progresses the voice of the filmmaker opens this phenomenological experience into one of multiplicity that incorporates the subject and her voice narrating events of another time as the spectator witnesses the subtle exploration of celluloid film process and light leakage through the camera. In this way through the voice, a verbal articulation of space operates alongside the visual space of the film frame so that different spaces are represented in parallel: the domestic loft and its windows within the

⁶ Michael Snow quoted in Adams-Sitney, P, *Visionary Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 375.

⁷ Adams-Sitney, P, *Visionary Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 375.

film frame with the interior room where a woman's voice describes another time or place. *Blind Light* is meditative of micro and macro space, splitting between attention of filter and lens adjustments and planetary space where the concentrated focus on light getting into the camera is determined through camera aperture, window blind, or cloud movements over the sun.

The physicality of three-dimensional space as it can be experienced on screen is the core concern of the *Blind Light*. The film draws a line between interior and exterior space whilst examining the threshold between. These thresholds that monitor the amount of light or air/heat passing through include the camera lens and its filters, the window blinds and window of the room housing the camera. Additionally attention is given to the clouds that also alter the amount of light and heat that pass through. Whilst this threshold dividing the space above and below the clouds is one the filmmaker and performer has no control over, she manipulates the light passing through window and lens, which impacts on the light reaching the celluloid as the film image is shot.

This 'dance' of playing with light passing through these thresholds that interconnect with each other resonates with Irigaray's theory of the little girl who in response to the loss of her mother's presence dances, thereby constructing for herself a vital subjective space which is open to the cosmic maternal world, to the gods, to the other who may be present.⁸ Irigaray's image of a performed ritual around the threshold of her sex provides a feminine

⁸ Irigaray, Luce, 'The Gesture In Psychoanalysis', in *Between Feminism And Psychoanalysis*, ed, Teresa Brennan, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 132.

alternative to Freud's 'fort-da' theory of the little boy, Hans, whose response to the absence of his mother is to lose and then retrieve a cotton reel on a string. Crucially, Freud presents this theory of loss as ungendered, whereas Irigaray interprets the 'fort-da' game of Little Hans as pertaining to a masculine phallic unconscious. The sexual movement fundamental to the feminine is, she says:

“Much closer to gyration.... The girl describes a circle, both inviting and refusing access to the territory thus inscribed. She plays with this gestural territory and its limits. She produces a space, a track, a river, a dance, a rhythm, a song.”⁹

As the film is a woman's response to the loss of her (female) lover, Irigaray's image of monitoring a threshold resonates with the continuous opening and closing of the thresholds of window and camera lens in the film.

Blind Light was made as a meditation on loss, at the same time as responding to Michael Snow's film *Wavelength*. I was interested to connect the questions asked in Structuralist films regarding the illusion of cinematic space and time with a reflection on space and time, both in cinema and in life.

Fall In Frame

The key focus of the film lies in the relationship between the woman and the camera. After the opening sequence, which unwraps the camera from cloth in

front of a mirror, the protagonist sleeps in a darkened room under blankets while the camera continues running. As she wakes and gets up to open the blind, 'real-life' action is at the same time a filmmaking 'action'. For example, the letting in of light enables the set to be lit for a full cinematic exposure, but her opening of the blind is also part of her activity to begin the day. In this way her 'home' becomes analogous to the inside of a camera. Actions that follow continue to mix real-life actions in a home with filmmaking actions. The domestic activity she performs to camera enacts prescribed roles of femininity, which are largely learnt through the camera. Although the camera gradually becomes less present in frame as the film progresses, its presence when absent from frame persists. This sense of the camera ever present is echoed in the woman being literally inside a room that she turns into a camera by using the window blind as an aperture shutter. She is wrapped inside the camera in the same way that she unwraps the camera from cloth at the start, and at the end of the film the camera attaches to her dress train as she attempts to leave. Whether inside her or outside her, such boundary distinctions are not clear. This echoes Irigaray's description of the female imaginary where it is not possible to distinguish what is touched from what is touching.

Following tropes performed in *Blind Light, Fall In Frame* shows the window shutter being opened and closed, and the camera is moved from position to position by the same person who lies in front of it and appears to fall asleep. Rather than being separated, the roles of camera operator, performer and spectator are made contiguous. The idea of a contiguous relation follows Irigaray's idea of the female imaginary, where the relationship that originated

between mother and daughter is one that is side-by-side as opposed to oppositional. Irigaray's alternative relationship between objects that emerges from the female Imaginary offers a mode of exchange that desires the proximate, rather than property which is not reducible to any centring, but instead rebounds from one to the other without any possibility of interruption

Normative separation of cameraman and performer is challenged as she participates in her own image-making. In the performer's involvement of her own doubling, the viewer is implicated by being forced to identify across a split role of camera operator and performer at the same time. The usual partitioning of camera activity from 'action' in mainstream narrative cinema is incorporated into the frame in the first half of *Fall In Frame*. The use of sound serves to emphasise camera and operator/performer activity, window blind manipulations and tripod scraping the floor.

Chantal Akerman's film *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* was an important influence for *Fall In Frame*, in particular because of the quality and change in film language after the first scene and the attention to imprisonment and escape, as object of a gaze whilst also instigator of her action through spaces interior and exterior. *Je, Tu, Il, Elle* opens with a static camera showing a bedroom, with a woman on her own in the space. Time feels interminable – the film language is read as Modernist, minimal, and durational, as in conventional cinematic terms nothing happens. As the film develops – as she leaves the confined space of her home – dialogue and interaction with others create a momentum that appears to change the film's language. *Fall In Frame* follows a similar trajectory. The film starts with a

woman on her own in a confined domestic space who moves furniture, lies down on the bed, eats and writes, and then leaves the space: this becomes the journey of the film. The opening scene of *Fall In Frame* similarly sets up a minimal, cinematically self-reflexive space in terms of the filmmaking apparatus being made conscious, which then changes to a different kind of film language as the woman and the film leave the confines of the room. Following *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, the break in cinematic language is not sudden but gradual, for as *Fall In Frame* progresses, the camera's visibility and consciousness of its viewpoint continue, so that an uncertainty about the nature of the film's language and its self-reflexivity continues throughout. This uncertainty is a key component of what the film is doing, which is to upset the satisfaction of being able to recognise generically what one is watching and therefore what one could be likely to expect next.

The pacing of the film changes as the film progresses. The first half is durational, the length of shots is considerably longer; time fills the space as 'non-events' are performed, i.e. set preparation and camera movement. As the film progresses this reflective time begins to collapse. Fast edit cuts assist in generating a sense of action, especially after the tea set has fallen to the floor, out of the window, and she begins her journey to the sea. The shift in tempo is abrupt and unexpected disturbing the contemplative presence of the viewer in the same way as the table-lay is thrown out of the window. Instead the viewer now adopts a different, more distanced relationship with the film.

Phantom Rhapsody

The reflexive relationship between camera and space is explored further in *Phantom Rhapsody*. The presence of the static camera, positioned behind the curtains, is defined in the opening scene as curtain layers open to reveal pools of light, which move slowly across a stage thus determined through the light. In this way the creation of space on film is brought to consciousness as a reflexive device.

Phantom Rhapsody was inspired by pre-narrative early cinema that Tom Gunning describes as the harnessing of visibility, this act of showing and exhibition, which cinema before 1906 displays most intensely,¹⁰ in particular the early cinema of Georges Méliès' magical tricks. For Méliès the narrative scenario has no importance, since he uses it merely as a pretext for the stage effects, the tricks or the nicely arranged tableaux.¹¹ Although the film has many cuts, the camera is always facing the same way, towards the stage so as to enhance the quality of a flat tableau reminiscent of the two-dimensionality of painting or stage sets reminiscent of Méliès' tableaux. High-contrast lighting and the quality of black-and-white, where the camera faces the stage at a perpendicular angle enhance the flatness of the cinematography. This two-dimensional quality that derives as much from the lighting as from the camera angles re-stages historical paintings with minimal props, costume and set. Through this, the revealing and

¹⁰ Gunning, Tom 'The cinema of attraction: Early film, its spectator and the avant-garde', in *The Cinema Of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006, pp 381-388.

¹¹ Georges Méliès quoted in Gunning, Tom 'The cinema of attraction: Early film, its spectator and the avant-garde', in *The Cinema Of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006, p 382.

concealing of cloth and drapes that is the language of painting operates here also as theatrically staged acts, reminiscent of early travelling street theatre where props and set are at a minimum. At the same time the use of black-and-white references early photography and early cinema.

Whilst a critique of representations of women's naked bodies lies at the heart of the film, the journey between the different mediums of painting, sculpture, theatre and early cinema provides the substance. Flesh, drapery, mirrors, curtains, props and poses perform a gaze or maybe a touch, in a three-dimensional stage set that becomes the flat surface of a frame. In this way, a dialogue is created between the different artistic mediums that belong to different time periods: painting, figurative sculpture, and cinema. The same tropes or props perform the same function; revealing and concealing her flesh as part of picture-making, marking space as a way to draw space, making demarcations within the image, which includes partitioning the space. The movement from three dimensions to two dimensions, from the still frame of a painting or photo to a moving image frame, constitutes a continual oscillation of illusion that the film puts into play. The use of curtains as a proscenium arch to demarcate the stage from the audience is a device used in both traditional Western theatre and painting. Art is on one side and the audience-viewer on the other. For centuries, in classical painting, curtains and drapery figure repeatedly as devices to demarcate space within the painting and between the naked woman and viewer, especially in the case of *trompe l'oeil*. Georges Banu describes the curtain depicted in painting 'as being on the cusp of inside and outside, real and illusory, seen and unseen, the veiled and the truth, opening and

closing'.¹² This echoing of the painting or stage set as the woman's body is summoned in the film.

Curtains or drapes are pulled or drawn throughout the film, swapping the cloth backdrops between black and white. This device or trope, as it is a recurring phenomenon in my films, plays with the subject-object relationship of foreground and background, where what is conventionally behind the scenes or in the background is foregrounded. This includes, for example, the lighting and set, so the process of preparing set and costume are incorporated within the frame of the film.

¹² Georges Banu quoted in Doy, *Gen Drapery: Classicism And Barbarism In Visual Culture*, London: IB Tauris, 2002, p 10.

Section 2: Materiality, haptic, mortality, celluloid

The use of 16mm film is the literal base of all the films, which explore the sensuous and haptic nature of celluloid. This section will attempt to examine the ways in which the cinematic can be a material experience. I have drawn upon Laura U. Marks' *The Skin Of The Film*, which outlines a case for how experimental film and video approach what she describes as 'intercultural cinema', operating at the level of a haptic visuality which intervenes in dominant (film) discourse. Marks describes how many works of intercultural cinema often begin from the inability to speak, to represent objectively one's own culture, history and memory.¹³ She discusses theories of embodied spectatorship that draw on the work of Merleau-Ponty and Bergson, both of whom at their root counter Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of representation that is grounded in the alienation of visuality from the body, as in Lacan's 'mirror phase'.¹⁴

For Irigaray, also discussed in Marks' book, touch is the first sense experienced by the foetus and by the infant, and should be the model of a mutually implicating relationship of self and world; touch seems to be the foundation upon which subsequent sensuous experience is built. More than any other sensory deprivation, the loss of the sense of touch creates a feeling of being an orphan in the world.¹⁵ In this section I explore the potential of film language to

¹³ Marks, Laura U, *The Skin Of The Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment And The Senses*, London: Duke University Press, 2000, p 21.

¹⁴ Marks, Laura U, *The Skin Of The Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment And The Senses*, London: Duke University Press, 2000, p 150.

¹⁵ Marks, Laura U. *The Skin Of The Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment And The Senses*, London: Duke University Press, 2000, p 149.

articulate the haptic. This is in part a response to Irigaray's call to begin to create a female imaginary that might privilege or embody something that touches in ways other to patriarchal symbolic language such as Lacan's Symbolic.

Stages Of Mourning

The meditation on mourning and loss in the film can be seen in terms of invigoration. My aspiration was to excite or summon an engagement with death and mortality that could at the same time enliven the spirit. A quote from Hegel describes this sentiment:

The life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself.¹⁶

The emotions that come from the body, the devastation of a death, are best conveyed through the body itself, that is, through the language of the haptic in cinema. Through experiences of light and sound that can be felt through the skin, there is a physical sharing between the body that is grieving and the body of film.

In *Stages Of Mourning* the materiality of celluloid is employed to explore mutability and mortality. The traces of my late lover, the filmmaker Sandra

¹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel quoted in Dollimore, Jonathan *Death, Desire And Loss In Western Culture*, London: Routledge, 2001, p 155.

Lahire's face and body as imprints in photographs and celluloid operate to confuse the distinction between skin and photographic or film surface. The textures of these materials, detected through both image and sound, bear the weight of the emptiness of their illusion. Promising the re-living of the deceased, the colour and texture of the celluloid at once bring her back to life and reinforce her absence. Exploring the capacity of lens-based media to carry the ghosts of the dead, celluloid in particular speaks of ghosts, not least the demise of its own life. As Laura Mulvey observes, in the 21st century, classical Hollywood cinema serves as a memorial embalming of celluloid Hollywood film stars as ghosts.¹⁷ As the 21st century witnesses the gradual replacement of celluloid with digital, the current demise of celluloid as an industrial medium further heightens a desire for its tactile quality. Its tonal latitude and texture, its softness and susceptibility to corrosion and scratch, render celluloid an organic medium more hospitable to human ghosts because the medium belongs to the past. Celluloid emulsion, originally from an animal, is symbolically closer to the body.

The film's central concern is the examination of the relationship with the phantasmatic that exists in the cinematic illusion of the screen phantom in a similar way in which the deceased continues to live in the mind of the recently bereaved. The textural quality of the phantom is brought to life in ways that draw attention to death and bereavement, as well as cinema. The material residue that contains the phantom ghost carries the weight of the tension of the absent figure. So the materiality, texture and surface qualities of the

¹⁷ Mulvey, Laura, *Death 24x A Second: Stillness And The Moving Image*, London: Reaktion Books, 2006, pp 17-18.

photographic paper, 16mm celluloid or computer screen inhabit a haptic world that is expressed in the film also through the sounds of these materials. A flute plays long-drawn-out single notes as moments of breath. This contrasts with the sound of touching cardboard photographs. The dryness of the bearer of the deceased image, as photograph, contrasts with the moist air of the breath and the sensation of feet in water. Close-up shots of the filmmaker's fingers touch the celluloid frames as they are loaded into the spools of the projector.

At the end of *Stages Of Mourning*, 16mm projected film footage of Lahire twirling on a beach is projected onto interior curtains and then onto the back of the recently bereaved filmmaker as she opens the curtains. We hear the birds outside as the projected light and image is flooded by sunlight, the image almost disappearing as the outside world enters the space, overexposed, flooding the screen. Because the image is on the skin there is a sense that it is felt rather than seen. The bleaching of light articulates a haptic vision that is felt through the body. And the washing away of the projector image caused by the strength of daylight focuses attention on the qualitative aspects of the different light sources, both of which bear warmth: the interior projector much weaker than daylight as a material and which in competition will disappear when present, whereupon a new day is marked. The performer sees the image on her back because she is the filmmaker. The awareness created for the viewer is not a singular vision based on spatial or temporal point of view, the vision instead is multiple, between moments, between both here and there, where a multiplicity of places of experience co-exist between the textures of light, sound and image. The deceased lesbian lover remains in some sense in her skin. This image that ends

the film evokes an intersubjectivity that can be read between the living and the dead as much as between women and felt on the skin as a haptic experience.

Taking My Skin

The emphasis on the haptic is a central aspect of the mother-daughter relationship as being inside the mother and being held after birth and being suckled are experiences of touch that occur prior to speech and the onset of subjectivity. The use of black and white celluloid, of hands holding and of touch generally are key features of the film that create a space for haptic vision. This attention to materiality is provided as much from the tactile imagery of hands and skin as it is in the conversations between the couple where birth and death are described.

The focus on the intersubjective relationship between the mother and daughter is derived from a feminist concern to draw out relationships between women. As Irigaray articulates, it is necessary for woman to begin to speak her identity in words, images and symbols within this intersubjective relationship she has with her mother, in order for her to enter into a relation with both men and women.¹⁸ The intersubjective is expressed through the mutual filming and being filmed in a side-by-side relationship and the holding of mirrors to each other as we speak to each other. Pre-life and post-death moments of being incorporated inside the body of another constitute the conversation between the couple, in a key scene

¹⁸ Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy Of The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p 45.

over halfway through the film: birth being a physical incorporation inside one's mother, and post-death being the psychical absorption of the deceased loved one that is psychically introjected by the one who mourns. The intention was to invert expectations of death in relation to age where the mother shares her experience of giving birth with her daughter, while the daughter shares with her mother her experience of losing her lover through death. The sharing of experiences that the other hasn't experienced is drawn out with long pauses of silence. The description of a newly born child is finally heard instead as a description of a recent bereavement. In this way mirror images are configured: one of pregnancy and a newborn child, the other of bereavement and being weighed down with the phantom of a dead body that dwells within. The image of inspiration for the filmmaker was a pregnancy in reverse, so the weight gets lighter as time goes by. The new mother, like the recently bereaved, experiences intersubjectivity where the other takes centre stage over or with the self.

The film collapses an idea of the intersubjective as it applies to a relationship between women in three ways: The early and current relationship between the mother and daughter that embraces pre-birth and pre-subjectivity (through their discussion), the sexual relationship between the lesbian couple, and the relationship between the living and the dead. The early first love of the mother is the origin of the lesbian relationship and the love after death, bringing the three encounters together. This personal journey that reflects on birth, love and death can also be mapped onto Irigaray's call to develop a female imaginary:

how to bring the maternal-feminine into language from the point of view of theme, motif, subject, articulation, syntax, etc .¹⁹

The film revolves around a female gaze between mother and daughter that originated from the mother: it is a gaze that at the same time focuses on a body that was once held. This history of embracing before looking is remembered in the film through the performance of holding either a mirror or a camera for or at each other. Both mirrors, functioning as cameras, are in moments passed between the couple and as part of this passing of their seeing objects they exchange seats, exchanging places. This swapping of place occurs at two moments in the film, the first where they are both blinded because they are looking through the camera as they at the same time walk across a room to change seats, and the second where they hold mirrors as they change seats. What is being negotiated is their position as their point-of-view, their place in the world, their space from which they can speak and see. This physical space in which their body will occupy and therefore provide their point of view is exchanged. It is the space from which they will speak and hold the camera. This subjective space, that the mother provides initially but which is later negotiated in order for the daughter to become separate, is literally performed in the film.

The couple hold each other's gaze, hold each other in conversation, receiving and reciprocating. Hands hold and pass the camera to each other; they hold the oval mirror to each other (mirror serving here as a camera), bearing each other's

¹⁹ Luce Irigaray quoted in Whitford, Margaret *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy Of The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p 45.

bodies. Conversation and filming occur side by side; the performers conduct their own film and sound recording. The physicality of celluloid through both Super 8 and 16mm is wrapped with the haptic quality of the sounds of the voices. This reference to the mother-child pre-verbal relationship would, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, be understood as that of the haptic because it references the pre-linguistic.

The durational quality of time that is meditative and reflective has to do with the time that is given to the space. The slowing down of time fills the space, and so through this temporal 'space' the possibility to experience qualities such as texture, whether as image or sound, is opened up. Thus what is experienced as 'background' in linear narrative (mainstream) film is positioned as foreground.

In Jayne Parker's *Almost Out*²⁰ the language of video and its capacity for simultaneity is forefronted as a key element. The simultaneity of seeing the image reproduced is brought into the conversation as is the birth of the daughter (the filmmaker) and the third party, a cameraman. The act of creating audiovisual material is placed alongside the act of (human) birth, so bringing together the physicality of body and video screen. *Taking My Skin* contributes further to a discussion begun by Parker, examining the feminine through a mother-daughter relation, and its relationship to moving image technology (16 mm film in *Taking My Skin* and Umatic video in *Almost Out*). Likewise, *Taking My Skin* examines celluloid black-and-white film in relation to the feminine through a mother-daughter relation. In similar fashion, *Taking My Skin* explores the multiple layers

²⁰ Parker, Jayne *Almost Out*, Umatic video, b/w, 105 min, 1984.

in the once biological relationship between the couple, as well as with cinema and mortality.

Blind Light

The haptic is explored in *Blind Light* by focussing on the process of how the celluloid image is achieved, which is the disturbance to maintain a 'correct' exposure. It is in the over-exposure where light spills into the frame and floods the image into full disappearance, and in the gradual fluctuation of light as the performer turns the room into a camera that she manipulates alongside and with the actual camera, that the haptic is felt. It is a combination of the celluloid chemical process as a performance, which is perceived at the interstitial moments of excess, of leakage where one thing becomes another, light as touch, process or performance as image. It is felt rather than symbolised, the light dissolves the image, turns the carrier of image as film projection into its materiality, which is light. Too much light also threatens to hurt the eye.

Visceral qualities are achieved through the sun bleaching the celluloid as the clouds pass over it, as camera filters interact with the sun's rays, as raindrops hit a glass window, as window blinds open letting in light gradually, and as the filmmaker, manoeuvring the exposure dial, then moves into the frame sitting on the windowsill where sunlight obliterates her body as clouds pass beyond the sun. At the other extreme it is when the tripod is heard travelling in semi-darkness to its new position, almost visible as the camera is repositioned for

filming, that the focus on how the image comes into being takes precedence over what is literally imaged and symbolised.

During these moments the filmmaking process is made manifest within the frame. As distinct from *Wavelength*, which excludes exposing the process of the filmmaker and his performance of filming, *Blind Light* exceeds the range in *Wavelength* by bringing into frame the filmmaker: her body at the side of the frame, her fingers with the filters, and in sparse moments her voice, as well as the images beyond the immediate view out of the window, i.e. the place of the light source, the sky. The intention was to expand the range of dimensions and textures that are explored in *Wavelength* through the person operating the camera (that which is behind the camera vision) and that which is beyond the vision of view, i.e. the clouds, moon, stars etc. The writing combines micro and macro, subject and predicate in a dynamic of bodily and inanimate: I, eyeball, tears, rain, sun, and stars.

The film was inspired also by the structuralist landscape films of Chris Welsby, in particular his film *Seven Days*.²¹ Shot outside over seven days, Welsby's film was edited in chronological order whilst camping out in Mount Carningly in south-west Wales. The key strategy in *Seven Days* that is also embraced in *Blind Light* was to allow the movement of the clouds to determine the picture. In *Seven Days*, when the sun is out, the camera faces its shadow and when the clouds hide it, the camera faces the sky. Wind, visible through grass, rain and cloud, and light intensity of the image are determined by the elements. The camera is fixed on a

²¹ *Seven Days*, 16mm, col, 20 min, 1974.

tripod used to record the stars, so it rotates at the same speed as the earth.

Aligned with the earth's axis, it rotates every 24 hours. To quote Welsby:

The final shape of the film is consequently a product of the interaction between the predictable mechanistic nature of technology and the chance-like quality of the natural world.²²

Filmed indoors, *Blind Light* explores instead an interaction between the performer/filmmaker operating camera and window light with the movement of sun and clouds. Embracing the elements to determine what will appear in the film, *Blind Light* is a meditation on sky and land and the planetary, but rather than in relation with technology, it is in relation to a subject, to the body and its materiality as mortal.

The core constituents of the elements – body, sky and ground – open their dimensions as if into parallel worlds such as the depiction of stars and the voice describing another moment in time and space. The use of elements was in part inspired by Bachelard's writing on the healing capacity of the natural world and its relation to poetic expression.²³ Although Bachelard does not make any feminist claim and almost all of the poets he cites are men, he does refer to the feminine and the maternal in his discussion of water. Irigaray cites Bachelard in her desire to return to 'those natural materials, which constitute the origin of our

²² LUX online, *Seven Days*, Chris Welsby,

<http://lux.org.uk/collection/works/seven-days> , retrieved 1 August 2014.

²³ Bachelard, Gaston, *Water and Dreams: An Essay On The Imagination Of Matter*, Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1994.

Bachelard, Gaston, *Air And Dreams: An Essay On The Imagination Of Movement*, Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988.

body, our life, our environment, the flesh of our passions'.²⁴ The film moves between different extremes of light intensities that turn into dry and wet, noise and silence: from rain hammering on the skylight with dissipating clouds in view to sunlight splintering through the lens as the breathing filmmaker applies lenses and filters to the camera eye.

Fall In Frame

The relationship between the camera and the woman's body is the core focus of the film. Since the camera is ostensibly a device through which one is able to look without being physically present in the space upon which one looks, the activity of touching is removed. Whilst much Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of cinema has focussed on this voyeuristic aspect of cinematic vision, feminist phenomenological approaches to cinema from Sobchack²⁵ to Marks²⁶ consider the haptic potential of cinematic vision. *Fall In Frame* works to bridge or pervert the axis between voyeurism and haptic cinematic vision from the feminist perspective of focussing on the relation between the woman and the camera, where the physicality of the camera both touches and is touched. During the film the camera is seen on a tripod but is unloosed again in the last section of the film where it attaches itself to her, in fact to her clothing. In this image, as the camera

²⁴ Luce Irigaray quoted in Whitford, Margaret *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy Of The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p 55.

²⁵ Sobchack, Vivian *The Address Of The Eye: A Phenomenology Of Film Experience*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

²⁶ Marks, Laura U. *The Skin Of The Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, And The Senses*, London: Duke University Press, 2000.

actively seems to be pursuing her, the camera touches the woman so that subject and object are interchangeable.

The opening scene shows a 16mm camera through a wall mirror, but before the zoom-out that makes us aware of the mirror, the camera is unwrapped from a white cloth. A body is made naked, as a newly born penis/baby/eye/camera, which once unwrapped becomes able to see. The sense of a female tactility that gives it its birth prior to vision is symbolically clear. The singularity of the phallus is perverted with the cloth wrapped around it that is uncovered by a young woman with long hair who unveils the camera lens.

The use of cloth in *Fall In Frame* intertwines between body, prop, set and background. It covers the camera's body, the woman's body and the table, and she lies in it or under it at the start. It attaches to her as she attempts to throw it out of the window and then follows her as she moves out of the house. This wrapping of the cloth between otherwise separated entities breaks apart their separation so that ideas of subject and predicate or subject and space are turned in a fold that disturbs such binary separations. The folding of cloth is evocative of feminist theory such as that of Irigaray, where multiplicity is the female imaginary of her sex in which her lips touching and touched are multiple.²⁷ Postmodern philosophy on multiplicity, such as Deleuze's writing on the fold, is also evoked in the emphasis on cloth and folding in both *Fall In Frame* and

²⁷ Irigaray, Luce *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, p 26.

Phantom Rhapsody.²⁸ The start of the film folds onto the end, camera lens covered over with cloth, the end where it starts. Ambiguously the camera cannot see her but it is still there.

An important inspiration for the film is Akerman's first film *Saute Ma Ville*.²⁹ In this fast-paced film, a young woman shuts herself up in a high-storey apartment. She cooks, eats and cleans though these predetermined domestic activities are carried out with increasing aberrance, dysfunction or madness until finally she blows herself and the building up. The claustrophobic space, which becomes associated with her madness and need to leave, echo the same in *Fall In Frame*. There is a key moment in *Saute Ma Ville* where the woman looks at a mirror image of herself in the space, which is followed by a shot that is of her in the mirror. This sense of dissociation evokes potential psychic breakdown, a crisis of a splitting between subject and object that is associated with the crisis of femininity. Akerman's film is very physical because we see her body at close range. Her body is tight within the camera frame, which creates a sense of spatial constriction; her living space is too small for her. She prepares then eats food, then cleans the space with substances that touch or spill onto her skin; she sits on the very wet carpet that she attempts to clean. She wears rain gear for the cleaning jobs as substances randomly disperse in all directions. Even the presence of the mirror, she touches. Cream fluid is spilt all over her face as she

²⁸ Deleuze's writing on the 'fold' provides an alternative perceptual view on the world to the rigid frameworks of rationality and logic that emerged from the Enlightenment period. See Doy, *Gen Drapery: Classical And Barbarism In Visual Culture*, London: IB Taurus, 2002, p 150.

²⁹ Akerman, Chantal *Saute Ma Ville*, 35mm, b/w, 13 min, 1968.

dances before finally lying on the cooker hob to rest for her death. The soundtrack is singularly her voice rhythmically singing wordless gibberish. We hear, see and feel the rhythms of her body, her hunger, her desire, her frustration, her breath. In this way we access something of her body that can only be effected on film, and it is something that smears the glass reflection, literally with her creamed finger. It is an eruption that pierces the symbolic of sense-making language, an eruption that blasts how we might see her image. In this way she makes herself a subject through the articulation of the rhythms, excesses, heat, wetness and mess between her emotions and her body that wants to get out, that culminates in a physical explosion, inanimate and animate together.

Fall In Frame similarly is concerned with the physicality of the body, though the tempo is very much more held back, if not entirely repressed. However, the haptic relationship between the woman alone in the space and the camera are similar. For example, the first scene where the performer and film operator sleeps in a sofa bed in a darkened space directly in front of the camera. As she lies still underneath the covers looking at the camera, the viewer shares this experience of tactility, of sensation to the skin or through the body, directly as if physically sensing it. As she gets out of the covers to open the blind and let in the light, sensory experience shifts toward the visual as light enters the domestic room revealing different qualities of textures in the room. As the light comes up, the focus is literally on the various surfaces: the sofa covers, her dress, the camera, her hair, the floor. As she moves to the other side of the room to dress a table for food, attention to the textures of cloth of the table and her dress,

crochery, and her hair is highlighted. Women's domestic work such as sewing and preparing food in the still-life painting are expressive of the sense of touch. The haptic emerges in these moments through the surface and texture of sound, in a synaesthetic experience: window blind pulled, tripod scraping the floor, table laid followed by it crashing to the floor and out of the window, and the dress train of crochery scraping along road and beach.

Phantom Rhapsody

A key concern of the film was to connect the use of female flesh across different visual disciplines over the centuries. The literal constructing of the image, from the setting up of the lights to the re-arrangement of costume, cloth, hair, props and drapes, constitutes the 'content' of the film. The lighting flattens the figures almost to two dimensions, wrapping around the skin to create ethereal figures in the same way that the cloth wraps around the flesh, intertwining skin with inanimate, so that as visual illusions the phantoms are made to appear and disappear. The cloth is touched and touches. As the lights, on stands, are moved across the stage by the performers, the lights are touched just as the light beams touch the performers' skin, thus bringing them to life as screen phantoms. The setting up of lights that cast spotlight circles and travel across the stage, and the re-arrangements of drapery and props as performers prepare and then pose, stress a focus on the preparation of an image. The surface of the image as cloth, skin and light merge. So constituent parts are shown as separate and then together as a unity of a constructed image, where the moving images reference the still.

Drapery evokes ideas of a container and of the haptic because it touches the skin. This attention to the touch of skin as cloth wraps and folds between body and space resonates with Irigaray's writing on the female imaginary that is a search for a language that is through the material or the container. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, she describes a state of dereliction between women who need to find a language to speak to each other;

How can we stay alive when we are far apart? [...] We must learn to speak to each other so that we can embrace from afar. When I touch myself, I am surely remembering you. But so much has been said, and said of us, that separates us."³⁰

The drapery in *Phantom Rhapsody* unwraps its way between the body and the draped curtains, between the foreground and background. Distinctions between light, cloth and flesh, between two dimensions and three, in fact between still and moving (four dimensions) are unclear or are indistinguishable. The celebration of early cinema calls upon a fluidity of perception where disciplines and entities otherwise separate are folded together. The set is the performance, the props are costumes, the foreground becomes background, and the characters switch roles and positions, and are often indistinguishable. Transformation literally occurs in a magic trick behind curtain cloth, but occurs anyway within the performances.

³⁰ Irigaray, Luce *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, p 215.

This is the first of my films to have a musical score specifically composed. There is a haptic quality in the minimal solo musical composition of violin and trumpet, which echoes the nostalgic quality of the 16mm. Both instruments are textural, as is black and white. As non-electronic instruments that have a long history, the sound echoes through centuries in the way that the staged paintings do. But the haptic is the timbre or textural, not the colour and shape, or the tune, but the quality of the surface, the feel of it aurally or visually, the surface quality that makes it the material it is, whether the cloth or pool of light, the horse hair sliding on the violin string, or the breath through the brass pipe.

Phantom Rhapsody explores the material characteristics that belong to an early black-and-white cinema of celluloid such as the fixed frame, and camera and edit tricks that the early pioneers of cinema such as Méliès explored. In *Phantom Rhapsody* the materiality of celluloid is celebrated for its capacity to metamorphose and to make objects and people appear and disappear, which is generative of ideas of mortality in relation to both the life of cinema and human life. Techniques of metamorphosis and in-camera creation of the double achieved through re-winding and re-filming on a 16mm Bolex camera are particular 'tricks' explored in *Phantom Rhapsody* that borrow from this early period of cinematic innocence, where cinema had not yet become a medium associated with storytelling and dialogue. In its early period the illusion of the image as magic connected more with the wonder of the image and its association with magician performances and spectacle than it did with dramaturgy and actors that demand a narrative. Its fundamental role as an illusion of something other than itself took precedence as opposed to the signifier (image) being

subservient to the thing it represents (the signified), which is what the cinematic image has now become over a century later.

Section 3: Privileging the Feminine

The political endeavour to assert the feminine underpins much of the work of my films, albeit with more or less direct methods. In the post-Lacanian French feminist theory of Luce Irigaray, in particular her text *Speculum of the Other Woman*,³¹ she draws on a history of Western philosophy and psychoanalysis to describe the nature of Western culture as homosocial, following Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, which says that symbolically the female relation does not exist. It is her thesis, developed further in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, that the female-to-female relation has been lost and needs to be rediscovered within Western discourse. To quote Margaret Whitford's reading of Irigaray:

An unsymbolised mother-daughter relationship makes it difficult if not impossible for women to have an identity in the symbolic order that is distinct from the maternal function, and thus prevents them from constituting any real threat to the order of western metaphysics, described by Irigaray as the metaphysics of the Same. They remain 'residual', 'defective men', 'objects of exchange', and so on.³²

And to quote Luce Irigaray herself: 'The mother-daughter relationship is the dark continent of the dark continent.'³³

³¹ Irigaray, Luce *Speculum Of The Other Woman*, translated by Gillian Gill, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.

³² Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p 77.

³³ Irigaray, Luce, *Le Corps-à-corps avec la mère*, French Edition, Conference et Entretiens, 1981, p61

Irigaray writes:

How then to create a house, a possible space-time, for the woman-as-subject. For this, we have to consider the morphology of the female body and her relationship to the ground, to the mirror, to space and time, and to dwelling.³⁴

Each of the five films discussed here fall closely within this image of a female subject creating a space as she relates to the ground, to the mirror and to space, time and a home, albeit in different ways as the language of each film differs.

Also as important is Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', as the aspiration to create a female gaze underscores many of my films.³⁵ Additionally her essay 'Film, feminism and the avant-garde' has been of significant influence, as it recognises the value for a feminist politics of inventing a film language that would avoid both the total abstraction of no content in avant-garde abstract formalism and the subordination of formal cinematic processes of dominant realist cinema, where identification between spectator and screen protagonist closes the gap between form and content.³⁶ Key women artist filmmakers who have responded to feminist debate have been primary sources of inspiration for the films, including Chantal Akerman, Abigail Child, Maya Deren, Mona Hatoum, Ulrike Ottinger, Sandra Lahire and Jayne Parker,

³⁴ Luce Irigaray quoted in Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p159

³⁵ Mulvey, Laura, 'Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema, *Visual And Other Pleasures*, London: MacMillan, 1989, pp14-26

³⁶ Mulvey, Laura, 'Film, Feminism And The Avant Garde', *Visual And Other Pleasures*, London: MacMillian, 1989, pp111-126

who I have mentioned individually in reference to particular films. As a practice over ten years there are many more artists I did not have space to include.

The social questioning of the gaze, in terms of feminist gender politics and a queering of sexuality, is marked with an emphasis on mortality and death. This haunting of the gaze, that is derived from the autobiographic, hovers directly or indirectly in the first three films discussed. This hovering is one that shifts between the axes of wanting and not wanting to look. The performance of looking is constant but it is with ambivalence.

Stages Of Mourning

A questioning of the gaze is a core component of *Stages Of Mourning*, which is that of the filmmaker looking at her recently dead lover in photographs and on film. Photographs that were originally staged to examine questions of female representation and lesbian looking with and of myself and late lover, are re-staged as tableaux vivants in the film. The faces are very close, so as to suggest an idea of sexual desire within their gaze. The photographs and their appearance and re-staging in the film create a sense of the intersubjective between two women. The idea of the intersubjective, as a theme underpinning the film, was inspired by Irigaray's writing on the subject, where she describes the nature of a relationship that provides an alternative economy to patriarchal structures. She envisages that in a different economy, '[a]woman would be directly in

intersubjective relation with her mother. Her economy is that of the *between-subjects*, and not that of the subject-object relation.³⁷

The conditions of emergence of female subjectivity are simultaneously then love between women (a female sexual economy), which is the matrix which can generate change or discourse as a process of enunciation.³⁸

The most important filmic reference for the film is *Night Dances*³⁹ by the late filmmaker Sandra Lahire, which similarly explores relations between women, a mother and daughter who are figured as lovers split by death. Lahire dedicated the film to her mother, who died whilst helping her make the 'piano musical'.⁴⁰ The film was the second part of her trilogy on Sylvia Plath.⁴¹ The film stitches images, voice and piano-playing between herself and her mother. Piano notes dance with playing fingers and sparkles of light reflect on water whilst two women, separated by time, dance at night. Lahire introduces the myth of Demeter and Persephone, who are closely bound to each other but who cannot be together because they are not above ground at the same time, one of them is always below ground. This theme of lightness and darkness, and of love between incompatible times, travels from *Night Dances* into *Stages Of Mourning*. In both

³⁷ Luce Irigaray quoted in Whitford, Margaret *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p 45.

³⁸ Luce Irigaray quoted in Whitford, Margaret *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, pp 48-49.

³⁹ Lahire, Sandra, *Night Dances*, 16mm, col, 15min.

⁴⁰ LUX on-line, *Night Dances*, Sandra Lahire, http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/sandra_lahire/night_dances.html, retrieved 1 August 2014.

⁴¹ The trilogy consists of *Lady Lazarus* (1990), *Night Dances* (1995) and *Johnny Panic* (1999).

films the deceased and the living are stitched back together through a dance of light.

Whilst the gaze remains intersubjective and between women, it is also between the living and the dead, embracing different time frames. The filmmaker Phil Hoffman has spoken of how film has a particular cathartic capacity to express the desire to bind the time period before and after a loved one dies.⁴² For this reason film has the capacity to both deny death whilst at the same time meditate upon the nature of loss and its capacity to animate the dead. Only through film language can the dead and the living (albeit for a period) be stitched together.

The impetus to make the film arose out of two social taboos: death and lesbian love. Death, for Amos Vogel, 'is the last taboo in cinema'.⁴³ In 'Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions On Death, Representation And Documentary', Vivian Sobchack provides a critique of Western culture that understands our inability to come to terms with bodily processes as a problem that has to do with our fear and taboo of dying and death.⁴⁴ In this way feminist critique is allied with a critique of Western societies' incapacity to come to terms with mortality. The separate but connected insistence to demand the viewer to witness a lesbian grieving was intentionally provocative, making the political demand for a woman

⁴² Conversation with the filmmaker at his 'FilmFarm' in Mount Forest, Ontario, Canada 2008

⁴³ Amos Vogel quoted in Sobchack, Vivian, 'Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions On Death, Representation, And Documentary', *Quarterly Review Of Film Studies*, (Vol 9, Issue 4, 1984), p283

⁴⁴ Sobchack, Vivian, 'Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions On Death, Representation, And Documentary', *Quarterly Review Of Film Studies*, (Vol 9, Issue 4, 1984), p283-300

to have her love for another woman recognised. The Civil Partnership Act that was instituted in United Kingdom in 2004, after the death of my late partner; however, my exclusion from 'next of kin' rights in the hospital, my exclusion from contributing to the funeral arrangements and my being cut off from Lahire's family after her death were to do with cultural attitudes within her family. For these reasons the film mixes aggression and love.

Although ostensibly the film shows bereavement as a singular event, that is, one person grieving for another, it was my intention that the apparent singularity of this loss be opened out into a meditation on loss that is made public in the form of a film. Since early or primary loss is revisited through each bereavement thereafter, and what we experience individually and together gets mixed up, the process of mourning in the film is an offering for the spectator to share in a process of mourning. It is also an act that creates a public union between the filmmaker and her deceased lover as preserved in film.

In regard to the gaze, a primary impetus to make the film was the difficulty of looking at photographic images or film of the loved one after their death. This difficulty in looking I hoped to overcome through making the film: that is, through the process of looking and re-looking at her image in the photographs and on film, the material would cease to haunt me. Fourteen years after making the film I wonder, however, how much this looking has to do with the deceased loved one, and how much it has to do with looking at mortality, which is in fact one's own death that is summoned in the recognition or re-witnessing of a loved one's disappearance.

Taking My Skin

The question of gender and the female gaze is central to the film which stages props that pertain to Lacan's 'mirror phase'. Since *Taking My Skin* is a film and not a theory one cannot make a coherent argument for how it might challenge Lacan's theory of the 'mirror phase'. However, one could say that its language suggests a searching that exceeds the limits of Lacan's theory, namely Lacan's assertion that the relationship of the early mother–daughter dyad cannot be symbolised in language. It is the matriarchal potential of the powerful role of the mother within Lacan's theory of subjectivity that prompted the desire to make the film. Inspired by Irigaray's critique of Lacan's 'mirror phase', I wanted to make a film where oval or 'oral' mirrors are held and passed between a mother and daughter.

A critical scene in the film is the mirror sequence where an oval mirror is passed between the couple, who swap chairs and sit still for several minutes with a mirror held on their lap, as it bears the image of their other half. The female gaze is central to what is happening in the mirror. This passing of mirror between mother and child evokes reference to Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the 'mirror phase', which describes the first stage of the onset into subjectivity as a specular stage that precedes the entry into the Symbolic i.e. (verbal) language. In Elizabeth Grosz' interpretations, it is through an identification with the image of the mother that the child gains an identity as an ego. In this way the child internalises otherness as its condition of possibility. The ego illusorily sees itself as autonomous and self-determined, independent of otherness. It feels itself to

be its own origin⁴⁵. Thus at the heart of a sense of origin and identity is displacement and disjuncture, between a fragmented experience of a not yet coordinated muscular body and a unified image in the mirror that shifts between being that of the mother and that of the self.

In *Speculum Of The Other Woman*,⁴⁶ Irigaray is critical of Lacan's positioning of woman with mother and otherness, i.e. as a mirror that is not a subject and which cannot enter into language. Rather than seeing Lacan's theory as a means to understand patriarchal structures that deny women subjectivity, Irigaray argues that Lacanian psychoanalytic theory reinforces patriarchal power through such articulations.

The actual cinematic presence of the mother in *Taking My Skin* is a response to the unsymbolised 'mother' that in the darkened room of the cinema recalls the early oceanic experience of plenitude with the mother before speech. Not only is the mother now a subject, but her point of view shifts between being active as camera operator and as spectator of my image whilst also being filmed. Not only is she imagined, she is physically present, looking, being seen, speaking, listening. She participates in the act of her being imaged in the camera by speaking about what it feels like to be filmed, and she participates in filming her daughter and in speaking about what it feels like to hold the camera and film her daughter. The early relationship with the mother is set side by side with the filmmaker's

⁴⁵ Grosz, Elizabeth, *The Ego and the Imaginary*, Jacques Lacan, London: Routledge, 1990, pp24-49

⁴⁶ Irigaray, Luce *Speculum Of The Other Woman*, translated by Gillian Gill, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985.

relationship with her mother forty-four years later. There is a focus on the connections and breaks between the couple, incorporating dialogic languages of touch, verbal, facial and bodily communication as well as the extended prosthetic dialogue conducted through the camera. The rhythm of exchange between giving and receiving lies at the heart of the exchange between the dyadic couple, where levels of closeness and distance fluctuate. Reciprocity is performed expansively to include senses and muscles of the body; eye, ear, mouth, skin, hands and limbs. The female gaze that is performed from either the mother or the daughter's point of view is made conscious through their dialogue as they voice their feelings concerning the experience either side of a camera. This rebounding of relationships between looking, speaking, listening, holding, filming, being filmed, passing objects and receiving, runs close to Irigaray's description of the female imaginary where, as she says "the woman always speaks *with* the mother, the man speaks in her absence."⁴⁷ Because the gaze is between a mother and daughter, it challenges the monolithic looking of mainstream narrative cinema.

Inspiration from feminist films that explore the mother-daughter relationship from the point of view of the daughter includes the already cited video *Almost Out*, as well as *Measures of Distance* by Mona Hatoum, who shows slides of her mother naked in the shower. In *Measures Of Distance* handwritten letters in Arabic from Hatoum's mother in Beirut to her daughter living in London appear as moving text on the screen. These letters are read out in English by the daughter, and the voiced text is mixed with conversations in Arabic between the

⁴⁷ Luce Irigaray quoted in Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 161.

mother and daughter, words which once replaced a physical union between the couple. The conversation and letters reveal both geographic and more abstract familial forms of separation between mother and daughter. The idea of a wall as a boundary, whether geographic or psychical, underpins the confrontation with gender, familial and geographic boundaries. Hatoum describes key moments in the film as 'literal closeness and implied distance'.⁴⁸ The idea of distance with closeness constitutes a central dynamic of *Taking My Skin*, where an examination of close and far circulates between physical proximity as actual or imagined, as mediated through the camera or through vocal exchange.

An equally important contextual reference for the film is Chantal Akerman's film *News From Home*,⁴⁹ which questions the relationship with the mother in terms of gender as well as in terms of nationality, home and displacement. In the film, a voiceover reading letters sent from Belgium by the filmmaker's mother are read out by the daughter living in New York. There is no reply from the daughter, instead long silences following each letter accompany durational long takes of Manhattan street scenes and the subway.

These examples of feminist experimental films, made by daughters of and with their mothers, explore the mother-daughter dynamic precisely to engage with the question of gender difference, as each film challenges the dominance of a masculine gaze in mainstream cinema through the forging of a female gaze and

⁴⁸ Manchester, Elizabeth, 'Mona Hatoum: *Measures of Distance*'. <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hatoum-measures-of-distance-t07538/text-summary>>, accessed July 10, 2013 .

⁴⁹ Akerman, Chantal *News From Home*, 16mm, col, 105 min, 1974.

female connection. In these films the woman behind the camera, and her relationship with the 'subject' in front of the camera, is brought to consciousness: not only is the cameraperson a woman, but the relationship between the camera operator and mother as subject of the film transgresses the normative relationship of distance between camera and subject. Not only is it a relationship between two women, the mother-daughter relation in particular is transgressive of patriarchal structures where the father-son relationship is what engenders symbolic value. The mother-daughter relationship symbolically operates outside the patrilinear discourse that is upheld by masculine structures of power.

Blind Light

Blind Light borrows aspects of a modernist paradigm by figuring the apparatus and process as a core element of the film. The presence and voice of a woman speaking of a relationship with another woman, and edits which break up the otherwise 'pure' cinematic experience of a single camera turn about its axis, disturb an otherwise modernist framework and aesthetic. The voiced words speak about another space, which introduces an added textural layer. The 'mess' of introducing a voice that enunciates subjective psychological life through spoken words that interferes in an otherwise 'pure' reflexive structure provides a feminist critique of the masculine singularity of the Modernist project of Structuralist film. As Teresa de Lauretis argues in her essay on Michael Snow, the central conceit of the pioneering Structuralist film *Wavelength* is modernist in placing the 'origin' of the art in the artist whose desire is inscribed in the

representation, his longing both mediated and effected by the apparatus.⁵⁰ To quote de Lauretis, 'Visionary film is made by a single person and in turn is revelatory of that person, if person is read as primarily "Man".'⁵¹ Constance Penley later makes a comparable argument about British 'structuralist-materialist' films.

The subject constituted by the early avant-gardists and the structural materialists is essentially the same even if one constructs its subject in the name of a romantic humanism and the other in the name of science and materialism. Both play on an infantile wish to shape the real to the measure of the subjects own boundless desire.⁵²

Whilst *Blind Light* has no image of a figure centrally in it, the sense of a gaze is nevertheless present. The object of the gaze is the light from the window, flooding or not the room or the film exposure. Whilst filters, clouds, window blinds and aperture oscillate in increasing and decreasing the light, the object of the gaze that is constant is the sun. This looking that would physically damage the eye, or physically overexpose the celluloid, is likewise symbolically difficult. The first voice reads 'I can't look'. Following the gaze in *Stages of Mourning* that suffers the desire to look at the 'live' image of the 'dead' (the filmed image of the deceased), *Blind Light* also explores a desire to look that is painful, or more simply, it explores a looking at the impossible, a looking at what will destroy

⁵⁰ Theresa de Lauretis quoted in Mellencamp, Patricia, *Indiscretions: Avant-garde Film, Video and Feminism*, Indiana University Press: 1990 p24

⁵¹ IBID

⁵² Constance Penley quoted in Mellencamp, Patricia, *Indiscretions Avant-garde Film, Video and Feminism*, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990, p24

oneself, that is death. This 'not looking' suggests something traumatic. The voice continues: 'There's been no rain for weeks. The eye burns, swells, loses focus and disappears in a stream.' The human body and the land are brought together as physically changing states. Long pauses between the voiced statements create uncertainty and unease: it is not possible to look directly at the sun.

The assertion of a female subject as the central figure, performing, remembering, speaking, set in a context of her own space, with the sky and ground and facing the sun, is powerful on its own terms. The woman is placed in primary position in a relation with the world without a male context. It is interesting to consider a quotation from Irigaray which seems to have many parallels with *Blind Light*.

She writes:

What women do need is to stand centred about their own axis, an axis which passes microcosmically from their feet to the top of their head, macrocosmically from the centre of the earth to the centre of the sky. The axis is present in the iconographic traces left by traditions in which women are visible. It is on this axis that women can find the condition of their territory, of the autonomy of their body and their flesh.⁵³

⁵³ Luce Irigaray quoted in Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, p 164.

Fall In Frame

The question of how experimental film can challenge the ideologically separate historical avant-garde film practices such as Structural Film⁵⁴ and feminist avant-garde⁵⁵ lies at the heart of the film. In the first half, a female performer films herself whilst also being in frame as performer and camerawoman. She arranges and films the set. Her actions confuse what is expected of a performance to a mainstream cinema audience. In the opening scene that shows the camera unwrapped from cloth, the mirror serves as a second camera that empowers the status of the camera, as it is unwrapped, ready for action. The symbolism of the woman preparing it for this task resonates with the figure of the mother. The performer moves from one end of the room where she had been sleeping to another where she sets up a scene – a film set where she sets up a space to prepare food.

The relationship between the woman and the space she occupies or journeys through, and the activities she performs, speak of a state of dereliction. Irigaray describes how women are abandoned outside the symbolic order, lacking the mediation in the symbolic for the operations of sublimation to take place.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Examples include *Wavelength* (Michael Snow, 1967), *La Région Centrale*, (Michael Snow, 1971), *Berlin Horse* (Malcolm Le Grice, 1970), *River Yar* (Chris Welsby and William Raban, 1972), *Room Film* (Peter Gidal, 1973), *Pause* (Peter Kubelka, 1977).

⁵⁵ Examples include *Saute ma Ville* (Chantal Akerman, 1968), *Jeanne Dielman* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1977), *Double Strength* (Barbara Hammer, 1978), *Thriller* (Sally Potter, 1979), *Light Reading* (Lis Rhodes, 1979), *K* (Jayne Parker, 1989), *I Dish* (Jayne Parker, 1982) *Almost Out* (Jayne Parker, 1985), *Mayhem* (Abigail Child, 1987), *Myth* (Kate Elwes, 1983), *Syntagma*, Valie Export 1984.

⁵⁶ Whitford, Margaret, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy In The Feminine*, London: Routledge, p 78.

There is a sense that the space, the camera and in turn the activities she performs are pre-determined, and she is thus abandoned from herself.

‘The girl tries to reproduce around her or inside herself a movement whose energy is circular, and which protects her from dereliction, from immediate effraction, from depression, from loss in itself.’⁵⁷

Associations of women with domestic food preparation and sewing are evoked in the living space and film set, as historical ghosts. The tea set and its destruction, the woman sewing and seated with a mirror, all take place whilst she films herself. At the table actions are performed for mirror and camera, for her to comb her hair and fall asleep. There is a sense of moving forwards and backwards at the same time, or of a doing and undoing; the table is laid with crockery that is then destroyed as the tablecloth is pulled. It is reflexively shown as such with camera ‘in frame’ stressing the fact the performance is ‘only’ for the camera, thereby ironically playing with the lie at the heart of fictional cinema. The axis of a largely masculine modernist reflexive avant-garde cinema⁵⁸ coincides with an axis of radical feminist filmmaking⁵⁹. This combination is

⁵⁷ Irigaray, Luce, ‘The gesture In psychoanalysis’, in *Between Feminism And Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan, London: Routledge, 1989, p 133.

⁵⁸ Examples include *Kitchen* (Andy Warhol, 1966), *Broadwalk* (William Raban, 1972), *Monitor* (David Hall, 1975), *This Is A Television Receiver* (David Hall, 1976), *Seven Days* (Chris Welsby, 1976), *Girl Chewing Gum* (John Smith, 1976).

⁵⁹ Examples include *Saute ma Ville* (Chantal Akerman, 1968), *Jeanne Dielman* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1977), *Double Strength* (Barbara Hammer, 1978), *Thriller* (Sally Potter, 1979), *Light Reading* (Lis Rhodes, 1979), *K* (Jayne Parker, 1989), *I Dish* (Jayne Parker, 1982) *Almost Out* (Jayne Parker, 1985), *Mayhem* (Abigail Child, 1987), *Myth* (Kate Elwes, 1983), *Syntagma*, Valie Export 1984.

confused and thus exposes the collision of different histories of avant-garde cinema and their mutual competition for claims of radicalism.

She prepares the tea for the camera, then drinks it in the mirror, which instantly upsets an idea of pure surface. The mirror represents both camera (as she performs to camera and mirror) and a dressing table mirror. In this way, the gender is stressed. The more neutral terms of mirror as reflection of the world, as camera, as reflexively dismantling the separation of the frame, are here interrupted with the strictly female space of privately dressing one's face, the dressing becoming also a hiding that evokes ideas of female masquerade.⁶⁰ The looking in the mirror at herself gets mixed up with making and drinking tea, which is then mixed with sewing where hair, dress and tablecloth are literally stitched together. This sense of dissociation or depression is consistent with the idea of her being in a state of dereliction.

Feminist influences for *Fall In Frame* include Ulrike Ottinger's film *Ticket of No Return*, where two women divided on economic grounds, one upper-class, the other a homeless tramp, both steadily drink themselves to death in a long-drawn-out 108 minutes. It is a one-way journey from the centre to the outer limits. *Fall In Frame* has a very different filmic language but the image of the aberrant woman who seeks to leave but is caught in a trap is congruent. *Fall In Frame* shows a difficult image that is confrontational and uncomfortable, largely

⁶⁰ The earliest thinker who writes on women and masquerade being Joan Riviere and her highly influential essay for feminist theory, 'Womanliness As Masquerade', *International Journal Of Psychoanalysis*, (Vol 10, 1939, 303-13).

due to the acts performed but also because of its placeless-ness as a film, which changes its language and status as a film halfway through. The sense of the woman's actions breaking apart occurs around the same time that the film language changes: she lifts her dress to the camera and throws the tea set out of the window, so that the film language and the 'story' or series of events change at the same time. The lifting of her skirt to the camera is a pivotal moment in the film. She breaks from her action to face the camera directly. She gazes back at the camera as she starts to lift up her skirt; as the camera zooms in her gaze is gradually eclipsed from the frame. It is uncomfortable as it is uncertain when the action will stop. It is not a gaze that overcomes a suggested patriarchal voyeurism, but it is made conscious and uncomfortable. There is a sense that the performance of lifting her skirt to the camera is demanded of her. It was the first film I had shot for some time that involved filming someone other than myself – in this case my niece – and this awkwardness became a part of the content.

The journey to the sea in *Fall In Frame* stems in part from the journeys to the sea that are evoked in all three of Maya Deren's most significant films, *Meshes Of the Afternoon*, *At Land* and *Rituals In Transfigured Time*, but also in my own films *Cast*, *Stages Of Mourning* and *Taking My Skin*. As Deren's films suggest, femininity is associated with the sea. For Deren this symbolism emanates in part from her interest in the psychoanalyst Carl Jung.⁶¹ Through a fluidity of editing technique, movement, and powerful symbolic imagery, Deren creates non-verbal, rhythmic and haptic qualities in black-and-white 16mm film that conjure ideas of a female

⁶¹ McPherson, Bruce, 'Preface'. In *Essential Deren*, ed. Bruce McPherson, New York: Documentext, 2005, p 11.

vision and imaginary, and gestures of empowerment that are distinct from Western mainstream Hollywood cinema.

As with my films, the sense of time period is uncertain, so using black background drapes removes the social and temporal context of the setting. The placing of the woman as exclusive homemaker is historical. Her long white nightdress could be mediaeval or Victorian, hence recalling an earlier period. The interior and architecture show a Victorian house in present-day early 21st century. This sense of calling upon a history in order to situate the present is performed also in the recall of an early film of mine, *Backcomb*. The purpose of this recall was to raise the question of gender politics in relation to the demand of the art world market for what is cutting-edge, as the endlessly 'new' is in tension with the feminist artistic agenda of raising the issue of gender politics in artworks 'again'. It was out of this dilemma that the decision to test this artistic challenge was made through showing the repetition, making it conscious as a feminist dilemma that seeks invention whilst at the same time wants to be true to 'old' demands that either risk repetition or remain silent.

Phantom Rhapsody

A feminist examination of gender and sexual orientation are central to *Phantom Rhapsody*. The broad contextual reference of cinema, theatre, magical side-show acts and classical painting emphasises the depth of gender inequality of sexual culture over centuries. The intention was to heighten consciousness of the weight of the historical layers of such hierarchy. The title of the film was inspired

by Terry Castle's book *The Apparitional Lesbian*, which presents a study of the representation of the lesbian in Western literary history.

The lesbian remains a kind of 'ghost effect' in the cinema world of modern life; elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the centre of the screen. Some may even deny that she exists at all.⁶²

Castle writes that because the lesbian challenges the moral, sexual and psychic authority of men so thoroughly, the 'Amazon' has always provoked anxiety and hatred.⁶³ She quotes Wittig: 'The refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or woman, consciously or not. For a lesbian this goes further than the refusal of the role "woman". It is the refusal of the economic, ideological and political power of a man.'⁶⁴ *Phantom Rhapsody* attempts a playful critique that makes light of what is otherwise heavy subject matter. Surface and depth become part of its language, where sexual identity and cliché operate at the level of the surface, as light across a stage.

The use of the mirror in the film connects a history of painting with cinema, as well as the public field of art and the private arena of female psychology as it emanates from her dressing table mirror, although privacy is not ostensibly explored in *Phantom Rhapsody*. Instead it explores the superficiality of body

⁶² Castle, Terry, *The Apparitional Lesbian; Female Homosexuality And Modern Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, p2

⁶³ IBID

⁶⁴ IBID

surface and pose, taking pleasure in the thinness of the film skin. Mirrors are mostly used to reveal a face where we have instead been given a naked back e.g. in the Velasquez *Rokeby Venus* (1647-51). The film imitates the mirror of the painting but here it is a woman holding the mirror, rather than Cupid. In the film's evocation of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1486) the re-staging reverses the image from the original so that instead we see her back. In this way the audience that has traditionally been addressed as being heterosexual and male is denied the full view of the woman, whilst the model's magician, who here is a woman, has command of her full view. This privileging of who sees her body challenges who has ultimate privileged access to her body in terms of spectatorship within traditions of Western art and mainstream cinema. The famous paintings were chosen because, having been repainted over the centuries, the images bear the traces of ritual encounter, as stories told or re-imaged over centuries. As with classical mythology, such imagery is invested with the power of the cultural perceived as natural.

In *Phantom Rhapsody* the women expose their bare flesh to perform moments of magic. Magician sideshow performance tricks intermix art as magic in painting, cinema and theatre, through the use of black and white drapes that are plied into multiple purposes or surfaces, as dress, screen, magic cloth or curtain. The creative potential of art to perform magic is used to reconfigure an imaginary of looking that employs female self-determination. The intermixing of roles alternates playfully between the performers, who either undress or hold the magician's baton. As well as the fact that both performers are women, their swapping of roles further democratises their power relationships. This exchange

between viewer and viewed departs from otherwise very fixed roles that divide men and women as depicted in the paintings referenced or in Méliès' acutely divided gender roles of magician and assistant/model.

The use of magic occurs in Deren's films in many different forms; for example, objects appear or metamorphose from nowhere (*Meshes Of The Afternoon* and *At Land*), Deren herself appears at moments in multiples of two or three (*At Land* and *Meshes Of The Afternoon*), sea waves move backwards (*At Land*), and gravity is upset as she moves up the stairs (*Meshes Of The Afternoon*). This witch's magic Deren explores is a female vision that is active, as opposed to the common perception that vision is a passive process of witnessing what is in front of our eyes. Through the use of shot reverse shot, Deren's films show the woman's vision of objects as one that changes what is in front of her eyes, and asserts the role of the imagination that is part of vision.

In Deren's subsequent films that she authored as edited films, it is always the woman's vision that 'performs' the movement of the objects: her gaze moves, turns or transfigures the objects she sees. But it is the first film she made in collaboration with Marcel Duchamp in 1943, *The Witch's Cradle* (left unedited before she died)⁶⁵ that most directly addresses the occult, and the history of magic in relation to gender politics. Filmed in an old textile factory basement where Duchamp had made an exhibition of string for the New York Surrealist exhibition in 1942, the film circumnavigates ideas of the uncanny, sexuality and

⁶⁵ Deren, Maya and Duchamp, Marcel *The Witch's Cradle*, 16mm, b/w, 10 mins, 1943,

the power of witchcraft. The shadow puppet lighting casts the figures as flat phantoms. It is similar in this regard to that in *Phantom Rhapsody*. Objects move independently but in conjunction with the movement of performers.

Phantom Rhapsody draws on the inspiration of Deren's filmmaking that asserts a re-imagining or re-imagining of a woman's gaze through her camera, thus engendering the power to reconfigure the world. In *Phantom Rhapsody* active female vision projects rather than receives but is taken into the realm of a lesbian gaze, which challenges by recreating the way in which a woman lives and desires. The women look at each other and consequently turn each other into objects of desire with the wave of a stick, poking fun at masculine and heterosexual domination of the magician role.

Contextual references for this re-staging of historical art and cinema by feminist and queer artists include Abigail Child's film *Mayhem*, in which she inserts her own footage of the female body into found footage fragments from 1940s *film noir*. Her own (filmed) footage imitates the lighting, shadows, striped dresses and frozen (frightened) gaze of the stunned female protagonist. In this way, and also through the pose and framing of the high-contrast black and white film, the re-staged footage becomes indistinguishable from that of the original 1940s classic *film noir*. The soundtrack is cut up so that details of dialogue cannot be followed in narrative terms. Instead, snippets that create emotional tension are emphasised and a gendering is expressed as much through sound as through light and dark. Through this technique an alternative lesbian gaze cuts across the ostensible heterosexual male gaze of the found footage, literally adding but also

queering the original erotic gaze with a more fluid multiplying nexus of looking and being seen.

Phantom Rhapsody asserts an alternative to the male-subject versus female-object of Méliès' cinema, by turning a dominant male heterosexual gaze into a lesbian gaze. In addition it attempts to expose the process of making the image of a woman for display, whether in film or in Western painting. It connects languages of film, theatre and painting and sculpture, creating important connections between these languages, mostly through the use of black and white cloth. Correspondences are made between the revealing and concealing of flesh in different visual mediums through the use of cloth as stage curtain, dress or magician's cloth, thus revealing how the same language of gendered politics persists through different time periods and different art forms. In making these connections, the film shows how the construction of male heterosexual desire of the female body operates across different artistic mediums in very similar ways.

Summary

The circular structure of this commentary, where each film has been discussed several times, each from a different intellectual perspective, has enabled an opening out of the reading of each film. Whilst the purpose of this was to avoid the restriction of a definitive interpretation for each film, which is the standard way to approach writing about films, the cost is the risk of repetition. The endeavour was to enable a focus on subtle processes and effects that each section separately picks out.

At a personal level, the practice of writing this commentary raised questions regarding the relationship between theory and practice, where as the writer my position shifts between the maker and the reader of the work. It also shifts between time, the 'I' living a life and making work and the objective relationship I attempt to take as I reflect upon and write about my work. For this reason I have adopted different grammatical subject points of view, from first-person to third-person, shifting positions between the subjective 'I' and the objective 'filmmaker' that I set in the context of other artists. It is also the subject matter of the films to examine the movement between positions of subjective and objective. In this regard the grammatical inconsistency of 'I', the filmmaker who writes 'as if' objectively about her films, attempts to embrace an idea of self that is decentred as befits the films, which embrace unstable relations between subject and object.

The presence of the autobiographic in the films has not been separately discussed. It is in the first three films that a mother and deceased lover underpin an otherwise philosophical, filmic or social questioning. As I mention in the text, it is the incorporation of the autobiographic that has let in the 'theme' of mortality and death, and where the gaze is marked with such emphasis. The problem with attempting to objectify one's practice, in particular when autobiographic elements are present such as lover or mother, was one I wanted to engage with as an important part of the work. The medium of film is an ideal medium to play out an examination of split subjectivity and what is subjective and objective.

Revelations that emerged from the experience of writing up this commentary include a developed awareness of how my theoretical reading, in particular the feminist theory of Irigaray and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in general, have impacted on my filmmaking. Because in my practice the relationship between the theory and the practice is indirect, in the same way that the autobiographic impacts on the work in indirect ways, it can take many years after completing a film before a new revelation of reading the film can occur. For example, it was ten years after completing *Stages Of Mourning* that I understood its connection to *Night Dances*. The writing of this commentary has assisted in finding many such connections, including those between the films, which the structure of this writing as circular has further enabled.

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