

# OEI N°69-70 ON FILM

REDAKTÖRER FÖR OEI # 69-70  
Martin Grennberger och Daniel A. Swarthnas

ARBETSGRUPP FÖR OCH MONTAGE AV OEI # 69-70  
Martin Grennberger, Cecilia Grönberg, Jonas (J) Magnusson, Daniel A. Swarthnas

PRODUKTION  
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# MATTUSCHKA AND PUCILL: THESE FILMS CANNOT BE PROVED

*Caroline Koebel*

Early 1990s NYC was fertile ground for a young experimental filmmaker just out of college in terms of both the diverse local no-budget cinema and the spirited works finding their way across the Atlantic from such artists' organizations as sixpackfilm in Vienna and London Filmmakers' Co-op. Mara Mattuschka and Sarah Pucill in particular challenged - and inspired - me and my peers on the moving image border as formidable European artists sowing vast labor for the female sexuality and aesthetics collective research bank.

Affirming curiosity over authority as a tool for dialog, this text courts the fragmentary, the fissure, the blunder, and the gasp. Initially imagining a focus on the very films, such as Mattuschka's *S.O.S. Extraterrestria* (1993) and Pucill's *Backcomb* (1995), that had been so influential to me in the '90s, instead—in light of learning about other titles through my current research—I have puzzled out alternate points of entry.

Mattuschka's *Pascal-Gödel* (1986, 16mm, b/w, silent, 5 min) and Pucill's *Mirrored Measure* (1996, 16mm, b/w, sound, 10 min) are each a cocoon encasing a singular inwardly referencing cinematic world, and each a communicative act affirming a passage outward from the profilmic to the viewer. While there is a tempting delirium to getting lost within, there is likewise a provocative dare to hold one's ground and keep one's wits from outside the respective diegetic scope. Like the theorems of the mathematicians (after whom Mattuschka names her film) Blaise Pascal and Kurt Gödel, there is a certain undecidability, incompleteness, and self-prophesying riddling these films whose muscles as experiments in cinema ripple.

Of painting's "tendency towards abstraction" after cubism Peter Wollen<sup>1</sup> writes, "the work of art could be defended in terms of objecthood, pure presence: it could be explained as a solution to a problem, often set by the relationship between a signifier and its physical, material support

(the matter or substance of expression)." It is this "presence," this "solution to a problem," this "relationship between a signifier and its material support" that causes Pucill and Mattuschka's films to be at once so evocative and so ungraspable (always creating trails of cinematic scents, always slipping away to other time and space dimensions).

Repeated viewings of the two markedly different films gradually reveal their affinities and resonances. Consider, for example, that their opening sequences both feature ritualistic preparations for the actions to follow.

In *Pascal-Gödel* a hand reaches into the frame to unfurl a backdrop of black-and-white squares. The next instance cropped-headed and science lab-coated Mimi Minus (the director Mattuschka's onscreen alter-ego) spreads more of the hand-painted tile material onto a table, immersing herself in seemingly infinite checkerdom.

Framing the frame, distancing devices, gender performativity, masquerade, the doppelgänger, institutional verses domestic spheres, hypnotic and hallucinatory, oneiric and expressionistic: deceptively concise and expeditious, the sequence elicits a flood of associations and primes viewers for competing states of disorientation and equilibrium. By setting a multivalent context through an economy of means, *Pascal-Gödel* excites a spectatorship characterized by questioning, problem-solving, and imaginative play.

If the Minus character's actions evince slippages between a clinical procedure and an impromptu picnic, the laying of cloth on a table in *Mirrored Measure* reads more unequivocally as single-purposed (i.e. in preparation for formal dining). That is, until the action registers as so



riddled by contradiction and paradox that the sequence veers in the direction of dialectical montage (in which one image undergoes radical transformation by its juxtaposition with the next).

Pucill achieves this effect not by combining images taken by a camera that has traveled near and far, not by a camera that has "seen it all," but rather by looking exhaustively at an otherwise claustrophobically delimited space. Laying cloth on table, snatching it away, revealing wood underneath, relaying the cover, dragging it away, covering the wood again, smoothing cloth with hands, brushing up against it, pushing in chairs, accompanied by a screeching intermittent soundtrack: what is easily recognizable as a quotidian task (albeit with connotations of the bourgeois class) becomes so removed from any set reference points that its existence on a level of abstraction initiates free range meaning.

Fraught with tension through a complex symbiosis of form and content and (recalling Wollen) a wilding of the referent and its material expression, *Mirrored Measure* sets its own internal logic that to act is to react, to create is to negate, to rise is to fall, to fill is to empty. Water in pitcher, hands passing and pouring and lifting, glass to lips, wetness, arrhythmic sound, clashing noise, pause, performers in close-ups of mouths, chins, necks, thighs, arms, a younger woman, an older woman, continuous shifts between parts of performers (i.e., from the younger's smooth hand to the older's lined mouth)... Here is a cosmos of force and counterforce, thesis and antithesis, relief and shadow, rejuvenation and degeneration, the palpable and the intangible. Pucill's deft use of synecdoche and montage further underscores her intimacy with cinema's contours for shaping the real.

Both Pucill and Mattuschka conceive cinema as a meeting place for a multitude of expressive modes and a bridge between the visual and performing arts. Each foregoes strictures of linearity in favor of exploring the recursive and circular, the spatiotemporal shape of their filmmaking a spiraling interiority (but, as suggested earlier, an inwardness full of connective tissue to the outside). Note, however, that they do not waylay narrative altogether; the films in question convey a sense of progression over time. The ostensible sequence of events, "the story" in crudest terms, of *Mirrored Measure* is a multigenerational cast of women drinking water together around a formal dining table; *Pascal-Gödel* has Mimi Minus imbibing a large bottle of wine on her own while using it as a chess piece.

Amidst a rapid stutter of positive and negative picture, live action and animation, still life and moving image, abstraction and representation, painting and photomechanical reproduction, Mattuschka-Minus, centered and frontal, grabs the bottle by its neck, holds it to her mouth, rests it on the squares, clutches it from the bottom, drinks from it, confronts the camera. In terms of its steely web of humor, audacity, and sociocultural

resistance, *Pascal-Gödel* shares affinities—from Ester Krumbachová's lively and resourceful sets to the two protagonists both named "Marie"—with *Daisies* (1966), the trailblazing film of female emancipation by Czech director Vera Chytilová.

Whereas in other of her films (e.g. *Nabel Fabel*, *Kaiserschnitt*, *Beauty and the Beast*) Mattuschka images the incontrovertibly feminine body, in *Pascal-Gödel* she presents a conspicuously androgynous female self—absent is nudity, absent is biological "proof." However, it is the very play of gender, the irreverence toward conventional femininity that makes Minus's advance to drunkenness so potent. In her staging of mind over matter, Mattuschka not only appropriates the masculine-identified role of the ascetic but also sends up notions of masculinist creation in the arts and sciences, whether pillars of 1960s Viennese Actionism and 1970s Conceptualism or the historical figures of her film title.

Wandering from the bottle as a sole intoxicating source (and indeed emptying it), Mimi Minus—the movement of her hands now more expressive than functional—touches her lips, uncurls her fingers, holds her face, rubs her eyes, and massages her skull. Departing her crisp checker cloth origins (however campy its touch of faux), the protagonist is sited—both as subject and object—more and more within the moist and malleable realm of painting ("action painting" dare I suggest?). Rigor and precision fall sway to hands smearing paint and pigment traveling in all directions—the physical self as pure kinesthesia, an agent of creation, the signifying sensual.

This letting go, this revelry in a lack of control, this unmitigated energy, this sense of abandon mounts too in Pucill's far more measured *Mirrored Measure*. From technical deviations (e.g., grease pencil edit marks, blurred focus) through a storm of motion within the frame (e.g., swirling and convulsing water in the otherwise benign vessels of the pitcher and glasses) to a grand toppling of the image in which all that is raised comes crashing down, to the culminating close-up of the work's first and only eye (a finger collects pooling water and disperses tears) a totemic negation arises, impossible to resist—perhaps because it engulfs any will to name it, perhaps because it intimates a calm and tranquility heretofore unknown.

#### NOTE

- 1 Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes" in *Studio International*, November/December 1975.



Sarah Pucill, *Mirrored Measure* (1996)  
Mara Mattuschka, *Pascal-Gödel* (1986)