

THE UNCANNY, UNEXPLORED, AND IMPENETRABLE

Antoinette Zwirchmayr

In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard speaks about a casket¹ that conceals a secret. We believe that this casket could also be a camera. Like a casket, it can be opened, and takes a place in open space. Bachelard writes that, from the moment the casket is opened, there are no dialectics. It is similar with the camera: once it is opened, the light destroys everything that is inside (the undeveloped film is instantly exposed). The images exposed on the film (if the film had been used to record something) will be erased and thus lost forever. In this case, the mystery of the casket/camera is visible only to the person behind the lens, because the images already exist only in their memory: a captured motif becomes *an imaginary object*.² In the camera, as well as in the memory of the filmmaker, the past, present, and future meet. Thus the casket/camera becomes a memory of what is immemorial, and is not liberated inside the hidden recollection. When this treasure (film material) gets out, oppressiveness comes into play. “According to him [Schelling, translator’s note], the uncanny is the name for everything that ought to have remained ... hidden and secret and has become visible,”³ Sigmund Freud writes. It is exactly the uncanny, unexplored, and impenetrable that is characteristic of Narcisa Hirsch’s films. Through her images, she tries to show

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 85.

² *Ibid.*, 87.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McIlintock (London: Penguin, 2003), 4.

a new, different world. Perhaps these films arise out of a dissatisfaction with reality; they are a way out. According to Susan Sontag, cameras are “fantasy-machines whose use is addictive.”⁴ This eagerness of vision also means to possess: “Seeing [...] is having. It both sees the world and has it.”⁵ Recording means being able to transform yesterday into today and a moment into an eternity. For Narcisa Hirsch, one of the founders of Grupo Goethe, a group of Argentine filmmakers in Buenos Aires, filming means an encounter of the inside and outside: “The image is born at the threshold of matter–light in the intersection of being and thought as a new reality.”⁶ Her films can be described as willful; they represent an autonomous type of contemporary cinema. They are distressful and provoke anxiety, since death is a recurring motif. Femininity and adolescence are other central themes. In the film *Mujeres* (Women, 1985), we see a heavily made-up woman rigid in an indeterminate space, and therefore seemingly lifeless. This image is accompanied by a quote from *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,”⁷ which refers to the cultural model of women. A strong sense of loneliness is also developed through images of empty Argentine countryside, which occur in all her films.

Narcisa Hirsch’s film work comes largely from the 1970s and 1980s, when the artist worked with Super 8, 8 mm, and 16 mm format films. Later, she digitized and re-edited her work. Her work includes practically only short films, from several minutes to half an hour long. Due to the brittleness of Super 8 and 8 mm films today, it is almost impossible to screen these works in the original format. In an interview with Alejandra Torres, Narcisa Hirsch emphasizes that she feels no regret for the material: “Nothing like nostalgia. No. Nothing like nostalgia or melancholy. Only inventing new forms from residual life.”⁸ I think that her pictures show specific properties of the film material, which we can’t find

⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* [electronic edition] (New York: RosettaBooks, 2005), 16.

⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 103.

⁶ Adrián Cangi, “Una autobiografía en imágenes,” in *Narcisa Hirsch: Catálogo*, ed. A. Torres (Buenos Aires: Casa Nacional del Bicentenario, 2010), 13.

⁷ *Mujeres* [film], directed by Narcisa Hirsch (Buenos Aires, 1985), 00:10:45. Citations in these films are in Spanish; we have translated them for the purposes of this article.

⁸ Cangi, “Una autobiografía en imágenes,” 16.

in video, for example dirt on the film, damage from the previous projections, or the very specific color range of Super 8 film. This is how the artist describes her approach to filming: “I am very focused, but not in terms of hard work ethic, because I’ve never worked like those writers who say: ‘I get up at nine o’clock in the morning and work until one.’ I work very randomly, without being organized, very impulsively, and without excessive discipline.”⁹

Narcisa Hirsch also often reaches for her earlier footage, and incorporates it into various films. When looking at her complete body of work, this reused footage creates a feeling of intimacy. By using montage, the artist changes the context, offering new interpretations of her films.

An especially interesting aspect of Hirsch’s work, apart from motifs like death, self-portrait, or womanhood, is the feminine gaze pointing at a male object. Using as examples films like *A-Dios* (Goodbye/To God, 1979),¹⁰ *Patagonia* (1972), and *Mujeres* (Women, 1985), we would like, among other things, to discuss this feminine gaze.

A-Dios (1979)

At the beginning of the mysterious 20-minute experimental film *A-Dios*, the following text appears:

“Dedicated to Jung, and all the other men who helped me live
with men
with heroes
and with alchemists.”¹¹

In *A-Dios*¹² different motives are often repeated: male nudes, men riding on horseback in the Argentine countryside, or a slow-motion shot of the sky. The structure of the film gradually thickens. The music of the violin, which accompanies the image, becomes more violent and restless at

⁹ Alejandra Torres, “Ver(se) mirar a la cámara,” in *Narcisa Hirsch: Catálogo*, ed. A. Torres (Buenos Aires: Casa Nacional del Bicentenario, 2010), 61.

¹⁰ The original title of the film implies a certain ambiguity. It could be a dedication to God, or a way of saying goodbye.

¹¹ *A-Dios* [film], directed by Narcisa Hirsch (Buenos Aires, 1979), 00:00:24.

¹² See Illustrations, Figure 2.

the close. The level of imagery is filled by new unexplained motifs, such as found footage of an atomic bomb explosion or two kissing skiers.

Unlike other artists of her generation who were strongly influenced by feminism, Narcisa Hirsch turns her gaze intently on the man's body. For example, her contemporaries Carolee Schneemann or Ana Mendieta utterly refrain from showing men in their works. Narcisa Hirsch's films, on the other hand, are characterized by a thoroughly erotic view of a male object. Her work overturns the theory of Laura Mulvey, who, in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film," wrote: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female."¹³ Narcisa Hirsch leaves the passive female role, becoming, thanks to the camera, the active ingredient, letting men become passive objects in front of the camera lens.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote: "A woman who does not wish to be a slave to man, certainly does not avoid him, rather she attempts to turn him into an instrument of her desire."¹⁴ *A-Dios* is shaped by woman's gaze at a male object and is interwoven with quotations from *The Second Sex*. Black-and-white found footage showing a ski jumper in free fall could represent a fallen God, and relates to the following passage: "[man] is considered a shipwrecked God and His misfortune is that he fell from the sky of glory."¹⁵ The floating clouds that always return correspond almost perfectly to the depiction of the "sky of glory." Other quotations from de Beauvoir's text, however, are not so easy to recognize.

The beautiful male body does not show its face to the audience. Because it is illuminated by candles, it appears as if it was on fire and is attempting to turn toward darkness, into nothingness. It could represent a soul trapped in the bodily shell. A flawless body stands opposite the limping man coming towards the camera. This scene may refer to the following excerpt: "He wanted to seem as necessary as pure idea, a oneness, a whole absolute spirit, but feels a prisoner of a limited body in place and time, which he did not choose, where he was not invited, useless, clumsy, absurd."¹⁶

¹³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Film," in *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

¹⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe 2* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 178.

¹⁵ *A-Dios*, 00:04:27.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 00:04:50.

In *A-Dios*, Narcisa Hirsch confronts us with the unpleasant reality of human aging. Black-and-white male portraits show figures who almost all stare directly into the camera. It is not so much about their relationship to the author of the film. Rather, it is what their looks are trying to say without being able to speak. The last portrait is a filmed photo. It could be a young C. G. Jung, since Hirsch addresses Jung in the quoted text at the beginning of the film. Filmed photos may refer to death – man’s (Jung’s?) look is stiff. After that we see two young men who are crucifying a live frog.

It seems as if Narcisa Hirsch was building her film from individual stones based on passages from Simone de Beauvoir’s book. She is trying to find a film language that would extend the text rather than replace it.

Through montage, music forms a perfect harmony with the images, while neither of these elements—sound or picture—dominate the other.

Patagonia (1972)

The 18-minute 16mm film *Patagonia* is first and foremost a tribute to the Argentine countryside. The opening scene is a nearly three-minute portrait of a young man who initially looks into the camera with confidence, but gradually becomes uncertain. The portrait and shots of barren land merge in a double exposure. To the sounds of Brazilian musician Caetano Veloso, who sings “it’s a long, long road, it’s a hard and long way,” Narcisa Hirsch may be indicating a path of adolescence that awaits that young man. The middle part of the film is dominated by understated shots of herds of cattle and sheep, working people, or objects such as glass bottles, images of stray dogs, and animal skeletons. These banal depictions emphasize the most urgent film image. It is the only staged image; the others are documentary in nature. The shot shows a naked male body lying by the sea next to washed-out seals.¹⁷ Neither the man nor the seals seem to be alive. At first we think of the sleeping man and Paul Virilio comes to mind, who says that “in the context of sleep, we are talking about death, from which we return.”¹⁸ Or is the unknown man in a state of semi-sleep?

¹⁷ See Illustrations, Figure 3.

¹⁸ Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. by Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), [32].

Heraclitus writes: “The awake share a common world, but the asleep turn aside into private worlds.”¹⁹ The shot that shows a grave in the cemetery, however, suggests that it is a dead body. At the end of the film we find that the seals are still alive. They are trying to get into the sea, into their living space. The dead man’s body has disappeared, apparently dissolved.

Patagonia is a picture that shows particularly clearly the materiality of analog film. Narcisa Hirsch, for example, interrupts film positives (Argentine landscape shots) to continue with the negatives. Vertical green film strips intersect with horizontal images. Hirsch reveals the existence of photography in the film by placing, through editing, film frames that show the Argentine countryside alongside black frames. As a result, the images only briefly flash and disappear with the following one. The cinematic gimmick of a multiple approach to the grass surface has a very playful effect. The final scene shows Narcisa Hirsch filming herself in the mirror. In this way, she shows the machine, which has become a part of herself. In his 1930 essay *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud describes man as “prosthetic god” who invents a prosthesis to achieve the “likeness of God.”²⁰

Mujeres (1985)

In *Mujeres* (Women), black-and-white footage alternates with color, and the film’s 25 minutes are accompanied by the sounds of panpipes and a ringing bell. Like in the films *Testamento y vida interior* (The Will and Inner life, 1976), *Ama-Zona* (1983), or *A-Dios* (1989), there are several recurring motifs. A woman dressed in black coming forward from a bleak Argentine landscape in a snowstorm is quite remarkable, and the scene appears four times in the film. It seems as if the woman is not making progress and is unsuccessfully trying to come closer to the camera. To multiply this scene, Narcisa Hirsch projected the film on the screen and re-recorded it with a 16 mm camera. A little later this shot appears for the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. by James Strachey (Eastford: Martino Publishing, 2010).