



# The Primacy of Perception

Ramon & Silvan Zürcher on *The Girl and the Spider*

BY BLAKE WILLIAMS

*I will never know how you see red, and you will never know how I see it; but this separation of consciousness is recognized only after a failure of communication, and our first movement is to believe in an undivided being between us.*

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty



Near the midpoint of *The Girl and the Spider*—Ramon and Silvan Zürcher’s overdue, much anticipated follow-up to their masterful debut feature, *The Strange Little Cat* (2013)—a character launches into another of the Zürcher brothers’ distinctive anecdotal monologues. Mara (Henriette Confurius), who is as close as this film gets to a protagonist, describes for her neighbour, Kerstin (Dagna Litzenberger-Vinet), an incident that occurred the previous day between herself and her newly ex-roommate (and perhaps ex-girlfriend) Lisa (Liliane Amuat). “I was in my room while Lisa was on the toilet,” she recounts. “She asked me to bring her a roll of toilet paper. Instead of giving it to her, I walked past the door from left to right, from Lisa’s point of view.” The image cuts to the scene while she recalls it, privileging us with a more objective account of the incident: a fixed shot showing Mara stand up from her desk, grab a package of toilet paper, and march past the door, her arms outstretched like a zombie. She ambles past the opened door three times—left to right, right to left, then, once again, left to right—at which point we hear Lisa break into laughter. Mara continues, “When I walked past the door the second time, Lisa wasn’t looking. She thought that I walked from left to right twice, without turning around in between. Like a ghost.” At this point, we see the bathroom door suddenly slammed shut, right onto Mara’s left middle finger—a moment of seemingly unprompted cruelty, and a detail that Mara opts not to tell her neighbour. “Can you imagine that?”

This scene, unassumingly, is a paragon of the Zürchers’ project, an instructional map that teaches the viewer how to watch the surrounding scenes and sequences. It’s all there: the visual joke that we, the audience, only truly experience via language (yet can nevertheless visualize); the capricious character manners, blinking from trivial amusement to nastiness to longing, irrationally yet within the realm of reason; the tenuous divisions between actions and words, words and images, images and the unseen—between ideas and bodies. It’s a celebration of what is lost in reality’s gaps, and the euphoria of discovering what you missed.

In that, *The Girl and the Spider* is a film of ruptures. Its first moving image, fittingly, is a jackhammer penetrating the earth, and its inciting narrative event—Lisa moving out of a shared living situation with Mara in order to live on her own—is one that the Zürchers understand to be an act of destruction, not of origination or development. As with all plot elements in their films, the occasion of Lisa’s departure feels secondary to the film’s sensual and formal engagements. Character motivation and cause-and-effect logic is either nonexistent or gets buried beneath myriad layers of movement and spoken phrases that may or may not make any sense to us. We can only get caught up and washed along in the film’s beautiful display of *things resuming*, moving along, never being the same again. We can call it transience, or some kind of entropy: the ground breaks, wine leaks (from piercings plastic and corporeal), files corrupt, and Mara bleeds from no less than three physical wounds (to say nothing of the emotional ones) that she acquires across the film’s overflowing 98 minutes. In the Zürchers’ cinema, contentment, pleasure, or beauty of any kind is located in an embrace of and yearning for that which is irreparable. It’s manufactured by the information missed when we

weren’t looking or couldn’t see—when we were offered the task of communication.

A cut in a Zürcher film, especially this one, is almost always a revealing, never a suture. It exposes the mark that we heard being etched; the angle that reconfigures our understanding of the spatial dynamics of the setting or environment; the beholder that we and/or the character couldn’t sense was present watching what we were watching—the subject we never knew our gaze belonged to. There’s an acknowledgment, shot to shot, cut to cut, that there is more to the world than what we can presently see or say that we know. Which is to say that the Zürchers’ cinema, which isn’t remotely Gen Y, millennial, or whatever in spirit, is one that is actively, playfully, and quite deeply concerned with contemporary intersubjectivity—an apt project for a pair of identical twin brothers, who despite their similar features could never experience the exact same thing in the exact same way. And at the present moment, I can think of few worthier undertakings for a narrative cinema practice than one that challenges and is curious about the ways that humans perceive themselves, others, and the perceptions of others.

**Cinema Scope:** *The Girl and the Spider* is credited as “a film by” both of you, which differs from your previous feature and shorts. Was this project more collaborative than the others?

**Ramon Zürcher:** Actually, yes. In *The Strange Little Cat* and my shorts, I wrote the script and Silvan’s role was as the script doctor. He would read and edit the script, but I imagined most of the film myself, and then directed and edited it. For this film, though, Silvan wrote and developed the first draft; it started with him. On the set, I was the main one working with the actors and Silvan was the assistant director. That said, the borders between our roles were not so defined this time—the artistic and organizational aspects flowed together. That’s why we put the credit that way, because both of us were artistically involved through the whole thing. It’s really coming from both of us.

**Silvan Zürcher:** The way we work, in certain ways we are two poles. I’m more meticulous with the formal things, while Ramon has a bit more range with drama, so we find a balance between ourselves, these two different poles. But I also don’t feel attracted to directing so much, even though I did enjoy directing my short film, *Zombie* (2010). Maybe in the future we will make a film where it is more appropriate for me to direct and have Ramon be the assistant director or co-director. It doesn’t have to always be the same set-up. The poles can shift.

**Scope:** Did you also work together creatively in school growing up, or did you have different interests?

**Ramon:** The interests always were similar, but, for example, I was usually better at painting and drawing. It’s strange, we are genetically identical, yet we drew so differently.

**Scope:** Was the subject matter of your drawings different, or mainly the results?

**Silvan:** The results!

**Ramon:** Silvan was better at writing texts and languages.

**Silvan:** Yeah, that’s true. I studied the theoretical side, and

Ramon studied art and the more practical side. Later when we started studying film is really when we began working together.

**Scope:** Did Mara get her illustration talents from you then, Ramon?

**Ramon:** No! Well, maybe a little bit. But it's not like Mara is me, or this other character is Silvan. Every character is a little bit part of us. It's a poetic, lyrical representation of feelings and thoughts we have in our lives, of what it's like for each of us to feel life. To me it's like a lyrical ballet, like music.

**Scope:** The sound design is so beautifully orchestrated in your films. In *The Girl and the Spider* especially, the soundscape—the ambient cacophony of everyday sounds, noises, snippets of dialogue—almost feels like a *musique concrète* composition. It's a nice contrast against the classical pieces on the soundtrack, like Eugen Doga's "Gramofon" waltz that plays during the film's transitional caesuras.

**Ramon:** Yeah. Also, we actually tested out using more experimental music for the caesuras instead of the waltz, to see if maybe we could use music with an aesthetic closer to the film, something less classical. But I always liked the contrast between modern or non-classical narration and classical music, because it's not *only* an art film, not *only* experimental, but something in between. And intuitively, I felt that the waltzes have good energy, a bit like a comedy with a little bit of melancholy. The music we chose also goes with the characters: the piano waltz is important because of the chambermaid and her piano, and then you have "Voyage, Voyage," which goes well with Mara, her melancholy. But also, we liked the trashy '80s pop.

**Scope:** The chambermaid is a fascinating presence in this film. In a way she's just another minor character, but your conception of her—with her purgatorial existence out in the middle of the ocean—really elevates the scale of the film. She lifts the story to something more mythical.

**Ramon:** There are several mythical elements in the film: Nora, in her dark room, is like a myth; also, the old woman and the visiting cat, and the myth of the disappearing chambermaid. But these aren't huge myths. They're everyday myths. Sometimes in the small things there are big things being articulated, and the chambermaid found her utopia on the cruise ship, cleaning rooms. That's her utopia!

**Scope:** The ocean is greenscreened into the shot, correct? There seems to be a bit more image compositing, a bit more artifice in this film than you've had before.

**Ramon:** Yes. The water, the sky, the seagulls were all shot at sea, but the actress is just in our studio in Bern, Switzerland, in front of a greenscreen.

**Silvan:** Also, in the apartments—the exteriors of the windows, it was all greenscreens, all controllable. What you see when you look out the window, we could look for that after the shoot, and put it in later.

**Ramon:** The scene of the old lady on the roof, too: we shot the roof outside at an original location, but the lady was filmed in the studio, and then we added those layers together.

**Silvan:** But there was a small amount shot in Berlin, like some exterior shots—the car rides, also the motorcycle shot—but the

majority was filmed in the studio. Most of the exteriors were shot in Bern.

**Ramon:** It wasn't a classical studio, but a former brewery. Bern doesn't have a classical studio with soundstages: you have to create your studio in these spaces that were used for other things.

**Scope:** So, even the two apartments that the film takes place in, you built those in a brewery?

**Ramon:** Yeah! At first, we did look for actual flats to shoot in, but the floor plans of the ones we found didn't fit with the script. We needed two flats facing each other, vis-à-vis, and in Switzerland there often is just one flat per floor. In the studio, we could make two opposite flats, and use that skeleton to make all the different flats in the film—Mara and Lisa's shared flat, Lisa's new flat, Kerstin and Nora's shared flat, the absent family's flat, and the old lady's flat. Like chameleon apartments that could change their appearances.

**Scope:** Lisa and Mara's shared flat looks so similar to the one in *The Strange Little Cat*, I thought it might have been the same one.

**Ramon:** No, it's not. For *The Strange Little Cat* we found a real flat to rent in Moabit, in Berlin, but we had to fake that set-up, too, because it was a ground-floor flat and we needed it to look like it was on the second floor, so we placed trees in front of the windows. Even that ended up being kind of studio-like. But the shoot of *The Girl and the Spider* became an adventure or experiment, having to invent everything, the whole space.

**Scope:** Why use a Swiss studio instead of a German one?

**Silvan:** We shot in Switzerland instead of Germany this time because of financing. First, we wanted to finance it in Germany, but it was complicated because there you first have to get a broadcast deal to show it on a TV channel, and it's difficult to motivate a TV channel to jump on board for this kind of project. Switzerland was easier to get the funding, so in the end it's actually a Swiss film. That said, the actors still speak in standard German, the German that they speak in Germany. To us, the film doesn't take place in a specific city, there's nothing particularly Swiss or German about the story.

**Scope:** Since you bring up language, I want to ask about the way your films depict communication. Conversations can be quite minimal and stark, you tend to avoid eyeline matches, and there are often interruptions in the dialogue, or earlier conversations that abruptly resume. Because of this, the context for what someone is saying or who they are speaking to can be somewhat obscured, and the dialogue becomes absurd.

**Silvan:** Communication typically has the role of connecting people: one person experiences something, and shares it with another person. We like to show communication that no longer fulfills this role of connecting people, but that separates them, as the use of the camera highlights, too. The people stay disconnected even though they're communicating. For instance, when Mara's finger is injured after the zombie anecdote, she is telling this story to her neighbour, Kerstin. The fact that she got injured is the heart of the flashback, the core detail that makes the story seem worth telling. We show the audience that it happened, yet she doesn't tell it to Kerstin. So, the characters are talking, but they withhold information. They speak, but they remain somewhat isolated.

**Scope:** This withholding of information seems central to many other formal strategies, too, as your films make an effort to complicate the viewer's ability to feel oriented in the film environment. I'm thinking, for example, of your frequent use of tight, planimetric framing, and the disjunction between what we hear and what we can see.

**Ramon:** This is central to our thinking when we create the *découpage*. For example, when Mara is scratching the object at the desk, you can hear the noise and you can think about what she is etching. We *could* show what she's doing, but if you hear the noise, even though you don't see what object she's using, you imagine it. Seeing it isn't necessary. Similarly, later when you hear the fly and realize that she kills it out of the frame, it's only later that you see it. You had the dead fly in your mind, and then when you see it, you think, "Ah, that's the fly." It makes it more...complex? Maybe more...

**Silvan:** Non-linear? Actually, it may seem non-linear, but it's very linear, very chronological. Also, we decided not to use establishing shots that would show the spatial layout, such as how the different apartments are related to one another.

**Scope:** Opening the film with a shot of the floor plan helps!

**Silvan:** Yes, because it's also tricky. The viewer has to imagine it, to make a mental architecture. You get the impression, as if it were woven. If it's too difficult for the viewer to spatially orient themselves, then it isn't productive. We had to negotiate between having not too much yet still enough ambiguity about the filmic space. The spectator has to work, but not become too lost.

**Scope:** Since there's always so much going on visually, aurally, and also cognitively for the viewer, the film's construction must be very intricately planned and precise, so it hangs together. I'm curious, though, about how much spontaneity you accommodate when you're on set. Do you allow for sudden creative whims during the shoot?

**Ramon:** There are many scenes that end up being very similar to how we conceived them. In *The Strange Little Cat*, I think there were only two shots that we ended up not using, so it was very close to how we planned it. But for *The Girl and the Spider*, which had many more shots in general, we ended up cutting out way more shots. We also changed some scenes' chronology sometimes during the editing.

**Silvan:** It's not that we changed the order of different scenes, but the scenes themselves, their inner structure. We assembled some of them differently than how we wrote them. We would discover different build-ups.

**Scope:** I believe this is the first of your films to have someone other than yourselves listed as an editor, with Ramon and Katharina Bhend sharing the credit. Did having an additional perspective change your editing approach in any significant way?

**Ramon:** Katharina was actually editing the rough cut as we were filming. After the shoot, we worked together for three months. After that she had another project to edit, so we knew going into the production that there might not be enough time, and we had to look ahead and plan for what to do when she departed. But yeah, at first I was sort of afraid to work with another editor, because when I'm editing, personally I like to watch every take, to

be sure that we use the best one. I'm used to having my hand on every single thing—I'm a little bit of a control freak—so I wanted to know how it feels to have somebody else at the wheel while I'm the passenger. It's like doing computer painting, where normally you have the mouse in your hand and can just paint what you think as you're thinking it. Here I had to verbalize my ideas, and someone else moved the mouse. I wanted to test out this kind of situation, as an experiment.

**Scope:** And then when Katharina left?

**Ramon:** The following few months of the editing process, I just edited it myself and it was the same as usual. But I think this situation with Katharina had many positive things, because she is very emotionally driven, and has a very strong intuition, which was a very valuable perspective.

**Scope:** To return to the subject of artifice, *The Girl and the Spider* seems to flirt with genre a bit, incorporating some fantasy or horror tropes: mentions of ghosts, death crosses, and some nocturnal, almost spectral characters like Nora and the old lady on the roof. It seems you're starting to push back against realism a bit this time.

**Ramon:** We wanted to set up a kind of minimalist style of storytelling, and then to go from there into a more artificial, genre direction. It's part of a basic interest we have in surrealistic things, in a dreamed reality, where there aren't only the things that you see, but where the characters' psyches project the images onto the screen. That surrealist method was always an interest of mine, and maybe also Silvan?

**Silvan:** Yeah. Also, *The Strange Little Cat* originally was going to have some surreal scenes, but we ultimately decided to keep things minimalistic and simple with that one. We are interested in both an economical aesthetic and in surrealistic scenery, and in *The Girl and the Spider* we finally merged these two inclinations. It's a step we've been interested in taking for a long time. But also, Ramon, your art videos were actually quite surrealistic.

**Ramon:** And my paintings, too. I think there are two souls in us, and because our astrological sign is Gemini...

**Scope:** The twins! Very appropriate...

**Ramon:** Yes! Well, see, the Gemini is an air sign, and our ascendant is Virgo, an earth sign. The air likes B-movie trash, and without self-control it goes toward those expressive things. But the Virgo, the earth, is rather controlling and rational. So it feels as if surrealistic things grow like a plant, but then the rational comes in like a pair of scissors and cuts them out. It's important to leave some plants, and not cut everything away. Our next film, *The Sparrow in the Chimney*, is a journey to a feverish reality. *The Girl and the Spider* has some expressionistic things emerge, but in the next film they will be even more present.

**Scope:** So, broadly speaking, this trilogy of films is charting your movement from realism into a more expressionistic or subjective approach to narrative?

**Ramon:** Yes. And it is also a journey from a kind of stasis to movement. First you have the cat—cats used to be very free, roaming around in nature before becoming domesticated, like prisoners. Then the spider, it builds its web, this fragile home for itself that remains as a trace of the spider's presence once it leaves

and disappears. The web for me is about transience, which is what *The Girl and the Spider* essentially deals with, in a way. And the next film will be about rebellion, with the sparrow needing to break out of the chimney to fly freely, to rebel against the bars and rules. I think it will be closer to a war film—a family war film. Very explosive.

**Silvan:** I also think of *The Girl and the Spider* as a catastrophe film, because it's about things, relations, living situations falling apart, breaking up, being damaged.

**Scope:** Mara's body in particular is subjected to damage. The film is like an accumulation of physical injuries for her.

**Ramon:** It's a brittle world.

**Scope:** These processes of tearing things down, building things up, making a mess, cleaning it up—this state of flux is very prominent in your *mise en scène*. There's hardly any stability, as if the world is always in a state of becoming disorderly. Even the PDF image of the apartment layout gets corrupted, the text and lines get scrambled into meaninglessness.

**Silvan:** Yeah, and as you mention in the example of the PDF file, it's not only the analog world but the digital world too, and actually it's the same for the characters' desires, as if their desires aren't clear anymore. The film is like a merry-go-round of desire, with the characters desiring in various directions. It's not so clear how these things are structured.

**Scope:** Desire has always had a unique presence in your work, and it can manifest itself in casually transgressive ways, like the intimations of incestuous desire in *The Strange Little Cat*. But in *The Girl and the Spider*, there is a particularly forward presence of queer desire.

**Ramon:** From the very beginning, we thought of *The Girl and the Spider* as a kind of queer universe. Not like, "Okay, Lisa is a lesbian, and Mara is a lesbian..." or any definitions like that. It's rather a spectrum, and the characters are not set in any particular place on that spectrum: they occupy the entire line, with everyone having a very fluid sexuality and complex desires. It's like a queer-bisexual-multisexual universe where the relations, the friendships, don't fit any traditional definition of anything. Everyone's sexuality is allowed to change.

**Silvan:** I like that no one is predictable. Also, for example, how a character can be both monstrous and darling at the very same time.

**Scope:** Right, the characters often behave with a surprising hostility toward one another.

**Silvan:** To me, I find this kind of unpredictability in the behaviour more realistic. One never knows if there's a tender moment coming or a hostile or mean moment. These social possibilities are present in every moment.

**Scope:** Regarding unpredictability, you make working with animals and insects look effortless, as if you have complete control of their movements. Can you describe your process for choreographing and filming non-human subjects?

**Ramon:** Well, for example, the tabby cat is owned by the mother of the actress who plays the little girl, Eleni. The cat came to the set, we shot it separately without the actors, and added it in post-production.

**Silvan:** There were so many actors around, the cat was too shy or too terrified by all the activity. We needed to separate the animal from the actors and just composite it in the same space with editing. Cats need it to be calm.

**Ramon:** The other cat in the film, the orange cat who visits the old lady, that one was a professional acting cat with a trainer. Not like Eleni's cat, which was just an improvising cat.

**Silvan:** But as it is a cat and not a dog, it was still improvising. We had to shoot many takes until we got the result we needed for the film.

**Scope:** This orange cat, it isn't the same one from *The Strange Little Cat*, or is it?

**Silvan:** No, it's a different one.

**Ramon:** It's a Swiss cat.

**Silvan:** Actually, the dog in *The Strange Little Cat*, he died.

**Scope:** Oh no!

**Ramon:** Tragedy.

**Silvan:** It's sad, yeah. Dead already.

**Ramon:** But yeah, the cat in this film worked pretty well with the trainer, it wasn't very difficult. It actually made for a very good shoot, because it was something we couldn't completely control. The cat would make us an offering, and then we would see what it gave us and we had to decide if we could use it.

**Scope:** I assume the dogs were easier to work with?

**Ramon:** Oh yeah, it's very different. The dogs could be in the shot among all the actors, and their trainer just worked with a clicker—it's actually a very conventional way of working with dogs in movies, to make a click and then the dog knows, "Ah yes, time to bite the sponge."

**Scope:** Then there is the spider, which you have roaming freely up the walls, when it isn't crawling on the actors.

**Silvan:** These situations when the actors were handling the spiders, exchanging it in their hands, were the ones that needed the most takes. These were very time-consuming situations.

**Ramon:** Sometimes 15 or 16 takes, because we never knew where the spider would want to go. But we actually had two spiders—though we mostly worked with only one, because it was very good—and each was kept in its own glass. We had found out from an arachnologist that if you briefly put the spider in the refrigerator, then it will behave a little bit slower. If it wasn't kept in a fridge, it would move around very quickly, very fast. So, we knew that we could manipulate the speed of the spider with the temperature. None of them was hurt, of course. In the end, we set both spiders free.

**Scope:** They look poisonous.

**Ramon:** No! But the actor who plays Lisa (Liliane Amuat) has a huge fear of spiders, so for her scene where she held the spider, the actress who plays Karen (Sabine Timoteo) worked with her until she could calm her.

**Silvan:** Sometimes I think it would just be easier to make an animation film, rather than to try to make reality adapt to our conception of it. In animation you just draw the characters and animals and they go along the path exactly as you need them to go. Of course, when filming reality there's also freedom, because the elements offer things to us that we didn't expect, and some of them are surprisingly beautiful.