

The Shadowers: Haunting the Real
Dr. Anne Marsh

Monika Tichacek's video *The Shadowers* (2004) won the Anne Landa Award for Video and New Media Arts from the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2007. It is a powerful and provocative work that stretches the boundaries between body art, ritual and sado-masochism by assaulting the senses and transgressing the social realm. In psychoanalytic terms it tears at the screen of the real and immerses the viewer into the abject world of instinctual response where language has no authority.

Viewing the video from the beginning, we are lured into an exotic environment with the slow panning of the camera, birds sound off screen. At first the viewer is presented with a relatively safe and alluring visual scan of nature but all is not well in the natural environment. We are quickly engulfed by a rapid sequence of unforgiving images that present a disjunctive narrative. Close ups and fast cuts destabilise the viewer's equilibrium. The narrative is disturbing and verges on the obscene.

Three women make up this narrative, at first one appears to dominate the other but it soon becomes apparent that there is a contract between all three women. Each seems to alternate between oppressor and victim – the role playing is carefully orchestrated and the ritual that unfolds is dramatic, abject and difficult to watch.

As viewers we are voyeurs looking into a ritual that is hardly fathomable. Here the social order is defunct. It has been consumed by something other – it is primordial, instinctual, cathartic. Tichacek trespasses into the dangerous zone of the pre-Oedipal, a stage before language where the barbarity of the unconscious holds sway. A realm in which we are all murderers.¹

If we dissect some of the scenes it will become apparent that the relations between the protagonists is complex and unresolved. Each scene is punctuated by a fade to black – a visual void. In the first scene a female is seen lying in the roots of a large tree, she seems asleep or unconscious. She lies amidst nature. Birds sing. She could be dreaming. This quiet moment is disrupted by the image of another woman advancing in the undergrowth, she appears sinister, her hair matted and decorated with bits of the forest floor. She could be a witch doctor or a shaman. A tone of terror ensues. Our prone female becomes both an object of seduction and a victim as she is

dragged violently by her hair into the woods. The abusing woman is older, perhaps a mother figure, but a bad mother – a torturer.

Things get worse. The torturer impales the tongue of her victim on an old tree stump with a hypodermic needle, which she produces from her hair. She pierces the organ of speech and renders her subject mute. The scene is excruciating to watch. Harrowing animalistic screams assault the viewer but they appear to be coming from the torturer who wails to the forces of nature as if summoning up demons. The bad mother then nails the long white fingernails of the younger woman to the stump so that she is immobile.

In the next scene, the witch doctor/bad mother figure threads wires from the tacks impaling her victims fingernails to the mouth of another woman. It is unclear exactly where the wires are attached in the mouth; perhaps they are wound around the base of the teeth rubbing against the gums. A horrible tug of war unfolds which wounds both women. The first victim – Tichacek – is now in excruciating pain, her tongue has turned black, her eyes roll in her head, she quivers. The second victim engaged in this abject struggle has injured her mouth – this is a self-inflicted wound. At this stage the witch doctor removes the needle from the tongue of the first victim and ungagged she attempts to pull the tacks from her fingernails to release the other woman.

The contract between these women is not the conventional contract between sadomasochists where there is a mutual understanding and a sign, which is agreed upon so as to release the other from pain on the other's command. In Tichacek's relations the power structure seems more perverse and it is clearly in the realm of the female as masochistic seductress, victim and powerful mother. It is the mother/shaman who first offers her saliva, which dribbles down the wires into the bruised and bloodied mouth of both her victims. This is a poignant moment in the enfolding terror and it sheds light on the torturer's psychopathology. It tells us of the disorder in the house of power. Here, the abuser, after maiming her victim, attempts to restore her to health, stressing a love/hate relationship in this scene of oppressive violence.

The wounded mouths take on a horrible kind of sumptuousness at this stage. The

camera zooms into the simulated rotting flesh, which is glistening with what appear to be pomegranate seeds. Thus the wound becomes inviting. This motif is repeated later on the simulated cadaver of one of the women who becomes a feast for the other in an act of anthropophagy.

This performance of ritual violence and psychological terror is followed by a second act that again begins at the tree in the forest. This time Tichacek's thighs have been surgically stitched together up to the pubis. In the second scene of the second act a tango between two women reveals Tichecek's legs sewn from thigh to ankle with elastic wires which allow movement.

The tango originated in brothels and was devised so that the male pimp could present his whores to his clients in a sexually provocative way. In Tichacek's dance two women dance the dance of whores after undergoing a ritualised assault on one another.

In the final scenes Tichacek returns to the sacrificial alter in the woods, this time she sits cross-legged and seemingly in perfect control. The camera zooms into what appears to be the slain body of her sado-masochistic accomplice, the flesh is gorged and rotting with the sumptuous fruit upon which she feeds. This gorging on dead flesh simulates a seductive necrophilia. In the final scene she returns to the tree where she finds the bad mother lying, seemingly dead, her flesh rotting. Tichacek kisses her hand. The camera pans back to nature, closing in on leaves and foliage which appear to be dripping blood. A haunting soundtrack fades to black.

The Shadows is part of a new wave of performance art work that is mediated through video and presented on screen for the audience. Although some critics have insisted that such remediation forecloses on the real time aspects of performance, *The Shadows* clearly demonstrates that the visceral elements of body-centred performance can be transposed to the video medium without compromising the body art genre.ⁱⁱ

Anne Marsh
Associate Professor
Theory of Art & Design
Monash University.

ⁱ . Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1991, p. 16.

ⁱⁱ For a discussion of the various critical positions see Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediated Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999.