

Making and Letting Suffer

By: Jose da Silva

For all its violence and dread, Monika Tichacek's *The Shadows* is not simply a phantasmic narrative of suffering and horror. It is a vision of cruelty, where the psychological states and behaviour of detention are tested by cruel drives and impulses. Cruelty is envisaged as a natural instinct, an unsuppressed compulsion that leads to an inevitable spectacle of degradation, fetishism and death. There is a disturbing will to submission, bodies are reduced to objects, and the world is foreseen as an enclosed universe. Conflict emerges between the physical and the psychological, and the procedures of torture become a means to explore the subject's internal dialogue with aggression and desire.

Where narrative grants an understanding of suffering, the abstract imagery of *The Shadows* does something else: it haunts us. This isn't the dark, fleeting shape of a poltergeist or the paranormal phenomena of 'shadow people'. This is a darker, fleshier incarnation; something that lurks in the psyche, and that is now ready to prey. Tichacek doesn't treat this haunting with straightforward pathos or rationality, opting instead for allegorical nuances to surface throughout the succession of carefully composed and aestheticised performances.

The dark space occupied by *The Shadows* is hermetically sealed against the outside world. The laws are absolute and rigorously enforced. The laws govern Tichacek's body with contempt for movement and a necessity to control speech. The hypodermic needle that pins Tichacek's tongue to a stump leaves her speechless, open only to supplication. The delicate nailing of each fingernail traps her further, leaving her defenceless, open to the slightest injury. These cruel spectacles are witnessed at close proximity, with a claustrophobic and unrelenting pace. Tichacek is forced to watch herself and the viewer forced to join her with voyeuristic intent. As Edward Colless stresses, the experience is 'private, psychologically attenuated, and barely communicable.'¹

Tichacek enters an order governed by the affirmation of selfhood and self-worth through ritualised acts of domination and submission. *The Shadows'* warden, played by performance artist Ana Wojak, represents a monstrous, uncontrollable desire for rule. It is a desire underscored by the master/slave dialectic, where sovereignty is maintained only by preferring death to subservience. However with its acute theatricality, *The Shadows* ensures any connection to sadomasochism is read accordingly as a strategic game, in which subjects invent 'new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their bodies... [and] know very well that it is always a game; either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tactic, that makes them aware of certain boundaries.'²

Trauma is depicted not only in the acts and bodily effects of violence, but in moments where the aggressor's acts materialise as themselves, an effect of trauma. The tears that pour out of Tichacek's sodden eyes are not her own, but simultaneously streams of saliva spit out onto her cheek. It is an arresting interchange that Tichacek describes as an 'ambiguity of where the pain resides and how it comes to you, or how it can leave you as well.'³ This indistinctness also characterises the attribution of responsibility, with *The Shadows* rejecting any simple division between victim and aggressor. Bound by a web of elastic strands, pierced and threaded between her legs, Tichacek is an active participant in the cruellest of tangos. With each orchestrated step, she is lead by/leads her partner, opening and closing her legs with according restraint.

Yet the action or process by which physical trauma is inflicted is not always depicted. The stitching of Tichacek's thighs with surgical thread is represented only as an outcome. Wojak hitches Tichacek's skirt and reveals legs crossed and sewn in a pose that must be maintained. Even the slightest movement has the capacity to harm. It is a controlled and deeply horrific scene in which the body is reduced to anti-movement and pure inwardness, drawing parallels to the immanent power structures of detention and subjugation, where subjects have no capacity to think or act outside themselves.

Such parallels have a political significance within a contemporary visual vernacular (Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay), and while *The Shadows* does not concern itself with a specific misuse of power, the symbolism of oppression is too potent to be overlooked. Perhaps then *The Shadows* is not only an examination of sado-masochistic desires and phobias, but also an allegory of power politics, where human bodies become objects and our capacity for cruelty haunts us through film and the photographic images. Susan Sontag argues the importance such imagery has when discussing the documentation of atrocities, urging, 'even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer; they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing; may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.'⁴

A destructive transference of self and other is also explored through the exchange of body fluids and the ingestion of flesh. Secreted dribble from the mouth of *The Shadows*' third character is fed into Tichacek's along strands of elastic. Both are doomed by their symbiosis, with Tichacek ultimately devouring the decomposing body of her host, smeared with a coat of bloodied mucus and bruised with ruby gems. This is a difficult scene, not for the perverse attraction of its cannibalism or the all-encompassing romance that it references, but because it transfers the victimisation of self to the cruelty of others.

In its closing sequence, *The Shadows* illuminates the wilting branches of a darkened tree, dripping and glistening with bloodied mucus. It appears that nothing could be the same again, everything, even the natural world had been contaminated by cruelty, humiliation and torture. All that is left are voids leading to a nihilistic world of unharnessed violence. It is an impression that underlines the public dimension of private experience. And more so, that the grammatical and semantic difference between making suffer and letting suffer is in the end an invariant, 'that seem, once and for all, to qualify a state of suffering, namely, cruelty, "cruelly".'⁵

1. Edward Colless 'Mirror, Mirror...' Australian Art Collector 32 April-June 2005, p73.
2. Michel Foucault cited in David Macey 'The Use of Pleasures' *The Lives of Michel Foucault* Hutchinson, London, 1993, pp368-9.
3. Monika Tichacek interviewed on The World Today ABC Radio National, Tuesday 14 June 2005.
4. Susan Sontag *Regarding The Pain Of Others* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2003, pp114-5.
5. Jacques Derrida *Without Alibi* (Trans. Peggy Kamuf) Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, p238.