

The Mutilated Body and the Unbroken Shadow

Lily de Rais

Black Sun

Between two planes: a tubus, the canal along which the unseen dimension of human life passes and is played out; an internal shadow, a black sun radiating a profane, dark illumination. The two planes interpenetrate within the same dimension, separated only by a rupture in human continuity, becoming two points either side of that infinite unfolding which is the soul of the individual.

The first plane is that of the manifest world, one which in the general economy of matter requires that all things take form. In the light of the sun, this matter appears solid – belonging to the world of objects which are, in and of themselves, not so much stable entities as conditions; not so much fixed points in the universe as arbitrary projections of the self.

An internal shadow then – without revealing itself (as shadows are perceived in the light, naked in the face of the sun) a process occurs – it contains our human condition; it is that process of absorption of those material entities from the manifest world with which we have engorged ourselves, weakly attempting at identification through symbolic incorporation.

Emerging into the blinding day of the second plane all that was previously form has become formless, become the stinking ordure of a universe processed by humanity. A summit of human experience is effected and its result is the obsessive compulsion of repetition racing toward exhaustion and death.

That tubus connecting the two planes is the alimentary canal, its two punctures rupturing planes of manifest experience are two orifices: the mouth and the anus.

Uyush the Sloth... descended into the Underworld through a hollow bamboo stem. He created the joints in the stem by defecating at regular intervals.

Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Jealous Potter*

Sovereign

There is a woman, naked, in a room. Slowly she draws something from her mouth. She is seen face-on; in profile. Something begins to emerge, to dangle from her mouth: a tube. It is white.

The film is in black and white. It is Jayne Parker's *K*. Over the space of a number of minutes we see a remarkable process unfold – the woman in question brings forth, expels, an intestine. As it emerges, and its considerable length becomes evident, she knits it into a kind of visceral blanket. Finally, when the whole is exterior to the body, she is seen in long-shot holding up the offal weave.

This is not the end of the film – only the first of two sections. What is important is not the spectacle of vomiting forth the central canal of the body but what it comes to represent. This is not metaphor, nor again some version of the abject, but a field mapping the fluctuations between corporeal and psychic identities within the individual. The artist is offering herself, her body as the site for reflection on the nature of a human relationship to the oscillating dualities of body and soul; animus and anima. This sacrifice is mediated by the nature of technological representation (film), moving beyond the carnival of actual, embodied experience, the anguished desire for a tangible 'reality'. It situates the space of reflection in the empathic not the empirical – we are asked to feel this sacrifice, not see it.

Further still, beyond the locus of bodily privation as an act of denial, there is an obscene pleasure taken in excretion, the evacuation of processed matter through the bodily orifices. The act of mutilation, the mutation of external form, is mirrored by the actions of ingesting and digesting – the transformation of solid, base matter into the amorphous; brown gold. This has become ritualised, both in the mundane world and in the sphere of social exchange. It appears in *K.* as the ritualistic and compulsive action of the woman in the second part of the film – diving into a swimming pool, surfacing, climbing the platform, diving again. After the sacrifice the celebrant must be purged – water, as both the cleanser and the contaminator, is central; it is the pool of memory in which one must bathe to remember why sacrifice is fundamental.

K. could be a container, a chalice or even a rite; the artist is offering the site of the body as a figure for a profound relation to existence, one which neither denies duality nor seeks conformity. As viewers we are inscribed within another order, the inexorable logic of the symbolic.

The Ecstasies of St. Theresa

Surface too, is internal. Pierced by the shadow of divine illumination, St. Theresa's ecstasy floods out of her. Her wound is the love of God, a punctum through which not blood but transcendental experience leaks out. Bernini portrayed this state not through the traditional trope of nudity as Truth, but through the infinite folds of the soul figured in the saint's robe. The cloth (of marble) becomes liquid, an erotic-religious excretion of somatic desire. A sacrifice of discontinuity, or individuation, for continuity: non-knowledge, pure, unmediated existence.

Foreign Body

Along a horizontal-vertical axis, at the zero degree which is the beginning and the end of the horizon, the ineluctable membrane between the terrestrial and the chthonian, lies a projection: an inert convex body becomes the membrane upon which an exploration of the body's internal functions is exposed. The body succumbs to an external representation of its inner self – all the while greedily consuming the means by which this representation is mechanically produced. A loop, a closed circle or economy of ceaseless desire forms – the body consumes and finds itself consumed by the eye of the camera broadcasting its very act of being consumed and consuming. It is something like a contemporary vision of the serpent Ananda (or Ouroboros, Abraxas) eating its own tail, disappearing within itself and being re-born. A cipher reaching from earth-bound corporality to the cosmological.

The body has long been inscribed within the field of representation, but so rarely is it played out internally, no longer abject, or at least not in the sense invoked by Bataille, that it has become the site of a paradigm shift. Here, in Hatoum's work, it is no longer a vessel, no longer the means of transportation, but the journey itself. That which in the historical order of art remained under the veil of mimesis is now exposed and entered into the language of representation. And yet it is untouched. It has succumbed to a radical exhibition of its intimate privacy only it has ultimately revealed nothing; an emptiness, a voracious void lurking a hair's-breadth beneath the surface of spectacle, yawning up before us, denying the moment of aesthetic banality and stubbornly remaining nothing more than a representation of what it always already has been. Caught in the false light of the camera, the internal shadow has vanished beyond our grasp. Translated into the order of the sublime it has resisted incorporation – it remains radically incomplete, unassimilable, de-aestheticised.

Janus and the Headless Man

As figures of a relationship of the human, and in particular of the human body to art, *K.* and *Corps Etranger* exemplify the possibility of a radical departure from the binary dichotomy of difference between subject and object. In this way works of art, indeed all 'objects', can be experienced as conditions – states of being – that are in constant flux and individually negotiated in relation to each person, whose sense of self then is defined in the rush between categories, the oscillation between that which is interior and exterior – the arbitrary projections

of the self in relation to the object. This movement is a point along the line of human continuity where an infinite unfolding occurs, exposing the inner core of absolute solitude, a fundamental individuation, which is the locus of identity; a knowledge and a communication out of time, rationality and empirical existence.

Shadow of the Blind

More than a sacrifice the shadow is the intrinsic wound carried by each person through all time. It is both a membrane between dimensions and an inconstant companion which must be relied on through faith alone, for to lose it is to cease to be numbered among the living, to become Undead. Thus the shadow is a haphazard reminder of what it is to be human – those aspects of existence which are by their natures indefinable and ephemeral. The shadow cannot be broken, harmed or destroyed; of our fleeting and transitory existence it alone remains, populating the image sphere of photographs, film and recollections.

The shadow is inviolable, sovereign. It shuns communication; is revealed by the sun; retreats in darkness, yet is able to persist even after death – white shadows frozen into the scorched earth of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – ineffaceable residues of the moment between life and death. At the extreme of human anguish what could resist the sublime more completely than a black sun tracing a shadow of absence?

Night is also a sun
Georges Bataille

Jayne Parker, *K.*, 16mm b/w film, 12 mins, 1989

Mona Hatoum, *Corps Etranger*, video installation, 1994

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