



Exhausting Tomorrow: Michael Robinson's "The Dark, Krystle" (2013)
By James Hansen
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INEZ: But, you crazy creature, what do you think you're doing? You know quite well I'm dead.

ESTELLE: Dead?

INEZ: Dead! Dead! Dead! Knives, poison, ropes--useless. It has happened already, do you understand? Once and for all. So here we are, forever.

ESTELLE: Forever. My God, how funny! Forever.

GARCIN: For ever, and ever, and ever.

(A long silence.)

GARCIN: Well, well, let's get on with it...

Over the image of a fire burning blue, we hear the faint, exhausted whisper of a middle-aged woman. "There was a fire in the cabin. I tried to leave, but the door was locked. I died in that fire..." The woman sits in a hospital bed. Her head slightly tilted, she gazes into the distance with a look of despair. "I don't know who I am." These sounds and images serve as the prelude of Michael Robinson's new video *The Dark, Krystle*. They establish the work's central premise, that of being trapped in a place with no hope of escape. And yet, the narrator doesn't die, despite stating her condition as being dead, as no longer knowing herself. She is alive, born new even, but lacks an awareness of herself, of her life, of her history.

Robinson's body of work could largely be said to confront this condition in the form of appropriated media. His ability to craft startling contemporary works from cast off remnants of relatively recent popular culture has cemented his status as one of the most important voices of 21st century experimental cinema. However, it isn't quite right to say he revives dead imagery or unearths lost objects, as is often said of found footage filmmaking. Instead, Robinson wants to observe media as they cut horizontally across time. His films and videos are collaged in such a way that they account for the media's previous incarnations and their current state of existence.

This transversal operation pushes the images beyond their own parameters, all the while remaining true to their initial manifestation. As such, they are simultaneously open and closed, aware and unaware. His work locates and refashions popular material precisely at the point where it is unclear what or who that material is anymore. His mode of

response echoes the words of Maurice Blanchot: "A sound response puts down roots in the question...It can close in around the question, but it does so in order to preserve the question by keeping it open." (While this certainly echoes the work of Martin Arnold, which Akira Lippit describes as an ex-cinematic memory machine, Robinson allows images themselves to act as a structuring principle without necessarily evoking mechanical reproduction and the technological apparatus. This isn't to say Robinson ignores these historical concerns. Rather, his work inscribes the differences between the appropriating processes of physical film and digital media.)

This position allows the Krystle character to stand as something of a clarifying figure across Robinson's work. *The Dark, Krystle* examines her fate as a character presumably unaware of her own imprisonment to the confines of gender and gesture. Utilizing material from the long running soap opera *Dynasty*, Robinson filters the program's longstanding catfights between Krystle and Alexis through their infinitely repeated gestures. After the prelude (cue the dramatic music!), there is a series of shots in which Krystle's back faces the camera before she aggressively turns to presumably face someone off screen. Next, she begins with her head raised before ultimately slouching her head downward. She stares into the distance, the camera zooms in on her bewildered face, she cries and violently throws her head to the right. Robinson smoothly transitions from one gesture to the next establishing a nebulous flow between abstract repetition and narrative continuity. However, despite the swelling music and rising action, the gestures bottom out and become empty. Each element feels overdone and artificial. The monotonous mood of Krystle's perpetual feuds with Alexis transfers to the enervated audience.

Around the midway point, Robinson attempts to leave Krystle, but, once again, finds the door locked by Alexis. Suddenly, the villainous Alexis takes over the video. She drinks, drinks more, and drinks even more. Krystle's multitudes of gestures become calcified in Alexis's singular menacing activity: drinking, drinking, and drinking. While the character's voiceover indicates a rising of the stakes, the action remains the same. The images no longer correspond with their narrative arch – although Robinson's impressive use of sound creates a fully formed environment of such a melodrama – but instead only refer to the eternal condition of the narrative itself. Thus, if melodrama operates through a series of rising actions while ultimately reach a boiling point in which events spill over into excess, *The Dark, Krystle* functions as an excessively excessive melodrama, which in turn deflates its own rising action. Robinson reveals the images as trapped by repetitive redundancy and incapable of sustaining their content.

Meanwhile, as the images and gestures deflate into meaninglessness, boredom and fatigue transfers directly to the audience. In this way, *The Dark, Krystle*'s achievement extends beyond the critique of network television's narrative system and the playful questioning of melodramatic operations. *Dynasty*, along with *Dallas*, was perhaps the first shows to transfer the daytime soap opera into a primetime television series. *Dynasty*'s arrival signaled the end of the prior soap opera format – fixed in the day, marketed largely towards women – and a turn toward global audiences and markets.

If Robinson's *Circle in the Sand* recognizes his debt to female filmmakers, as he has indicated in interviews, *The Dark, Krystle* engages domestic settings in a differential manner, similar in some ways to his already canonical *Light Is Waiting*. Here, Robinson's internal juxtaposition of footage indicates not only the systematic breakdown of the daytime soap opera (as *Light Is Waiting* did with the TGIF moment), but also perceives

the exhaustion of the housewife as a representational figure and as a marketing demographic. Robinson takes two women – Krystle, the dutiful housewife, and Alexis, the professional ex-wife – and shows their actions as eternally repeatable and thus hollow, tiresome, and ultimately lacking literal and figurative purchase. They are trapped. Their house will burn. They will die. They won't know who they are. And they'll do it all again tomorrow. An already exhausted tomorrow.