

MRK in conversation with Fischer - Hausdorf

A film that questions the univocal rhetorics of modern science inasmuch as the classical artistic representations of the female body. During an autopsy, confused organs—liver, heart, stomach, intestines, brain—discuss their fate while trapped within the body of a woman who has committed suicide.

This is Offal traverses in tragicomic form the subject of female suicide: a pathologist prepares the body of a woman for an autopsy. The ghostly corpse rises, while her organs take on a life of their own and speak their confusion, discontent, and misunderstanding of her suicide in a riotous wordplay-filled dialogue. The liver, heart and brain signify (together with a detached hand and foot) the 'offal' of the film's title and the 'awful' irrevocability of the act.

Eva Fischer-Hausdorf: In your films you narrate the realities of women's lives during different historical periods of political, social, economic and cultural upheaval such as the French Revolution and the First World War. In *This is Offal* you deal with female suicide. What brought your interest to this subject and what was the historic material you worked with for this film?

Mary Reid Kelley: I was reading about the mythological Cretan princess Ariadne, who helps the Athenian hero Theseus solve the riddle of the Labyrinth by lending him her spindle of thread. They elope together after Theseus kills the Minotaur, but then he abandons her on the island of Naxos. At this point several versions of the story proliferate: commonly, Theseus' abandonment is ordered by Dionysus, who wants Ariadne for himself.

This makes Theseus seem less of a jerk, which is convenient for the Athenians since he is their city's founding hero. But another version seemed to me more in keeping with the story's trajectory, and dispenses with the "deus ex machina" appearance of Dionysus: Theseus abandons Ariadne for reasons of expediency and indifference, and once she discovers it, she hangs herself with the thread from her spindle.

In the version I wrote for *The Thong of Dionysus*, Ariadne makes an unsuccessful attempt at suicide, and is then encouraged by a band of drunken Maenads to search for "a raisin to live". When that film was finished, suicide in myth and in life was still very much at the front of my brain. I picked up an excellent book on the subject, *The Savage God* (1971) by Al Alvarez, a cultural and historical study of suicide, which reveals radically disparate attitudes towards it. Attitudes towards suicide have evolved rapidly since then and the "right to die" is now essentially a civil rights issue. But the class of suicides I was most interested in were those prompted by anguish and despair. Alvarez's book has a horribly sad prologue: he was good friends with Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath and he writes very personally of her suicide, regretting not being a better friend to her.

EFH: Your works are strongly characterized by your complex scripts, written in meter and full of wordplays. Can you explain the importance of language and wordplay for your work and especially for your new film?

MRK: I always think of the scripts as being, ideally, a puzzle for viewers, something they have to solve. In *Offal*, this invitation is also taken up by its characters: the organs of the corpse try to "solve" the mystery of the

suicide of the woman to which they belong to. The organs spend a lot of time blaming each other for the act, complaining of various betrayals: the foot is accused of slipping on the bridge, the brain is blamed for the idea to do it. Betrayal is a central theme for me, betrayal in one form or another occurs in almost all the films. I have also long thought of wordplay and particularly puns as betrayals within language.

EFH: The apparition of the ghostly risen body and the organs, which have come alive, are a central effect in *This is Offal*. Technically, how did you create this effect?

Patrick Kelley: We shoot everything against a green screen, which allowed us to treat the whole work as a collage. Each character was shot separately, with Mary performing each of them. I then synchronized and layered the pieces together in the space of the screen. I created the backgrounds separately using digital tools with imagery and textures that Mary painted by hand. Transparency is an old, familiar cinematic device used for ghostly beings—we wanted to employ this simple technique so it became clear who the characters are, that they exist on a separate plane from the mortician and the corpse. Mary used an inverted makeup technique to construct each organ on her face, and then we had to use a simple brace to hold her head in one place as she performed. This fixed image allowed for freedom of expressive movement when it came to my layering and animating the characters in the editing process. I then placed each face on a sort of digital, three-dimensional plane that could be manipulated throughout the sequence. In addition to giving each character a constant floaty, random movement, I

basically responded to their inflections and lines in animating the faces, hoping to highlight and accentuate their statements and attitudes.

EFH: The dialogue between the corpse and her organs recalls tragicomic elements of the theatre of the absurd, like the setting of illogical scenarios, absurd plots and bizarre dialogues in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. You also quoted Albert Camus' notions of the absurd and suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as important inspirations for your new film. How are these ideas and elements reflected in *This is Offal*?

MRK: Camus says that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide". I am inclined to agree. Suicide here stands as the consequence of despair, which, especially if you are a young man (and I think this book is particularly directed to young men trying to survive the Second World War) puts you at high risk of suicide. I really admire this book, which also influenced *The Syphilis of Sisyphus* (2011). I believe Camus intended it to be a practical, useful book, even if the models he provides would not be useful to someone like me. I often find myself caught between admiring a male writer's poem or book of philosophy, and amusing myself with the inapplicability of that work to myself as a woman, or perhaps to the historical female peers of the writer. It is a gap that is a great invitation to imagination, and also to parody. The best parody is part admiration, part ridicule, and I find it a good technique for closing the gap between myself (or my female characters) and these writers. The *Offal* character burlesques and inverts Camus' reasoning. Camus' premise, against which he builds his magnificent argument for resistance and the embrace of the absurd, is that suicide is an "escape".

The woman in *Offal* escapes nothing through her suicide, her illusions and vanities transcend death. She might be a failed Camus character, but she is a very good Dante character. Nobody in the *Inferno* finds death a liberation either.

EFH: All your films have been developed in the context of your intimate working collaboration. Can you speak about your reasons and the importance of this working process for you?

PK: The work looks the way it does because it is the product of just two artists. We share an interest in early cinema, when you had a tiny crew and single camera, and when the set and visual effects came out of theatrical practices. This element of our work has evolved over time, to where the theatricality has become a more prominent element. But I also think there are other, practical benefits to working this way—we can work when and how we want, just as an artist working in more traditional media can function independently.

MRK: Possibly because we were both trained as studio-based artists, Pat as a photographer, me as a painter, we prefer adapting our filmmaking process as much as possible to this studio model. One benefit is that if we have an idea late in production, we can walk over to the studio, shoot immediately and include it.

PK: The collaboration has also evolved since we made the first video over 8 years ago. At first, I was teaching college full time and my role was more technical, coming in towards the end of the process to shoot and edit. But over time the collaboration became more organic and intertwined. Mary remains the author of the scripts, but

we bounce visual ideas off of each other earlier in the process. This allows for better anticipation and development of the actual shooting and post-production, and hopefully a better integration of the visual with the text.