

by Bradford Nordeen



Portrait by Nicholas Muelner

Michael

Michael Robinson's films confound pop mythologies, blending the words of Stevie Nicks with those of V.C. Andrews, and calling on tunes by Counting Crows, Thompson Twins or Guns N' Roses, to weave *media res* memories into elaborate psychodramas of individualism and survival. But as any good queer experimentalist should, Robinson repurposes these pop rumours as fully-realised, emotional worlds, where the gods of Egypt are re-cast as Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Jackson, and *Dynasty* reclaims the Greek dynamism of its leading ladies from their soapy manors.

Bradford Nordeen Unlike many filmmakers working in your field, most of your work is showcased both in theatres and right there on your website...

Michael Robinson I put everything I had up in 2009 or 2010. I reached the point where I realised I was watching a lot of other artists' work online and taking it with a grain of salt.

B_N Aesthetically?

M_R Yeah, as a mode of viewing. It's not the same thing as a theatre but it doesn't mean it's not also useful. It's nice to have things exist outside of the highbrowness of most art and film circles; that does sort of limit the audience. It's nice to have people randomly stumble upon things.

B_N And it can breathe there too, in a way.

M_R Yeah. I've actually met a few people who didn't realise that I showed stuff outside of the internet, they thought I was an internet artist—which I'm not. But that's fine, too!

B_N Well I could see your use of pop imagery or sound, like Full House and Cyndi Lauper giving people the wrong idea. When did you start incorporating monologues and found sound? Was it the bit from *Masters of the Universe: The Movie* that pops up in *Victory over the Sun*?

M_R Probably the text in *The General Returns from One Place to Another* (2006). *Victory Over the Sun* (2007) would be the first time I used a vocal monologue as a structuring device.

B_N Was that liberating?

M_R It was satisfying; I don't know if it was liberating, but it was actually really hard to figure out. In the pieces I have made that use components from various places, or even *The Dark, Krystle* (2013), I feel like what I'm doing is bringing together a whole new arrangement of things: it's usually a process of finding moments that work, leaving blank space, and then figuring out how best to move between them. I work in Final Cut and it's usually just a mess of two seconds here, ten minutes here, and then just whittling. I think it seemed really nice to make something relatively simplistic and direct like *The Dark, Krystle*. Its source material

comes from one place and it sort of has the equation to make itself.

^{B_N} What was the impetus for that?

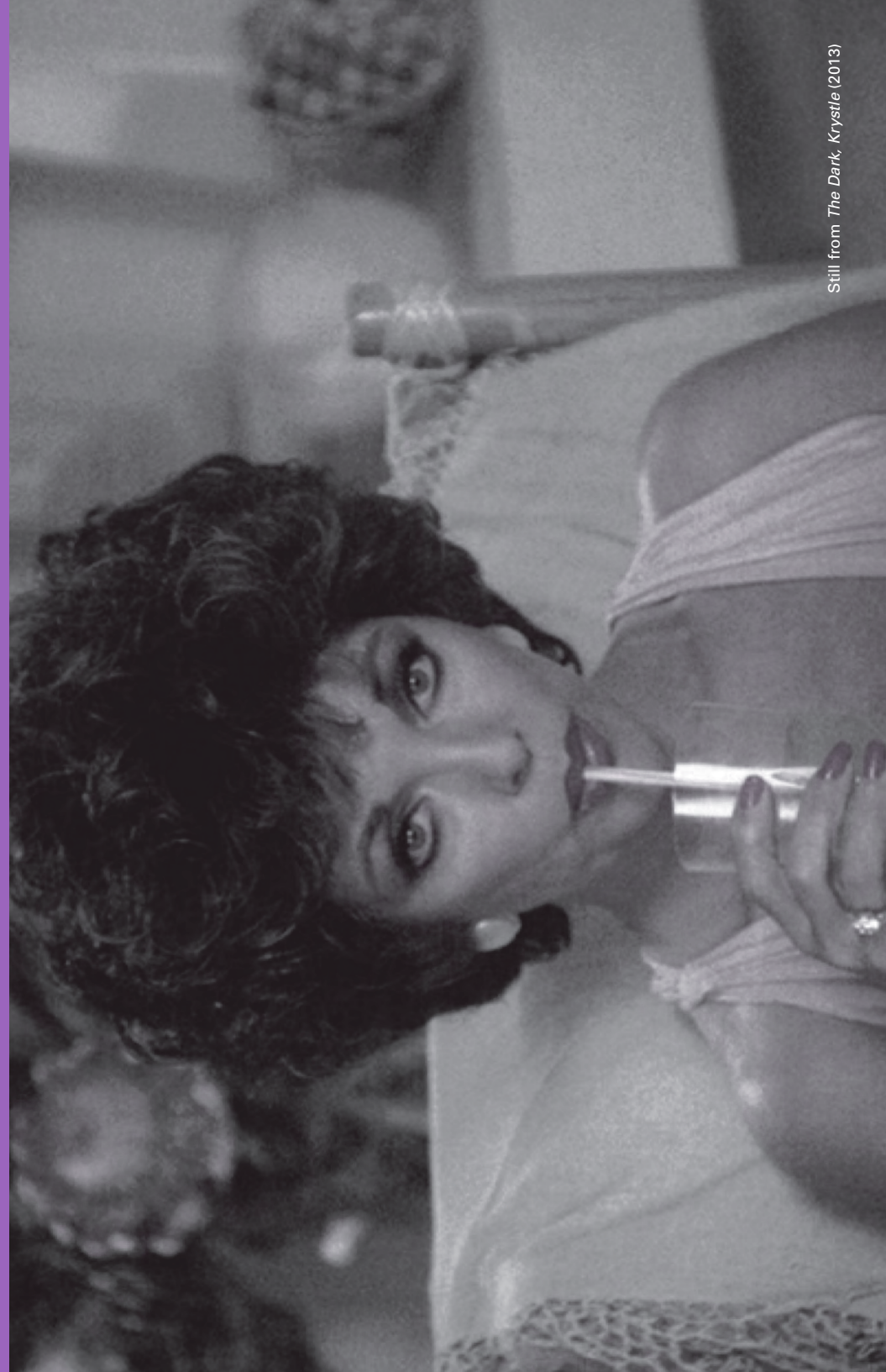
^{M_R} *The Dark, Krystle* started with me looking up what was available from YouTube of *Dynasty* and finding that if you search for *Dynasty*, the first things that come up are the cat fights, predominately the Season 2 one in Alexis' studio and the lily pond one from Season 3. I was like, 'Oh my god, I need to see these on DVD, in the nicest resolution possible, and maybe do something!' So I got Season 2 on eBay, and watching [the first cat fight], I realised there was nothing I could do with that scene; it's amazing just the way it is. So I sat on it for a little bit and started watching the actual show, and pretty instantly the tics that *The Dark, Krystle* focuses on emerged, in terms of Krystle constantly being upset and crying and Alexis always having a glass of something in her hand. That just became the obsession—I followed my gut instinct of wanting the satisfaction of seeing those things condensed.

^{B_N} Well, Alexis is constantly drinking, but Krystle cries, looks on in despair, and even takes a few tumbles in the video. She seems to have more of an arc in your movie, as opposed to Alexis.

^{M_R} Alexis has a bit of an arc but it's a little more projected onto her. Krystle has a wider range of facial expressions she gets to use, sure, but I feel like her dialogue is never anything more than perfunctory: 'I want this / I'm sad / Let's do this / I'm a good mother / I want a baby,' the embodiment of well-intentioned wishful thinking with a stubbornly moralistic optimism. All she wants is her family to be together, have a baby, and that's kind of it.

^{B_N} She's the embodiment of empathy, right? She's the entrée to this family.

^{M_R} The dichotomy between them is pretty central, but I wanted to show that Alexis isn't just being shady to Krystle but empathising with her, and they're both deflecting the problems of their roles. I didn't want it to be one versus the other, but them versus the world. I was also struck by just what the show was. I'd had a vague idea, but I'd never actually watched it. I knew what Linda Evans and Joan Collins looked like, and the general set-up of them being rich and catty. Beyond that, I didn't know how beautifully made it was.



Still from *The Dark, Krystle* (2013)



Still from *The Dark, Krystle* (2013)

It's really reminiscent of Douglas Sirk melodramas, but most of the references to it now come from things like *RuPaul's Drag Race* or *Paris Is Burning*. *Dynasty* largely continues to exist as footnotes in gay culture. It's not on TV anymore. It's not really that re-watchable for a general audience. The soap opera format is pretty disposable.

^{B_N} Kind of like the supercut—it's not the most deep of forms, but it is however an interesting form, and really interesting to take seriously. Were you worried about making something that could just be perceived as just a supercut?

^{M_R} No. *The Dark, Krystle* is a supercut by definition—to reduce something that happens over and over again and string it together—I was happy to just embrace that. I'll be happy to put *The Dark, Krystle* on the internet eventually, too, and see how it lives there. The forms of video that have been born from online viewing, the YouTube and Vimeo forms, I don't think there's any reason to be afraid or dismiss them over stuff that's only meant for cinemas. There's something to be learned from these forms; when they're executed well, they should be shown in a big theatre. I think it's a matter of context and where people aim things. Looking back on media history, there's only been a decade or two where this media—having easy access to DVDs and now streaming—has been accessible for people to make. Neither the more classical, avant-garde found footage film nor the internet supercut are stable forms. I think it's good to embrace what feels productive for the moment and keep going.

I think it plays well. I often worry that my work feels a little bit like the comedy sideshow in festivals. I know that's not actually the case, but I think that the experimental film community can be a rather serious place. I need a healthy dose of humour for me to think through my work. But, by and large, *Krystle* has been well-received and got pretty big laughs from those crowds. It's probably the most overtly funny film I've made.

^{B_N} Right. It's the one that embraces camp the most. And a lot of people approach avant-garde film with very set and rigid frames of mind, so it's fun to encounter something like your film *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us* (2010) for the first time. It's a revelation because it's working within experimental film structures but also allows pop tactics, sensibilities and humour to invade them. *These Hammers* is such an unlikely balance—all this Egyptian pageantry, which is really literal and comedic, even, but the depth of emotional resonance always strikes me; that you are able to



Still from *These Hammers Don't Hurt Us* (2010)

tease meaning out of Michael Jackson's *This Is It* bonus features.

^{M_R} I initially started playing around with 'Remember The Time'. I was particularly drawn to the early '90s iteration of Michael Jackson and that video was the centrepiece in some ways.

^{B_N} Because it was the most expensive?

^{M_R} It was the most expensive music video ever made at the time, and it's still up there in terms of budgets, but that dance sequence is my favorite Michael Jackson dance sequence, or group choreography scene, if you like. It's just beautiful and awesome.

Anyway, it didn't feel like a serious project and when he died I thought, 'okay I can't do this Michael Jackson film anymore; it's gonna be too canned.' But having time to digest the public reaction to his death and how weird both his life was, and his celebrity—thinking through all of this via the internet—I felt inspired to translate that strangeness into a film that was both sympathetic to him and asking some bigger questions about celebrity and obsession, life and death. Looking at the people in his life that were ostensibly friends and confidantes, I kept landing on images of Elizabeth Taylor. Having his Egyptian styling in my head, then

Cleopatra, these mass cultural / Hollywood depictions of ancient Egypt became a fabric to weave together over the more emotional and open-ended story about Liz and Michael. And I wanted it to feel like it was giving equal weight to them as real people, to their celebrity, and to the characters they commanded in some way. You don't learn anything about Michael Jackson or Elizabeth Taylor, or their characters even really; it's more just using those as vessels.

^{B_N} 'Vessel' is the perfect word for it, because it does really open out beyond Michael to this stellar realm in an emotionally resonant way. Were you basing your approach to composition on anything that existed before or were you just sort of feeling your way through the material?

^{M_R} I wanted to graft the mythology of the passage to the Underworld onto the film, and also bring in other ideas from Egyptian mythology, but processed through their depictions in mass culture. So I just started looking for as much as I could get my hands on in terms of CGI pyramids, details of mummies and sarcophagi and pharaohs... So I just upped my Netflix queue to eight discs and started getting every B Mummy movie I could find, every Egyptian documentary—a lot of which are terrible to the point of having nothing to offer.

But I carved out the strains that resonated best and let the more narrative scenes with Michael and Liz anchor this more open-ended, psychedelic stuff. She became more central as it went on; maybe just having so much more of her to work with...

^{B_N} Well *Cleopatra* is a much longer film!

^{M_R} I finished it a few months before she died, but in some ways I wanted it to feel like their characters entered the afterlife together; her ushering him as the more troubled soul, as she did apparently in real life; she was a confidante and like a rock for him—allegedly.

^{B_N} Right. Those videos of the Christmas.

^{M_R} The Christmas, yeah. With the Super Soakers.

View Michael's films and videos online at poisonberries.net