



Patrick Staff, *The Prince of Homburg*, 2019, HD video, color, sound, 23 minutes.

Patrick Staff

DUNDEE CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Patrick Staff's reimagining of Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 play, *The Prince of Homburg*, was a compelling balance of nocturnal confusion and daylight insight. A carceral video installation incorporating sculpture and photography, it adopted the dualities of the original text—freedom/imprisonment, sleeping/waking, dream/reality—to map the limits of individual agency and autonomy in the current political moment.

The two rooms of the exhibition—one light, one dark—laid out this dialectical commitment. *The Appetite* (all works 2019) consisted of a barbed security railing lining both rooms, with objects based on motifs from Kleist's play (among them a key chain, a shirt stuffed with plastic flowers, and a set of padlocks) caught in it. Five large photograms likewise referenced or punned on Kleist's props. Collectively, these objects manifested a ghostly absence, variously bringing to mind the prison, the memorial, and the border checkpoint.

These sites and the discourse informing their societal function are a large part of the focus of

Staff's video *The Prince of Homburg*. It looped in the red-walled and dimly lit second room, which resembled a deserted café or bar. The film is an oneiric aggregate that flits between an engrossing series of monologues interspersed with, among other things, sections of handpainted animation, superimposed images (some from a film adaptation of the play), audio of "The Star-Spangled Banner," commentary from queer writer Johanna Hedva playing a version of the prince, and analysis lifted from theater director Neil Bartlett's introduction to his version of the tragedy, read by Conal McStravick.

In each monologue section an individual talks casually to the camera, laying out a set of contemporary absences, fault lines, and impasses, focusing particularly on issues affecting queer and minority communities in America: The writer Sarah Schulman discusses the funeral as a site of potential political action, referencing the aids crisis; the actor Debra Soshoux considers law, consensus, and gender; the musical artist Macy Rodman explains the difficulties caused by fatigue as a side effect of hormonal treatment when transitioning; and the writer Che Gossett frames shame and guilt as "carceral emotions," elaborating on ideas close to Judith Butler's, concerning the excluded and the ungrievable in society.

Consequently, the cis male lead of Kleist's play has disappeared as the subject, and with him any indulgence in his particular form of melancholy. While Kleist focused mainly on the suffering of the prince and other male characters resulting from their machismo, inflexibility, and faith in a state order they can neither escape nor imagine differently, Staff instead looks at the wider contemporary structural mechanisms and behaviors that cause suffering, specifically, restrictions on freedom and agency caused by political inertia, emotional coercion, and physical imprisonment.

To the prince (condemned to death for his individual zeal), as to Hamlet, time is out of joint, as if reality has somehow taken the wrong path and no longer makes sense. Staff's film embodies this temporal disjuncture and ruination. The montage produces a cyclical movement, a doubling back, and a set of redefinitions, mirroring Gossett's discussion of feedback loops. This sense of stasis is what gives the piece its dark implications. However, the video's interlinked and frustrated articulations are resonant in their anti-androcentrism, clear in their elucidation of societal functions, and absorbing in their proposals for structural change.

— Calum Sutherland