

STAN DOUGLAS: KLATSASSIN

DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK
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Film still from *Klatsassin*, 2006,
recombinant high definition
video projection.
Courtesy David Zwirner, New York

An interesting moment of reappraisal may come after spending some time with Stan Douglas's film *Klatsassin* (2006) and then taking a second look at the series of 11 black-and-white portraits that accompany it in this exhibition. The portraits alone introduce a variety of gruff-looking men who appear as characters in the film: the Constable, the Prisoner, the Prospector, the Thief and so on. The images themselves offer little sign of who will be who in the *Rashomon*-structured retelling of an incident in which the Constable is shot, apart from the one aboriginal fellow in the line-up, who we can assume – this story taking place in the North Woods of nineteenth-century British Columbia – is the Prisoner. It is not the characters' identities that reveal themselves (or don't) in the photographs, but hints at the characters' personalities and personas, ideas about their voices, their demeanours, their histories. An entire series of imaginings unfolds in front of the pictures of these men as their faces animate the stock supply of back stories in one's mind.

But when one finally sets off into the non-linear and recombinant narrative web that is *Klatsassin*, those imaginings must be rewritten. The art of film, through script and acting, through plot and structure, demands that the audience submit to projected identifications, alternative sympathies, cinematic desires. At least that is what conventional filmic narratives demand. *Klatsassin*, of course, is not conventional. To see the full configuration and reconfiguration of its many scenes, each of which recounts, in one way or another, through flashbacks, anecdotes and testimonies, the disputed details surrounding the Constable's tragic demise, would require 69 hours of viewing. What this means of course is that one never sees, or rather gets, the whole story. Instead, given the formal redundancy of the film's narrative device, one is freed to consider just who – no, make that *how* – the characters are, how their actions and behaviours bear upon their 'characters', which is to say our, the audience's, image of them. And the accompanying portraits, like the film, will never look quite the same.

Energising the audience's memory in this manner, which is akin to setting it up for a fall, reflects Douglas's long-running interest in the malleability, and fallibility, of both personal and historical narratives. But *Klatsassin* is perhaps Douglas's first full articulation of that genuinely philosophical dilemma that turns on the fraught relationship between a reality 'out there' (in this case, an event; the undeniable instance of death) and our understandably mind-dependent epistemic access to it. Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) opened this door. But with that bit of cinema there remains the fact of the film and the possibility of an audience's shared and circumscribed experience of it. *Klatsassin* walks fully through it by holding out no such possibility.

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