

Matt Lipps: Tremulous Wounds**William J. Simmons**

The co-existence of binaries is by now a cliché, but it is true nevertheless that the outline is a space of simultaneous surety and unsurety, of love and its absence. We see a form in the doorway or across the room at a bar, lit from behind or not at all, and we know undeniably that they are or will be our beloved. We know undeniably because we have seen so many dusted, sprinkled outlines or narratives or genres of so many beloveds. At the same time, that image, that outline of the handsome body is necessarily unfinished and terrifying; it is a desire or idea only partially materialized or uncovered and whose intentions we cannot divine. It is impossible to know when the ultimate outline—the skin—becomes a rotting shell and when it becomes a connective force, so we fear both the outline and the loss of the outline.

In his essay “Garbo’s Face,” Roland Barthes might prefer the shell when it comes to the (female, white) Hollywood star, who is both the particular beloved of the relentlessly individual viewer/author and the beloved of many—an object of desire to be passed around like a party bottom. Barthes says of the face of Garbo: “It is not a painted face but a face in plaster, protected by the surface of its shadows and not by its lineaments; in all this fragile and compact snow, only the eyes, black as some strange pulp but not at all expressive, are two rather tremulous wounds.”¹

Siegfried Kracauer likewise appeals to snow with regard to the image forever altered by mass media: “In a photograph, a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow.”² These respective snows are necessary obfuscations that shelter the face and history and pain and one’s outlines, one’s boundaries (and of course that sheltering has everything to do with the hysterical and racialized need to safeguard all that is metaphorically and/or actually white). Photographic or filmic snow swaddles the beautiful face, a memento, so that history cannot sweep it away into a state of discourse and generalities. Yet that same icy emulsion renders all bodies and all desires indistinguishable from each other. We are left with an archetype—the lover you come back to again and again in the flesh or in your mind but whose face you cannot recall.

Matt Lipps’ encasing of racialized and gendered images from “The Family of Man” within the equally racialized and gendered outlines of fashion photography neither shovels nor further solidifies the snow that transubstantiates a body into a stereotype or a faceless lust or a blockbuster exhibition or an unwilling representative of a neo-colonial worldwide community. Criticality is itself a shroud of sorts that reduces the photograph to another binary condition of being either deconstructive or complicit. We cannot say of Lipps’ work that, as is often remarked of Martha Rosler’s political photomontages, the spectral images of the “real” world haunt the pristine, glossy pages of *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Vogue* and the never-out-of-print exhibition catalogue for “The Family of Man,” as if we need the pasticheur to tell us that war reportage and Versace and Avedon and porn and racist curatorial strategies exist on

the same plane. We know this because we live in that coextensive state, and, as with Rosler and Barbara Kruger, for that matter, the power of Lipps' work lies not in the easy condemnation of a juxtaposition, but rather in the uncomfortable and erotic space of repulsion and guilt admixed with love. Recalling Barthes, who desires (to be) and is frightened by Garbo's face, Lipps works within the tremulous wound: he doubtfully touches it like St. Thomas the Apostle, he longs to suture it so as to restore a traumatized beauty, and he leaves it open, weeping, receptive to other frigid fluids and emulsions. These wounds are outlines that we both long for and fear. They are fissures bathed in the intimate and impersonal light of a melodrama or an impending storm.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 73.

² Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 51.