

MYTHO
LOGIES

ROLAND BARTHES



GARBO'S FACE

Greta Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when the apprehension of the human countenance plunged crowds into the greatest perturbation, where people literally lost themselves in the human image as if in a philter, when the face constituted a sort of absolute state of the flesh which one could neither attain nor abandon. Some years earlier, Valentino's face caused suicides; Garbo's still participates in that same realm of *amour courtois* when the flesh develops certain mystical sentiments of perdition.

It is without a doubt an admirable face-as-object; in *Queen Christina*, a film shown again here in recent years, the star's makeup has the snowy density of a mask; 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. Even in its extreme beauty, this face not drawn but instead sculptured in something smooth and friable, which is to say both perfect and ephemeral, matches somehow Chaplin's flour-white complexion, those vegetally dark eyes, his totemic visage.

Now, the temptation of the total mask (the mask of antiquity, for example) may imply less the theme of secrecy (as is the case with the Italian half mask) than that of an archetype

See illustration 7.

of the human face. Garbo produced a sort of Platonic idea of the human creature, which accounts for her own face being virtually sexless without being at all "dubious." It's true that the film (Queen Christina is alternately a woman and a young cavalier) lends itself to this indeterminacy; but Garbo does not give any kind of travestied performance; she is always herself, frankly revealing under her crown or her wide-brimmed felt hats the same countenance of snow and solitude. Her nickname, Divine, probably intended to suggest less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where things are formed and finished with the greatest clarity. She herself knew this: How many actresses have consented to let the crowd watch the disturbing maturation of their beauty? Not Garbo: the Essence must not degrade, her visage could never have any other reality than that of its intellectual perfection, even more than its plastic one. The Essence has gradually dimmed, progressively veiled by dark glasses, hooded capes, and various exiles; but it has never altered.

Still, in that deified countenance, something sharper than a mask appears: a sort of deliberate and therefore human relation between the curve of the nostrils and the superciliary arcade, a rare, individual function between two zones of the face; the mask is merely an addition of lines, the face is above all a thematic recall of the former to the latter. Garbo's face represents that fragile moment when cinema is about to extract an existential beauty from an essential beauty, when the archetype will be inflected toward the fascination of perishable figures, when the clarity of carnal essences will give way to a lyric expression of Woman.

As a moment of transition, Garbo's face reconciles two iconographic ages, assures the passage from terror to charm. We know that in our own moment we are at the other pole of this evolution: Audrey Hepburn's face, for instance, is individualized

not only by its specific thematics (woman-as-child, woman-as-cat), but also by her person, by a virtually unique specification of the face, which has nothing essential left in it but is constituted by an infinite complexity of morphological functions. As a language, Garbo's singularity was of a conceptual order, Audrey Hepburn's of a substantial order. Garbo's face is an Idea, Hepburn's an Event.