ON VERTICALITY IN *FALLING LESSONS* (1992)

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Falling Lessons is film portraiture in flight mode. Within an avant-garde subgenre that takes in Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964-1966), Gregory Markopoulos's *Galaxie* (1966) and Wendy Clarke's *Love Tapes* (1977-), Amy Halpern's film can be logged as an Unidentified Flying Object. Structured by, but unfettered to, the portrait format, it merges into its vertical stream of faces a series of staged fictional scenes about police violence against the Black community of downtown Los Angeles, alongside performance sequences and landscape shots. Filmed over fifteen years and drawing mostly on friends, family, and art-world figures, it does not cling to the artist—or indeed the human—as privileged subject matter, finding parity between a flamingo, a street kid, and a famous structural filmmaker.

I recently took part in Clarke's *Love Tapes*, when artist Kim Coleman restaged the participatory video project, first initiated in the 1970s, at this year's Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival. Inviting participants from all over the world to share their insights and experiences of love, *Love Tapes* centres video as an instrument for revelation and self-reflection. With the camera in front of me and the curtains drawn, I felt impelled to communicate something personal and "authentic" about romantic love—my ancestral Spanish-Catholic bloodlines drawing me irrevocably towards the confessional. *Be cool, Sophia, don't give too much away.* (I failed.) In his *Screen Tests*, Warhol's static camera also contains its subjects, submitting them to the disciplinary regime of the fixed frame and the three-minute duration of the film reel. But Halpern's roving camera sets its subjects free.

More coolly melodic than the mug-shot mentality of the *Screen Test*s or the confession-box format of the *Love Tapes*, *Falling Lessons* doesn't let its subjects give too much away. Resisting the stationary gaze, the camera moves unrestricted across faces and torsos, coming to rest briefly on the eyes. They say that eyes are the windows to the soul, but some of these windows need a wipe-down: a look can be impossible to read. The gazes of Halpern's subjects—enigmatic yet defiant—are held in brief suspension, before being sent skywards or down to the ground by the camera's vertical panning movement.

Untethered to human subjectivity, Halpern's portraits unfix the notion of the human form as a stable construct. "I'm not attached to my body when I'm not using it," says visual-music historian and filmmaker William Moritz breezily, wearing a tie-dye kaftan, as he floats free from the film frame. "Step out of your skin. Let it go!" says another voice in the ether. In *Falling Lessons*, disembodied hands make orchestral manoeuvres in the dark, beckoning us from the beyond.

Halpern said in interviews that the film's vertical pan was intended to evoke the upside-down mechanics of film projection. Most film gauges run vertically through the projector, the upended image inverted by the lens into the shimmering projection we see on the screen. Our process of seeing undergoes a similar reverse-flip. The image projected onto the backs of our eyes is upturned, our brain correcting the topsy-turviness of seeing in a millisecond flash. Even as we come into the world, many of us arrive head first and screaming, dangled in the air by our feet. Within this formal conceit of verticality, *Falling Lessons* evokes a range of ways of seeing and being in the world. We see a baby bottom up and a woman bottom down. In a moment, everything can turn on its head.

Verticality does more than just drive the movement of the camera in a projection-like unspooling of faces and gestures. It also invokes shifting currents of energy and mood, that wild surge of life that streams past us and through us. Halpern was inspired by watching the unreadable sea of faces on the busy streets of her New York childhood, but I cannot help bringing in a more West Coast state of mind. In *Falling Lessons*, a little girl tells the camera that "there's all this energy. You can either point it up or down." Known in traditional Chinese medicine as the meridians or *jing luo*, meaning "to pass through," these electrical networks are said to carry *qi*, the life force, vertically through the body. The healing vibrations of Lakshmi Shankar's singing and Yogi John Franzoni's gong disperse within and outside of the film, while deep exhalations punctuate its sound design. *Ahhhhhh.* But still, the mood toggles between countercultural looseness and urban fear: police sirens ring incessantly. For every harmony, we hear dissonance.

Each of Halpern's portraits hinges on a state of energetic flux, as a body in perpetual free-fall searches for a way out. The act of falling in love has embedded in it a metaphor of descent. We fall *head over heels*, a phrase that conjures love's somersault plunge into the irrational. Halpern's love for her subjects, be they human or animal, is palpable. But love is also volatile, offering a promise of transcendence, an ascent to elsewhere, that can leave us face down in the mud. A hippy figure points his finger upwards to heaven, echoing the posture of Leonardo da Vinci's final portrait, *Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1515). Two shots later, that painting comes briefly into view. The New Testament prophet gestures to heaven, but Halpern pans down.

Filmmaker Chick Strand, Halpern's contemporary and one of the film's subjects, once described *Falling Lessons* as "the strangest film" she'd ever seen. It too threw me for a loop on first watching it. I mostly tripped on its splintered quasi-narrative, which slices through the structuralist conceit with a deeply disjunctive change of tone. A mother watches her young Black son get chased and then shot by police. Her piercing screams are drowned out by the sound of helicopters flying overhead. As she gets progressively more upset, police bundle her into the car. Moments later: a *vibe shift*. With the atmospheric pressure seemingly building towards a riot, it suddenly mutates into a rock gig. Members of the Chicano punk band Los Plugz turn the police car into a drum kit and passersby get grooving. The mother, previously hysterical, is now laughing. This resolution, if we can call it that, is so totally improbable that it flips the scene back on its head, reminding us of its status as a fiction and of the impossibility of tidy narratives—particularly in a country under siege.

The film's dramatic climax profoundly changes the nature of those looks to camera. Faces transform into witnesses to police brutality, and the earlier dialogue about fear ("I'm not afraid of anything") takes on a renewed urgency that speaks to the relative privilege of being a white, middle-class artist. The concluding scenes were based on real events that Halpern saw unfolding on her block in Venice. A committed anti-racist and organiser, she was an active player in the L.A. Rebellion movement; many of its filmmakers, from Ben Caldwell and Barbara McCullough to Julie Dash, appear in *Falling Lessons*. Some might say this is not Halpern's story to tell. Yet the film's complex entanglement of race and specta-

torship registers as commentary on the dangers of art-world bystanderism in the face of state violence.

The fifteen-year filming of *Falling Lessons* spans, practically to the year, the controversial tenure of Los Angeles Police Department chief Daryl Gates, who oversaw his organisation's racialised and abusive practices. In 1992, Rodney King, a Black man, was arrested on the interstate for being under the influence and was violently beaten by police officers. The attack was filmed and widely broadcast, yet none of the four officers was found guilty, sparking an uprising that led to 63 people being killed, and for which Gates finally resigned. *Falling Lessons* was shot decades before the #BlackLives-Matter movement shone a light on police brutality through the vertical video format of TikTok and Instagram, making us witnesses to white supremacy, doom-scrolling our way to either a suspension of agency, or a call to action—depending on whom you're asking. But seen from today, it echoes with that moment, as well as the recent ICE immigration raids that turned to rioting, with people jumping on cars not far from where Halpern shot those scenes all those years ago.

In its accumulating images of levitation and lift-off – be they birds, clouds, airplanes, or that steady stream of faces, always looking up, up, up – *Falling Lessons* gestures towards the transcendent, but violence and fear keep dragging us back to hell. The film seems to ask: How can we find hope, love, and beauty in a world turned upside-down?