Luminol Theory
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2. Luminol

Mike Thompson’s luminol lamp shines a light on human mortality and precarity.\textsuperscript{11} The lamp is a sacred artifact, a cultic, ritual object that runs on human waste. The luminol lamp comprises a light bulb that is activated once human blood reacts with the luminol in the vial. This reaction, most commonly used to detect whether violence has taken place at suspected crime scenes, is taken out of context and given a magical twist by Thompson. The luminol lamp combines the human and the chemical. It invokes violence and disposability, but also transformation. Finally, it reminds us of the precarity of the human condition and the scarcity of the earth’s resources by inviting the consumer to give a little of their own bodily fluid in exchange for light. Thompson dramatizes the danger of taking fuel for granted, and critiques patterns of consumption. The luminol lamp gives light, receives blood, explodes in chemical reaction, and regenerates waste fluid into energy. Thompson’s luminol lamp combines organic and nonorganic matter and converts waste into aesthetic material, shining its queer unearthly light on human finitude.

Just as luminol releases one quantum of light when it comes into contact with biological material, so too does this book illuminate the memory of the dead women and girls who are its subject. This combination of the chemical and the occult is not accidental but rather illuminates the supernatural aspect that is presented by the luminosity of blood and, by extension, the awesome, numinous nature of scientific endeavor.

The fields of chemistry and biology are concerned with bioluminescence, and the subfield of forensic analysis is concerned more specifically with the potential properties of luminol that allow it to excavate hidden histories—the properties that enable forensic scientists to discover facts that can help them solve violent crimes. However, as with all scientific analyses, luminol evidence is unstable and can give false readings. Luminol glows

blue as it reacts with a range of biological and nonbiological materials, including “plant peroxidases (fresh potato juice), metals […] and some cleaners (esp. hypochlorites.)”

Luminol has also been known to react with “an old porcelain sink or bathtub that has been exposed to cleaners.” The reaction between luminol and this range of materials, though, is never as intense. It produces a “‘twinkling’ or ‘rippling’ effect,” whereas “luminol’s reaction with a true bloodstain produces an intense, long-lasting, even glow, frequently in patterns such as spatters, smears, wipes, drag marks, or even footwear impressions.”

To categorize luminol theory as belonging to the sciences, even the social sciences, is to ignore the inherent subjectivity of literary theory. It is important to consider that this book does not simply deal with the reaction between certain kinds of organic matter. The difference between the “twinkling” effect of “fresh potato juice” and the intense “glow” of a room soaked with blood is not simply chemical. It relates to the lived — and dead — experience of those who have been subject to extreme violence. By reproducing the violence done to these bodies, I have engaged in a metapornographic investigation that does not exempt me from the charge of sexual exploitation that I aim to critique. Since the days of Victorian sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, curators and cultural historians of pornography have been troubled by the question of whether pornographic representation stifles or generates coercive sexual practices. Lisa Downing recasts this disturbing question, framing it in relation to necrophiliac representation:

I would perhaps not go so far as to suggest that the line between a necrophiliac writer and a would-be practitioner is quite that thin, or that the equivalence between neurotic phantasy and acting out translates so literally and according to such a simple relation of cause and effect. Nonetheless, this idea sup-

12 James and Eckert, Interpretation of Bloodstain Evidence at Crime Scenes, 161.
13 Ibid.
ports the persuasive view that literature serves a social function by encoding, within a safe space, desires which must not be enacted in the world. However, the fear exists, as Krafft-Ebing has made clear, that such textual representation may simultaneously defuse and stimulate the impulse. This reaches the heart of contemporary debates on pornography, which question how far it is safe (and indeed helpful) to diffuse images and fantasies that facilitate sexual release, thereby possibly reducing the incidence of coercive sexual acts.¹⁵

By engaging in metapornographic enquiry in this book I cannot exempt myself from this morally sticky position. I offer two counterpoints: First, I agree with Peter Brooks that — in Elisabeth Bronfen’s paraphrasing — “all narrative may well be obituary in that it seeks a retrospective knowledge that comes after the end, which in human terms places it on the far side of death.”¹⁶ And, I also offer the hope, in an attempt to ameliorate this necessarily complicit position, that nowhere are the hidden stories of this book more palpable and more immediate than when doused in blood. The murdered and mutilated bodies that appear in the pages of this book are reclaimed as autonomous bodies and voices that speak from the margins, from beyond the pleasure principle.

¹⁵ Downing, Desiring the Dead, 62–63.
¹⁶ Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body, 61.
Each blood-soaked body produces its own “intense, long-lasting, even glow” that cannot be doused or even transmuted. As the bodies of these dead girls “decay” there will always be “one quantum of light” emitted in their memory.