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Olympus Moves to Hollywood

The Pure Pleasure of Cinema Itself

SINCE THE birth of cinema, scholars have been eager to endow this distinctively modern medium with symbolic ancestors from ancient Greece. Plato's cave allegory, with its illusionistic images projected onto the wall of a dark chamber, is regularly invoked by film theorists, and the classicist Martin Winkler has declared Apollo film's patron deity.[1] I would like to propose adding Helen of Troy to this company. Unlike Plato or Apollo, she has been a staple of the large and small screen from their beginnings to the present day.[2] Unlike them, moreover, she gives the femininity of film its due. As the most beautiful woman in the world, she is a vehicle for questions about beauty, pleasure, desire, and power that lie at the heart both of cinema and of popular culture more broadly.

The Hollywood film industry emerged at a time when the intimate relationship between beauty and visuality, closely aligned since antiquity, had reached fever pitch.[3] The relative beauty of female stars was constantly evaluated, and contests were used to identify newcomers who might feed this obsession.[4] Such displays were aimed not only at the presumptively heterosexual male viewer, but also at the narcissistic female gaze. The latter has been signified

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1. For the former, see especially Baudry 1999 [1970] and cf. Wyke 2003: 439; Conor 2004: 20–21. For the latter, see Winkler 2009.

2. Winkler 2009: ch. 2 surveys Apollo on screen, but the god rarely appears outside adaptations of Greek tragedy (plus a notable *Star Trek* episode discussed in ch. 5 below).

3. Conor 2004: 19–25 discusses modernism's inheritance of Greek ocularcentrism.

4. On beauty culture in the 1920s, see Banner 1983: ch. 12; Banet-Weiser 1999: ch. 1; Conor 2004; Carden-Coyne 2009: ch. 5.

since antiquity by the emblem of the mirror.[5] A mirror functions as a picture frame, which makes a woman "connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight."[6] More than a frame, however, the mirror's ability to reflect "lifelike" moving images makes it a kind of proto-film.[7] The film screen, in turn, serves as a mirror to the world, showing the movie fan icons of feminine beauty to which she herself may aspire.[8] When she uses her own mirror to align her appearance with that of the stars,[9] what she sees is an echo of the filmic image, bridging the gap between viewer and viewed.

As a tool allowing women to construct their own appearance for their own purposes, the mirror betokens not only beauty and narcissism but feminine power. The garments, adornments and accessories that have served, from time immemorial, as a proxy for beauty, help to construct women as desirable objects for the male gaze. At the same time, however, they thwart that gaze, insisting on women's own power to reveal or withhold the mysteries that lie beneath.[10] The love of adornment that facilitates the pursuit of their erotic agenda thus becomes an encoding of women's own erotic desire. In the beauty culture of early Hollywood, as in antiquity, this was a source of considerable anxiety. In Liz Conor's words, "Women who actively sought a desiring gaze were associated with visual deceit, artifice, and the entrapment of men. They exhibited their desire to become sexual subjects by positioning themselves, rather duplicitously, as sexual objects."[11] This manipulative exercise of erotic agency was rendered still more dangerous by women's "peculiar susceptibility to the image—to the cinematic spectacle in general."[12] Young women flocked to the

5. For examples from Greek vase painting, showing Helen with a mirror, see Blondell 2013: 7, 50–51.

6. Berger 1972: 51. On the mirror as frame, see Hollander 1978: ch. 6; cf. also Banta 1987: 366–74.

7. Since ancient times, the mirror has betokened a deceptive "realism" (cf. Plato, *Republic* 596de).

8. For film as a mirror, cf., e.g., Bazin & Gray 1967: 97; Morin 2005: 121.

9. For the importance of the mirror to movie fans, see Blumer 1933: 35–37 and cf. Thumim 1992: 166–68; Stacey 1994: 67–68; Conor 2004: 150–51. On audience identification, see further below, p. 13 n. 36.

10. This effect is enhanced when the performer is a star (Haskell 2016: 324–25).

11. Conor 2004: 92. For ancient Greece, see Blondell 2013: ch. 1. In Victorian times, similarly, the "natural" female desire for fashionable clothing was "linked not only with weakness and fickleness but also somehow with godless and unaccountable female sexual power" (Hollander 1978: 361). On the lust for clothing as a placeholder for sex in the 1920s, cf. Ryan 1976: 373.

12. Doane 1987: 1.

cinema, and soon became the primary consumers of mass culture more generally, helping to "feminize" it as frivolous and disreputable.[13]

Helen of Troy is a fitting figurehead for this symbiosis of film and femininity. If the feminine is "an unattainable visual image of desirability,"[14] then she is its mythological quintessence: the object of all men's desire and all women's aspiration, whose uncanny beauty destroys men's wits and distorts their perception of reality.[15] This makes Helen a figure both for sensory pleasure—especially scopic pleasure—and for the dangers (real or imaginary) that it poses. As such, she is an early ancestor of Lulu, the seductive, destructive beauty played by Louise Brooks in G. W. Pabst's silent classic *Pandora's Box* (1929), who represents "the pure pleasure of cinema itself."[16]

This proto-cinematic role is vividly conveyed by a remarkable variant of Helen's story, in which it is not she who causes the Trojan War, but a double or *eidolon*, fabricated by the gods to be her exact visual counterpart.[17] Though nominally a "copy," as a reification of Helen's beauty the *eidolon* is not merely a deceptive image but also, in an important sense, the "real" Helen, since it fulfills her mythic function: it is divinely created to cause the Trojan War through its beauty. The story makes Helen a figure not only for visual enchantment, but for imitation, illusion, and the manufactured image.[18] Though quite

13. On the rise and gendering of the movie fan, and women as target audience, see J. Allen 1980: 486; Hansen 1991: 114–25; Stacey 1994: 85–86; Conor 2004: 100; Fuller 1996: ch. 6 & 7; Studlar 1996 [1991]: 263–64; Barbas 2001; Driscoll 2002: 224–26; Higashi 2002: 314–15. For the "femininity" of the popular, see L. Fischer 2003: ch. 2; Conor 2004: 225–27. For the contrast with "real" culture as masculine, see Huyssen 1986; Maltby 1989: 13; Modleski 1991: ch. 2. Even at the end of the twentieth century, when movies had long been targeted primarily at young males, mass culture was conceived of as a "bimbo" (Morris 1990: 23–24).

14. Stacey 1994: 66.

15. On the uncanniness of Helen's beauty, see E. Mansfield 2007: 29–35. Postrel argues that she is the mythic ancestor of the concept of glamor, which "allows us to imaginatively inhabit the ideal" (Postrel 2013: 41, 45; see further 147–50). On glamor, see also Massey 2000: 36–42; Moseley 2002; Shields 2013: ch. 2 and below, p. 000.

16. Doane apud L. Garcia 2013: 20.

17. The Greek word *eidolon* is one of a family of terms relating to vision, appearance, and beauty. On Helen's *eidolon*, see further Blondell 2013: 117–22 and ch. 10. For film's preoccupation with doubling, see Braudy 2002: 226–35.

18. Plato himself identifies Helen's *eidolon* with illusory visual pleasures like the images in his cave (*Republic* 586bc).

widespread in antiquity, this version has never to my knowledge been represented in popular cinema.[19] Yet every screen Helen is, in its way, an *eidolon*.

A Village near the Sea

Mediterranean antiquity offered cinema not only symbolic ancestors but an endless supply of varied and spectacular stories, whose permeation in European and American cultural traditions made them simultaneously exotic and familiar, prestigious and accessible. The Trojan War, in particular, offered a rich trove of cinematic possibilities for combat, adventure, camaraderie, and spectacle.[20] Thanks to Helen, this male-centered story can also be larded with heterosexual romance—a vital ingredient in the Hollywood formula. Antiquity also provided a way for Hollywood to assert its cultural legitimacy. Then as now, Hollywood was "criticized by the self-elected intelligentsia as glorifying the moron."[21] Eastern snobs looked down on this Western outpost as superficial, anti-intellectual, and unsophisticated. But the ancient world had long been "sacralized as the core of high culture and sanctified as the Eden of Western civilization."[22] The production of films about Greece and Rome thus allowed Hollywood to present itself as "the Athens of today," uplifting the masses by bringing education and culture to all.[23] Not coincidentally, such claims also helped to build audiences by attracting the middle class.[24]

One way classical Greece served this agenda was by giving the highest of high cultural endorsements to Hollywood's obsession with physical beauty. Assuming the mantle of antiquity allowed the movie business to lay claim to a "timeless" or "classical" ideal giving an intellectual, mythical, and transhistorical stamp to the idea of absolute beauty—a beauty that could be

19. It appears in high cultural forms such as opera, but very rarely in popular receptions of the classics. Wise's 1956 film alludes to it, however (below, ch. 3).

20. For a list of screen treatments of the Trojan War, see Winkler 2007b; cf. also Wieber 2005; Solomon 2015.

21. Waterbury 1928. Cf. Addison 2006: 6, 15.

22. Winterer 2002: 142.

23. The quote is from a 1929 letter to a fan magazine (M. Williams 2013a: 49). See further Hansen 1985: 326–30; Hansen 1991: 63–64; Olsson 2008: ch. 6; Slide 2010: 55; Christie 2013: 117–23; B. Dixon 2013: 32–34; M. Williams 2013a: 28.

24. For the influence of classicism on the middle class (especially women), see Winterer 2002: 144–47. For the cultural tie-ins used to attract middle class viewers to the movies in early Hollywood, see, e.g., Michelakis 2013: 149–50.

reincarnated, unchanged, in countless women, even thousands of years and thousands of miles from the culture that gave it birth. The beauty standards in question, based on ideas about symmetry and specific proportions, were enhanced for the screen by makeup and often surgery.[25] They were derived not from actual Greeks, but from the Aryanized ancient Greece devised by northern European philhellenists.[26] This was helped along by the ancients' own idealization of light skin for women (Helen, for example is described as "white-armed" in Homer), and "golden" hair for gods and heroes.[27] At a time when whiteness was being constructed to define "real" Americans, as opposed to Black people and immigrants, "Greek" beauty was one way to justify Anglo hegemony in the movies.[28]

As exemplars of unfading beauty, the Greek gods become an emblem for the supposed universality of film in a way that served the interests of Hollywood's increasing global reach. An article in *Photoplay*, the leading early fan magazine, explains: "The gods of Olympus ordained beauty of human face and figure the highest good," but "Greece fell before the barbarians. Over the ages its ideals were lost [until] the movies came with their demand for beauty, for youth, for health, for artistic productiveness," and in "a village near the sea . . . a community grew, made by beauty, urged by beauty, producing beauty" (figure 1.1).[29] The author, Ruth Waterbury, proves her point by comparing the measurements of male and female film stars with the Apollo Belvedere and Venus de Milo respectively. This leads to "the startling discovery that measurement for measurement movie gods and goddesses are beautiful as the ancient ones of Greece." Even movie stars grow old and die, of course; yet film

25. Cf. Annas 1987: 52–54; Morin 2005: 31–35; Addison 2006: 13. In nineteenth-century art the ideal was "regularity" of features, which "meant the straight, slender nose, the full yet controlled line of the lips, and the high 'pure' brow made familiar from endless plaster casts of Greek statuary" (Banta 1987: 115–16). As late as the 1970s, "contemporary" beauty could be said to be "derived from the classic Greeks . . . heroic yet serene in its dehumanized regularity" (Buchman 1973: 29).

26. On the "whitening" of ancient Greeks, see Bernal 1987: ch. 6–7; Dyer 1997: 20–22; Mohanram 2007: 49–52; Squire 2011: 18–23; McCoskey 2012: ch. 4; Inglis 2001: 81; Painter 2010: ch. 6.

27. As recent scholarship has emphasized, however, this does not mean the ancient Greeks conceived of "whiteness" as a racial category. Most recently, and comprehensively, see Derbew 2022.

28. Wexman 1993: 140.

29. Waterbury 1928b.

FIGURE 1.1. Spread from *Photoplay*, April 1928. The caption at right reads, "Venus rising from the movies. Just a modern American girl, but Joan Crawford, to a quarter inch, approximated the figure of the ancient goddess of love and beauty."

immortalizes them as perpetually young and beautiful, allowing them to die— and live—"over and over," and thus be blessed with their classical forebears' immortality.[30]

The winners of Waterbury's involuntary beauty contest, shown posing as their ancient counterparts, are Richard Arlen (Most Like Apollo) and Joan Crawford (Most Like Venus). Waterbury was following in the footsteps of philhellenic art historians, archeologists, aesthetes, eugenicists, and anatomists, for whom the Venus de Milo in particular exemplified the ideal of female beauty. Crawford embraced the identity, even using the Venus on her

30. Tyler 1947: xviii. This kind of immortality may be assisted by an early death (Morin 2005: 107; Addison 2006: 10; Postrel 2013: 100–101). On the role of ancient Greek statuary in constructing the idea of the star as divinity, see M. Williams 2013a; M. Williams 2018. On stars' divinity, see also Braudy 2002: 212; Fowles 1992: 182–83; Stacey 1994: 67, 142–44, 235; and Morin 2005: 27–88.

personal bookplates, but many other stars were also compared measure-for-measure with the statue's imaginary vital statistics.[31] They often posed with it for photographs, making the Venus into an iconotext that "bathes [the star] in reflected glory, and imparts perceived European sophistication onto the American idol."[32] Venus also pervades the beauty discourse surrounding early Hollywood in other ways. Her name appeared in countless movie titles, such as *The American Venus* (1926), whose plot involved a beauty contest and featured the 1925 Miss America, Fay Lanphier. Miss America contestants were referred to as "Venuses," and beauty pageant connoisseurs found mythic precedent in the Judgment of Paris, which has been aptly labeled "the paradigmatic story of western male gazing."[33]

The use of statues, specifically, as evidence for "classical" ideals had a further advantage, since it authorized an otherwise potentially scandalous degree of skin exposure. This convenient alibi was likewise inherited from the Victorians, for whom "Greek art allowed one to contemplate the naked body with a good conscience, and at the same time to congratulate oneself on possessing a taste far removed from the common herd's."[34] In antiquity, Aphrodite is most definitely a goddess of carnal desire, and the legacy of Greece included the pre-Christian sensuality and primal emotions of the Nietzschean Dionysiac.[35] But the classical alibi depended on a desexualized aestheticism: Greek beauty was supposedly not erotic but innocent and wholesome.[36] Echoing the

31. E.g., Annette Kellerman (Conor 2004: 152) Thelma Todd (Donati 2012: 31); Greta Garbo (M. Williams 2013a: 15; M. Williams 2013b: 139); Gloria Swanson (M. Williams 2013b). On Crawford as Venus, see M. Williams 2013a: 64 and cf. M. Williams 2018: 7. On stars and statues, see also Carden-Coyne 2009: 241–47.

32. M. Williams 2013a: 55. The iconotext "comments on the star and her place within history as it is being constructed," so that "each icon reflects upon, and validates, the other" (M. Williams 2013a: 54). See further M. Williams 2013a: 164–65; M. Williams 2013b: 126–31.

33. Squire 2011: 80; cf. Deford 1971: 117; Conor 2004: 140–41.

34. Jenkyns 1980: 136. During the Greek revival, this alibi was used only for male nudity (Mosse 1988: ch. 5), but Hollywood had no difficulty applying the argument to both sexes. On the "double articulation" of the classical nude (i.e., the simultaneous provision and denial of eroticism), see Dyer 2004: 119 and cf. M. Williams 2013a: 2.

35. Cf. Ribeyrol 2013; Momigliano 2013; Banta 1987: 399–400. For Venus as the enemy of Christianity—even a satanic figure—see Ziolkowski 1977: 27, 44. For the double and intertwined "aesthetic and libidinal" artistic receptions of Venus, see Arscott & Scott 2000.

36. Carden-Coyne 2009: 228; Mosse 1988: 13–16, 48–53; Conor 2004: 164–66; cf. Jenkyns 1980: 133–35. Isadora Duncan used similar rhetoric to legitimize her "Greek" dancing as Culture (Daly 1995: ch. 3).

rhetoric of philhellenism, Waterbury explains that it is Hollywood's balmy climate that allows it to reproduce the "bare-legged" look that allegedly prevailed in ancient Greece, when "clothes were mere draperies," before "Beauty was dethroned and Prudery put in its place."

The double vision afforded by such high-minded rhetoric was assisted by the fact that the draperies of Greek antiquity, modest though they were in practice, are never more than one step away from lingerie, via the simple substitution of diaphanous fabrics (a technique already popular with ancient Greek artists). The looseness of such drapery—which tends to be only lightly attached—further assists the justification of sexiness via claims of "authenticity." Hollywood remained considerably more prudish than Greek statuary. Unlike the Venus de Milo, Joan Crawford appears in *Photoplay* wearing a bandeau top, and Richard Arlen wears shorts in place of Apollo's fig leaf (itself an addition to the ancient original). Yet the gloss imparted by such statuary's cultural associations enabled filmmakers to push propriety to the limit. As MGM's Irving Thalberg observed, "you could get away with anything in a movie, particularly sex, if you made it historical—and expensive."[37] Cecil B. DeMille, in particular, was notorious for "wallowing in sadistic sex but dodging recriminations with vast doses of historical nobility."[38]

The World's Greatest Vamp

Like her patron goddess, Helen of Troy represents, in Goethe's famous phrase, the "eternal feminine."[39] A newspaper article from 1916 informs us that an artist named Ray van Buren studied "the beauty of Helen as delineated in the finest Greek friezes and sculptures," before extolling the modern women who, in his view, have "the same classic, tantalizing, heart-storming beauty as the immortal Helen of Troy."[40] She also pervades the broader discourse of beauty culture. A tip for lustrous hair, for example (involving egg whites and carbolic acid), is

37. McConathy & Vreeland 1976: 27.

38. Card 1994: 219. On deviant sexuality in ancient world films, see Cyrino 2014.

39. On the "eternal feminine" as a status that "naturalizes the position of women as objects of the gaze," cf. Stacey 1994: 225.

40. Anon. 1916. Note that many such newspaper stories were syndicated, and thus read far more widely than their appearance in one local paper might suggest. Artists were often used as beauty contest judges, both for their "professional wisdom about female beauty" and as a way "to confer class on the spectacle" (Mifflin 2020: 29).

attributed to Helen's "beauty recipe books."[41] Her name appears less often than Venus's in movie titles, but advertisements for beauty products often invoke the goddess and her protégée in the same breath.[42] Sometimes they are even conflated, as if Helen had been the winner—not just a bribe—at the Judgment of Paris: "The Search for a New Helen of Troy Begins in France, [with] the Modern Judgment of Paris . . . to Determine Who Is Most Beautiful."[43]

As icons of female beauty, both Helen and her patron goddess were vehicles for contemporary ambivalence about the cultural legitimacy of modern America. Many sources opine that in Hollywood Helen would be nothing in comparison with the abundance of American beauties.[44] Despite Ray van Buren's enthusiasm for Helen, he contrasts her singularity in her own day with the alleged fact that "the measurements of fifteen hundred girls at Wellesley College average approximately the classic lines of Venus de Milo."[45] As a pagan goddess, however, Venus can enter modern life only in magical or symbolic ways. Like other such divinities, she is of interest primarily as a force that rules mortal lives or brings the human condition into focus through (often humorous) contrast. Helen, on the other hand, stands at the center of a narrative that can, if necessary, be stripped of the supernatural to become a strictly human love triangle.

With few exceptions, ancient reports of Helen's divinity are ignored. Opinions on her historicity diverged: though naysayers continued to consign her to legend, proof of her historicity was eagerly sought and often found. As one newspaper headline proclaims, "Helen of Troy Real—Not a Myth."[46] "Science" went "dredging for relics of the world's greatest vamp," and managed to unearth such artifacts as "Helen's safety pins."[47] There is endless speculation

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41. Anon. 1926.

42. E.g., Anon. 1922a. On Venus in advertising, see M. Williams 2013b: 139–40.

43. Anon. 1920.

44. Even the Venus was sometimes criticized, usually for being too fat or "thick-waisted" (see, e.g., Conor 2004: 158; M. Williams 2013b: 139).

45. Anon. 1916. For Wellesley's rivalry with Swarthmore and other manifestations of Venus-mania in this period, see Morton 2016.

46. Anon. 1924a.

47. Anon. 1925; *El Paso Herald*, January 28, 1922. (Items like the latter with no byline or headline—such as gossip items, ads, and capsule reviews—are not cited in the bibliography.) Solomon 2015 argues that Schliemann's discoveries prompted the demythification of the Trojan War and a concomitant burst of interest in Helen.

as to what she "really" looked like, especially her hair color (was she a blonde or a redhead?), and her age at the time of her elopement, variously estimated at 40, 45, 46, 48, 60 or even 120 (as proven by German scientists).[48] This unfading beauty is presented as an aspirational model for modern women. Exercise guru Diana Watts, author of *The Renaissance of the Greek Ideal* (1914), touts her "Greek physical system" of exercises, which kept Helen young at 48, as the secret of beauty and "perpetual youth."[49]

The extraordinary popularity of Helen's name in this period gave her a different kind of link to the mortal world.[50] According to the widespread "What's in a name?" articles, it conjures "a dazzling figure of youth, beauty and cleverness."[51] The name's familiarity made it easy to attach mythical associations to real people, such as the beautiful Helen Norpoth (a.k.a. Helen of St. Louis), the tennis champion Helen Wills (a.k.a. Helen of California, Helen of Berkeley, or one of the Four Helens of Sport), and the political candidate Helen Pettigrew (a.k.a. Helen of Kansas). Her name was also used for non-Helens who are judged the most beautiful in a particular city, region, race, or class (St. Louis, "Gypsies," typists, athletes). It was especially resonant in Los Angeles because of the University of Southern California's Trojan theme, which included the selection of an annual "Helen of Troy" to represent the university. On the East Coast, the 1923 musical comedy *Helen of Troy, NY*, featuring a modern American Helen who works at a collar factory, was a smash hit on Broadway.

This pervasiveness makes Helen easily available for naturalization in modern terms—an availability reinforced by the paradigmatic character of her story, which taps into anxieties about female visibility, female movement, and especially female sexuality, with which cinema has always been, in its own way, as concerned as ancient Greece. In early Hollywood, that concern centered on the vamp, femme fatale, or siren—a seductive, sexually assertive woman who threatened men both by exposing herself to the male gaze and

48. Anon. 1911.

49. Watts 1919b; the article is illustrated with a woman archer mimicking the famous Trojan archer from the Temple of Aphaia on Aegina. For the importance of exercise in early twentieth-century beauty culture, see Banner 1983: ch. 10 and cf. below, pp. 70–71).

50. See Social Security, "Popular Baby Names by Decade," accessed April 9, 2020, http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/decades/. For the use of resonant names in film, cf. M. Smith 1995: 193.

51. Marshall 1921.

by actively pursuing them.[52] Helen's elopement made her a benchmark for such misbehavior. One newspaper explains that Homer gave the event "such widespread notoriety that wives even today are following the beauteous Helen's example."[53] Its consequences make her the go-to comparandum for any women fought over by men, whether the arena be warfare, politics, or the stage. All this renders Helen "the original vampire," "the world's greatest 'vamp,'" or one of the "vivid vamps of history."[54] She is a fitting emblem of the scandalously eroticized atmosphere of the film industry, a.k.a. "Los Angeles Love" (figure 1.2).[55] The author of the article illustrated here speculates that it was Helen's story—more specifically a certain painting of her story—that inspired a man named Edward Fawcett to abduct a woman named Elise Hilliger in his airplane.

Despite the lighthearted tone of such articles, the anxieties underlying them were quite real. With their supposedly innate susceptibility to the seductions of the moving image, women were expected to—and did—identify with film stars and strive to reproduce what they saw on screen.[56] Onscreen and off, the stars served as mannequins for the latest fashions and spokespersons for an endless procession of beauty products.[57] This influence extended beyond fashion as such, to the kind of "moral demise" associated with "excesses of finery."[58] One might think that shopping is one thing, adultery another, but the pleasures of conspicuous consumption and of sex, and thus the desires

52. The vamp evolved from the original movie "vampire," identified with Theda Bara. See further Walker 1967: 19–27; Higashi 1978: ch. 3; Card 1994: ch. 9; Staiger 1995: ch. 6; Negra 2001; Negra 2002a.

53. Anon. 1921a.

54. Currie 1925; Anon. 1925; Jordan 1922. Other oft cited vamps include Eve, Cleopatra, the Queen of Sheba, and Madame du Barry (cf. below, figure 2.4).

55. For the equation of scandalous sexual behavior with "Hollywood love," see Dyer 1998: 45–46.

56. Identification with stars is a complicated and theoretically contentious issue. See especially M. Smith 1995, who eschews psychologizing models to argue that we respond to characters as analogues of persons and distinguishes character "recognition" from both "alignment" (a shared point of view) and "allegiance" (which is moral). Cf. also Stacey 1991; Fowles 1992: ch. 7; Dyer 1998: passim; Hallam & Marshment 2000: ch. 5; Woodward 2003: ch. 3; Stacey 1994: ch. 5; Morin 2005: 78–81, 135–49.

57. On the symbiotic relationship between consumer marketing and early cinema, see J. Allen 1980; Eckert 1990; Higashi 2002; and cf. Wyke 1997: 97–100.

58. Conor 2004: 73.

FIGURE 1.2. Article in *The Charleston Daily Mail*, December 11, 1921. The central panel is captioned, "'Abduction of Helen of Troy,' the Famous Painting by Rudolph von Deutsch that May Have Inspired Edward Fawcett to Carry Off Elise Hilliger in his Airplane."

unleashed by the movies, were not so easily distinguished.[59] A 1933 survey by the sociologist Herbert Blumer investigates in great detail the moral influence of the movies on young people.[60] Clothing, seduction, romance, and sexual behavior are prominent themes among both sexes, but especially among the female subjects, who claim to be learning not only fashion and beauty tips but

59. Cf. deCordova 1990: 138–39.

60. On Blumer and the Payne Fund studies, see Black 1994: 151–54; Jowett et al. 1996; Fuller 1996: ch. 9.

techniques for kissing and seduction. The glamor and independence of female stars were empowering in other ways too, allowing young women to fantasize about divorce as well as marriage, and fostering "resentment of parental control."[61]

In response to such threats, censors, critics, and censorious members of the public (even prior to the infamous Production Code) were alert for impropriety on screen, especially where female sexual behavior was concerned.[62] In order to evade censorship—formal or informal—the movie vamp or "fallen woman" had to receive her comeuppance.[63] At the end of *Flesh and the Devil* (1926), for example, the vamp (Greta Garbo) drowns in a freezing pond. Lulu (Louise Brooks), the hedonistic heroine of *Pandora's Box* (1929), ends up murdered by Jack the Ripper.[64] A "fallen" woman might be reformed, and even aspire to domestic bliss via love and marriage to the right man; but such affairs rarely work out; "motion picture morals dictated that infidelity lead to tragedy rather than divorce and remarriage."[65]

Among the many newspaper stories recounting her legend, vamp-Helen receives the appropriate comeuppance in a few more learned entries, by way of an obscure ancient tale about her death in Rhodes at the hands of vengeful women.[66] On screen, however, she always survives. As in antiquity, the beauty that makes her infinitely desirable saves her, in the end, from the fate merited by her scandalous ways. There is a marked contrast here with the other principal vamp from Mediterranean antiquity, the "dangerous but defeatable" Cleopatra, who is doomed in advance to the "inescapable closure" of death.[67]

61. Blumer 1933: 67, 157. The movies also spurred desires in girls for foreign travel and college, and inspired ambitions for careers ranging from professional musician to private secretary (Blumer 1933: 157–70). For the influence of Hollywood stars on fans in Britain, see S. Alexander 1989: 264–66; Stacey 1994: 158–59, 237–38. For Australia, see Conor 2004: ch. 3.

62. See further Schumach 1975; Everson 1978: 152–54; deCordova 1990: 129–36; L. Jacobs 1991; Card 1994: 6–7; Staiger 1995; Higashi 2002: 315–17; Olsson 2008: ch. 5.

63. On the "fallen woman" film, see Higashi 1978: 88–95; Fishbein 1989; L. Jacobs 1991. On the frustration or punishment of the female look in silent film, see L. Williams 1984.

64. For the US release, it was censored and the ending moralized to reform Lulu (Pratt 1973: 390; Card 1994: 207).

65. Higashi 1978: 93.

66. E.g., Anon. 1911; cf. Blondell 2013: 41–42.

67. Wyke 2002: 297; Wyke 1997: 89.

Though Helen is rarely granted a "happy" ending, her story never receives this particular kind of closure. The "world's greatest 'vamp'" is the one who gets away.

Beauty's Highest Form

Despite Helen's affinity for the Hollywood screen, there are complications in reconceptualizing this particular legendary figure in cinematic terms—complications arising directly from her mythic identity as the most beautiful woman in the world. The ancient Greeks seem to have thought of beauty—at least in principle—as an objective property.[68] Paris might appear to have based his famous Judgment on personal taste, but it is understood that any man would make the same choice, since Aphrodite just *is* erotic beauty. The same principle underpins the willingness of Paris—and indeed of all Helen's suitors—to choose her sight unseen.[69] Ideas about objectivity also underlie, in a slightly different way, the disturbingly popular notion that transcendent female beauty can be portrayed via an assemblage of body parts—a notion that can be traced back to a "portrait" of Helen by the famous fifth-century BCE Greek painter Zeuxis.[70]

Outside myth, however, the idea of absolute beauty runs aground on the undeniable fact that different people have different preferences, or to use the modern cliché, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.[71] If beauty is, in its essence, a subjective response, then the notion of "*the* most beautiful woman in the world" simply makes no sense. We are *unable* to conceive of a Helen in the Greek sense, one who just *is* the most beautiful of all. To complicate things further, the romantic ideology of beauty values specificity and uniqueness, to the point where "flaws" may be deemed necessary to individuate even Helen from what would otherwise be a mere stereotype.[72]

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68. Cf. Pollitt 1974: 12–23; Barasch 1985: 16–18, 20; Steiner 2001: 32–44; Blondell 2013: 2–3.

69. In Greek myth, Helen's suitors court her based solely on her renown (Blondell 2013: 30).

70. According to legend, Zeuxis combined the finest body parts from five young female models to produce his painting of Helen (Squire 2011: 81–84). His procedure was often imitated in the Renaissance (Barasch 1985: 125, 146). More recently, to create the truly perfect face, an "expert" named Julian De Silva "combined Amber Heard's nose, Kim Kardashian's eyebrows, Scarlett Johansson's eyes, Rihanna's face shape, Emily Ratajkowski's lips and Kate Moss' forehead" (Harrison 2017).

71. On the subjectivity of beauty, see Kirwan 1999 and cf. Maguire 2009: 74–78.

72. For the tradition of Helen's "flaw" (starting in the late sixteenth century), see Maguire 2009: 59–65, 69.

Yet the objectivity of beauty is not so easily dispatched. Its persistence in defiance of the beholder's eye creates a tension detectable throughout history. A famous poem about Helen by the Greek poet Sappho provides an early example.[73] In the competitive beauty culture of the early twentieth century the theme played a conspicuous role. One newspaper informs us that the choice of even twelve women as "most beautiful" has "aroused a storm of controversy," showing that beauty is "a matter of taste" and "as one sees it."[74] Yet if all personal judgments are equally legitimate, why should there be any controversy, let alone a "storm"? How, indeed, can we even hold such contests, since the very notion of competition implies some kind of objective criterion for judgment?[75]

In early Hollywood, the tension was mediated to some extent by classifying women into "types"—derived in part from the traditions of nineteenth-century art—which were coded by both appearance and behavior.[76] Some types were supplied by geography or nationalism (the American, and her sub-types, was a matter of special concern). Other notable types were the Vamp or Siren, the Madonna, the Flapper, and the Tomboy or Outdoor Girl. Several were derived from antiquity, including the Venus, the Diana, the Cleopatra, and the Helen.[77] All were in principle commensurable, but types could also be ranked as such. When two rival Australian beauties were designated a Venus and a Madonna respectively, the success of the latter pleased those who considered the Madonna type "beauty's highest form."[78] Thanks to the legacy of philhellenism, the "classic" beauty retained a certain normative status, associated with the timeless and universal.[79] This made her the preferred high-cultural choice. A woman known as "the American Beauty" may be the

73. See further Blondell 2013: 111–16. For this problem in treatments of Helen, see Maguire 2009: 74–78.

74. Anon. 1922b.

75. On the tension between subjective and "objective" criteria for judging the Miss America Pageant, see Deford 1971: 50–52, 101–2; Banet-Weiser 1999: 53–56.

76. The principal types are discussed in Conor 2004. On "typing" in nineteenth-century American art (especially the preoccupation with identifying an American type), see Banta 1987.

77. The latter two are variants of the Vamp or Siren (M. Williams 2013a: 50–51); the Venus embodied "female heterosexual maturity with sublime aesthetics and modern fashion," while the "modern Diana" was more boyish, slimmer, and sportier (Carden-Coyne 2009: 241).

78. Conor 2004: 287 n. 34; cf. figure 2.5 below.

79. In nineteenth-century art the "Grecian type . . . by tradition was the official Type, since Platonism rubbed off on all creatures in diaphanous draperies" (Banta 1987: 396).

FIGURE 1.3. Florence Colgate as shown on ABC News.

undisputed "champion of feminine loveliness" based on the "verdict of the masses," but an "expert" claims the title, instead, for a "perfect blonde" with "classic" and "distinctly Grecian features."[80] In the beauty culture of early Hollywood, however, even the "classic" is usually just another type.

Though typing allowed for some choice in these matters, it did not ultimately resolve the tension between objective and subjective judgment. In the twenty-first century, the popular commitment to the eye of the beholder remains stronger than ever, yet beauty contests persist, along with endless articles in the popular press implying that there are, in fact, objective criteria for judgment. In recent years such criteria have been given a "scientific" imprimatur by evolutionary psychologists. According to the *Daily Mail*, one Florence Colgate "is blessed with what is described as the perfect face. It matches an international blueprint for the optimum ratio between eyes, mouth, forehead and chin, endowing her with flawless proportions" (figure 1.3).[81] Another "expert," Julian De Silva, deems the actor Amber Heard's face the closest to perfection, based on both "scientific facial mapping software" and "ancient Greek" analysis of "the 12 key marker points of the face."[82]

80. Anon. 1921c.
81. P. Harris 2012.
82. Harrison 2017.

Not surprisingly, both these women accord with stereotypical white beauty norms, including blue or green eyes and long, blonde, straight or lightly waved hair: the enduring legacy of the nineteenth-century "fetishization of tall, pale, blond, beautiful Anglo-Saxons."[83] The same applies to the majority of those judged "beautiful" by the plethora of digital tools now available for evaluating beauty. One such app features a "'facial assessment tool': an AI-driven system that promises to look at images of your face to tell you how beautiful you are—or aren't—and then tell you what you can do about it."[84] Such "tools" give an imprimatur of "objectivity" to dominant racist preferences that are baked into the tools themselves, and further perpetuate these biases through their societal influence.[85] Such claims lead to the bizarre conclusion that the eye of the beholder may be mistaken. If you prefer, say, Angelina Jolie over Florence Colgate, you are simply wrong.

Ultimately, the only way to resolve this tension is for all eyes of all beholders to agree. It was, arguably, such agreement that caused the Trojan War.[86] But this solution only works in myth or fantasy. Thanks to the subjectivity of beauty, the closest we can get to "objectivity" in real life is via the democratic criterion of majority opinion. This means that if a majority (or even a plurality) of viewers *think* a particular rendition of Helen is (the most) beautiful then she *is* (the most) beautiful. If we follow this path, we can only conclude that the audience reception of a particular screen Helen tells us not only how effectively the film has impressed viewers with her beauty but how beautiful she actually is. In Yeats's phrase, her beauty is "the crowd's creation."[87] Until the day when the unanimous crowd consists of every viewer, however, the beauty in question will never have the authority of myth.

Mightier than Pen or Sword

Early Hollywood trumpeted the superiority of film over mere written text, bragging, for example, that "Universal Moving Pictures are Mightier than PEN or SWORD."[88] When it comes to transcendent beauty, however, the pen—if

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83. Painter 2010: 200.
84. Ryan-Mosley 2021.
85. Levin 2016; Ryan-Mosley 2021.
86. "When men agree on the beauty of a woman war results" (Anon. 1921c).
87. Cf. Jeffares 1989: 9.
88. Everson 1978: 24.

not the sword—enjoys a distinct advantage. It is the verbal nature of epic poetry that allows Homer's Trojan elders, famously, to affirm Helen's godlike beauty without recourse to specifics.[89] Though Homeric epic is often described as "cinematic," a vast gulf remains between the quasi-divine power of the poetic narrator and the camera's inexorable eye.[90] A strictly narrative approach, with its verbal appeal to the imagination, is unavailable, by definition, to the visual artist.[91] Highly stylized genres may approximate such an approach, however, by using simple, easily legible tropes for beauty as such, leaving subtler details to the imagination. In Greek vase painting, for example, Helen's beauty is signified by the same short list of culturally accepted markers of desirability that we find in verbal texts (long hair, light skin, tall stature, fine clothing). Comic books, like Eric Shanower's *Age of Bronze*, work similarly. We are not asked to decide whether such images provide a convincing rendition of supreme beauty, let alone a plausible likeness of a "real" person. Their success depends, rather, on audience buy-in, which is earned by fulfilling certain cultural, generic, and narrative expectations.

Problems are bound to arise, however, if an artist makes any kind of claim to "realism." To be sure, all art is to some degree stylized: there is ultimately no such thing as realism (otherwise there would be no way of distinguishing representations from things). As Murray Smith puts it, "Praising something for its 'realism' depends implicitly on recognizing that it is not of the same order as the thing imitated."[92] Nevertheless, illusionistic realism has often been seen as the ultimate goal of the visual artist. Zeuxis—the same artist famed for his composite Helen—supposedly demonstrated his skill by making a painting of grapes so realistic that birds tried to peck at them.[93] Such anecdotes draw attention to the fact that a representation is just a representation, exposing the fantasy of illusionistic realism for what it is. Yet tradition is replete with the yearning to cross the line between image and living creature, especially where female beauty is concerned.[94]

89. See *Iliad* 3.156–58 and cf. Braudy 2002: 27. On the indescribability of (Helen's) beauty, and the hazards of supplying detail, see Maguire 2009: ch. 2.

90. For this aspect of Homer, see Clay 2011; Graziosi 2013: 24–33.

91. "The impossibility of rendering visible the ideal . . . is not simply an aesthetic predicament; it is an ontological one" (E. Mansfield 2007: xiii).

92. M. Smith 1995: 32–33.

93. See further E. Mansfield 2007.

94. This aspiration is conveyed by the many stories about agalmatophilia, of which the most famous concern the statue of Aphrodite known as the Cnidia (with which men allegedly tried

Photography took fantasies of illusionistic realism to a new level. The camera was thought of as a superior version of the eye, which captured reality in a more truthful and objective way than previous visual media.[95] A photograph gives the impression of an "invisible umbilicus joining image and referent, the link which commands, often beyond reason . . . a belief that the scene *did* exist."[96] This "indexical" realism is reinforced by the camera's ability to "reproduce" minute surface detail—the kind of specificity that says "*we are the real*."[97] *Moving* pictures took these realisms still further by endowing "the changeless image" with "*the breath of life*."[98] Echoing the Zeuxis anecdote, cinema's founding legend claims that spectators reacted to the first moving images—such as a speeding train—as if they were "real."[99] Synchronized sound rendered such images even more "realistic" by providing "PICTURES that TALK like LIVING PEOPLE!"[100]

This proud claim to the "realistic" presentation of "living people" gave the upstart new medium of film a way of asserting its superiority over traditional media. Despite their high-cultural halo, neither Venus de Milo nor Apollo Belvedere can walk, talk, breathe or sing. The difference is particularly clear when actors share the frame with artworks, producing a visual contrast between living people and static, monochrome objects. It is clarified more dramatically in the many films that set the latter in motion, using cinematic magic to bring artworks to life. In so doing, film seemed to realize, at last, the dreams of art and legend, which are replete with the yearning to animate static images.[101]

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to have sex), and Pygmalion's passion for the sculpted Galatea (see Nead 2007: 58–68; cf. Konstan 2014: 21–24).

95. See McQuire 1998: part 1 and cf. Winkler 2009: 9–10.

96. McQuire 1998: 15.

97. Barthes 1986: 148. On indexical realism, see Bazin & Gray 1967: 12–14, 96–98; Barthes 1981: 4–6; Herwitz 2008: 71–77. On the plethora of film realisms, see further Comolli 1980 [1971]; Sontag 1982 [1963]: 350; Ang 1985: ch. 1; Carroll 1985; Fiske 1987: ch. 2; McQuire 1998; Hallam & Marshment 2000; C. Williams 2000; Braudy 2002: 20–33; Maltby 2003: 229–37; G. King 2005. For a good brief account, see Stam 2004: 7–15.

98. *Photoplay*, December 1918. On the equation of movement with life, cf. Nead 2007: 45–46.

99. See Gunning 1999 [1989]; and cf. Nead 2007: 26, 173.

100. *Photoplay* ad quoted in McQuire 1998: 85.

101. See K. Gross 1992. That yearning reached a peak in the late nineteenth century (Nead 2007: ch. 2). For ancient Greece, see Steiner 2001: ch. 3.

Not coincidentally, the fulfilment of such fantasies has been a perennial movie theme, ever since Méliès himself played Pygmalion.[102] Animating Greek statues, specifically, allowed Hollywood to appropriate the prestige of antiquity while implying that film is "more radiant, complete, modern, democratic and alive."[103] It is no coincidence that this trope so frequently concerns Venus, the divine exemplar of the desired and desiring female. The "realism" of even still photography was thought to make images of bodies more arousing, but *moving* pictures took "realistic" eroticism to a scandalous new level.[104]

The exaltation of photorealism has troubling implications for the representation of beauty. Close-ups, in particular, allow us to scrutinize and judge a subject's face and body in minute detail—and judge we will.[105] The camera's "fiendishly keen eye" makes even "a slight bump on the nose assume the proportions of Mount Everest."[106] From the earliest days of cinema, supposed imperfections were countered by makeup, surgery, and any other means available, in order to align newcomers with previously approved conventional types.[107] Yet despite the studios' preference for such types, they also wanted stars to be individual in appearance.[108] In live action cinema, moreover, no matter how generic a character may seem, the medium itself pulls away from typing and towards uniqueness. In Murray Smith's words, "The physical uniqueness of a real person (a performer) represents in an iconic and indexical fashion the physical uniqueness of a fictive person (the character)."[109] This is

102. Such films include *A Tinted Venus* (1921), *Night Life of the Gods* (1935), *One Touch of Venus* (1948, 1955), *Jupiter's Darling* (1955), *Love Goddess* (1988), *Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), and the Disney *Hercules* (1997). On film as "pygmalionesque," see James 2011 (esp. ch. 4 on Venus) and cf. Nead 2007: ch. 2; Adriaensens 2013; M. Williams 2013a: ch. 2. For Méliès as Pygmalion, see Michelakis 2017: 26.

103. Michelakis & Wyke 2013: 19. A similar effect is produced by posing living stars with statues of Venus, which makes them seem "more vibrant, present and contemporary" than the goddess (M. Williams 2018: 138; cf. above, p. 9).

104. Nead 2007: 173. See further Nead 2007: ch. 5 and cf. Knippschild 2013: 320–21. In Ovid's account of Pygmalion, it is modesty that initially prevents the statue from *moving* (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.250).

105. On the spectator's position of mastery, see Ellis 1992: 81–84.

106. H. Lang 1930; cf. Addison 2006: 10, 14. For the impact of the proximate gaze on the evaluation of beauty, see Conor 2004: 131–32.

107. Cf. Mellencamp 1995: 211–12.

108. Finler 2012: 39–40.

109. M. Smith 1995: 19.

especially true of the close-up, in so far as the face, as the site of human unique-ness, is "the portrait that reveals character."[110] The more "realistic" and indi-vidual the resulting image, the more strongly the viewer's subjective responses are activated, threatening the mythic power of stylized beauty. With its proxi-mate gaze and ability to reach mass audiences, the camera invites disagree-ment among the multitude of beholding eyes.

One of the ways in which the studios touted film's unprecedented "realism" was by presenting the screen as a "window" through which we can look "di-rectly at a 'real' world, present or past."[111] Better yet, film can "transport one to the very scene, defying time and distance."[112] As a magical mode of trans-portation, it enables the lucky viewer to "walk the streets of Paris; ride with the cowboy of the West; or delve in the depths of earth with swarthy miners."[113] As the same author explains, the traveler is also transported emotionally: "He feels . . . the thrill of human sympathy with some child of poverty or sorrow; perhaps with some dainty maid in silk attire." If we are cinematically trans-ported to ancient Troy or Sparta, then, we may expect to "thrill" at the sight of the dainty Helen as if she "really is" the world's most beautiful woman.

The fact that such beauty is strictly mythical was no deterrent in itself. In-deed, one reason Hollywood was so enamored of Greek myth was precisely its provision of material that is not of this world—the supernatural, the mon-strous, the unreal—as fodder for the new medium's illusionistic power. Even the most fantastical stories must be rendered "realistic" in the sense of trans-porting the spectator to a believable world.[114] Within such a world, film can "realistically" show us a Zeus hurling thunderbolts, the superhuman feats of a Hercules, or the size and monstrosity of a Polyphemus.[115] This is also the kind of world in which Helen's beauty is, after all, conceivable: only in myth can an

110. Bordwell et al. 1985: 54. This is why for facial close-ups, unlike longer shots or close-ups of a hand or foot, the actor cannot be replaced by a double.

111. Rosenstone 2001 [1995]: 54.

112. Hansen 1985: 331 (quoting Universal Pictures promotional copy). Theater architecture often presented the moviegoing experience as a window or entrance into the ancient world (Michelakis and Wyke 2013: 8).

113. Fitch 1910.

114. See Hallam & Marshment 2000: 82–84. On the importance of photographic "realism" in representing the *un*real, see Bazin 1997 [1946].

115. Portrayal of the Greek gods is a bone of contention among those concerned with "real-ism" in ancient world cinema. For various approaches, see F. Martin 2002: 90–93; Squire 2011: ch. 5; Winkler 2015d; Gordon 2017: 224–26. Arguably the gods should be excised because to

anthropomorphic god hurl thunder, a hero support the world on his shoulders, a cyclops dash men's brains out, or a woman's face cause the greatest war of all time. But beauty, as a subjective phenomenon, is crucially different from strength, size, one-eyed monstrosity, or even thunderbolt-hurling. We do not need to feel Hercules's fist in our faces to accept that he is strong; but we do need to feel the impact of Helen's beauty to believe that she is beautiful. If the viewer does not respond personally to a representation of beauty, its impact will be alienating (often comically so).

Fantasy genres can bypass at least some of these problems. They may simply stipulate, for example, that someone has superhuman powers, or that a love spell attracts all viewers (intradiegetically) to a person of even ordinary appearance. The viewer can accept such matters as "really" happening—in a world in which we do not live. But the effectiveness of such methods depends on the extradiegetic and intradiegetic framing of the phenomenon in question. When magic is used to denote the supernatural power of Helen's beauty, it is typically presented *not* as explaining an ordinary woman's extraordinary power, but as a true expression of her beauty. This originates in the *Odyssey*, where Helen's supernatural nature, as the daughter of Zeus, is symbolized by a magic drug that she uses to banish negative emotions.[116] The spell she casts does not defy the normal relations of cause and effect; it is inherent in the fact of her beauty.

A filmmaker who eschews blatant invocations of the supernatural must find other ways to suggest transcendence without sacrificing the relevant brand of realism.[117] Such methods include many cinematic techniques, from script to mise-en-scène, lighting, editing, soundtrack and so on.[118] A filmmaker can use the same conventions as stills artists, who "gilded their sitters" with "heavenly radiance" like the halo of a saint.[119] Cinematic tricks can also convey, for

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modern eyes they appear to eliminate human agency (see, e.g., Purves 2014b). In practice, however, this is rarely an issue for viewers.

116. See further Blondell 2013: 79–81.

117. Victorian painters addressed the problem of Helen by using conventional signifiers (such as rich costume, sensuous luxury, and hair color) to suggest "timelessness" without erasing the sitter's individuality (Inglis 2001: 76–80). On ways to counteract the individuating power of faces, cf. M. Smith 1995: 135–37.

118. For examples of cinematically enhanced beauty, see Walker 1967: 124 (Jean Harlow); Dyer 1998: 64 (Marlene Dietrich); Barton 2010: 74 (Hedy Lamarr). Cf. also Mellencamp 1995: 28–31.

119. Shields 2013: 368.

example, Helen's extraordinary impact on the internal audience.[120] But they cannot bestow verisimilitude on that beauty as such. There is no special effect that can, by itself, make a specific image of a woman seem beautiful to all or even most viewers.[121] For this reason, cinematic effects can only take us so far in the quest to convey supernatural beauty in a "realistic" manner.

The Present Dressed in Funny Clothes

As if all this were not enough, classical Hollywood subscribes to yet another kind of realism, namely a storytelling style that stresses the importance of individual psychology and human agency in propelling choices and plot.[122] This requires movie characters to think and feel in ways that enable the audience to understand their motivations and "relate" to them as if they were "real people." Even characters from exotic cultures—including the past and future—must be represented as individualized characters with "personality," whose words and actions are "authentic" in terms that have been naturalized within the culture of viewing. This is often justified by invoking a "universal" human nature, which just happens to map onto the norms in question.[123]

Once again, the facial close-up is of special importance. By betraying all the subtleties of feeling and expression, such shots convey a sense of inner life that invites the audience to relate to the character as "real."[124] This is especially significant for the screen performance of romance, where the close-up

120. For a good example, see below, p. 233.

121. In films of the *Odyssey*, the song of the Sirens presents a comparable problem. As one critic of *Ulysses* (1954) observed, "To be convincingly enchanting, the music that Ulysses heard would have had to be of such surpassing beauty as to convince the audiences and enchant them as he was enchanted" (Hugh Gray 1956: 350). In *Ulysses*, the problem is solved by giving them Penelope's voice, which marks the effect as a subjective one (compare the incident in the *Odyssey* in which each man hears Helen's voice as his own wife's: Blondell 2013: 83–84).

122. The standard work on classical Hollywood style remains Bordwell et al. 1985. For the importance of emotional and psychological realism to consumers of popular culture, see Ang 1985: 28–34, 41–46; Jenkins 2013: 107–19.

123. On the tension between historical specificity and alleged "universality," see Staiger 2000: ch. 11.

124. On the emotional impact and "overpowering intimacy" of the close-up, see Card 1994: 21–23 and cf. Bordwell et al. 1985: 190–92; Stacey 1994: 210; Dyer 1998: 15, 118–21; Maltby 2003: 379. The performer's voice further fosters such involvement, in part by suggesting the existence of "the hidden self" (Braudy 2002: 217; cf. 189–90, 213–14).

"foreground[s] the star's position as an ideal of beauty and sexual desirability," especially by zeroing in on the kiss and accompanying facial expressions.[125] Facial close-ups not only raise the stakes regarding the representation of beauty, then, but invite identification with the woman behind the face as a particular "real" person, as opposed to a mere type.[126]

These realisms of character and psychology are typically reinforced, for people from the distant past, by locating them in an environment replete with "authentic" detail. Taking advantage of the contemporary enthusiasm for the *Realien* of archeology, Hollywood studios from the outset maintained research departments, whose remit was to dress the "window" into the past with appropriate concrete particulars—architecture, clothing, weaponry, and so on.[127] This in turn serves psychological realism, since "once a realist mise-en-scène is established, there is an impulse to read the characters and events within it according to realist expectations."[128] The result is, in most cases, a heavily stylized and historically arbitrary rendition of antiquity, whose ahistoricity is veiled by fetishizing the "authentic realism" of the mise-en-scène.[129] The antiquarianism to which most such films pay lip service thus functions, typically, as a way of distracting us from the *in*authenticity of emotions, thought-structures, and social interactions. The past turns out to be less, in L. P. Hartley's famous words, a "foreign country," than "the present dressed in funny clothes."[130]

The funny clothes are important, in so far as they are the primary signifier of historical difference.[131] Yet costume also supports psychological realism by assisting in the expression of character, especially by accumulating the kind of

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125. Wexman 1993: 144. See also Wexman 1993: 17–19 and cf. Morin 2005: 145.

126. This is why, in Hirsch's view, characters in historical epic should be "observed as icons seen typically in long shot rather than close-up" (Hirsch 1978: 45). Cf. the way that the close-up "subverts melodramatic moral typage" (Affron 1991: 110).

127. On film's colonialist celebration of "its ethnographic and quasi-archaeological powers to resuscitate forgotten and distant civilizations," see Shohat 1991: 49–51 (the quotation is from p. 51).

128. Hallam & Marshment 2000: 82.

129. Custen 1992: 40 (quoting an MGM press book). On techniques for constructing "realism" in historical film, see Custen 1992: 34–45, 111–18; Sobchak 2003 [1990]; Lindner 2005; Pierson 2005; Stubbs 2013: ch. 2; Llewellyn-Jones 2018; M. Williams 2018: 204.

130. The latter phrase is from Braudy 2002: 91.

131. Wexman 1993: 138–39.

detail that promotes "identification and involvement."[132] This is particularly
important for female characters. Clothing and accessories have always been
integral to the construction of femininity: a woman "is what she wears."[133]
Along with makeup, hairstyling, and other forms of decoration, costume is an
extension of the body creating an (often ill-defined) transition between that
body and the world.[134] This was already implicit in the Greek myth of Pan-
dora, the first woman, who is literally constructed of clothing and adornments.[135]
A women's magazine from 1923 makes the point more positively:

> I love to watch women of commonplace molding
>   Transformed by the wearing of exquisite things,
> In garments of beauty their splendor unfolding
>   As grubs into butterflies claiming their wings.[136]

As this poem suggests, the options open to a woman are often expressed
through her available wardrobe, making her clothing preferences a means of
revealing (or constructing) her appearance and, by extension, her character.
The choices available to ancient Greek beauties, as conceived by Hollywood,
are all variations on the theme of "mere draperies," ranging from the allure of
modest virtue (subdued solid colors, matte textures, limited accessories),[137]
to the vamp's outrageous eroticism (revealing, luminescent clothes and an
abundance of gleaming jewelry).[138] Wherever they lie on this spectrum, how-
ever, all costume designs are informed not only by the designers' ideas about
antiquity but by the period in which the film is made, helping contemporary
viewers to respond to their wearers as people like themselves.[139]

132. Gaines 1990a: 19. On the use of costume to express character and advance narrative in
classic Hollywood style, see Gaines 1990b.

133. Gaines 1990a: 1.

134. See further Steele 1985: ch. 7; Gaines & Herzog 1990.

135. See further Loraux 1993: ch. 2; Zeitlin 1996: ch. 2; Blondell 2013: 7–10, 15–22.

136. The poem, by Angela Morgan, is reprinted from *Red Book*, December 1923.

137. Unadorned, "classical" drapery traditionally conveys lofty nobility, virtue, truth and
beauty (Hollander 1978: 2–3, 64–65, 81, 277). For "mere draperies," see above, p. 10.

138. For the ancient Greek equation of jewelry with the "shining" of erotic beauty, see Blondell
2013: 7–10. On sparkle and glamor, see Postrel 2013: 120–22 and cf. Hollander 1978: 342–44.

139. See further Hollander 1978: 295–307, and cf. Llewellyn-Jones's discussions of Cleopatra
and Delilah (2002: 290–96; 2005). Hair and makeup, especially, are almost always modern
(Annas 1987).

These various techniques for producing psychological realism can make the most stylized fantasy and absurdest narrative—not to mention the cheesiest special effects—seem "real."[140] But they create yet more problems for presenting the world's most beautiful woman on screen. If the dramatis personae must appear to have real, understandable feelings and motives for their behavior, then the woman brought before our eyes as Helen must seem beautiful enough to explain—if not justify—the willingness of two great armies to fight over her, for ten years, at enormous cost in slaughter on both sides. She must preempt the viewer's inclination toward skepticism, scorn, or amusement at the idea of fighting such a war over any woman, let alone this particular one. If the Helen in question seems subpar, we may decide that the Greek and/or Trojan men are making fools of themselves over a woman who does not match her reputation. While this is a linchpin of much comedy at Helen's expense, it is fatal to any attempt to convince us of a screen Helen's "real" beauty.

At this point the reader may reasonably object that even within the parameters of "realistic" cinema the audience is not foolish enough to confuse image with reality (the train anecdote notwithstanding).[141] The screen may pose as a window but is really a picture frame, which draws attention to the artfully constructed nature of what it presents to view. This is markedly true for historical films, as for myth and fantasy and other forms of exotica. Not only are their subjects and environments known to be dead or nonexistent, but viewers are constantly reminded of this fact by such distancing factors as exotic costume, extraordinary spectacle, and the familiar faces of modern stars—not to mention the fact that everyone typically speaks English.[142] Surely, then, we do not have to fall in love with the Helen on screen to accept her as a "realistic" representation of a woman with whom every man would fall in love.

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140. NBC's head of programming was bowled over by the "reality" of the first pilot for the original *Star Trek*, despite its famously primitive special effects. He said that although he had seen many outer-space films, "I've never felt I was aboard a spacecraft. I never believed the crew was a real crew. But you guys gave me the feeling of total belief. I loved it" (Solow & Justman 1997: 59).

141. Cf. Maltby 2003: 380–84; Carroll 1985: 79–80. For the train anecdote, see above, p. 21.

142. This is exacerbated by the difficulty of finding an appropriate level of diction (cf. Llewellyn-Jones 2009: 574; Blanshard & Shahabudin 2011: 19). Hirsch argues that this makes silent film more suitable for ancient world epic (1978: 43–45).

Yet it is an inescapable fact that audiences have been "falling in love" with on-screen beauties since the beginning of cinema.[143] This is also the response to which we are predisposed as viewers. We are voluntarily trapped, "willingly undergoing a fixed term of imprisonment."[144] Just as we want to believe, however temporarily, in the "reality" of Zeus, Hercules and the monstrous cyclops, so we also want to believe (no more and no less) in a Helen beautiful enough to cause an epic war. Like Zeuxis's birds, we long to peck at those grapes. In subsequent chapters, we shall see this corroborated by the extent to which viewers disregard conventional wisdom—the eye of the beholder—and privilege their own responses to a Helen as a true measure of her beauty. This double vision, which subtends much of the pleasure of viewing, encourages us to judge that beauty by how it affects us personally—and condemn it if she fails.

The Choice Film Assignment of All Movie History

The pitfalls surrounding beauty, representation, and realism make bringing Helen to the screen a perilous enterprise. As the "essential" feminine, or the embodiment of physical perfection as such, she must transcend particularity; in so far as the goal is "realism," however, she must have a compelling visual and personal individuality, of a kind that makes her specific as well as extraordinary in the eyes of all beholders.

One approach, in theory, would be not to show Helen at all, but to use the reactions of the internal audience, combined with her concealed body, to provoke the imagination of the external audience and triangulate their desire. Indeed, if beauty is in its essence subjective, this is arguably the *only* effective approach. Many films have used this technique in the case of Jesus, for comparable reasons.[145] But Helen is not protected by piety. More to the point, in the context of popular cinema, her identity as the ultimate object of desire imposes an imperative to *show* her famous face. According to the trivia page for *Troy* on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb)—which I have not been

143. See, e.g., deCordova 1990: 90; Fowles 1992: 161–62; Babington 2001: 1–2; Barbas 2001: 16–17; Morin 2005: 60–67.

144. Elsaesser 1981: 271. On the complicitous spectator, see further Comolli 1980: 138–40; Neale 1990: 163–66; M. Smith 1995: 41–45, 54–58; Aaron 2005.

145. He is "a potent force for historical change yet also unrepresentable precisely because He also supposedly represents the timeless" (West 2015).

able to authenticate—"Wolfgang Petersen originally didn't want Helen to appear in the movie. He felt that an actress couldn't live up to the audience's expectations, but the producers insisted she appear." In the words of a medieval romance, "Nature had made her to be beheld and seen."[146] To put it in more contemporary terms, she is defined by her to-be-looked-at-ness.[147]

If beauty really is in the eye of the beholder, of course, it should not matter what Helen looks like (provided certain male characters respond appropriately in order to generate the story). The same applies to another narrative strategy that is often used to circumvent such problems, that is, declaring Helen merely an excuse for the Trojan War (as opposed to its cause). This means the war is not about her or her beauty, or even about men and their desire—at least not their desire for women; it is about their desire for wealth or power, for which Helen serves merely as a more or less plausible pretext. In such a scenario, she could, in theory, be portrayed as an average woman who just happens to appeal to certain men. Tellingly, however, directors have eschewed this approach. It is very clear in *Troy*, for example, that Helen is only a pretext for Greek aggression, but this did not prevent the director, Wolfgang Petersen, from declaring, "She has to be believable as the face that launched 1,000 ships."[148] As the inevitable Marlovian allusion reminds us, it is Helen's face and its consequences that give her myth its enduring power. No matter what turns her story may take, then, any representation must engage somehow with her identity as the most beautiful woman in the world.

In making Helen's beauty visible, most films begin with conventional signifiers, grounded in contemporary tastes and expectations, which are inflected to varying degrees by historicity. The foundation is always long hair (usually but not always blonde), a slender figure, and the "mere draperies" synonymous with antiquity, which range from voluminous to barely there. This kind of generic marker can be used to preempt questions of "realism," much as it does with Greek vase painting.[149] In *The Story of Mankind* (1957), for instance—an eccentric film about the afterlife featuring various historical events—Dani Crayne's hair, features, costume, and gestures, in her vignette as Helen, provide a cartoonlike sketch that makes its point without any

146. Scherer 1967: 371.
147. This influential term was coined in Mulvey 2009 [1975]; cf. also Squire 2011: 82.
148. Fleming 2003.
149. Cf. above, p. 20.

attempt at individuation.[150] The so-called peplum films present similarly stylized character types without apology—indeed, with relish.[151] Yet "types" are not intrinsically "unrealistic." Rather, they establish expectations, mediating between the viewer's experience and reality. Even the most generic live-action Helen is inhabited by an embodied performer and becomes "realistic" if we turn our attention to that performer's specificity.

This brings us to the all-important matter of casting. The movies' obsession with beauty would seem to make the role of Helen, as one 1950s Hollywood-watcher put it, "the choice film assignment of all movie history."[152] The selection of an actor for this assignment must begin with a "beautiful" face and figure, but it cannot end there.[153] Beauty and especially glamor are sometimes associated with impassivity or lack of movement, but if a woman looks her best in still photographs, her beauty is not "stageable."[154] In a *motion* picture, a static, expressionless face, however well proportioned, is alienating rather than alluring.[155] (It is no accident that "wooden" is a standard descriptor for poor acting.) The performance of beauty, in so far as it depends on the close-up, requires particular subtlety. As one beauty advisor warns us, a blank expression "will ruin the best of good looks."[156] An actor's voice is also important, especially considering voice's time-honored role in the expression of seductive femininity.

150. As the word "cartoon" implies, the use of typing is at its most extreme in animation, on which see Wells 2007: 201: "It is not an act of record, but of interpretation, and has the advantage of not having to be mediated through the available 'signs' of live actors, physical locations, material period costumes, etc." This means, ironically, that the characters are genuinely themselves (as opposed to being actors).

151. The term "peplum" refers to a wave of films about antiquity, often cheaply made and mostly Italian, that emerged in the post-WWII period alongside that period's historical epics. See further Lucanio 1994; Pomeroy 2008: ch. 3; Pomeroy 2013; Pomeroy 2017; Shahabudin 2009; O'Brien 2014; Rushing 2016; Blanshard 2017: 437–40.

152. Anon. 1954a.

153. The need to choose a single actor for the role is not absolute in principle, but multiple casting would prevent us from identifying (with) Helen as a specific real person (see M. Smith 1995: 24–29 and cf. 130–32).

154. Shields 2013: 44. Postrel argues that still photography conveys the glamor of the stars (2013: 177–78), as distinct from charisma, "which requires a live performance" (2013: 117).

155. That is the premise underlying, for example, the classic horror film *Eyes Without a Face* (1960). Even at rest, the beautiful face should convey "a sort of internal mobility like the mysteriously alive waters of a still fountain" (Tyler 1970 [1947]: 56).

156. Anon. 1923a.

The performer's effectiveness thus depends not only on her features but on her ability to employ the resources of gesture, demeanor, and voice—in other words, to act. As Hedy Lamarr put it (and she should know), "You can't just take some bosomy cutie and by giving her some sexy lines and tight costumes create a glamour girl. Sophia Loren would be a glamour girl even if she were in rags selling fish. She has the look, the movement, and the intellect."[157] A powerful performance can even trump supposedly "objective" appearances. Bette Davis, for example, is not conventionally beautiful. According to Molly Haskell, "She was universally considered unsexy" in Hollywood, "not to say unusable"; nevertheless, Haskell argues, she has a beauty and charm that are "willed into being"; she convinces us that she is beautiful and sexy "by the vividness of her own self-image."[158]

The next question is whether to cast an unknown or a star. Helen's mythic identity would seem to situate her at the apex of the star system, which was occupied, in Hollywood's golden age, by "that unique creature, the film goddess—one who provokes admiration, imitation and sometimes the most total and irrational devotion of a multitude of worshipers."[159] Such stars, often referred to as "love goddesses,"[160] become public signifiers, allowing audiences to draw on the collective desire that is produced and reproduced through circulation of their images.[161] This kind of iconic energy is concentrated in the sex symbols of collective fantasy—the Marilyn Monroes—whose burden of erotic signification far outstrips their identity as individuals.

Yet even the most brilliant star is at the same time a "real" person whose life extends beyond her screen presence, linking her many manifestations to provide a measure of coherence and continuity. There is a mutually reinforcing

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157. Lamarr 1967: 85.

158. Haskell 2016: 217, 221. The first quotation refers to *Jezebel* (1938), the second to *Beyond the Forest* (1949).

159. Card 1994: 159. On stardom, see further deCordova 1990; Gledhill 1991; Ellis 1992: ch. 6; Allen & Gomery 1993: 172–85; Wexman 1993: 19–25; Mayne 1993: ch. 6; Stacey 1994; Geraghty 2000; Barbas 2001; Maltby 2003: 141–54; Dyer 1998; Dyer 2004; Morin 2005; Llewelyn-Jones 2018: ch. 4.

160. See further Wexman 1993: ch. 4 and cf. Haskell 2016: 102–17. For the analogy between Greek goddesses and Hollywood goddesses, see also Maurice 2019: 94–95.

161. For the "complicated game of desires that plays out around the figure of the star," see Ellis 1992: 98. For beauty and (heterosexual) love as the essence of stardom, see Morin 2005 with Dyer 1998: 45–46.

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