

The Onscreen Makeover

Conflicting messages of inner and outer beauty in
A Star is Born and *Beyond the Lights*



Cathy Lomax, *Doubles (Making Up '54)*, 2010, oil on canvas,

Cathy Lomax, June 2017

The on-screen makeover is a rite of passage, the moment when, with the help of makeup and clothes, the ugly duckling becomes a swan-like woman. But this ritual is not always a straightforward journey from plain Jane to glamour puss. Makeup is a complex medium and while it may promise a corrected appearance that will reveal the real you, it can easily become a mask that conceals and suppresses.

In this paper I will focus on *A Star is Born* and *Beyond the Lights*, two films where excessive makeup is seen as problematic, and look at how the made-up surface can have contradictory meanings.

The Makeover

There is a long held notion that, to quote Thomas Carlyle, 'appearances are direct expressions of the inner self.'¹ Richard Sennett in his 1977 examination of changing ideas of public and private, *The Fall of Public Man*, dates this assumption, that exterior form echoes interior qualities, back to the middle of the 19th century in Europe.²

The makeover, a procedure where appearance is improved with dramatic before and after results, trades on the idea that an enhanced appearance equates to improved opportunities. This was an attractive idea for the predominantly working class audiences of early cinema and as Sarah Berry points out, 'The mythology of the makeover became synonymous with the Hollywood star's rise from obscurity to fame.'³ Elizabeth Ford and Deborah Mitchell suggest that the makeover has become a genre of its own within mainstream American cinema⁴ harking back to Pygmalion and Cinderella, archetypal stories embedded in Western culture.

In many Hollywood makeover films, the female star is not quite herself when she is drab and dowdy, it is only when she clears away this false exterior (or rather applies different makeup) that the true beauty, which lies within is revealed.⁵ This is the case in one of the highest profile makeover films, 1942's *Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper), which stars Bette Davis as a frumpy, suppressed spinster with clumpy shoes and a beetle brow, who emerges after illness as a

sophisticated woman with perfectly arched brows, defined lips and a glamorous wardrobe (*fig. 1*).



Figure 1: *Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942)

The makeover has been central to the plot of numerous other films throughout film history including *Forbidden Fruit* (Cecil B deMille, 1921), *Madame Satan* (Cecil B deMille, 1930), *The Women* (George Cukor, 1939),⁶ *Cover Girl* (Charles Vidor, 1944), *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1957), *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990), *The Princess Diaries* (Garry Marshall, 2001), *Kill Bill* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003) and *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016)

The Makeup

In order to examine what the putting on and taking off of makeover makeup means it is first worth considering the role of makeup both on- and off-screen. The earliest films used blue-sensitive, black and white film stock that inaccurately rendered some colour tones. Red for instance appeared very dark onscreen while blue eyes looked white. Makeup was used as a material to correct this problem and as a way of emphasising facial features that would otherwise be bleached out under the bright Kleig lights. The popularity of cinema and the stars of these early films, created opportunities for commercial tie ins and with the advent of more sophisticated film stocks makeup was used (and sold) as more than merely a corrective medium. By the 1920s, note Mulvey and Richards, actresses 'looked exotic, symbolised modernity and did outrageous things like wearing nail polish, so coloured nails

became a craze'.⁷ These new women or flappers were, says Stephen Gundle, the women 'who first embodied in the public realm a desire for personal freedom and self-definition'.⁸ Screen stars including Clara Bow, Louise Brooks and Greta Garbo took the part of flappers on screen, they 'wore short, bobbed hair, lipstick, and dresses that only came down to the knee [...] Their beauty was not natural but unusual and artificial [and they became] the first film stars to define a look that impressed the fashionable social elite.'⁹ By the 1930s, writes makeup historian Richard Corson, Hollywood set the makeup fashions.¹⁰ The growing popularity of Hollywood films and the development of new products to keep pace with technical developments on-screen, meant that the everyday wearing of makeup for women was consolidated as a normal practice. By the 1940s notes Melissa McEuen, 'Hollywood had transformed the made-up bad woman [of the 1920s] into a glamour girl whose exotic femininity stemmed largely from her made-up face'¹¹ This influence of film star looks meant that a certain degree of makeup began to be expected as part of a presentation of femininity.

A Star is Born

Even as the wearing of makeup was normalised it represented a complex code, which was easy to get wrong. *A Star is Born* has been filmed three times with a fourth version starring Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper due to be released in 2018. Its enduring appeal is in its star-making plot. In each film a talented ingénue is taken under the wings of an experienced older male mentor. Her star rises just as his wanes. In the 1954 version, directed by George Cukor, Esther Blodgett, played by Judy Garland is given a contract by a big studio under the recommendation of one of their stars, Norman Maine (James Mason), who saw her singing for pleasure late at night with her band. The studio brings her in to be tested and made-over by studio technicians who despair of her facial deficiencies:

'it's the nose, the nose is the problem... suppose we try the Crawford mouth to take the attention away from the nose.' (*fig.2*)



Figure 2: 'Suppose we try the Crawford mouth.' *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954)



Figure 3: 'He laughs raucously.' *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954)



Figure 4: 'Take every bit of that junk off your face.' *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954)



Figure 5: 'A recognisable Judy Garland.' *A Star is Born* (George Cukor, 1954)

They give her no say in the transformation process and try to iron out the quirks that make her an individual, thereby transforming her into an archetypal movie star. Her mentor (or we could say fairy godmother), Norman Maine, does not initially recognise the transformed Blodgett. When he does he laughs raucously (*fig.3*) before sitting her down and telling her to:

‘Take every bit of that junk off your face.’

‘But my eyes are all wrong and my ears are too big and I’ve got no chin.’ She replies

‘Take it all off and put on your eyebrows and your lipstick like you always do and I’ll do the rest’ he says as she aggressively covers her studio made-up face with cold cream (*fig.4*).

The transformation process is not shown but Norman Maine’s toned-down version of Esther Blodgett is far from makeup free. Instead it is a recognisable Judy Garland that stares back at us from the mirror (*fig.5*), wearing a full star makeup of foundation, powder, lipstick, eye shadow, mascara, eyebrow pencil and rouge. The suggestion is that there is a right and wrong makeup. The correct makeup will reveal the real you. The wrong look will make you a laughing stock. Esther Blodgett is renamed Vicki Lester by the studio and of course goes on to become a huge star. Her mentor, fairy godmother Norman Maine, has a less happy fate.

Beyond the Lights

In *Beyond the Lights*, a 2014 film directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood, Noni Jean as played by Gugu Mbatha-Raw is a rising R&B star with glamorous makeup, long straight hair and provocative clothing (*fig.6*). She looks exactly right as a highly sexualised current-day, female music star, slotting in alongside real life figures such as Beyoncé and Rihanna. Early in the film we see Noni Jean sing at a talent contest, she is a talented but plain child with an ambitious mother.

Forward to the present day and after winning a prestigious award a desperately unhappy Noni Jean is rescued as she attempts to jump off of a



Figure 6: Beyond The Lights (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2014)



Figure 7: Beyond The Lights (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2014)



Figure 8: Beyond The Lights (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2014)

hotel balcony. The people around her, including her styling team, treat her as material to be moulded. She seems to have no input or interest in how she looks (*fig.7*) in a career that has been built on what is described as 'face-down, ass-up' packaging.

Her suicide attempt is played down as she carries on with her intense schedule. It is only when she is required to fake S&M sex onstage with her white-rapper lover that she takes control and runs away with a young policeman who claims to 'see *her*'. The implication being that he can see through the artifice to the real her.

We don't see Noni's transformation from plain girl to R&B star on-screen instead we see what could be deemed a reverse makeover. In her hideaway with the idealistic young policeman Kaz (another fairy godmother?) Noni Jean wipes off her makeup and cuts out her hair extensions (*fig.8*), a dramatic transformation that takes her back to a young woman more recognisable as the child in the talent competition. A reviewer at Hollywoodreporter.com notes that 'Watching her remove her fake nails and weave and set free the realness within is quite moving.'¹²

As the film finishes Noni Jean performs one of her own songs on a festival stage. She wears her own hair, albeit it styled, and sports a natural makeup, including short nails with a dark nail polish (one of the present-day indicators of a serious woman), and sombre outfit, an appropriate look for the soulful music she is now performing (*fig.9*).

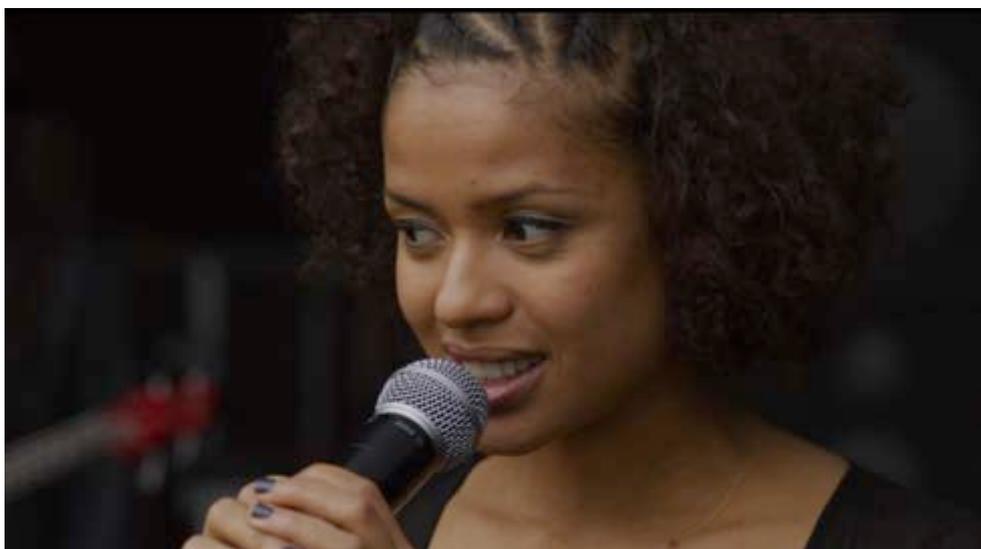


Figure 9: *Beyond The Lights* (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2014)

In both these films we are shown how the wrong kind of makeup (or mask) can misrepresent an individual, leaving them open to ridicule, advertising them as sexually available and making them unhappy. Joan Riviere in her 1929 essay, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' suggests that high achieving women take on a mask of femininity in order to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men. But is the demonization of makeup just another way of controlling how women look, bad girls wear makeup and good girls are unadorned?

In her 1996 essay *Pandora's Box*, Laura Mulvey writes; 'A mask-like surface enhances the concept of feminine beauty as an 'outside', as artifice and masquerade, which conceals danger and deception.' The suspicion is that under the makeup is something terrible and dreadful and that makeup is deceptive and not to be trusted.

Both Noni Jean and Esther Blodgett have to enlist the help of a man to find the outward appearance that represents who they really are. A misogynistic touch that reinforces Mulvey's proposition that painted women are seen as deceptive and 'bad'. It is worth noting however that in their 'more real' states both women continue to wear makeup, albeit a makeup that has been toned down and approved by their men. Catherine Constable sees the mask as a 'truthful illusion' rather than purely patriarchal or indicating the absence of truth. She says that the mask can be seen to have a wide range of possible meanings that destabilise 'the definition of glamour as objectification.'¹³

Kardashian

Current-day star Kim Kardashian who is best known for the reality series *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, is an example of someone who embraces artifice. In the numerous selfies compiled in her 2016 book *Selfish*, she shows her bare face, her sunburnt face, her smudged makeup swimming-face and her heavily made-up Halloween face. She refuses to hide the mechanics of the image. Many of the pictures in the book deconstruct her image by showing the people who work, under her direction, on her look (*fig. 10*). So in amongst the solo selfies are pictures and captions, revealing the intensive work her

favourite makeup artists put into her face and how her stylists organise and repair her clothes. Kardashian is easy to dismiss as a shallow, appearance



Figure 10: Kim Kardashian from *Selfish*



Figure 11: Cindy Sherman

obsessed, reality star. But her project can also be read as art and has some themes in common with the work of artist Cindy Sherman who uses her own body and face in her photographs, dressing herself up and down (*fig. 11*) and thereby deconstructing images of women from cinema and art history (which have on the whole been made by men).

No Make Up

So is makeup merely, as masquerade theory would have us believe, a material of the patriarchy created to trap women? In May 2016 musician Alicia Keys initiated the #nomakeup movement by appearing on a record sleeve bare faced (*fig. 12*). She describes how this came about:

'My face was totally raw... As far as I was concerned, this was my quick run-to-the-shoot-so-I-can-get-ready look, not the actual photo-shoot look ... [The photographer, Paola Kudacki] started to shoot me. It was just a plain white background, me and the photographer intimately relating ... And I swear it is the strongest, most empowered, most free, and most honestly beautiful that I have ever felt ... it was that truth that

resonated with others who posted #nomakeup selfies in response to this real and raw me. I hope to God it's a revolution. 'Cause I don't want to cover up anymore. Not my face, not my mind, not my soul, not my thoughts, not my dreams, not my struggles, not my emotional growth. Nothing.'¹⁴



Figure 12: Alicia Keys, photo Paola Kudacki

Conclusion

Should the makeover be seen as a dumb romantic fantasy – fodder fed to susceptible female filmgoers? Is makeup itself a dangerous, deceptive medium, something that traps and constrains us? Or is the makeover a way of realising our true self and makeup a creative tool to be embraced as a way of democratising faces and lifting spirits? (In WWII in America a slick of red lipstick was seen as a way of maintaining morale on the homefront, and cosmetics were kept off the ration throughout the war in Great Britain). And is there a suspicion that Alicia Keys can go bare faced because unlike most of us she is naturally beautiful? Kate Pasola in the online post 'Why I'm Rejecting Alicia Keys' No Makeup Movement' maintains that until magazines show celebrities with blemishes and wrinkles the no makeup idea is just another way of making women feel bad about themselves.¹⁵ Llewellyn Negrin

asserts that western cosmetics rather than masking an authentic self, actually reflect the multiplicity of who a person really is by dissolving 'the unified self into a myriad of different guises or masks'.¹⁶ Noni Jean in *Beyond the Lights* and Esther Blodgett in *A Star is Born* do not reject makeup completely in their journeys to find the true representation of themselves. Rather they have to find the makeup that represents who they want to be seen as at that point in their lives.



A Star is Born (George Cukor, 1954)

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- ¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartus Resartus* (1938), pg 153
- ² Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (1977), quoted in Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Hollywood Catwalk*, pg 83
- ³ Sarah Berry, *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood* (2000), pg xviii
- ⁴ Elizabeth Ford and Deborah Mitchell, *The Makeover in Movies* (2004)
- ⁵ Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Hollywood Catwalk* (2010), pg 85
- ⁶ In *The Women* Mary (Norma Shearer) transforms from a relaxed and confident wife, who shares her leisure activities with her husband and wears checked shirts and corduroy skirts which evoke his hunting garb, to a more poised and autonomous woman with a wardrobe of outlandish evening dresses and a perfect manicure of 'jungle red'. Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Hollywood Catwalk*, pg 57
- ⁷ Mulvey & Richards, *Decades of Beauty* (1998), pg 74
- ⁸ Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History* (1994), pg 159
- ⁹ *ibid*, pg 160
- ¹⁰ Richard Corson, *Fashions in Makeup* (2010), pg 516
- ¹¹ Melissa A McEuen, *Making War Making Women* (2010), pg 48
- ¹² David Rooney, 'Beyond the Lights: Toronto Review'
- ¹³ Catherine Constable, 'Making Up the Truth: On Lies, Lipstick and Friedrich Nietzsche' (2000), pg199
- ¹⁴ Alicia Keys, 'Alicia Keys: Time to Uncover'
- ¹⁵ Kate Pasola, 'Why I'm Rejecting Alicia Keys' No Makeup Movement'
- ¹⁶ Llewellyn Negrin, 'Cosmetics and the female body: A critical appraisal of poststructuralist theories of masquerade' (2000), pg 84