

HOLLYWOOD ³ EXOTICISM

Thirty years ago, no lady ever made up. . . . And now, from the greenish or umber sheen of her eyelids to the flame or saffron of her lips and nails, the lady of to-day is a subtle and marvelous creation based on the entity that is—Herself.

Vogue, June 1934

Since the early days of the star system, Hollywood femininity has been closely tied in with the marketing of cosmetics, and one of the most important stylistic vehicles for this relationship was the glamour of exoticism. The stereotypes of exotic ethnicity deployed in Hollywood films were both repeated and modified within cosmetics advertising of the 1930s, and numerous female stars endorsed makeup brands. It has been argued that the use of exoticism in cosmetics advertising has historically “displaced” discourses of race and gender via a “language of ‘color’ and ‘type.’”¹ This can be seen as a suppression of racial difference, but commercial discourses have also worked to normalize difference by treating it euphemistically. For example, in the early 1930s Max Factor began de-

signing cosmetics to correspond with a range of complexion, hair, and eye colors, and this “personalized” color-matching system (which was widely adopted by other brands) avoided issues of race by describing differences in skin tone as aesthetic categories or “complexion types.” Cosmetics advertising of the 1930s certainly utilized stereotypes (popular makeup products used “Tropical,” “Chinese,” and “Gypsy” colors), but the advertising was, nevertheless, significant because it described beauty in terms of multiple points on a spectrum, rather than a single, monochromatic ideal.

The paleness that many women, both “white” and of color, had struggled for years to create with bleach creams, arsenic and lead powder, veils, and parasols was, I would argue, significantly modified by Hollywood’s familiarization of the sensual, painted face. This relativization of beauty norms also resulted from the expansion of a commercial beauty culture that relied economically on the promotion of new looks, new faces, and new colors. The 1930s’ exotic makeup lines can thus be seen as an early form of commodified multiculturalism aimed at maximizing cosmetics sales. By mid-decade, most cosmetics manufacturers had stopped advertising traditional, lily-white facial powder altogether.

By the end of the decade, the cinematic projection of sexuality onto nonwhite women, typically characterized as dangerous “vampires” or tragic native-girls, had also been modified. Sensuous and dusky dark-haired sirens like Dolores Del Rio, Dorothy Lamour, Hedy Lamarr, and Rita Hayworth had replaced pale platinum blondes as icons of glamour. It is difficult to interpret such changes in fashion iconography, but what is clear is that in the 1930s a relative increase occurred in the range of beauty types on the American screen and in advertising, suggesting that the dominance of white, monoracial beauty was significantly challenged by previously marginalized female identities.

From their first appearance at the turn of the century, Hollywood’s ethnic stereotypes were predicated on the notion



Cover of *Screenland* featuring Greta Garbo's cosmetic exoticism, circa 1933.

that there exists a category of nonethnic whiteness. Even in the late 1930s, when Mendelian genetic theory had disproved the concept of “pure” races with that of the human gene pool differentiated only by temporary geographical isolation, Hollywood perpetuated myths of racial purity and the dangers of “mixed blood.” Films and publicity materials continued to



Article "Loretta Goes Oriental," *Photoplay*, March 1932, p. 71.

refer to racial purity even as genetic theory was becoming popularized in the form of pro-assimilation arguments, which gradually displaced hereditarian and eugenicist racism in mainstream ideology.² At the same time, however, Hollywood's

constructions of race were visualized in the form of clearly artificial “ethnic simulacra,” the cosmetic basis of which was often described by publicity in terms of the wonders of Hollywood makeup illusionism.

These “simulacra” are the material of what Ella Shohat calls Hollywood’s “spectacle of difference”—its creation of ethnicity as a consumable pleasure.³ One of the primary products of this spectacle, the image of exotic beauty, was indispensable to the recuperation of cosmetics. The frequent use of exotic female stars as endorsers of women’s beauty products was thus at odds with nativist norms of beauty, just as women’s obsession with Rudolph Valentino, Ramon Novarro, and Charles Boyer’s passionate sexuality was seen as a rejection of culturally approved but boring WASP masculinity.⁴ One way to explore the controversial popularity of “ethnic” beauty is to look closely at the discourses around it, such as the way that racial difference was used in marketing, and the range of readings that such strategies made available.

The artificiality of Hollywood’s ethnic categories was visible not only in discourses about cosmetics but also in publicity about nonwhite stars and films that represented hybrid racial identities. Notes from the Production Code Administration’s censorship of *Imitation of Life* (1934), for example, are symptomatic in their unease about Peola, the film’s mulatta character (played by Fredi Washington). Washington’s image on screen clearly undermined the myth of racial “purity,” but the Hays office, which coordinated the industry’s self-censorship, responded by referring to the character of Peola as “the negro girl appearing as white.” The film disturbed the Production Code Administration because it undermined the visual inscription of race as color, as well as implicitly reflecting to the history of miscegenation. The Hays office insisted that the invisibility of Peola’s race was “extremely dangerous” to “the industry as a whole” and stipulated that the film script attribute her lightness to an albino-like aberration within “a line of definitely negro strain.”⁵ The difficulty of inscribing racist

essentialism in terms of skin color also emerges in *Photoplay's* description of Nina Mae McKinney, star of *Hallelujah!* (1929), which begins, "Nina isn't black, she's coppery," and concludes with the comment, "She may be black, but she's got a blonde soul."⁶ The visual culture of Hollywood consumerism made it increasingly difficult to assign fixed identities to glamorized racial stereotypes.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have pointed out how the "racial politics of casting" in Hollywood effectively "submerged" the multiculturalism that is at the center of American national identity, replacing it with a visually coded racial hierarchy.⁷ But the constant publicizing of Hollywood's cosmetic illusionism, along with marketing discourses obsessed with the "makeover," undermined the racial essentialism that required stereotypes to be taken as signs with real-world referents. Hollywood's exoticism of the 1930s was a product of centuries of Eurocentric representations and decades of racist production practices. But these films also popularized a form of exoticism as masquerade within an increasingly diverse market for both Hollywood films and associated goods like cosmetics, subjecting their images to an idiosyncratic process of consumer appropriation.

Western Beauty and Split Femininity

Modern cosmetics have been promoted in terms of a fairly recent concept of "democratic" beauty, based on the proposition that with good grooming and makeup, every woman can be beautiful in her own, unique way. In the early 1930s, beauty columns began to suggest that facial beauty was simply a matter of effort and technique. This concept of beauty as universally attainable was predicated on a sense of the body's malleability and constructedness, and like the notion that one's personality could be endlessly modified through fashion, it supported the requirements of a consumer economy. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, concepts of physical beauty have been even more controversial than

debates over the legitimacy of fashion. Beauty as a social value continues to be highly problematic from a range of perspectives, including contemporary feminist ones. But the condemnation of physical beauty has a long history in relation to the moral condemnation of women's sexuality, and a discussion of the rise of commercial beauty culture needs to take account of this.

Christian warnings against "vanity" and the cultivation of physical attractiveness have often clearly articulated anxieties about the expression of female sexuality. Historian Arthur Marwick has traced the discourse of English, European, and American beauty manuals from the sixteenth century onward, arguing that their emphasis on the cultivation of feminine virtue was linked to fears of female physical beauty as a form of power. Until the nineteenth century, many books on beauty were, in fact, written by church officials or professional moralists, and reflect a long-standing European model of split femininity iconically represented by "the Madonna and the whore." Real feminine beauty is said to reflect moral goodness (the beauty of the Madonna), but it can also exist physically in the absence of goodness (the seductiveness of the whore). In Gabriel de Minut's 1587 book *Of Beauty*, for example, the author explains that an attractive woman who is not virtuous is only *seemingly* beautiful, while in fact stimulating "the pollution and contamination of vice and ordure."⁸ Beauty is thus a sign whose meaning can only be determined by the feelings it invokes in men: if it stimulates lustful desire, it is not "real" beauty but a sign of the *woman's* immorality. The usefulness of this ideology for inhibiting women's expression of their own sense of attractiveness is clear, given the risk of inspiring the "wrong" kind of appreciation.

In spite of this moralizing split between physical and spiritual beauty, by the late eighteenth century there was a large market for practical advice on techniques of cosmetic self-improvement. As the nineteenth century progressed, the value of beauty for both men and women within a growing capital-

ist and service economy became obvious, and the recognition of beauty as social capital is evident in its absorption into a feminine work ethic. Women's cosmetic self-maintenance came to be seen as a process that might not *produce* beauty but could help retain positive attributes and was, therefore, dutiful rather than unethical. This view led to a plethora of beauty guides that originated and circulated in England, France, and the United States. Their authors included "society beauties," professional writers on fashion and etiquette, and purveyors of scientific beauty treatments.

In the nineteenth century a fairly limited range of cosmetic aids were used, however, particularly by comparison with the earlier popularity of cosmetics among social elites in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bourgeois women limited their use of beauty products to items like refined soap, lotions and astringents for softening the skin, hair oils and tints, and facial powder. In 1866, poisonous white facial powders made from lead or arsenic salts were finally replaced by an oxide of zinc, which was cheap and became available to working-class women.⁹ Christian anxieties about physical beauty and cosmetic self-adornment remained powerful, however, until the popularity of cheaper cosmetics after World War I began to mitigate the social stigma of makeup.¹⁰ In the transitional, prewar period, bourgeois women's interest in cosmetics was made morally acceptable by the quasi-spiritual philosophies of "beauty culturists." These were primarily female entrepreneurs who, like Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubenstein, had some knowledge of dermatology and a lot of marketing skill. They made cosmetics morally acceptable by promoting a philosophy of "Natural Beauty" to be achieved through good health, expensive massage, and "scientific" skin treatments. Their approach combined moralizing about the need for inner perfection with the pleasures of salon pampering: as one advertisement asked, "Is your complexion clear? Does it express the clearness of your life? Are there discolorations or blemishes in the skin—which symbolize imperfections within?"¹¹

But this mind-body philosophy, which was carried over from the nineteenth century, also implied that individuals who were less than beautiful could be judged as to their moral inferiority, a theory popularized by the pseudoscience of phrenology. In addition, it presumed to set the standards of “Natural Beauty” according to northern European ideals, implying that racial “difference” could be read as both an aesthetic and a moral imperfection. Such theories represented a nativist bias in the United States that became increasingly virulent in response to new patterns of immigration and resulted in the eugenics movement. Eugenics brought together Christian notions that the body was a mirror of the soul, a Darwinist emphasis on heredity, and a pseudoscientific notion of racial purity. It aimed to purify the “white” race by restricting immigration and miscegenation, and by preventing “deviant” bodies from reproducing.¹²

Following World War I, however, nativist claims to physical and aesthetic superiority became increasingly incompatible with the demands of the new consumer economy. Given the requirements for “Natural Beauty”—a WASP pedigree, lots of fresh air, and virtuous thoughts—most American women would have been doomed to an inferior visage. But consumer-marketing professionals needed women to look in the mirror and see potential beauty so that new products could be positioned as a means of self-improvement. The cosmetics industry had also begun to shift from a “class” to a mass market in the nineteenth century, when white-collar women were confronted with the value placed on their personal appearance in the commercial service sector. This market of working- and middle-class women gradually became far more significant to the cosmetics industry than its traditional market of elite female consumers.¹³

The Makeover and the Max Factor

The growing presence of women in service-sector work and the entertainment industry throughout the nineteenth century

meant that female beauty became increasingly visible as a form of social capital. New women's magazines and self-help literature facilitated the rise of a commercial beauty culture that increasingly looked to actresses to legitimize new modes of self-adornment.¹⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century, cosmetics manufacturers had solicited letters of endorsement from reigning theatrical divas to be printed in publications aimed at bourgeois women.¹⁵ In the early twentieth century, however, endorsements by cinema stars began to outnumber those from "legitimate" stage actresses, as popular appeals to a mass market for beauty products displaced reliance on elite consumers.

Helena Rubenstein opened a salon in London in 1908 and by 1916 had begun a chain that included salons in several major U.S. cities. Mainstream American women were still reluctant to adopt her eye shadow, however, and Rubenstein turned to Hollywood for promotional help by designing the Orientalist eye makeup for Theda Bara in *A Fool There Was* (1915).¹⁶ With their heavy, seductive eyes and "vampire lips," Hollywood silent-film stars like Bara, Nita Naldi, Pola Negri, and Alla Nazimova successfully challenged American norms of childlike beauty epitomized by Dorothy and Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford. Their success can be seen in the popularity of Clara Bow's huge eyes and "bee-stung lips," which were incorporated into the innocent but assertive sexuality of late-1920s flappers like Colleen Moore and Joan Crawford.¹⁷ By 1934, the style pedagogy of Hollywood was metaphorized in a film featuring Thelma Todd as a model who demonstrates the miracle of cosmetics in the window of a beauty emporium, while a simultaneous huge "close-up" image of her face is projected alongside her in the shop window, attracting a crowd of onlookers (in *Hips, Hips, Hooray*).

Makeup played a significant technical role in the production of the Hollywood screen image. The use of heavy makeup on film actors was initially necessary to conceal the skin's red corpuscles, which were visible on orthochromatic film; it

also hid imperfections exaggerated by the camera and provided a more consistent image for continuity purposes. By the early 1930s, panchromatic film stock allowed the use of a thinner greasepaint, and studio makeup artists began producing a carefully shaded and contoured face for the Hollywood screen—a look that was further stylized by studio lighting and photographic retouching.¹⁸ To maintain the image he had created of Marlene Dietrich, Josef von Sternberg supervised all her studio portraiture: to make Dietrich's nose more aquiline, he once painted a thin silver line from the bridge to the tip of the nose and focused a small spotlight on it, with effective results.¹⁹

The stars' faces were individualized with a range of signature features: the shape of the mouth and eyebrows, the color and form of the hair, and the amount and style of eye makeup worn. Stars usually maintained a consistent makeup style from film to film, except when playing a "character" role, although they adapted to and modified broader fashions in makeup. Joan Crawford's mouth, for example, was painted inside her natural lip line throughout the 1920s to make her mouth smaller and rounder. In 1932, however, the films *Letty Lynton* and *Rain* display a fuller, somewhat overpainted mouth. As one article noted, "The lipstick extended beyond the corner and the mouth was greatly exaggerated in both thickness and length." In spite of the controversy this caused, Crawford's trend setting established what came to be seen as the "natural"-shaped mouth.²⁰

The logic of an expanding consumer market for cosmetics helps to account for steady increases in the variety of products available from the early twentieth century onward. In 1931, an article in *Harper's Magazine* commented:

A quarter of a century ago perfume, rice powder, and "anti-chap" for the hands constituted the entire paraphernalia of a woman's boudoir table. Now that table looks like a miniature chemist shop. No detail of appearance which can

safely be entrusted to artifice is ever left to nature. . . . As a result feminine beauty, once the Creator's business, is now Big Business's.²¹

The article reported that more than two billion dollars were spent each year on beauty products, and that forty thousand beauty shops were scattered across the United States. The marketing strategies that fueled this growth were based on a few key concepts, most of which had also been applied to fashion marketing, as discussed in chapter 1. These included the cultivation of a personal style chosen from a range of "types," the idea that this style could be changed at will, that an openness to change was necessary for finding or perfecting one's style, and that Hollywood stars represented idealized types for emulation and also demonstrated the effectiveness of cosmetic self-transformation.

Profiles of female stars in Hollywood fan magazines inevitably include a photograph of the star when she had just arrived in Hollywood. Much is made of the quaintness of her appearance in contrast to the astounding beauty she has cultivated since, which is credited to both her drive for self-improvement and the skill of studio makeup artists and designers.²² In the 1933 article "These Stars Changed Their Faces—And So Can You!" this process is described in terms of facial features that have been "remodeled" by particular stars:

Though styles may change in dresses and hats, most of us cart about the same old face . . . year in and year out. And sometimes we'd be glad to exchange the old looks for some new ones. But how can it be done? The movie stars are showing you! . . . In the new films, there are many "new faces," which have been remodeled over familiar frames. And something tells us that these new eyebrows, lips and hairlines are going to be as avidly copied by Miss America as the Hollywood clothes styles have been.²³

Beauty advice columns of the early 1930s focused increasingly on the use of cosmetics, as indicated by the article, "What Any Girl Can Do with Make-Up." The columnist describes a young woman who went from "demure" to sophisticated, thanks to "a new coiffure, a different line in clothes, and most important of all, a new make-up scheme." The column concludes by suggesting, "why don't you try a few changes . . . we girls of 1930 have waked up to make-up!"²⁴ A Max Factor advertisement in the same issue repeats this narrative in the form of a testimonial by Bessie Love (an MGM star) titled "I Saw a Miracle of Beauty Happen in Hollywood": "She was just like a dozen other girls, but Max Factor, Hollywood's Make-Up Wizard, by the flattering touch of make-up, transformed her into a ravishing beauty . . . Revealing the secret of how every girl may obtain New Beauty and New Personality."²⁵

The degree of artifice employed by Hollywood makeup artists was actually played up in beauty articles, and the very artificiality of the made-over face was celebrated as evidence of the democratization of beauty:

There is a corrective formula for everything that is wrong with the feminine face. . . . The miracle men know what that is. They put it to work. And they transform those who are average . . . into individuals whose attraction and charm circle the globe.²⁶

The concept of the "makeover" is regularly promoted in Hollywood fan magazines, although the first use I found of the term itself was in January 1939: in a beauty column, several female stars describe their New Year's fashion and beauty resolutions, which articulate concisely the cosmetics marketing strategies noted earlier. Anne Shirley, for example, "feels that only by experimenting can a person discover what's most becoming to her," and Joan Blondell states categorically, "the whole secret of beauty is change. . . . A girl who neglects changing her personality gets stale mentally as well as physically. So I'm going to vary my hair style, my type

of make-up, nail-polish, perfume.” In this article, constant self-transformation is also described as a source of pleasure rather than just a means to an end. The makeover epitomizes consumer marketing because it is a process that is simultaneously goal-oriented *and* its own reward—it offers the pleasure of potentiality: “If you get bored with yourself at times, let your resolution be to do something about it. Experiment with new make-ups, change your hairstyle and make yourself over into a new person.”²⁷ Advertising for beauty products, however, still emphasized the positive results of their use—like romance or a job—and cinematic makeover sequences often had even more dramatic consequences.

Along with self-transformation and change, the promotion of color was a successful cosmetics-marketing concept. Just as product stylists in the 1920s stimulated the market for household products by designing them in vibrant colors, cosmetics began to be produced in an ever wider range of tones by the end of the 1920s. For cosmetics, the fashion “type” became linked to hair and eye color rather than personality, encouraging women to try a variety of makeup hues to see which ones matched their own coloring. In 1928, Max Factor changed the name of his cosmetics line from “Society Make-Up” to “Color Harmony Make-Up,” on the advice of his marketing agency, Sales Builders, Inc. Their research showed that women usually bought cosmetics items in different brands; if the need to buy “harmonized” products was stressed, however, women would buy every article in the same brand. The result was the Max Factor “Color Harmony Prescription Make-Up Chart,” which indicated the complementary shades of powder, rouge, and lipstick to be used according to complexion, hair, and eye color. This “harmonizing” concept was part of a widespread technique of marketing women’s fashion separates and accessories as complementary “ensembles.” Richard Hudnut cosmetics used it successfully in an “eye-matched makeup” line, which offered a variety of cosmetics chosen according to eye color, while advertising for “Lady

Esther” cosmetics cautioned that “the wrong shade of powder can turn the right man away! . . . so I urge you to try all my shades.”²⁸

One of the most significant aspects of the use of color to promote the growth of cosmetics was the introduction of new facial powders and rouges that were meant to accommodate a wider range of skin tones. In previous centuries, women had bleached, enameled, and powdered their faces with an array of frequently toxic substances. A gradual change took place, however, as outdoor activities like bicycling and tennis became popular among upper-class women, and working-class women moved from farm to factory labor. Suntanned skin became associated with bourgeois leisure, while pallor represented long hours worked in sunless factories. In addition, beach resorts like the Riviera became meccas for social elites in the 1920s, resulting in a vogue for suntan as a visible sign of upper-class travel; as a writer for *Advertising and Selling* mused,

What inherent urge causes people to paint upon their faces the visible marks of their political or social levels? . . . The outdoor complexion has now met with consumer recognition . . . prompted by the desire to imitate leisure—that leisure which may go to Florida, Bermuda or California and bask in the sun.²⁹

Cosmetics manufacturers took notice of the new acceptability of nonwhite skin and began to produce darker powders, as well as artificial bronzing lotions. By 1929, Jean Patou and Coco Chanel had introduced suntan products, and Helena Rubenstein was selling “Valaze Gypsy Tan Foundation.” Other cosmetics manufacturers were blending powders to be “creamy,” rather than white, and producing “ochre,” “dark rachel,” and “suntan” shades. Joan Crawford was credited for spreading the trend among Hollywood flappers—in addition to tanning her face, Crawford browned her body and went stockingless, a style that was popular “for sleeveless,



Joan Crawford tans with Douglas Fairbanks Jr. in a publicity photograph for MGM, circa 1931.

backless frocks.” Predictably, hosiery soon became available in darker colors as well.³⁰

The end of the suntan fad was predicted periodically in early-1930s magazines, and Crawford was reportedly told by MGM to stop tanning because she looked “like a lineal descendent of Sheba,” and “contrast[ed] strangely with the pale Nordics in her films.”³¹ Instead, it became the norm for women to tan in the summer, or even year-round if they lived

in a warm climate. Golden Peacock Bleach Cream and other facial bleaches, which were advertised regularly in women's magazines until the late 1920s, appeared only rarely after the early 1930s, although skin lighteners were still marketed to the African American community.³² But as the racist quips about Crawford's suntan attest, the end of idealized pallor did not mean the end of the color line in American culture. What it accompanied, however, was a period of intensified commercial and cinematic representation of non-Anglo ethnicity, in the form of an appropriable exoticism. But the implication of such marketing was that nonwhite beauty cultures had an increasing influence on the mainstream. The cosmetics industry's maximization of its market through exoticism, in other words, resulted in a diversification of aesthetic ideals rather than the promotion of exclusively nativist, "white" beauty.

Hollywood Exoticism and Beauty Culture

An expanded range of color tones had been introduced into mainstream cosmetics by the late 1930s, but the discourses surrounding this change had a complex history both in Hollywood and in the marketing of cosmetics. Silent-screen "vamps" and the love goddesses who succeeded them were products of Hollywood's participation in a long tradition of projecting sexual licentiousness and exoticism onto colonized subjects. In the United States, European obsessions with the East were augmented by political and economic designs on Latin America and the South Pacific, giving rise to additional ethnic stereotypes and erotic "others" associated with those cultures. From its beginning, cinema had played a significant role in the popularization of imperialist fantasies and ethnic stereotypes, and the Hollywood studios found that the sexual exoticism associated with these themes was consistently popular.

Hollywood offered a range of nonwhite characterizations throughout the 1930s, from the "Latin Lover" roles of Ramon Novarro and Charles Boyer to the Latin, Asian, and South Seas beauties played by stars like Dolores Del Rio, Lupe

Velez, Dorothy Lamour, and Hedy Lamarr. The European stars Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Lil Dagover were also “Orientalized” in many films and described as embodying a “pale exoticism.” The casting of Euramerican actors in “ethnic” roles was commonplace in Hollywood, and the process of transforming them via elaborate character-makeup techniques was often discussed and illustrated in magazines.³³ Most non-Anglo Hollywood performers had their names anglicized, however, to eliminate any reference to their cultural background. Others were chosen to represent foreignness and rarely allowed to do anything else. On occasions when a star constructed as “ethnic” played a “white” role, it was noteworthy: when the Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio was cast as a French-Canadian lead in *Evangeline* (1929), *Photoplay* noted that “after winning a place on the screen because of her sparkling Spanish beauty and the fire of her performances, [she] now steps into a role that might have been reserved for Lillian Gish. It’s a tribute to her versatility.”³⁴

More frequently, non-Anglo actors played a wide range of exotic roles; Lupe Velez was cast as a Chinese woman in *East Is West* (1930), a Native American in *The Squaw Man* (1931), and a Russian in *Resurrection* (1931). There was an interchangeability between all “ethnic” roles, but movement from “ethnic” typecasting to “white” roles was rare. One of the most notorious cases of casting discrimination in the 1930s took place when MGM asked Anna May Wong to audition for the role of the maid, Lotus, in their 1937 production of *The Good Earth*. The Los Angeles-born Wong had performed successfully on the stage in London and Europe and was the most popular Chinese American performer in Hollywood. In spite of Wong’s status, the leading role in *The Good Earth* was given to Austrian actress Luise Rainer. Disgusted, Wong refused to play Lotus, questioning why MGM was asking her to play “the only unsympathetic role” in the film, while non-Chinese Americans played the main characters.³⁵

In the United States, these characterizations were screened

in the context of a nativist backlash against immigration aimed at both Asians and the “new immigrants”—Jewish, Italian, and Eastern Europeans who arrived in the late nineteenth century. Unlike their Anglo, German, and Nordic predecessors, the “new immigrants” were perceived as being unfit to assimilate into a nativist-defined American identity, which was in danger of being “mongrelized” by their presence. In 1907, Congress established an “Immigration Commission” to look into the impact of the new immigrants on the country; two years later, the report granted Congress broad powers to exclude and deport specific categories of immigrants. According to David Palumbo-Liu, “from 1921 to 1925, nearly thirty thousand people were deported,” and over the next five years that number doubled; the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 effectively restricted all Asian immigration.³⁶ Hollywood’s exotic ethnicity of the 1930s thus arose in the context of social anxiety about race but also represented an ongoing attraction and fascination with idealized forms of ethnicity.

Hollywood ethnicity in the 1930s also had hierarchical distinctions, with Castillian Spanish “blood” as the most idealized and assimilable form of nonwhiteness possible. Like the Mediterranean-influenced French and Italians, the Spanish were seen as both exotic and European. Dolores Del Rio was repeatedly described as having an “aristocratic” family in order to distinguish her from mixed-race Mexicans, and the studios’ disregard for Spanish-speaking countries’ linguistic differences led them to dub films into Castillian Spanish, even when they were set in Mexico, Cuba, or Argentina. Actresses described as Spanish appear to have outnumbered any other “ethnic” category in the late 1920s and early 1930s; in addition to Del Rio and Velez, the performers Raquel Torres, Conchita Montenegro, Arminda, Rosita Moreno, Movita Castaneda, Maria Casajuana, and Margo all appeared, for a while at least, on-screen and in the pages of fan magazines. The sex appeal of the “Latin type” is clear from an article noting that Casajuana was discovered when Fox, “on the look-



Anna May Wong in a publicity photograph for Paramount (no date).

out for sultry types, staged a beauty contest in Spain.”³⁷ Like the “Spanish blood” that redeems Valentino’s character in *The Sheik* (1921), Spanishness is often Hollywood’s ethnically acceptable alibi for hot-blooded sexuality. It was also used as a racial default-setting for performers who played a range of



Lupe Velez in a publicity photograph (no date).

ethnic roles; a magazine profile of Margo, whose biggest Hollywood role was as a Russian in the Orientalist fantasy *Lost Horizon* (1937), notes, “Margo’s exoticism is not an affectation. It is an inheritance bequeathed by her Castillian ancestors.”³⁸

Nativist ideology had often stressed women’s role in maintaining “racial purity”: in 1922, feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman supported the eugenics movement by calling on women



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"Choose your makeup by the color of your Eyes"

SAYS

Dolores Del Rio



A SECRET? Yes, a beauty secret... direct from Hollywood... from glamorous Dolores Del Rio. "Choose your makeup by the color of your eyes!"

WHAT DOES IT MEAN? Just this: Nature has given you a personality color, a color that never changes... It's the color of your eyes! That's the secret of Marvelous Eye-Matched Makeup. First of all, it's makeup that matches... harmonizing sets of face powder, rouge, lipstick, eye shadow and mascara... all in correct color sympathy.

AND IT MATCHES YOU... because this new makeup is scientifically keyed to your own personality color - the color of your eyes! Wear this new makeup and...

YOUR FACE IS A PICTURE... not a jumble of misfit makeup... but correctly made up, as it would be in Hollywood, in the shadows an artist, a color expert would choose to glorify you.

AND IT'S RIGHT WITH YOUR SMARTEST CLOTHES... for after all, like every well-dressed woman, you instinctively know and wear "your" colors, the shades that harmonize with the color of your eyes.

ASK THE GIRL WHO WEARS IT! In actual tests 9 out of 10 women agree they are immediately better looking in Marvelous Eye-Matched Makeup. Your favorite beauty editor, your own drug or department store will recommend Marvelous Parisian type face powder, rouge, lipstick, eye shadow and mascara if your eyes are brown like Dolores Del Rio's; Dresden type if your eyes are blue; Parisian type for gray eyes; Continental type for hazel. Each single item costs only 55¢ (Canada 65¢) in large full size packages.

FIND OUT... FIND OUT! Discover what Eye-Matched makeup can do for you this very night. The proof will be what he says when he sees the more glamorous you.

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- ★ **MASCARA.** Gives character to lashes, makes your eyes look bigger, darker, and deeper. Clings on naturally, doesn't "smudge."
- ★ **LIPSTICK.** Blends perfectly for lasting, translucent, prettens your lips, stays clinging, for deeply luscious color.
- ★ **EYE SHADOW.** Charmous new soft-focus shadow that makes coloration in your eyes' beauty. Easy to apply.

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MARVELOUS Eye-Matched MAKEUP
by RICHARD HUDNUT

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Dolores Del Rio in an advertisement for Richard Hudnut eye-matched cosmetics, 1937.

to utilize “their racial authority” in order to “cleanse the human race of its worst inheritance by a discriminating refusal of unfit fathers.” The same year, the Cable Act declared that any female citizen who married an immigrant who was unable to naturalize would automatically lose her own citizenship. As Palumbo-Liu notes, the only other act for which one’s citizenship could be revoked was treason; a woman’s conception of a child with an “alien” man was thus seen as the equivalent of treason.³⁹ Miscegenation was identified as “race suicide,” and was included in the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) list of representational prohibitions when Will Hays became president in 1922, removing the possibility that any Hollywood film narrative could include a non-tragic cross-racial romance.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, by promoting stars who represented a sophisticated ethnicity designed to be mass marketed internationally, Hollywood utilized “the spectacle of difference” in ways that allowed for anti-essentialist readings.

Hollywood’s émigré performers were a crucial part of the film studios’ attempts to maximize international distribution, and numerous production decisions about casting, dialogue, and representational issues were also made in relation to the requirements of nondomestic markets.⁴¹ The consideration of different national codes of censorship was a particularly relevant factor, as was the popularity of specific stars overseas. In 1933, *Variety* took stock of the value of Hollywood stars in foreign markets, noting that

there are some picture stars in the U.S., very popular here, who are even more popular abroad. . . . The foreign stars in the U.S., of course, like Marlene Dietrich, Maurice Chevalier, and Lillian Harvey can be figured on to garner at least as large a harvest outside the American boundaries as within them. Not true of Greta Garbo or Ronald Colman, however, because of the amazing strength both have at home.⁴²

The importance of stars as global commodities was highlighted when the studios, attempting to maintain their foreign markets following the transition to sound, tried making multiple foreign-language versions of selected films; in most cases, a completely different cast was used—without the English-speaking star. But when the original star happened to be bilingual (as were Dietrich, Garbo, and Novarro), a foreign-language film could be produced with equal star value, doubling profits.⁴³ This desire for international appeal accounts for much of Hollywood's consistent poaching of foreign talent. Arguing in support of Hollywood's use of non-American labor in 1937, an attorney for the MPPDA told a congressional committee on Immigration and Naturalization that “[s]ome of the world-wide character and appeal of American motion pictures must be credited to the employment of foreign actors.”⁴⁴

Hollywood's use of stars representing “foreignness” can therefore be seen as an attempt to target three distinct audiences: (1) Anglo-American viewers who liked exoticism, even if only in terms of racist stereotypes; (2) an immigrant-American audience interested in multicultural characters; and (3) nondomestic viewers with various linguistic and cultural preferences. The desire to create a global product thus put the studios somewhat at odds with the racist xenophobia of 1930s America. Such a conflict between audiences was also evident in the studios' battles with the Christian Right over what mainstream moral standards were, resulting in stricter Production Code enforcement after 1934. Hollywood's glamorization of racial difference and simultaneous pandering to racist stereotypes can thus be attributed, in part, to marketing conflicts and the desire to create non-Anglo characters that were acceptable both at home and abroad.

The Technicolor Face: “Jungle Madness for Cultured Lips”

Twentieth-century cosmetics advertising vividly documents the importance of Hollywood exoticism to the construction of a new kind of beauty achievable through a more colorful use

of makeup—a discourse linked to Hollywood's gradually increasing use of Technicolor from the mid-1930s onward. Early Technicolor sequences had been used in black-and-white films of the 1920s to highlight spectacular scenes such as fashion shows or elaborately decorated sets, while color simultaneously appeared in consumer product design and advertising graphics. In 1932, however, the Technicolor company developed a three-strip process that, although expensive, was used for big-budget costume and adventure films. Big-budget productions became increasingly popular by mid-decade on the theory that, as David Selznick argued, money could be made during the depression only by producing either a lot of cheap films or a few expensive ones.⁴⁵

The new Technicolor process was first tested in the Disney cartoon *Flowers and Trees* (1932), then in a two-reel short called *La Cucaracha* (1934), and finally in the feature *Becky Sharp* (1935). Three-strip films initially tended, like earlier two-strip sequences, to be in spectacular rather than realist genres because of anxieties that viewers would find the color jarringly stylized when paired with a realist *mise-en-scène*. Color was thus used in musicals or backstage entertainment/fashion films like *The Dancing Pirate* (1935), *A Star is Born* (1937), *Vogues of 1938* (1937), and *The Goldwyn Follies* (1938); in Westerns such as *Dodge City* (1939), *Drums along the Mohawk* (1939), and *Jesse James* (1939); and in fantasy/costume dramas like *The Garden of Allah* (1936), *Ramona* (1936), *Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Selznick International Pictures also produced a successful Technicolor comedy, *Nothing Sacred*, in 1937. The question of whether Technicolor would be accepted by viewers as compatible with Hollywood's realist conventions focused, in particular, on the importance of the face as a privileged signifier. In 1920, a producer warned that Technicolor threatened to overwhelm the screen with visual information, which conflicted with established goals of focusing attention on performers' faces and

eyes through lighting and cinematography: "The human being is the center of the drama, not flowers, gardens, and dresses. The face is the center of the human being. And the eyes are the center of the face."⁴⁶ Another critic complained of early Technicolor that "when the figures retreat to any distance, it is difficult to distinguish their expression."⁴⁷ Anxiety that facial features could not be photographed in color with the same attention-riveting results that had been achieved in black and white became central to the Technicolor firm's research. As David Bordwell has noted, "The firm was at pains to compromise between developing a 'lifelike' rendition of the visible spectrum and developing a treatment of the human face that would accord with classical requisites of beauty and narrative centrality."⁴⁸

One way that the chaos of the Technicolor palette was adapted to Hollywood norms of facial representation and beauty was to use performers whose style could be "naturally" associated with bright colors. Female stars who were "the Technicolor type" had "vivid" features and personalities, which often meant that they were exotically ethnic. When *Motion Picture* ran a profile of the actress Steffi Duna called "Steffi Is a Perfect Type for Color," Natalie Kalmus, Technicolor's production advisor, was asked why Duna had been chosen for the first three-strip films (*La Cucaracha* and *The Dancing Pirate*). She listed Duna's qualifications: "A colorful complexion; a contrasting shade of hair; natural rhythm (color accents a woman's gracefulness you know); a personality vivid enough to counter-balance the most brilliant kind of setting; and she's the type that can wear picturesque clothes." Along with having "natural rhythm," Duna was described as exotic: "Steffi of Hungary . . . and all the bright romance of it sings in her blood. In Budapest, you see, children are weaned on the gypsy music. . . . Steffi could dance to it before she could talk."⁴⁹ The description of ethnicity in terms like "vivid," "colorful," and "picturesque" was also commonplace in the promotion of stars like Dolores Del Rio (the

“Sparkling Spanish beauty”), Tala Birell (“she’s as exotic as a red camellia”), and Anna May Wong (“she brings to the screen . . . the mysterious colors of her ivory-skinned race”).⁵⁰ But the advent of Technicolor produced even more emphasis on the relationship between color and exotic beauty, with Hollywood stars playing a central role in the promotion and naturalization of “colorful” femininity.

Along with Duna, a new style of tropical exoticism appeared in the mid-1930s that contrasted sharply with Garbo’s “pale exoticism.”⁵¹ It had been visible in the 1920s’ deluge of South Seas island films, which usually featured romance between a white hero and a native woman, since the Production Code Administration considered such couples relatively non-threatening and ruled in 1937 that romance between “white” characters and the “Polynesians and allied races” did not constitute miscegenation.⁵² The island girl made a dramatic re-appearance in the early 1930s just in time for a major fashion vogue in tropicalism. Balinese batik appeared in beachwear, along with the “Goono-Goono bathing suit” and a general “Javanese Influence.” In 1935, an advertisement for brassieres declared that “Women of the Isle of Bali have always had the most beautiful breasts in the world,” and a Tahitian-style bathing suit advertisement noted that “it all started in the Riviera. Smart women . . . adopted the daring costumes and colors of primitive islanders.” *Vogue* concluded that “it’s smart, this year, to look like a Balinese maiden when you have the figure for it,” and also advised:

If you are wearing a swathed Oriental evening frock . . . your make-up should be as glamorous as possible—deep, mysterious eye shadows, with perhaps a touch of gold or silver. This is the moment to use mascara on your lashes, and even indulge in kohl, and to make yourself, in general, as exotic as you possibly can.⁵³

The following year, Dorothy Lamour made her sarong debut in *Jungle Princess* (1936) and became synonymous with the

tropical look in subsequent films, like *The Hurricane* (1937), *Her Jungle Love* (1938), *Tropic Holiday* (1938), and others. By 1938, Lamour's long dark hair, sultry brown eyes, and prominent red mouth were being emulated widely, as an advertisement for lipstick in "a wicked new shade" indicates: "Jungle madness for cultured lips . . . the sublime madness of a moon-kissed jungle night . . . the most exotic color ever put into a lipstick."⁵⁴ Also available was "tropic beauty for your fingertips," with nail polish in shades like "Congo," "Cabaña," and "Spice."⁵⁵

The Lamour "type" was a boon to the cosmetics industry, as well as to Technicolor, because her dark hair and skin tone could accommodate a wide range of cosmetics. The perfect expression of this type appeared in 1938 when Hedy Lamarr caused a sensation with her appearance in *Algiers*. While Lamour was called "untamed and torrid," Lamarr was a "red-lipped, tawny-eyed, black-haired girl" whose "lush, exciting beauty" combined sensuousness with an aloof glamour.⁵⁶ The Max Factor company was central to the promotion of sultry new stars like Lamarr, Ann Sheridan, and Rita Cansino (soon to be Hayworth), using them to endorse the new, multicolored approach to cosmetics. One Max Factor advertisement, featuring a photograph of Lamarr, stated: "Beauty's secret attraction is color . . . for it is color that has an exciting emotional appeal." Soon older stars followed the new "brunette trend"; Joan Bennett switched from blonde to raven hair and even duplicated Lamarr's long bob with a center part, her distinctive, downward-curving eyebrows, and wide, red lips. Bennett noted that with her new coloring, she could tan her face and wear stronger shades of makeup and heavier, "more Oriental" perfumes.⁵⁷

Max Factor had been commissioned to devise an improved makeup foundation for use with Technicolor, one that could be layered in different shades without being too thick or reflective. The result was "Pan-Cake" makeup, which made its official debut in Walter Wanger's *Vogues of 1938*. Accord-



Hedy Lamarr sets the style in a publicity photograph for MGM (no date).



Rita Hayworth in a publicity photograph for Columbia Pictures (no date).



Joan Bennett looks demure, circa 1932.



Joan Bennett after her Lamarr makeover, circa 1938.



Dorothy Lamour gives the sarong new style in a publicity photograph for Paramount, circa 1936.

ing to reviews of the film, the goal of Technicolor realism had been reached with a “natural” rendering of facial tones and features. One critic devoted most of his review to a discussion of the new makeup, while another wrote that the actresses “were so lifelike . . . it seemed like they would step down from the screen into the audience at any minute.”⁵⁸ Once Technicolor and cosmetics manufacturers had established both the beauty advantages of color and the naturalism of the new representational palette, it remained for Pan-Cake makeup techniques to be promoted to consumers. Referred to as “shaded” or “corrective” makeup, it was said to give Dietrich “that lovely exotic high-cheekboned look” and to disguise numerous structural imperfections in other stars’ faces. Contoured makeup could, in effect, give anyone high cheekbones, a “new nose,” or “larger eyes.” Most important of all, the process required the use of more than one foundation color—potentially doubling sales of facial powder. To make cheekbones stand out, they could be powdered with a light shade, while a darker “shadow” was applied underneath. If, like Dietrich, one applied the shadow in a triangle shape, the results would be “positively Oriental.”⁵⁹

Technicolor makeup techniques were thus said to increase the transformative qualities of makeup and the range of complexions and colors located within the new norms of natural-looking beauty. A *Photoplay* beauty column of 1938 was devoted to a discussion of the “Technicolor . . . school of beauty”; in addition to exoticism, the Technicolor face is said to represent the full range of different complexion and coloring types among women. Using *The Goldwyn Follies* as an example, the writer suggests that there are at least thirteen different “variations of coloring” represented by women in the film, offering female viewers the opportunity to find their own “color harmony” among the many facial shades available. In addition, she points out that film stars now wear “different make-ups for different color gowns, so that the whole ensemble is a perfect blending of color.” The column is essentially an

advertorial for the Max Factor company's "personalized color palette," system, even incorporating the company's slogan of "color harmony" into the text. But it also demonstrates the way that the growth of the cosmetics industry was predicated on women's use of an ever greater range of products and colors on their faces.⁶⁰

Hollywood exoticism was thus central to discourses that fueled the renaissance in cosmetics, as were Technicolor and the desire for export-market appeal. The high point of Hollywood's vivid exoticism was reached in the 1940s with the Technicolor figure of Carmen Miranda. "Good Neighbor" films like *The Gang's All Here* (1943) presented not only the archetype of the Hollywood Latina (with huge eyelashes, red lips, and a multicolored "tutti-fruity hat") but also a pro-Latin American sensibility designed to foster Pan-American solidarity against the Axis powers. Miranda's first Hollywood film, *Down Argentine Way* (1940), features a musical number in which the blond-haired Betty Grable emulates Miranda's look, wearing vivid makeup, an ornamented turban, costume jewelry, and a ruffled, off-the-shoulder gown. Gable represents the consumerist assimilation being promoted by such films, in which Latin American style is domesticated via music and comedy. Soon numerous American women would also emulate Miranda by wrapping their hair in colorful floral scarves for factory work and using bright red lipstick and costume jewelry to make their rationed outfits more exotic.

Going Native: From Primitivism to Tourism

The whites went, not to . . . hear Shakespeare, who had bored most of them in school, but to get something different—that something at once innocent and richly seasoned, child-like and jungle-spiced, which is the gift of the Negro to a more tired, complicated, and self-conscious race.

Vogue review of the Federal Theatre Negro unit's
Macbeth, November 1936

Encounters with exotic beauty in Hollywood film are motivated by a range of scenarios, particularly that of interracial romance, which allowed Euramerican characters to (temporarily) appropriate aspects of an exotic identity. Although racial difference is often reinscribed in such films, its attractions are also foregrounded. Primitivist constructions of femininity emphasize an Edenic sexuality that is libidinal but innocent, providing a mediation of Western split femininity. This mediation was crucial to cosmetics marketing, which was dependent on the decorative aspects of exotic beauty but had to negotiate associations of immorality that still clung to the image of the nonwhite and “painted” woman. Edenic female primitivism thus represented an idealization of racial difference that minimized the potential transgressiveness of such encounters.

The arrival of Josephine Baker in Paris in 1925 signaled a shift from the influence of the Orient on European designers to that of Africa and the tropics. Primitivism in European art and fashion had an impact on American trends, as did the rise of the phonograph and its dissemination of jazz and African American dance styles, followed by the mainstream appropriation of these forms in musical theater. In contrast to the image of decadent, pre-crash “jazz babies,” depression-era Africanism often stressed the cultural virtues of the supposedly less civilized African American community. As in the blues-based opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and the film *Hallelujah!* (1929), this community was seen as emotionally elemental and less “complicated” than dominant white culture, which was fraught with the “self-consciousness” and worry of having to reestablish its economic hegemony. From a less condescending perspective, the ongoing effects of the depression caused many to wonder whether modernity was worth the costs being paid, and even whether the entire course of modern civilization might have gone astray. This critique took place across the political spectrum, from libertarian populism to a progressive socialism that often relied on American nostalgia for preindustrial, communitarian values. According to

these arguments, the depression was the result of a flawed system that not only failed to provide a secure labor base but had made Americans lose sight of their real values: community, nature, and meaningful labor.

Hollywood responded to the popularity of primitivism in a range of films, some emphasizing a critique of civilization, others offering a romantic, if temporary, return to Edenic innocence. The latter include South Seas films like *Tabu* (1931), *Bird of Paradise* (1932), and *The Hurricane*, as well as those that emphasize a more muscular exoticism like the *Tarzan* cycle.⁶¹ Critiques of civilization were made in back-to-the-land narratives like *The Good Earth* (1931), *The Purchase Price* (1932), *The Stranger's Return* (1933), and *Our Daily Bread* (1934), which are structured around a city/country dichotomy emphasizing the personal and moral regeneration possible through a return to agrarian values. Such films may reject urbanism in favor of a return to the simple life, but only when that life is found outside North America do these films' connections to discourses of exoticism become apparent. In Pearl S. Buck's 1931 novel *The Good Earth*, the hero, Wang Lung, and his wife, O-Lan, survive the opium-induced collapse of ruling elites by proclaiming, "We must get back to the land"; the book was a best-selling novel and successful film (1937), suggesting that the image of peasant dignity could be held up as a model of noble primitivism. But some back-to-the-land films combined the nobility of peasant labor with a slightly more hedonistic exoticism in order to depict the pleasures of premodernity as well as its virtues. *Lost Horizon* replaces Western agrarianism with the myth of Shangri-la, offering the lure of innocent sexual exoticism combined with Christian communalism. Because of its setting in the inaccessible and pristine mountains of the Orient, Shangri-la is represented as a place of mystical wisdom as well as uncorrupted, natural sensuality.

Lost Horizon opens in war-torn China with the hijacking of a small plane carrying the diplomat Robert Conway

(Ronald Coleman), his brother George, and three Americans, who are taken to the mountain utopia of Shangri-la. Sondra (Jane Wyatt) provides the film's love interest. Although she appears Eurasian, Sondra has been brought up in Shangri-la following the death of her European explorer-parents. Dressed in Chinese-style robes, her cultural Orientalism and racial "whiteness" give Sondra a hybrid femininity that is at once exotic and innocent. Her Edenic sexuality is demonstrated when she flirts with Conway by riding past him on horseback and diving nude into a mountain pool while he looks on. She has a rapport with nature represented by the sound of the small pipes she has tied to numerous pigeons, whose music creates a faintly mystical aura around her whenever she goes outside. The costumes and mise-en-scène of *Lost Horizon* reflect the mid-decade vogue for Chinese-inspired design, combining Chinese furnishings with an international-style modernism to evoke Asian metaphysics rather than the excessive opulence of much Hollywood Orientalism. Like Sondra, Shangri-la combines Western and Eastern virtues: Christianity, the ancient wisdom of the Orient, and the virtuous labor of a happy peasantry.

Unashamed sexuality was one of the qualities frequently projected onto African American women during this period. The characterization of Chick (Nina Mae McKinney) in *Hallelujah!* (1929) illustrates a somewhat infantilized mode of female sexuality, while Josephine Baker performed a more sophisticated version in her French film roles. In *Vogue's* article on the Federal Theatre's *Macbeth*, the popularity of Harlem nightspots is attributed to Anglo-American emotional repression, which is described in some detail:

Civilization—call it that while it lasts—is for most of us poor white trash a barrier between ourselves and life. . . . But the Negro seems to carry that flame right inside of him. You can tell he does by the way he laughs. White laughter is by comparison so often uneasy, hysterical, insincere, thin. . . .

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We find it hard, except vicariously in some Harlem, to be wholeheartedly sad or glad. The Negro, at least as he appears to us, is either high or low, either tasting the full joy of being alive or bottomlessly blue.⁶²

Most films that celebrate ethnic primitivism do not make a particularly convincing critique of whiteness or civilization but instead offer a more escapist paradigm of cultural tourism that, like the night out in Harlem, offers a safe and reinvigorating form of contact with “primitive” vitality.⁶³

The film *Bird of Paradise* displays many qualities popular in jungle and island films: a natural paradise, lots of exuberant, native female sexuality, a “beefcake” display of the hero’s body, and a safe return to civilization for the Americans. The heroine, Luana, is played by Dolores Del Rio, whose aristocratic background and marriage to MGM art director Cedric Gibbons made her a career-long icon of sophisticated ethnicity in fan and fashion magazines, as well as cosmetics advertising. As Ana López describes, “Hers was a vague upper-class exoticism articulated within a general category of ‘foreign/other’ tragic sensuality.”⁶⁴ The character of Luana combines a childlike but assertive sexuality with loyalty and self-sacrifice (her inevitable suicide saves the hero’s mother, as one character comments, from the heartbreak of having her son come home with a native bride). Luana’s unabashed sexuality is represented positively throughout the film, however, and is not used to justify her death; instead, her self-sacrifice is attributed to her irrational refusal to become “civilized.” Unimpressed by both Christianity and modernity, she is doomed to die. Luana’s appearance is elegant and yet untamed—she wears makeup accentuating her dark eyes, lips, and sculpted features but has a loose, curly mop of dark hair. In ceremonial sequences she wears a long, geometrically patterned cape from her shoulders and a large feathered headdress, while only a double lei and thin grass skirt cover her breasts and legs, making her look both regal and sexual. Luana is frequently associ-

ated with food and nourishment, making her an ideal hybrid of untamed sensuality (displayed in exotic tribal adornment) and pastoral, nurturing femininity.

By the end of the 1930s, tourism had become a popular cinematic context for the representation of exoticism. A mode of temporary adventure, it contributed to the marketing of cultural exoticism as a “spectacle of difference” available via the travel package or the luxury cruise. The musical *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) celebrates Pan-American Airways’ new route to Brazil, and *Honolulu* (1938) centers around a ship-board romance en route to Hawaii. Tourism thus made exoticism safe for mass consumption: in 1936, *Vogue* noted that in Hawaii “the medley of natives, American military officers, and sundry Orientals makes the location scene colorful without being alien.”⁶⁵ In *Honolulu*, Eleanor Powell has the opportunity to wear a gold-lamé-and-grass skirt and do a hula dance number, suggesting tourism as another way for consumers to try out new self-images.

Significantly, no native Hawaiians have speaking roles in this film; instead, service-sector workers, entertainers, and a Chinese houseboy represent local culture. Romance between fellow travelers replaces jungle love, and the innocent aggressiveness of Luana’s desire is transposed into the female tourist’s opportunity to perform exciting native dances. In *Flying Down to Rio*, cultural appropriation is highlighted in the form of the Carioca, the sensual new Latin dance, which is learned by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers during their visit so that it may be imported to North America. The tourism film thus tends to offer an assimilated or picturesque form of exotic femininity rather than a dangerously alluring one. The tourist is a cultural shopper rather than the liminal subject seen in Orientalist adventure films like *Morocco* (1930) or *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1932), which addressed more transgressive desires to cross the cultural borders of identity.

Orientalist Fashion and Exotic Masquerade

European Orientalist fantasy was integral to the marketing of cosmetics and self-adornment from the eighteenth century onward. As Kathy Peiss has noted: “Advertisers created narratives about beauty culture through the ages, bypassing the Greco-Roman tradition in favor of Egypt and Persia. Cleopatra was virtually a cult figure, displayed in advertising to all segments of the market.”⁶⁶

In the early nineteenth century, English and French Orientalist salon painting popularized myths of Islamic beauty, centered around fantasies of the harem. In Ingres’s painting *Bain Turq* (The Turkish Bath, 1862) a group of women lie entwined in each other’s arms, adding a frisson of lesbianism that was not uncommon to the genre. Reina Lewis has argued that the myth of the harem is typical of Orientalist discourses, with the desire to breach the harem walls symbolizing the drive to colonize and possess Eastern lands. However, Orientalist paintings frequently depicted the most desirable harem women as light-skinned. A common alibi for this was their identification as Circassian women, a Turkish ethnic minority said to be light-skinned and more beautiful than any other women on earth. Lewis concludes:

The pale harem women oscillate between being like and not like European women, i.e. as both the permitted and the forbidden object. Part of the frisson of the white odalisque comes from the projection of the white wife (the licit object) into what amounts to a brothel situation (an illicit site): she is pitied but desired as the fantasy combination of Europe’s splitting of female sexuality.⁶⁷

Orientalist beauty can thus be seen as a fantasy of feminine beauty unfettered by Christian taboos against female sexuality. Notwithstanding Lewis’s reading of their potential meaning for male viewers, such images may also have resonated with European and American women’s interests in the possi-

bilities beyond Victorian norms of female sexuality and self-presentation. The cult status of Cleopatra within twentieth-century beauty discourses, for example, suggests that the power associated with Eastern sensuality had a strong appeal among women as well as men. Beauty salons were often described as sites of collective female pleasure that emulated the harem's luxurious baths, massages, and all-female exercise rituals. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Orientalist beauty was offered to Western women as a means of transgressing the strictures of split femininity: by temporarily adopting signs of exotic sensuality via makeup and clothing, Western women could present themselves as a combination of (white) virtue and (nonwhite) sexuality.⁶⁸

The projection of female desire onto a fantasy of Eastern and Southern eroticism was particularly visible in Orientalist women's fiction, most notoriously in the 1919 novel *The Sheik* (written by Englishwoman E. M. Hull), which was filmed in 1921 with Rudolph Valentino, turning him into an icon of female desire for non-WASP sensuality. Similarly, in Robert Hichens's 1904 novel *The Garden of Allah*, the English heroine, Domini, travels to North Africa, "aching" to experience "elemental forces" and be "free from the pettiness of civilized life."⁶⁹ Domini has a passionate love affair with a Russian man, although he leaves her in the end and returns to the monastery from which he has fled. The book was a huge success in the United States; it was filmed in Hollywood three times (1916, 1927, 1936) and staged twice as a theatrical spectacle, in 1907 and 1912, complete with sandstorms and live animals. According to William Leach's history of American consumerism, "The Garden of Allah" became a shorthand term for Orientalist luxury in a range of contexts, from numerous "Allah" fashion shows to the lavish Sunset Boulevard estate of Hollywood star Alla Nazimova, which she named "The Garden of Allah."⁷⁰

The eighteenth century saw the first wave of widespread fashion Orientalism in clothing, with the use of embroidered

Chinese silk and Indian cotton, the styling of gowns “*a la turque*,” and the wearing of Arab burnouses. The mid-nineteenth century saw a huge renaissance of Orientalist fashion with the “opening” of Japan and its influence on the visual arts.⁷¹ Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the rich threw *Arabian Nights* parties and dressed up like rajas and harem dancers, or decorated their homes with the ornate carpets, cushions, and curtains associated with Islamic luxury.⁷² Orientalist style could also express rebellion or bohemianism, as it had for Victorian female dress-reformers when they wore loose “Turkish” or “Syrian” trousers under their tunics. French designer Paul Poiret became the undisputed master of Orientalist fashion in the early twentieth century: his vision combined modernist formal simplicity with decorative pastiches of Islamic and Asian motifs. In 1911, Poiret gave a “Thousand and Second Night” party to celebrate his new “Oriental” look and appeared costumed as a sultan while his wife, Denise Poiret, played the “favorite of the harem” in a gold cage with several women attendants.⁷³

Orientalist fashion, in both couture design and ready-to-wear markets, had an upsurge in popularity in the middle to late 1930s. In *Mata Hari* (1931), Greta Garbo appears in gold lamé from head to toe, with tight gold leggings and boots worn under a long jacket and turban. In one scene, Garbo wears a more revealing gold lamé costume while performing a slow, writhing dance around a large deity-sculpture, demonstrating her “pale exoticism,” if not her dancing talent. The promotion of cosmetics as a form of self-transformation was also linked in a number of films to Orientalist associations with luxury and female sexuality. Lacquer red was an important Orientalist color, according to a 1936 advertisement for Helena Rubenstein’s Chinese Red lipstick and rouge:

Flaming flowers, lush vivid fruits, the bright plumage of an exotic bird. . . . Chinese Red is high, clear, brilliantly attuned to this season of intense color. It is vivid, young—

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with lots of red for flattery and just a hint of gold to give you a touch of the exotic. To pallid skin it lends a lovely glow. To dusky skin it adds a vibrant accent. It lifts every skin to new heights of enchantment.⁷⁴

The phrase “Chinese Red” thus evokes a number of key cosmetic and marketing concepts: natural vividness, exoticism, and youth, as well as adaptability to a range of skin tones. The same year, Elizabeth Arden introduced a summer line of “Chinese and Copper” makeup; the Chinese foundation is in an “amber tone that makes you look like a Manchu princess,” and is to be worn with “Dark Nasturtium” lipstick and rouge, black eye pencil, and blue green “Eye Sha-do.”⁷⁵



Greta Garbo in an MGM publicity photograph for *Mata Hari* (1932).



Greta Garbo in an MGM publicity photograph for *The Painted Veil* (1934).

Along with the opulence of the Manchu princess, the Orientalism of the middle to late 1930s also signified stylistic modernity. As in the art direction of *Lost Horizon*, which combined Chinese and modernist design, Chinese-inspired fashion appears, in several films, to indicate a character's aesthetic sophistication.⁷⁶ *The Painted Veil* (1934) stars Greta Garbo as Katrin, a German woman who moves to China, where her elegant Chinese-style outfits contrast dramatically

with the old-fashioned, ruffled dresses and wide-brimmed hats of other expatriate European women. Katrin embraces the Orient, as demonstrated in a scene in which she walks dreamily through a chaotic street festival and enters a temple containing gigantic statues of Buddha and Confucius. In this scene, she wears a white turban and floor-length white coat; their elegant streamlining and Orientalist details make her look both modern and mystically elegant.

Orientalism had been a defining aspect of the 1930s silhouette since 1931, when the *Exposition Coloniale* in Paris exposed designers to wide-shouldered dancing costumes from Bali and Thailand, which Schiaparelli immediately incorporated into the shoulder-padded silhouette she had used in suits the year before.⁷⁷ The peak of Orientalist fashion diffusion, however, was in the mid-1930s, when the ever adventurous Schiaparelli was pictured in the August issue of *Vogue*, having “gone native” in Tunisia to learn “the mysteries of Oriental sewing, draping, and veil twisting,” just as her travels to India had inspired the presence of several saris in her line the previous year.⁷⁸ Hollywood followed, and occasionally introduced, such Orientalist trends because of the continued popularity of exotic narratives. From the mid-1930s onward, studio designers created numerous costumes with turbans, sari-wrapped bodices, and “Persian draping.”

By the late 1930s, these styles had become decisively mainstream. *Photoplay* exclaimed in 1939 that “all smart women are going Oriental for fall,” listing required accessories such as a “Maharaja’s turban,” several “heavy ropes of golden beads,” “earrings that jingle like Hindu dancing girls’,” and “a wide silver bracelet fit for a Maharanee.”⁷⁹ The “let’s dress up” tone of this description, like *Vogue*’s article on Schiaparelli’s adventures in Tunisia, highlights the importance of fashion throughout the 1930s as a vehicle for fantasy. Accessories and cosmetics were the least expensive means of subtle self-dramatization and masquerade; simply by drawing one’s eyebrows up slightly at the ends, instead of down, and wearing Chinese colors like

red and black, an air of adventure and sophisticated chic could be assumed.⁸⁰ Frank Capra's film *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1932) incorporated this trend into its Orientalist captivity narrative, with a "makeover" sequence that offers a transgressive appeal second only to the film's interracial romance.

In *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, the heroine's desire for the exotic is initially cloaked by her intention to pursue missionary work in Shanghai. Megan Davis (Barbara Stanwyck), a plainly dressed member of an old New England family, instead becomes trapped in the midst of civil war fighting, is knocked out, and is rescued by the elegant, French-speaking warlord General Yen (Nils Asther). Megan wakes surrounded by the opulent luxury of Yen's summer palace but also to the sound of prisoners of war being shot outside her window; this contrast between aesthetic refinement and moral barbarism is repeated throughout the film as a characterization of Chinese culture. After three days of refusing to dine with Yen, Megan sits on her balcony watching young lovers on the riverbank outside her room and falls into a dream. In this surreal vignette, an evil-looking caricature of Yen enters her room and reaches out with long, clawlike fingers while she screams. Suddenly another man, wearing a dapper suit, white hat, and mask, bursts in through the window and rescues Megan by destroying the evil Asian. They embrace, and she removes the mask from his face, happily discovering that he, too, is Yen. They gaze into each other's eyes, Megan lies back on the bed, and they kiss.

Megan's conflicted desire for Yen is paralleled by her fascination for his courtesan Mah-li (Toshia Mori), who always appears elaborately made up and dressed. Mah-li convinces Megan to join her at dinner with Yen, offering to help her dress. In a montage sequence with multiple dissolves, Megan is bathed, perfumed, and dressed in silken lingerie by Mah-li and her servants, and a range of ornate Chinese gowns are displayed before her. She chooses the most elaborate one, with huge, glowing silver sequins, loose, embroidered sleeves, and

a sequined fringe below the knee. The gown contrasts dramatically with the plainness of Megan's own dress. Mah-li then has her carved vanity table carried in, commenting that Megan is "in need of powder and paint." Megan appears intrigued by Mah-li's display of cosmetics, and picking up a powder puff, she muses, "yes, perhaps I am." Following another dissolve, Megan is seen transformed, wearing the glittering dress with long, ornamental earrings, her hair coiffed, face powdered, eyes shadowed, and lips painted the same dark red as Mah-li's. For the first time in the film, Megan is shown looking like a glamorous movie star, and her satisfaction with this image is immediately followed by a flashback to her fantasy of kissing Yen. As the image disappears, Megan looks unhappily at her beautiful reflection, scoops cream onto her fingers and begins removing the makeup. She is next seen coming to dinner with her face bare, hair primly tied back, wearing the disheveled dress she arrived in.

This makeover sequence clearly associates Megan's pleasure at being groomed and gowned by Mah-li with her illicit desire for Yen, but while her desire for him remains taboo, her makeover offers viewers the satisfaction of seeing Stanwyck's star glamour restored in a particularly opulent style. The makeover is repeated at the end of the film, when Yen declares his love for Megan. She begins to cry and runs to her room; in her confusion she sees the vanity table and begins to transform herself again. Still in tears, Megan is shown in close-up, putting on Mah-li's makeup in a sequence intercut with Yen's preparation of poisoned tea for himself, having lost his political power and failed to gain Megan's love. As he is about to drink the tea, Megan enters his darkened room wearing the sequined gown. The scene is shot with heavy lens diffusion, making the gown's large sequins burst into luminous circles of light as she moves through the shadows. As Yen strokes her hair, Megan begins to cry again, and he drinks the poison. Megan's desire for Yen is figured as a *Madame Butterfly*-like tragedy that requires the death of Yen so that he can await



Nils Asther and Barbara Stanwyck in a Columbia Pictures publicity photograph for *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1932).

Megan in heaven, where, as he suggests, there is no racial difference. Megan's emulation of Mah-li, on the other hand, creates the film's most visually dramatic moments and represents within the film's racist narrative an acceptable resolution of her desire for the exotic via fantasy and self-adornment.

Orientalist fashion and cosmetics tended to aestheticize particular forms of cultural and racial difference so that they could be visually appropriated. These stylized forms of cultural referencing helped to promote the expansion of a commer-

cial beauty industry from one that idealized normative “white” features to one that thrived on exoticism as a form of commodified multiculturalism. Orientalist and primitive femininity had long functioned as a Western fantasy of a non-split female sexuality, and the association of cosmetics with exoticism gradually helped overshadow the stigma of the “vamp” attached to women’s use of cosmetics. Clearly, the ethnic stereotypes that circulated on-screen and in cosmetics marketing were mystifications of cultural difference and the politics that structured them; they also perpetuated a sexualization of non-whiteness that could be oppressively deployed. At the same time, the popularization of sultry, darkly hued feminine glamour and the marketing of cosmetics in terms of a spectrum of colored features helped to displace nativist beauty norms that non-Anglo-American women had long been seen as inferior to. This relativization of norms, on which cycles of stylistic change and product development depended, exposed exotic beauty types as signs of imaginary ethnicity. To some extent, Hollywood’s exploitation of the “spectacle of difference” worked against the mimetic inscription of ethnicity that linked exterior appearance to essentialist racial categories. The popularity of these styles also suggests that in spite of the exclusionary immigration policies of the 1930s, international markets and domestic product diversification led to the erosion of nineteenth-century nativist beauty norms, changing the face of popular culture to a significant extent.