BEFORE AND AFTER: THE MAKEOVER IN FILM AND CULTURE

DISSEMINATION

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By

Angela Clair Dancey, B.A., M.F.A.

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Dissertation Committee:
Professor Linda Mizejewski, Adviser
Professor Jared Gardner
Professor Judith Mayne

Approved By:

Adviser
Graduate Program in English
ABSTRACT

If the popularity of current reality television programs such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Extreme Makeover* is any indication, our culture is currently obsessed with the ritualized physical transformation known as the *makeover*. My dissertation project examines this obsession as it appears in popular cinema. Films such as *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Now, Voyager* (1942) and *Working Girl* (1988) reveal, with particular clarity, the psychological and cultural assumptions that both create and sustain the makeover. My study of these films is guided by the following research questions: How and why is the makeover a source of pleasure for the viewer? Why are certain film actresses associated with the makeover? Why are makeovers almost always performed on white women? How is the makeover in film related to the makeover found in other cultural forms, such as magazines and television? The answers to these questions, I argue, carry far-reaching implications for our understanding of the social construction of identity, visual representation and consumerism.

The introductory chapter of my dissertation establishes my theoretical position within current film studies, and discusses the diverse origins of the modern makeover—sources ranging from fairy tales and 19th century American literature to women’s magazines and 20th century beauty advertising. My argument here is that the makeover in consumer culture and the makeover in film engage in an endless cycle of
creation and vicarious satisfaction of our collective desire for transformation. Unlike the makeover in television and women’s magazines where ‘ordinary’ people are improved through changes in their appearance, the makeover in film presents us with actresses who are essentially *disguised*, through costuming and cosmetic effects, as these same ordinary people—and not just ordinary, but unattractive or even ugly. When an actress playing the part of an unattractive woman receives a makeover, it becomes simply a reinstatement of her already recognized glamour and celebrity persona. Because of this, I argue, the makeover in film ultimately represents a contradictory ideology. While it asserts that with a little bit of make-up and the right haircut, anyone can be sexually competitive and climb the social ladder, the makeover simultaneously reinforces very strict ideals of physical beauty, as embodied by the female star. In other words, the makeover is egalitarian and at the same time elitist, presenting unrealistic standards of appearance somehow attainable by anyone.

In the course of my research, I have discovered that certain female stars are strongly associated with the makeover in film. In chapter 2 I look at three actresses—Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn and Julia Roberts—whose identities are inextricably linked with the theme of physical transformation. Using the work of Richard Dyer (*Stars*), Judith Mayne and Jackie Stacey, I argue that these female stars represent certain ideological conflicts that undergird the makeover itself. For example, Hepburn’s publicity emphasized her aristocratic European heritage and strong interest in couture fashion. At the same time, in films such as *Roman Holiday* (1953) and *Sabrina* (1954), she was marketed as a “woman’s star,” a feminine role model who was also sexually non-
threatening. In this way, she was constructed as simultaneously elite and accessible, offering herself up to the viewer for both consumption and emulation.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the makeover in terms of the re-engineering of the human body through technology. In order to do this, I provide close readings of two recent films, *G.I. Jane* (1997) and *Miss Congeniality* (2000), both of which contain makeovers performed by a larger patriarchal system (the U.S. military and FBI, respectively) on a female protagonist. In *Miss Congeniality*, the main character is almost scientifically feminized in order to complete an undercover assignment as a beauty pageant competitor; in contrast, her counterpart in *G.I. Jane* is systematically masculinized as part of her transformation into a lean, mean, combat machine. I want to show that as the body’s potential for refinement through technology increases, the body itself becomes a site of almost unlimited possibility for transformation. However, this malleability has distinct limits based on circulating standards of physical beauty and gender roles. In other words, these transformations still take place within the parameters of ‘correct’ femininity, ‘correct’ masculinity, ‘correct’ whiteness, ‘correct’ blackness, etc. The makeover in film, then, often labors strenuously to establish that the cultural ‘correctness’ of its transformed bodies remains intact, despite contrary visual information. For example, *G.I. Jane* utilizes heterosexist visual and narrative techniques to reassure us that Demi Moore remains a desirable straight woman after her makeover, despite the fact that she has shaved her head and stopped menstruating as a result of her punishing fitness regimen.

Chapter 4 explores the makeover in film as a distinctly feminine discourse, in the sense that it functions as an apparatus defining correct femininity, but also as a undeniable source of narrative pleasure for the female viewer. The films on which I
focus my analysis—*Moonstruck* (1987), *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996) and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002)—are typically classified as romantic comedies. Here I read them in terms of the woman’s film, a Hollywood genre first popularized during the 1930s and 1940s and recurring in various forms through the present. The woman’s film, both in its classical form and more contemporary variations, is defined primarily by its female address and concern with ‘women’s issues,’ including motherhood, marriage and homemaking. As a condition of its production, the woman’s film reflects a largely regressive ideology and patriarchal value system; however, several feminist scholars have theorized that its narrative holds the potential for what has been termed reading “against the grain.” In other words, the woman’s film offers a space for temporary transgression, where women occupy the story’s center and exercise their own desires. The makeover in film participates in this fantasy by its representation as a tool for self-empowerment and autonomy. Thus, the makeover in film enjoys a special relationship with female desire and its fulfillment, although this relationship is still governed by strict cultural ideas about beauty, sexuality and appearance.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the makeover as an *apparatus of whiteness* that defines and supports whiteness as a category of identity. In the film *Working Girl* (1988), Tess’ successful performance of class in the workplace is made obvious, while her performance as *white* is taken completely for granted. And while discrimination is addressed in terms of sex, there is absolutely no acknowledgement of the privilege Tess enjoys as a white woman. In contrast, the Jennifer Lopez vehicle *Maid in Manhattan* (2003) foregrounds representations of race and ethnicity only to erase their significance in favor of class distinction. The film’s self-conscious acknowledgement of ethnicity in the film does
little to actually address racial difference or challenge whiteness as a construct. Instead, the ethnicity of the main character serves mainly to fortify the existing class difference between her and the male love interest, to render this difference even more visible. My argument is that while *Maid in Manhattan* represents one of the few cinematic makeovers performed on a non-white woman, Marisa’s transformation actually serves to reinforce whiteness as a category, emphasizing the ability, in consumer culture, to purchase and perform whiteness.

Finally, in my conclusion, I offer some possible explanations for the relative absence of male bodies within the makeover narrative in film. While television seems far more receptive to male makeovers, there are a miniscule number of masculine makeovers in film. A possible explanation for this disparity is the lack of narrative in makeover television; does the emphasis on *technology* over *story* on shows such as *Extreme Makeover* make masculine transformation possible? Another potential influence is the fundamental argument made by feminist theory that in visual representation, including narrative film, women are valued primarily for how they *look*, while men are valued for what they *do*. But even this observation does not fully explain the makeover’s preference for female bodies; clearly, more research is needed in the area of gender and the makeover in film.
Dedicated to my family
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VITA

July 8, 1971……………………………………………Born -- Bellingham, Washington

1995………………………………………………..B.A. French Language and Literature,
University of Washington

1995…………………………………………...B.A. English with Creative Writing Emphasis,
University of Washington

2000…………………………………………...M.F.A. English, Creative Writing (Poetry),
The Ohio State University

1998-2004……………………….Graduate Teaching and Administrative Associate,
The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field:  English
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION


*Makeover.* If contemporary popular culture is any indication, we are currently indulging a profound obsession with the ritualized physical transformation known as the makeover. Since 1936, when the editors of *Mademoiselle* transformed an “ordinary reader” into the “‘Made Over Girl,’”¹ the makeover has been a staple of women’s magazines, cosmetics advertising and talk shows. Select a current copy of *Marie Claire* magazine from the rack, and the reader is likely to find in its pages ‘real’ or ‘ordinary’ women plucked from the masses and transformed into beauty queens through the magic of cosmetics and fashionable clothing. Late-night television broadcasts an infomercial promoting the Alexis Vogel Makeover System, a collection of make-up that sells for 4 easy payments of $39.95, with the slogan, “Change your look, change your life!” Midday channel surfing holds the potential for a rerun of the *Sally Jesse Raphael* talk show titled, “I’m Ashamed of My Looks…Make Me Over” or “I’ll Show You! It’s a Brand New Me!” while the primetime reality show *Extreme Makeover* submits willing contestants to painful plastic surgery and rigorous diet and exercise regimes, then reveals them to their shocked friends and families. Another popular reality show, *The Biggest Loser*, pits overweight men and women against each other with the objective to lose the most pounds through diet and
exercise. Contestants are carefully monitored through suspenseful televised weigh-ins, and every lapse into gluttony or sloth is gleefully broadcast. The internet offers pop-up advertisements for “Cosmopolitan Virtual Makeover v.3,” computer software that allows the user to manipulate her own scanned image, applying virtual cosmetics, experimenting with hair styles and colors, even accessorizing with jewelry, hats and colored contacts. A Google search under the term “makeover” pulls up the web site <www.stylemakeovers.com>, which offers “Free makeover workshops packed with makeover instructions to help you develop your unique style. Another site, <www.visual-makeover.com>, pushes a $49.95 makeover package that promises an “in-depth evaluation of your individual hairstyle” and includes a videotape of twelve “customized” looks.

Despite its overwhelming cultural ubiquity, the makeover has only recently been recognized as a topic for academic analysis. Evidence that the makeover has officially bridged the gulf between mainstream and academic culture can be found in the October 17, 2003 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, where a regular feature titled “Deconstruct This” solicits critical response to a selected newsworthy phenomenon—in this particular edition, makeover shows. The article first notes the current proliferation of makeover-based television programming, and then asks three scholars to respond to the question, “What accounts for the makeover obsession?” Robert Thompson, a professor of media and popular culture, attributes the craze to our national and cultural history of “reinvention,” while Virginia Blum, author of Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery, argues that the makeover acts as “a wish-fulfillment antidote to a downwardly mobile culture” (“Finding Happiness Between Commercials”).
Although the makeover has clearly reached a peak in media visibility, its complicated cultural history remains largely unexamined. Like the mousy, bespectacled bookworm in a typical teen film who is ignored by the rest of her classmates (until she receives a makeover, of course), the makeover has been overlooked as a site of serious academic inquiry. My project, therefore, seeks to transform the makeover itself into an area of intellectual interest. While the makeover is enjoying a current surge of popularity in visual culture, particularly on the television screen, it has also enjoyed a quiet and constant presence in Hollywood cinema, where it circulates as a narrative motif in a wide range of genres. My dissertation focuses on the makeover in film, where, I argue, the makeover assumes its most ideologically rich and complex form and where the rhetorical tension between the fantasy and the reality of self-transformation is at its most pronounced.

Unlike the makeover in television and women’s magazines where ‘ordinary’ people are improved through changes in their appearance, the makeover in film presents us with actresses who are essentially disguised, through costuming and cosmetic effects, as these same ordinary people—and not just ordinary, but unattractive or even ugly. When an actress playing the part of an unattractive woman receives a makeover, it becomes simply a reinstatement of her already recognized glamour and celebrity persona. For example, in the Barbra Streisand vehicle *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996), which I analyze in more detail in chapter 4, the director/actress spends the first part of the film in shapeless clothes, with scraggily hair and little makeup. However, the audience recognizes the ‘real’ Streisand—that is, the recognizable star—underneath the costume of unattractiveness. In this way, the makeover in film articulates a cultural standard of
feminine beauty through two bodies: the female character in her post-makeover appearance and the female star who plays her, whose beauty is already in circulation.\(^4\)

While my primary focus is on the makeover as it appears as a narrative device in Hollywood film, I want to acknowledge how the cinematic makeover interacts with and depends on other cultural texts, including advertising, women’s magazines and reality television, in order to construct its story of reinvention through appearance. Essentially, the makeover in film appropriates elements of consumer culture—the combined discourse surrounding beauty products and practices, fashion, diet, exercise, self-help books and plastic surgery—and organizes them within older narrative structures, such as the myth of Pygmalion, *Cinderella* and the rags-to-riches American Dream. In other words, the cinematic makeover invokes the dominant themes of advertising and beauty culture—hope, success, discipline, self-determination—to tell a familiar story about transformation. Through the cinematic image, the makeover in film renders visible the rewards of an improved appearance that are implied by product advertising. As film critic Sarah Berry notes in her essay *Hollywood Exoticism: Cosmetics and Color in the 1930s*:

> 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 . . . Advertising for beauty products, however, still emphasized the positive results of their use—such as romance or a job—and cinematic makeover sequences often had even more dramatic consequences. (116)
The makeover in film derives its power from our familiarity with the makeover as it is employed in other popular texts; conversely, the cinematic makeover informs and supports the makeover in consumer culture. This symbiotic relationship between the makeover in film and the makeover in consumer culture produces an endless cycle of creation and vicarious satisfaction of our collective desire for reinvention, or what I term the fantasy of agency.

The fantasy of agency reflects the central promise of commercial advertising: that the consumer will change for the better, will be more in control of the trajectory of his or her life, will be refined and improved by the purchase and use of a certain product. The makeover in film supports this fantasy through its story of dramatic physical transformation that is supposedly available to anyone with the power to purchase goods. In other words, the makeover in film supports the democratization of beauty, with beauty acting as a synonym for success, power and privilege. The inherent problem with this democracy is that it is not democratic at all, because the makeover in film is enacted on a star’s body that is already inscribed as beautiful, and therefore successful, powerful and privileged. Thus, the fantasy of agency articulates one of the central contradictions of the makeover—the representation or production of a physical ideal that is simultaneously accessible and impossible.

Finally, I argue that the makeover in film acts as a ritualized reinscription of a ‘correct’ femininity in terms of appearance. It is essential to note that the overwhelming majority of makeover recipients in film are straight, white women. Thus, the cinematic makeover’s representation of a ‘correct’ femininity both assumes and supports whiteness as a social construct. Heterosexuality is also positioned as an important component of
this ‘correct’ femininity, often in conjunction with a narrative of romance. Therefore, while it is rooted in archetypal transformations of fairy-tale princesses and ugly ducklings, the makeover in film also functions as a commodity form that promotes specific products as well as intangible cultural ideals concerning female social identity.

**Histories of Pleasure**

The origin of this dissertation can be traced to a somewhat unlikely source: a classroom screening of Brian De Palma’s teenage telekinesis film, *Carrie* (1976), whose original marketing tagline reads, “If you’ve got a taste for terror… take Carrie to the prom.” In the movie, the title character (played by Sissy Spacek), a lifelong outcast within the public school system, is invited to the senior prom by Tommy (William Katt), the most popular boy in her class. Unbeknownst to Carrie, the invitation is a goodwill gesture on the part of Tommy’s girlfriend Sue (Amy Irving), one of Carrie’s former tormentors--she essentially allows Carrie to take her place as Tommy’s date in order to assuage her own feelings of guilt. Carrie accepts, and makes a triumphant entrance at the dance, her physical appearance transformed with make-up and a fashionable new dress. She immediately receives the stunned approval of her popular classmates. Through her makeover, Carrie becomes not only socially acceptable but also sexually desirable, as Tommy gazes at her with all the signs of physical attraction. Sue sneaks into the event to watch Carrie and Tommy on the dance floor, clearly taking great pleasure in the other girl’s successful makeover.

The gore and special effects that dominate the rest of De Palma’s film quickly subsume Carrie’s dramatic transformation; however, I found the fleeting sense of pride
and delight we are encouraged to share with Sue’s character both intriguing and very familiar. Although I was studying the film in the context of the horror genre and its related theories, I couldn’t stop thinking about the satisfaction I felt in watching Carrie’s ‘before-and-after’ moment, pleasure I recognized from my own consumption of women’s magazines. In a written response to the film, I addressed Carrie’s metamorphosis and my own reaction to it, asking, Why do we enjoy makeovers?

While this question refers to our collective movie-going, television-watching, magazine-reading culture, lurking behind this critical inquiry is a more personal one: Why do I enjoy makeovers? At the same time that I was acknowledging my own pleasurable response to the makeover, I felt profoundly ambivalent about a narrative that celebrates physical conformity to what I perceived as unrealistic standards of feminine beauty. Like other feminist cultural critics, I was confronting the seeming incongruity between my intellectual politics and my own pleasures of consumption. As Annette Kuhn writes:

   Politics is often thought of as one of life’s more serious undertakings, allowing little room for pleasure. At the same time, feminists may feel secretly guilty about their enjoyment of images they are convinced ought to be rejected as politically unsound. (Power of the Image 8)

My discomfort reflects the historically troubled relationship between feminist theory and feminine appearance. Early Second Wave feminists aligned fashion with patriarchal oppression, so that painting the face with cosmetics and adorning the body with the products of fashion were condemned as activities that both imbricate women in capitalist culture and render them objects of public display for the male gaze. In acknowledging fashion’s potential as a topic of academic inquiry rather than
condemnation, Elizabeth Wilson’s 1985 sociohistorical study, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, marks a turning point in feminist attitudes toward appearance culture. In her introduction, Wilson reclaims fashion and cosmetics as a site for feminist study that extends beyond political condemnation:

Fashion has been a source of concern to feminists, both today and in an earlier period . . . Within feminism, fashionable dress and the beautification of the self has been perceived as expressions of subordination; fashion and cosmetics fixing women visibly in their oppression . . . [However,] to discuss fashion as simply a feminist moral problem is to miss the richness of its cultural and political meanings. The political subordination of women is an inappropriate point of departure if, as I believe, the most important thing about fashion is *not* that it oppresses women. (13, author’s emphasis)

While Wilson’s larger project—the consideration of fashion in terms of modernity—is not necessarily a feminist one, her elucidation and subsequent rejection of the earlier feminist view is nothing less than revolutionary. Wilson points out that in the 1970s, feminist academics took interest in previously dismissed facets of feminine culture—soap operas, romance novels, girls’ magazines—recognizing that “the way in which their audiences consumed and used them was not mere escapism, but was an attempt to *maximize pleasure*” (66, my emphasis). Wilson notes that fashion was left out of this theoretical shift, and that feminist hostility toward fashion endured. Her implicit argument here is that an exploration of fashion as a resistant or liberatory practice might reveal that it performs a similar pleasurable function within feminine culture. However,
as cultural critic Joanne Hollows argues in her survey *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, Wilson’s text emphasizes avant-garde and fashion subcultures to the extent that “everyday fashion practices are marginalized” (145).

The next important turning point in feminist critical attitudes toward fashion and appearance was the publication of the 1990 anthology *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*. The collection, which brings together analyses of fashion practices (including a chapter from Wilson’s book) with a special emphasis on the connection between film costuming and the production and consumption of both mass market and couture apparel, represents a clear theoretical break with previous feminist interpretations of fashion, which editor Jane Gaines describes as “dictionaries of our bondage” (4). Essays about female bodybuilders (“On the Muscle”) and young girls’ cultural ‘use’ of dance narratives (“Fame, Flashdance, and Fantasies of Achievement”) demonstrate the diverse range of subjects these critics were beginning to explore under the rubric of fashion and feminism.

In the years that follow the publication of *Fabrications*, the consumer practices of ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ women (including cinema spectatorship) have become increasingly of interest to feminist critics, and the scope of their analysis continues to widen, encompassing leisure activities, mass-produced fashion, cosmetics and other everyday pleasures of feminine culture shared by academics and working-class women alike. In the course of these changing critical attitudes toward feminine culture, pleasure has become legitimized, in Kuhn’s words, as an “area of analysis in its own right” (*Power* 8). This dissertation, accordingly, is an exploration of the contradictory and complicated pleasures of the makeover. As a feminist project, it incorporates related modes of
analysis (consumerist theory, spectatorship theories, star theory, fashion and costume theory) that have become increasingly of interest within feminist film theory. It is also a feminist cultural project, concerned with areas of feminine culture and communication—cosmetics, magazines, clothes—that have only recently been recognized as legitimate areas of study within feminist theory. Therefore, this project represents a significant conjunction of feminist film theory and feminist cultural theory in its exploration of how film uses the makeover to construct female identity through appearance.

Making Over Methodology

As an area of critical inquiry, the makeover has received only minimal, often superficial, attention. Two recent dissertations by Ann Braithwaite and Madeleine Cahill discuss the makeover, but only as a lesser (but necessary) component of their larger topics. In *From Makeovers to Making Over: Bodies, Agency, and Popular Feminism in Women’s Beauty Magazines*, Braithwaite claims the makeover as “both the central metaphor and critical focus” of her project, but limits her study to women’s magazines of the 1990s, leaving film and television unexplored (iv). Cahill’s project, ‘A Bad Time of It in This World’: *The Construction of the ‘Unattractive’ Woman in American Film of the 1940’s*, acknowledges the makeover as a process frequently endured by the character type she is attempting to codify, but doesn’t go beyond this specific relationship in order to analyze the makeover itself. As a result of the makeover’s peripheral status, my project is informed by a diverse group of scholars in several different areas of study, representing a significant and unique intersection of film genre theory, feminist theory, and cultural
studies. We often speak of methodology as a lens through which to examine a subject; for this project I have constructed a kind of critical kaleidoscope. Some of my shards of theory are well worn, like beach glass, while others are only recently formed. The act of collecting, rejecting and combining these pieces into a unified methodology serves as a constructive element of the analytical process itself, so that the makeover represents both the subject of my methodological approach and its organizing system.

Because the makeover represents a repeatable visual and narrative formula with mass appeal, film genre theory is a logical starting point for analysis. In fact, Chris Straayer’s “Redressing the ‘Natural’: The Temporary Transvestite Film,” has a similar project to my own. The essay identifies a group of films in which a male or female character cross-dresses as a plot device, usually as a means of disguise. Most important to theorizing the makeover in film is Straayer’s introduction of the term “multi-genre intersection” (403), which recognizes how the temporary transvestite plot can appear in several other established genres. However, as interesting and provocative as Straayer’s project may be, she is still working within a traditional model of film genre, one that I am actively resisting.

While I find it valuable to discuss the makeover as a shared characteristic among films, I am rejecting the earlier theoretical model of film genre that seeks to establish rigid, exclusive categories, in favor of a more permeable, inclusive one. In this way, my project continues, and hopefully substantiates, the recent intellectual shift in film genre theory represented by Rick Altman’s revisionary text *Film/Genre* (1999). Altman’s reassessment of film genre as an ongoing process, rather than a rigid taxonomy, has influenced my theorizing of the makeover as a device (or what Altman might call a
moment or “situation”) rather than the defining characteristic of a static generic category. One of Altman’s main arguments is that genre cannot be defined by a monolithic group of films, but exists in “the overall circulation of meaning constitutive of the process” (84). Appropriating this concept of genre, my study includes close readings of films that might not appear to be “makeover films” but somehow speak to the interplay of appearance, gender, self-transformation and pleasure that the makeover articulates. With a traditional model of genre my critical question would be: “What are the conventions that define a ‘real’ makeover film?” Instead, I want to ask: “Which films can I include in this category?” With this approach, the makeover acts not as generic qualifier but a kind of free-floating narrative device or strategy, allowing seemingly disparate films to be examined together. Thus, my topic is not the “Makeover Film” but the makeover in film. This minor difference in terminology opens my project to multiple modes of analysis beyond film genre and increases the range of films that engage with the makeover and its themes.

Visually, the cinematic makeover is remarkably consistent from film to film, and this characteristic alone calls for some application of genre theory. The makeover in film almost always employs a scene I’ve termed the makeover moment, where the makeover subject is revealed both to an audience within the film and the extradiegetic spectator. The makeover moment typically involves some physical movement on the part of the transformed female character toward the male love interest. For example, in the teenage Pygmalion film She’s All That (1999), the made-over Laney Boggs descends a staircase toward Zack, who stands open-mouthed in wonder. In Vertigo (1958), the character Judy, transformed by Scotty into Madeleine, strides toward him in a haze of green light.
while the Bernard Hermann score swells dramatically. In another teen film, John Hughes’ *The Breakfast Club* (1985), Ally Sheedy’s made-over character emerges from a small office within the high school library, then walks slowly and dramatically toward a seated Andrew (Emilio Estevez). In *Miss Congeniality* (2000), the newly made-over FBI agent Gracie Hart stalks like a model on a catwalk, in slow motion, from the airplane hangar where her military operation-style makeover was performed. She heads straight toward fellow agent and soon-to-be love interest Eric Matthews, who removes his sunglasses in order to get a better look at her bright purple tube dress. The makeover moment is also distinguished by its consistent cinematography—the camera often performs a slow pan up the body, beginning with the character’s feet, and ending with her newly prettified face. When used, this pattern of camera movement is mind-bendingly *uniform*. The makeover moment in *Now, Voyager* (1942), for example, is nearly identical to that in *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, which in turn is almost indistinguishable from that in *Love Potion #9* (1992).

While my focus here is on the makeover as a strategy in cinema, the “makeover movie” can also be described as a category of plots, with recognizable sub-categories. In their 2004 survey, *The Makeover in Movies*, Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell offer such a map of related narratives and themes. Using a conventional model of genre theory, the authors group films around easily identifiable themes: cultural sources, age and social class. They emerge with five main categories: Cinderella films, Pygmalion films, teen makeovers, middle-age makeovers and social climbing films. Cinderella and Pygmalion films, as their names imply, borrow their plot features from older narratives. Examples of the former, according to Ford and Mitchell, include the Disney animated
feature *Cinderella* (1950) and the more recent Drew Barrymore vehicle *Ever After* (1998); included in the latter category are, not surprisingly, *Pygmalion* (1938) as well as the less obvious *Shampoo* (1975). Although Ford and Mitchell make some interesting choices in grouping these films, their investigation into the cultural implications of the films within these categories is minimal. Neglecting recent work in such critical areas as consumerism, stardom, and beauty culture, the authors use an outdated model of feminist film criticism in order to argue whether a selected movie uses the makeover to convey a “positive” or “negative” message to the female viewer. However, while the book ultimately functions as a catalog rather than an analysis, its categories do make an important argument for the pervasiveness of the makeover narrative across audiences and time periods. In identifying age as an important narrative feature of the makeover movie, the authors demonstrate that this particular story is aimed at women across a wide range of age groups. Also, by including in their survey summaries of films that span decades of Hollywood production, they imply that the history of the makeover movie is synonymous with the history of film in America. While Ford and Mitchell’s book does provide a useful catalog of the makeover in movies, I want to make it clear that I am interested not in categories, but in much larger critical questions about what the cinematic makeover means.

In order to explore this question, my dissertation relies heavily on elements of star theory; in fact, chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of the relationship between stardom and the makeover in film. As I previously noted, the women’s magazine makeover grounds itself in the glamorization of an everyday reader. In film, this ordinary subject is replaced by a female star who is deliberately constructed as ‘ugly,’ a kind of makeover in
reverse. A significant part of the pleasure, therefore, comes from the knowledge that this disguise will eventually be removed, revealing the actress who always already signifies beautiful. Virginia Blum notes that

in viewing actresses who are playing “average” but are known to be great beauties, we cannot forget that it is Farrah Fawcett as the desperate housewife in The Burning Bed or Sharon Stone who is eager to be filmed without makeup in Last Dance if only to prove that she can do plain in between her star turns at gala events swathed in Armani. Regardless, the great beauty’s beautiful image poignantly haunts her representation of ordinary-looking. (192, author’s emphasis)

The willingness of an actress to deglamorize or ‘uglify’ herself on film is often perceived as a mark of her artistic integrity and commitment to her craft. Consider Nicole Kidman’s prosthetic nose used in her acclaimed portrayal of Virginia Woolf in The Hours (2002) or Charlize Theron’s dramatic process of ‘uglification’ in Monster (2003) for which she won the Academy Award for Best Actress. In this way, to be represented as ugly or ordinary on-screen is equated with being real, imbuing the star’s performance with a certain authenticity. As Jeanine Basinger points out in her study of the woman’s film genre:

A first-rank star appearing on the screen without makeup, elaborate hairdo, or wardrobe was defined as realistic acting, as if putting on flat shoes and a frumpy dress somehow constituted a performance of deep intensity and daring. An acknowledgement of the false nature of the
Hollywood image is implied by these “honest performances” in which glamour is erased.

Of course, there is no real risk involved in this process of deglamorization—the star’s beauty remains a constant presence, conveyed through her already beautiful image that “haunts” her performance of ordinariness. This existing glamour is fortified by the cosmetic transformation of her character, which inevitably incorporates elements of the star’s own beautiful appearance.

Like the camera movements that accompany the makeover moment, the components of cinematic ugliness are strikingly consistent across films. Heavy brows (in *Voyager*, Davis appears to have two false moustaches glued above her eyes), unstyled or unfashionable hair, glasses, and drab, baggy clothing signify ‘before’ in the movie makeover continuum. The transformation, then, becomes an act of *removal* as much as application—removing the individual pieces of the disguise in order to reveal the ‘real’ woman beneath. Even when the lead actress is not famous enough to be immediately recognizable, her character’s ugliness is often so over-inscribed that her appearance points to an inevitable makeover. Apparently, while ugly supporting female characters, usually sidekicks or sources of comic relief, are permitted to maintain their ugliness through the duration of a film, Hollywood will not allow for an ugly lead actress to remain so. At some point, the star’s temporary costume of ordinariness must be removed and her rightful glamour restored through the device of the makeover. This phenomenon, which I have termed the *Ugly Star*, is discussed in more detail in the chapter that follows this introduction.
Certain female film stars are strongly aligned with the makeover. Of course, the narrative of stardom itself is one of transformation, exemplified by self-reflexive Hollywood products such as *Star Dust* (1940), *A Star is Born* (1954) and *Cover Girl* (1944), which depict the makeover as an integral component of the star’s seemingly instantaneous rise to fame. Blum notes that the “Hollywood story par excellence is one of overnight ‘discovery,’ startling Cinderella-like ascensions into the public eye” (148). As a condition, stardom carries with it an implied history of physical transformation. Berry discusses this relationship as depicted in movie magazines of the 1930s:

Hollywood stars represented idealized types for emulation and also demonstrated the effectiveness of cosmetic 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. (114-115)

Despite the inherent relationship between Hollywood stardom and transformation, I would argue that particular female stars represent certain ideological conflicts or oppositions that are contained by the makeover itself, ensuring their repeated appearance in makeover-based films. In chapter 2, I discuss three such stars: Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn and Julia Roberts. Hepburn is the actress most frequently aligned with the makeover narrative, starring in *Roman Holiday* (1953), *Sabrina* (1954), *Funny Face* (1957) and *My Fair Lady* (1964). And while *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961) doesn’t feature a makeover, it privileges feminine artifice and consumerism in such a way that it
is consistent in tone with this group of films. Rachel Moseley’s recent feminist text on
Audrey Hepburn, *Growing Up with Audrey Hepburn*, offers a fascinating case study of
the convergence of persona and commodity. According to Moseley, Hepburn both exists
as a commodity herself and, through the makeover narrative, actively articulates a system
of consumerism.

Moseley’s work on Audrey Hepburn has also informed my dissertation by
providing a theoretical model for feminist studies in feminine culture, privileging fashion
and female identification in ways that have assisted my reading of the makeover in terms
of consumerism. The work of feminist cultural critic Jackie Stacey in *Star Gazing:
Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* is also relevant here; she emphasizes the
role of the female star in relation to the spectator/consumer:

Female stars were not only bodies on display providing ideals of feminine
beauty—they were also used to sell products to female spectators for their
self-improvement . . . The transformation of the body, through
consumption, emerged as one of the key consumption practices that
connected spectators with their favourite stars. (206)

Because of its imbrication with consumer culture, the makeover in film constructs its
viewers as consumers, and implies that this is not only a pleasurable position, but also a
powerful one. Recent feminist interest in Madonna as a cultural icon focuses on her
ability to continually reinvent her own image through cosmetics, clothing and hairstyle,
and whether or not this constitutes some form of power. In her 1987 essay, “Producing
and Consuming the Woman’s Film: Discursive Struggle in *Now, Voyager,*” Maria
LaPlace argues that the film characterizes consumption as a potentially liberating activity for women:

In *Now, Voyager* the fictional processes of the woman’s film, drawing on a wider woman’s culture, have pulled commodity consumption and the commodity aspect of the star system into a different orbit—a symbolic system in which women can try to make sense of their lives and even create imaginative spaces for resistance. (165)

I would argue that these “fictional processes” LaPlace describes are not limited solely to the woman’s film. In fact, my dissertation picks up where LaPlace’s essay leaves off, arguing that the makeover in film, with its promise of social mobility, financial success, and romance, articulates a fantasy of agency that operates across genres and viewing positions. *Now, Voyager* conveys this fantasy by privileging, as LaPlace notes, consumption as a means of agency. After her successful makeover, Davis’ character Charlotte asserts her autonomy in terms of economics. When her overbearing mother threatens to cut her off financially, disapproving of Charlotte’s desire to “buy what you choose, wear what you choose, sleep where you choose,” Charlotte suggests, to her mother’s horror, “I could earn my own living. I think I’d make a very good headwaitress in a restaurant.” In this way, the film aligns labor with independence; as a wage earner, one has the freedom to consume according to personal taste, and construct an appearance that reflects this.

This fantasy isn’t limited to the makeover subject—I would argue that the makeover in film also promises a sense of mastery to the makeover agent, that his or her skillful manipulation of appearance in reaction to an uncertain world will result in a
feeling of power. In the film *Clueless* (1995), for example, the character Cher tries to convince her friend Tai to be her makeover subject. When Tai protests, Cher’s friend Dionne responds, “Oh, let her. Cher’s main thrill in life is a makeover. It gives her a sense of control in a world full of chaos.” While this bit of dialogue is meant to describe a fictional character, it inadvertently offers a description of the film *spectator* as well.

Earlier I discussed my own experiences with the film *Carrie*, noting the way we are encouraged to identify with the character Sue, the girl who has orchestrated Carrie’s makeover moment and takes great pleasure in watching the results of her efforts. In films that feature a similar agent of transformation, a character who is distinct and separate from the makeover subject herself, there is almost always a scene where this agent *observes* the product of his/her efforts, conveying a deep satisfaction and pleasure in the process. This parallel between the makeover agent and the film spectator suggests that the makeover in film offers multiple points of identification and subsequent sources of pleasure for the viewer.

This is not an ethnographic study; I can make no scientific claims about how the audience interprets the makeover in film. However, the repetition and uniformity of the makeover as a device implies it is doing some kind of pleasurable cultural work for the viewer. My critical questions here concern the nature of this pleasure, which I want to discuss in terms of two related areas: fantasy and consumerism. The conception of cinema spectatorship in terms of fantasy offers an alternative to traditional models of psychoanalytic theory that insist on theorizing viewing positions in terms of sexual difference. Building on the work of Jean LaPlanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis in the 1967 essay “Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality,” feminist theorists Constance Penley
and Elizabeth Cowie suggest that the cinema functions as a form of fantasy, one where subject positions and identifications are inherently fluid or, as Judith Mayne describes, “the boundaries of biological sex or cultural gender, as well as sexual preference, are not fixed” (88). Theorizing the pleasure of the makeover in terms of fantasy allows for a discussion of the spectator that is not necessarily dependent on sexual orientation or gender.

The makeover in film represents a significant connection between spectatorship in consumerist discourse—fashion photography, advertising, window shopping—and cinema spectatorship. As Mary Ann Doane notes, “The cinematic image for the woman is both shop window and mirror, the one simply a means of access to the other” (“The Economy of Desire,” 132). The makeover in film acts as both “mirror” for the female spectator and “shop window” in its display of fashionable clothing, cosmetics and other beauty products—and these aren’t just any commodities, but ones attributed with transformative power by the makeover narrative. Therefore, spectatorial pleasure derived from the makeover in film can be understood in terms of the shopper’s gaze, where simply looking at consumer goods is a pleasurable activity in and of itself. Of course, the theoretical alignment of cinema and consumerism is nothing new—the concept of the movie screen as shop window has been explored by critics such as Charles Eckert, (“The Carole Lombard in Macy’s Window”) Jane Gaines (“Dream/Factory”) and Jackie Stacey (Star Gazing). My project adds to this existing discussion by identifying a concrete example of the relationship between film and consumerism, one that goes beyond simple product placement or film-related trends in consumer spending. While the makeover in film isn’t necessarily selling a specific product, it reinforces an ideological continuum
that begins with 1) shopping and consumption, which facilitates 2) an improvement in physical appearance, and ends with 3) some tangible “reward” for this activity, such as romance, financial success, or class ascension.

In her lighthearted analysis of feminine culture, *Pink Think: Becoming a Woman in Many Uneasy Lessons*, cultural commentator Lynn Peril summarizes the message of beauty advertising in the 1940s and 50s:

> It’s as if personality and appearance were the first two links in a long and complex chain that ended in success and happiness if a woman applied herself properly, or in ignominy and loneliness if she didn’t. (169).

In beauty advertising, the promise of transformation is often accompanied by a second promise of a ‘happy ending’ as a result of the metamorphosis: romance (especially marriage) and social popularity. With its emphasis on heterosexual romance, the makeover in film clearly echoes the appeal of beauty advertising that depicts marriage as the reward for proper consuming and grooming. Accordingly, sexual orientation, like racial difference, is rarely addressed directly by the makeover in film. With its emphasis on heterosexual romance or marriage as a reward for self-improvement and ‘correct’ consumption, the makeover in film is overwhelmingly heteronormative, consistently basing itself on the assumption that makeover participants are straight. Makeover television reiterates this emphasis on heteronormativity even within a queer context. Despite the fact that the makeover agents on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* are flamboyantly gay, the straight subject’s success in appealing to the opposite sex is positioned as the end goal of the collaborative cosmetic and social transformation.
The makeover in film plays to our collective desire for a dramatic and holistic personal transformation, a desire that appears to be as old as American society itself. In *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, historian Jackson Lears describes the use of the transformation motif in early advertising:

> The desire for a magical transfiguration of the self was . . . an essential part of consumer goods’ appeal in nineteenth-century America. The origins of that dream were complex and obscure; certainly it drew strength from ancient folk myths . . . as well as Protestant conversion narratives.

(43)

In this passage, Lears identifies an important connection between advertising and social myth in conveying a uniquely American desire for metamorphosis. Reading the makeover in terms of religious conversion might seem presumptuous, but consider this: what else is the latter but a spiritual ‘before and after?’ In other words, the makeover simply renders physical that which is originally metaphysical.

One of the many makeover television shows currently on the air emphasizes this theme of conversion, attaching it to female competition and financial reward. *The Swan* selects two women per episode to receive dramatic makeovers, including extensive plastic surgery, strict diet and exercise regimens, and weekly psychiatric counseling. They are separated from their families and housed in apartments where all reflective surfaces have been covered or removed. Each episode charts their progress over three months, and concludes by choosing one women to go on to compete in a larger beauty pageant which will crown one participant as “The Ultimate Swan.” The show
consistently praises the women who “give themselves over to beauty,” in the words of one of their panel of “experts” who perform the collective makeover.

*The Swan*’s quasi-religious rhetoric is especially evident in one episode where a participant changes her mind about the facial surgery she has previously agreed to, deciding to leave her nose, a distinctive feature among the women in her family, relatively intact. “I still want to be able to recognize myself in the mirror when this is over,” she says to camera at one point. The show’s producers and surgeons are very unhappy about her decision; the show’s creator is dispatched to the woman’s apartment, like some bizarre missionary, in an effort to convince her to agree to the original surgery. The woman refuses, and, unsurprisingly, at the end of the show her rival is selected to go on to the “Ultimate Swan” competition. The message here is clear: the most “successful” makeovers are the ones where the participants have become the most unrecognizable to themselves, where the process of erasure and substitution is most pronounced. These, in turn, are the transformations that are rewarded with the approval of the expert panel, and are deemed the “winners” of each episode. The show claims to be recognizing the “hard work” of the contestants, but what have they really done besides simply submit to the surgical knife, the gym machine, the diet program and the authority of the “life coach” who counsels them?

In transforming ‘ordinary’ women with extreme beauty practices and procedures, *The Swan* and shows like it actively promote the democratization of beauty, a concept popularized by early commercial marketing that sought to make the use of cosmetics socially acceptable around the turn of the 20th century. According to social historian Lois Banner, beauty culture of the early 1900s exploited the period’s collective “interest in
advancing democracy and self-improvement” (217). Kathy Peiss, social historian and author of numerous texts about the history of American beauty culture, concurs, noting that beauty culture “popularized the democratic idea that beauty could be achieved by all women if only they used the correct procedures and treatment” (“Making Faces,” 376). This collective observation has important implications for the cultural development of the makeover—clearly, the democratization of beauty that Banner and Peiss describe paved the way for the standardization of this system of ritualized transformation.

Considering the proliferation of make-up, plastic surgery and other beauty practices in our current culture, it seems difficult to imagine a period in our recent history when the use of cosmetics resulted in public scandal and censure. As Peiss points out repeatedly in her 1998 book *Hope In a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture*, the history of American beauty culture in the 20th century is, in itself, one of transformation. Throughout the previous century, the use of cosmetics passed in and out of fashion, but by the late 1800’s, the middle class shunned cosmetics in favor of the ‘natural’ look. The use of cosmetics was associated with either the idle rich or the lowest classes of women, with negative connotations for each group. As Peiss explains,

One the one hand, for many Americans, cosmetics were associated with aristocratic excess . . . and female self-indulgence . . . On the other hand, the ‘painted woman’ most powerfully signified the prostitute . . . Paint demarcated the boundary between respectability and promiscuity, bourgeois gentility and lower-class vulgarity. (“Making Faces,” 374)

With the turn of the century came a growth spurt in American business as a whole, as distributors and advertisers sought a truly national market. The cosmetic industry
embraced this new consumerism, transforming itself from a system of local commerce to a mass-market industry. However, cosmetic use still faced considerable resistance from consumers. Only the combined efforts of beauty operators, women’s magazines, and retailers—in other words, commercial beauty culture—to gentrify the use of cosmetics convinced women that the pursuit of beauty was, in fact, a duty.

One of the ways that cosmetics marketing appealed to women was by promoting the idea that make-up and beauty practices offered a means to improve the user’s social situation, and not just in terms of romance, but also the workplace. In fact, cosmetics companies promised not just an improved social life and standing as a result of their products, but an entirely new concept of selfhood. Peiss argues that cosmetics manufacturers of the early 20th century promoted cosmetics as a means of remaking identity. They offered a system of signification that overturned the association of visible cosmetics with a degraded or false female self by attaching cosmetics to a rhetoric of personal transformation, of self-making—what we know today as the cosmetic “makeover.” (“Feminism and the History of the Face,” 172)

Clearly, cosmetics marketing created the cultural conditions for the makeover in film, which simply appropriates this ideology of “self-making” and articulates it within a cinematic narrative of transformation.

Also using a sociohistorical approach in his book *Soft Soap, Hard Sell*, Vincent Vinikas attributes the new acceptance of cosmetic use in the 1920s to a crisis of gender politics. According to Vinikas, cosmetics were a means of emphasizing sexual difference
in a time of anxiety that surrounded women’s changing roles in society (46). As he argues:

The widespread reintroduction and acceptance of cosmetics in the first decades of the twentieth century was a noticeable revision in the schedule for the depiction of female. This innovation can be interpreted as a ritual of feminization, and the timing of its appearance reveals its meaning. (57)

The phrase, “ritual of feminization,” and its implications for the makeover in film are especially intriguing. It is possible to read the makeover in film as a reenactment of the process Vinikas describes, so that each makeover becomes a re-inscription of femininity—and a particularly public femininity—that is ultimately reassuring. This is especially relevant to makeovers on talk shows, when teenage tomboys are made over to look more ‘girly,’ often to the visible relief of the parents who offer her up. Also, the fact that Vinikas connects this ‘ritual’ with a specific historical moment—when the definition of the term ‘feminine’ was experiencing a particular slipperiness—could even explain why certain film genres associated with the makeover, such as romantic comedy and teen films, become more popular during certain periods of production. In other words, does gender/sexual anxiety as a social condition produce more makeovers?

As I stated earlier, one of my central research questions is, what does the makeover mean? A cultural studies approach to the makeover reveals an ideology that is egalitarian and at the same time elitist, presenting unrealistic standards of feminine beauty somehow attainable by anyone. The makeover in film, I argue, embodies contradiction: while it asserts that with a little bit of make-up and the right haircut, anyone can be sexually competitive and climb the social ladder, it simultaneously
reinforces very restrictive cultural ideals of physical beauty. More often then not, the
makeover subject expresses regret over her transformation, professing some variation on
“It’s what’s inside that counts,” yet quietly retaining her newly ‘improved’ appearance.
The makeover narrative is also strongly associated with heterosexual romance—the
character’s new appearance often facilitates a romantic coupling that could not have
occurred before the transformation. In fact, a significant number of films that incorporate
makeovers are romantic comedies. The makeover can also operate as a visual signifier of
a character’s movement into a higher social or economic class, while still other films use
the makeover to address both sexuality and class mobility simultaneously, reinforcing
their shared relationship with appearance in our culture.

While racial difference is rarely addressed directly by the makeover in film, it is
conspicuous in its uniform absence. In chapter 5, I discuss how the makeover in film can
be theorized as an apparatus of whiteness, a device that participates in the larger cultural
construction and inscription of whiteness. In this observation, I am indebted to
Gwendolyn Audrey Foster’s work in her book Performing Whiteness: Postmodern
Re/Constructions in the Cinema. Foster’s study of “the performance of whiteness in
moving images” (2) makes important connections between consumer culture and identity
that have informed my analysis of the makeover in film as it relates to ethnicity and race.

The reluctance of the makeover in film to address racial difference can be read as
further evidence of its close ties with consumerist culture: 20th century capitalism
positioned white, middle-class woman as the ideal consumer.\textsuperscript{12} Despite a healthy market
for African-American beauty products dating from the late 19th century, non-white
women were largely excluded from beauty culture media until the late 1960’s. Peiss
notes, “*Mademoiselle* featured the first makeovers for ‘distinct racial beauty types’ in 1967. It was not until 1974, however, that the first black model, Beverly Johnson, appeared on the cover of *Vogue*” (*Hope in a Jar*, 258). Apparently, while they were deemed worthy of beauty instruction, women of color had to wait several years before they could serve as mass-market ideals of feminine beauty themselves.

In addition to their exclusion from visual representation within beauty culture, non-white women have also been historically denied the possibility of upward social mobility within the larger community. In her feminist cultural study *American Archives: Gender, Race and Class in Visual Culture*, Shawn Michelle Smith considers the role of white privilege in the metamorphosis of the title character in *Sister Carrie*: “Carrie’s unquestioned whiteness grants her a mobility denied to Pauline Hopkin’s Aurelia, Jewel, and Dianthe, who are ruined by the logics of a white supremacist patriarchy” (221). The unquestioned whiteness of makeover subjects in film seems to serve the same function, allowing for the possibility of social movement as a result of physical transformation, while inherently and systematically excluding non-white women from this activity.

Cosmetics advertising used the promise of social mobility through physical transformation in order to promote its products to non-whites; however, this mobility had distinct limits. Peiss observes that in the 1920s cosmetic companies marketed products to blacks using images of “refinement and social improvement,” but cautions that this strategy must be placed in the overall context of racial stereotyping and Black aspirations. The advertising for the highly successful Overton-Hygienic Manufacturing Company, for example, featured light-skinned,
refined-looking women and appealed more to respectability and gentility than elitism. (“Making Faces,” 384)

Skin bleaching creams were regularly marketed to black consumers using white or European standards of beauty, as well as the notion that lighter-skinned blacks of both sexes were more successful in finding work and black women more successful in marriage (“Making Faces,” 388). Peiss makes a fascinating observation concerning this strategy that carries important implications for the makeover in film and its ideological attitude toward whiteness:

Bleach creams . . . were also widely advertised to white women. Until the mid-1920s, when the suntanning craze swept the United States, bleach creams were touted as a means of acquiring a whiteness that connoted gentility, female domesticity, “protection” from labor, the exacting standards of the elite, and Anglo-Saxon superiority.

(“Making Faces,” 388)

Whiteness, in this example, is held up as an ideal for both non-whites and whites alike, revealing the artificiality of the racial category itself.

In other words, whiteness, like beauty, acts as a fiction that can never be fully achieved. According to cosmetic advertising (and, it could be argued, commercial advertising in general), one can never be white enough or beautiful enough, otherwise, there would be no need for products that supposedly bring the consumer closer to this ideal. The makeover in film participates in this fiction in two ways: through its representation of an idealized and impossible standard of female beauty and its privileging of whiteness as an integral part of that standard.
In a similar vein, according to Peiss, the makeover device was used to promote cosmetics as a means of eradicating class and ethnic boundaries within groups of recently arrived European-Americans. Zip depilatory, for example, used before-and-after photographs to demonstrate how an olive-skinned woman, clearly coded as ‘immigrant’ or ‘foreign’ (but still white or European) used the product to eliminate excess facial hair, achieving social acceptance as an American (Hope in a Jar, 145). The makeover in film reiterates this potential for mobility through the eradication of ethnicity, showing non-white characters that assimilate into American culture (My Big Fat Greek Wedding [2002]), or find love with a white character (Maid in Manhattan [2003]) as a result of their makeovers. Apparently, while white or European ethnicities can be successfully negotiated by cosmetic transformation, judging from the almost complete absence of black women from the makeover in film, this same activity is not available to black women.

Finally, in its discussion of the makeover in relation to consumerism and female agency, my project contributes to the ongoing critical conversation about post-feminism and popular culture. In order to discuss the makeover and post-feminism, however, I must first make it clear what kind of postfeminism I am invoking here. According to Suzanna Danuta Walters, the terms post-feminism and post-feminist can be defined in relation to two distinct cultural discourses:

Currently two strands of what we could call “postfeminist” discourse exist. In recent years, postfeminism has emerged both as a descriptive popular category and as a tentative theoretical movement loosely associated with the postmodern and poststructuralist challenge to “identity
politics.” These two versions of postfeminism (the popular, mainstream backlash one and the one associated with academic poststructuralism and postmodernism) have serious points of overlap that equally, albeit with different intentions, contribute to the dissolution of feminism as theory and practice. (117, author’s emphasis)

Charlotte Brundson makes a similar distinction between popular post-feminism and academic post-feminism, describing the former as “a journalistic or popular periodisation in which ‘woman’s lib’ is somehow over in the mid-1980’s” (85). However, Brundson understands popular post-feminism as more complex and contradictory than just antifeminist backlash. She continues:

The reference is usually to a series of popular cultural representations which are both dependent on but transcendent or dismissive of the impulses and images of 1970s feminism. . . I would propose the necessity of marking and recognising a qualitative shift in the repertoire of anglophone popular femininities from (approximately) the early 1980s. The reasons for these changes are extremely complex . . . but the point here is that they are labelled and recognised within the popular media in which they appear as being ‘post-feminist’. (85)

In her recent essay, “Postfeminism from A to G,” feminist scholar Chris Holmlund reiterates this distinction between popular or what she terms “chick” post-feminism and academic post-feminism; she also identifies a third category of “grrrl” post-feminism (116). This latter category she describes as “politically engaged yet playful. They are happy to acknowledge the diversity among women that ‘chick’ postfeminism ignores,
and they are eager to carry on first- and second- wave feminist struggles” (116). This third category of post-feminists is clearly represented by popular publications such as *Bust* magazine, which features well-researched articles about feminist politics and contemporary women’s issues next to images of retro pin-up girls and editorial reviews of organic beauty products.

The attitude or ideology in which I am most interested in terms of the makeover in film is the “popular” or “chick” post-feminism that reflects a certain hostility toward political feminism and a simultaneous reliance on the movement’s achievements. In order to make this interest clear, from this point on I will use the term post-feminism only to refer to this specific cultural position; I will refer to academic post-feminism simply as *postmodern feminism*, which I find a more fitting (and less confusing) term. As for Holmlund’s third group, the postfeminist “riot grrrls,” I think the term *neo-feminism* is more appropriate to describe their particular embrace of pre-feminist imagery and activities combined with elements of “classic” feminist ideology. Working with these definitions, I want to argue that the makeover in film can be discussed productively in terms of post-feminism. Consider this passage from Brundson’s analysis of *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Working Girl* (1988), where she argues that

the post-feminist woman has a different relation to femininity than either the pre-feminist or the feminist woman…she is neither trapped in femininity (pre-feminist), nor rejecting of it (feminist). *She can use it.* However, although this may mean apparently inhabiting a very similar terrain to the pre-feminist woman, who manipulates her appearance to get her man, the post-feminist woman also has ideas about her life and being
in control which clearly come from feminism . . . The key narrative trope for this figure in 1980s Hollywood cinema – the site of both the inscription and the remaking of femininity – is shopping and trying on clothes. (85-86, my emphasis)

Of course, shopping and trying on clothes are activities that the makeover in film exploits; so many movie makeovers, from *Vertigo* to *Pretty Woman*, include a shopping sequence, whose main purpose is to celebrate the pleasures of buying things. What Brundson identifies here is the intersection of a pre-feminist, regressive manipulation of appearance—a good definition of the makeover—with feminist notions of individual achievement and success. In other words, the makeover in film tells us that shopping is powerful, and it can just as easily get you a better job as it can get you a man. In this way, the makeover in film, like post-feminism, associates shopping with both agency and pleasure.

In the chapters that follow, I have organized my discussion of the makeover in film around certain larger themes that have emerged in the course of my research: stars and stardom, technology, genre and whiteness. In chapter 2, I look at three actresses—Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn and Julia Roberts—whose star identities are inextricably linked to the idea of physical transformation. My argument is that these stars represent certain ideological conflicts that undergird the makeover itself. I conclude with a reading of these three star bodies in terms of history, in order to point out that the ideological functions of the makeover have historical conditions. In other words, these stars articulate specific moments in the history of the makeover through their images and films, as well as cultural ideas about femininity and whiteness.
In chapter 3, I discuss the makeover in terms of the re-engineering of the human body through technology. I want to show that as the body’s potential for refinement through technology increases, the body itself becomes a site of almost unlimited possibility for transformation. However, this plasticity is still subject to cultural limitations; as “extreme” as these makeovers might be, they are careful not to disrupt boundaries of sex, gender and race. As evidence, I provide close readings of two recent films, *G.I. Jane* (1997) and *Miss Congeniality* (2000), both of which contain makeovers performed by a larger patriarchal system (the U.S. military and FBI, respectively) on a female protagonist. In *Miss Congeniality*, the main character is almost scientifically feminized in order to complete an undercover assignment as a beauty pageant competitor; in contrast, her counterpart in *G.I. Jane* is systematically masculinized as part of her transformation into a lean, mean combat machine. Both films rely heavily on the theme of surveillance in order to reassure us that their female protagonists are culturally ‘correct’ in their femininity and sexual orientation.

In chapter 4, I examine the relationship between the makeover and a specific genre known as the woman’s film—a form of female-marketed melodrama first popularized in the 1940s. The films on which I focus my analysis—*Moonstruck* (1987), *The Mirror Has Two Faces* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*—feature middle-age makeovers, where a female character in her 30s or 40s is rejuvenated by a dramatic change in her appearance. Here I am interested in recent critical work by Jeanine Basinger and Karen Hollinger that explores the woman’s film as a site of potential empowerment for the female spectator. According to these critics, because these films make women and their desires the narrative focus, they function as a space of temporary
resistance for the female viewer. The makeover in film participates in this activity by representing itself as a tool for female autonomy, bringing love, success and money into women’s lives. In other words, the makeover in film enjoys a special relationship with female desire and its fulfillment, although this relationship is still governed by strict cultural ideas about femininity, aging and appearance.

In chapter 5, I look at how the makeover in film demonstrates an overwhelming preference for the representation of white women’s bodies. This choice, I argue, reflects how the makeover in film functions as an *apparatus of whiteness*, a cultural device that defines and supports whiteness as a category of identity. The two films I analyze here, *Working Girl* and *Maid in Manhattan*, articulate certain ideas about whiteness, class and transformation. In *Working Girl*, Tess’ successful performance of upper class identity is made obvious; however, her performance as *white* is an assumption. Similarly, the film makes a point of showing how Tess is sexualized by her coworkers and discriminated against in terms of her gender, yet there is not acknowledgement of the advantages Tess enjoys as a white woman. In contrast to *Working Girl*, *Maid in Manhattan* features a broad range of ethnicities and racial identities, yet does little to actually address racial difference or challenge whiteness as a construct. Instead, ethnicity is invoked primarily to emphasize the existing class difference between the female protagonist and the male love interest. My argument here is that while *Maid in Manhattan* represents one of the few cinematic makeovers performed on a non-white woman, Marisa’s transformation actually serves to reinforce whiteness as a category, emphasizing the ability, in consumer culture, to purchase and perform whiteness.
In my concluding chapter, I offer some possible explanations for the relative absence of male bodies within the makeover narrative in film. While television seems far more receptive to male makeovers, there are a miniscule number of masculine makeovers in film. A possible explanation for this disparity is the lack of narrative in makeover television; does the emphasis on technology over story on shows such as *Extreme Makeover* make masculine transformation possible? Another potential influence is the fundamental argument made by feminist criticism that in visual representation, including narrative film, women are valued primarily for how they look, while men are valued for what they do. But even in this observation does not fully explain the makeover’s preference for female bodies; clearly, more research is needed in the area of gender and the makeover in film.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how my own pleasure in the makeover led me to this project; the pages that follow reflect the many questions and conflicts that I confronted as I negotiated this pleasure in terms of the makeover in film. While I still experience a deep and undeniable satisfaction in watching *Extreme Makeover* (and, yes, the transformation of Sissy Spacek in *Carrie*), my enjoyment of the makeover has evolved, acquiring a new level of awareness of and respect for its complex and contradictory pleasures. In her own exploration of the pleasures of the magazine makeover, Ann Braithwaite describes it as “a story of change that both never ended, and never changed” (2). While the story of transformation in film appears similarly stubborn in structure and ideology, I would argue that our understanding of this narrative device could change. My hope is that this project contributes to such an understanding of the origins and effects of the makeover in film and culture.
1 See Peiss (1998: 144).
2 This popularity is notable for extending beyond bodies to incorporate living spaces—a CNNMoney.com article dated Oct. 31, 2003 counts at least 30 home makeover shows on offer during the Fall 2003 television season, including Trading Spaces, While You Were Out, and Designing for the Sexes. The Fall 2005 television season includes ABC’s popular Extreme Makeover: Home Edition and FOX’s Renovate My Family, which combines cosmetic makeovers with a home makeover.
3 The character, a college professor, supposedly eschews cosmetics and fashion in favor of more intellectual pursuits. However, she displays Streisand’s signature long and well-manicured fingernails in both her ‘before’ and ‘after’ states of appearance. Clearly, we are meant to observe but ignore this obvious visual reference to Streisand’s extradiegetic persona, a consistent element of her appearance whether she is playing a mental patient in Nuts (1987) or comedienne Fanny Brice in Funny Girl (1968).
4 Of course, it should be argued that this ‘beauty’ is just as much a construction as ‘ugliness’—this is vividly illustrated by the recent tabloid obsession with stars photographed without makeup, with visible cellulite, botched plastic surgery, etc. The rhetoric of these features is contradictory—they simultaneously celebrate the ‘ordinariness’ of their celebrity subjects (“They’re human, just like us!”), and attack them for allowing the mask of ‘beauty’ to fall, however briefly.
5 In makeover television, this moment has become known as the “reveal.”
6 This is what Suzanna Walters terms the “‘images’ perspective, where meaning is perceived as readily apparent and judged in terms of its sexist, or nonsexist, content and characterization” (1995: 25-26)
8 See Penley, “Feminism, Film Theory and the Bachelor Machines” and Cowie, “Fantasia.”
9 See Rachel Bowlby’s Just Looking (1985) for a discussion of consumerism and spectacle.
10 A well-documented exception to this is Now, Voyager which had several tie-in campaigns with both regional and national cosmetic and beauty outlets (see LaPlace).
11 Often this activity is celebrated in the form of an extended, stand-alone scene where the spectator is encouraged to take vicarious pleasure in both the display and purchase of various items of apparel—Pretty Woman contains a quintessential example. The “shopping scene” has a digressive quality similar to the “fashion show” sequence common to films of the 1920s and 1930s, and seems to exist only to reinforce the supposed pleasure and power of consumption.
CHAPTER 2

STARDOM AND THE MAKEOVER: BETTE DAVIS, AUDREY HEPBURN, JULIA ROBERTS

While stars exist as a subject of scrutiny, speculation and discussion within film studies and the popular media alike since cinema’s inception, these earlier critics did not, in the words of Judith Mayne, “problematize or analyze the actor’s signifying role—i.e., the place of the star within the larger system of the classical cinema” (123). Critical study of the film star was transformed with the publication of Richard Dyer’s *Stars* in 1979, a text that single-handedly established a new mode of star analysis that was widely adopted (and adapted) by fellow critics, while a second text, *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), articulates many of Dyer’s theories about stardom in more detail. Most important to the evolution of star theory, and the purposes of my own analysis, is Dyer’s concept of star image:

A star image consists both of what we normally refer to as his or her ‘image,’ made up of screen roles and obviously stage-managed public appearances, and also of images of the manufacture of that ‘image’ and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it. Each element is complex and contradictory, and the star is all of it taken together.

(*Heavenly Bodies*, 7-8)
According to Dyer, the star functions as a site of ideological conflict or convergence, whose image signifies certain values or social meanings. Equally important to my analysis of stardom and the makeover is Dyer’s interest in the function of stars within consumer culture, and his argument that “the general image of stardom can be seen as a version of the American Dream, organised around the themes of consumption, success and ordinariness” (Stars, 35). Because the makeover is essentially a product of consumer culture itself, the conception of stars as representative consumers is especially relevant to my project.

A second body of critical work in star theory important to my theorization of the makeover in film is Jackie Stacey’s 1994 text Star Gazing. Like Dyer, Stacey discusses stars as models of successful consumption, but narrows her focus to examine how female stars embody an idealized feminine appearance that is actively tied to the purchase of consumer goods. Specifically, Stacey analyzes the relationship between female star and female viewer, and the corresponding processes of spectatorial identification. She categorizes these processes in two ways: those that take place within the cinematic context (while actually watching the film) and those that are performed separately from the viewing experience, what she terms “extra-cinematic identificatory practices” (159). Stacey breaks down this latter category into four distinct activities: pretending, defined as conscious role-playing or ‘make-believe’; resembling, which relies on the recognition of an existing physical similarity between spectator and star; imitating, described by Stacey as the duplication of specific gestures and behaviors associated with certain actresses; and, finally, copying.
This last activity differs from the previous ones in that it involves an actual physical transformation facilitated by consumer goods, such as clothing and cosmetics.\footnote{1}

According to Stacey:

> Copying is the most common form of cinematic recognition outside of the cinema. . . Here individualised fantasies become practices aimed at the transformation of the spectator’s own identity. . . In front of a reflection of herself, the spectator attempts to close the gap between her own image and her ideal image, by trying to produce a new image, more like her ideal. \footnote{(167)}

While pretending, resembling and imitating rely solely on the imagination, combined with some knowledge of the chosen star’s body of work, copying represents a lasting (possibly permanent) manipulation of appearance in relation to that of the star.

The makeover in film, I would argue, is the visual dramatization of this identificatory process Stacey describes, where the star re-enacts her own transformation from ordinary to celebrity. In this way, she serves as both a static visual ideal (the after state which the spectator strives to reproduce through her own appearance) and a model consumer, communicating successful strategies of transformation to the spectator, setting up a mentor/student relationship that is often mirrored by characters within the film itself.\footnote{2} I would also argue that every makeover, whether cinematic, televisual or printed, articulates this activity of copying as an identificatory process, where the ideal Stacey describes may be an actual star image, or simply a conglomeration of culturally desirable features. As it becomes simultaneously more accessible to regular folks and expected
among celebrities, cosmetic surgery both delivers the after appearance we associate with stardom and works to actively codify this ideal, so that making people look like stars becomes equivalent to making people look more like each other. In other words, the contemporary markers of physical attractiveness—full lips, white and uniform teeth, high cheekbones, small nose, pert breasts, flat stomach—are also products of the most popular cosmetic procedures among celebrities and, increasingly, non-celebrities. This totalizing activity of cosmetic surgery, which erases both idiosyncratic and culturally recognized racial or ethnic features, actually contradicts the makeover’s promise to externalize the inner, unique self. Thus, the makeover, and cosmetic surgery in particular, relies on the strange argument that we must become more like each other in order to become more like ourselves.

In Heavenly Bodies, Dyer examines in detail the images of three stars, Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland, in terms of sexuality, ethnicity and sexual identity, respectively. As Dyer himself states in his preface, the central goal of this short text is “to suggest by example how general ideas about the stars can be thought through in particular cases” (ix). In the sections that follow, I am appropriating and modifying Dyer’s example, by thinking about the makeover in film through the lens of stardom, as represented by three actresses: Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn and Julia Roberts. My argument here is that each of these female stars represents a collection of social meanings or conflicts that resonate with the underlying ideology of the makeover. In other words, the makeover in film and stardom itself are inextricably linked, while these particular actresses articulate certain aspects of this relationship. Specifically, I discuss Davis in
terms of consumerism and authenticity, Hepburn in terms of accessibility and elitism, and Roberts in terms of class, sexuality and appearance. However, I first want to examine one of the central contradictions produced by the intersection of stardom and the makeover: the ugly star.

**The Ugly Star**

In my introductory chapter, I discuss one of the contradictions inherent to the cinematic makeover—the already beautiful actress, *pretending* to be an unattractive, plain, or otherwise ordinary woman within the film’s narrative. ⁴ The makeovers performed on these subjects often involve the simple removal or erasure of the ‘disguise’ of plainness worn by the actress in her character’s before state. Further complicating this contradiction is that the star *herself* has most likely been subjected to plastic surgery, rigorous exercise and dieting, or, at the very least, professional make-up and lighting, in order to refine her appearance according to cultural ideals. Thus, the character’s after appearance is simply a reinstatement of the star’s existing beauty, which in itself is artificially enhanced. In her excellent 2003 study *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery*, Virgina Blum describes this paradox as “the large-scale reversal of calling real what is retouched and recasting as fiction what is plain or homely or downright ugly” (190). In this way, the terms before and after in the makeover continuum are part of a closed system of meaning; they make sense only in relation to each other and the narrative of transformation they work together to communicate. Blum describes the joint effect of the before and after pictures in the culture of cosmetic surgery:
Adjacent to the after picture, the before picture is elegiac in content; it’s about its own effacement. Second, the after picture represents what the body grew toward—something more beautiful, an after, which results in the picture assuming more importance than the body it represents. (203)

Despite its celebration of all things after, the makeover in film constructs the before appearance of its subject just as carefully and deliberately as the desired state that eclipses it. Here I want to look at the various ways the fiction of before is conveyed by the film’s narrative and mise-en-scène—in other words, the visual and story codes that tell us the character is ripe for transformation. What I will show is that the contrast between before and after cannot always be aligned perfectly with the opposing terms ugly and beautiful.

In her dissertation work on what she calls the “unattractive” woman in Hollywood film of the 1940’s, Madeleine Cahill argues for two larger categories of ugly women in classic cinema: what she terms the “ugly duckling” and the “truly ugly” woman. The latter character type, Cahill notes, is usually a supporting player with an unattractive personality to match her looks, who carries no potential for transformation during the course of the film; she is ugly of character as well as appearance and therefore cannot be redeemed. In contrast, the “ugly duckling” corresponds closely with the typical makeover subject:

The ugly duckling is the heroine of the tale; she is played by a major actress who, understood to possess a conventional beauty, typically plays romantic leads. Her beauty is typically ‘disguised’ during the first part of the film and subsequently uncovered through the use of the make-over
motif as the character is transformed—usually physically, sometimes emotionally. The audience is actively encouraged to identify with her.

(10)

While Cahill makes an important distinction between the “truly ugly” supporting actress (who remains perpetually before) and the “ugly duckling” who is only temporarily unattractive, I want to interrogate her latter category even further, suggesting a range of representations contained by that single term. For the purposes of my own analysis, I will use the term ‘unattractive’ to describe the generalized pre-makeover state, and the terms ‘ugly,’ ‘plain,’ and ‘excessive’ to describe points along this continuum.

While the definition of unattractive may be considered subjective, the visual signifiers of cinematic unattractiveness are strikingly consistent across films. Of course, it is not important whether the spectator is actually turned off by the character’s appearance, but that he or she recognizes that the film itself actively codes the character as unattractive. As a result, the physical costume of unattractiveness in film is generally limited to a just a few key elements. Eyeglasses are a common feature that connote both a lack of interest in cosmetics and grooming, and a certain ‘bookishness’ that is put in opposition to attractiveness (brains vs. beauty).6 Heavy eyebrows are another frequent symbol, along with frizzy hair—perhaps because they are both easily corrected features that offer dramatic visual results.7 Excess weight and markers of age such as gray hair also communicate that a character is in her before state. Orthodontic braces are a common symbol of unattractiveness in teen movies. Clothing is frequently unflattering, unfashionable and sloppy, and the character’s behavior and body language is generally anti-social, awkward or inappropriate, especially in relation to the opposite sex. All of
these elements can be used in different combinations to connote a range of unattractiveness.

The most extreme representation of unattractiveness is the ‘ugly’ woman, who is constructed as almost aggressively, organically unattractive; her costume of unattractiveness is usually the most theatrically overdetermined. Often, her ugliness is associated with some monstrous defect or early tragedy, such as the childhood accident that leaves Joan Crawford’s character Anna hideously disfigured in *A Woman’s Face* (1941). The character’s physical beauty is restored through plastic surgery, a process, Cahill notes, that also restores “Anna’s soul to its natural beauty,” allowing her to reject the life of crime to which she has previously resigned herself (208). A sequence of flashbacks in *Now, Voyager* inform us that dumpy, reclusive spinster Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis) has been systematically traumatized by her mother’s emotional manipulation, the resulting damage to Charlotte’s psyche reflected in her unattractive appearance.

While we can assume that an ugly lead actress will be subject to a transformation, not every makeover subject can be described as ugly. Often, simple inattention to grooming or a rejection of cosmetics and fashionable clothing is enough to signify the character’s before condition. In other words, the character’s appearance might fall within the parameters of attractiveness (or at least she is not coded as offensively ugly) but her potential beauty lies dormant, neglected by its possessor and therefore acting as an impediment to her success in love or social status. In films such as *Carrie* and *Rebecca* (1940), for example, the main characters are not inscribed as ugly, but instead as unrefined, ignorant of beauty practices, or simply uncaring. They appear plain,
unadorned, and ordinary rather than monstrously unattractive—their costume of unattractiveness is more a lack of artifice or cosmetic enhancement rather than an excess of undesirable features. As Sara Halprin notes in “Look At My Ugly Face!”: Myths and Musings on Beauty and Other Perilous Obsessions with Women’s Appearance:

Ugliness in women in the movies is horrible.

Plainness, on the other hand, perceived as a neutral state somewhere between beauty and ugliness, is a topic of some interest, for plainness holds the promise of transformation to beauty. (209)

It is interesting to observe that in both Carrie and Rebecca, the main characters’ transformations correspond with an onset of sexual maturity—Carrie experiences her first kiss following her change of appearance, while the unnamed narrator in Rebecca is shown kissing her husband passionately on the mouth for the first time after she has pinned back her hair and exchanged her usual twin set and tweed skirt for an elegant, fitted dress. In each film, the main female character’s plainness conveys childishness and immaturity, while her newly sophisticated wardrobe connotes her transformation into a grown woman, able to inspire and reciprocate sexual desire.

Yet another form of the before state of a character’s appearance is neither ugly nor plain—it can be termed as a kind of inappropriate excess that the makeover seeks to control or tone down. This type of before condition is strongly associated with both class and sexuality in the films in which it is employed—the cheap, loud clothing, unsophisticated or garish makeup, wigs or other types of cosmetic artifice worn by the pre-makeover subject mark her both as lower-class and hyper-sexualized. Like the ugly woman, she is grotesque, but the horror originates in her blatant misuse or mishandling of
the symbols of femininity. The character Judy in *Vertigo* is an excellent example of this type—her clown-like make-up, bright clothing and aggressive body language do not necessarily make her unattractive. In fact, male characters in the film, including Scotty, are clearly attracted to her; when Scotty knocks on her apartment door and asks her out for dinner, she acknowledges that it is not the first time a man has attempted to pick her up nor is the first time she has accepted. While Judy is not unattractive, she is definitely inappropriate, especially in contrast with her earlier incarnation as the remote and elegant Madeleine. Judy’s makeover is represented by a beauty salon montage where the main activity is *removal*—more of a *makeunder* that involves the wiping off of lipstick and eyebrow pencil, the substitution of clear polish for Judy’s flaming red nail color, and the bleaching of her reddish-brown hair. The implication is that this overall draining of color is intended to evacuate Judy’s overpowering sexuality as well.10

In the 1937 version of the melodrama *Stella Dallas*, the title character, played by Barbara Stanwyck, acts as an example of a makeover gone horribly wrong, *producing* rather than *correcting* an excess of appearance. Stella expresses her new-found wealth through layers of artifice, prompting one young upper-class man to comment, “That’s not a woman, that’s a Christmas tree!” Stella, who clearly takes great pleasure in her colorful attire and manner, resists her husband’s attempts to give her a makeunder similar to the one performed on Judy in *Vertigo*, which would tone down her flamboyant wardrobe and behavior. As a result, she is ostracized by her upper-class community and voluntarily removes herself from her daughter’s life. As Linda Williams writes:

One basic conflict of *Stella Dallas* comes to revolve around the *excessive*
presence of Stella’s body and dress. She increasingly flaunts an exaggeratedly feminine presence that the offended community prefers not to see…Her strategy can only backfire in the eyes of an upper-class restraint that values a streamlined and sleek ideal of femininity.

(489, author’s emphasis)

The great tragedy of *Stella Dallas*, therefore, becomes her innate lack of taste, that intangible quality that allows other women in the film, such as her rival Helen Morrison and her daughter Laurel, to perform femininity correctly, to construct a mask of female appearance that doesn’t announce itself as such. It is only at the film’s tear-jerking conclusion that Stella’s excess is corrected to an extreme, with nearly all traces of her former colorful disguise removed, creating, in Williams’ words, “an abstract (and absent) ideal of motherly sacrifice” (492). Thus, in *Stella Dallas*, transformation becomes punishment.11

The larger experience of the cinema itself asks us, as viewers, to suspend our disbelief in order to enter the film’s fictional world and derive pleasure from it. The makeover in film further complicates this agreement between screen and spectator, demanding that we ignore previous knowledge of a star’s appearance, and accept the concept of the ugly star. As Blum states, “For movie stars, the metamorphosis is always from the fake dowdy or overweight or old to the thrilling unfolding of their real and shining beauty . . . Their bodies are just part of the ever-unfolding twentieth-century story of changing your life” (219). In the following sections, I examine the meanings represented by three such star bodies, beginning with an actress who is not necessarily
associated with the makeover across films, but whose performance of transformation in one particular film helped to popularize the makeover narrative in Hollywood cinema.

**Bette Davis: Now, Consumer**

In many ways, the plot of the 1942 Bette Davis vehicle *Now, Voyager* serves as a template for the typical makeover-based film: ugly woman plucks eyebrows and becomes beautiful woman, meets equally attractive man, falls in love. However, because the film is a melodrama, the romantic coupling in *Now, Voyager* is systematically and masochistically thwarted. In its review at the time of the film’s release, *The New York Times* criticized the film as a series of “endless renunciations” (3), while in a similarly negative tone, *Variety* described it as “a story of seemingly never-ending tragedy” (“*Now, Voyager*”). Despite its dismissal by mainstream (and most likely male) reviewers, the film has been embraced by female viewers across generations, including feminist film scholars who hold it up as representative of the recently legitimated woman’s film genre.

Adapted from the novel of the same name by Olive Higgins Prouty, *Now, Voyager* tells the story of Charlotte Vale, a repressed and reclusive spinster whose unattractive appearance matches her harsh, sarcastic demeanor. When Charlotte’s sister brings psychiatrist Dr. Jacquith (Claude Rains) into the family home, he takes an interest in Charlotte’s apparent misery, against the wishes of her controlling mother. Charlotte successfully undergoes a course of therapy at Dr. Jacquith’s institution, and her appearance changes dramatically to reflect her inner transformation. On a subsequent cruise to South America, intended as her re-introduction to society, Charlotte meets a mysterious and handsome man named Jerry Durrance (Paul Heinreid). The couple are
clearly attracted to each other, and share a night of illicit passion—illicit because Jerry is
trapped in a loveless marriage. Charlotte returns to Boston and struggles valiantly against
her mother’s tyranny; however, her mother’s death following a verbal argument between
the two women sends Charlotte into a tailspin of guilt. She returns to Dr. Jacquith’s
sanitarium, and through a rather amazing coincidence, meets Jerry’s daughter Tina, a
misfit and self-proclaimed “ugly duckling” with whom Charlotte identifies strongly. In
an equally amazing turn of events, Charlotte essentially adopts Tina, while Jerry remains
with his neurotic wife. The film ends with Tina’s own successful mental and physical
makeover.

Although we are ultimately denied the satisfaction of a romantic union between
Charlotte and Jerry, the film delivers several pleasurable moments when Charlotte’s
physical makeover is revealed to both the film’s audience and her character’s astonished
family and friends. In fact, the film’s most dramatic makeover moment, when we first
see Charlotte in her fully transformed state as she descends the gangplank of a cruise
ship, seems to have single-handedly established a recognizable visual grammar for
communicating the makeover in film. Before discussing the film in any detail, however,
I want to examine the persona of its leading actress, especially her construction in the
popular media as a ‘real’ and committed actress rather than simply a celebrity.

According to her press, Bette Davis was an ordinary woman uncomfortable with
the glamour Hollywood demands from its celebrities, while her unusual level of
commitment to the craft distinguished her from her fellow screen actors and coded her as
special. Thus, on one level Davis simply represents that seemingly contradictory
rhetorical interplay between what Dyer terms “stars-as-ordinary” and “stars-as-special”
(Stars, 43). However, the extent to which Davis claimed to resist pretension and artifice, both in her daily life and her film roles, marked her not just as uninterested in consumerism, but as aggressively opposed to it—she was consistently positioned as a kind of anti-consumer. As a result, Davis was especially suited for her role in Now, Voyager not because she consumed conspicuously, but because her star image depends on a renunciation of consumerism. My argument is that Davis’ star body communicates a perpetual before appearance, one that contains the potential for a reluctant, but successful, glamour. In other words, while Davis may not have been the ideal consumer, she was the ideal makeover subject.

In her introduction to the published screenplay of Now, Voyager, Jeanne Thomas Allen describes the evolution of Davis’ screen persona as a reflection of her constant struggle with the Hollywood publicity machine and its often fruitless attempts to find a suitable category for her unconventional star image, especially during the earliest years of her career:

Davis’s first marketing label was a blonde sex bomb, which, in 1934 with her fought-for role in Of Human Bondage, shifted to that of vamp. The vamp star image continued into the turning-point role in Jezebel (1938), which provided the transition from blonde bitch vamp to the strong-woman roles of Dark Victory, The Old Maid, and Now, Voyager. (29) Accordingly, Davis’ press routinely describes her as a Hollywood ‘misfit’ continually in search of suitably challenging roles to match her challenging star persona. Her box-office success as the feisty, spoiled Julie Marsden in Jezebel was an apparently successful match of character and actress, earning her the cover of the March 28, 1938 issue of Time
The title of the accompanying article, “Popeye the Magnificent,” refers to her distinctive and prominent eyes, and immediately marks its subject as a site of contradiction; while she is attributed with a facial feature that is usually considered grotesque, she is also pronounced “magnificent,” either in spite of or due to her unconventional appearance (or both). The article traces her rise to cinematic fame despite an early rejection by theatre great Eva La Galliene (for Davis’ lack of sincerity), and a humiliating dismissal from Universal Pictures blamed on her “lack of sex appeal,” according to studio boss Carl “Junior” Laemmle, who also declared, “I can’t imagine any guy giving her a tumble,” (34). After describing these early setbacks, the author goes on to summarize Davis’ work ethic:

Spunk, a capacity, if not a liking, for hard & thankless jobs, a willingness to play roles that would send most Hollywood beauties protesting to their agents, have given Bette Davis her present eminence. “I’m no Pollyanna,” she says truthfully, “I like to play gutty [sic] girls and attractive wenches.” (34)

The full title accompanying a cover story on Davis in the January 23, 1939 issue of Life magazine reveals a similar rhetorical approach to its subject: “Bette Davis: She Prefers ‘Attractive Wench’ Parts in Which Her Acting is Hollywood’s High” (52). The feature is heavy on ‘candid’ photos of Davis at home—one image of the star talking on the telephone is accompanied by a caption that reads, “Informality is her keynote. She does her own nails, answers the phone herself, is happiest in shorts or slacks” (53). In addition to characterizing her as unpretentious and lacking in artifice in her everyday life—according to the writer, she has “no need for orchid corsages, dark glasses and other
histrionic props” (55)—the article both emphasizes and praises Davis’ commitment to physical realism, in other words, her willingness to look conventionally unattractive in her films, using a quote nearly identical to that from the earlier *Time* feature: “Most Hollywood actresses would go into retirement rather than play roles requiring them to make their hair look stringy, snarl or wear old clothes . . . [Davis] says: ‘I like to play gutty [sic] girls and attractive wenches’”(57).

Although *gutty* is an actual descriptive term, we can be fairly certain that Davis is not referring to its conventional meaning: “charged or sprinkled with drops.” Instead, she seems to be combining *gritty* and *gutsy* in order to create her own unique adjective, one that describes the streetwise, shrewd and tough female characters she was strongly associated with during the 1930s, an association she obviously fostered in her press. Her breakthrough role as the trashy and manipulative Mildred Rogers in *Of Human Bondage* (1934) clearly falls into the category of attractive wench, while roles that followed, such as an alcoholic stage actress in *Dangerous* (1935) and a nightclub “hostess” who stands up to the mob in *Marked Woman* (1937) certainly qualify as *gutty*. Her subsequent transition from “blonde bitch vamp” to the strong woman type is especially evident in an article titled “Gallant Lady,” from the June 1939 issue of *Good Housekeeping*. The feature combines a short Davis biography with a somewhat romanticized history lesson on the subject of the costume epic *Juarez* (1939), in which Davis plays “Carlotta, Empress of Old Mexico . . . the lovely and tragic aristocrat, wife of Maximilian,” (39). By emphasizing the actress’ previous struggles with Hollywood typecasting and an ambivalent industry, in contrast to her current success, the writer implies that Davis has finally been recognized as a ‘serious’ artist, as reflected by ‘serious’ roles such as
Carlotta; Davis has officially made it in Hollywood, and on her own terms. In
documenting the instability of her early career, the article describes Warner Brothers’
tries to transform the actress into a starlet after signing her for a “prestige picture”
with George Arliss:

Miss Davis was quiet, well-spoken, ladylike. They considered her
adequate for the role’s small demands. But even for that it was felt that
something should be done to improve her appearance. The make-up
department went to work on Ruth Elizabeth Davis from Massachusetts.
They bleached her own light hair until it was nearly white. They fringed
her large, light blue eyes with a generous smudge of false eyelashes. It
was in this disguise that Miss Davis appeared in a picture called *The Rich
Are Always With Us* . . . A slight resemblance to Constance Bennett was
considered an encouraging sign. (38)

Note that the end result of Davis’ studio makeover is termed a “disguise,” implying a
mismatch between the typical starlet appearance of the 1930s (platinum hair, dramatically
made-up face) and Davis’ supposedly authentic self. The process of erasing “Ruth
Elizabeth Davis from Massachusetts” and replacing her with Bette Davis of California, is
simply a variation on the familiar Hollywood narrative of discovery and transformation,
the twin rites of passage experienced by every movie star. While this star story is
usually celebrated in the media, in this context it is regarded as one aspect of
Hollywood’s initial misrecognition of the ‘real’ Davis; her identity as a serious and
committed actress concealed by blonde hair and false eyelashes. While this
characterization contradicts the typical rhetoric of stardom and transformation, it fits perfectly with Davis’ public construction as an industry anomaly.

The story of the earlier, unsuccessful transformation is also consistent with the infranarrative of Davis’ star text, which, I argue, positions her as an ideal makeover subject. While this might seem contradictory, let me explain: Davis’ initial makeover didn’t ‘take’ because it produced a conflict between her ‘real’ identity and her outward appearance. Whereas the typical star transformation supposedly unleashes the inner glamour (and therefore success) of its recipient, according to this source, Davis’ makeover obscured rather than revealed her star quality. The implication is that physical glamour of the type imposed on Davis early in her career was incompatible with her artistic integrity. Davis’ more subtle career transformation from sexy vamp to independent woman represents the pleasurable and productive alignment of inner self and outer appearances—similar to her character’s transformation in Now, Voyager.

While the emphasis on the star as an authentic or ‘real’ person is a strategy often employed by the press, in Davis’ case, this characterization is especially forceful, dominating her publicity throughout the 1940s and beyond. In nearly all of the sources I consulted for this analysis, the writer (who is sometimes supposedly Davis herself) feels compelled to reiterate her rejection of Hollywood glamour, particularly in terms of dress and appearance, so that even as her screen persona evolved, her association with a certain simplicity and authenticity remained consistent. In the early 1940s, Davis continued her movement away from the attractive wench persona, instead appearing in a number of successful woman’s films and costume dramas such as All This, and Heaven Too (1940), The Great Lie (1941), The Little Foxes (1941) and, of course, Now, Voyager.
Nevertheless, a *New Yorker* profile published Feb. 20, 1943 takes its title, “Cotton-Dress Girl,” from the scornful nickname Davis received from Laemmle at the time of her dismissal from Universal in the early 1930s. The article, like the nickname, works to distinguish “cotton-dress girl” Davis from the typical Hollywood “satin sweethearts” (19), implying that she is both plainly adorned and lacking in sexuality (she is a “girl” rather than a potential lover or “sweetheart”). After recounting the familiar autobiographical information (strict New England upbringing, theatrical background, penchant for reading and other intellectual pursuits) that reinforced her non-starlet status and claiming “Miss Davis wishes that she had been born beautiful” (24), the writer makes this somewhat confusing statement: “[Davis’] box-office is enormous because men fans are convinced that she is feminine, though she is really only maternal,¹⁴ and because she fascinates most women fans and those she doesn’t fascinate she frightens” (29). Thus, Davis’ appeal to viewers, both male and female, is interpreted here as a strangely aggressive yet asexual one, where she is either mothering her fans or terrifying them.

By the time a lengthy autobiographical piece appeared in *Collier’s* in 1954 (stretched over two issues), Davis had landed squarely in what I’ll term her middle-aged star phase, playing mannered but acerbic roles in the black comedy *All About Eve* (1950), domestic dramas *Payment on Demand* (1951) and *Another Man’s Poison* (1952), and *The Star* (1952). These films clearly exploit elements from Davis’ own experiences as an aging actress and the corresponding themes of marriage and dissolution (the freshly-divorced Davis fell in love with Gary Merrill during the filming of *All About Eve*—they married weeks after the production wrapped, starring together in *Another Man’s Poison* and 1952’s *Phone Call From a Stranger*). The *Collier’s* article places an emphasis on
domesticity and aging, while Davis continues to cling to her outsider identity, recounting an anecdote from her early career that demonstrates her profound discomfort with what she terms “Hollywood precedent and custom”:

Then, as now, it was the habit of film actresses to appear at the Awards affairs wearing glamorous gowns of lace and tulle. Instead I had bought an expensive but simple navy-blue and white dinner dress. Particularly shocked was a well-known Hollywood newspaperwoman who followed me into the ladies’ room and said, “How dare you appear like that? You’ve got no right to look like that. You’re an actress and you’re supposed to look like one.” ("Marriage," 37, author’s emphasis)

It is appropriate that her attacker in this tale is a member of the press—as such, the anonymous “newspaperwoman” acts as a stand-in for the larger publicity machine that Davis continued to position herself so stridently against. Throughout the article, Davis relates both her enduring and self-conscious lack of pretense and her overriding disdain for the machinations of the Hollywood system, particularly the press. When she opines, “I must have shocked my Maine neighbors. Instead of gold lamé and 10 servants, they found me running around with a broom” ("Marriage," 38), it seems hard to believe that anyone paying the least attention to Davis’ publicity would expect anything other than a plain, hard-working New Englander who rejects fancy clothes and other accoutrements of celebrity life in favor of simplicity and economy.

The compulsion to portray Davis as a committed actress yet reluctant celebrity communicates a star persona grounded in absolutes such as authenticity (vs. falsity), honesty (vs. deception), and realism (vs. fiction). An oft-repeated anecdote concerning
the filming of *Marked Woman* illustrates this identification perfectly—apparently, Davis was dissatisfied with the intentionally unobtrusive bandages the make-up department created for her character after she is roughed up by her mobster employers. According to the story told by Davis herself in multiple sources (including *Collier’s*), she immediately left the set and paid a visit to her own physician, asking him to bandage her as if she had been severely beaten. She returned to the studio, demanding that she be photographed in her resulting appearance, and she was. Some fifteen years following this incident, Davis writes in *Collier’s*, “There are many movie executives who still don’t believe in that type of realism to this very day. The result is an air of phoniness in many American films which audiences sense, rather than feel . . .” (“All About Me,” 29, my emphasis). What is fascinating here is that Davis is making an ideological distinction between positive artifice (the realism in which she participates) and negative artifice (the phoniness she perceives as a deception of the audience). Thus, in this passage, Davis seems to be arguing that she is somehow a more trustworthy performer, one who has made a special bargain with her fans, particularly women, not to deceive or betray them, even though her one consistent goal as an actress is to convince the audience *she is who she is not*. This perceived female-to-female address is an integral component of Davis’ star image, according to Mayne:

> In Davis’ case, what is unique is not only her visibility, but also the way her on-screen persona plays so consistently across the register of female-to-female relationships. In other words, there is an ideal fit between the address to female consumers in advertising and the film roles themselves.

(132)
Maria LaPlace makes a similar argument in her essay “Producing and Consuming the Woman’s Film,” noting that the studio marketed *Now, Voyager* as “a how-to-be-beautiful guide with Davis as chief instructor” (141). While it might seem counterintuitive to use a well-known anti-consumer in order to coach female spectators in how to achieve an ideal feminine beauty, it actually makes perfect sense—because Davis’ star image is so strongly aligned with the makeover’s before state, as I argued previously, in a sense we are witnessing her own transformation in *Now, Voyager* as well as that of her character. LaPlace describes the strategy of the promotional materials that accompanied the distribution of the film, and the effects of this marketing:

The Press Book attempts to link the representation of the ‘real’ Davis with her character in *Now, Voyager*, Charlotte Vale…implying that it is Davis who is being glamorised . . . This blurring of actress and role reinforces the recruitment of the Davis image to promote a consumerist discourse on female beauty and grooming . . . the impression is given that Davis, as well as Charlotte Vale, has changed in appearance and has learned to value these skills. (150)

Even without access to these promotional materials, it is easy to make a connection between the star image conveyed in Davis’ press and the character she plays in *Now, Voyager*. Both Davis and Charlotte are portrayed as plain, proper and unglamorous; both are from New England and seem to reflect the culturally recognized traits of that region, such as restraint and inhibition. Even more important is the fact that while both Davis and Charlotte are physically plain, this is not out of simple ignorance. Davis’ publicity makes it clear that she understands the system of Hollywood glamour but chooses to
actively resist its influences on her everyday life—although she is comfortable
manipulating the signifiers within this system occasionally. In a coda to the Collier’s
award ceremony anecdote quoted previously, Davis describes receiving her second Oscar
while wearing “a glamorous gown of tulle plus feathers” (“Marriage,” 37, my emphasis).
The implication here is that not only does Davis understand the codes of appearance
perfectly well, but she can also outdo even the most sophisticated starlet, if she so desires.
And this, of course, is the whole point: Davis’ plainness is portrayed as her own
autonomous choice, a kind of personal protest against the falsity of Hollywood.

As a character, Charlotte is similarly acquainted with the tools of attractiveness,
as conveyed by the film’s first flashback showing her as an outgoing young woman both
confident in her appearance and attractive to the opposite sex. As LaPlace notes, “The
flashback figures what Charlotte’s dialogue afterward will reinforce: she is ‘naturally’
attractive (and passionate)—it is her mother who has forced ugliness upon her by not
allowing her to follow consumerist dictates on diet, shoes, glasses” (143). That Charlotte
is aware of consumerist discourse, but simply prevented from participating in it by her
mother’s manipulation, is substantiated by the fact that it is apparently Charlotte who
performs the physical makeover on herself prior to her unveiling on the cruise ship.
While her clothing is borrowed (significantly, from an actress) and she must follow the
hand-written notes attached to them in order to perform the glamour they represent, there
is no beauty shop montage or shopping sequence to indicate how or at whose hands her
cosmetic transformation takes place. Therefore, we must assume that the newly
rehabilitated Charlotte, as a side effect of her psychoanalysis (who knew?) can now
groom herself, apply cosmetics and arrange her hair in fashionable styles.
Dyer describes Davis’ role in *Now, Voyager* as a kind of lesson in how to successfully “achieve femininity” in the public sphere (*Heavenly Bodies*, 15). Within a larger discussion of stardom in relation to the *private* (which he associates with the individual and naturalness) and *public* (associated with society and artifice), Dyer places Davis in a group of actresses (including Rosalind Russell and Katharine Hepburn) who “have the uncomfortable, sharp, quality of people who do survive and succeed in the public world, do keep up appearances, but edgily, always seen to be in the difficult process of doing so” (14). Indeed, Davis’ press confirms her undeniably tense relationship with Hollywood stardom, an institution which Dyer defines as “the business of being in public, the way in which the public self is endlessly produced and remade in presentation” (14). Her film roles reiterate this struggle:

Davis’s career thus runs the gamut of the possibilities of the private individual up against public society; from, in the earlier films, triumphant individualism, the person who makes their social world . . . to, in the later films, something like alienation, the person who is all but defeated by the demands of public life. (15)

I am particularly interested in how the theme of physical transformation fits into Dyer’s oppositional system—for what else is the makeover but a visual representation of the successful transition from private to public, channeled through appearance? We see this especially clearly in *Now, Voyager* where Charlotte’s pre-makeover condition keeps her confined to her room; she is anti-social, secretive and withdrawn. Her successful mental rehabilitation corresponds with tentative steps toward socialization during her stay at Dr. Jacquith’s institution, but her fully realized public self is only revealed during her South
American cruise, in the famous gangplank sequence. Not only is Charlotte’s appearance dramatically altered, but she also becomes a completely functional social being, as represented by her family’s astonishment when they greet Charlotte on her return to Boston. Both Charlotte’s sister and niece (who, previous to this scene, enjoys teasing her spinster Aunt Charlotte mercilessly) stand open-mouthed in wonder as Charlotte disembarks, her body a nexus of social activity performed by her classy new acquaintances. Thus, their pleasurable shock is a response to both her dramatic physical transformation, and her newly public body, desirable and desiring.

In his discussion of the star’s function as an articulation of “what it is to be a human being in contemporary society,” (Heavenly Bodies, 8) Dyer introduces a table of opposing terms which supposedly illustrate “the division of the world into private and public spaces, a way of organising space that in turn relates to the idea of the separability of the individual and society”:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>private</td>
<td>public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual</td>
<td>society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sincere</td>
<td>insincere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>physical</td>
<td>mental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>body</td>
<td>brain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naturalness</td>
<td>artifice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(11-12)

I want to argue that the makeover in film, particularly as it is portrayed in Now, Voyager, complicates and even circumvents this system of oppositions. Because the
makeover actually promises the retrieval and articulation of the ‘real’ or ‘natural’ self through the medium of the body, its goal is to directly challenge and collapse the oppositions “sincere/insincere” and “naturalness/artifice.” Consider this re-interpretation of Dyer’s table through the lens of the makeover:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>before</th>
<th>after</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>private</td>
<td>public</td>
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<tr>
<td>individual</td>
<td>society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inner</td>
<td>outer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invisible</td>
<td>visible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mental</td>
<td>physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brain</td>
<td>body</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice that I have added the makeover’s definitive dichotomy “before/after,” aligning “before” with “private” and “after” with “public”—nowhere is this better illustrated than in *Now, Voyager*, where the corresponding ‘before’ states of both Charlotte and Tina are associated with solitude and crippling lack of socialization, while the corresponding ‘after’ states facilitate the formation of human relationships and social mobility. Note that I have also reversed the oppositions “physical/mental” and “body/brain,” since the makeover’s ‘before’ state emphasizes a certain interiority that is manifested outward through the effects of the transformation—the subject’s invisible, inner qualities rendered visible through a newly-attractive physicality. It could be also argued that the makeover essentially collapses the distinction between mental and physical by promising to bring them into perfect alignment, drawing them *together* under the unifying phrase, “the real (insert pronoun here).”
My larger point is that a consideration of film stardom and the makeover, especially in relation to Bette Davis and Now, Voyager, forces us to reexamine existing assumptions about the nature of stardom. Davis’ star persona, which revolves around terms such as authenticity, realism and sincerity manages to simultaneously refute and promote consumerism, much in the same way that the makeover itself pretends to be about the uncovering of the ‘real’ or ‘natural’ person rather than the celebration of artifice. Like Davis, the star I examine in the following section appeals primarily to women spectators—but while Davis was portrayed as a strident anti-consumer, this star embraced, articulated and embodied her own particular form of naturalized glamour, conveyed repeatedly in her films through the makeover motif.

**Audrey Hepburn: Glamorous Waif**

As I noted in my introduction, Audrey Hepburn is the actress most strongly associated with the makeover across films—in particular, the Cinderella motif that the makeover in film so frequently borrows. Hepburn’s own biography reinforces this association; her off-screen careers and aristocratic heritage “produced her as princess, model and ballerina rolled into one” (Moseley, 36). In her first interview in the American press, a short piece in the New Yorker noting her performance as the 16-year-old heroine in the Broadway production of Gigi, describes the 22-year old as “fairly tall, handsomely configured, and as fresh-appearing as a milkmaid” (32). The qualities associated with the play’s title character—waif, ingenue, orphan—clearly resonate with the Hepburn star persona solidified by her film roles. In terms of narrative, Gigi relies on the younger woman/older man dynamic that acts as a constant in Hepburn’s Hollywood
films, where she is consistently paired with leading men who are 10, 15 or even 20 years her senior, and who play characters who are both mentors and lovers. The article also emphasizes Hepburn’s European-ness, as she describes to the interviewer how her fluency in French was an advantage in the casting process for this particular production: “Colette decided I was the Gigi she wanted for this play, which, even though it’s done in English, has to have a French touch” (32). Of course, this same “French touch” repeats itself as a strong presence in Hepburn’s films, such as *Sabrina, Funny Face* and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and it is interesting to note that the association between Hepburn and French-ness can be traced to an early non-cinematic source, essentially Hepburn’s American performance debut.

Despite the apparent efforts of Hepburn’s first *Life* magazine cover to sexualize the emerging starlet (the cover image shows her in a typical Hollywood cheesecake pose, talking on the phone while clad in a man’s oxford shirt and little else) many critics, including Molly Haskell and Rachel Moseley, note that Hepburn appeals primarily to female movie-goers, serving as a highly feminine, yet simultaneously sexually non-threatening, role model. While the same *Life* cover story makes the claim that Hepburn “has caused more talk than any recent actress, including Marilyn Monroe” (128), it is clear, through the article’s use of adjectives such as waif, urchin, and girl in describing Hepburn, that she and Monroe are opposites in terms of visible sexuality.

 Appropriately, the *Life* photo essay, based around the production of *Sabrina*, portrays Hepburn in numerous child-like poses, such as peeking over the top of a refrigerator to gaze longingly at a plate of pastries (“Not for Audrey,” reads the caption), riding a bicycle, sitting cross-legged on the floor as she reads, and stretching out her leg at an
awkward angle as she primly sips a cup of coffee (two activities, according to *Life*, that represent “natural gawkiness” and “natural grace,” respectively). Therefore, while the cover image clearly attempts to sexualize the star, the accompanying words and images either directly contradict the pin-up or settle for a kind of rhetorical fuzziness, where Hepburn “defies definition” (128) due to her “mercurial beauty” (139). In this way, despite its initial attempts to cast Hepburn in the sexpot mold, the *Life* feature ultimately fortifies the construction of Hepburn’s star body in terms of contradiction, where she is beautiful but not too beautiful, aristocratic but common, simultaneously waif and “woman of the world” (128).

Hepburn’s well-publicized family history and personal interest in fashion, art and dance conveyed sophistication, good breeding and worldliness; her film roles cast her over and over again as a fairy-tale princess who, through changes in her appearance, transcends class barriers and gets the prince by film’s end. It is interesting, then, that *Roman Holiday* (1953), Hepburn’s first major Hollywood role and the one that established her as a major actress and media fixation, both reverses the Cinderella motif and denies us a romantic coupling at the film’s end. In the romantic comedy, Hepburn’s character—Princess Ann—masquerades as an ordinary citizen in order to experience life as a commoner. In the course of her escape from the royal family (whose nationality is never disclosed), she meets an American newspaper reporter, Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck) who recognizes her true identity but hopes to command a high price for an exclusive story about her adventures. As Joe shows the princess around Rome, the two begin to fall in love. When she is recognized by officials and sent back to her family, she resumes her royal duties, but with the implication that she has matured or improved herself. Still, by
virtue of their resumed social inequity, the couple must remain apart, providing a moment of purely masochistic pleasure at the film’s conclusion.

With its emphasis on cross-class romance, the film borrows heavily from the plot of an earlier screwball comedy, *It Happened One Night* (1934).\(^{18}\) Both films feature upper-class, inexperienced young women escaping from the restrictions of their respective families and effectively slumming among the common people. In *It Happened One Night*, Claudette Colbert’s spoiled heiress Ellie enjoys such novelties as riding buses, hitch-hiking, and staying in roadside motels—not exactly as picturesque as a tour of Rome, but still treated as a vacation from her usual stifling lifestyle in the same way Princess Ann’s experience is portrayed. Both films share a similar delight in showing a privileged, wealthy woman out of her element, taking pleasure in the unfamiliar conditions of quotidian life, conditions most likely unpleasantly familiar to the movie-goer at the time of each film’s release.\(^{19}\)

Both films feature jaded newspaper reporters coming to the rescue, acting as tutors to these naïve young women in the ways of ordinary life, from the fine art of eating breakfast (specifically, dunking a donut in a cup of coffee) in *It Happened One Night*, to driving a motor scooter in *Roman Holiday*. And, while the tutelage and protection of these respective reporters is initially motivated by greed, this is soon replaced by feelings of attraction and love. Both films use a farcical bedroom scene to convey sexual tension between the characters—in each film, circumstances force the couple to share not only sleeping quarters (a motel cabin in *It Happened One Night* and a cramped studio apartment in *Roman Holiday*) but also clothing, since the unprepared female character must wear the male character’s pajamas, so that she is literally getting into his pants.\(^{20}\)
In addition to these similarities in plot and narrative features, I want to argue that *It Happened One Night* and *Roman Holiday* offer a similar pleasurable appeal, especially to the female spectator, but in slightly different ways. The earlier film is a typical screwball comedy (in fact, many critics consider it the first example of the genre) that expresses the social conflict between the two protagonists (class inequality) in terms of personal antagonism, a discord that is eventually resolved through romantic love. As Kathryn Rowe explains, in *It Happened One Night* “the familiar union of man and woman also bridges the gap between social class, asserting that the differences between social classes are as illusory as those between the sexes” (126). *Roman Holiday* deviates from this narrative strategy in two significant ways: the social conflict (class inequality) between the two protagonists is *not* expressed in personal terms; and this same class inequity which is resolved in *It Happened One Night* is only temporarily suspended in *Roman Holiday*. While Ann and Joe acknowledge their romantic feelings for each other through words and embrace, the film does not end with their successful pairing, but in fact steers itself toward melodrama with its tearful conclusion. Nevertheless, even this temporary suspension of social inequality must be read as a pleasurable fantasy for the spectator, much in the same way that the “Temporary Transvestite” film, as defined by Chris Straayer, “simultaneously challenges and supports traditional gender codes” (402). Consider Straayer’s description of the cultural work performed by this category of films:

> These films offer spectators a momentary, vicarious trespassing of society’s accepted boundaries for gender and sexual behavior. Yet one can relax confidently in the orderly demarcations reconstituted by the films’ endings.

(402)
Clearly, *Roman Holiday* performs a similar function, suspending class boundaries when Princess Ann becomes a kind of temporary commoner. But once her vacation from aristocracy is over, she returns to her rightful position. Apparently, while love can conquer economic class in *It Happened One Night*, it cannot bridge the gulf between a commoner and a genuine aristocrat in *Roman Holiday*, a disparity that can be read as an articulation of the ideological conflict between American democracy and European social hierarchy. The pleasurable romance coupled with the painful separation mark the film as an interesting hybrid of screwball comedy and melodrama, reiterating Rowe’s theory that “romantic comedy usually contains a potential melodrama, and melodrama a potential romantic comedy” (110).

*Roman Holiday* also places a strong emphasis on appearance and physical transformation that *It Happened One Night* lacks. The film opens with a *Citizen Kane*-like newsreel, introducing us to the princess as a public figure, waving to the crowds and posing for photographers. Next, we see Princess Ann receiving guests in a formal gown and jewels, the trappings of prestige and feminine aristocracy. Her private discomfort with the appearance that accompanies her station is conveyed by two incidents: the loss (and subsequent recovery) of one of her high-heeled shoes at the embassy reception (also a clear allusion to the Cinderella story), and her complaints about the old-fashioned nightclothes she is provided at that same night’s end. “I hate this nightgown,” she says to her lady-in-waiting. “I hate all my nightgowns, and I hate all my underwear, too.” The film implies a mismatch between Ann’s identity and appearance focused on age—her clothing is that of an old lady rather than a young, fashionable woman—and in this way could be read as a representation of the conflict between older, conservative European
values (or at least an American interpretation of these) and the changes in attitude and social politics post-WWII.  

This conflict is further articulated by the obvious parallel the film conveys between the fictional Princess Ann and Princess Margaret, considered the wild child of European aristocracy at the time of the film’s release. Several recent reviews of the film refer to the script’s rumored basis in the real-life romantic adventures of the British princess in Rome. While these rumors are difficult to substantiate, a comparison of Princess Ann’s character in the film and the real-life Princess Margaret reveals an undeniable resemblance. In an article that appeared in the *Birmingham Post* following Princess Margaret’s death, she is described as a style icon; her very public and glamorous image both offered a significant break from Europe’s dreary past and embodied the motif of transformation:

Princess Margaret sparkled like a star against the drab sky of post-war Britain. She brought glamour and sex appeal to the Royal Family in an age that was hungry for style . . . Even as a 16-year-old, there was massive public interest when Princess Margaret took her first steps in public life. Gone were the frumpy-but-suited tweed suits and berets of her childhood. In came the heels and designer hats that declared life could be fun again.  

Like Hepburn, Princess Margaret was considered an ideal of feminine physical dimensions for her time: despite her small stature, the article states, the princess had “a 23-inch waist and a 34-inch bust” and “the aplomb of a fashion model” (13). Hepburn’s equally diminutive measurements were also a matter of public record. For both of these
celebrities, this public discussion of body size was frequently tied to fashion and clothing—their slim bodies served as both figurative and literal models of desirable fashionability, simply because their bodies were suited to the current styles. Both the fictional Princess Ann and Princess Margaret represent the rise of modern youth culture, and the public’s mounting interest in the appeal of “cool.” Further strengthening the connection between the two princesses is the extensive press coverage Margaret was receiving at the time of Roman Holiday’s release for her own inappropriate romance with a divorced and much older commoner. As Hepburn biographer Barry Paris notes, “Paramount denied any connection but slyly exploited the similarities between Princess Anne’s (sic) love for a reporter in the film and Princess Margaret’s involvement with Captain Peter Townsend in real life” (82).

For her escape from the embassy, Ann makes very little attempt to disguise herself. Her physical appearance, especially her facial features, are still clearly recognizable, and while she dresses down in relation to her opulent surroundings, her high-necked and long-sleeved white blouse, long skirt, white gloves and pumps are still very prim, proper and princess-y. Her transformation into “Anya” really begins when she exchanges her heels for a pair of sandals at a street market stall. Next, she finds herself in front of a hair salon where a mirror has been positioned in the display window, surrounded by images of young women in fashionable short hairstyles. The camera watches Ann watching herself, gazing at her own long-haired reflection and clearly comparing it to the representations surrounding her own. Her gaze then turns to follow a woman leaving the salon with a cropped haircut similar to the ones depicted by the shop’s display. The window display, mirror and female client work together to create a
“before and after” effect that convinces Ann to enter the salon, where she demands that her long locks be chopped off into a boyish, gamine style. This haircut, which clearly distances her from her former princess appearance, symbolizes both a rejection of fairy-tale femininity and Ann’s emerging autonomy—significantly, it is also the hairstyle that Hepburn herself popularized as part of her overall, widely-imitated androgynous ‘look.’

After her haircut, we see Ann loosening up even further: she discards her necktie, opens her collar and rolls up the sleeves of her blouse (this all takes place off-screen), so that when she next meets Joe, she looks dramatically transformed, both acclimated in terms of her immediate surroundings and more youthful and hip. The addition of a jaunty neckerchief during her continuing adventures with Joe completes her bohemian but elegant look. The ultimate sign that Ann has completed a successful transformation is her ability to blend in with the crowd at the barge dance; her violent response to an attempted capture by the undercover royal guards who follow her to this location places her firmly on the side of the common folk.

Ann’s eventual return to her royal duties is accompanied by a return to formal clothing. During the press conference that marks the conclusion of the film, Ann enters the room in a light-colored, full-skirted dress, hat and white gloves. While not as “cool” as her earlier appearance, her look is now less stuffy and more fashionable, a compromise between her earlier outdated clothing and the youthful casualness of her ‘slumming’ attire. It is during this scene that Ann and Joe experience their final interaction, through a series of looks and a heavily coded question and response. Ann’s apparently spontaneous wish to meet the members of the press, which startles her entourage, acts a statement of both her newfound independence and acceptance of her royal “duty,” a word that figures
prominently in these last scenes. Clearly, the film wants us to understand that Ann has come into her own over the last 24 hours, as signified by her behavior and, more importantly, her appearance.

In *Sabrina*, released a year after *Roman Holiday*, the Cinderella narrative is restored to its usual chronology. The film opens with Sabrina’s fairy-tale description of the Long Island estate where she lives with her father, a chauffeur to the wealthy Larabee family. At this point in the film, Sabrina is shown as plain and child-like, dressed in a long, dark pinafore dress and flats, with her hair in a long ponytail. When she is sent to Paris to attend cooking school, Sabrina is befriended by an elderly baron, who performs a Pygmalion-like makeover on her which begins with this comment to Sabrina, while gazing at her ponytail: “You must stop looking like a horse.” Off-screen, Sabrina cuts her hair (shades of *Roman Holiday*) and acquires a new wardrobe—in a letter to her father, she describes the evening dress the baron has found for her so she may accompany him to a charity ball.

Sabrina returns home, where she is spotted at the train station by her long-time crush and black sheep of the Larabee family, David. Following his reaction shot, we are given a slow pan up Sabrina’s body, showing her sleek black suit, French poodle in her arms, earrings, turban-style hat and heavy make-up. David doesn’t recognize her at first, but is clearly attracted to her in a way he was not before, and invites her to a formal dance being held on the estate. Sabrina’s entrance, in a floor-length, strapless gown, turns the heads of several men at the dance, who ogle her openly while she searches for David in the crowd. This scene, which the other servants of the house watch with evident pleasure, indicates Sabrina’s transformation into a sexually desirable woman and the
beginning of the class ascension that will be carried out by the end of the film. This scene is interesting, too, because it positions Sabrina as a fantasy stand-in for the rest of the staff—I would argue that their interest and pleasure in her success is intended to mirror the pleasure the audience takes in witnessing her assimilation into a scene of privilege and wealth.28

Sabrina’s makeover is the key element to her social and sexual transformation. While a man of privilege initiates her metamorphosis, the film implies that it is the cumulative effect of Paris itself that refines Sabrina, and the city becomes a motif of transformation. While Sabrina doesn’t win her original object of desire, she does end up with his equally wealthy (and much older) brother Linus, who has in turn been emotionally transformed by his courtship of Sabrina, a courtship initially motivated by greed but eventually directed by genuine emotion. At the film’s conclusion, Sabrina and Linus depart for Paris, the scene of Sabrina’s original transformation, with the implication that the two will marry and Sabrina’s rise through the ranks of class will be complete.

Released back-to-back, Roman Holiday reverses the Cinderella narrative, while Sabrina immediately corrects it, so that the two films both contradict and complement each other. While her characters experience opposing trajectories of transformation in each film, Hepburn’s star persona consistently codes her as princess, where princess is synonymous with special, superior or simply better. Here I want to coin an admittedly awkward term—princess-ness—in order to describe that quality of innate superiority expressed through the Hepburn persona and supported in her films by the makeover motif. It is important to understand that princess-ness doesn’t necessarily
describe wealth or even an aristocratic heritage, but connotes a certain internalized fairy-tale goodness that the makeover renders visible.29

In 1956’s musical comedy Funny Face, Hepburn’s innate princess-ness is conveyed through the theme of intellectual depth vs. physical artifice. In the film, Hepburn plays Jo, a beatnik bookseller who is discovered by photographer Dick Avery (Fred Astaire) as the new face of Quality, a fictional fashion magazine. While on the surface the film satirizes the superficiality of the fashion world, we are clearly meant to take pleasure in Jo’s transformation as well as her rather disturbing romantic coupling with Astaire’s character, who is at least 20 years her senior. This tendency to pair Hepburn with older leading men, which begins with her Broadway role in Gigi and is repeated in Roman Holiday, Sabrina, Funny Face, My Fair Lady, and Breakfast at Tiffany’s—in other words, all of her “Cinderella” films--can be read as an important component of Hepburn’s asexual star image. Casting older men as her romantic interests diminishes their sexual threat—the age difference combined with the lack of explicit sexual contact or even chemistry conveys the safety of a father/daughter relationship.

Even as Funny Face mocks the world of fashion magazines and designers, it clearly privileges fashionable appearance as a means to achieving one’s dreams (Jo is able to travel to Paris and meet her intellectual hero) and romantic success (the film culminates with a soft-focus romantic coupling between Astaire and Hepburn). Quality is run like a military operation, as reinforced by the sounds of a military marching band that accompany scenes in the magazine offices and legions of assistants ordered about by an editor who addresses Jo as “that thing” and “that creature” previous to her transformation. But at the same time that the film seems to code magazine and fashion
culture as dehumanizing and manipulative, Jo adapts quickly and easily to her role as fashion model, as if her physical transformation has unleashed some innate quality of taste and fashionability that reflects Jo’s ‘true’ identity. And, of course, it has—her makeover restores the Hepburn we recognize from previous films and fashion images.

Significantly, Jo’s makeover is performed in Paris, the site of refinement and cultural superiority in the majority of Hepburn’s films. As I stated earlier, Hepburn herself was strongly associated with her European heritage, and this association is an important component of her star image, which in turn informs the narratives of her films. Her leading men carried similar connotations. As Dyer notes:

[Stars are] about the business of being in public, the way in which the public self is endlessly produced and remade in presentation. Those stars that seem to emphasise this are often considered ‘mannered,’ . . . When such stars are affirmative of manners and public life they are often, significantly enough, European or with strong European connections—stars . . . such as Fred Astaire, Margaret Sullavan, Cary Grant, David Niven, Deborah Kerr, Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn, Rex Harrison, Roger Moore. These are people who have mastered the public world, in the sense not so much of being authentically themselves in it nor even of being sincere, as of performing in the world precisely, with poise and correctness. They get the manners right.

(Heavenly Bodies, 14, my emphasis)

I quote this passage at length because it speaks to the star image of Hepburn as well as her male co-stars (see emphasis). The fact that Europe (Rome, Paris, London) frequently
functions as the site of Hepburn’s cinematic makeovers, *even when her character doesn’t actually live there*, articulates a larger discourse about European culture as a repository of good taste and breeding. The one exception among Hepburn’s film transformations is the one that actually takes place before the film’s action in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Instead of Europe, Hollywood is the site of her transformation from Eula Mae of Tulip, Texas, wife of Doc Golightly (yet another much older domestic partner) to Holly Golightly, potential starlet. In the film, producer O.J. Berman describes how he was able to “smooth that accent out,” in preparation for Holly’s first screen test, but she runs away to New York before she begin the process of becoming a movie star. This rejection of Hollywood is consistent with Hepburn’s star image—as Moseley notes, in addition to her European-ness, Hepburn was strongly associated with New York as a site of sophistication and East Coast culture, as opposed to the sunny superficiality of California and Los Angeles (127).

Hepburn’s star images relies on a collection of related contradictions: she is simultaneously special and ordinary, elite and accessible, experienced and innocent, European and American. Her film roles and persona (which are largely inseparable) promote these contradictions through the repeated motif of the makeover, reinstating Hepburn’s real, glamorous self to our view over and over again. It makes perfect sense that a figure who brought together such disparate terms within a single body has come to represent the fairy-tale potential of the makeover like no other star in Hollywood history. In the following section I will discuss a contemporary star whose image repeatedly borrows elements from Hepburn’s own text, but with slightly different implications for the relationship between class, sexuality and the makeover.
Julia Roberts: Small-Town Princess

*Pretty Woman* is the film that established Julia Roberts as a major Hollywood star. It is also the film that helped cement the aspect of her star persona I am most interested in, her construction as a site of class and sexual anxiety as related to appearance. My argument is that this association actually takes its earliest form in the 1988 romantic comedy, *Mystic Pizza*, and is continued over a decade later by one of her most successful roles to date, the title character in *Erin Brockovich* (2000), a legal assistant and single mother whose class status is indicated by her “sexy” clothing. I also want to discuss the incredibly successful, class-conscious romantic comedy *Notting Hill* (1999) as a re-writing of *Roman Holiday*, where Hepburn’s princess is replaced by Roberts’ movie star. Reading *Notting Hill* as a loose remake of *Roman Holiday*, where celebrity is substituted for aristocracy, speaks to the nature of film stardom itself.

Like Audrey Hepburn, Roberts conveys a certain aspect of princess-ness, that innate fairy-tale goodness, through her star image and film roles. Where Hepburn and Roberts diverge, however, is in terms of sexuality—while Hepburn communicates her princess-ness through a kind of feminized androgyny, Roberts, from her earliest film roles, is sexualized to the point of excess. This overdetermined sexuality, in turn, is often linked to class status, specifically lower class or working class characters. In *Mystic Pizza*, Roberts plays Daisy, a 20-something waitress of Portuguese heritage living in a small Connecticut fishing village. From its opening scenes, the film codes Daisy as a promiscuous flirt, in contrast to her bookish, comparatively plain-looking high-school age sister, a fellow waitress at the pizza parlor. Daisy’s work uniform consists of a strategically altered t-shirt (cut low in front and cropped at the waist), tight miniskirt, and
long and tousled, Bardot-like hairstyle. Daisy is also positioned as the central focus of the desiring male gaze within the film, as demonstrated by three men sitting at the restaurant’s counter who swivel their heads in unison to follow her path, much to the chagrin of her younger sister. Daisy is oblivious to the men’s looks, however, because her own gaze is occupied by the sight of a bright red Porsche sports car passing in front of the restaurant. Later, we learn that this car is owned by Charlie, or Charles Gordon Windsor, Jr., a wealthy law school dropout who pursues Daisy after she beats him in a pool game at the local working-class bar.

Significantly, it is also a sports car that attracts Roberts’ character in *Pretty Woman* to the wealthy male protagonist, Edward, played by Richard Gere. When he stops on the street to ask her for directions, Vivian observes Edward’s trouble driving the manual transmission Lotus in downtown Los Angeles, and offers her assistance. She drives the car to his hotel, and, apparently on a whim, he invites her up to his penthouse in the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. Vivian’s appearance in these opening scenes of the film is both highly sexualized and artificial. From her thigh-high vinyl boots, to her synthetic, stretchy mini-dress, to the blond page boy wig and thickly-applied makeup, everything about Vivian’s ‘look’ screams of artifice. Her outfit is a stark contrast to Edward’s understated business attire, as well as the tasteful and expensive clothing of the shocked hotel guests who observe Vivian in the lobby and elevator. Vivian’s appearance, and others’ reactions to it, is meant to communicate the depth of her inappropriateness; she does not fit into Edward’s world and is very much aware of this, as shown by her discomfort when confronted with the opulence of her surroundings and horrified stares from the upper-class hotel guests.
It is important to note that the first in a series of makeover moments, and the
beginning of Vivian’s movement toward a ‘natural’ and appropriate beauty, takes place
the morning after her first night in Edward’s suite. As he is preparing to leave the room
and bid Vivian goodbye, Edward discovers her sleeping, with her naturally long, reddish
curly hair fanned out on the pillows above her naked back. Edward seems shocked and
pleased by the revelation of this element of her ‘natural’ beauty, and it is clear that we are
supposed to take pleasure in this unmasking as well, as the camera lingers voyeuristically
over her sleeping form. Thus, the removal of Vivian’s hooker ‘costume’ begins—she
retains her natural hairstyle for the rest of the film, and the fate of the platinum wig is
never disclosed.30

Both Mystic Pizza and Pretty Woman use the motif of formal dress to signify their
respective characters’ initial movement into a higher class. The women cannot
accomplish this movement themselves, of course; first a man must invite them to a
sufficiently high-class event where formal dress can be worn. In Mystic Pizza, Daisy
purchases a black cocktail dress after her first glimpse of Charlie in his red sports
car—revealing that her aspirations for class mobility are in place before she even meets
the man that might help her accomplish this movement.31 She wears the dress on their
first dinner date, and in a scene clearly intended to reinforce Daisy’s sex appeal, she
attempts to hitch a ride for the couple when his sports car gets a flat tire on a rural road.32
After Charlie’s first attempt to flag down a car fails, she pushes him aside, teases her hair
with her hands, then thrusts out her rear end and thumb simultaneously, putting on a
show of sexual suggestiveness for both Charlie and the oncoming car. Charlie then
pushes her aside and begins a strange burlesque parody of her bump and grind, ending by
dropping his pants, which finally prompts a convertible full of young women to pull over and pick the couple up.

In Pretty Woman, Vivian isn’t invited to dinner by Edward—because of the nature of their relationship, she is ordered to attend, and to purchase a suitable dress with Edward’s money (and the assistance of the Beverly Wilshire’s concierge, Barney). When Edward arrives at the hotel the night of the dinner to collect Vivian from the bar, he initially fails to recognize her in her newly acquired black cocktail dress, seated with her back to him (and to the viewer). The film constructs his eventual recognition as a makeover moment, when Vivian spins around on her bar stool to face Edward, conveying his (and our) pleasure through a series of reaction shots. However, as Hilary Radner points out, “One little black dress is not enough—Vivian needs a wardrobe, which she can only acquire with Edward’s credit card, and, more importantly, his authority” (70).

The infamous shopping sequence that follows functions as an erotically charged spectacle of excess, reiterating the theme of consumerism through the parade of luxury goods and the enthusiastic bowing and scraping of the management and sale staff. As Stella Bruzzi writes:

> From the moment Edward dangles his gold credit card in front of Vivien’s (sic) nose, through the orgiastic trying on and purchasing montage, to her contented, overladen return to the Beverly Wilshire hotel, this whole sequence is cut like a pop promo celebrating the art of shopping. (15)

The shopping sequence also provides a pivotal scene of feminine revenge, enacted when Vivian returns to the Rodeo Drive boutique where, despite proffering handfuls of Edwards’s cash, she is initially denied the right to shop by the rude, snobby salesgirls.33
On her return to the shop, Vivian, transformed by her new wardrobe, is not immediately recognized by the all-female staff, and they greet her with gracious smiles and offers of assistance. Once Vivian informs them of her identity, she asks, “Do you work on commission?”—then raises her full shopping bags to indicate her recent spree, telling the women, “Big mistake. Big mistake.” The shop assistants can only look on in wonder, and, presumably, regret.34 Through this episode Vivian, armed with the power of her new wardrobe, is fully vindicated, and, as the soundtrack hammers home via the Roy Orbison tune, assumes her title of “Pretty Woman.”

The second important formal dress in Pretty Woman is the red, floor-length gown Vivian wears, with white elbow-length gloves and upswept hair, for her date with Edward at the opera. This sequence most clearly echoes the fairy tale ball of the Cinderella story, substituting an elitist cultural performance in order to ‘test’ Vivian’s innate superiority (her princess-ness). Vivian’s strong emotional reaction to the opera (and Edward’s approval of this reaction) helps her pass with flying colors, and later that night, the film implies, she and Edward make love as equals, rather than as client and sex worker.

Both Mystic Pizza and Pretty Woman posit lower-class female characters against wealthy, but emotionally troubled, ‘yuppies.’ In portraying both Daisy and Vivian, Roberts’ mannerisms and dialogue construct her as highly sexualized and ‘earthy,’ in contrast to her initially cold and dysfunctional upper-class love interests. Both Daisy and Vivian function as truth-tellers in relation to their respective male protagonists, reducing complicated situations to their simplest terms (“You and I are a lot alike,” says Vivian to Edward. “We both screw people for money.”) and seeing through the pretense of their
upper-class surroundings (observing the dynamics of a Windsor family dinner, Daisy accuses Charlie of using their relationship as a means to rebel against his class situation and anger his father). Thus, as characters, Vivian and Daisy represent a potentially dangerous sexuality that is controlled through appropriate clothing and appearance. This same sexuality is then used to humanize their respective male romantic partners, so that the female characters’ original over-inscribed sexuality is muted to a kind of earthy authenticity; the previously negative physicality of the characters, once channeled through newly appropriate behavior and wardrobe, becomes positive.

Roberts’ press at the time of Pretty Woman’s release emphasizes these qualities of sexuality, lack of pretense and authenticity within the star herself, sometimes tacking on a rags-to-riches narrative. Michael Reese’s profile in Newsweek, titled “The Barefoot Principessa,” 35 quotes Pretty Woman director Garry Marshall describing Roberts as “‘schlumpy with elegance’” (52). Reese himself describes the actress as “determinedly inelegant…barefoot, without makeup and dressed in a ragged pair of faded Levi’s” (52). Noting that her role in Steel Magnolias earned her an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress, the writer declares, “Not bad for a girl from Smyrna, Ga.” (52). Similarly, in a Rolling Stone profile (and cover story) Steve Pond establishes a connection between Roberts’ ascension to fame and the fictional character she plays:

Pretty Woman, the modern-day Cinderella story that blew things wide open for Roberts, isn't the only fairy tale in the life of this twenty-three-year-old who left Smyrna, Georgia, five years ago, won an Academy Award nomination for her role as a self-sacrificing diabetic in Steel Magnolias early this year and wound up atop the box-office charts. (46)
Pond goes on to quote Joel Schumacher, who directed Roberts in the medical thriller *Flatliners* (1990), describing the star’s “‘wonderful dichotomy,’” which he characterizes as “‘a *My Fair Lady* thing’” (46). Marcia Magill’s description of Roberts’ screen presence in *Pretty Woman* uses the much-repeated adjectives “sexy” and “coltish,” without making it clear if these are intended to be opposing terms or synonyms. Clearly, these combined interpretations of Roberts’ career and personality, both on-screen and off, reflect a star persona where Roberts is constructed as simultaneously refined yet down-to-earth, attractive but reassuringly accessible, a kind of small-town princess.

Even more important to my analysis of stardom and the makeover, Bruce Bawer’s lengthy review of *Pretty Woman* in *American Spectator* makes a significant comparison between Roberts and Hepburn:

> You can almost hear [director] Marshall behind the camera, saying, “Smile, honey! Smile at the customers!” He’s plainly trying to turn her into a new Audrey Hepburn: her wide, sparkling smile is very much like Hepburn’s, and the dresses she buys on Rodeo Drive strongly suggest the Givenchy fashions Hepburn made famous. There are moments, too, when the storyline of *Pretty Woman* recalls, variously, *Sabrina*, *Funny Face*, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and *My Fair Lady*. (31)

Though Bawer doesn’t mention *Roman Holiday* in this catalog, I would argue that this film, read in conjunction with the 1999 romantic comedy *Notting Hill*, strengthens this association between Roberts and Hepburn. In fact, I suggest reading *Notting Hill* as a loose remake of the Hepburn film, where Princess Ann is replaced by Anna Scott, Hollywood star and media obsession, effectively substituting *royalty* with *celebrity*.38
Both films begin with sequences establishing the main characters as a primarily public figures: in *Roman Holiday* we are shown a fake newsreel documenting the princess’ activities, while *Notting Hill* opens with a similar montage of Anna Scott on magazine covers, walking the red carpet at film premieres, being photographed, and other public appearances.39

When Anna meets her love interest William (Hugh Grant), she is, like Princess Ann, dressed down, wearing sunglasses, hat, and dark clothing. Like Hepburn’s character in *Roman Holiday*, she is attempting to pass as a regular person, but despite her attempts at disguise she is immediately recognized as a public figure by the “common folk” in the film.40 We have already been alerted to the importance of star image and appearance in the film when William informs us, through an earlier voiceover, that his wife has left him for a man who “looks just like Harrison Ford.” While William clearly recognizes Anna, he makes an effort to speak to her as if she is a not a movie star, making deprecating comments about himself and his failing bookshop, behavior that seems to charm Anna (in contrast to the would-be shoplifter who asks for her autograph while being kicked out of the store). Like Peck’s newspaperman, Grant’s bookstore owner is charismatic but unsuccessful, a loser in more ways than one when his ‘princess’ enters his life. Despite his low position on the economic and social ladder, William represents the Prince Charming of the film, as he comes to Anna’s rescue just a little bit later in the film, offering her assistance after he has collided with her on the street and spilled juice on her ‘disguise.’41 Anna changes clothes in his nearby flat, producing a strange hybrid of her ordinary person disguise and public persona, as she is forced to
exchange her stained clothes for a sparkly black evening dress from one of her shopping bags, pairing it with the tennis shoes and casual leather coat of her previous outfit.

As the romance between Anna and William progresses, the film clearly privileges the common folk of his world, while demonizing both the press that follow their every move and the industry that supports this behavior. After a publicity-related break-up and attempted reconciliation, Anna and William finally end up at a press conference where, like Ann and Joe in *Roman Holiday*, they communicate their feelings of love for each other through the format of the Q&A session. Unlike the Hepburn film, though, this exchange of looks and dialogue ends with a successful romantic coupling, followed closely by a montage of a wedding, the two happily attending a movie premiere, and a visibly pregnant Anna reclining across William’s lap on a park bench. This conclusion recalls the opening montage of photographers and media imagery, but includes scenes of the private life of the two lovers, so that not only does William make a successful adjustment to life in the public eye, but Anna makes an equally successful transition from public to private, culminating in a satisfying, heteronormative moment of closure.42

In *Roman Holiday*, economic class is the main impediment to the lovers’ union—in *Notting Hill*, the conflict is produced by the collision of public and private, where public is coded as false and private as authentic. While Anna makes more money than William (demonstrated by her gift to him of an original Chagall painting), it is not class that threatens to keep them apart, it is fame—specifically Anna’s fame and William’s lack of it. *Notting Hill* stands out from Roberts’ earlier works in its self-conscious use of her star image. Rather than simply reiterating her small-town princess persona, the film’s narrative itself performs as text the same contradictory activity that
films such as *Pretty Woman* perform as subtext—reassuring us that Julia Roberts/Anna Scott contains some core of authenticity while simultaneously privileging that which makes her different from the masses.

As I argued in my earlier discussion of the Hepburn oeuvre, the transformation narrative in *Sabrina* serves to correct the reverse-Cinderella motif of *Roman Holiday*. Similarly, *Runaway Bride* (1999), released just two months after *Notting Hill*, serves the same function for Roberts, casting her as small-town hardware store owner (!) Maggie Carpenter, who falls for city slicker columnist Ike Graham, played by her *Pretty Woman* co-star Richard Gere. After losing his job over a libelous column about Maggie, a commitment-phobe who has abandoned multiple men at the altar, Ike journeys to her home in Hale, Maryland (get it?) hoping to salvage his career through an exclusive interview. Like Clark Gable’s aggressive and worldly reporter in *It Happened One Night*, Ike is able to relate to the common folk, charming information out of people and insinuating himself into Maggie’s community. While the film makes constant use of the conflict between the down-home, very unglamorous Maggie and the aggressively urban, jaded Ike, I would argue that her princess-ness is conveyed through the repeated visual motif of the bridal gown. In a scene clearly reminiscent of the shopping sequence in *Pretty Woman*, the owner of the local bridal boutique refuses to sell Maggie the wedding dress she wants to purchase, citing her dismal marital track record, even though Maggie has adequate funds to purchase the gown. It is only when the reporter intervenes and demands she be sold the dress that the owner relents. We next see Maggie twirling before the shop mirrors and the reporter in the floor-length gown, delight evident on both of their faces. Even though the dress is intended for her wedding to another man, the
message is in this scene clear—like Vivian in *Pretty Woman*, Maggie has found the right man (though she doesn’t know it yet) *and* the right wardrobe (thanks to the man’s authority) to unleash her princess-ness.

Wardrobe also serves an important ideological purpose in Roberts’ subsequent biopic, *Erin Brockovich*. While modeled on the real Erin Brockovich, a legal assistant whose investigative work helped win a class action suit benefiting hundreds of sick people, Roberts’ character is clearly evocative of roles from her early career. As the film makes a point of emphasizing, mainly through the reactions of its supporting characters, Erin prefers inappropriately sexualized, revealing outfits, including low-cut tops that show plenty of cleavage, short skirts and gaudy jewelry. Her hair is large and curly, echoing that of the prostitute Vivian in *Pretty Woman*. In fact, as a whole, the character Erin Brockovich, as played by Roberts, closely resembles Vivian both in terms of appearance and behavior—like Vivian, Erin is earthy, candid and intolerant of bullshit in any form. As such, she acts as a counterpart to the various male bureaucrats and authority figures she encounters in the film. However, unlike Vivian, Erin is never physically rehabilitated, but instead stubbornly clings to her trashy style as a means of expressing her personality in the face of corporate cynicism. Instead, her princess-ness is conveyed through her emotional involvement with her clients, and her selfless commitment to their cause. The unexpectedly huge check she receives from her cantankerous employer at the end of the film, representing her portion of the legal settlement, is represented as simply icing on the cake: a well-deserved financial reward for the character’s inherent goodness. Thus, despite the lack of a physical makeover, the themes common to Roberts’ star image—earthiness, sexuality, authenticity, class-
consciousness—are consistently conveyed through the film’s narrative and mise-en-scène.

**Conclusion: History, Class and Whiteness**

As I have shown, the individual star texts of the three film actresses discussed in the previous sections—Bette Davis, Audrey Hepburn and Julia Roberts—resonate with different ideological aspects of the makeover in film. I want to conclude with a reading of these star bodies in terms of history, in order to point out that these ideological functions of the makeover have historical conditions. In other words, these stars articulate specific moments in the history of the makeover through their images and films. In particular, I want to consider what these star texts have to say about social class and whiteness by way of the makeover motif.

Bette Davis rose to stardom in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s. Both this period of production in Hollywood and Davis herself are strongly associated with the popularity of the cinematic genre known as the woman’s film. Mary Ann Doane, whose critical work helped legitimate the genre as an area of study, notes an important feature of the woman’s film is its “address to a female viewer”:

> The films deal with a female protagonist and often appear to allow her significant access to point of view structures and the enunciative level of the filmic discourse. *They treat problems defined as “female” . . . and, most crucially, are directed toward a female audience.* (3, my emphasis)

I want to argue that Davis’ star body, through its association with the female address in her films, actively codes the makeover as a distinctly *female* phenomenon, and as such
represents an important moment in the concurrent cultural histories of the makeover and
the body. In her performance as the troubled Charlotte Vale in *Now, Voyager*, Davis’ star
body articulates the growing interest in psychoanalysis within American society, a trend
reflected in the popular culture of the time. The film’s narrative tells us that her
character’s “female trouble” is all in her head, while her successful psychological
rehabilitation is expressed through her physical makeover. In this way, *Now, Voyager*
actively feminizes mental illness; by presenting it as a “female” problem, the film offers a
pathological explanation for the unsuccessful performance of femininity.

In *Now, Voyager*, because all the major characters belong within the same
wealthy (and white) class, there is little acknowledgement of difference in these terms.
Instead, the film articulates its ideas about class through one of the favorite motifs of the
woman’s film: choice. When Charlotte’s controlling mother threatens to cut her off if
she continues to behave as she pleases, Charlotte responds by threatening to join the
working class and support herself. Charlotte’s brief rebellion serves mostly as a device to
indicate her conviction to live her life as she pleases, since her mother’s timely death and
Charlotte’s subsequent inheritance allow her to remain comfortably wealthy without
having to find work as “a headwaitress in a restaurant.” In this way, *Now, Voyager*
deflects issues of class aspiration onto Davis’ star persona and her association with the
“Independent Woman” figure. In other words, the film’s main theme is personal
autonomy rather than class mobility, a theme synonymous with Davis’ rejection of
Hollywood social competition, her self-promoted lack of pretense and “Yankee”
sensibility.
In contrast, Audrey Hepburn’s star text tells a fairy tale of class mobility, communicated through multiple repetitions of the makeover motif in her films, while her star body reflects a changing feminine ideal. Hepburn’s slender, small-breasted, boyish appearance was a stark contrast to the popular female body of the 1950’s, as represented by the womanly physiques of Jayne Mansfield and Marilyn Monroe. As the Hepburn body type became the standard for fashion models and actresses, it connoted desirability and class. Whereas Mansfield and Monroe reveled in fleshy excess, Hepburn’s slender body represented restraint and civility, perceived markers of upper class behavior. As Rachel Moseley writes, “In her demeanor—her controlled, even mannered use of her body and her slenderness—Hepburn speaks (high social) ‘class’ through her corporeal form” (126). In this way, Hepburn’s star body offered the possibility of class ascension simply through body type, while her films used the makeover motif to rediscover and reinforce this connection over and over again.

Hepburn’s star body clearly articulates a ‘classy’ femininity through appearance, however, as Moseley notes, “It is essential to recognize that the whiteness of ‘Audrey Hepburn’ is key to the hegemonic status of her femininity” (14). In other words, the correctly classed femininity Hepburn represents is also an articulation of whiteness; at the level of ideology, whiteness and femininity cannot be detached from one another. It is also important to note that Hepburn’s performance of whiteness is never acknowledged as such: “Hepburn’s whiteness is unmarked in the same way that the middle-classness of her ‘look’ remains unmarked and appears as ‘classic’” (Moseley, 15). In this way, Hepburn’s star persona conveys the idea that to be ladylike is to be white; the possibility
of the former exists within the latter. Dyer remarks that “to be a lady is to be as white as it gets” (*White*, 57).

Finally, I want to consider Julia Roberts in terms of the 1980s economy and post-feminism. In many of her films, especially early in her career, Roberts plays characters constructed as earthy antidotes to the materialistic and emotionally crippled men around her. At least one of these characters is a prostitute (*Pretty Woman*) while the rest are prostitute-like, from the hyper-sexualized, gold-digger Daisy in *Mystic Pizza* to the Hollywood actress in *Notting Hill* who, it is implied, has essentially whored herself out to the movie industry. As such, Roberts’ star body conveys and attempts to resolve an historical anxiety surrounding wealth and sexuality in the 1980s and 90s, prompted by the perceived successes of the women’s movement. As Hilary Radner writes:

> In an era in which more than fifty percent of all women work outside the home, the 1980s and 1990s have seen the intensification of this new femininity that identifies itself within a public sphere. This new femininity defines itself and its pleasures (the libidinal economy) on a marketplace in which her capital is constituted by her body and her sexual expertise, which she herself exchanges. (59)

Like Hepburn, Roberts embodies the possibility for class mobility, but unlike the older star, Roberts grounds her potential for class ascension in a distinctly sexualized body. As such, Roberts’ films use the makeover motif in an effort to regulate the inappropriately visible exchange-value of the prostitute or gold-digger character s she plays. Of course, this process of converting ‘prostitute’ into ‘lady’ relies on whiteness as a precondition. As feminist critic D. Soyini Madison writes in her analysis of *Pretty Woman*:
Vivian’s race is not a subject of explicit significance in the film; however, it is fundamentally significant that only because she is a white woman, a “pretty” white woman, can the plot unfold in the manner that it does . . . One need only mentally substitute a beautiful black woman in Vivian’s role to understand how thoroughly racial difference and its absence informs this contemporary fairy tale as an important commentary on sexual, economic, and political constructions of difference.

(230, author’s emphasis)

In fact, this observation could be applied to all three of the stars discussed in this chapter; the makeover in film both assumes whiteness and works to inscribe whiteness as part of a correct, ‘classy’ femininity. Thus, the star body participates in the seemingly endless dialogue between race, sexuality and class, a discussion moderated by the makeover.

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1 More recently, cosmetic surgery is being used in order to attain the “look” of certain celebrities (see Marie Claire, July 2004, “Makeover? Or Madness? ‘I Paid Thousands to Look Like a Celebrity’”), so that the activity of copying is bringing the spectator even closer to her ideal, closing the “gap” of which Stacey speaks almost completely.

2 Films consciously modeled after the Cinderella myth usually include a ‘fairy Godmother’ character who ‘teaches’ the makeover subject lessons in femininity that facilitate her transformation—The Princess Diaries, The Breakfast Club and Grease are all good examples.

3 Nowhere is this more evident than the FOX network’s reality makeover series The Swan—because contestants are made over by the same group of surgeons within a short space of time, their ‘after’ appearances are all disturbingly similar to each other as well as reminiscent of Hollywood star appearance in general, though it is impossible to say exactly which celebrities the women resemble.

4 Hilary Radner’s description of this paradox in Pretty Woman is especially apt: “The spectacle of transformation that the film offers its viewers has always already taken place” (1993: 72).

5 Cahill names actresses Judith Anderson, Agnes Moorehead and Thelma Ritter as examples of this type.

6 In It’s a Wonderful Life (1946), Mary Bailey undergoes a kind of reverse-makeover intended to symbolize the contrast between the ‘real’ life she shares with George and the ‘George-free’ fantasy he experiences. In this alternate universe, Mary is the lonely, timid town librarian who, when George confronts her, is wearing eyeglasses, apparently not a part of her attire in her life with George. Here, the glasses are used to symbolize both her vocation and her unhappy spinsterhood.

7 Interestingly enough, unattractive characters rarely undergo plastic surgery as part of the makeover process within film—most likely because the actresses who play them have already undergone these procedures in their own lives.

8 As Maria LaPlace notes, in Now, Voyager, “‘ugliness’ is only the condition of not doing the proper things to the body: grooming, dieting, makeup, fashion can make any woman ‘attractive’”(143).
9 Previous to this moment, her husband shows affection by kissing her on the forehead or cheek in a very fatherly way, calling her a “little fool.”

10 Much has been made by critics and fans of Judy’s very obvious lack of a brassiere in the film—a sharp contrast to Madeleine’s constricting gray suit and clearly symbolic of the type of sexuality each character represents. See http://www.labyrinth.net.au/~muffin/kim_novak_c.html for a fascinating interview with Kim Novak where she discusses her collaboration with Hitchcock and Edith Head in creating her dual characters’ wardrobes.

11 Significantly, Judy’s transformation in *Vertigo* is also associated with tragedy and punishment—following her makeover at the hands of Scotty, she falls to her death from the church bell tower.

12 A term of my invention, defined in the introduction as the moment where the transformed makeover subject is revealed both to an audience within the film and the extradiegetic spectator.

13 As Dyer notes in *Stars*, “The importance of publicity is that, in its apparent or actual escape from the image that Hollywood is trying to promote, it seems more ‘authentic.’ It is thus often taken to give a privileged access to the real person of the star” (61).

14 It is interesting to consider the opposition of the terms “feminine” and “maternal” in this description—is the writer using “feminine” to mean “sexy”?

15 Whether or not this article was actually written by the star herself is impossible to determine—it is much more likely that ‘Bette Davis’ is actually a studio press agent. However, the frequency with which Davis supposedly spoke directly to her fans through these features emphasizes how her star image relied on a kind of commitment to authenticity, both in her publicity and her film roles. See Mayne (127) for more about this aspect of Davis’ press.

16 Apparently this pose was scandalous enough to prompt an angry letter to the *Life* editors from a Mrs. Hugh W. McKinley, “President, Friday Conversational Club, Monongahela, Pa.” The letter, published in the Dec. 28, 1953 issue, describes the cover photo as “almost indecent” (1).

17 It’s interesting to see how quickly readers imitate the language of the article—another letter to the *Life* editors published in the Dec. 28 issue a male reader describes Hepburn as a “charming sphinx” (1) while in a somewhat more disturbing one, reader George LeBoff requests a photograph of Hepburn drinking a glass of seltzer water so he can “see what happens when she squinches those big, elfish eyes” (1).

18 At least one reviewer (briefly) noted this connection at the time of the film’s release—see A.H. Weiler’s review in the August 28, 1953 edition of *The New York Times*.

19 Although it should be noted that while the world of working-class Rome into which Princess Ann escapes would be considered “ordinary” by its inhabitants, an American audience would recognize the city as an exotic tourist destination.

20 The fact that she is wearing men’s clothing can be read as a double transgression/suspension of social codes, a reading that becomes especially interesting as Princess Ann’s appearance and behavior becomes increasingly masculinized (cropped hair, cigarette smoking) through the course of the film.

21 Biographer Barry Paris notes, “Hepburn’s vital statistics were the same from age twenty-three to the end of her life: 32-20-35” (108-9). Slight variations were reported by the *New York Post* and *Photoplay*.

22 Whether their bodies influenced fashion or fashion made their body type suddenly desirable is a more complicated discussion that I will not take up here.

23 This is conveyed in the film when the young barber, after cutting off Ann’s long hair, pronounces, “Now is cool!”

24 See Moseley (100) for a discussion of Hepburn’s short hair and its interpretation by female fans.

25 Europe, especially Paris, is privileged as a site of transformation and refinement in most of Hepburn’s films—*Funny Face* also features Paris as the location for her character’s makeover. See Moseley (136).
There is a similar activity in *Maid in Manhattan*, where the hotel staff act as cheerleaders to the ascension of Jennifer Lopez’ character, implying that simply watching someone of your own station achieve class mobility is both pleasurable and rewarding.

Consider how the term princess has entered the American cultural lexicon in recent years as a both a derogatory and dismissive stereotype (i.e. “Jewish American Princess” or “JAP”) and an expression of pride (i.e. a bumper sticker that reads “MAKE WAY FOR THE PRINCESS”). This range of meanings prompts an interesting question, perhaps to be taken up elsewhere: what is it to be a “princess” in American culture?

As Charlotte Brundson notes, “Although Vivian is working as a prostitute for most of the film, the dominant presentation of her is as naturally not-a-hooker. It is the blonde wig and the cheap tarty dress which turn out to be the real disguise” (1997: 96).

In the opening scenes of the film, Daisy comments to her engaged co-worker, “The only reason to get married is to get the hell out of Mystic.”

This scene is also a clear allusion to a similar one in *It Happened One Night*; though the cross-class romance is reversed, the privileging of feminine sexual spectacle is the same.

As I noted in my introduction, the theme of revenge is common to the makeover narrative—often the makeover subject (both in reality television and fiction film) is given the opportunity to confront those who have abused him/her while in the before state. Clearly, this is reminiscent of the Cinderella story, where the put-upon Cinderella is finally vindicated by her transformation and romantic coupling with Prince Charming, much to the chagrin of her evil stepsisters.

It must be noted how transparently this scene of retribution is set up by the narrative—Vivian’s appearance is no more outrageous than any rock star or celebrity, and it’s hard to imagine she would be tossed out of the store with such exaggerated venom. Clearly, we are meant to despise the saleswomen as cruel and snobbish, the ‘evil stepsisters’ to Vivian’s Cinderella.

The title alludes to *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954) in which Ava Gardner plays a seductive, earthy peasant woman who is ‘discovered’ by a Hollywood director and subsequently romanced by a wealthy nobleman. This cinematic allusion both calls attention to the similar plotlines of *Pretty Woman* and the earlier film and draws a parallel between Roberts the star and Gardner’s fictional character, while the writer’s substitution of “principessa,” Italian for “princess,” reinforces the Cinderella narrative reflected in his profile.

In the aforementioned *Rolling Stone* profile Roberts herself expresses confusion regarding her recurring comparison in the press to a young horse, asking her interviewer, “Is it my teeth?”

*Pretty Woman* itself makes an explicit parallel between the two stars when it shows Vivian watching a scene from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* on television—this allusion both calls attention to the similar socio-economic positions of the fictional characters in each film (Holly Golightly is implicitly coded as a prostitute) as well as similarities between the two female actresses.

Not to imply that these two categories are mutually exclusive, but simply to note how *Notting Hill* reinterprets the inherent ‘specialness’ of aristocracy through film stardom.

These latter images are apparently taken from Julia Roberts’ own publicity, further blurring the distinction between star and character.

Anna Scott is very much aware that she is being constantly recognized—therefore her ‘disguise’ of dark glasses, hat and inconspicuous clothing simply fulfills our expectations of what a movie star travelling incognito should look like.

Again, this echoes the scene in *Roman Holiday* where Joe first encounters Ann, half-asleep in a city square, and ‘rescues’ her from her circumstances.

This fictional happy ending is mirrored by Roberts’ apparently successful real-life marriage to cameraman Danny Moder, a ‘commoner’ in the eyes of the media, who gleefully report that he is referred to as ‘Mr. Roberts’ on the sets of her films.

Roberts herself was engaged to marry Keifer Sutherland in 1991, then ran off to Ireland with actor Jason Patric within days after the wedding was cancelled. Though reportedly a mutual decision, the split was interpreted in the press as an abandonment of Sutherland by Roberts, and it seems clear this element of her public past informs the film’s narrative.
CHAPTER 3

BUILDING BODIES AND BODYBUILDING: TECHNOLOGY AND GENDER IN 
G.I. JANE AND MISS CONGENIALITY

In the previous chapter, I examine how the ideology of the makeover is expressed through star bodies. Here I want to discuss the makeover in terms of technology and the gendered body; specifically, how the makeover in film functions as a “technology of gender,” to borrow Teresa de Lauretis’ term for a discursive strategy or device that articulates or reiterates gender through physical appearance. As the body’s potential for transformation increases, the body itself, particularly the female body, has come to represent a site of almost unlimited malleability, or what Susan Bordo terms “cultural plastic” (246). Cosmetic and weight loss surgery, body building, aerobics and advanced beauty practices from ultra-violet tooth whitening to permanent eyeliner are all recent technologies that allow women to alter their appearances and physical shapes dramatically. Whether these technologies are exploited or not isn’t necessarily important—their very existence imbues the female body with a sense of increased plasticity. Paradoxically, this potential for transformation is strictly contained within culturally determined standards of femininity and physical attractiveness. As Bordo so perceptively notes, “One cannot have any body that one wants—for not every body will do” (250, author’s emphasis). This contradiction corresponds directly to the makeover’s production of a body that is simultaneously accessible and impossible. My central
argument in this chapter is that the makeover in film has adapted and responded to this increased potential for modification of the body by showing increasingly more dramatic physical transformations, where sexual difference itself is at stake. At the same time that it shapes bodies more aggressively, the makeover in film uses visual and narrative strategies that reinforce and reward existing cultural ideals of feminine appearance and behavior, making it very clear which bodies will, in fact, “do.”

In order to explore the relationship between technology and the makeover, I focus on two recent films, *G.I. Jane* (1997) and *Miss Congeniality* (2000). Both contain makeovers performed on female protagonists within larger patriarchal systems—the U.S. military and FBI, respectively—that represent institutional control over the individual through discipline, surveillance and conformity. Part of my analysis, therefore, examines the particular ways institutions express ideology *through* the gendered bodies they literally and figuratively construct. In doing so, I am appropriating de Lauretis’ proposal that “gender…is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as the practices of daily life” (2). In *Miss Congeniality* and *G.I. Jane*, gender is produced through the combined work of several of these “technologies of gender,” such as the U.S. government, the cinematic gaze, narrative conventions (particularly romance), and the makeover itself. In *Miss Congeniality*, the tomboyish FBI Agent Gracie Hart is almost scientifically *feminized* in order to complete an undercover assignment as a beauty pageant competitor. Gracie’s makeover seeks to temporarily differentiate her from her male coworkers, allowing her to reluctantly assimilate within the uniquely feminine institution of the beauty contest. Once there, she acts as the representative eyes and ears
of the FBI, while her fellow agents watch the action through remote cameras and sound devices placed on Gracie’s body. Thus, in building a ‘better’ Gracie, the FBI positions her as just one component in a larger machine of covert observation and detection. A similar aesthetic operates in *G.I. Jane*, where United States Navy Lieutenant Jordan O’Neil is systematically *masculinized* as part of her transformation into a lean, mean, combat machine. As in *Miss Congeniality*, a physical makeover is necessary for the main character to reach her individual professional goals. While Gracie’s transformation separates her from her male colleagues, Jordan’s metamorphosis requires that she become *more* like the male trainees who surround her, both in terms of how her body appears and how it performs. However, unlike Gracie, Jordan is not made over *directly* by the institution in which she participates. Instead, Jordan shapes her own body in response to her understanding of how a ‘good’ soldier looks and behaves; she has *internalized* what it means to be a better Jordan, in terms of gender difference, discipline and conformity.

Despite the opposing physical results of the makeovers in each narrative, both films are careful to code their recipients as unwaveringly heterosexual and inherently feminine, both before and after their corresponding transformations. In other words, they participate in what Anne Balsamo describes as “the obsessive reinscription of dualistic gender identity in the interactions between material bodies and technological devices” (162). This reinscription of gender polarity takes place *through* the makeover in *Miss Congeniality*, as a direct process of feminization; in *G.I. Jane*, this reinscription is a *reaction* to the main female character’s masculinization, reassuring us, through camera techniques and narrative strategies, that the muscular female is still female. In addition to a comparison of these two films, I want to begin my analysis of each movie in terms of
its relevant cultural setting, first with Miss Congeniality and the beauty pageant, followed by G.I. Jane and female bodybuilding.

**The American Beauty Pageant**

In terms of ideology, the makeover and the beauty contest work in perfect harmony.¹ Both cultural constructions rely heavily on the contradiction between accessibility and impossibility. As we have seen, the makeover conveys the democratization of beauty through very narrow standards. Similarly, the modern beauty pageant implies that *any* young woman could potentially be crowned Miss America (or Miss USA or Miss Universe) when in fact only a small fraction of the female population meet the standards of appearance and femininity by which contestants are judged. As with the makeover in film, whiteness is highly prized by the beauty contest, to the exclusion of all other groups. Until the late 1960s, the Miss America pageant (the reigning queen of beauty competitions) actually required that contestants “must be of good health and of the white race,” as stated in the official rules. The first black Miss America, Vanessa Williams, was crowned in 1984; she was forced to resign after her nude photos, taken when she was younger and in financial need, were published in *Penthouse* magazine. Clearly, Williams’ light skin and ‘white’ features could take her only so far; her very public sexual transgression was unacceptable to pageant officials. Thus, the makeover as a device and the beauty pageant as an institution both participate in a narrative of upward social mobility facilitated by the successful performance of white femininity, of which appearance is a dominant component.
The beauty contest essentially appropriates the already-public performance of femininity, codifies and simplifies the system of judgement and reward for female competition based on appearance. As Candace Savage notes: “Beauty contests put the everyday practices of femininity—dieting, shaving, tweezing, make-up and all the rest—on center stage, where they [can] be studied, imitated and critiqued by all interested parties” (9). Everyday ‘prizes’ for appropriately feminine appearance and behavior—marriage, a desirable career, financial security—are represented in the beauty contest by more tangible rewards: a college scholarship, a screen test, cash, a new car, and of course, a big, sparkly crown. By emphasizing the everyday, ordinary beauty practices of women as a means to financial and social gain, the beauty pageant implies that any woman with these technologies at hand can compete. Again, the pageant promotes the same democratization of beauty and resulting social mobility that the makeover claims to represent.

In reality, contemporary pageant contestants undergo a very exclusive and expensive pre-pageant transformation in order to be considered competitive. Keith Lovegrove describes his firsthand observations of the process leading up to the 2001 Miss Arizona USA pageant:

The first task is to read and sign the legal documents…the contestants then embark on the beautification process. A professional pageant coach is considered a worthwhile investment…Stacey Kole, Miss Arizona USA 1998 and top-ten finalist at Miss USA, provides “comprehensive pageant consulting.” Her hourly sessions or four-day packages include interview technique, mental conditioning, stage presence, wardrobe, beauty and
“personal bio preparation.” Further grooming includes manicures, pedicures, brow- and lash-tinting, perm-waving, acrylic nails, permanent make-up, facials, laser resurfacing, waxing, electrolysis and ultra-violet teeth-whitening sessions. (124)

Clearly, not just any teenager or young woman could compete in the modern beauty contest; in fact, Lovegrove notes many of these women are professional competitors, who have been entering and winning pageants since they were children, so that performing adult femininity competitively becomes their livelihood. This mercenary approach to the beauty contest is concealed by the pageant’s claims of naturalized (and nationalized) beauty in its contestants, reinforcing the illusion that any young woman could become beauty royalty.

The enduring emphasis on a swift upward rise facilitated by the beauty contest is closely related to the narrative of Hollywood stardom, where an ordinary young woman is ‘discovered,’ then thrust into the media spotlight. In fact, in the early days of the American beauty pageant, the event itself often operated as the means to this discovery, so that participating in a beauty contest was simply the first in a chain of events that led to movie stardom or a modeling career. As Lois Banner explains:

In contrast to recent beauty contests, in which the prizes generally involve money, material goods, or college scholarships, beauty contests of the 1890’s and the early years of the twentieth century often offered as prizes an opportunity in modelling [sic] or in the theater. And although then as now most beauty contest winners quickly faded into obscurity, some did
achieve positions in Ziegfeld’s choruses or became models for one of the “pretty girl” illustrators. (263)

In fact, the silent-era “It” Girl Clara Bow is one of the most famous examples of the rags-to-riches beauty queen. In 1921 she won a beauty contest sponsored by *Photoplay* magazine which awarded a Hollywood screen test as its main prize. She was subsequently ‘discovered’ by the film industry, advancing to fame and fortune after enduring an early life of what Banner describes as “extreme poverty” (263). “The limited data on other beauty contest winners also suggests that they viewed the experience as affording them potential social mobility,” concludes Banner (263). The successful performance of femininity, according to the cultural standards articulated by the beauty contest, offered American girls and women of limited means a very real opportunity for social and economic improvement.

In the 1930s, in response to public debate, the Miss America pageant made a conscious effort to distance itself from the perceived tawdriness of Hollywood and the modeling industry, instead rewarding a more wholesome, ‘girl-next-door’ type of American femininity. As such, winners of the Miss America pageant in the second half of the 20th century were more likely to become model housewives and mothers than movie stars. However, the Miss Universe pageant, created in 1951 and sponsored by Catalina swimsuits, promised quite the opposite future for its competitors, using Hollywood as its primary bait:

The Miss Universe competition never claimed to be anything other than a beauty contest. The call-to-contestants magazine advertisement of 1951 featured a photo-illustration of screen goddess Piper Laurie in a body-
hugging Catalina swimsuit and a cloak of ermine draped loosely over her shoulders. The image was an aspirational one, and the copy promised the opportunities of fame and fortune: “Girls! Win One of Six Universal-International Studios Screen Contracts! Thrill to an all-expense paid trip to California and the World’s greatest beauty pageant.”

(Lovegrove, 28-32)

Clearly, the beauty contest and Hollywood cinema exerted a strong material and ideological influence on each other, and the makeover plays a central role in this shared history. Specifically, both institutions communicate the idea of the makeover, even if that process of transformation isn’t immediately visible. In other words, when we see the pageant contestant wearing the coveted crown and striding down the runway, or the movie star in a couture dress waving from the red carpet, we understand that at some point, a makeover was a necessary element of their ascension into the public eye. As products of the ‘before and after’ continuum, beauty queen bodies and celebrity bodies express the very concept of transformation and its accompanying upward mobility.

Finally, both the beauty pageant and the Hollywood star system privilege whiteness and reward the successful manipulation of feminine appearance, while simultaneously maintaining the illusion that the women who succeed within these institutions possess a ‘natural’ beauty. This rhetorical tension between the natural and the artificial—the artificial as natural—is also expressed through and supported by the makeover in film and culture.
Miss Congeniality: The Adult Tomboy

At the beginning of Miss Congeniality, FBI Agent Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock), struggles for recognition both from her superiors and handsome fellow agent Eric Matthews (Benjamin Bratt). Gracie, a single woman in her late 20’s who pays little attention to her appearance, is considered “just one of the guys” among the other agents. When the agency receives letters indicating a planned terrorist attack at the “Miss United States” beauty pageant in San Antonio, Gracie is persuaded to endure a makeover so that she might go undercover as a contestant. Pageant consultant Victor Melling (Michael Caine) is hired to supervise Gracie’s transformation into Miss New Jersey, a process that includes extensive, painful beauty treatments, dieting and lessons in ladylike behavior. Once she joins the pageant, Gracie investigates the contestants and pageant administrators, searching among them for the terrorist who identifies him or herself as “The Citizen.” Just as she becomes convinced that she is close to finding the source of the threatening letters, the Citizen is discovered in a remote cabin in Montana and the relevant case is declared closed. As the agency prepares to pull out of its investigation, Gracie demands to remain behind, certain that her instincts are correct and that a terrorist still lurks somewhere within the pageant. While the agency refuses to give any official support, Agent Matthews elects to stay by her side. Meanwhile, it is revealed that pageant organizer Kathy Morningside (Candice Bergen), in reaction to declining television ratings and her potential dismissal, is the real author of the threatening letters she has attributed to the Citizen. During the pageant finale, Gracie determines that an incendiary device is attached to the crown, which is about to be placed on Miss Rhode Island’s head as she is named the winner. Gracie destroys the crown just in time, saving
her friend, and she and Eric arrest Kathy and her son, who has been acting as her assistant. As Gracie and Eric walk away from the scene, he asks if he can take her out on a date when they return to New York, and they share a kiss. The following day, as Gracie and Eric are leaving the hotel, Victor intercepts them with news of a bomb threat at the pageant’s Farewell Breakfast. As the agents rush into the room, they discover the bomb threat is simply a ruse—Gracie has been named “Miss Congeniality” and the contestants want to present her with an award. The film concludes with a newly feminized and attractive Gracie clutching her statuette and laughing with her friends.

The literary and cinematic figure of the tomboy is central to our understanding of the main character’s makeover in *Miss Congeniality*. The tomboy is associated with childhood, specifically prepubescence. Her identification with boy culture is usually expressed through elements of her appearance, such as short hair and jeans rather than dresses or skirts, and her behavior, such as an interest in activities that our culture generally associates with boys. Tomboyish tendencies are frequently indulged because of the assumption that once the tomboy reaches puberty, she will abandon her masculine behavior and appearance as part of the process of growing up. The failure to do so results in potential transgression. As Judith Halberstam writes in *Female Masculinity*:

> Tomboyism tends to be associated with a “natural” desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys... Tomboyism is punished, however, when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification... and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence. Teenage tomboyism represents a problem and tends to be subject to even the most severe efforts to reorient.
The film codes Gracie as a tomboy in order to explain her masculine appearance and habits, while simultaneously establishing her as reassuringly heterosexual. Understanding Gracie as androgynous but straight prevents any potential misreading of her character as a lesbian. However, as an adult tomboy, Gracie still represents a problem that must be resolved within the film’s narrative. As an adult woman who continues to behave like a tomboy, Gracie is pathologically immature. She is also sexually unsophisticated, as evidenced by her admission that she has gone out on only two dates during her adult life, both of them unsatisfying. As Yvonne Tasker notes:

The image of the ‘tomboy’ captures a sense of immaturity—of both a freedom from the responsibilities of adult life and a sense of incomplete development. A mapping of transgression that can be contained, the tomboy signals a composite of experience and innocence—of capabilities and energies together with sexual naïveté. (84)

Gracie’s makeover is an attempt to solve the problem of the adult tomboy, and thus represents a process of emotional and sexual maturation. By feminizing Gracie’s appearance and behavior, the makeover seeks to retrieve Gracie from her inappropriate extended girlhood and force her into womanhood, enacting a delayed coming-of-age. This successful transition, in turn, allows Gracie to pursue both heterosexual romance and female friendship, elements of a well-socialized, adult femininity.

Miss Congeniality conveys Gracie’s initial state of “incomplete development” through the juxtaposition of two important scenes: the playground flashback to Gracie’s childhood, and an FBI stakeout that takes place in the present of the film’s narrative, with Gracie as an adult. In the first scene, which opens the film, Gracie is shown at about 11
or 12, sitting some distance apart from the other children, engrossed in a Nancy Drew mystery novel. She wears black frame glasses that practically scream ‘bookworm’ and her hair is pulled into two messy braids. Her focus on the pages of the book is interrupted by a noisy fight between two boys: the instigator is a stereotypical playground bully, the victim his nerdy counterpart. Clearly motivated by romantic feelings for the smaller boy, Gracie drops her book and rushes to his defense, punching the bully in the face and dispersing the crowd. As she moves to help the object of her affection to his feet, he shoves her away in annoyance. Rather than being grateful, the rescued boy is resentful of her interference, claiming that his deliverance at the hands of a girl leaves him worse off in the eyes of their classmates than if he had been beaten up by the bully. Gracie’s response to this rejection is to repeat the earlier punch to the face, this time knocking down the object of her crush and stomping off in anger.

We learn several important things about Gracie’s character in this initial sequence. First of all, we are clearly meant to understand that Gracie is destined to be a federal agent. Her early interest in female detective fiction, her willingness, even as a young girl, to engage in physical confrontation, and her seemingly inherent sense of social justice all speak to the appropriateness of her adult occupation. Secondly, though even more importantly, Gracie’s youthful interest in boys leaves no doubt as to her sexual orientation. However, her adolescent romance is unrequited, hinting at Gracie’s lack of sexual success as an adult. We also learn that, as a child, Gracie is impulsive, stubborn and angers easily, as demonstrated by her violent reaction to romantic rejection. As Gracie grows older, we would normally expect this emotional immaturity to give way to a more ‘adult’ composure; the presence of these childish traits in her adult personality, as
demonstrated by her behavior in the stakeout scene that follows, conveys a serious lack of social development.

The similarities between Gracie as a child and as an adult are communicated visually through the use of a dissolve between the playground scene (past) and the stakeout (present). An image of the young Gracie slowly transitions into a nearly identical close-up of the adult Gracie, wearing similar black-framed glasses and two sloppy braids on either side of her head. She is wearing clothing that an adolescent girl might choose: a T-shirt decorated with what looks like a comic book character, a zip-up “hoodie” sweatshirt and jeans. Seated in a restaurant booth, she is pretending to study a Russian textbook that has one extraordinary feature: it conceals a tiny video camera that allows her to transmit images of her fellow diners to various male agents stationed outside the restaurant. As the stakeout devolves into a shootout, Gracie’s actions demonstrate she is a capable agent: tough, clever and strong. However, she makes a split-second, impulsive decision that leads to another agent being shot. As the injured man is transported out of the scene and into a waiting ambulance, Agent Matthews tries to console Gracie, urging her to go home and recover from the night’s events. His final words to her, “By the way, you look like hell,” are the cruel equivalent of Gracie’s childhood rejection by the opposite sex. And yet, Agent Matthews is right, Gracie does look like hell, with disheveled hair hanging in her face, dirty clothing, and a washed out and slightly greasy-looking complexion.

Read in conjunction with the playground sequence, the stakeout scene reinforces Gracie’s heterosexuality, but also makes it clear that she is not a fully mature woman, as signified by her consistent physical appearance over time. While Gracie’s desire has an
appropriate object, it is problematic in that it is not reciprocated, apparently due to her unfeminine behavior and appearance both as a girl and an adult. Even in her adulthood, where Gracie’s perceived masculine traits are appropriate to her male-dominated occupation, her “hellish” appearance prevents romance. In other words, while an adult tomboy might fit in to an extent at the FBI, her viability as a heterosexual object of desire is diminished by the way her body and face refuse to conform to reigning standards of female physical beauty.

This point is further emphasized by visual and narrative cues conveyed in the sequence following the shootout. When Gracie returns home to her apartment, she first trips over a pile of discarded clothing, kicks her bed in retaliation, then mechanically microwaves a TV dinner, that universal symbol of domestic isolation. When she returns to the front room of her studio apartment to wait for her meal to heat up, she trips a second time, turns on some loud music, puts on a pair of boxing gloves and begins pounding and kicking a punching bag suspended from the ceiling. She is clearly trying to work out some aggression generated by the evening’s events; however, the sequence as a whole efficiently communicates what we are supposed to recognize as consistent aspects of Gracie’s personality: she is clumsy, she is messy, she is lonely and she is frustrated. In short, she is a woman ripe for transformation, from her bushy eyebrows to her awkward, unladylike behavior.

Gracie’s desperate need for a makeover is reinforced by the sloppy masculinity of professional uniform: a loose-fitting, menswear-styled suit with a carelessly buttoned white shirt and clunky black oxford shoes. Her long, dark hair is a traditional marker of femininity, but the stringy clumps that escape from her loose ponytail and hang down
into her face communicate a distinct lack of interest in feminine grooming. She is also free of makeup, or at least *communicates* that idea through her heavy eyebrows and colorless face. Her strongly accented speech (generic, working class New York) is punctuated by unladylike snorts of laughter; her gestures are unselfconsciously crude. In short, elements of Gracie’s performance resemble a parody of masculinity, a broadly exaggerated imitation that borders on male drag. At the same time, the film is careful to counter this masculinity with frequent indications of Gracie’s natural potential for femininity. Her masculine tendencies, the film implies, make up nothing more than a disguise she mistakenly assumes in order to play the role of a federal agent. Her misguided eagerness to conflate ‘agent’ with ‘male’ has created a misalignment between her inherently feminine interior and excessively masculine exterior. In this way, Gracie’s performance is an example of female masculinity operating as “a pathological sign of misidentification and maladjustment” (Halberstam, 9). This misidentification, in turn, generates disharmony in Gracie’s professional and social life, so that until her ‘pathology’ is identified and treated, she will be unhappy and, apparently, unloved. While the film portrays Gracie as a smart, skillful agent, it also shows that her immaturity, impulsiveness and bursts of frustrated anger continue to hinder her advancement in the bureau. The implication here is that Gracie’s discomfort in her own skin, her apparent inability to perform simultaneously as ‘woman’ and ‘agent,’ prevents her from being successful in the workplace. The film wants us to read Gracie as a misfit, so that Gracie’s body and its confused gender identifications represent the main narrative conflict. Simultaneously, we are meant to understand that Gracie has not moved too far
over the gender divide; the film’s constant tension between masculine and feminine traits expressed through Gracie’s body conveys her potential for redemption.

We can see this strategy at work in a scene where Gracie is shown eating dinner at a bar frequented by FBI agents. The camera lingers on Gracie’s hands and mouth as she feeds herself a mammoth hamburger and fries doused in ketchup; she is eating ‘like a man’ both in her choice of food and the manner in which she eats it. However, the film plays with this concept of gendered food choices when, after finishing her meal, Gracie asks the bartender for “a pint.” “Rough day?” he asks. What we assume will be a pint of beer turns out to be a pint of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, with spoon. Thus, the film counteracts her “masculine” hamburger and fries with the stereotypically “feminine” pint of ice cream consumed in one sitting in response to daily stress. It is also during this scene that Gracie is confronted by her alter ego in the form of an attractive blonde Vassar undergraduate named Beth, the latest romantic conquest for Agent Matthews. Beth represents every conventional feminine quality Gracie lacks (she is pretty, blonde and friendly where Gracie is spinsterish, brunette and hostile), and Eric’s obvious attraction to the student serves to emphasize his lack of interest in Gracie’s appearance. Beth announces that she is writing her thesis about the FBI, and asks Gracie, with wide-eyed innocence, “Do all the women in the bureau have to wear those really masculine shoes?” Gracie seems both envious and contemptuous of Beth’s successful performance of femininity: “Have fun at the mall,” Gracie mutters to her in parting. The film’s portrayal of Beth as attractive but insipid reflects a deep mistrust of academic feminism that is echoed throughout the film. Beth may be educated, the film seems to say, but she is also sheltered, unlike Gracie, who is tough, acts on her instincts rather than her intellect, and
consistently holds her own in a man’s world. The film clearly wants us to understand that Gracie is a better choice of romantic partner for Eric, and it is simply her disguise of unattractiveness that prevents their union.

By repeatedly pitting Eric and Gracie against each other in a battle of verbal animosity and physical skill while alluding to an evolving romantic relationship, *Miss Congeniality* conforms to the structure of a typical screwball comedy, where heterosexual love is expressed in terms of conflict. In fact, the film’s detective plot is really just a device to facilitate Gracie’s transformation and her subsequent romantic coupling with Eric. The audience recognizes that the aggression between Eric and Gracie masks their attraction to each other, and it is only a matter of time before this becomes apparent to the characters themselves. An example is the scene where Gracie boxes with a male dummy while Agent Matthews tries to convince her to accept the undercover mission. “I’m not gonna parade around in a swimsuit like some airhead bimbo,” says Gracie. “You do a few butt-shaping exercises, tighten this up” says Eric, slapping her rear end, “and you could pull this off!” The verbal bout between Eric and Gracie transitions into a physical struggle, much to the delight of the male agents looking on. Gracie grabs Eric in a headlock and they wrestle and argue simultaneously, in a broad parody of sexual intimacy. Their struggle ends with both agents on their backs, stretched out side-by-side, spent and sweaty. Neither has clearly won the physical challenge, but Gracie finally relents to Eric’s pleading that she go undercover as a pageant contestant. “Where am I gonna put my gun?” she asks. “No place I wanna know about,” Eric replies. While they are seemingly repulsed by each other, Eric and Gracie share a level of physical
familiarity and intimacy that works against this characterization, so that we understand their animosity as an expression of a mutual attraction that is yet to be realized.

**Miss Congeniality: Building a Better Gracie**

Girl culture and FBI technology form an unlikely alliance during the search for a suitable undercover candidate, a merger that foreshadows the successful coupling of beauty culture and ‘masculine’ skills within Gracie herself. At the beginning of the search sequence, a computer programmer explains that he has borrowed software found on the “Dress Up Sally” web site, Sally being a Barbie-like fashion doll for girls, in order to clothe images of agents’ bodies in swimsuits and evening gowns, testing their pageant potential. The process itself is ridiculous: as each agent’s service record is pulled up, the computer programmer pushes a few buttons, and the accompanying photograph of the agent’s clothed body is virtually stripped, right down to the undergarments. That the program could determine the appearance of each agent’s near-naked body is impossible, demanding a hearty suspension of disbelief—at the same time, it reinforces the omnipotence of the FBI within the film. This scene implies that the FBI is so powerful that not even the body is safe under its clothing. Technology allows federal investigators not only to expose the private body, but also to clothe it however they might wish, assigning any identity necessary for the agency’s goals.

This power to manipulate the body is demonstrated in a comical way when the search for a suitably malleable agent becomes tedious. The agents, bored by the seemingly fruitless activity, begin to amuse themselves by selecting various male agents’ images and transforming them into drag queens, to the delight of the predominantly male
Agent Matthews’ virtual body is clad in a tight dress and high heels, producing a visual incongruity that elicits howls of laughter. When this activity is performed on Gracie’s image, it is clear that everyone is expecting similarly hilarious results—since Gracie is practically a man herself, at least in the eyes of her co-workers, clothing her in a bikini seems as potentially grotesque. To everyone’s surprise, Gracie’s virtual swimsuited image conforms most closely to the current feminine ideal of physical beauty. Gracie is horrified by the prospect of entering a beauty pageant, and the sequence concludes with her steadfast refusal to participate. “You might want to hit the ‘Save’ button,” she says to the assembled male agents while gesturing toward her glamorized image on the computer screen, “because you’re never going to see that again.” Gracie’s mortification, coupled with her fellow agents’ shocked reactions, characterize the scene as a kind of ‘outing,’ where Gracie’s mask of androgyny is dramatically lowered, revealing a sexually charged image of conventional femininity. This is the same strategy Tasker describes in relation to the “peculiar gender status” of the cinematic tomboy: “The sense of a transitional state is sometimes played for eroticism—as if the ‘masculine’ clothing forms a disguise behind which the ‘real’ figure of the woman is glimpsed” (81). The scene can also be read as a virtual preview of Gracie’s actual transformation, reinforcing the extent of the FBI’s power—she can be made over, through the technology of the hybrid computer program, with or without her complicity. Thus, the transformation of Gracie’s ‘real’ body is simply a fulfillment of this virtual projection, a computerized blueprint for building a better Gracie.

Gracie’s actual physical transformation is depicted as a grueling military operation, implying that the painful process she endures reflects her dedication as a
government agent, a very specific (and comic) example of beauty as duty. Gracie’s makeover takes place in the middle of the night, in a disused airplane hangar populated by teams of white-coated dentists, pink-coated cosmetologists and other beauty experts, all supervised by pageant consultant Victor Melling. “Attention,” an official-sounding female voice intones over a loudspeaker. “Attention all hair removal units. Wax, electrolysis, laser to commence at 2300 hours.” These and other apparently unpleasant cosmetic procedures are performed on Gracie, accompanied by her vocalizations of pain and stern military marches on the soundtrack. Several shots in this sequence are taken from Gracie’s point of view as she is scrutinized by Victor and various team members, then descended on with dangerous-looking beauty implements and devices. Gracie’s discomfort illustrates the larger ideology that feminine attractiveness is the result of suffering and hard work. At the same time, the film seems to be making fun of beauty culture, as if to say, look at the ridiculous extremes women will go to in order to be considered beautiful in today’s society. However, as we will see, this supposed social satire is undermined later in the film by Gracie’s subtle embrace of physical beauty, as well as the romantic coupling facilitated by her transformation.

Gracie’s makeover moment, when she is revealed in her transformed state, also marks the beginning of a significant change in her relationship with Eric. Accordingly, the cinematic spectator is encouraged to identify with his point of view during this sequence. As dawn breaks, signifying both a new day and a new Gracie, a phalanx of beauticians, led by Victor, emerges from the open doors of the airplane hangar. The group slowly parts to reveal Gracie clad in a skintight blue tube dress, high heels and sunglasses. As she strides forward, swinging her now-shiny hair to the strains of the
R&B classic “Mustang Sally,” Agent Matthew’s reaction is suitably dramatic: his mouth hangs open in disbelief as he lowers his own sunglasses to get a better look. Suddenly, Gracie has become the object of his gaze in a way she wasn’t before, and it seems as if her desire for him might be reciprocated. However, Gracie’s very ungraceful stumble on her unfamiliar heels acts as a glimpse behind her costume of feminine beauty—she may look different, this scene tells us, but underneath she’s still the same old clumsy tomboy, and Agent Matthews’ level of interest drops accordingly. Apparently, while Gracie’s process of sexual and social maturation has begun, she has a long way to go before she can hold Eric’s attention long enough to facilitate their romance. Still, he congratulates Victor on his accomplishment, and the pageant consultant exclaims under his breath, “My God, I’m good.”

In the period immediately following her makeover, Gracie’s appearance is characterized as a hard-won disguise rather than a reflection of her dormant femininity, a simple illusion constructed by Victor and his team for which she deserves little credit. Despite her knockout status, Gracie is still just as much of a misfit as she was before her makeover—she has just been transformed from an adult tomboy to a female female impersonator. Like Vivian in *Pretty Woman*, Gracie must *internalize* the qualities that will mark her as a lady rather than a tomboy, so that her behaviors—from saying “yes” instead of “yeah” to eating with her mouth firmly closed—become an indication of her successful transformation. In this way, *Miss Congeniality* conforms to the ideology of many ‘rags-to-riches’ makeover films (such as the aforementioned *Pretty Woman*, *My Fair Lady*, and *The Princess Diaries*) that express femininity through *manners*, and in particular *upper-class manners*. In other words, it is not enough that the makeover
subject looks attractive—for her makeover to be complete, she must demonstrate her femininity through her actions and behaviors. Thus, Miss Congeniality works to conflate femininity with upper class identity, so that to become truly feminine (by upper-class, white and privileged standards) is a process of social refinement. The beauty pageant acts as the ultimate expression of this alignment between class and femininity, where the element of competition reinforces how these two factors facilitate social mobility.

An earlier scene in the film illustrates this conflation well: Gracie’s initial meeting with Victor, which takes place in a location well known to the makeover in film, the quintessential “classy restaurant.” In makeover-based movies, the expensive, tasteful restaurant represents the public arena where a successful, classed femininity must be performed. For example, in the dinner scene from Pretty Woman, which is played for laughs, Vivian must negotiate the unfamiliar rules of dining etiquette while under the scrutiny of her wealthy dining companions. In Vertigo, the idealized, elegant Madeleine is first observed in an expensive restaurant where she seems completely at home. Her character becomes strongly associated with this location as an obsessive and grief-stricken Scotty revisits the restaurant first by himself, then with Judy, who does not perform classed femininity nearly as well as her own creation. Thus, the prototypically expensive restaurant becomes a testing ground for the makeover subject, either indicating her successful transformation or publicly revealing her shortcomings. For Gracie, the restaurant setting highlights the inappropriateness of her behavior, as she tears into a bloody steak, washing it down with a bottle of Bud Light. Gracie has simply transferred her typical “masculine” dining habits, as demonstrated in the earlier bar scene, to a new location, one that illustrates her misfit status even more clearly. Victor observes Gracie’s
manners with shock and dismay, bemoaning his task of transforming “Dirty Harriet” into a potential Miss United States, who is, in Victor’s words, “always well-spoken and polite” (in other words, the opposite of Gracie). “I haven’t seen a walk like that since Jurassic Park,” he declares as he follows Gracie out of the restaurant. As a character, Victor functions both as Gracie’s Pygmalion (at one point she addresses him as “Henry Higgins”) and her most severe critic, repeatedly voicing the class-based ideology of the film. “With some intensive work,” he says at one point to Agent Matthews, “she’ll be ready for the world’s finest trailer park.”

While Victor Melling expresses the film’s ideas about class and femininity, Kathy Morningside, pageant organizer and amateur terrorist, voices the film’s critique of intellectual, militant feminism. This critique is directed specifically at Gracie, whose character clearly articulates the feminist position that, as an institution, the beauty contest demeans and objectifies women. Whether Gracie herself identifies as a feminist or not is irrelevant—what’s important is that other characters in the film recognize her as a feminist, and use this identification to explain her pre-makeover appearance and behavior. In this way, Miss Congeniality reinforces the stereotype that to be a feminist is to be unfeminine. Kathy reiterates this characterization in a speech addressed to Gracie during their first meeting: “I’ve been fighting all my life against your type—the ones who think we’re just a bunch of worthless airheads. You know who I mean: feminists, intellectuals—ugly women. But I refuse to give in to their cynicism.” Through Kathy’s hostility toward Gracie, the film recycles the tired notion that feminists categorically reject beauty practices on both a political level and a personal one. Note how Susan J. Douglas describes the media’s response to the women’s movement of the 1970’s:
News reports and opinion columnists created a new stereotype, of fanatics, “braless bubbleheads,” Amazons, “the angries,” and “a band of wild lesbians.” The result is that we all know what feminists are. They are shrill, overly aggressive, man-hating, ball-busting, selfish, hairy, extremist, deliberately unattractive women with absolutely no sense of humor who see sexism at every turn. (7, my emphasis)

Kathy’s attack on Gracie as a representative of feminist politics culminates with her question for Gracie during the interview portion of the pageant finals: “New Jersey, as you may know, there are many who consider the Miss United States pageant to be outdated and anti-feminist. What would you say to them?” Gracie’s response:

Well, I would have to say that I used to be one of them. And then I came here, and I realized that these women are smart, terrific people who are just trying to make a difference in the world. And we’ve become really good friends. [Applause] I mean, I know we all secretly hope that the other one will trip and fall on her face, but—oh, wait a minute, I’ve already done that! [Laughter] And for me this experience has been one of the most rewarding and…liberating experiences of my life.

Because beauty and feminism are incompatible in Miss Congeniality, Gracie’s process of beautification requires a revision of her personal politics. In this way, the narrative constructs a potent syllogism: All feminists are ugly. Gracie is no longer ugly. Therefore, Gracie is not a feminist. In fact, by the film’s conclusion, Gracie and Kathy have practically swapped identities. While the whole concept of a beauty queen gone bad (Kathy is a former Miss United States) is played for laughs, by the end of the film she
clearly represents the concept of beauty as a duty taken to dangerous and self-destructive extremes. In contrast, Gracie has learned to embrace beauty practices and the institutions that reward them, while simultaneously letting go of the anger and impulsiveness to which Kathy has succumbed. This dual transformation is best illustrated during the scene of Kathy’s arrest. As Gracie, still clad in her evening gown, leads a handcuffed Kathy past reporters to a waiting patrol car, the former beauty queen attempts to reason with her captor, but her pleading quickly degenerates into an angry tirade:

Miss Hart, you don’t understand. All I’m guilty of is trying to make the world a more beautiful place. Look at yourself! Why, when I met you, Dennis Rodman looked better in a dress. But now, you’re a lady! I did that…Twenty-five years of bitching beauty queens, and what do I get?

Fired! They steal my life; they steal my beauty pageant!

Gracie replies, “Hey! It is not a beauty pageant, it is a scholarship program,” alluding to a comment Kathy makes earlier in the film, when she corrects Gracie’s original dismissal of the Miss United States pageant as “just” a beauty contest. When Kathy drawls condescendingly, “Yeah, yeah,” Gracie shoots back with a stern “Yes.” The implication is clear: in correcting Kathy’s speech, she is throwing her own training back in the other woman’s face, demonstrating that not only is Gracie in a position of authority, but she has become more of a ‘lady’ than Kathy herself. In fact, it is the aging beauty queen that now resembles the stereotypical feminist extremist.⁴
**Miss Congeniality: Friendly Competition**

As Miss New Jersey or “Gracie Lou Freebush,” Gracie must perform a very particular kind of American femininity associated with the beauty pageant, an institution that is frequently parodied (in films such as *Smile* and *Drop Dead Gorgeous*) and simultaneously held in reverence by popular culture. Again, we are reminded that despite its detective plot, the film is really about Gracie’s conversion from an unattractive, cynical misfit (notice the conflation of feminism and cynicism) to an attractive woman who actively identifies with and embraces feminine culture, as represented by the beauty pageant and its contestants. While she initially befriends the other women in the pageant in order to gain their confidence, it is clear that she quickly becomes emotionally attached to them, especially Miss Rhode Island, a friendly, ditzy young woman who is fascinated by Gracie’s self-confidence and toughness. When Miss Rhode Island falls under suspicion due to her past involvement with a hardcore animal rights group, Gracie is commanded to pump her for information under the ruse of “girl talk.” Gracie is clearly unfamiliar with the idea of “girl talk,” and instead treats Miss Rhode Island and several of the other contestants to pizza and beer, revealing her continued identification with ‘masculine’ eating habits. She then takes the entire group out for a drunken night on the town, and the scenes that follow are clearly meant to represent Gracie’s indoctrination into the world of female friendship, as the women drink, dance and confide in each other.

The extent of Gracie’s emotional bond with the pageant contestants and her corresponding conversion to feminine culture is revealed by her insistence on remaining behind after “Operation Thong,” as the male FBI agents have condescendingly dubbed it, officially ends. As Gracie confides in Agent Matthews, “For the first time in my life, I
feel like I’m in the right place at the right time, and I have to protect those girls.” Gracie has undergone an emotional transformation that mirrors her physical one, and this bit of dialogue describes more than just her professional commitment—it communicates her newfound enthusiasm for female friendship and culture. The “right place” of which she speaks is within a uniquely female community, one that she formerly dismisses with contempt. At this point in the film, Gracie’s interior begins to correspond with her exterior appearance; she is finally growing up and becoming a mature woman, thanks to the influence of the “girls” she must protect.

Gracie receives a second, less dramatic makeover when the other agents return to FBI headquarters in New York, one that reflects the extent of Gracie’s inclusion within the female pageant community. Gracie panics when she discovers that Victor cannot coach her through the final stages of the competition, though he seems unfazed, confident in the degree of her metamorphosis. He triumphantly declares, “I’ve taken a woman without a discernable smidgen of estrogen and transformed her into a lady.” Gracie’s appearance, although still clearly post-makeover, begins to unravel without the assistance of her handlers, as large clumps of hair fall into her face, reminiscent of her ‘unattractive’ state. She frantically seeks out her friends as they race around backstage, half-dressed, with curlers in their hair and partially applied makeup, during a purely voyeuristic sequence. This scene, like several others set backstage, is an opportunity to display the women’s bodies in various states of undress, both to the agents who surreptitiously observe the scene through Gracie’s presence and the cinematic spectator. In contrast to her friends, Gracie is clothed in a baggy black sweat suit, with scraggly hair and minimal makeup. As the girls gather around her, Gracie begins sifting through her cosmetics bag,
asking, “Now, which one of these is the lipstick?” The girls exchange alarmed looks, then descend on Gracie, wielding make-up, hairbrushes and other beauty accoutrements, essentially enacting a second, entirely female-performed makeover. While not as drastic as her initial makeover, this sequence is important because it indicates how fully her fellow contestants have accepted Gracie, so that they don’t hesitate to assist her even while competing with her. Thus, this second makeover has more to do with Gracie’s internal, emotional transformation, her conversion to feminine culture and friendship.

At this point in the pageant, unaided by the cooperation of its organizers, Gracie is being judged by the same criteria as the real contestants. In other words, the contest is no longer fixed, and Gracie is being legitimately rewarded for her successful performance of femininity within the context of the pageant. Before the final talent competition, Gracie presents Cheryl (Miss Rhode Island) with a set of flaming batons, a response to her earlier admission that her secret desire is to perform a “sexy dance” with these accessories, though her strict, religious parents would disapprove. This scene is clearly meant to communicate a form of exchange between the two characters and the ideological binary—repression vs. liberation—they represent. Because Gracie’s original talent performance, playing the water glasses, is sabotaged by a group of thirsty contestants, she performs an impromptu self-defense demonstration, assisted by Agent Matthews. Her ‘talent,’ essentially beating her fellow agent to a pulp, is a surprise success with both the audience and the television crew, who seem both horrified and entertained by the spectacle. When Gracie makes the next cut, as one of the final five contestants, her reaction is one of genuine pleasure and surprise, rather than the burlesque of the sobbing beauty queen she performs in earlier sequences. Rather than mock the
pageant and its conventions, she is now sincerely flattered by this institutional approval, and remaining in the competition takes on personal as well as professional meaning for her. From his surveillance position among the rafters of the stage, Agent Matthews smiles and says to himself, “You go, Gracie Lou.” Clearly, Gracie’s success in the pageant increases Eric’s attraction to her, paving the way for a romantic clinch at the film’s conclusion.

It is also at this stage of the pageant that the film makes an attempt at social critique when a departing contestant, Miss New York, reveals to the audience that she is a lesbian. Taken by itself, her defiantly public coming out is a potentially powerful statement about gender stereotypes; specifically, what constitutes the difference between ‘feminine’ and ‘femme.’ However, the dialogue that accompanies this protest immediately undermines this potential critique. As Miss New York walks across the stage in order to exit the competition, she turns to the audience and shouts, “This is for all the lesbians out there! If I can make it, you can make it too!” By exposing herself as a lesbian at the point where she has reached the highest level of the competition before her elimination, the character is effectively reassuring us that lesbians can be feminine; they can participate in a competition that rewards the successful performance of a very straight form of femininity without detection. It is difficult to imagine any lesbian rejoicing in a statement that says, at its most basic level of meaning, that lesbians can pass as ‘real’ women and achieve social advancement as a result. As such, her hurried speech is less an expression of emancipation than an unprompted refutation of the stereotype that lesbians (like political feminists) can be identified by their ugly, hirsute and masculine appearance. As the contestant is dragged offstage by a security guard, we see the
television crew in their control booth, occupying the role of chorus, reacting to and interpreting the spectacle before them. As the male producer expresses a kind of shocked disgust at Miss New York’s outburst, his androgynous female co-worker chides his apparent homophobia, in the process revealing that she herself is a lesbian. While this exchange attempts to make a humorous point about visibility, it arrives on the heels of a very confusing, self-negating portrayal of coming out as political protest, so that the film’s overall ‘message’ about sexual identity in this sequence is difficult to decipher.

Gracie’s success in the pageant finally convinces Eric that she is an attractive woman, worthy of his sexual attention. After the patrol car holding Kathy Morningside rolls away from the curb, Eric sidles up to Gracie, ostensibly to congratulate her on a job well done. The two stroll away from the crowded nighttime scene, accompanied by an upbeat, romantic theme on the soundtrack. Eric begins to sheepishly reveal his underlying motivation for approaching Gracie: “Listen, I was thinking, you know, when we get back to the city, after we write up our reports and you get all ugly again, maybe we could have dinner, you know?” Gracie appears confused. “You’re, like, asking me out on a date?” she asks. Eric replies, “Just a casual dinner. And if we happen to have sex afterwards, so be it.” Gracie’s eyes light up as she grabs Eric’s jacket and pulls him in for a kiss. At last, the inevitable romantic coupling hinted at repeatedly, but simultaneously deferred, takes place. Despite Eric’s claim that his interest in Gracie will continue even after she gets “all ugly again,” it’s undeniable that Gracie’s makeover acts as the catalyst for his physical attraction to her, an attraction that is legitimized by her relative success in the beauty contest. As earlier scenes indicate, especially the nighttime near-embrace at the hotel poolside, Gracie has been receptive to Eric’s advances.
throughout the film. It is Eric who must be persuaded, through Gracie’s new-and-improved appearance and ladylike behavior, to reciprocate her desire.

Though the film could easily conclude with this classic screwball clinch, the narrative is not over quite yet. After the passionate embrace between Eric and Gracie, we cut to a daytime establishing shot of the San Antonio hotel where the contestants have been staying. As they leave the hotel together, Eric teases Gracie, claiming that she’ll miss the pageant once she goes back to her regular life. But before they can finally depart, Victor lures them back to the pageant’s Farewell Breakfast, saying that an “incendiary device” has been found on the premises. The two agents rush into the dining room only to discover that it is a ruse—there is no bomb, only Gracie’s “new friends” who want to present her with the pageant’s Miss Congeniality award, for being “the nicest, sweetest, coolest girl at the pageant.” As Cheryl places a sash around Gracie’s body and hands her a glass statuette, Gracie begins to cry, telling the assembled crowd that she is “moved” and “truly touched” and that she really does “want world peace.” In the film’s final frame, we see a laughing Gracie, surrounded by pageant contestants, a picture of joy and self-assurance. The soundtrack reprises “She’s a Lady,” and its lyrics, “She’s all you’d ever want/She’s the kind I want to flaunt/And take to dinner/She always knows her place/She’s got style, she’s got grace/She’s a winner” are now an apt description of Gracie’s situation. While the romantic coupling of Gracie and Eric is important to the film, especially in terms of the screwball genre it evokes, this final scene is clearly the film’s ‘real’ conclusion. It drives the point home yet again that Gracie has grown up, become a true lady, and allowed female friendship to assume its rightful place.
in her life. As a result, she finally achieves real success in her professional life, not to mention her romantic life.

It is absolutely essential to my analysis of the makeover to note Gracie’s appearance at the film’s conclusion. Despite Eric’s prediction that she will “get all ugly again,” Gracie retains important elements of her post-makeover appearance. While she is wearing a pantsuit and white shirt similar to the outfit she wears in her pre-makeover state, the rest of her appearance is completely different. Her hair is now loosely styled in soft waves and pushed back from her face, so that we can see her features clearly. She wears small stud earrings and discreet nail polish, and her face is obviously made-up in self-consciously ‘neutral’ tones. The film makes no attempt to explain who applied this makeup. It seems hard to believe that Gracie has made herself up, since a day earlier she couldn’t distinguish between lipstick and eye shadow. It seems equally unlikely that Victor or one of the girls helped her, since the pageant is officially over, and Gracie’s obligation to be beautiful has ended. As in so many makeover movies, when the post-makeover subject is suddenly wearing makeup around the clock, with no explanation as to its source, the effect is that the made-over, made-up look becomes naturalized. Of course, this project of naturalizing the artificial is shared with advertising, women’s magazines and television. But it is through the makeover that this process acquires a visual narrative—in other words, the ‘natural’ artificial appearance always contains a makeover, whether it is depicted or not. The makeover in film not only depicts the before and after, but builds a narrative around this process.

Ultimately, Miss Congeniality represents a successful merger of two institutions, the patriarchal FBI and female-dominated beauty culture, within one physical body. This
coupling can be read as a reflection of the film’s screwball genre, in that a kind of ideological romance takes place between the male-associated FBI and the feminine beauty pageant. Importantly, it is only when Gracie learns to incorporate both of these institutions and their corresponding technologies into her daily existence that she is able to achieve success as an agent and a woman, as represented by her relationship with Agent Matthews. And while the film positions the technologies of the FBI, including surveillance, observation and manipulation of the powerful gaze, in opposition to those of female beauty culture, it also reveals the strong relationship between these institutional technologies. After all, it is through the gaze that technologies of beauty are codified and rewarded; the systems and techniques of beauty invite and are made meaningful only by observation. The makeover itself gains meaning only when there is someone there to see the end result, and as such represents the perfect site of convergence for technologies of surveillance and technologies of appearance.

Female Bodybuilding: See Jane Train

While G.I. Jane does not reference it directly, I will argue that certain narrative and visual choices align the film closely with female bodybuilding as an institution. In fact, the film seems to be negotiating or reconciling the historically difficult concept of the female soldier through the ideology of female bodybuilding. As Chris Holmlund notes, “Images of muscular women…are disconcerting, even threatening. They disrupt the equation of men with strength and women with weakness that underpins gender roles and power relations, and that has by now come to seem familiar and comforting” (19). As a character, Jordan O’Neil poses a threat to military power structures based on gender
difference, a threat grounded specifically in her physical body, both how it looks and how it performs. Thus, while G.I. Jane is not about female bodybuilding per se, the film clearly borrows strategies from cultural representations of women ‘pumping iron’ in order to reassure viewers that Jordan is not a transgressive figure.

One of the central strategies used by representations of female bodybuilding is to persistently inscribe muscular female bodies as heterosexual, counteracting any threat of sexual transgression:

This redefinition takes the form of attaching certain markers of femininity to the figure of the female bodybuilder, markers that anchor her to established and accepted values. Muscle is rephrased as “flex appeal,” her heterosexuality and heterosexual desirability are secured... (Schulze, 60)

G.I. Jane employs this same strategy, taking great pains early in the film narrative to code its protagonist as unwaveringly heterosexual. In this way, her later physical transformation, including a shaved head and bulkier muscles, is less threatening. In fact, she is selected as the first female SEAL trainee on the basis of her perceived heterosexuality, while other qualified applicants are rejected because of their suspected lesbianism. The film’s conflation of gender with sexuality anchors Jordan firmly to “markers of femininity”—no matter how she appears or what she does, as long as she desires men, she is female.

Another successful strategy used by representations of female bodybuilding, according to Laurie Schulze, is to construct an association between female bodybuilding and “an ideology of control aligned with notions of competition in the workplace” (60). G.I. Jane performs a similar activity by framing Jordan’s ‘masculine’ ambition and
aggression within the context of her individual career goals. Though she is part of a political agenda, Jordan consistently denies that her actions are intended as a “statement,” but that she is interested only the opportunity for “operational experience” that will allow her to ascend within the ranks of the Navy. Still, the film actively encourages a reading of her behavior based on gender politics and equal rights. In this way, the film is careful to convey that its central conflict is not Jordan’s attempt to become a man, but to be treated like a man, a distinction that works to defuse Jordan’s potential transgression.

Additionally, *G.I. Jane* functions collectively with recent films such as *Terminator 2* (1991) and *Aliens* (1986) to normalize a newly-desirable feminine appearance: a muscular female body that is also reassuringly objectified and sexualized. While Jordan undergoes a dramatic physical transformation during her quest, its main components are either reversible (shaved head) or within the realm of what Schulze calls “flex appeal”—a fit, muscular female body that is still considered feminine and sexually attractive. This cultural standard, a toned but sexualized female body, was originally popularized in the late 1980s by media stars such as Madonna and aerobics queen Jane Fonda. While muscul arity in men, according to Richard Dyer, “is the sign of power—natural, achieved, phallic” (273), this is not true for muscul arity in women. As Wendy Chapkis explains:

> While female muscles may be in, pretty clearly only certain kinds of muscles on certain kinds of recognizably feminine bodies are really acceptable. The model of the youthful and physically fit woman ultimately is not a symbol of power so much as it is a symbol of the beauty of feminine control over appetites and age.
Thus, while Jordan’s musculature allows her to keep up with the male trainees (she can perform like a man), in reality her body is not transgressive or threatening. Jordan’s muscles simply connote discipline and self-control, both attractive qualities for a male soldier, as well as a female fitness enthusiast, to possess.

In her analysis of the 1984 documentary *Pumping Iron II: The Women*, Chris Holmlund notes the role of fetishization in deflecting anxiety surrounding the muscled female form: “Most of the images in *Pumping Iron II*…function to defuse rather than provoke male and female spectators’ anxieties about muscular women by fetishizing women’s bodies and by making them the objects of heterosexual desire” (22). She continues, “Though muscular, breasts and buttocks still appear as tits and ass” (24). This last statement is especially relevant to the workout sequences in *G.I. Jane*, where the threat posed by Demi Moore’s phallic musculature is defused by the consistent emphasis on her breasts, buttocks and legs.

While the notion of female bodybuilding generated a great deal of excitement and apprehension in the 1980s, the institution has been largely absorbed by existing cultures of pornography and female appearance. A survey of current web sites and print magazines reveals that representations of female bodybuilding have evolved along two ideological paths: fetishism and the larger rubric of “female fitness.” However, it is often difficult to discern where the boundaries between each category begin and end. For example, many web sites, such as www.athleticwomen.com, are devoted to images of “muscular women,” “fitness models” and “strong women.” This particular site includes a wide range of photographs of conventionally attractive women with muscular or “fit” bodies. These include anonymous models in tight PVC fetish clothing and/or bondage...
gear, women wrestlers of the WWF, movie stars such as Angelina Jolie (as video game heroine Lara Croft) and female athletes like tennis star Anna Kournikova. One web site, www.thevalkyrie.com, claims to be built and maintained by a woman who calls herself “Diana the Valkyrie.” The site, which clearly takes its cue from the popular and, some argue, subversive 1990s television series “Xena: Warrior Princess,” offers comic-book style drawings of and erotic stories about mythological female warriors. However, while it may position itself as a site for empowering feminist fantasy, its “Links” page is dominated by web addresses for conventional, hard core wrestling, spanking and S&M porn sites, effectively blurring the distinction between cultural subversion and complicity. A handful of sources emphasize the legitimate sport of female bodybuilding, exemplified by the annual “Ms. Olympia” and “Ms. International Fitness,” competitions. However, the vast majority of current cultural representations either openly fetishize muscular female bodies, or else incorporate them into a larger discourse about female “fitness,” where the implied end goal is always increased physical attractiveness.

Dick and G.I. JANE

G.I. Jane opens in Washington D.C., where a confirmation hearing for the position of Secretary of the Navy is taking place. As chairwoman of the confirmation committee, Senator Lillian DeHaven (Anne Bancroft) refuses to back the candidate, criticizing both his treatment of female officers under his command and the fact that nearly one quarter of jobs in the military are off-limits to women. In exchange for her support, the Navy offers her a contingency plan for 100% gender integration within a year’s time, provided that a few test cases involving female candidates are successful.
Senator DeHaven agrees with the plan, but only if she can pick the test cases herself. Unbeknownst to her, navy officials plan to train the first one with the elite SEAL program, which boasts a 60% dropout rate among its all-male trainees. After reviewing a selection of suitable candidates, the Senator chooses Lieutenant Jordan O’Neil (Demi Moore), who is thrilled to be offered an opportunity to gain operational experience, which she has been previously denied because of her gender. Jordan’s boyfriend, a higher-ranking naval officer, is opposed to Jordan’s participation, and the two have an argument. Jordan arrives at Catalano Naval Base in Florida to begin SEAL training. The male trainees react with hostility toward her, and Jordan soon becomes frustrated that she is not receiving equal treatment from her superior officers. After a meeting with the base commander during which he agrees to treat her in the same way as a male trainee, Jordan shaves her head and begins a strenuous exercise program. She continues to advance in the training program even as male trainees drop out. During an exercise meant to simulate POW conditions, Jordan struggles with the Commander Master Chief (Viggo Mortensen), who beats her mercilessly when she and her team are captured. Jordan fights back, at one point telling the Master Chief, “suck my dick.” Following this incident, Jordan is photographed socializing with a group of female officers, one of whom is a suspected lesbian. When the Navy receives the photographs from an anonymous source, Jordan is charged with “conduct unbecoming to an officer,” and she voluntarily withdraws from training to avoid an investigation into her behavior. Her boyfriend discovers that Senator DeHaven secretly commissioned the photographs, in response to threats from military administrators that they will shut down naval bases in the Senator’s home state unless Jordan’s progress is halted. Jordan confronts the Senator, and she is
reinstated as a SEAL trainee. Immediately following her triumphant return, Jordan and the remaining trainees are diverted to an actual operation in Libya. During their invasion of the Libyan shore, the Master Chief is injured, and Jordan drags him to safety. The entire team is air lifted back to the States. At the graduation ceremony, the Master Chief presents each trainee with a SEAL insignia. Afterwards, Jordan discovers a book of poetry in her locker, with the Master Chief’s medal of commendation tucked inside.

The film’s ideology is expressed primarily through Jordan’s interaction with two main characters that, appropriately, represent a gender binary themselves: Senator DeHaven and the Master Chief. Senator DeHaven, who at one point describes herself as “just an old dame without much time left,” acts as a mentor figure for Jordan; the film initially positions her as Jordan’s strongest advocate, fulfilling the role of a gruff but ultimately nurturing parent. The Senator also presents a model for Jordan to emulate, in that she is a woman who has apparently maintained her femininity while participating in a male-dominated institution. In fact, the film often uses her character to articulate gender difference, particularly during a sequence following the controversial confirmation hearing. The Senator leaves the hearing in dark glasses and an expensive-looking white coat, resembling a European film actress more than a legislator, an effect that is heightened by the packs of reporters and cameramen that race after her like paparazzi pursuing a celebrity. As the senator uses a pocket mirror to touch up her appearance in the safety and comfort of her limousine, her male assistant informs her that the “defense boys” have already called to arrange a private meeting with her. The implication is clear: the fashionable Senator is the “dame” who must go head-to-head with the “boys” of the military. This opposition is expressed visually through the
Senator’s glamorous femininity, which stands in stark contrast to the uptight, uniform masculinity of the Navy officers.

When Senator DeHaven convenes with several aides around a group of files containing biographical information and photographs of potential candidates for the initial test case, it becomes clear that she is looking for a very particular kind of woman: white, athletic but feminine, photogenic and visibly heterosexual. The first file she reviews includes a photograph of a heavily muscled woman as she competes in a marathon. “Perfect,” snaps the Senator, “when we do a chromosome check.” One of her assistants notes a candidate’s impressive fitness record, then follows with a derisive comment about “female power-lifting,” eliciting chuckles from the rest of the room. The camera shows us the black-and-white photograph he is looking at, an image of a muscular, short haired, masculine-looking woman exerting herself on a weight machine. “That’s a face you won’t see on the cover of Newsweek,” says the Senator. “She looks like the wife of a Russian beet farmer.” When they select Jordan’s file, the Senator picks up her photograph and studies it carefully. The camera shows us an image of Jordan in a swimsuit, poised to dive during a competition. “Well,” she says, “this really is top-drawer. With silk stockings inside.” She files through several more candid shots of Jordan in a tank top and shorts, an athletic but svelte and feminine young woman. The camera closes in on a final still image of Jordan smiling at a male companion, apparently as they move to embrace. The Senator has found her ideal candidate, a suitably feminine, white, classy, heterosexual woman to use as the first test case, as opposed to the ugly, ethnic, working-class, masculine power lifters and marathon runners. Also significant is the Senator’s use of a clothing metaphor to describe Jordan’s inherent femininity, one
that implies a class distinction, with luxurious “silk stockings” being preferred to a proletariat pair of nylon pantyhose.

It must be noted that as a star, Demi Moore herself expresses this heterosexual ideal, as grounded specifically in the visible female body. While this articulation of cultural standards of beauty is inherent to film stardom itself, I would argue that Demi Moore’s star body is publicly scrutinized in a way that is extraordinary, even within the celebrity-obsessed entertainment media. An example is the infamous August 1991 *Vanity Fair* cover photograph showing a heavily pregnant Moore posing in the nude, her hands strategically concealing her breasts and genitals while her swollen belly occupies the majority of the frame. While the image itself was not necessarily sexualized, the public seemed both titillated and disturbed by this ‘sexy’ star body depicted in the process of producing a child. In a second controversial *Vanity Fair* cover image, from 1992, Moore is again pictured in the nude, except for flesh-colored pasties that conceal her nipples and a pair of tiny thong underwear covering her pubic area. Her body has been painted using a *trompe l’œil* effect, so that she appears to be wearing a men’s suit, complete with striped tie and flower in the lapel. Moore’s body is simultaneously naked and clothed, representing an irrepressible, essential femininity (her nude female body) emerging from a masculine exterior (the painted-on suit). Taken together, the magazine covers communicate two important qualities that define Moore’s body in terms of a heterosexual ideal: it can successfully make babies, and it displays a very physical femininity even when ‘clothed’ in masculinity. This latter quality is especially relevant to my reading of *G.I. Jane*, where Moore’s body continues to communicate femininity even when immersed in masculine culture and appearance. Thus, even before the film’s
narrative unfolds, the circulation of Moore’s star image works to imbue her body with a basic, biological femininity, one that remains intact despite her character’s assimilation into a male community.

The Senator continues this articulation of a heterosexual ideal during her initial meeting with Jordan. Waiting nervously in the Senator’s office, Jordan wears a form-fitting uniform, sleek hair and subtle make-up, conveying a strongly feminine appearance. During their conversation, Jordan admits that she was turned down for active duty during the Gulf War, the excuse being that submarines don’t have bathroom facilities for women. “Did that piss you off?” asks the Senator. When Jordan concurs, the Senator says, “Good. I like pissed off.” The Senator asks her, “Have you got a man?” When Jordan seems confused, she elaborates, “Fiancé, steady buck. You know, some kind of solvent heterosexual…I don’t want this blowing up in our faces if you happen to be batting for the other side.” The Senator’s preference for crude language, a typically masculine behavior, is used here to communicate the character’s tough personality, which the film implies is a result of her position of authority. But despite this unladylike bluntness, the Senator herself consistently operates as the voice of heteronormative ideology within the film.

If Senator DeHaven can be read as Jordan’s mother figure, the Commander Master Chief is an incestuous father figure, one who embodies the twin themes of surveillance and violence. His first appearance in the film immediately presents him as a figure of authority as articulated through the gaze. As the trainees line up for the first time on the sandy ground outside their barracks, the Master Chief, sporting a mustache and mirrored wraparound sunglasses, walks among them, quoting poetry by D.H.
Lawrence and shoving them around. His physical appearance, particularly the mirrored sunglasses that allow him to observe the trainees while concealing his own eyes, communicates an unequivocal masculine power. Training exercises continue through the day and night; at one stage, the recruits are instructed to write an essay on the subject “Why I Love the United States Navy,” as the Master Chief reads a J.M. Coetzee novel and listens to Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*. These allusions to canonical male writers and composers serve two functions: they imply that the Master Chief has more intellectual depth than the average naval officer, and, particularly in referencing Lawrence and Puccini, they reinforce the gender essentialism produced by the master (chief?) narratives in which these authors participate.

The film consistently, almost compulsively, expresses the relationship between Jordan and the Master Chief in terms of sexual difference, often implying an undercurrent of heterosexual attraction between the two characters. The film’s constant sexualization of Jordan’s body imposes a rubric of surveillance onto all of her relationships with men, particularly the Daddy/lover/voyeur figure of the Master Chief. This activity is particularly obvious during the scene where Jordan showers alone in the dim light of the barracks head. At first, we see just her head and hands as she bathes under the spray. We then a cut to the Master Chief as he enters the shower room, followed by a point-of-view shot of Jordan’s wet, nude body from behind. The Master Chief, the embodiment of authority as represented through the gaze, clearly likes what he sees, as conveyed by his appraising look and subtle leer. We cut back to Jordan’s face as the Master Chief begins to speak, then she turns to face him defiantly, simultaneously inviting his gaze and refusing to acknowledge its power. This confrontation, freighted with sexual tension, is
an interesting parody of an earlier scene Jordan shares with her boyfriend, one that appears to exist solely to visually confirm Jordan’s sexual identification. It is a cliché candle-lit bathing scene\(^8\) where she and her boyfriend are shown cuddling, sipping wine and discussing her future among the soapsuds. The scene feels strangely out of place, almost as if it has been lifted from another Demi Moore film such as *Ghost* (1990) or *The Butcher’s Wife* (1990), both romantic fantasies made at the peak of her popularity. Its function is blatantly obvious: to reassure viewers that Jordan is a ‘real’ woman, who desires men and is desired by men. In the scene, Jordan and her boyfriend begin to argue after he accuses her of wanting to “play soldier” when the real opportunities, in his opinion, lie elsewhere. Jordan rages back, pointing out that “anyone with tits” can’t work on a submarine, can’t be a SEAL. If she succeeds in her training, she says, she plans to go into combat as a SEAL, a possibility that startles her partner enough so that he jumps out of the tub. “Get your dick back in here,” she says, a command he ignores. The emphasis on sexualized body parts—“tits” and “dick”—reveals what this scene is really about: the reassuringly physical markers of gender. While these two scenes might appear to be very different in tone, they both represent a power struggle based on gender politics, one subsumed within the ideological context of heterosexual romance, the other rendered almost painfully visible and overt. Together, the scenes work to reinforce gender difference as expressed through the body, difference that is confirmed and supported by the gaze.

“Dick” and “tits” form a consistent binary in Jordan’s interactions with the male trainees and her commanding officers, all of whom, not surprisingly, seem compelled to define her in terms of sexual difference. Her initial meeting with the base commander
shows him puffing an enormous cigar, an almost laughably obvious phallic symbol. Sucking away at his metaphorical “dick,” the commander assures Jordan: “We’re not trying to change your sex. You’ll have a separate bed and a separate head.” As she strides toward her new sleeping quarters, Jordan’s fellow trainees openly ogle her body. When Jordan enters the mess hall, the male candidates erupt into wolf whistles and catcalls. “Doesn’t she know it’s rude to point?” someone shouts, referring to her breasts poking out of her tight white T-shirt. Again, Jordan’s “tits” become the focus of her gender identity, put firmly in opposition to the “dicks” that surround her.

Though the surveillance theme is expressed primarily through the character of the Master Chief, at one point in the film Senator DeHaven takes possession of the gaze, using it to inflict emotional violence on Jordan. During the beach party scene, where Jordan socializes with a group of female officers, we see a photographer setting up his equipment behind a bush some distance away from the women. Accordingly, the gathering is filmed as a series of shots that transition to freeze frames, conveying the idea that the entire event is being photographed. Sure enough, the film quickly reveals that the photographs are instrumental to a convoluted side plot that has Senator DeHaven turning against her protegee in response to threats from the “defense boys” that they will shut down military bases in her home state. Jordan travels to Washington to confront the Senator, threatening to go to the press if she doesn’t get the charges voided. Frightened by this “pissed off” creature of her own design, the Senator relents, and Jordan is returned to training. The message conveyed by this narrative diversion is that politics simply get in the way of the ‘real’ and honorable work performed by the military. While the film is deeply suspicious of authority, it is political authority, rather than military authority, that
cannot be trusted within the narrative. Thus, the film is not really critical of the military as an institution, except when it overlaps with government; in fact, the military, and especially the Navy SEAL unit, comes to represent all the positive qualities Jordan aspires to, including honesty, strength and, yes, equality. It is the politicians, motivated by greed and negative ambition, who bear the brunt of the film’s mistrust. More importantly, it is implied that in betraying Jordan, Senator DeHaven betrays her entire gender. Thus, her femininity is revealed as a kind of façade, useful for manipulating others, while Jordan’s inherent goodness marks her as authentically feminine.

_G.I. Jane: The Female Phallus_

The most significant scene between Jordan and the Master Chief, which I will argue is also the actual climax of the film, takes place during a training mission that mimics an infiltration into enemy territory. In the exercise, Jordan’s entire team is captured and held under POW-type conditions. As their leader, Jordan is singled out for interrogation, including physical abuse at the hands of the Master Chief. Demanding information from her, he punches and slaps Jordan around, declaring himself the sole authority on the island, a domain which includes her “worthless womb.” As he holds her head underwater in view of her captured male teammates, the Master Chief encourages them to “end this right now” by divulging information about their mission. Clearly, he is playing on their emotional reaction to seeing a woman being tortured without regard to her gender. The camera pans across the men’s disturbed expressions, including those of the other trainers, who are obviously uncomfortable with the struggle now going on between Jordan and the Master Chief. As Jordan beseeches her teammates not to give up
any information, the Master Chief drags her over to a table and forces her to bend over it. Pushing her bloody face onto the table, he begins to pull her pants down, clearly in preparation for sexual assault. As her horrified (but curious) teammates look on, the Master Chief presses himself against her bare buttocks, calling for the men to be “chivalrous” and prevent Jordan’s rape. Suddenly, Jordan kicks her leg back, nailing the Master Chief squarely in the groin, then slams her head backward, connecting with his nose and apparently breaking it. As he falls to the ground in pain, Jordan spins around, her hands still bound (and trousers magically pulled back up), and kicks the Master Chief in the face. As her teammates cheer her on, Jordan continues to kick him repeatedly; however, the Master Chief retaliates with several quick punches that knock Jordan to the ground, where she remains for several seconds. “You’re a real hero,” one of the male trainees yells sarcastically at the Master Chief, who staggers toward the captives as they symbolically turn their backs toward him. As he tries to explain his actions to the group, the camera reveals Jordan swaying to her feet behind him. “Master Chief,” she calls out, “suck my dick!” The male trainees clap and cheer as the soundtrack swells triumphantly. As Jordan’s teammates chant “suck my dick,” the Master Chief strides toward her, gives her two meditative nods of approval, then walks on. With this triumphant claim of the “dick,” Jordan verbally evacuates herself from the subservient, female position within the rape scenario, recasting herself in a position of dominance as expressed through gender difference. If Jordan now owns the metaphorical “dick,” then the logic of sexual difference dictates that the Master Chief’s phallus has been replaced by a male “pussy,” rendering him temporarily weakened and emasculated.
The threat of Jordan’s “dick” is immediately countered by yet another example of the repeated, almost neurotic reinscription of Jordan’s body as both feminine and sexual, often implying femininity through sexuality. In other words, though elements of her body may convey masculinity, as long as the camera actively displays and sexualizes those body parts that still communicate femaleness (breasts, legs, buttocks), the threat posed by her metamorphosis is at least partially neutralized. Following her success in the training exercise, Jordan’s team invites her out for a drink at the local bar. The scene opens with a shot of an anonymous woman’s long, bare legs as she leans against a pool table. The camera pans from her high-heeled shoes up to her denim short shorts, producing a moment of confusion for the viewer—could this possibly be Jordan? The camera pans up the woman’s body, revealing a hand holding a bottle of beer, a tight tank top holding a pair of large breasts, and finally, long brown hair that conceals her features. This is definitely not Jordan, but who is she, and why are we looking at her? Because we aren’t allowed a clear look at her face during this initial appearance, she functions as a kind of ‘everywoman,’ a generically attractive and sexually available female who appears in stark contrast to the bald and bruised Jordan. And yet, since the film uses similar strategies to display both Jordan’s body and the anonymous woman’s form, there is the sense that Jordan could be this woman, that they are essentially the same. In this way, the film cleverly uses this other woman’s body, and our confusion about its identity, as a means of conveying Jordan’s femininity.

Throughout the rest of the barroom scene, Jordan jokes and drinks with her teammates, makes peace with her detractors and appears to have finally become ‘just one of the guys.’ Through the ritual of alcohol and its association with male social bonding
and endurance (holding one’s liquor as a sign of masculinity), Jordan is accepted by her fellow trainees, who toast her with a reprise of the “suck my dick” chant. In the restroom, Jordan examines her battered face in the mirror, looking almost pleased by the extent of her injuries. Another woman observes this activity, then sidles up to her and says, “Ain’t really none of my business, but I say leave the bastard.” Jordan smiles to herself, apparently amused by the women’s misunderstanding of the situation. While this exchange is played for a kind of ironic laugh, it is nonetheless consistent with the film’s characterization of the relationship between Jordan and the Master Chief (the “bastard” in question) as a kind of romantic entanglement. Though they never actually have intercourse, Jordan and the Master Chief are brought into a sexual relationship through the implication of domestic violence, an activity that both produces and is produced by sexual difference. On another level, the theoretical ‘battle of the sexes’ becomes literalized through the conflict between Jordan and the Master Chief, while Jordan’s ‘right’ to be battered and sexually threatened is celebrated as a victory. She can laugh and shake her head at the well-intentioned woman who thinks Jordan is being abused, because her injuries occurred within the context of equal rights.

**G.I. Jane: “No Better, No Worse”**

Jordan’s crusade for equal treatment disavows middle-class feminism at the same time that it employs its terminology. For example, despite Jordan’s claim that she doesn’t want to be a “poster girl” for feminism, she makes demands such as, “Treat me the same: no better, no worse,” during her frequent visits to the base Commander. This theme of gender equality is reinforced through the parallel the film takes pains to make
between Jordan and a black SEAL trainee. During a diving exercise, Jordan’s failure prompts the Master Chief to leave her entire team in open water, so that it must find the way back to base on its own. As the trainees slowly swim in the direction of shore, one of them complains bitterly that their situation is all Jordan’s fault, implying that she has no place there. A black trainee speaks up, directing his narrative toward Jordan, and describes how his grandfather was not allowed to serve in the Navy during WWII. The excuse he was provided by the military is that blacks have “bad night vision.” A white male trainee exclaims, “Damn, man, that’s unbelievable. Thank god times have changed.” “Have they?” the black trainee replies, looking at Jordan. “So you see, O’Neil, I know where you coming from,” he says. “You’re the new nigger on the block, is all. Maybe you just moved in a little too early.” This parallel between the black soldier’s experience and Jordan’s participates in the film’s continuous attempt to portray Jordan’s physical struggle as a quest for equal rights in terms of gender. Despite her denial of this motivation within the narrative, the undercurrent of feminism allows for a reassuring context for her ambition. Conflating gender with race in this particular scene lends her struggle a certain moral quality, a ‘higher calling’ that counteracts any discomfort about her increasingly masculine appearance. The fact that Jordan enjoys social and cultural privileges as a white woman, including her selection for this training, is never addressed. In this way, the film appropriates a particularly white form of feminism, one that ignores racial difference in favor of gender politics.

Jordan’s emphasis on outward appearance as the ultimate indication of her unfavorable outsider status sets up her motivation to erase, to best of her ability, the physical markers of femininity. At one point, Jordan claims that separate quarters and
deferential treatment are harming her performance. “How am I supposed to fit in with these guys when you’ve got me set up as an outsider?” she asks the base Commander. “Why don’t you just issue me a pink petticoat to wear around the base?” Note how the conflation of ‘female’ with ‘outsider’ works to deflect anxiety surrounding Jordan’s intentions—according to this equation, Jordan doesn’t want to become a man, she wants to become an ‘insider’. Thus, her makeover becomes a process of assimilation and inclusion; her appearance will allow her to blend in with the male recruits around her. Her transformation also speaks to her commitment as a soldier, expressing her love for the United States Navy through her body, in the same way that her essay conveys this devotion through her words.

The scene of Jordan’s near-ritualized head shaving functions as the film’s pivotal makeover moment, though her self-performed transformation is portrayed as a continuous process. The head-shaving scene is important both to the film’s narrative and its ideology. Previously, she is criticized for “playing with her hair,” as she attempts to push the long strands out of her face during a training exercise. Her hair acts as both a literal and figurative hindrance to her progress; it is the most obvious marker of her conventional femininity and serves to separate her visually from her fellow trainees. In the scene, Jordan enters the camp’s “Defense Cuts” barbershop, calling out for assistance. When she realizes that the shop is empty of both employees and customers, she locates a pair of electric clippers in a drawer, admiring their chromed, phallic shape. She removes her cap, stands before a mirror and strips off her jacket. Looking at her own image as she loosens her hair, now tangled and messy after days of training exercises, she runs her hands through it meditatively. She begins to shave her head, beginning at the very front,
just above her forehead. At first, the expression on her face is one of determined anger; as the strands of hair begin to fall away from her head, her chapped and bloodied lips spread in a satisfied grin. When she has finished, she stands before the mirror, running her hands over her smooth, bald head. When she sees the barber about to return to the shop, she grabs her jacket and bolts out the door, nearly knocking him over on her way out.

During this sequence, the film presents Jordan’s body from several different camera angles—side, high angle, low angle—fetishistically drawing out her performance as long as possible. Part of the scene’s gravity is due to simple shock value: it is obvious that no fakery or special effects are being used, and it is nearly impossible for the viewer not to react to the fact that this is really Demi Moore really shaving her head. It is a disruptive moment in the film’s narrative, where we are made suddenly aware of Demi Moore as a star and the film itself as a construct. We are forced to consider the circumstances of the recording of this scene, rather than how it fits into the film’s diegesis. Also, because there is no one within the film to observe the scene (except Jordan herself, in the mirror’s reflection), the film spectator is strongly implicated in the film’s persistent theme of surveillance. The spectator is made aware, particularly through the multiple camera angles, of being the primary surveyor in this scene, and is thus aligned with the Master Chief and his night vision scope. The music that accompanies this sequence, with Chrissie Hynde singing, “The bitch is gone,” implies that Jordan has undergone some kind of shift in identity through her haircut: the old Jordan (“bitch”) has disappeared—but what or who has taken her place?
Jordan’s haircut is the catalyst for her overall transformation—unlike the mythical Samson, who is weakened by the removal of his hair, Jordan appears to find reserves of energy and strength following her haircut, and she throws herself into her training with renewed enthusiasm. The film communicates this transformation through a montage sequence showing her successful participation in the grueling SEAL training, alternating with images of Jordan performing stretching and strength-training exercises. In these latter shots, Jordan appears to be alone in some dimly lit corner of the barracks. She is clad in combat boots, short shorts and a cropped white tank top clearly worn without a bra. The camera lingers on her breasts and legs as she performs push-ups and chin-ups, using chairs and pipes as props for her workout. Her strategically lit, sweat-soaked skin, combined with her grunts of physical effort, lend a kind of soft porn quality to the scenes. While the juxtaposition between her jiggling breasts and shaved head is somewhat disconcerting, it is clear that the function of this scene is to inscribe Jordan’s body as both feminine and highly sexualized. These sexualized ‘workout’ scenes are strikingly similar to ones in Terminator 2, the sequel to the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle. Early in the film, we see an imprisoned Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) using her prison bed as a makeshift gym machine. As she strains through pull-ups in her skimpy tank top, we are asked to both admire her well-defined muscles and her perky breasts. I would argue that the latter subsumes the former, much in the same way that the conventionally feminine appeal of Demi Moore’s body trumps the potential masculinity of her muscles.

Following this first ‘workout’ montage, Jordan is shown being examined by the female medical officer. Not surprisingly, Jordan is wearing only a white cotton bra, which provides minimal coverage, drawing attention to her large breasts and their
prominent nipples. Among other maladies such as tendonitis and jungle rot, Jordan is
diagnosed with dysmenorrhea, or lack of a menstrual period due to a significant drop in
body fat, which the medic explains as “not at all unusual for female athletes.” Note how
the film deals with what might be interpreted as an alarming indication that Jordan is
transforming from a woman into a man. By characterizing Jordan as an athlete rather
than a soldier, her loss of a menstrual period (her workouts must really be paying off) can
be qualified as “not at all unusual.” Instead, we are encouraged to read her
dysmenorrhea as simply a physical indicator of her commitment and discipline over her
body. Shortly after this scene, we are treated to yet another workout montage—this time
Jordan is clad in a black sports bra and briefs as she performs strenuous sit-ups and push-
ups, the camera closing in on her sweaty “six-pack” (abdominal muscles) as she twists
and strains. These images alternate with shots of the Master Chief yelling at a male
trainee, this same trainee ringing the bell in order to drop out of the program, Jordan
talking with the female medic, and Jordan finishing first in a weapon assembly exercise
that she had previously failed. At some point, the press gets wind of Jordan’s story,
taking photographs of her with a telephoto lens as she trains, keeping track of her
progress and dubbing her “G.I. Jane,” yet another variation on the theme of covert
surveillance. We also see snippets of a news broadcast promising a “feminist
perspective” on Jordan’s situation. These images are interspersed with ones of Jordan
performing one-handed push-ups in slow motion, the camera once again lingering on her
straining, glistening body, effectively conflating her physical exertion with sexual
release.
While the film reinforces Jordan’s femininity primarily through sexualized representations of her body, another way it attempts to reinscribe her essential gender identity is through her ‘feminine’ behavior. This takes the form of her apparently instinctual generosity, of which her fellow recruits initially take advantage. One example takes place during the nighttime obstacle course sequence, when Jordan kicks aside the regulation wooden steps intended to help her over the wall, then motions for her team members to come forward so she can boost them up and over. As the last soldier is helped up, he reaches down to take Jordan’s arm and return the favor. However, as he grasps her hand, he says, “Why don’t you quit, O’Neil. Quit now,” and releases her so she falls back down to the muddy ground. The Master Chief observes this scene through a night vision scope, a device he has been using throughout the exercise, apparently without the trainees’ knowledge. Again, the film uses the theme of surveillance to position the Master Chief both as omniscient authority figure and voyeur. Later, when the group is assembled near the barracks and read the individual times for the obstacle course, the Master Chief reprimands Cortez, the trainee who dropped Jordan from the wall, and Jordan’s selflessness is vindicated. In a similar sequence, Jordan smuggles some scraps of food into the classroom where the trainees are writing their essays about their love for the U.S. Navy. Exhausted and hungry after hours of training, Jordan surreptitiously stuffs some of the morsels into her mouth, then offers the rest to the male trainee seated next to her, who quickly snatches them from her hand and eats them, looking grateful. The message in each sequence is clear—Jordan’s altruism conveys her inherent goodness, as well as a very feminine impulse to nurture. And while this
generosity might be abused, it will ultimately help her move forward in the training and
gain the respect of her fellow trainees, as well as the Master Chief.

During their final training mission, an “operational readiness exercise” in the
Mediterranean, the team is diverted to an actual military crisis in Libya, and the film
morphs into a typical military action-adventure. I would argue that this combat sequence
serves an ideological function rather than a narrative one, and as a result feels distinctly
anti-climactic. These scenes, which are accompanied by a generic ‘middle-eastern’
musical theme on the soundtrack, position Jordan, along with her teammates, against a
familiar, Arabic Other. This, more than anything, represents her total immersion in the
patriarchal system—the dominant binary of male/female that Jordan struggles to collapse
throughout the first part of the film now shifts to the opposition American/Libyan. In
other words, in these concluding moments of the film it is far more important that Jordan
identifies as American, so that her gender is an afterthought, subsumed by her identity as
a soldier of the U.S. military.

The film’s final sequence reinforces the unsettling mixture of the paternal and the
sexual between Jordan and the Master Chief, who is now emasculated by his injuries and
forced to use a cane, a powerful symbol of impotence and phallic substitution. After the
graduation ceremony, Jordan returns to her locker, where she finds a paperback copy of
Selected Poems by D.H. Lawrence.10 Inside the book, a medal of commendation for the
operation in Libya marks the page containing the poem, “Self-Pity,” that the Master
Chief recited to the trainees on their first day. Jordan looks up to see the Master Chief,
hobbling away toward his quarters. He turns and looks back, and the two of them
exchange a look laden with emotion. Jordan begins to cry as the Master Chief smiles,
then disappears from view. As she looks over the poem, she grins and bites her lower lip like a love-struck schoolgirl, and the screen fades to black. Here, the Master Chief is literally handing down his power, as embodied by the medal as well as the book of poetry with which he intimidates his trainees. The metaphorical “dick” is officially passed to Jordan, who balances the masculinity inherent to such a possession with an appropriately feminine emotional response.

**Conclusion: “Miss Con-Jane-ality?”**

While *Miss Congeniality* and *G.I. Jane* differ in terms of their generic conventions (screwball comedy vs. military action-adventure) they clearly express a common ideology about the female body and the male gaze, illustrating, I would argue, how the makeover acts as an intersection of these two elements. In both films, the female protagonists are consistently defined in terms of the gaze, either as objects of the look, or as complicit in a larger institutional form of observation. Also, while each makeover takes its subject in a different direction in terms of gender (feminization vs. masculinization), both films work obsessively to reinforce gender polarity through the body. Ultimately, these two films are about *surveillance*, about how institutions look at women’s bodies, and how these same institutions use technology to shape these bodies, either directly or indirectly at the level of discourse.

The notion of a feminine, heterosexual ideal is a primary concern for each film; while it is not stated explicitly, *whiteness* is an important component as well. This concern is expressed through each narrative’s institutional search for the ‘correct’ body. In *G.I. Jane*, Jordan is considered the embodiment of this heteronormative ideal, thus rendering her the perfect subject, in the eyes of Senator DeHaven, for a masculine
transformation. Because Jordan is a ‘real’ woman, in terms of her sexual object-choice and appearance, the physical changes her body endures in order to succeed in SEAL training do not alter her essential feminine identity. As a candidate for the test case, Jordan is safe; there is no danger she will actually cross over the gender divide in the course of her transformation. In contrast, Miss Congeniality locates the potential for a feminine ideal in Gracie. Her physical changes seek to retrieve that essential femininity which supposedly lies dormant within her, concealed by her masculine appearance and behaviors. In terms of the makeover, the respective search within each film identifies Gracie as ‘before’ and Jordan as already ‘after.’ Accordingly, the makeover serves a different function in each film. In Miss Congeniality, it reflects a process of maturation through feminization, correcting a pathological gender misidentification within its recipient. In G.I. Jane, the makeover functions as a means of assimilation, as well as a test of Jordan’s core femininity concurrent with her military training, both of which she passes with flying colors.

Both films engage with feminism, or more accurately, post-feminism, in revealing ways. Miss Congeniality can be read as post-feminist in the sense that it actively rejects an older model of feminism that is hostile toward feminine beauty practices and institutions like the beauty pageant. In this way, it actually reflects a more recent trend in academic feminism where beauty culture, fashion and female consumption are considered legitimate areas of investigation, as well as potentially subversive or liberating activities. However (and this is a big however), the film consistently relies on tired stereotypes about academic and political feminism in order to set this ideological stance in binary opposition to post-feminism, so that Gracie’s conversion from the former to
latter rings uncomfortably simplistic. *G.I. Jane* resembles the more popular definition of post-feminism, distinguished by its simultaneous dependence on and disavowal of the feminist movement (Brundson, 85). Even as Jordan consistently positions herself against feminism, claiming that she doesn’t want to make a “statement” or act as a “poster girl,” she also makes demands for equal treatment using the terminology of the women’s movement. Here, the definition of ‘feminist’ is someone who makes statements, who makes herself and her politics publicly visible—in other words, the same stereotypically angry, militant activist who is summoned up repeatedly in *Miss Congeniality*. In this way, while each film invokes post-feminism in different ways, they both define feminism in terms of extremes of behavior and ideology. Additionally, through the unquestioned whiteness of its main characters, these films engage with that aspect of post-feminism that has generated the most criticism: its focus elite, straight white women.

1 The creator of *The Swan* was the first to recognize this connection and put it to work on her TV show, by not only giving participants painful and dramatic makeovers but then forcing them to compete against each other in order to be crowned “The Ultimate Swan.”


3 While Victor’s sexual orientation is never clearly stated, it is possible to read him as gay, reinforcing the concept of the gay man as an expert in gendered behavior and appearance, something that the “Queer Eye” shows take as their principal ideology. It is also possible, by virtue of his British accent and general ‘European-ness,’ to read him as simply cultured, so that his expertise is due more to class status than sexuality.

4 The fact that Candice Bergen is famous for playing the television sitcom character Murphy Brown, a feminist journalist who was actually singled out by Vice President Dan Quayle for criticism in the context of conservative “Family Values,” also lends depth to this observation.

5 Note the film’s continued conflation of gender and class, locating class so specifically within the female body that levels of sex hormone can determine one’s social status.

6 Another way the film supports this strategy is by aligning Jordan’s character with a black SEAL trainee, so that her struggle for recognition as equal to a male soldier is conflated with the black soldier’s stories of his grandfather’s experiences with racism in the armed forces.

7 See Susan Bordo’s discussion of Madonna’s physical and ideological transformation during this decade (269).
8 That bathing is considered a feminine activity is a cultural assumption expressed everywhere from women’s films to television commercials (“Calgon, take me away”). The candle-lit bathtub scene has appeared in a range of film genres, and carries not just sexual but masturbatory connotations.

9 Both during and after work on the film, Moore was often featured in paparazzi and publicity photos flaunting her newly bald look. This, in turn, became part of the film’s promotion (See the film Demi shaved her head for!) and her haircut was perceived as a physical sacrifice along the lines of Robert DeNiro’s weight gain to play Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull* (1980): a testament to one’s commitment to the craft.

10 Lawrence’s identity as a master essentialist must be noted once again—the Master Chief’s appropriation of the author’s voice expresses his own character’s function within the film text: to reiterate gender roles and differences through his relationship with Jordan.
CHAPTER 4

DESIRING LOOKS: MATERNITY, MATURITY AND MAKEOVERS IN THE WOMAN’S FILM

In my work on the makeover in film, I’ve noted that the makeover consistently takes its subject in one of two directions in its process of self-improvement: from young to old (maturation) or old to young (rejuvenation). In the former category, we find films where the makeover represents a cultural and sexual coming-of-age expressed in terms of appearance. In the category of rejuvenation, we find films where the makeover seeks to retrieve its recipient from advancing age, restoring her youthful appearance and, therefore, her attractiveness. This type of makeover reflects the notion that too much maturity is just as undesirable as a lack of maturity. Thus, while each category of makeover takes its recipient in different directions in terms of age, they work together to associate physical and sexual attractiveness with youth. In this chapter, I want to examine a small group of films that feature middle-age makeovers, where a female character in her 30s or 40s undergoes a dramatic change in her appearance. This transformation works to partially restore her ‘lost’ youth and signals her readiness for a romantic union with the male object of her desire. The films on which I focus my analysis—Moonstruck (1987), The Mirror Has Two Faces (1996) and My Big Fat Greek Wedding (2002)—are typically classified as romantic comedies. However, I want to read
them in terms of the woman’s film, a Hollywood genre first popularized during the 1930s and 1940s and recurring in various forms through the present.

While the woman’s film has been known by many derisive labels—“tearjerkers,” “weepies,” and, more recently, “chick flicks”—what these various forms share is an emphasis on “the personal arena of domestic and heterosexual relations, culturally defined as feminine” (Gledhill, 224). In other words, “women’s issues” such as marriage, home-making, female friendship, maternity and its related theme of self-sacrifice are recognized as the central interests of the woman’s film. While the comedies I examine appear to work against this convention by focusing more exclusively on female appearance and attractiveness rather than maternity (not one of the protagonists is a mother herself) the theme of birth or partition is still conveyed by the production of the makeover subject’s transformed body. In fact, despite their overt interest in the heterosexual couple, all three films prominently feature mothers as supporting characters, mothers who are often complicit in the “re-birthing” process that produces new and improved versions of their daughters. Thus, while these middle-age makeover comedies emphasize physical appearance and romance in a way that the traditional woman’s film typically does not, they also display a clear interest in the family, particularly the mother-daughter relationship, so that an undercurrent of domestic melodrama churns beneath the obvious romantic and comedic plotlines. Similarly, while these films present themselves as straightforward romantic comedies, they privilege female friendship and community in a way that aligns them closely with the feminized discourse of the woman’s film.

Unlike the majority of classical Hollywood films, the woman’s film relies on the point of view of a female protagonist, figures such as “the unwed mother, the waiting
wife, the abandoned mistress, the frightened newlywed or the anguished mother” (Doane, 3). The films I discuss here codify an equally pathetic figure, which I will term the *Premature Spinster*. While the independent woman is a recurring figure in the woman’s film, best personified by actresses such as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, the Premature Spinster carries a slightly different, more *tragic* meaning than the average single woman. She is the woman who has not only remained unmarried and childless into middle age, but who has also been denied the experience of ‘true’ romantic, heterosexual love. Thus, while the Premature Spinster is not a mother, wife or lover, and therefore, according to heterosexist ideology, not a fully realized woman, we are meant to understand that she is at the same time well past the prime of her life. This contradictory status is communicated by her exaggeratedly unattractive appearance, often including dumpy clothes, padding to represent overweight, gray hair and heavy eyebrows. Her cinematic predecessors include such iconic female characters as Charlotte Vale in *Now, Voyager* and Catherine Sloper in *The Heiress* (1949). However, the difference between these heroines and those in the contemporary films I discuss has to do with the narrative trajectory regarding female desire—specifically, fulfillment versus denial. In *Now, Voyager*, for example, though Charlotte’s heterosexual desire for Jerry releases her ‘true’ self in terms of personality and appearance, she is ultimately denied the satisfaction of a romantic union that the heroines in *Moonstruck*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *The Mirror Has Two Faces* are granted. In these latter films, narrative pleasure results from the successful union between the heroine and the object of her desire, not from the masochistic deferral of desire on which the melodrama thrives.
In this way, the middle-age makeover films discussed here can be read as versions of the woman’s film where *fulfillment* presents itself as the key narrative concept. Imagine a woman’s film where the unwed mother marries and bears a legitimate child, the husband of the waiting wife returns safely, and the abandoned mistress is redeemed through a new and better love. My argument is that the films analyzed in this chapter represent a distinct relationship between the makeover and female desire, where physical transformation is both the *product* of female desire and often the *means* by which it is ultimately fulfilled. The makeover device, therefore, acts as a bridge between melodrama and comedy, creating the possibility of a new kind of woman’s film, where desire is fulfilled rather than denied. However, it is important to note that this narrative fulfillment still takes place within the makeover’s contradictory and ultimately regressive ideological framework, where beauty, love and success are portrayed as simultaneously accessible and, through the use of star bodies, impossible. I am also interested in how each of these films engages with the concept of whiteness through the bodies of their “off-white” stars—Cher, Barbra Streisand and Nia Vardalos—and how their corresponding transformations might disrupt or participate in the larger construction of whiteness as a category.

**The Woman’s Film: A Short Critical History**

As a genre, the woman’s film was initially recognized and theorized by feminist critics as part of a larger interest in ‘feminine’ cultural modes of address. Like talk shows, soap operas, fashion magazines and romance novels, the woman’s film, with its female address and narrative interests, was largely ignored by film studies in the 1950s
and 1960s in favor of ‘masculine’ genres like the western and film noir. Christine Gledhill describes how the development of feminist theory in the 1970s prompted a shift in critical interest in the woman’s film:

Feminist attention was drawn to any production aimed at the female audience which placed the heroine at the center of the narrative, thus articulating the woman’s film as a cross-generic corpus of films linked by their address to a female audience to be examine alongside women’s fiction, women’s magazines, the “women’s page,” . . . and so on. Inevitably . . . the woman’s film and melodrama are frequently (but not invariably) treated by critics—both journalistic and academic—as one.

Accordingly, the first book-length surveys of the woman’s film were published by 1970s feminist film scholars Molly Haskell (*From Reverence to Rape*) and Marjorie Rosen (*Popcorn Venus*). Because both critics worked within the early “images of women” school of criticism, one that emphasized the distinction between “positive” and “negative” portrayals of women in film, their mode of analysis is considered primitive and their work often dismissed by later critics. However, they must be credited with not only recognizing the woman’s film as an area of interest for feminist scholars, but also performing an initial attempt at identifying common themes and categories of films, which many later analyses appropriated as their starting point. One of these is Mary Ann Doane’s *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*, published in 1987 and widely recognized as an indication that the woman’s film had fully arrived within the academy. Doane’s study of the woman’s film in its classical period simultaneously
defined and legitimized the genre in terms of serious feminist inquiry. Of central concern to Doane is the potential the woman’s film offers as a site where issues of female spectatorship might be explored:

The insistence of their address and the forcefulness of their tropes make the women’s films of the 1940s an appropriate textual field for the investigation of issues surrounding the concepts of subjectivity and spectatorship and the ability or inability of feminist theorists to align these concepts with sexual specificity . . . One can readily trace, in the women’s films of the 1940s, recurrent suggestions of deficiency, inadequacy, and failure in the woman’s appropriation of the gaze. It is the very concept of subjectivity and its place in feminist theory which is in question. (5)

Despite her argument for the importance of the woman’s film to feminist film studies, Doane’s overall opinion of the genre is negative—though their collective address to a female audience might be considered potentially empowering, the ideology they convey, according to Doane, is depressingly consistent with a patriarchal value system. She also sees very little possibility for a resistant spectator, claming that “it is a mistake to believe that women have the option of simply accepting or rejecting” the representations of femininity that the woman’s film creates and sustains (176). Instead, Doane argues that it is only a continued analysis of the texts themselves, not spectators’ experiences with them, that will help us understand how they communicate their ideology.

More recent analyses of the woman’s film challenge Doane’s contention that the genre simply reinscribes patriarchal systems, arguing instead for a potential reading ‘against the grain.’ Jeanine Basinger’s engagingly personal analysis of the woman’s film,
A Woman’s View (1993), claims that these films contain a kind of dual consciousness at the level of ideology, a quality she describes as “two-faced.” Basinger sees the genre’s contradictory activity as a space for possible alternate readings by female spectators:

The woman’s film was successful because it worked out of a paradox. It both held women in social bondage and released them into a dream of potency and freedom. It drew women in with images of what was lacking in their own lives and sent them home reassured that their own lives were the right thing after all…By making the Other live on the screen, movies made it real. By making it real, they made it desirable. By making it desirable, they made it possible. (6)

According to Basinger, the woman’s film offers models of transgressive femininity at the same time as it warns women away from these choices. In identifying with the cinematic ‘bad girls’ employed by the woman’s film as negative examples, claims Basinger, the female spectator is able to temporarily suspend the social and cultural restrictions placed on her in terms of gender and experience a kind of short-lived liberation. More importantly, the woman’s film recognizes and gives shape to female desire in a way that is potentially empowering, even if this desire is ultimately left unfulfilled or punished. Acknowledging female desire at all, argues Basinger, offers a space for its realization.

In her 1998 study of what she terms the “female friendship” film, Karen Hollinger finds much less potential for alternative or transgressive readings and spectator positions within the traditional woman’s film. While she acknowledges the “textual contradictions” seemingly inherent to the genre, she attributes these to its attempts to “superimpose a patriarchal view of female character and development on actual female
nature and offer male fantasies of femininity as female realities” (35). In other words, the ideological ‘gaps’ the woman’s film presents to the viewer result from the discrepancy between its patriarchal structure and its ‘feminine’ subject matter. In Hollinger’s view, these films simply “offer the conservative perspective and inadvertently open themselves up to alternative readings” (35). However, she argues that the contemporary female friendship subgenre or film cycle, which finds its origins in the traditional woman’s film, holds far more potential for resistant readings. According to Hollinger, the female friendship film typically portrays a more complex range of female identities, perhaps reflecting in part the growing influence of female screenwriters and directors as cinematic meaning-makers. Despite this increased potential for a progressive ideology, Hollinger notes that these “chick flicks” also contain a strongly regressive attitude toward feminism:

The feminist ideas expressed by the films often seem appropriated merely to provide a basis for popularly entertaining narratives rather than to offer any serious confrontation with women’s issues. Even when issues important to women are broached, their presentation is typically rendered on such a personal level or the solutions proposed are so simplistic and unrealistic that the significance of women’s problems is minimized rather than accentuated. (237)

The middle-age makeover films I discuss here share a similar desire to have it both ways, to incorporate both progressive and regressive elements within their narratives. One way they do this is through their attempts to negotiate the term spinster in relation to women’s recent social and cultural history. In other words, these films directly or indirectly
confront the notion of spinsterhood in contemporary society, as well as within specific cultural and ethnic groups. In their own convoluted ways, *Moonstruck*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *The Mirror Has Two Faces* pose some interesting questions about what it means to be an ‘old maid’ in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, especially since the definition of middle-age itself has changed over the past several decades. However, this potential for critique is seriously undermined by the redemptive quality of the heterosexual relationship in each film. For example, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* makes a point of showing how Toula’s failure to live up to her family’s expectations that she will marry and have children becomes her sole point of reference in terms of identity. We are clearly asked to sympathize with Toula in this conflict, and regard her parents’ wishes for her as old-fashioned and oppressive. However, the film’s resolution to this situation is to marry Toula off, set her up cozily with her husband in the house next door to her parents, and conclude with an image of her embracing her school-age daughter. Thus, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* seems to question the assumption that marriage represents the ultimate life goal for women, yet at the same time positions it as a positive (and seemingly inevitable) narrative goal.

Similarly, *The Mirror Has Two Faces* attempts to question our collective obsession with beauty and appearance, yet makes over the female protagonist so that she conforms more closely with our culture’s physical ideals. And while there is such a strong emphasis on the interactions between female characters that the film could be read in terms of Hollinger’s female friendship cycle, the women are nonetheless defined primarily through their relationships with men. In *Moonstruck*, the narrative promotes the idea that the pragmatic female characters are really in charge, while the male
characters are the ones who seem unable to make decisions. At the same time, the women are completely subordinate to their relationships with men, and yet again marriage (or, in the case of the main character’s parents, a re-commitment to their existing union) provides the proper narrative conclusion. My point here is that these films, like the majority of woman’s films, engage with feminism in highly superficial ways; while they may appear to be critical of gender roles and cultural standards of femininity, they consistently reinscribe very traditional patriarchal values. The makeover motif works in harmony with this activity, by simultaneously offering the subject liberation from her former identity and imprisoning her within a patriarchal system of representation. These films, then, are fundamentally contradictory, presenting themselves as feminist yet revealing themselves as overwhelmingly heteronormative.

Moonstruck: My Mother, Myself?

In Moonstruck, singer and actress Cher plays Loretta Castorini, a 37-year-old widow whose husband was hit and killed by a bus only two years into their marriage. Seven years following his death, she is living with her extended Italian-American family in Brooklyn and working as an accountant. Her 40-something boyfriend Johnny (Danny Aiello) proposes marriage and she accepts, though she admits to her mother Rose (Olympia Dukakis) that she doesn’t love him. Rose chooses this moment to tell Loretta that her father Cosmo (Vincent Gardenia) is cheating on her. Days after his proposal, Johnny must fly to Italy to see his dying mother, but asks Loretta to contact his estranged brother Ronny (Nicholas Cage) and invite him to the wedding that will take place on his return. Loretta goes to see Ronny at the bakery where he works, and he tells her that he
holds Johnny responsible for the loss of his hand in an industrial accident and the subsequent loss of his fiancée. Loretta and Ronny end up in a romantic embrace, and they have passionate sex. The next morning, Ronny tells her he is in love with her. Loretta regrets her night of passion with Ronny, but agrees to go with him to see *La Bohème* at the Metropolitan Opera, on the condition that they will not see each other again. That afternoon, Loretta goes into the Cinderella Beauty Shop and has a makeover, then purchases a sexy new dress for the event. She and Ronny watch the opera, then run into Loretta’s father and his mistress in the lobby of the opera house. Loretta and Ronny end up back at his apartment once again, where, despite her feelings of guilt, the two make love. Meanwhile, Rose dines alone and meets a professor who escorts her home, boosting her self-confidence. That same night, Johnny returns from Italy and seeks out Loretta at her parents’ home; Rose covers for her and tells Johnny to return the next day. Loretta returns home the following morning and changes out of her party dress after her mother informs her Johnny is back and that he will be coming to visit her soon. Ronny arrives at the house, determined to meet Loretta’s family. They all sit down for breakfast, where Loretta’s mother confronts her father about his affair, and he agrees to end it. Johnny arrives at the house and tells Loretta he can’t marry her as long as his mother is alive. Ronnie proposes and Loretta accepts. The family celebrates with champagne toast, and the film closes on a shot of an old family photograph accompanied by music from *La Bohème*.

Despite its interest in heterosexual romance, the theme of mothers and mothering permeates *Moonstruck*, expressed through the close relationship between Loretta and her mother Rose, as well as supporting characters such as Johnny’s dying but still
domineering mother. Kathryn Rowe notes that this “attention to mothers” is unusual for both the film’s generic category and its mode of production: “Typically, the mother has no place in romantic comedy, and as a rule, Hollywood has had little use for white-haired female characters like Rose…but mother figures, both good and bad, are plentiful in this film” (204). Thus, while the narrative goal in Moonstruck is still the successful heterosexual coupling of Loretta and Ronny, the emphasis on its various female relationships invokes the genre of the woman’s film and its conventions. In fact, the film implies that the female characters dominate the male characters; Rowe describes Loretta as “a paradigmatic woman on top” who “challenges the authority of her father an the other men in her life” (204). However, I will argue that this dominance is mostly illusory, functioning only as a narrative device rather than an actual model of transgressive femininity. In fact, Moonstruck resembles a classic woman’s film in that it places its female characters and their friendships at the center of the narrative, yet defines these same women primarily through their relationships with men.

Through its female characters, Moonstruck repeatedly engages with an ideological binary typical to the woman’s film, motherhood vs. romance, and the choice implied as necessary between the two. This decision itself is often a source of melodrama, where the character is forced to choose between being a mother or a lover; she cannot, according to the ideology of the woman’s film, be both. However, it would be more accurate to describe Moonstruck’s particular interpretation of this anxiety as mothering vs. romance, since Loretta herself has not actually produced a child. Instead, through her maternal dominance over Johnny and other male characters, Loretta chooses to behave like a mother, to the exclusion of romantic love. Thus, Loretta’s makeover, as the
outward manifestation of her decision to incorporate sexual passion in her life and
distinguish herself physically from her own mother, represents her character’s movement
across this binary opposition, from mothering to romance.

The film uses another opposition, pragmatism vs. melodrama, in order to play
with the gender conventions that mark the woman’s film in its classical form. While
melodrama is generally considered a feminine genre, in Moonstruck the male characters
embody this trait, while the female characters are the pragmatists. Thus, it is Johnny,
Ronny and Cosmo who swoon, cry and brood, while Rose and Loretta roll their eyes at
their displays of emotion and excesses of the male ego. Loretta’s tragic early experiences
with love and marriage have rendered her a particularly staunch pragmatist. She is
openly scornful of romance, so that when Ronny announces that he is in love with her
following their night of illicit passion, she slaps him across the face and shouts, “Snap out
of it!” At the same time that she rejects sentiment, she appears to be superstitious,
blaming her earlier marital misfortunes on the lack of a proper proposal and wedding.
Loretta’s demand that Johnny present her with an engagement ring and select a specific
date for the wedding isn’t motivated by love or passion for her fiancé, but her belief that
these tokens will ensure a marriage without tragedy. While Kathryn Rowe reads these
elements—ring, church wedding, gown—in terms of fantasy, likening them to magic
“charms” that must be invoked (205), I see them simply as representations of social
convention, or the ‘correct’ way to create a heterosexual couple. Thus, I would suggest
that before her transformation, Loretta embodies a masculine perspective in relation to
both melodrama and comedy; she represents pragmatism and social order while the male
characters represent emotion and disorder.
Loretta’s conversion from pragmatism to melodrama begins when she meets the passionate and irrational Ronny. Her attraction to him results in a spontaneous and illicit sexual encounter whose effects on Loretta are immediate and dramatic. In her essay on Italian American women in contemporary film, cultural critic Mary Ann McDonald Carolan describes Ronny’s impact on Loretta in terms of her appearance:

Ronny’s melodramatic effect on Loretta is measured by the signifier of Italian American womanhood, the hairstyle. Before her opera date with Ronny, Loretta visits the Cinderella Hair Salon in order to update her matronly gray chignon with a cut and color . . . Transformed into a fairy princess whose beauty astounds Ronny, Loretta regally enters the enchanted realm of love and death at the Met. The next morning . . . Rose tells her that her hair looks different. Loretta’s response that “everything’s different” is an acknowledgement that her metamorphosis goes beyond the physical. (159)

A familiar literary and cinematic motif is the man or woman who receives such a tremendous shock that his or her hair is turned gray overnight. In Loretta’s case, the shock of her passionate encounter with Ronny prompts her to remove the gray from her hair, a significant reversal of this trope. Loretta’s physical transformation in preparation for her attendance at the performance of La Bohème signals her readiness to incorporate elements of melodrama and romance into her life; her acceptance of Ronny’s marriage proposal indicates the completion of this ideological journey. Thus, Loretta’s makeover represents her movement across two related binaries: mothering vs. romance and pragmatism vs. melodrama.
Previous to her physical and emotional transformation, Loretta is portrayed not just as a widow, but a woman in profound emotional, reproductive and sexual stasis, old before her time and resigned to a re-marriage free of romance or children. Since her first husband’s death, she has regressed (or advanced?) to a prematurely spinsterish state, moving back in with her parents and embracing a life of nun-like celibacy, or what Rowe describes as “a kind of death-in-life” (203). For Loretta, premature spinsterhood acts both as a kind of defense mechanism, protecting her from future trauma, as well as a form of self-punishment for lost opportunities. Loretta’s first marriage, she makes clear, was her “one chance at happiness,” her single opportunity to experience both sexual fulfillment and motherhood. She blames her childless state on her assumption that she had plenty of time to start a family, a decision she now considers foolish. Her second marriage does not represent an opportunity to become a mother; her reaction to her mother’s suggestion that she might have a child with Johnny is one of horrified shock, as she exclaims, “Ma! I’m thirty-seven years old!” What her second marriage does represent is safety—marrying a man who doesn’t challenge her or inspire feelings of passion will allow her to remain in her contradictory “death-in-life” state, where she can exists as both spinster and wife. However, the film clearly wants us to understand that this is the wrong choice for Loretta; this wrong-ness is so obvious that it actually becomes a part of Loretta’s overdetermined ‘before’ state. In other words, we can see that the relationship between Johnny and Loretta won’t last in the same way that we know her physical makeover is lurking in the film’s narrative.

Loretta’s appearance early in the film reflects the “death-in-life” Rowe describes, as she is shown exclusively in dark colored, utilitarian clothing and drab tweeds, a 1980s
interpretation of traditional widow’s weeds. Her hair is shot through with gray, particularly around the temples, and she wears it pulled back from her face in a loose bun, similar to her mother’s hairstyle. The gray hair signifies both Loretta’s premature aging and her lack of interest in her appearance, since she has chosen not to cover the gray hair with dye. Her only concession to ‘feminine’ adornment is a small gold cross pendant, connoting religious piety and traditional values consistent with her Italian-American identity. Her eyebrows are dark and heavy, clearly unplucked, and while the actress is certainly wearing makeup, its neutral tones are intended to communicate a face free of cosmetics. Loretta is not exaggeratedly unattractive in the way that some makeover recipients are carefully constructed to appear; she falls on the less severe, ‘plain’ end of the pre-makeover continuum, so that her appearance conveys neglect rather than actual ugliness. In this way, we understand that it won’t take much to improve Loretta’s appearance—just a little attention to her hair and makeup and perhaps some brighter clothing.

Before her makeover, Loretta resembles a younger version of her mother, a resemblance reinforced by her behavior toward the men in her life. At the beginning of the film, Loretta’s relationships with men, particularly her fiancé Johnny, described by Loretta’s father as a “big baby,” are defined in terms of mothering, devoid of sensuality, sexuality or romance. Her maternal fussing over the funeral director’s tie in the opening scenes of the film and her impulse to cook Ronny a steak dinner on their first meeting demonstrate different aspects of this behavior, which allows Loretta to be both nurturing and authoritative. As Rowe describes the relationship between Johnny and Loretta: “He plays the child and she the mother. She tells him what to eat, what to wear, and even how
to propose to her” (203). While Loretta is able to dominate Johnny and the other men in her life through mothering, she still refuses to acknowledge or act on her own emotional and sexual desires.

This maternal dynamic is transformed when Loretta meets the rebellious and passionate Ronny. Following their initial encounter, which produces an almost comically melodramatic scene of sexual abandon, Ronny tells her, “I was dead,” to which she replies, “Me, too.” Thus, Loretta’s physical transformation, which takes place immediately after her romantic interlude with Ronnie, represents not just rejuvenation but resuscitation, facilitated by the possibility of romance in her life. With just a single romantic encounter, the premature spinster begins to emerge from her self-imposed emotional stasis, like the sleeping princess of the fairy tale who is revived by a kiss. While Loretta’s makeover is ostensibly a response to Ronny’s invitation to the opera, echoing Cinderella’s night at the ball with her Prince Charming, we are clearly meant to understand that it acts as an external expression of her inner sexual and emotional awakening. Also, by distinguishing herself physically from Rose, Loretta establishes her identity, and thus her romantic destiny, as separate from her mother’s.

Loretta’s makeover begins with a typical motif: the makeover subject, who represents ‘before,’ gazing with interest at a photograph of a fashion model, who represents a potential ‘after,’ displayed in the window of a beauty parlor.3 Clearly intrigued by the possibilities this image represents, Loretta enters the “Cinderella Beauty Shop,” whose name blatantly communicates the nature of the transformation that is about to take place. Inside, we are shown more images of models that line the walls, acting as the equivalent to merchandise that a consumer might window-shop before making her
selections. Seated in a beautician’s chair, Loretta commands the young hairdresser, “Take out the gray.” The woman responds ecstatically, saying “I’ve been wanting to do this for three years!” A montage of beauty procedures follows, including hair dyeing, eyebrow plucking, a manicure, and the application of various cosmetics. Loretta leaves the salon with a head of hair free of gray and puffed out to twice its original size, heavy makeup and bright red nails. As she strides down the sidewalk, two men who are leaning against a nearby storefront openly ogle her appearance, and one of them whistles appreciatively. “Wow. Look at that!” the other man remarks, as Loretta stops to glance back at them, then continues happily on her way. Loretta’s new appearance receives approval not only from the women in the salon (one of whom declares how happy she is that Loretta’s “ugly grays” are gone) but also from the men on the street, who clearly embody the desiring male gaze, which is now turned full force on Loretta.

The second stage of Loretta’s makeover begins as she gazes into a shop window at a mannequin dressed in a red velvet party dress. Her thoughtful stare mirrors her previous gaze at the image of the model displayed in the window of the beauty salon, and both representations serve the same function: to advertise the possible identities available to Loretta through consumption. The dress that holds Loretta’s rapt gaze is the antithesis of her current wardrobe; it is colorful, frivolous and revealing instead of dark, sensible and modest. Through its color and style, the dress embodies all of the qualities—sexuality, youth, and exuberance—that Loretta has re-discovered in herself as a result of her encounter with Ronny. With her attention clearly focused on the object of her desire, Loretta enters the store, then emerges a few moments later, carrying several shopping bags, one of which presumably contains the coveted dress. As she strides down
the sidewalk, she stumbles into a group of Catholic nuns dressed in full habits. Loretta apologizes as the nuns glare at her disapprovingly, and the message conveyed by this interaction couldn’t be more obvious: through her makeover and subsequent purchases, Loretta is leaving her former cloistered life behind in order to embrace a new life of hedonistic possibilities.

Once home, Loretta pours herself a glass of wine, lights a fire in the fireplace and turns on some sexy jazz music. This stereotypically romantic setting facilitates what can only be described as a kind of masturbatory celebration of female consumption, where Loretta lifts her purchases out of their packaging, stroking the fabric of the red velvet dress as if she were caressing a lover’s skin. She begins to assemble her outfit for the evening, surveying her body in various stages of undress in a full-length mirror. In terms of character, this sequence represents a distinct shift from Loretta’s tendency toward maternal self-sacrifice to a highly sexualized self-interest, as conveyed by her absorption in her own reflection. Loretta’s final act is to apply bright red lipstick, and her corresponding glance in the mirror confirms that she has ultimately transformed herself into…Cher. The character now looks like the recognizable, already-circulating image of the actress who portrays her, from the teased black hair to the heavy makeup applied to her surgically enhanced features. Thus, at its most basic level, Loretta’s makeover is simply a removal of the cosmetic disguises signifying middle age, from the overgrown eyebrows to the silver hairs around her temples, allowing the desirable star persona lurking beneath to fully emerge into view.

By 1987, the year Moonstruck was initially released, Cher’s star persona was strongly marked by a flamboyant sense of fashion and dress, one that included the
frequent exposure of skin. For example, a photograph accompanying a March 17, 1975
cover article in *Time* magazine includes a photograph of the star from the waist up, naked
except for a swath of long, black hair covering each breast; the caption reads “Cher
models her most memorable costume” (56). The cover image shows her in a sheer nude
gown with strategically placed sequins and feathers, accompanied by the feature’s title,
“Cher: Glad Rags to Riches.” In 1986, she attended the Academy Awards in a black
sequined ensemble designed by Bob Mackie that included an enormous feathered
headdress, skimpy top and bare midriff, an outfit that is still referenced in nearly every
media discussion of over-the-top Oscar fashion. The name Cher selected for her
signature perfume—Uninhibited—says all that really needs to be said about her star
image, particularly how Cher *herself* perceives her public persona and participates
actively in its construction.

Cher’s stardom is associated with a very flexible ethnic identity; at various points
in her career, she has referenced Native American culture, her Armenian heritage and a
generalized “gypsy” identity through her costuming and recordings. In her book *Off-
White Hollywood*, Diane Negra claims that “Cher’s star body . . . challenges conventions
of whiteness in its high degree of self-awareness” (164). According to Negra,

Cher’s body functions as the sign of her unstable class and ethnic
attributes—the marker of her ability to complicate operative distinctions
between white and non-white, and high and low cultural forms . . .

Discourses on Cher’s transformable, constructed body have persisted
through nearly her entire career. (166)
Indeed, plastic surgery rumors have been attached to Cher since the 1970’s, when it was alleged that she had not only had her prominent nose surgically refined, but also several ribs removed in order to achieve her famously slender waist. While Cher has consistently denied these allegations, it is obvious that in more recent years she has had considerable work done to her face and body, so that she has that stretched and plumped appearance of so many female celebrities in her age group. My point here is that throughout her career, Cher has been strongly associated with bodily manipulation, whether through costuming and cosmetics, or more permanent modifications such as plastic surgery and tattooing; the ethnicity attached to this “transformable” body is equally fluid. Therefore, situating Cher as the end result or ‘after’ image in a makeover sequence takes on a special relevance, imbuing the post-makeover Loretta with all of the extradiegetic characteristics—outspokenness, brazen sexuality, and exoticism—commonly associated with the actress who plays her.

The third and final stage of Loretta’s makeover, and clearly her makeover moment, occurs outside the Metropolitan Opera House where she is to meet Ronny for their date. A yellow cab pulls up at the curb, the door opens, and a bright red pump attached to a long, shapely leg steps out onto the pavement. Following the familiar ‘reveal’ sequence of shots so beloved to the makeover in film, the camera pans up Loretta’s body, finally revealing her face, punctuating the completion of this movement with an orchestral blast on the soundtrack, a kind of musical “ta-da!” In keeping with the typical structure of the makeover moment, Loretta strides toward Ronny, who is searching the crowd for her figure. His gaze passes over her—misrecognition being a consistently important component of the makeover moment—before he finally realizes
who she is, at which point he stares at her in amazement and exclaims, “You look beautiful!”

What is essential to note here is that it is not Loretta’s transformation that provokes Ronny’s desire, but vice versa—Ronny’s desire awakens a similar, transformational feeling in Loretta, which then prompts her to alter her appearance in order to reflect this dramatic change. This sequence of events is significant because it reverses the more common narrative construct that occurs when the makeover motif and romance plot intersect. Typically, it is the physical transformation of the female character that actually facilitates the romantic coupling. In Moonstruck, this coupling happens first, so that the makeover functions as a reaction to the romance. In this way, Loretta’s physical transformation acts as an expression of emotional rejuvenation, rather than simply the means to social advancement or an attempt to snare the male love interest’s attention. Rowe makes a similar observation, contrasting Loretta’s transformation with that of Vivian in Pretty Woman:

Here…unlike in Pretty Woman, it is love, not money, that transforms the princess. When she dyes her hair, makes up her face, and exchanges her drab clothes and boots for a crimson dress and high heels, she re-creates herself as spectacle not to objectify herself or advertise her social position, but to signal her refusal of a premature death. (207-8)

While I would agree that this distinction in terms of motivation is important, I seriously question Rowe’s implication that Loretta’s transformation is somehow more genuine or empowering than that of the typical makeover subject, because she does not “objectify herself” like Vivian in Pretty Woman. Though it is true that sexual attraction rather than
materialism provokes Loretta’s transformation, her makeover is still complicit with rigid cultural standards of female beauty. In other words, while Loretta’s character may not consciously “objectify herself” within Moonstruck, her makeover participates in a larger discourse about exchange-value and physical appearance, the same discourse that informs Pretty Woman.

Despite the film’s repeated references to Italian-American art and culture (the Puccini opera, Dean Martin singing “That’s Amore,” Italian food and language) ethnicity serves mostly to provide a colorful setting for the film’s narrative. Unlike My Big Fat Greek Wedding, the film seems strangely unconcerned with ethnic identity and its effects on the main character. Loretta’s transformation is not depicted as an attempt to escape her heritage or cross over an ethnically defined social barrier, as it is for Toula. While ethnicity seems to factor very little in Loretta’s makeover, Rowe makes an interesting case for its relationship to generic conventions within the film:

It is important to note from the start that the film’s play with genre and gender inversion depends largely on its use of ethnicity . . . Moonstruck suggests that WASP culture may no longer provide as safe a place for comedic scenarios of gender inversion as it did during the classical period. Male weakness and foolishness and female power appear less threatening in the carnivalesque space of Italian-American, Irish-American, Jewish, or African-American culture.

By containing the action within a specific ethnicity, the question of difference is focused more exclusively on sexual difference, correlating with the film’s use of gender essentialism in terms of behavior. Thus, while Moonstruck may employ gender inversion
in its portrayal of melodramatic men and pragmatic women, men and women are still represented as fundamentally different from each other. This difference is taken to a metaphorical extreme in Loretta’s description of Ronny as a “wolf,” an analogy that is referenced several times in the film’s dialogue and its working title, *The Bride and the Wolf*. In this way, the film’s main couple is defined not just by sexual difference—in addition to being essentially different from each other in terms of gender, Loretta and Ronny are also different species.

*Moonstruck* communicates many of its central ideas about romance and love through the parallel that it constructs between Loretta and her mother Rose. Though Rose represents the central voice of pragmatism within the film, which Loretta consistently echoes, she herself is portrayed as a victim of romantic love. In some ways, she represents the tired stereotype of the spurned and bitter wife, abandoned in favor of a flashier mistress. The question she poses to various men throughout the film—“Why do men chase after women?”—is a product of the confusion and anger she feels about Cosmo’s irrational behavior. At the same time, through her agency and pragmatism, “Rose’s character breaks new ground in the representation of the Italian-American mother,”

Although on the surface Cosmo appears to control his wife, it is she who exerts control over her own sexual life as she rebuffs the advances of Perry, the professor whom she meets at the same restaurant where Johnny proposed to Loretta . . . Rose refuses to invite the professor back to her house not only because she’s married but also because, in her words, “I know who I am” . . . That evening, while Cosmo and Loretta explore their
sexuality (and by extension their identity), only Rose declares that she
knows who she is. (Carolan, 158)

Impatient with the increasing melodrama that surrounds her, Rose consistently pushes
Loretta toward pragmatic choices, encouraging her marriage to Johnny because Loretta
does not love him. In fact, when Loretta admits to Rose that she doesn’t love Johnny, her
mother says, “Good...when you love them, they drive you crazy because they know they
can.” Because she is looking at her philandering husband Cosmo as she says this, we are
clearly meant to infer that Rose married him for love, yet because she is now hurting as a
result of his infidelity, she wants her daughter to avoid making herself vulnerable in this
same way. Thus, when Rose asks Loretta if she loves Ronny and her daughter replies,
“Aw, ma, I love him awful,” Rose responds, “Oh, that’s too bad.”

Essentially, Rose positions herself as a warning to Loretta, so that her daughter
might avoid the misery she experiences with her husband. While Loretta ultimately
doesn’t heed the warning, opting to marry for love just as her mother did, we are still
supposed to understand this as a positive choice, a triumph of romantic love over
pragmatism. At the same time that Loretta takes a similar risk on romantic love as her
mother did before her, she deliberately distinguishes herself physically from Rose,
rejecting the markers of feminine aging that her mother has embraced. In this way, the
film seems to be saying that while Loretta has willingly chosen the more emotionally
dangerous route, the one from which her mother actively tries to steer her away, her
newly youthful appearance somehow ensures that she will not suffer the same fate.

With its emphasis on the mother-daughter friendship between a pragmatic
“woman on top” and an atypically lively matriarch, Moonstruck might appear to be a
more progressive interpretation of the traditional woman’s film. In fact, Rowe concludes her analysis of the film with an argument for its empowering potential:

By giving centrality and weight to its women, *Moonstruck* not only demonstrates the flexibility of a popular and enduring narrative form but takes a step toward more fully realizing its potential to foster new and more inclusive images of community. (209)

Unfortunately, I cannot wholeheartedly share in Rowe’s positive reading of the film—despite strong female characters who seem to call the shots, I would argue that Loretta and Rose are still defined primarily by their relationships with men, and because of this, *Moonstruck* engages with female desire within narrow parameters. But even as I criticize the film’s heterocentrism, I must acknowledge the film’s narrative as an undeniable source of pleasure. This pleasure, I would argue, is produced by the way *Moonstruck* simultaneously invokes the women’s film in its traditional form and redefines the genre in terms of fulfillment. Consider Basinger’s description of the nature of choice in the classical woman’s film:

It is these contradictory purposes, with their accidentally liberating events, that must be considered in defining the woman’s film. Put a woman at the center of the universe, show her making a choice that takes her outside of her ordinary behavior, then put her back into the fold . . . She is forced to make some kind of choice between options that are mutually exclusive, and these options will be visualized as two contradictory paths, one of which will empower and/or liberate her in some way . . . and one of which will provide her with love. (20-21)
Loretta’s choice between Johnny and Ronnie follows this model in that the men embody oppositional qualities—Ronnie represents life, passion and danger while Johnny represents death-in-life, comfort and safety. However, Loretta’s decision to marry Ronnie brings her both empowerment and love. In other words, Loretta does not have to choose between freedom and romance; her relationship with Ronnie takes her “outside of her ordinary behavior” and she remains there at the film’s conclusion. At the same time, she is brought “back into the fold,” through her choice of heterosexual marriage, as reinforced by the film’s closing images of family photographs of loving couples. In this way, Moonstruck conveys a tension between progressive and regressive narrative elements, a desire to ‘have it both ways’ that defines the woman’s film itself.

**The Mirror Has Two Faces (And So Does the Film)**

This remake of a 1958 French drama is directed by and stars Barbra Streisand as the dowdy, unmarried English professor Rose Morgan. Rose, apparently in her mid-40s, shares a Manhattan apartment with her mother Hannah (Lauren Bacall) a former great beauty who works at a cosmetics counter. Gregory Larkin (Jeff Bridges) is a handsome mathematics professor who, tired of dating young, sexually attractive women who continually break his heart, has decided to seek out a relationship based on companionship rather than sex or romance. Rose’s beautiful sister Claire (Mimi Rogers) is married to Alex (Pierce Brosnan), the unrequited love of Rose’s life. Claire reads and answers Gregory’s personal ad on Rose’s behalf, thinking the two are a perfect match. Rose and Gregory meet, discover they are compatible intellectually, and Gregory proposes marriage. While Rose pretends to be in agreement that theirs will be a sexless
marriage, she secretly hopes the relationship will become physical. When she attempts to seduce Gregory one night, he panics and rejects her, locking himself in the bathroom. Rose, devastated and hurt, moves back in with her mother, while Gregory travels to Europe for a 3-month book tour. In his absence, Rose takes a couple of months off from her teaching duties and makes herself over, with her mother’s help, exercising and dieting, shopping for new clothes and getting her hair and makeup done. On the night of his return, Rose prepares dinner for Gregory and reveals her new, sexy appearance to him. Gregory reacts with anger, claiming that she has betrayed him and their agreement. Rose tells him that she was once in love with him, but now she is not, and departs.

Meanwhile, her sister’s marriage has fallen apart, and Alex, clearly impressed by her makeover, asks her out for dinner. Alex attempts to seduce Rose, who realizes she is over him and still in love with Gregory. Meanwhile, Gregory is falling apart with grief, and goes to Rose’s apartment to try and reconcile. The two finally embrace in the street, kissing passionately to the strains of a Puccini aria, a reference to an earlier statement Rose makes about how people falling in love hear Puccini in their heads.

Clearly, the structure of The Mirror Has Two Faces and its generic conventions mark it as a comedy of heterosexual romance. However, I would argue that, as in Moonstruck, the relationships between the female characters represent the film’s true focus, primarily the triangle formed by Rose, her mother Hannah and her sister Claire. Both Hannah and Claire are considered conventionally beautiful; Claire is attractive to the point where she becomes a sexual threat, while Hannah is characterized as a vain, aging beauty who is both critical of her daughters’ choices and jealous of their youth. Rose’s interactions with these two women, as well as her overweight and single friend
Doris, communicate a great deal of the film’s contradictory ideology about appearance, aging and female desire. In fact, men matter very little in *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, except as narrative devices that represent certain choices for the female characters. This emphasis on female relationships, as well as its female auteur and lead actress, argue for a reading in terms of the woman’s film, both in its traditional form and its more recent incarnations, such as the “chick flick.”

Rose herself illustrates that combination of the mature and immature unique to the figure of the premature spinster. She is a popular English professor at Columbia University, yet she still lives at home with her mother, concealing candy bars in her dresser drawers and deflecting her mother’s attempts to transform her through cosmetics. Her appearance, including glasses, frizzy hair and shapeless clothes in monochromatic shades, connotes a profound lack of interest in her own image. In her review of the film in *People*, Leah Rozen recognizes the cinematic signifiers of ugliness that mark Rose as “allegedly mousy, which in *Mirror* means she eschews makeup, has lank brown hair and wears outfits that look like *Annie Hall* leftovers” (19). While Rose clearly has the means at her disposal to conform to standards of beauty (her mother brings home bags of make-up samples in the hope she will try them), she simply doesn’t want to, preferring instead to watch baseball games and old movies on TV and eat cheeseburgers. However, while she seems content in her career and her somewhat childish hobbies, the film makes it clear that Rose considers herself ‘over-the-hill’ in terms of romantic love. She has a middle-aged ‘boyfriend’ named Barry, a kind of male version of Rose, complete with glasses and an unfashionable wardrobe, with whom she goes out on the occasional chaste date, but he clearly isn’t ‘the one.’ Thus, the implication is that Rose, through her own
choices regarding her behavior and appearance, has effectively closed herself off from the potential for passionate romance or true love.

Similarly, Rose’s mother Hannah has isolated herself from the possibility of heterosexual romance, but for slightly different reasons: her own obsessive vanity prevents her from risking rejection based on her aging appearance. As a cosmetics saleswoman, Hannah is immersed in beauty culture, and doesn’t attempt to conceal her disappointment in her frumpy, unmarried, junk food-addicted daughter Rose. Over dinner one night, Hannah discusses how she has transformed a particularly “hideous” customer who was in dire need of a makeover, and the underlying implication is that she could perform the same magic for Rose, if only her daughter would allow it. The apartment Hannah shares with her daughter is littered with photographs of the ‘real’ Lauren Bacall, making use of her star image as a screen siren of the 1940’s in order to inform the character’s sense of a beauty that peaked several decades previously. The photographs also serve as a constant reminder to Rose of her heritage, a legacy of beauty she has failed to embody, to her mother’s great distress. Clearly, Hannah is intended to represent the folly of vanity and the inherent demise of physical beauty—what is unclear is how we are meant to interpret Rose’s makeover in light of this representation.

In contrast to her sister Rose, Claire has no shortage of sex and romance in her life. She is conventionally attractive, with long dark hair and a shapely physique, and she is aggressively flirtatious with men, who seem unable to resist her. Despite her beauty and success in romance, the film makes it clear that Claire’s motivation is mercenary—her sexual conquests satisfy her vanity but not her emotional needs⁵. The fact that Claire effectively ‘stole’ Alex away from Rose identifies the sisters in terms of
competition based on physical appearance: Claire is the pretty sister who always gets the guy, while Rose is the ugly (but funny) sister with whom men want to be friends, but not lovers. It’s a familiar narrative trope—the fairy tale princess and the old maid—that expresses the binary opposition of beauty vs. brains in terms of character. The relegation of each term onto a separate, distinct body emphasizes the impossibility of both traits existing simultaneously in one female body. In this way, Rose’s makeover works to temporarily suspend the boundary between these two terms, and, I would argue, this becomes part of the pleasure we are meant to derive from it.

Claire and Hannah serve both as ideals against which Rose is constantly compared and found lacking, as well as examples of the destructive potential of physical beauty. Claire’s shallowness and Hannah’s vanity are negative byproducts of their attractive appearances, and as such their characters seem to function as a collective critique of the politics of feminine beauty. However, this is where the extent of the film’s contradictory ideology about beauty becomes apparent: despite the warnings these female characters seem to embody, Rose’s capitulation to beauty culture, her makeover, is celebrated as a positive choice. Thus, while the film presents itself as a meditation on aging and appearance, its narrative is fully complicit with the very politics it pretends to challenge. In this way, The Mirror Has Two Faces illustrates that contradictory, “two-faced” quality of the woman’s film, where progressive and regressive impulses co-exist.

Many reviewers noted this contradiction at the time of the film’s release. David Ansen writes in Newsweek that the film’s “message of self-empowerment floats uneasily in an undercurrent of masochism and narcissism…Streisand means to criticize our unhealthy obsession with appearance, and ends up reinforcing it” (78). Ansen also notes,
in his synopsis of Rose’s physical transformation, how the film attempts to ‘uglify’ its lead actress: “The homely professor (who’s never that homely) discovers her self-esteem, undergoes a rapid-fire makeover (gym montage) and transforms herself into bombshell Barbra” (78). What Ansen recognizes here is the inherent contradiction of the ugly star; “bombshell Barbra,” or the Streisand image with which we are familiar, is simply covered up through the first half of the film, so that her character’s transformation is nothing more than a removal of a disguise. Richard Schickel makes a similar observation in Time regarding the transparent quality of Streisand’s disguise of unattractiveness:

[Streisand’s] glow is only half hidden under her shapeless clothes, half disguised by her boisterous enthusiasm for baseball, half explained by her relationship with an ego-flattening mom…In short, the fine feathers of a star we all know to be a strong, smart and sexy woman keep peeking through her ugly-duckling getup. (108)

Schickel goes on to argue that this metaphorical phenomenon of the star body “peeking through” its costume of ordinariness “spoils whatever suspense this story might hold” (108). While I would agree with him, I also have to point out that suspense in terms of not knowing isn’t really what’s pleasurable about the makeover narrative. In fact, knowing that a star body lurks under the surface doesn’t seem to “spoil” the tension at all, but instead acts the source of it. Judging from the enduring appeal of the makeover in film, and particularly the fact that certain recognizable stars are made over again and again in multiple films, we must assume that spectators are constructing a pleasurable system of tension and release despite knowledge of a star’s ‘real’ appearance.
Rose’s friend Doris (Brenda Vaccaro) is a single, overweight woman who shares Rose’s pleasure in eating cheeseburgers and French fries. As such, she functions as a kind of double for Rose; both women share what’s depicted as a self-destructive interest in food and a seemingly fruitless desire for romantic love in their lives. Accordingly, their friendship suffers after Rose’s transformation, which distinguishes Rose from Doris to the point where they form a kind of ‘before’ and ‘after’ sequence themselves. When the friends meet at their usual lunch spot, Rose in a sleek black suit and Doris in her usual tent-like dress, Rose selects a salad instead of her usual cheeseburger, claiming it “bloats” her. Doris looks down at the cheeseburger and Pepsi on her own tray, visibly hurt by her friend’s comments and what they imply about her. When Rose asks what’s troubling her, Doris replies, “I just thought we’d always be in the same boat, you know what I’m saying? Made it easier, somehow.” It’s an important moment in the film, one that approaches a valid critique of Rose’s choice to beautify herself, from the position of someone who has remained behind in the land of the unattractive. However, the film smooths over this potential for a meaningful discussion about the motivations behind Rose’s makeover, instead showing Rose offering her friend a kind of temporary compromise. “I’ll give you half my salad if you give me half your burger,” she says, and Doris beams with pleasure, her misgivings apparently quelled by this gesture.

This scene is consistent with the film’s overall unwillingness to pursue the same questions it invokes about women’s aging and appearance, at least through the character of Rose herself. In another post-makeover scene, Rose is seated at her vanity, styling her hair and applying cosmetics. As she works diligently at her appearance, the television next to her is playing a commercial for cosmetic dentistry. Rose takes a bite of a fat-free
cookie, spits it out in disgust and angrily switches off the television. For a moment, it seems as if something meaningful might happen within the context of the film, that Rose has become disillusioned with her makeover and society’s obsession with appearance as it relates directly to her. It is a potentially powerful moment, yet it goes absolutely nowhere—the camera pulls back to show us a glamour shot of Streisand in a frilly negligee and heeled slippers, as if to reassure us just how attractive she is, and then the phone rings. It is her old flame and brother-in-law Alex calling, and the film gallops off on this new plot tangent, abandoning the potential critique within this brief interlude. Thus, Streisand repeatedly lets her character (and herself?) off the hook; instead, Hannah bears the brunt of the film’s criticism of beauty culture and its resulting vanity. As Vivian Sobchack concludes in her reading of the film:

> Despite all her dialogue, Barbra had nothing to say; instead,…she silenced and repressed her own middle-aging—first, reducing it to a generalized discourse on inner and outer beauty and then displacing and replacing it on the face and in the voice of her bitter, jealous, “once beautiful,” and “much older” mother (played by the still spectacular Lauren Bacall). (51)

Rose’s makeover sequence takes the form of a montage that invokes all the conventional cinematic elements of physical transformation in order to deliver a pseudo-feminist message about personal empowerment. First, we see Rose jogging, presumably in Central Park, in a baggy sweat suit. This is followed by shots of her exercising on a treadmill in a health club, clumsily following along in an aerobics dance class, lifting hand weights and munching on a carrot, and pedaling furiously on a stationary bike. These images are accompanied by an upbeat tune on the soundtrack, and vocals (not sung
by Streisand) whose lyrics apparently communicate Rose’s feelings about this process of transformation: “Never knew what I could be/Never felt the power inside of me.” Through these images and words, we are meant to understand that the changes Rose makes to her eating and exercise habits are an expression of her inner power, not a capitulation to standards of feminine beauty or a denial of her own pleasure. Trading that Hostess cupcake for a carrot is something she is doing for herself, the film reassures us, not for Gregory or her mother. It’s a rhetorical spin we find often in women’s magazines and diet books, where the pressure to conform to the reigning ideals of female attractiveness is neatly translated into a concern for one’s health and wellbeing. In fact, women are often cautioned before embarking on any form of exercise program or dieting that the transformation won’t ‘work’ if the motivation is simply to look more attractive. Thus, popular discourse transforms the makeover itself from an activity motivated by vanity into a tool for empowerment and self-realization. In her dissertation about the makeover in women’s magazines, Ann Braithwaite writes:

For women’s magazines, the need to change something about one’s body is repeatedly set up as the first step to changing everything else about one’s life…And for women who might otherwise feel powerless to bring about change directly to those areas, the beauty and body makeover offers them ready access to something it seems they can really change—their bodies. The recurring appearance of this kind of broadly defined makeover story is thus to give women concrete steps by which they can empower themselves, by which they can change their lives through their own take-charge efforts. (98)
The makeover montage in *The Mirror Has Two Faces* clearly participates in this discourse of empowerment through physical change in order to make Rose’s transformation less pathetic (she’s doing it to get her husband to sleep with her) and more palatable (she’s doing it for *herself*). While it seems obvious that the occasion for this transformation is her desire for Gregory, the film tries to play this sequence both ways, portraying her makeover as a choice she makes on her own terms, using the “take-charge efforts” Braithwaite describes.

The second part of Rose’s makeover montage focuses on various beauty treatments, including a pedicure, the application of cosmetics, and a visit to the hair salon for a new cut, color and style. At one point, a male beautician is overheard asking Rose, “How did she *finally* convince you to come in?” The “she” in question is Hannah, who, in her dual role as overbearing mother and beauty expert, has been pressuring Rose to transform herself throughout the film. Accordingly, this portion of Rose’s makeover process is carefully supervised by Hannah, culminating in a shopping trip to Donna Karan where her mother runs clothing to the dressing rooms for Rose to try on her newly size 6 body.7 This is the stereotypical shopping montage that so many makeover films utilize in order to appeal to the spectator on the level of consumption, so that the makeover subject acts as a stand-in for the viewer as she peruses and selects expensive merchandise. Accordingly, no mention is made of whether or not Rose can afford all of this luxury—apparently, her salary as an English professor is more than enough to cover designer wardrobes, gym memberships and spa treatments.

When Rose finally presents herself to her shocked husband, he asks, “What happened to you?” She describes her transformation simply by saying, “I made a few
changes.” The combined effect of these “few changes,” presented cinematically through that familiar slow pan across every inch of her body, is that we now recognize the star body lurking beneath the heavy padding and neutral makeup. In other words, Barbra Streisand as we know her and understand her is fully present, from the straightened hair to the carefully manicured, talon-like fingernails, diffused and glowing through whatever type of filter the cinematographer has been instructed to use in order to camouflage signs of aging. Just as Cher’s extradiegetic qualities add meaning to the makeover in Moonstruck, Streisand’s star persona informs her character’s transformation.

From its earliest incarnation, Streisand’s star image has been associated with an unconventional and strongly ethnic physical appearance, one that the entertainment media openly debates as being ‘beautiful’ or ‘not beautiful.’ Through early performances in the 1960’s, particularly her television variety specials, Streisand’s image was widely circulated, and became associated with an idiosyncratic and almost eccentric type of bohemian glamour. Because she did not resemble the majority of Hollywood starlets and ingenues of the time period, her distinctive ‘look’ registered as unattractive to some, while others, especially less-than-perfect female fans, found her a model worthy of widespread imitation. Biographer James Spada describes Streisand’s public reception and the immediate female response to her star image:

Following the showing of My Name is Barbra, Streisand became one of the most controversial women in America. Almost everything about her became fodder for intense debate: her looks, her fashions, her fingernails, . . . her Jewish-ness, her sex appeal, her lack of it . . . She made the best-dressed list and the worst-dressed list. She was regarded as exotically
beautiful by many, hopelessly ugly by many others . . . Barbra’s glitzy success was especially inspiring to youngsters who didn’t fit into the WASPish mold . . . If she could turn homely into exotic and a prominent “schnoz” into a classic profile, and make the cover of *Vogue* . . . maybe they could, too. Within days of the airing of *My Name Is Barbra*, teenage girls in high schools across America proudly sported exaggerated eye makeup and blunt-cut pageboys while they struggled to grow their fingernails to “dragon lady” lengths.

In the 1968 film *Funny Girl*, Streisand plays real-life comedienne and singer Fanny Brice, a role she originated on the Broadway stage. Because she resembles Fanny Brice in many ways—a New York Jew of humble beginnings and an identifiably ethnic or off-white appearance whose talent provides a ticket to fame—it is easy to conflate Brice’s apparent insecurities about her appearance, at least as they are conveyed in the film, with Streisand’s star persona. In this way, there is a public perception that Streisand the star is anxious about her appearance, an anxiety that is substantiated by Hollywood gossip and has apparently increased with the actress’ age. Sobchack describes her reaction to a 1998 episode of the animated social satire *South Park* that features a caricature of Streisand:

> Here was featured a huge “MechaStreisand” trashing the town like Godzilla. Tellingly, one of the South Park kids asks: “Who is Barbra Streisand?” and is answered thus: “She’s a really old lady who wants everybody to think she’s forty-five.” This . . . suggests just how pervasively middle-aged women, particularly those with power like Streisand, are demonized and made monstrous in our present culture. (52)
Of course, it is impossible to know how much of this anxiety surrounding age and appearance has simply been culturally fixed on Streisand, and how much actually originates from the star herself. It is this same anxiety that clearly informs *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, so that the narrative resembles an attempt at cinema-as-therapy for its star and director. Ansen writes:

Is Barbara Streisand beautiful? This may not be a question that keeps you up at night, but it is one that Streisand herself keeps posing in movie after movie, on the assumption that her own self-doubt strikes a universal chord…Message to Barbra: you look great. Now can we please move on?

(78)

Rozen makes a similar observation about the apparent therapeutic activity of the film: “Streisand… is working out a lot of issues here about her appearance--on our time. Surely she can afford a therapist for this” (19). The fact that Streisand directs and stars in the movie (as well as wrote and recorded the main theme song, for which she won an Oscar) only adds the perception that this film is *about* Streisand herself, particularly her long-standing issues with appearance. My point here is that *The Mirror Has Two Faces* organizes itself around the question “Is Barbara Streisand beautiful?” in order to respond with a resounding *yes*. Basinger’s “working definition” of the classical woman’s film is particularly relevant here:

A woman’s film is a movie that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman.

(20)
The Mirror Has Two Faces is a woman’s film based on the insecurities of its star, the woman at “the center of its universe” in more ways than one. It appropriates the public discourse surrounding Streisand’s off-white (Jewish) beauty and places it within a fictional context. Thus, the film’s makeover works as an apparatus of narrative fulfillment (yes, Babs is beautiful) within a genre that typically employs masochism and deferral in order to elicit pleasure.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding: Becoming an American Woman

Toula Portokalos (Nia Vardalos) is an unmarried 30-year-old Greek-American woman who lives in Chicago with her extended family and works as a hostess in her father’s restaurant. The family constantly pressures her to get married, while she dreams of furthering her education and creating a life for herself. One day, she sees high school teacher Ian Miller (John Corbett) in the restaurant and there is an immediate, mutual attraction. Later that day, Toula asks her father Gus (Michael Constantine) if she can take some computer classes at the local community college in order to help update the restaurant’s ordering system. After some persuasion from Toula’s mother Maria (Lainie Kazan), Gus relents, and Toula begins classes. She performs a physical makeover on herself, including cosmetics, hairstyling, contact lenses and a new, more colorful wardrobe. Seeing an opportunity to escape her father’s restaurant, she persuades her aunt Voula (Andrea Martin) to hire her to work at the travel agency she owns and operates. After their initial post-makeover encounter, Ian wanders by the agency and asks Toula out on a date. Despite Toula’s misgivings about their cultural differences, the two fall in love, and Ian proposes marriage. Toula accepts, and plans for the wedding begin. Ian
agrees to be baptized so that the wedding may be held in a Greek Orthodox church. Ian’s WASP family meets Toula’s large Greek family at a barbecue. After many arguments and complications, the wedding takes place, and the couple moves into a house right next door to Toula’s parents. The film concludes with a scene that takes place 6 years later, with Toula sending her own daughter off to Greek school, which she herself despised as a child.

It could be argued that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* represents the ultimate “chick flick” in that both its production and its narrative are situated within a uniquely feminine discourse. The film’s beginnings can be traced to an autobiographical one-woman show of the same name written and performed by its leading actress, Nia Vardalos, a moderately successful Canadian comedienne living in Los Angeles. Describing what happened as a result of one of these performances as “a Hollywood fairy tale,” *Maclean’s* magazine reports:

> One night another actress from a Greek family, Rita Wilson—born Margarita Ibrahimoff, and also known as Mrs. Tom Hanks—went to see the show with her mother. Like Vardalos, Wilson had spent her childhood going to Greek school instead of Brownies. Wilson and her mom loved *Wedding* so much they visited Vardalos backstage. (42)

Apparently, when Wilson learned that Vardalos had written a screenplay based on her performance piece, she convinced her superstar husband to finance the film through his Playtone production company, then came on board as a producer herself. The finished product went on to become one of the most economically successful independent productions in cinematic history, at least according to the many press reports at the time.
of its release. Accordingly, the majority of press coverage of the film characterizes Vardalos as a kind of Greek Cinderella, and her triumph as an example of the continuing relevance of the American dream. At least one scholar notes the media’s eagerness to narrativize the film’s development using the same terms as the film itself—in her essay, “A Big Fat Indie Success Story? Press Discourses Surrounding the Making and Marketing of a ‘Hollywood’ Movie,” Alisa Perren points out the mythology at work in the media’s coverage of the film’s reception:

I encourage media analysts to cease from viewing *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* as an example of one woman and one film defying the odds. Instead, we should consider this film as an example of the uniformity of journalistic discourses, the complexity of the operations of contemporary Hollywood, and the continuing ideological power of the so-called American dream. (18)

I find it significant that the story of the film’s development, at least as constructed by the media and through its own marketing, reads like the plot of a woman’s film, one where female friendship and community result in a rags-to-riches ascension for the woman at its center. Because of this suitably dramatic back story, I would argue that *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* participates in a distinctly feminine discourse about family and ethnicity, one that resonated strongly enough with Wilson to prompt her financial support and, judging from its box office success, many other female spectators. According to Andy Seiler in the August 28, 2002 edition of *USA Today*, the film was aggressively marketed to women, particularly through ‘women’s’ television outlets such as the Lifetime cable channel and ‘women’s’ talk shows such as *Oprah, Live With Regis and Kelly* and *The
View (D4). Clearly, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* was recognized primarily as a woman’s film or “chick flick” by its own production team and marketed and promoted as such.

Like the other two movies discussed in this chapter, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* presents itself primarily as a romantic comedy. However, its concern with *ethnicity* distinguishes it from the other films, as it combines generic elements from passing and coming-of-age narratives with broad ethnic comedy to create what *Film Comment* calls “a film about breaking out of the prison house of ethnicity” (52). In fact, I would argue that *Wedding* is not necessarily about Toula’s desire to be a married woman, but her desire to be an *American* woman. In other words, despite its title, the film seems much more anxious about Toula’s ethnicity than her marital status, so that her wedding functions as just one component in her overall transformation from Greek-American to simply American. In this way, the film’s lineage can be traced to woman’s films such as *Pinky* (1949) and the Douglas Sirk remake of *Imitation of Life* (1959), where a young black woman attempts to advance socially by passing as white. Consider Jackie Byars’ description of the light-skinned Sara Jane in *Imitation of Life*:

> Sara Jane, acting in accordance with an emergent notion of woman, uses the issue of race to reject her “destiny,” but she strives for far more than recognition as a white. Like Lora, Sara Jane wants more. She wants the personal power that accompanies a successful career, and the sexual barrier that systematically blocks her progress is just as effective as the racial barrier. (253)

Like Sara Jane, Toula is prevented from assimilating by her ethnic identity; at the same time, she is stifled by the gender expectations placed on her by that identity. The
difference between Toula and the transgressive heroines of these earlier woman’s films, however, is that these characters are punished for their desires, while Toula is rewarded with a WASP husband, adorable child, a home and a career. More importantly, she is granted the simultaneous inclusion within and separation from her outrageously ethnic family. In other words, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* attempts to negotiate the politics of passing by producing a central character who supposedly embraces her heritage while simultaneously distinguishing herself from it, as communicated through the makeover motif.

When we first see Toula, her appearance is comical in its extreme frumpiness. Wearing earmuffs, thick glasses that appear about 20 years out of style, and clothing that would be more appropriate for a geriatric resident of a nursing home than a 30-year-old woman, Toula is pathetically unattractive. Her dull, shapeless brown hair hangs in her face, and her skin appears greasy and sallow. Like those of so many cinematic makeover recipients in the ‘before’ state, her eyebrows are heavy and untamed. While we can safely assume the actress is wearing some form of makeup, its application is meant to connote a distinct lack of cosmetics. Like Loretta’s in *Moonstruck*, Toula’s overall appearance communicates a certain resignation to a life of servitude and familial duty; for each character, beauty practices and female consumption are irrelevant to her occupation and secondary to her obligations within the family. However, whereas Loretta’s ‘before’ appearance simply communicates a lack of interest in grooming or fashion, Toula’s appearance is meant to be understood as *ugly*, so much so that is it obvious the character is going to undergo some kind of physical transformation during the course of the film.
In this way, Toula’s overdetermined appearance works to equate aging with ugliness, to the point where her own family seems genuinely repulsed by her.

It is important to note that while Toula’s exaggerated appearance in these opening scenes codes her as a Premature Spinster, at 30 years old, she is not even middle-aged. Her actual chronological age is largely irrelevant, except to Toula’s family—it is their judgement of her as ‘over-the-hill’ at 30 that she has internalized and that manifests itself through her frumpy appearance. Several scenes in the film imply that her family, by making no effort to conceal their disappointment in her continuing single status, is at least partially responsible for her Prematurely Spinsterish condition. As she sits in the car with her father Gus as they drive to work at the family restaurant, Dancing Zorba’s, he gazes at her uneasily and says, “You better get married soon—you starting to look old.” He repeats this observation once more in the film, making it clear that he believes a direct relationship exists between aging and heterosexual romance, as if a lack of the latter speeds up the former, making desire less possible with age. This belief has been incorporated into Toula’s personal ideology, as demonstrated by her wry voice-over in which she describes herself as “30 and way past my expiration date.”

Toula’s “expiration date” clearly originates with her family in accordance with the standards dictated by Greek-American culture, particularly in terms of gender roles. Toula describes her family’s expectations of its female members: “Nice Greek girls are supposed to do three things in life: marry Greek boys, make Greek babies and feed everyone until the day we die.” Toula has failed to achieve any of these things, a source of embarrassment and concern to her family, particularly her father. Gus wants to ship Toula off to Greece in order to find a husband, but she refuses. “It’s as if she don’t want
to get married!” says Gus, prompting gasps of horror from Toula’s aunt and uncle. The implication here is that because Toula’s family has given up on her fulfilling her duty as a “nice Greek girl,” she has in turn given up on herself, and her unattractive appearance is meant to communicate this to the world (and the film audience).

In terms of her character’s behavior, Toula is again the perfect embodiment of the Premature Spinster in that she is simultaneously immature and old before her time. Her lack of development is conveyed visually by a dissolve nearly identical in structure to one found in the opening scenes of Miss Congeniality, a film that contains a similarly ‘stunted’ heroine. In a flashback sequence, we see Toula as a teenaged outcast, with lank hair and 1970’s style glasses. This shot dissolves into an image of the adult Toula, still wearing the same glasses and an identical, unhappy expression on her face. This consistent element of her appearance—the glasses—symbolizes her lack of development from child into woman. At the same time, other aspects of her appearance, such as her frumpy clothes and pinched face, indicate a premature maturity. In this way, Toula appears past her prime even though she has not yet experienced a significant heterosexual relationship (the proverbial ‘one’), marriage or childbirth.

While Toula has not achieved full realization of her womanhood in the eyes of her family and society at large, she is also incomplete in that, previous to her makeover, she never fully assimilates socially. This is conveyed by yet another flashback sequence, where we see Toula as a self-described “swarthy six-year-old with sideburns” being rejected by her “blonde and delicate” classmates. Toula envies them for their “Wonder bread sandwiches” while she is forced to bring leftover moussaka for lunch, an anomaly for which she is cruelly teased. Note the conflation of ethnicity and gender implied by
her description of her own appearance: she is “swarthy” and hirsute, rather than pale and feminine like the popular, WASP-y girls she so admires. Thus, for Toula, to become Americanized is also a process of feminization. Her unattractive appearance as an adult is intended to convey her inability to transcend the negative ethnic markers that were attached to her as a child. In fact, the film implies that Toula’s misfit status begins with this early ostracization, and that it is a combination of cultural markers of difference and her continued immersion within the family that has relegated her to a life of premature spinsterhood.

The catalyst for the adult Toula’s transformation is the appearance of Ian Miller, a handsome young English teacher, when he meets a friend at Dancing Zorba’s, where Toula works as a hostess. Toula watches him through the window as he enters the restaurant, then stares at him openly as he joins his friend. She is motionless with focused desire, powerless either to look away or speak to him. Ian is startled by her attention and a little perplexed, yet laughs at her spontaneous comment that she is his own “personal Greek statue.” This exchange hints at a mutual attraction, yet Toula’s lack of confidence and Ian’s uncertainty prevent any further interaction. However, the film sets up a cause-and-effect relationship between this chance encounter and Toula’s subsequent enrollment at a local community college, an event that in turn prompts a self-enacted makeover. Thus, even though there is no indication that she will ever see Ian again, Toula’s obvious desire for him functions as the motivation for her self-improvement; his brief appearance acts as her personal ‘wake-up call’ that sets the makeover process in motion.
Through her physical makeover and corresponding intellectual challenges, Toula begins a belated process of maturation, distinguishing herself from her family and preparing herself for the romance that will signal her final separation from her parents. Toula’s transformation is communicated by a typical makeover montage that intersperses images of Toula attending classes at community college with shots of her applying cosmetics, setting her hair in curlers and awkwardly inserting contact lenses in front of a mirror. The montage concludes with a scene where Toula gazes at herself approvingly in a full-length mirror, having exchanged her drab and inappropriately elderly wardrobe for a more colorful, feminine and youthful outfit. Like Loretta’s similar moment before the mirror in *Moonstruck*, this scene represents the makeover subject’s recognition of her ‘true self’ in her reflected image. In other words, it functions as a kind of self-reveal, where the makeover subject confirms that her outward appearance now matches her interior identity.

One of the interesting things about *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is that it never attempts to explain where Toula gains the knowledge of beauty practices that allows her to transform herself. While Rose and Loretta seek out the help of beauticians in their respective makeovers, Toula is never shown consulting beauty magazines or other women for their advice, even though her own cousin is a hairdresser. Instead, Toula’s ability to apply blush and curl her hair is portrayed as a product of some innate sensibility or feminine instinct, which she then hones through repetition, just like any newly acquired skill. By depicting this process of self-beautification as simultaneous with her educational awakening, the film implies that they are both forms of *learning* that will help Toula achieve the same goal: cultural and social assimilation. Therefore, Toula’s
American education, of which her makeover is an important component, extends far beyond the classroom, incorporating lessons in consumerism and gender performance.

Toula’s makeover moment is unusual in that it depends on female approval, rather than that of the male romantic interest, an emphasis that reiterates the film’s articulation of a strongly feminine discourse. Typically, a female character’s makeover moment involves a ‘reveal’ in front of a male character, incorporating his reaction to the newly beautiful heroine’s appearance and encouraging the audience to identify with his surprise and pleasure. The only corresponding scene in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* occurs after Toula has successfully completed her computer training courses and begun working at her aunt’s Greektown travel agency. While Ian is making a purchase from a street vendor outside the agency he happens to catch sight of Toula through the large storefront window, then moves closer for a better look. Startled by his interest, Toula immediately ducks behind a water cooler, seemingly reluctant to make herself vulnerable to his gaze. It is a less than satisfying ‘reveal,’ especially considering the fact that, as we discover later, Ian doesn’t recognize Toula in her post-makeover state as the hostess from Dancing Zorba’s. In fact, it is only during their first date, when she reluctantly tells him that her family owns the restaurant and that she used to work there, that Ian finally makes the connection between this attractive young woman and his “personal Greek statue.” Because his recognition of her identity is delayed in this way, the scene at the travel agency is robbed of the power of the before and after construct that is so essential to the makeover moment. In other words, there must be a ‘before’ in order for there to be an ‘after,’ otherwise the scene simply reads as a man spotting an attractive stranger and asking her out.
I would argue that Toula’s *real* makeover moment occurs even earlier in the film, when she approaches a group of women at her community college during lunchtime. The scene mirrors the flashback where the popular girls of Toula’s elementary school reject her; however, in this later scene, Toula’s appearance reflects her combined efforts at beautification and feminization, so that her blond, WASP-y contemporaries respond warmly to her, inviting her to sit at their table. Toula sits down, smiles and pulls out her brown lunch bag, which contains one of those “Wonder bread sandwiches” she coveted in her youth. The implication is clear: Toula has finally learned, by defying her father’s expectations, using makeup and taking computer classes, how to fit in as both an American and a heterosexual woman. While her romantic relationship with Ian serves as the final confirmation of her newly attractive self, it is the approving reaction of her female classmates that seems to matter most here, rectifying Toula’s lifelong outsider status. Even though these women are essentially strangers, and not the same girls who ridiculed Toula in her youth, they represent a collective *white* femininity whose approval Toula desperately seeks. The women’s recognition and acceptance of Toula as one of them acts as the true indication of her successful transformation. Thus, Toula’s makeover functions in two important ways: it is a concrete reaction to the possibility of romance and desire in her life, as well as an effort to distinguish herself from her family and their overdetermined ethnicity.

The majority of the film’s comic moments depend on this tension between WASP and Greek American identities, as represented by the interaction between Ian’s uptight, affluent family of indeterminate Caucasian heritage and Toula’s aggressively
Mediterranean one. Critic Dan Georgakas discusses the film’s use of ethnic stereotypes, as well as Toula’s transformation:

The major plot element, the cultural shock of outmarriage, is actually now the cultural norm as more than seventy percent of all Greek Americans outmarry. Nor does the tired plot device of the make-over of the frumpy girl in Scene I ring any ethnic bells. Although few Greek American women are as glamorous as a Jennifer Aniston or an Angie Harmon (yes, both proudly assert Greek ancestry), Greek women are very fashion conscious, as attendance at any Greek American social event will demonstrate…There are plenty of Greek American and even Greek Chicago foibles that Vardalos could have utilized for ethnic laughs. Instead she opted to exploit the usual ethnic suspects. (36)

I would argue that what Georgakas has identified in his response to the film is its profound ambivalence concerning ethnicity, a combination of affection and condescension for its characters and the cultures they supposedly represent. While we are supposed to take pleasure in Toula’s physical transformation, what it really reflects is a process of erasure, where Toula’s physical markers of ethnicity are either subdued or eliminated altogether. The scene where Toula’s adult classmates, all of them blonde and slender, accept her into their midst after a lifetime of social banishment, indicates what her makeover is really about: her movement from Greek American to just plain American.

It should be noted that the film employs stereotyping in its portrayal of non-Greeks as well as Greeks. Ian’s WASP parents and best friend are generally shown as
snobbish and inflexible in their reluctance to socialize with Toula’s extended family; their collective bewilderment and, at times, open dislike for Greek culture borders on the ridiculous. Despite the fact that both sides of the ethnic binary are sources of comedy, it seems obvious that we should consider Toula’s movement away from an identifiable ‘Greek-ness’ as positive. After all, it allows Toula to marry, have children and pursue a career, options that were not available to her in her pre-makeover condition.

Because Toula is played by a lesser-known actress and not a recognizable celebrity like Cher or Streisand, her makeover is less dependent on the revelation of a star body beneath its costume of unattractiveness. In fact, by Hollywood standards, Vardalos is supremely ordinary in that she is not gorgeous or skinny, but physically imperfect, even slightly chubby and completely average. Instead, the pleasure of her transformation is based on the emergence of a very young body from beneath the disguise of age and decrepitude. While Loretta and Rose are physically rejuvenated as part of their respective makeovers, I would argue that Toula’s transformation is far more dramatic, almost magical, in its substitution of youth for middle age. While Loretta and Rose do look younger after their various cosmetic changes, they are still recognizable as women in their 40s, albeit women in their 40s who take better care of themselves than they did previous to their makeovers. For Toula, however, the physical markers of age, accompanied by an attitude of indifference, serve as a kind of artificial costume under which her ‘true’ (young) self is concealed. Once this costume is removed and substituted with another one that represents youth and femininity, she becomes another person entirely, to the extent that Ian fails to recognize her from her days as a hostess at Dancing Zorba’s. In fact, when Toula discusses this period in her life with Ian, she refers to
herself by another name, “Frump Girl,” one that conveys the same potent contradiction as Premature Spinster.

1 This is my label, not Hollinger’s. In fact, this term is shockingly absent from her text, perhaps in an effort to legitimize a film cycle that could easily be dismissed by this phrase.
2 Although, as the movie’s web pages on the Internet Movie Database note, the distribution of the gray changes from scene to scene!
3 Roman Holiday contains a particularly good example of the woman seduced by the beauty shop window.
4 The only non-Italian main character is the WASP professor Perry, who seems to exist solely to function as Rose’s ‘wrong choice.’
5 The film makes such an effort to portray Claire as selfish, self-centered and emotionally bereft that it’s difficult to understand why she goes out of her way to do a favor for her sister in responding to Geoffrey’s personal ad on her behalf. There is no real attempt to explain this aspect of her character, beyond its convenience in terms of plot development.
6 See Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of stardom and the makeover.
7 The film makes a point of revealing this ‘magic number’ through a bit of dialogue when Rose gives a suit back to her mother and tells her she needs it in the smaller size. We aren’t told what her pre-makeover size was, but this isn’t necessarily important—what matters is that Rose is now model-thin, a size six, a standard that millions of American women are encouraged to strive for by fashion and fitness magazines.
8 Of course, one has to wonder whether this success would have been quite so spectacular without the influence of Wilson’s very famous husband. In doing so, it is interesting to consider Hollinger’s contention that in the woman’s film, particularly its early incarnation, the depiction of relationships between women had much more to do with “women’s relationships with men” (41).
CHAPTER 5

WHITENESS AS WOMEN’S WORK IN MAID IN MANHATTAN AND WORKING GIRL

The makeover, as I have noted earlier, is a uniquely American activity, appropriating the culturally ubiquitous theme of transformation and re-articulating it in terms of social rank, success and popularity. As law professor and cultural critic Patricia J. Williams observes in The Nation:

The romance of the Cinderella story that most Americans embrace . . . is rooted in a dream of self-invention, of economic as well as personal liberation . . . Americans gobble up fantasies like Maid in Manhattan; our engines are fired by the belief that with hard work and the right makeover, being a maid in Manhattan need only be a phase. People love Cinderella for her challenge to the feudal order, her quintessential class-hopping freedom.

This “class-hopping freedom” is available almost exclusively to white women, especially in Hollywood film. With the exception of passing films, classical Hollywood movies almost never feature a strong non-white female character in any narrative, much less one of transformation and/or social ascension. Because the makeover in film is an articulation of social movement through appearance, it isn’t really surprising that women of color are consistently excluded from this activity. As our social climate supposedly changes for the better in terms of racial difference, however, shouldn’t this be reflected in
cinema? In other words, as opportunities for social, educational, and financial success become increasingly available to women of color, shouldn’t we see more of them being made over in film?

Judging from the continued scarcity of non-white women in contemporary makeover films, this shift has obviously not taken place. The reason for this enduring exclusion, I argue, is the makeover’s function as an apparatus of whiteness. In other words, the makeover in film actively participates in the construction of white identity in popular culture. In order to discuss the makeover as a ‘technology’ of whiteness, I would like to put the Jennifer Lopez vehicle Maid in Manhattan (2003) into conversation with another contemporary comedy, Working Girl (1988). In doing this, I am particularly interested in the work of Gwendolyn Audrey Foster in her 2003 book, Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema. Invoking Richard Dyer’s work in “whiteness studies,” she describes her main project as “a postmodern attempt to reconstruct, deconstruct, and examine the performance of whiteness in moving pictures” (2). I want to argue that Working Girl and Maid in Manhattan offer examples of white performativity, and that the makeover acts as an important component in supporting the social construct of this whiteness.

Working Girl tells the story of Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith), a young, white, working class secretary from Staten Island. Tess wants to advance in her business career, but is consistently held back by sexism and class discrimination. When she is finally transferred to a position working under a female executive, she is relieved and hopes to establish a sisterly, mentor-student relationship with her upper class, WASP boss, Katherine Parker (Sigourney Weaver). When Tess presents Katherine with an original
business idea, the purchase of a radio network, Katherine says she will take it under consideration. When Katherine breaks her leg on a skiing vacation, requiring her to stay in a foreign hospital for several weeks, she gives Tess access to her Manhattan brownstone and asks her to attend to her affairs while she recovers. While she is snooping around Katherine’s apartment, Tess discovers evidence that her boss has appropriated her idea and plans to pass it off as her own. Feeling angry and betrayed by both her boss and her cheating boyfriend Mick (Alec Baldwin), Tess decides this is the moment to take control of her life and career. With the use of Katherine’s apartment, wardrobe and mannerisms, Tess performs a self-enacted makeover, modeling herself after her boss. She asks her friend Cyn (Joan Cusack) to cut her long, teased hair, exchanges her cheap outfits for Katherine’s expensive and elegant clothing, and practices speaking in Katherine’s unaccented and cultured tones. She soon sets up a partnership with Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford) and the two discover a mutual attraction. After a successful meeting with Trask Industries, the radio station buyer, Jack and Tess make love. Afterwards, a phone call reveals that Jack is Katherine’s boyfriend; Katherine is returning to New York ahead of schedule and wants to see him as soon as she arrives. While she is assisting Katherine at her apartment on the day of the big business meeting with Mr. Trask himself, Tess accidentally leaves her planner behind, and Katherine reads about Tess’ activities during her absence. Just as the meeting gets started, Katherine interrupts, exposing Tess as her secretary and taking control of the deal. Tess leaves and returns to Staten Island, where she is a bridesmaid in Cyn’s wedding. As she is cleaning out her desk at work the next day, having been fired from her job as a result of her escapades, she runs into Jack, Katherine and the Trask entourage. Jack refuses to go
through with the deal without Tess, and Mr. Trask determines that she is, in fact, the
person who came up with the original idea to purchase the radio network, not Katherine,
as she claims. Trask tells Katherine he will see to it that she is fired and offers Tess a job
with his company. Tess accepts, and moves in with Jack. On her first day of work, she
mistakes her own secretary for her boss and has to be corrected; she telephones Cyn from
her very own office, and the entire secretarial pool celebrates this victory for one of their
own.

*Working Girl* constructs a space of almost uniform whiteness, where racial
difference manifests itself only through the occasional non-white extra. The two main
geographic spaces in the film, Staten Island and Manhattan, which also correspond to
working class and upper class identities, respectively, appear to be populated entirely by
white people of indeterminate ethnicity. Difference among whites in the film is defined
primarily in terms of class, which is conveyed through appearance and speech, as well as
sexual difference. In this way, *Working Girl* reinforces Richard Dyer’s observation that

Whites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not to be represented to themselves as whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualised and abled. At the level of racial representation, in other words, whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race. (3, my emphasis)

While Tess’ successful performance of class is made obvious in film, especially through
her quick changes in classed speech over the telephone, her performance as white is taken
completely for granted. And while discrimination is addressed in terms of sex, there is
absolutely no acknowledgement of the privilege Tess enjoys as a white woman. Through

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its repeated visual invocation of the Statue of Liberty, the film pointedly references the ideology of the “melting pot” model of society, where race, ethnicity and class are subsumed by a single identity: American. With this identity and its erasure of difference supposedly comes a potential for social mobility available to anyone willing to work for it. As a working class woman, Tess is intended to represent a certain lack of privilege, yet the color of skin (not the mention the shape of her body) grants her an immediate advantage in her quest for success.

*Working Girl* borrows heavily from the classic screwball comedy *His Girl Friday* (1940) in its portrayal of female ambition, the struggle for recognition and the desire to get ahead in a male-dominated profession. And while each film is ostensibly concerned with the career trajectory of the “girl” referenced by its title, narrative resolution in both *His Girl Friday* and *Working Girl* is represented by the creation of a heterosexual couple, marking the films generically as romantic comedies. Kathryn Rowe notes that both films use the workplace simply as “a backdrop for the film’s real interest, the relationship between the sexes.”

Both narrate the stories of women with “excessive” desire which is limited to the realm of heterosexual romance and motherhood. Both use the deferral of sexual fulfillment not only as a means to create and sustain the fantasies of romance, but as plot devices to prolong narrative suspense.

(110)

*Working Girl* clearly references the classical screwball romance through its settings and character types. Tess’ little girl voice and overt sexuality code her as the typical “dumb blonde,” a figure of female unruliness embodied by stars such as Marilyn Monroe and
Judy Holliday (Rowe, 171). In fact, Griffith’s breathy performance seems deliberately evocative of Holliday’s portrayal of the ditzy-yet-smart Billie Dawn in *Born Yesterday* (1950), a film that shares with *Working Girl* similar themes of class ascension and transformation. At the same time that she resembles the dumb blonde, however, Tess is also a capable businesswoman, a dichotomy represented by her statement, “I’ve got a head for business and a bod for sin.”

Jack’s more extensive knowledge of the business world, combined with his befuddled reactions to Tess’ screwball strategies, aligns him with the classic screwball “professor-hero” type. However, Jack Trainer is a distinctly “macho” interpretation of this figure; as a businessman, he falls somewhere between the feminized academic (best personified by Cary Grant’s character in 1938’s *Bringing Up Baby*) and the more aggressivly masculine hero, such as the gangster or policeman. Tasker notes that Jack is portrayed as “vulnerable in the cut-throat world of business…distancing himself from the more ruthless aspects” (43). At the same time, his desirable masculinity is reinforced by the many admiring glances he receives from various women throughout the film, such as the scene where the secretarial pool erupts in applause after watching him change his shirt. In this way, the film appropriates elements of the screwball comedy, but filters them through 1980s anxieties about femininity, masculinity and the workplace.

I would also argue that the film’s almost monolithic whiteness is a byproduct of these borrowed conventions, so that by invoking the Hollywood romantic comedy in its classical period, *Working Girl* continues its project of defining and supporting whiteness as a construct. Rowe notes that romantic comedy has consistently avoided “differences of race” (19), while Foster observes:
Whenever otherness may be appropriated by white subjects and white films, especially musicals, romances, and melodramas, it can be used to raise the specter of class difference, if only to solve (and thus erase) that difference with the tidy ending of the films, usually uniting or marrying two white figures from different classes, who can then class pass in society through marriage, elopement, or other plot contrivances. Most striking about this class-passing scenario is its ceaseless repetition, its continual reperformance to reinforce a blatantly fraudulent construct.

(98, author’s emphasis)

Thus, Working Girl conforms to the structure of the romantic comedy not only through its formation of a heterosexual couple, but also through its refusal to acknowledge racial difference. Instead, the film focuses on class difference, and uses the couple as a device to negotiate this discrepancy.

Despite the film’s interest in heterosexual romance, I would argue that class difference is actually represented most clearly by the relationship between Tess and Katherine, the upper class “ball-buster” who functions initially as Tess’ mentor and, ultimately, her rival. In order to support this claim, I want to point out that Tess’ makeover is not an effort to snare the male love interest’s attention—this occurs inadvertently through Tess’ mimicry of Katherine’s more appropriately classed femininity—but an expression of her character’s ambition in terms of personal success and career aspirations. In her reading of Working Girl, Yvonne Tasker appropriates the concept of cross-dressing, but defines it in terms of class rather than gender. In other words, while Tess dresses in women’s clothing throughout the film, her makeover
performs a shift in the *class* of woman this clothing represents. In this way, Tasker argues,

The film enacts a narrative of Tess’ transformation in which cross-dressing is an expression of agency. The film shares many of the characteristics of gendered narratives of cross-dressing: a pleasure in performance, a fear of discovery, the desire to escape limits and experience a freedom denied to the ‘ordinary’ woman. (40)

In *Working Girl*, then, class cross-dressing is a tool that allows Tess to experience Katherine’s elite lifestyle and the freedom and mobility that accompany her powerful position. The viewer is encouraged to identify with Tess’ exhilaration as well as the anxiety surrounding her performance; the film creates tension through the constant threat that Tess will be unmasked, and her real identity—working class secretary—will be exposed. In its use of the cross-dressing motif, the makeover in *Working Girl* reveals the potentially empowering performative aspect of class identity. At the same time, it exposes the limitations of class cross-dressing, since this form of transformation would be nearly impossible for a woman of color, whose body bears class markers that are not so easily removed or disguised. Thus, while films such as *Working Girl* imply that class cross-dressing is an activity available to any ‘ordinary’ woman, it is simultaneously made clear that one must have the right body on which to hang the disguise of upper class, a body that is thin, attractive, and white.

At this point, I want to suggest that the activity Foster terms “class-passing” and the social movement Tasker defines in terms of cross-dressing are actually the same thing—to this end, I am conflating these terms into one of my own invention: *class-*
dressing. What class-dressing describes is the specific activity of clothing, grooming and comporting oneself in order to be perceived as belonging to a higher social class than one currently occupies. Class-dressing creates a very specific type of makeover in film, where the emphasis is on the removal of excess rather than the retrieval or cultivation of beauty. In this sense, the makeover in Working Girl resembles the corresponding transformation in Hitchcock’s Vertigo, where a working class woman performs upper class femininity through appearance and speech. With this category of makeover, which openly invokes class markers, the female subject isn’t ‘ugly,’ unattractive or even plain in her pre-transformation state, she is simply *inappropriate*. Tess is not considered unattractive before her makeover; her pre-makeover career actually suffers because her male coworkers continually regard her as a sex object. What Tess’ makeover accomplishes, therefore, is the inscription of a correct and, in the words of her boyfriend Mick, *classy* femininity on her formerly inappropriate, excessive body. This is not to say that this correct femininity is devoid of sexuality; on the contrary, by observing Katherine’s flirtatious behavior with male executives, Tess learns to use this sexuality to enhance her business skills, rather than detract from them.

In accordance with this model of class-based transformation, Tess’ makeover is initially a process of evacuation, where markers of her inappropriate or excessively working class femininity are removed, and replaced with elements of a more appropriate, upper class appearance and behavior. This process actually begins *before* the film’s action, since Tess indicates through a bit of dialogue in the film’s opening scenes that she has been taking speech classes and attending business training seminars regularly. In this way, we are meant to understand that Tess recognizes her own deficiencies in terms of
classed behavior and appearance and is attempting to correct them; however, these attempts have had little effect on her career. When a model of successful, white, upper-class femininity enters her life in the form of executive Katherine, Tess’ desire for class ascension and success gains a concrete focus.

When Katherine makes her first entrance, her elegant and streamlined appearance is a stark contrast to Tess’ big hair, flashy accessories and patterned stockings, a contrast of which Tess seems suddenly and painfully aware. However, when Tess discovers that the two women are only a few months apart in age, it is apparent that she begins to imagine Katherine simultaneously in terms of difference and similarity. In other words, she recognizes the gap between herself and the other woman in terms of breeding and wealth, yet interprets their shared qualities (age, gender, and though it is not directly acknowledged, race) as signs that Tess could be easily understood in the same way as Katherine. In other words, Tess recognizes the gap created by social class, but also the means to close it, at least temporarily, through changes in her attitude, speech and appearance. This is an important moment, one that foreshadows Tess’ decision to class-dress, using Katherine’s image as her template. This subsequent adoption of Katherine as a mentor figure is actively encouraged by her boss, who at one point instructs, “Watch me, Tess; learn from me,” a directive the secretary eagerly and naively carries out. Of course, what the film doesn’t acknowledge is the importance of race in this relationship; a shared racial identification is a prerequisite for Tess’ successful performance of class, one that includes the performance of a correct white femininity.

Significantly, one of Katherine’s first lessons in “classy” white femininity has to do specifically with clothing. During their initial meeting, after establishing a form of
solidarity with Tess by referring to the both of them as a “team,” Katherine informs her that this team has “a uniform: simple, elegant, impeccable. ‘Dress shabbily, they notice the dress—dress impeccably, they notice the woman.’ Coco Chanel.” By quoting the French designer, Katherine positions herself as a representative of upper-class, Eurocentric femininity and makes it clear that Tess is the ‘shabby’ to her ‘chic.’ When Tess, sensing the implied commentary on her own appearance, asks for Katherine’s opinion, her boss tells her only to “re-think the jewelry.” Immediately after this exchange, Tess is shown gazing at her mirror image in the women’s restroom as she removes the gold-toned bangle bracelets from her wrists and wipes off her eye makeup with a tissue. Clearly, she has absorbed and responded to Katherine’s first lesson with immediate action, and from this moment on she is shown observing Katherine with rapt attention.

Foster uses the term “white space” to describe the public space “necessary to deploy whiteness...a space both open and closed, both inclusive and exclusive” (50). Katherine’s elegant and undoubtedly expensive residence represents the intersection of her public and private personas; significantly, it is a literal representation of Foster’s theoretical “white space,” filled with white furniture, white walls and immaculately white wall-to-wall carpeting. Even the focal point of Tess’ awe, the enormous crystal chandelier, connotes radiance through a lack of color. Tasker notes, “[During] Tess’ first, revelatory visit to Katherine’s apartment, her fascination with the accoutrements of power is evident, conveyed with a sense of discovery, of seeing things previously unseen or with new eyes” (41). These accoutrements include the more obvious markers of white privilege, such as the size and grandeur of the apartment itself, and the Warholesque
portrait of Katherine. They also include more subtly gendered markers of class, such as the vanity stocked with perfumes and cosmetics, the medicine cabinet stocked with Valium and other prescription drugs, and the stationary bicycle, which connotes both the financial means to acquire such a piece of equipment as well as the leisure time to use it.\(^2\) In other words, Katherine’s apartment is stocked with objects that represent and construct white, upper class femininity. When Tess moves into this “white space,” it corresponds with her symbolic occupation of Katherine’s social position.

Tess’ movement from naive mimicry to outright appropriation of Katherine’s class identity is communicated through changes to that most obvious (yet infinitely complex) signifier of race and feminine class identity: hair. Tess and her fellow workers in the secretarial pool are culturally marked by their big hair, which represents a significant investment of time, energy and hairspray. At first, Tess pins her hair back in an attempt to emulate Katherine’s simple bob, but she finally decides that her transformation into a serious businesswoman requires “serious hair,” and asks Cyn to chop it off just below her ears. Thus, she finally evacuates one of the most obvious markers of her class status, the teased mass of hair that connotes both excess and artifice. Similarly, she trades her inexpensive, trendy outfits for Katherine’s expensive and classically designed wardrobe. However, as we are shown during the scene where she prepares herself for the cocktail party, underneath the $6000 dress she is still wearing her racy black lingerie\(^3\), reiterating the theme of class masquerade. In other words, while Tess might wear Katherine’s dress (and wear it well, according to Jack Trainer’s reaction), she is still the same tacky, working class woman underneath it all. The black strapless bra and garter belt also carry connotations of the prostitute, articulating the
double meaning of the film’s title and implying that the businesswoman’s skilled maneuverings are essentially the same as the hooker’s hustle. As Tasker concludes in her reading of the film:

At the level of gender, class and race, the routing of aspirational narratives through cross-dressing accepts the very binarisms questioned through the act of crossing over. The conflation of romance, sex and work, and the production of women’s work as sexual performance (through the different configurations of prostitute/career girl/professional woman, in, that is, the image of the ‘working girl’), simultaneously conceals and reveals the complex interdependence of gender and class within popular discourse.

(47)

What I think Tasker recognizes here is the ideological contradiction shared by the makeover in film and cross-dressing, activities that are linked in Working Girl.

Tess’ inevitable unmasking, in true film fantasy logic, does no lasting damage to her reputation or psyche. In fact, she is offered a new, higher-ranking position with Trask’s company as a result of her performance. She also gets the guy, as illustrated by Trainer’s careful, patronizing attention to her on the morning of her first day of work at her new job; this sequence begins in Trainer’s apartment, implying that Tess has moved in with him and they are now an established couple. Several critics have made note of the film’s conclusion as a deviation from the typical romantic comedy, arguing that Tess’ interaction with her new secretary and her conversation with Cyn emphasizes female community and friendship rather than heterosexual romance. What I find more significant to my analysis is the film’s final image: a shot taken from outside Tess’ office
window, showing her talking on the phone. The camera slowly pulls away, so that her window grows smaller and smaller, until it is finally indistinguishable from the densely packed skyline that surrounds it. The effect of this shot is contradictory in that it both diminishes Tess’ accomplishments (she is only one of thousands of people in her position) and makes her all-important, an ‘everywoman’ who represents some universal or common experience. That this everywoman just happens to be white, an identity that is never directly challenged or even acknowledged, reflects the film’s participation in maintaining the larger social construction of whiteness.

While Working Girl participates openly in the fantasy of “white space,” Maid in Manhattan foregrounds representations of race and ethnicity, only to erase their significance in favor of class distinction. In other words, while the film features an aggressively multicultural range of characters, differences between these groups are dismissed. Instead, they are lumped together simply as “working people,” who are, apparently, always willing to help each other out, like one big, happy off-white family. Foster describes this tendency in Hollywood cinema to homogenize ethnic groups:

> The mark of the plural lumps together ethnicities, white or otherwise, as ‘other’ impurities to be cleansed in order to construct whiteness.

Furthermore, ethnicities are interchangable. (138)

The opposite of the off-white working class are the “people with money,” as one hotel worker describes the guests, who just happen to be white, European or WASP, and Republican. Thus, while Chris Holmlund rightfully points out that the film gives “postfeminist stalwart Pretty Woman’s rags-to-riches Cinderella plot an ethnic makeover” (“Postfeminism from A to G,” 118), the self-conscious acknowledgement of
ethnicity in the film does little to actually address racial difference or challenge whiteness as a construct. Instead, the ethnicity of the main character serves mainly to fortify the existing class difference between her and the male love interest, to render this difference even more visible. My argument is that while *Maid in Manhattan* represents one of the few cinematic makeovers performed on a non-white woman, Marisa’s transformation actually serves to reinforce whiteness as a category, emphasizing the ability, in consumer culture, to *purchase* and *perform* whiteness.

The film’s fairy tale narrative goes like this: Marisa Ventura (Jennifer Lopez), a young Puerto Rican single mother who works as a maid in a small luxury hotel in New York City. Like Tess in *Working Girl*, she dreams of getting ahead, but is held back by her own lack of confidence and her mother’s disapproval of such “fancy” aspirations. As she is cleaning the room of a wealthy woman, she gives in to temptation and tries on an expensive designer pantsuit. Chris Marshall (Ralph Fiennes), a Republican politician and playboy, enters the suite and assumes she is its actual occupant, Caroline Lane (Natasha Richardson). Chris, clearly taken with Marisa/Caroline, asks her to accompany him to a charity dinner, but she declines. When she returns to the hotel, she discovers that her Italian-American friend and co-worker Steph (Marissa Matrone) has filled out an application in Marisa’s name for an open position in management. Chris sends a lunch invitation to the real Caroline’s suite, and is confused by the real Caroline’s appearance at his door. Still unaware of Marisa’s true identity, Chris manages to get her a ticket for the charity dinner, and she decides to attend, with the idea that she will ask him to stop pursuing her. Her co-workers and various friends among the working class, including shop clerks and beauticians, band together to give her a makeover, which includes a
formal dress and shoes, a Harry Winston diamond necklace, a haircut and style, and star-quality makeup. At the function, she speaks with Chris but runs away when she sees the real Caroline approach. Chris catches up with her outside and the two embrace, then return to his suite and make love. The following morning, Caroline observes Marisa leaving Chris’ room, still wearing the diamond necklace. She informs the hotel management and accuses Marisa of being a thief. Marisa’s true identity is exposed, she is immediately fired, and she and Chris have an angry confrontation on the sidewalk. Months pass, and Marisa has found a new job at a different hotel. During a press conference Chris is holding there, Ty asks him a pointed question about “second chances.” When the conference is over, Chris finds Ty and tells him to take him to Marisa. They find her in a back room of the hotel, and Chris and Marisa embrace as photographers and film crews record them. The film ends with a montage of magazine covers with pictures of the couple, the headlines indicating that their relationship is going strong and both have advanced in their individual careers.

I want to begin my analysis of *Maid in Manhattan* with its star, Jennifer Lopez, whose celebrity persona clearly informs the film’s plot and its ideology. My argument is that through her extradiegetic love affairs, and film roles representing a wide range of ethnic identities, Lopez functions as a figure of racial and ethnic fluidity. In their essay, “Brain, Brow and Booty: Latina Iconicity in U.S. Popular Culture,” Isabel Molina Guzman and Angharad N. Valdiva make the claim that “Lopez has tapped into the ability to perform as panethnic other in order to meet Hollywood’s demand for the commodified ethnic other” (215). And Hollywood clearly loves this “malleable ethnic and racial identity” (“Brain,” 209), paying Lopez millions of dollars to play, in various films, a
Cubana, a Chicana, a Tejana, a Mexican, and a Puerto Riqueña (Holmlund, *Impossible*, 117). Lopez’ visibility across multiple popular discourses, including gossip magazines, television, dance, music, fashion, cosmetics, perfume and film, indicates her ability to package herself for a mass audience, and implies that her celebrity is being read in multiple ways by consumers.

Through her early dance career as a regularly featured “Fly Girl” on the Afro-centric 1980s comedy show *In Living Color*, Lopez was strongly associated with black, urban hip-hop culture. Her first starring film role, playing the Mexican singer in the biopic *Selena* (1997), pulled her toward a Latina identity, yet the film itself drew protest for its casting of an American-born and raised Puerto Rican in the role of a Mexican woman. Through her romantic relationship with rapper, producer and fashion designer Sean “Puffy” Combs, from whom she received her rap sobriquet “JLo,” Lopez’ star persona once again took on the nuances of black culture, and her physical appearance, often in Combs’ own designs, reflected this. She was even implicated in some of Combs’ illegal activities, earning her yet another level of street credibility.

Lopez’ star image took a dramatic turn when she became engaged to Ben Affleck, an actor Foster describes as a “white American cultural icon” (9); the press christened the high-profile pair “Bennifer” and followed their every move during the course of their romance. At this stage of her public life, Lopez began to be strongly associated with elite (white) fashion, luxury and glamour, developing her own line of clothing and perfumes and recording several radio-friendly pop songs. She was also selected as a spokesmodel for the French designer Louis Vuitton, and thus gained a new identification with white European culture. When her relationship with Affleck came to its spectacular conclusion,
she reunited with ex-boyfriend Marc Anthony, a major Latin pop star, and the two were quickly married. Their duet performance of a Spanish language song at a recent music awards show seems to indicate that Lopez has returned to her Latina roots, or at least wants to be perceived as having done so.

My point in recounting these lurid details of her celebrity lifestyle is to indicate how easily Lopez is able to move from one ethnic or racial identity to another in the course of her career. This movement is accomplished through the racial and/or ethnic identity of her chosen romantic partner as well as her appearance; these two elements often influence each other. In this way, through her activities of conspicuous consumption, Lopez is able to ‘put on’ ethnic identity as it suits her and her career. As Charlotte Brundson points out, this ability to shop for one’s identity is increasingly common in our postmodern society, and has the effect of destabilizing subject positions in terms of race and/or ethnicity:

As a persona in the public sphere, the post-feminist woman is also not necessarily ‘white,’ which I think is the case, historically, with the persona ‘1970s feminist’ . . . Precisely because this postmodern girl is a figure partly constructed through a relation to consumption, the positionality is more available. (85-86)

Lopez is doubly inscribed in her relation to consumer culture—she is both a *shopper* in terms of material possessions and their corresponding identities, and, through her recording career and fashion business, a *producer* of consumer goods. Brundson’s observation is supported by Foster’s claim that in our modern, consumer-driven age, “goodness and whiteness are judged according to material wealth and position” (125).
As non-whites become increasingly wealthy, especially in the entertainment industry, identity becomes more changeable:

As long as one has plenty of money, one can be a single mom, a gangsta’ thug, or an abusive superstar athlete and still be a hero in the white world. Class now has more to do with *cash* than with birth relations.

(125, my emphasis)

This malleability in terms of class and ethnicity, as expressed through Lopez’ ever-changing star body, directly informs the makeover in *Maid in Manhattan*. Because we already perceive Lopez as a ‘crossover’ star, one with the ability to occupy multiple ethnic and class positions, her character’s makeover becomes imbued with that same pleasurable fluidity. In a sense, Lopez is simply re-enacting her own makeover from nobody to celebrity within the fictional space of the cinematic narrative.

Even as it draws subtext from Lopez’ stardom, *Maid in Manhattan* works hard to depict just how ‘ordinary’ its main character is, and thus reinforce the idea that any underprivileged American could succeed in the particular way Marisa does. However, because Lopez plays Marisa, this character is anything *but* ordinary. Lopez herself wants to remind us of her working class roots through her “Jenny from the Block” persona. Her song of the same name includes the lyrics, “Don’t be fooled by the rocks that I got/I’m still, I’m still Jenny from the block/Used to have a little, now I have a lot/No matter where I go, I know where I came from (the Bronx!”) But despite her claims of street-wise authenticity, and “keepin’ it real,” Lopez is nonetheless a *very* wealthy female entrepreneur, more likely to own the “block” than live there. The privilege this wealth affords is communicated through both her carefully constructed star image and a more

> All the money in the world won’t make high-fashion clothes fit most bodies. Like Cinderella’s slipper, they can’t be slipped onto the feet of the ugly sisters . . . the new fashion superstar is the body, and . . . it has become the site of conspicuous consumption . . . Chances are that the rich person will have a body resculpted through gym workouts, advice from personal trainers, liposuction, and possibly implants. The rich person’s body will be a lot more expensive to maintain, and will look it. (223)

The irony here is that in *Maid in Manhattan*, Lopez plays a character who actually approaches her ‘real’ ethnic identity more than any other she has played, yet her “rich person’s body” articulates the distance between this character and the actress who plays her. In other words, the borrowed Dolce & Gabbana pant suit wouldn’t fit just any maid’s body, but it slips easily onto JLo’s well-exercised, well-fed curves just like that glass slipper slid onto Cinderella’s foot, confirming her inherent princess-ness.

As many critics have noted, Lopez’ star image is consistently grounded in her body, particularly her rear end, or in urban-speak, “booty.” Photographs of the star often emphasize her prominent posterior, and magazine and newspaper profiles consistently reference this body part, so that it has become emblematic of the star herself. Lopez encourages this fixation on her butt, claiming it as a symbol of ethnic pride that she has courageously retained in spite of industry pressure to conform to a whiter, thinner standard of beauty. As Holmlund remarks, “Framing and foregrounding her posterior are paramount to Lopez’ celluloid success” (*Impossible Bodies*, 117). The effect of this
“highly body-oriented publicity” (73), as film scholar Mary Beltran describes it, is to imbue Marisa’s character with all the femininity and desirability of the star who plays her. The film directly acknowledges the role of Lopez’ butt in her stardom. During a scene in Central Park, Marisa sits down on a bench and a magazine (with Chris’ photograph on the cover) catches on the back of her coat. As she frantically brushes it away, lifting her coat to expose her well-rounded rear end, she asks Chris, “Is it okay?” Staring pointedly at her ass, he replies, “It’s perfect.”

Marisa’s makeover, like Tess’ in Working Girl, is not about the transformation of an ugly woman into a beautiful one, but instead inscribes an already-attractive working class body as upper class, through the ‘right’ clothing and beauty practices. Of course, simply clothing a working class body in a Gucci gown and Jimmy Choo stilettos isn’t enough to produce a successful performance of upper class femininity. It is the combination of an inherently good and deserving body with the physical markers of refinement that will allow her to pass with class. Both Maid in Manhattan and Working Girl (along with Pretty Woman, Now, Voyager and many other films) call attention to the apparently prerequisite inner goodness the makeover requires in its recipient; this inner goodness, I would argue, is actually white goodness. In this way, Marisa’s makeover becomes a retrieval of this whiteness, in terms of both appearance and behavior.

Marisa’s goodness is accentuated by the bad behavior of the hotel’s white guests. Nearly all of the “people with money” display some form of white badness: the Frenchwomen steal towels, the male executive cheats on his wife, the British woman is a self-indulgent racist and another male guest routinely exposes himself to the maids. The staff members not only tolerate this bad behavior, but they find it a source of amusement
and reassurance that the rich are not necessarily superior to them. In their analysis of the film, Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer note:

Although *Maid in Manhattan* incessantly denies the existence of any real difference between rich and poor, it shows that difference in exaggerated, even clichéd, ways. The rich not only harbor embarrassing secrets, they are also the only truly prejudiced people in the film . . . The poor, on the other hand, are portrayed as an idealized community dedicated to serving the rich and helping each other. (96)

No matter how badly the guests behave, though, they are still *white* and continue to enjoy the privileges associated with their skin color. Marisa and her equally good-natured coworkers, through their non-white ethnic or racial identifications, are still confined to their working class roles. Thus, in order to prove Marisa as deserving of her makeover, her romance with Chris and the success she experiences, the film goes to tremendous lengths to depict Marisa as an *extraordinary* non-white person. For example, while the other multi-ethnic commuters read daily tabloids on the subway, Marisa reads *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. As Kord and Krimmer observe:

In addition to being a good mother, Marisa is conscientious and efficient on the job, hardworking, energetic, unassuming, modest, and lightheartedly witty on the subject of her own poverty . . . She works her ten-hour shifts smilingly, interrupted only by cordial banter with her coworkers . . . and spends the remainder of her time with her son, as a good mother should. Until Chris comes along, we do not ever see her
having a love life, a social life, drinking, eating (although she is seen
feeding her son), or relaxing. (95)

In fact, the film works so hard to portray Marisa as an impossibly good mother, good
worker and good person, that it inadvertently invokes the very stereotypes surrounding
Latina identity that it is clearly trying to challenge. In other words, each good quality is
so over-inscribed that the negative quality it is meant to combat is actually brought to the
forefront. Thus, when the film depicts Marisa happily working her tedious, dead-end job,
it is saying Look! She’s not lazy! When she races to her son’s school to hear his speech,
the film is saying Look! She’s not neglectful! When it shows her cooking a meal for Ty
and encouraging him to do his schoolwork, it is saying, Look! She’s not a crack whore
or a drunk! Most importantly, her total lack of a sexual life before Chris enters the scene
(except for a chaste kiss on the cheek for the elderly Caribbean security guard) counters
the stereotype of the fiery Latin sexpot, an image Lopez actually banks on in her musical
career. What all of this effort to construct a ‘positive’ Latina character accomplishes,
therefore, is the creation of a character that feels completely unrealistic and inauthentic,
no matter what her ethnicity:

It takes a tremendous amount of effort to maintain the lie of whiteness, yet
every time an ethnic type is actually portrayed, Hollywood and its
audiences congratulate themselves, as if they are themselves breaking up
the grand narrative lies of the past. Instead, they are usually heaping on
more lies. (Foster, 138)

Marisa’s makeover, which takes the form of a typical consumerist montage
where the camera acts as stand-in for the spectator/shopper, reinforces the film’s fantasy
of a united working class that joins forces in order to help one of their own achieve success. Her transformation includes hair straightening and styling and the heavy application of skin-lightening cosmetics, a process that erases Marisa’s already understated markers of Latina identity. In other words, Marisa’s makeover employs elements of an elite consumer and beauty culture in an effort to code Marisa as white. As Foster notes, “Whiteness is a commodity that can be bought and faked; and, to perform whiteness correctly, increasingly one is expected to be gluttonous American consumer” (102).

Marisa’s transformation also reveals the Lopez star persona we easily recognize from her presence in gossip magazines and music television, a persona inextricably tied to consumer culture. In her formal dress, elaborately styled hair and requisite “bling,” Marisa resembles already existing images of Lopez attending a movie or music award show, or perhaps a launch party for one of her many products. The point I want to make here is that Lopez, through her commodification across many different aspects of consumer culture and racial identities, and her ability to purchase material signifiers of elite whiteness, successfully performs whiteness. Her character’s makeover invokes this performance, and reiterates the relationship between class, consumption and identity. If whiteness can be bought, as Foster claims, then the makeover in film represents the process of inscribing whiteness through consumption.

1 There seems to be a conscious attempt to avoid any kind of ethnic identification for the main characters, particularly the working class ones. While Hollywood is usually quick to assign some kind of ethnic identity to lower class New Yorkers (the default seems to be Italian-American), in this film there is a curious lack of ethnic clues, including generically American first and last names. The exception is Doreen DiMucci, a petite, dark-haired woman with whom Tess’ boyfriend is caught cheating, and who is clearly meant to represent Tess’ opposite in terms of appearance and aspirations.
2 The counterpart to this stationary bicycle is the weight machine in Katherine’s office, which conveys both elitism and a very appropriate discipline of the body.
3 It is significant that Katherine displays equally elaborate lingerie, but in a demure shade of ivory, during her reunion scene with Jack.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have examined how the makeover in film finds its roots in such diverse sources as centuries-old fairy tales, contemporary beauty culture, the cult of self-improvement and the myth of the American Dream. The makeover in film collects cultural ideas about physical beauty, femininity, success and authenticity and constructs a narrative around them, an activity, I argue, that produces an inherent contradiction. This contradiction is conveyed primarily at the level of the film star; the makeover’s use of a star body, which connotes an always already beautiful appearance, creates an ideological conflict defined in terms of accessibility and impossibility. To put it simply, the makeover in film takes a beautiful star, asks us to believe that she is ugly, then, with great flourish, removes this fiction of unattractiveness: Look! A beautiful woman where there wasn’t one before! The makeover in film, in collaboration with woman’s magazines, advertising and television, also asks us to believe that this narrative sleight-of-hand is possible for anyone. We could all be glamorous and attractive if only we found the ‘right’ overpriced lipstick, the ‘right’ pair of tendon-shortening high heels, or the ‘right’ punishing diet and exercise program. More frequently, this list now includes the ‘right’ plastic surgeon. As a discourse, cosmetic surgery promises to deliver a star appearance even more convincingly than superficial beauty treatments. Through plastic surgery, it is
possible to literally ‘have’ a particular celebrity’s nose, buttocks or cheekbones. Stars and stardom, therefore, represent an integral component of the makeover in film; thus, I spend a full chapter showing how certain stars inform and are informed by the transformation motif in cinema.

Plastic surgery is just one of the technologies with which the makeover in film engages both directly and indirectly; diet, strenuous exercise and increasingly more extreme beauty practices actively participate in the larger discourse of physical transformation. This contemporary obsession with technologies of the body, I argue, has fueled the corresponding obsession with the makeover in film. Through advances in both its material and virtual manipulation, the body in contemporary culture has acquired an unprecedented plasticity, one that contributes to the enduring popularity of the makeover in film and other cultural forms. However, this malleability has distinct limits based on circulating standards of physical beauty and gender roles. In other words, while film characters and reality show participants might receive extremely “extreme” makeovers, their transformations still take place within the parameters of ‘correct’ femininity, ‘correct’ masculinity, ‘correct’ whiteness, ‘correct’ blackness, etc. The makeover in film, then, often labors strenuously to establish that the cultural ‘correctness’ of its transformed bodies remains intact, despite contrary visual information. For example, *G.I. Jane* utilizes heterosexist visual and narrative techniques to reassure us that Demi Moore remains a desirable straight woman after her makeover, despite the fact that she has shaved her head and stopped menstruating as a result of her punishing fitness regimen.

The makeover in film appears to be a distinctly feminine discourse, in the sense that it functions as an apparatus defining correct femininity, but also as a undeniable
source of narrative pleasure for the female viewer. In order to discuss this aspect of the makeover in film, I have situated it within a ‘feminine’ generic tradition: the woman’s film. The woman’s film, both in its classical form and more contemporary variations, is defined primarily by its female address and concern with ‘women’s’ issues, including motherhood, marriage and home-making. As a condition of its production, the woman’s film reflects a largely regressive ideology and patriarchal value system; however, several feminist scholars have theorized that its narrative holds the potential for multiple readings against the grain. In other words, the woman’s film could represent a space for temporary transgression, where women occupy the story’s center and exercise their own desires. The makeover in film participates in this fantasy through its depiction as a tool for self-empowerment and autonomy. The makeover narrative establishes a direct connection between changing one’s appearance and the accomplishment of other life goals, such as social ascension, a successful career, or snagging the male love interest. Thus, the makeover in film enjoys a special relationship with female desire and its fulfillment, although this relationship is still governed by strict cultural ideas about beauty, sexuality and appearance.

Finally, I have explored the relationship between the makeover in film and the cultural construction of whiteness as a category of identity. The makeover in film is strikingly consistent in its use of a white, female body in order to tell its story about transformation, social ascension and success. This choice reveals the function of the makeover in film as an apparatus of whiteness, a device or “technology” that helps to maintain the fiction of racial identity, particularly whiteness as the norm. In other words,
the makeover in film treats whiteness as an assumption, and thus participates in the larger cultural conflation of the white race and the human race.

At its center, the makeover holds the promise of transformation, a motif that is, to put it bluntly, as old as dirt. Our most familiar and, judging from how often they are retold and reinterpreted, most beloved fairy tales—Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, The Frog Prince—are all marked by some aspect of physical transformation. In these tales, the main narrative activity is the process of becoming someone or something else: becoming a human being, becoming a princess, becoming a prince, or becoming a woman. Because these fairy tale “becomings” are expressed through a dramatic change in physical appearance, they imbue the process of transformation itself, including the makeover, with magical or supernatural qualities. Transformation in fairy tales is also consistently instantaneous, taking place with the wave of a magic wand, the recitation of a few charmed words, or a talismanic kiss. The makeover in film appropriates this magic, delivering instant gratification through what I’ve termed the makeover moment, that instant where the makeover subject is revealed to us in all her newly attractive splendor. It is a moment of intense visual pleasure for the spectator, one that is specific to cinema as an institution and its particular combination of image and story.

One could argue convincingly that transformation is the narrative root of every story, particularly those circulating in American culture. American literature and cinema share a mutual obsession with the rags-to-riches plot, one that tells the story of transformation specifically in terms of social class; Hollywood articulates a narrative of class ascension both through its fiction films and its ‘real’ star bodies. Americans never seem to tire of stories about the underdog transformed into a winner, the orphan
transformed into a princess, and the nobody transformed into a star. After all, what else is that recent craze, reality television, than our own culture telling itself the story of ‘becoming’ over and over again? Becoming Donald Trump’s *Apprentice*, becoming an *American Idol*, becoming the *Survivor*, becoming the personification of ‘after’ in the makeover continuum—these are the narrative goals on which reality programming thrives. And, like Hollywood film, television acts as the *vehicle* for transformation at the same time that it constructs these stories; simply by virtue of being featured on television, an ‘ordinary’ participant is transformed into a media figure, whether or not he or she comes out on top in the competition. Because being selected for a reality show functions as a recognition of one’s star potential, it also represents the first major step in becoming ‘someone’ in American society.

What makes the makeover in film a *modern* form of the much older narrative trope of transformation, however, is its emphasis on authenticity, the ‘real’ self revealed to the world through an improved appearance. In other words, what defines the makeover is its central project: to externalize one’s inner charm and beauty. The fantasy of the makeover in film, then, is not becoming someone else entirely, but becoming oneself *more fully*. Film participates in this fantasy in two distinct ways: presenting us with fictional characters who undergo makeovers, and employing stars who always already embody the notion of the makeover through their stardom. As I have shown, the vast majority of these fictional characters and the stars who play them are white women, a choice that can be explained by the makeover’s function as an apparatus of whiteness. In other words, the makeover in film positions whiteness as an *assumption*, and thus

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participates in its larger cultural construction. However, this activity does not explain the overwhelming preference shown by the makeover in film for transforming female bodies.

Can men be made over? According to Hollywood cinema, very rarely. The few times that they are, they are often non-human or superhuman characters, such as the male aliens in *Earth Girls Are Easy* (1988) or the teenage caveman in *Encino Man* (1992). In these two films, the male makeovers reflect a process of *humanization*, and, in the case of *Encino Man*, modernization. In this way, the transformation motif works to resolve a “fish out of water” premise, so that the relevant Other is assimilated within the dominant culture. In other examples, male makeovers focus on race and role reversal, as in the Eddie Murphy comedy *Trading Places* (1983). In this film, the makeover actually creates and supports the “fish out of water” scenario, where a lower class black man is placed in a position of authority, replacing a professional white man who is then reduced to the black man’s class standing. In this way, the anxiety surrounding an essential masculinity is displaced onto the comedy of role reversal, and difference is figured primarily in terms of race and class. Therefore, the few male makeovers that exist on film work with very specific binaries such as human/alien, modern/prehistoric, and, in the case of *Trading Places*, legitimate/illegitimate, in order to safely deflect questions about ‘real’ masculinity and appearance.

Television has been much more receptive to the idea of men being made over, as evidenced by shows such as *Extreme Makeover* and *A Makeover Story*, which feature male makeovers just as often as female makeovers. Daytime talk shows presenting the occasional makeover themed episode are also much more likely to include men as the subjects of physical transformations than current feature films. Why? Part of the
explanation, I believe, has to do with the *narrative* inherent to the makeover in film. Female bodies are far more likely to connote social advancement through physical transformation than male bodies are, simply because women are judged by and valued for their appearance in a way that most men are not. However, the male makeovers featured on reality television and talks shows are largely removed from the narrative context on which a feature film relies. These “mini” male makeovers rely heavily on the before-and-after construct to provide a quick burst of pleasure for the spectator, one that is less dependent on gender and narrative than the more complex pleasures of the cinematic makeover.

Still, a decreased reliance on narrative does not fully explain the more inclusive attitude toward male makeovers on television. In fact, *Extreme Makeover* takes great pains to construct a narrative for both its male and female subjects, emphasizing any hardships or tragedies in their lives and consistently painting them as victims of their unattractive appearances. Even the application process becomes part of the makeover background story; the “winners” are often shown discussing the circumstances that led them to apply for the show and their reactions to being selected. In this way, the makeover subjects become “winners” even before their transformations take place, because *they knew the right story to tell* that would land them on the show.

I would also like to add a second possible explanation for the phenomenon of male makeovers on television: technology. Because *Extreme Makeover* is a plastic surgery show (and these processes are depicted and celebrated in all their gory detail) the emphasis on the malleability of the body, and the “extreme” physicality that can be achieved through technologies of surgery, exercise and diet. Because of this, I would
argue that the narrative is not so much about social advancement, for which a female body is the ideal choice, than it is about the wonders of technology and body modification, for which gender is less important or even irrelevant.

I would also argue that women are more frequently made over than men both in film and on television because an important part of the makeover’s project is to define and inscribe bodies with a ‘correct’ gender identity in terms of appearance. While the male body is becoming increasingly more objectified in visual culture, standards of masculine appearance are far less restrictive than those applied to the female body. In other words, a ‘real’ woman is often defined by narrow standards of physical beauty, while a ‘real’ man has a much wider range of socially acceptable appearances. As an institution, Hollywood offers women a particularly narrow range of ‘right’ looks through its female stars (white, blonde, thin, young), while leading men are allowed to age, claim a heritage other than European, and have less-than-perfect bodies. This disparity can be traced back to the much-referenced and disputed model of gendered film spectatorship originated by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” According to this model, female characters in narrative film share a quality Mulvey terms “to-be-looked-at-ness,” while male characters take a more active role, functioning as “bearer of the look” (837). Thus, in visual representation, including narrative film, women are valued for how they look, while men are valued for what they do (and how much money they make doing it).

While I offer these possible explanations for narrative film’s reluctance to make men over, there is clearly a need for more research in this area. It remains to be seen if the increasing visibility of the objectified male body in consumer and visual culture will
have any effect on the frequency of masculine makeovers in film. If male makeovers in film increase in number and scope, this would indicate that such a shift has taken place. If not, we must continue to ask questions about the makeover’s preference for transforming female bodies.

1 See Susan Bordo’s excellent chapter on the male body in contemporary visual culture in *Unbearable Weight* (1993).
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