Article

The redemptive power of the face: from Beatrice (Portinari) to Bérénice (Bejo)

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Abstract The capacity of the human face to affect behavior in the observer is obvious and unquestioned, yet we lack a usable philosophy of facial expression. This essay looks at one effect of the face in its highest moment of expressiveness: it discusses the redemptive force of a woman's face, as portrayed in Dante's works and in the modern film. Beatrice's face becomes a mediator to heaven and thus establishes a long tradition of that trope in Petrarchan love lyric. The invention of photography and cinema enabled nuanced, emotionally charged facial representation that departed from the affect-free pictorial representation of woman's face from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. In Michael Hazanivicius's film *The Artist,* the face of a redemptive woman mediates access to a compassionate world of charm, glamour, and innocence.

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A study of charisma led me in a straight line to an interest in the human face as the most prominent conveyor of that quality in any medium (Jaeger, 2012). Anyone who takes up that topic from a humanistic perspective will quickly realize that there is no conceptual frame to organize thought. In sociology, 'face' is the place where the social value of the individual registers. That value is unstable, constantly in flux, and the individual is constantly in a struggle to maintain and gain face, striving for actions and cultivating persons who 'give

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face,' opposing forces that militate to its loss. Face in that sense is also seen as the lead force in social interaction rituals, and that means not 'the face' but Face as a concept, showing prestige lost, won, or given (Goffman, 1982). Yet even that idea has nothing to do with what is the most prominent feature of the face regarded as an aesthetic object: its expressiveness.

A philosophy of the face, a phenomenology or a hermeneutics of facial expression, does not exist. Humanistic culture in the west, obsessed with analysis, interpretation, and explanation, has never taken up the topic in a serious way. It has produced no focal point of debate, no theory to crystallize discussion, and certainly no philosophy. Ask for a tradition in the philosophy and psychology of the face, and you wind up on the dead-end streets of faciality: physiognomy and phrenology. Charles Darwin found a study of facial expressions and their cognates in animals useful to shore up his idea of the descent of man from lower animals, and had many followers in this approach, perhaps most prominent, Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt (Darwin, 2009). But their line of argument depended on assuming an unreflected, spontaneous, pre-conscious, 'natural' setting of human expressions – matching them with animal expressions on that basis – which aimed at 'universals,' or at least general principles of mood and its expression, and put studies by and large outside of the confusing factors of intentionality, manipulation, and an individual psychology of facial expression. And even when the anthropological study of the face moved over into psychology (as in the work of Paul Ekman), its methodology remained scientific and empirical, not humanistic.

The metaphysical tradition has for centuries predominated in the humanistic discussion of representations of the human figure (Panofsky, 1968). It took the beauty of form to lead upward (by anagogic effect) to higher truths and posited an ideal where truth is beauty, beauty truth, and the face is the image of the soul. This discussion has by and large played out. It is at odds with a reading based on the effects of beauty since it removes focus from the surface quality of the object and insists that the value of beauty resides ultimately in some higher world, distantly suggested by generic beauty. The transcendentalism of Plato and Hegel leads us away from what is essential in the aesthetic understanding of the face.

Individual essays of interest for our topic include Jean-Paul Sartre's savage view of mutual gazing as a kind of psychological combat in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 1957); Roland Barthes's essay, 'On the Face of Greta Garbo' (Barthes, [1957] 1999); and Emmanuel Levinas's 'Beyond Intentionality' (Levinas, 1983). The last two essays mentioned frame my discussion. It is concerned with the face as an aesthetic object (as is Barthes's essay) and as a moral force (as in Levinas), though I mean 'moral' in the sense of the face's capacity to affect behavior: the face looked at, as we look at a portrait, the face captured in its moment of highest expressiveness, seen in the particular configuration which 'summons' the viewer (Levinas's term).

The face as it is experienced in reality – as you wear it in this moment and every moment, as you encounter it in the faces that meet you – is a natural and naïve work of art; the possessor of the face is its artist. It can rise to heights of expression, given the interaction of received material and the 'artist's' intention. But far more common is insignificance and ordinariness. Facial expression is rendered minor, habitual, everyday by its very commonness. Habit and everyday life are the great wastebin of unrecognized beauty, charm, passion, and malice. Walk through a downtown street of any big city and the glances or even searching looks at passing faces erode rather than sharpen the ability to interpret and understand the face in its character as a work of art.

What is required is the face perceived in a moment of highest expressiveness. This perspective interprets the face in its sublime and charismatic mode. It is one instrument of charisma among others such as speech, gesture, sentiment, the posture of the body, accumulated experience, and aura. And like charisma, it becomes interpretable not like a text, but only in its effect on an observer. My essay looks at one moment, one effect of the face in its highest moment of expressiveness: the redemptive force of a woman's face, perceived by a man in love. Let's define 'redemption' as the rescue, in a critical moment, of life, freedom, and human dignity from a condition that suppresses or denies or threatens it. Its beneficiary is always someone endangered by circumstance or personal crisis and unable to escape that danger unaided, the person in a state of intense need. The soldier in combat, the prisoner of war or of the justice system find in the recollected or represented face of a loved person a life-nurturing force. That force is conventionally located in woman's face. I don't know examples of the male face working in that sense, though the gender of the love-object seems to me variable, the critical factors being love and crisis, not gender.[1]

1 Max Weber notes the two conditions for the perception of charisma: 'need' (or 'suffering'; German, *not*) and 'enthusiasm' (Weber, 1968).

The face of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the saint or holy man, radiates a form of redemptive power in icon worship. The strength of this form of belief in Christian devotional practices more generally no doubt contributed to the quasi-religious treatment of the beloved woman in the poetry of courtly love from the high Middle Ages on. Whatever influences may flow into the idea, from this period on women are credited with a variety of charismatic powers. They change men for the better, bring moral improvement, refinement of mind and manners. The power resides not in the rank and authority of the woman alone, but rather in the way the male vision takes her in. The gaze mediates transformation, either love or the other moral benefits of the female presence. Gottfried, author of the classic version of the Tristan romance, says that any man who looked lovingly and deeply in the eyes of Blancheflur (mother of Tristan) would love all women and noble qualities from that moment on (Gottfried, 1967, 50; Gottfried, 2001, ll. 635–640).

Dante broadens the focus and extends the benefits of the female face from social and amorous ones to religious. Dante's Beatrice is a redemptive figure in a

religious but also charismatic sense, and that power is present most acutely in her face. Dante fell in love with Beatrice Portinari at age nine. She was eight. His love for her lasted throughout Dante's life, even though she died, a married woman, at age 24. She was the main driving and inspiring force of his lyric and epic poetry. His first major work, the *Vita Nuova* (1295), is a kind of amorous autobiography, the narrative of his love for Beatrice, including poems written to and about her with commentary. His unfinished prose treatise on philosophy, *The Banquet* (*Il Convivio*), was meant to be a summation of his philosophy. It is also a treatise on love. It was inspired by a compassionate lady who consoled Dante after Beatrice's death. He makes this lady into an allegorical embodiment of Philosophy. One section focuses on the moral and anagogic power of the beloved and on the effects of gazing on her face. Book three opens, 'My second love took its beginning from the compassionate countenance of a lady' (Dante, 2014, 3.1). His affection for the second lady grew strong because of the great compassion she showed him for the death of Beatrice: 'the spirits of my eyes became most friendly toward her' (Dante, 2014, 2.2) – a memorable formulation. Dante fits this effect into the larger metaphysical frame of the *Convivio*: the divine light infuses all things; the greater the virtue in a person, the more intense the light within, which shows in the face. Some are so radiant, that 'they overwhelm the equilibrium of the eyes' (Dante, 2014, 3.7). This is visible in Beatrice's speech, gestures, bearing, and conduct. Her face, illuminated by the light that radiates from the eyes, has various miraculous effects. It is so beautiful that nature alone cannot explain it. It is above nature, transcendent. Anyone who sees it will recognize in it a miracle, but at the same time a force that is real, living, embodied in the flesh: ' […] the sight of this lady was so generously granted to us in order […] that we might see her face […] Because of her it becomes believable that miracles […] have the power to exist' (Dante, 2014, 3.14). In her there is no difference between the world of miracle and the world of everyday life. She represents the world of souls and spirits come to life in the physical world. For Dante, the claim is serious enough that he can argue that the face of the beloved woman is one of the main supports of the Christian faith, since it confirms the reality of the miraculous and so also strengthens the plausibility of the miracles of Christ.

The vision of Beatrice also inspires a higher form of happiness than what is available to ordinary mortals, the happiness that humans experienced in the garden of Eden. The sight of her face 'renews nature.' That means that whoever gazes on her face is moved in his whole being closer to the ideal form of human nature as it existed prior to original sin and the corrupting influence of vice. To look on her makes men good, virtuous, loving, and charitable (Dante, 2014, 3.8). She reveals herself most intimately in two parts of the face: the eyes and the mouth. The beauty visible there is the creation of her soul; seeing her beauty, one sees her soul (Dante, 2014, 3.8).

Dante is describing charismatic effects as a form of revelation leading ultimately to salvation. This applies especially to Beatrice in her central role in the great redemption narrative of the *Divine Comedy*. Dante's work is framed by the crisis in the life of its author. Dante needs redemption because he has lost his way, strayed into sin; and a progress through all three realms of the spiritual world is the path of renewal – hell, purgatory, paradise. In the earthly paradise, the high point of Purgatory, the face of Beatrice becomes the agent in Dante's rise to heaven. Her face and the guidance of her eyes had sufficed for a time on earth to keep him 'on the straight path,' but he had forgotten her face, and that forgetfulness caused him to stray into sin and error (Dante, 1991b, 30.121ff.; 31.34ff.). Now in Purgatory he is purified. Gradually Beatrice reveals her veiled face. First her eyes, emerald green, in which he sees Christ reflected; then she lowers the veil to reveal her smile, in which Dante sees salvation (Dante, 1991b, 32.135–145). This places us at the end of Purgatory. In the opening cantos of *Paradiso*, Dante rises from the earthly paradise into heaven. He does this not by his own strength or some unexplained miraculous force, but by the anagogic power of Beatrice's eyes. She is his mediator to heaven and his guide through its lower realms (Dante, 1991a, 1.46–75; 2.22).

Petrarchan love lyric sustained the idea of the religious force of the beloved's face into the seventeenth century. But the idea died out, although the image of woman as the bearer and maintainer of morals and social norms in literature remained present. Madame de Lafayette's *The Princess of Clèves* is a good example. The bourgeois novel and drama of the eighteenth century showed woman as the bearer of virtue either triumphant (Pamela) or crushed (Emilia Galotti, Ottilie in *Elective Affinities*). In the nineteenth century, Margarete helps the guilt-burdened Faust evade the terms of his contract with the devil in Goethe's play. There is also a more earth-bound form of rescue: Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester, Sonja and Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. These works are relevant to the idea of the redemptive influence of woman, but not to the face of the beloved as the mediator.

From the end of the sixteenth century, the major medium of visual representation of the female face did not regard it or represent it with charismatic force. Painted portraits of women from the seventeenth to the twentieth century show a very narrow range of expression; conveying charisma and mystery in the face of their subjects played no role. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, affect in portraits of aristocratic women is rather to be avoided than stressed or even suggested. An aristocratic passivity and lack of emotion seems to be the criterion by and large. In the eighteenth century, a temperate smile came into vogue, but pronouncedly absent is any suggestion of mystery or an attractiveness with either erotic or metaphysical coloring. The portraits of the period clamp women into a social role and an affect determined by, and freighted with, aristocratic and, increasingly, middle-class virtues. Women in painted portraits were objects of commemoration showing noble

passivity, rank, luxury, and little else. Personality and charismatic qualities, even in small amounts, may well have appeared in bad taste. When the eighteenth-century painter Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun produced a smiling self-portrait, it caused a near scandal among critics used to impassive aristocratic faces. Colin Jones compares the revolution in facial representation (the portrait was first displayed in 1787) with the French revolution just two years away (Jones, 2014). However, Vigée-Lebrun was far from a nuanced representation of the female face. Her portraits tended towards a stereotypical smile that varied little from one individual to the next.

What might be called the discovery of individual humanity and psychology in women's portraits came slowly and partially. The academic painter Winterhalter achieved a few remarkable portraits of women with aura and personality, in part by accommodating the luxuriously tailored tents in which women were imprisoned for most of the classical period to the personal presence of the women portrayed: for example, Madame Rimsky-Korsakov, Princess Wittgenstein Sayn. Pre-Raphaelite portraits suddenly showed a much greater range of drama and expressiveness. A generation later, John Singer Sargent was able to convey a certain depth and complexity in women's figures and faces, but he stands at the border of modernism when such an enterprise became irrelevant to easel painting.

New technologies enabled a much more nuanced, subtle, emotionally charged representation of the face in the twentieth century. Photography and the cinema gave the representation of the face an energy, liveliness, and expressiveness that set them apart from either prose or painting and enabled the rediscovery of life, magic, and charisma in the human presence. The force and charisma of facial expression was a notable element in the cinema from the 1920s on. D.W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein, and Abel Gance produced films of such startling physical presence that it seems a highpoint of cinematic representation was reached in its first generation of feature films. In the classic American cinema of the 1930s, high quality black and white film made it possible to shape the living face of the actor into an image with sculpted, nuanced modelling of a subtlety and sensuality that had not been possible earlier in any medium; lighting heightened the capacity of the face to represent shades of moods. Central to film charisma, alongside lighting, setting, and emotional tone, is the close-up. The close-up shot literally enfolded the viewer in the sensual experience of the star and her world, brought the movie fan face-to-face with stars and divas magnified on the big screen to five-to-ten times the size of the merely human-size moviegoer. Film publicity magnified the star to transcendent heights, and the public accepted them on those terms: 'magical,' 'cosmic,' 'stars'; it co-opted the language of religion: 'goddess,' 'divine,' 'immortal,' the movies are a 'redemption' from everyday life. I believe that this popular acceptance of star glamour is closer to an adequate understanding of the charismatic face than academic readings, especially those under the

influence of the Frankfurt School, which dismisses the star system as an extension of business, a means of duping a mass, undereducated public by inflating the value of a worthless product.[2] Still today, movie glamour is to some extent an impure subject for academic intellectuals. The dominant discourse is negative, deconstructive (cf. Koepnick, 2007).

The expressiveness of the face reached a level that no sculptor or painter had achieved, or could. The redemptive power of the woman's face rode along on this trend, but as a late-comer and a passenger in a medium that was basically driven by other interests in female roles. Hollywood had favored a type of glamorous woman made mysterious by her masculinity (Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich), or ambiguous by ranging from austere beauty to threat (Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis), or, in the post-war era, desirable by her erotic presence or by her trivial, non-threatening cuteness. While the cinema had the techniques to rediscover the redemptive force of the face, it lacked the concept. Significantly, it was an Italian Catholic director, Federico Fellini, who revived the idea. In his earliest films, Fellini cast sweet, angelic women in lead roles where they were abused and exploited (Brunella Bovo in *The White Sheik* [1952], Giulietta Massina in *La Strada* [1954] and *Nights of Cabiria* [1957]).

In *La Dolce Vita* (1960), he recovered the redemptive power of woman and saw that power invested in her face. It remained potential and unrealized, though present and available. The film tells the descent into degeneracy of a talented writer turned gossip-column journalist, Marcello Rubini (Marcello Mastroianni). In the final scene of the movie, the debauched Marcello sits in a drunken stupor on the beach after a night of orgiastic revelry. A young girl calls to him from across the river that empties just at that point into the sea. He can't hear her. The final shot in the movie is a long lingering close-up of this sweet, angelic smile that would make 'the spirits of [Marcello's] eyes grow friendly' towards her if he could pull himself out of his stupor and realize the kind of rescue she offered to him. We met this same girl earlier as the waitress in a beach-front café, where Marcello is trying to work on his novel. He interrupts his work, chats with her flirtatiously, tells her she looks like an 'Umbrian angel.' She anticipates the muse-role of Claudia Cardinale in *8 ½* (1963). The power is there in her face and angelic presence. But Marcello in the end is beyond redemption. He gets up to stagger after the group of revelers, and again she calls him. But the river separates them – a Dantesque moment. He turns towards her, but cannot hear. He lifts both hands in a gesture, saying, 'What can I do? I can't understand you,' then lowers one hand, turns away slowly and covers his face with the other hand, in a gesture that projects shame (Figure 1). The point is that Marcello is not to be saved. The camera lingers long on the 'angel's' wistfully smiling face in close-up, the final shot of the movie (Figure 2). The redemptive power of innocence is there, available, but it comes too late.

8 ½ has, as its main character, a movie director in the grips of a creative crisis. He has a private muse, a product of his imagination, the embodiment of

2 See Adorno (1991) and Benjamin (2003). The rejection of Hollywood glamour as products of a 'glamour machine' is still prominent in academic and popular culture. For a glaring example, see Basinger (2009). For criticism of this line of thought, see Jaeger (2012, 304–310).

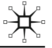
Figure 1: Marcello ashamed. Still from *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960).

Figure 2: Paola, or redemption lost. Still from *La Dolce Vita* (Fellini, 1960).

innocence and purity (Claudia Cardinale). He sees a vision of her while he waits in a line of old people lined up to receive water from a mineral spring. The muse approaches as in a dance, opens her arms to him, smiles rapturously (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Claudia the muse. Still from *8 ½* (Fellini, 1963).

She kneels at the spring, hands him the cup of healing water. So here is what he needs, the cure of his creative sickness, offered by a dream woman, beautiful and dressed in white. Then the vision disappears. The muse is replaced by a real woman, plain, sweaty and impatient, tired of handing out cups of water.

The muse appears again later in the film in another vision, promising to bring him purity and order – without bringing it. Eventually, Claudia Cardinale turns up as a real character, an actress to be cast in the film, but he, the director, having no script, also has no role for her. Again, a failure of imagined redemptive force, which is beginning to look like pure fantasy. And, being a silly, self-absorbed starlet, not a muse there to serve him, she does not have the desired effect. But at the end of the movie, inspiration suddenly strikes, the result of his return to his own youth and innocence. He sees the whole gallery of inspiring women, all dressed in white, gathered, waiting for him to direct them. They are all the women he has loved in his life, starting with the lady from the fountain, the lady in white, her radiant smile a miracle in itself (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Still from *8 ½* (Fellini, 1963).

He proceeds to direct them in what looks like a dance of life. It has the feel of the reality of the film, no longer just a set of phantasms.

Now it is interesting that Fellini, the Italian Catholic, has a concept of the redeeming force of a beautiful, loved woman's face. It may be some Dantean influence flowing in the blood of Italian Catholics, but it shows clearly the presence of themes and motifs that came to prominence in the Middle Ages. Fellini had collaborated with Roberto Rossellini on two films with a strong religious element, both indebted to medieval traditions: *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1950) and *Il Miracolo* (1948), a parody of a medieval miracle tale. However, in the major works of this disillusioned, guilt-burdened Catholic, the face of innocence either does not rescue the male tangled in error (*La Dolce Vita*) or is more or less imaginary, even if, ultimately, effective (*8 ½*). Inspiration may be available through a woman's face, but redeeming innocence is thwarted by a coarse, desecrating reality, the way sainthood is present in Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina) in *La Strada* (1954).

Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* (1980) borrowed shamelessly from *8 ½*. Here also a movie director has run out of inspiration and seeks it in women. Allen's characters are always looking for a healing, redemptive, rescuing force, and they find and lose it in the movies, or in music, or in loved women. Late in

Figure 5: Dorrie's smile. Still from *Stardust Memories* (Allen, 1980).

Stardust Memories, the main character, the famous movie director Sandy Bates (Woody Allen), is shot dead by an admiring fan. He appears in a public ceremony to receive, posthumously, an award for his films. He goes to the podium and tells the audience of his experience as he was dying. During the entire speech, quoted below, the camera rests on Dorrie (Charlotte Rampling), lying on the floor of their apartment eating yoghurt and returning Sandy's gaze, first questioning, then loving (Figure 5). The exchanged gazing creates a moment of redemption:

> [Sandy Bates (Woody Allen)]: Just a little while back, just before I died in fact, I was lying on the operating table, and I was searching to try to find something to hang on to, you know, 'cause when you're dying, life suddenly does become very authentic. And, and I was searching for something to give my life meaning, and, and a memory flashed through my mind. It was one of those great spring days, a Sunday [*Music plays: 'Stardust.'*] And you knew summer would be coming soon. And I remember that morning Dorrie and I had gone for a walk in the park. And we came back to the apartment. We were just sort of sitting around, and I put on a record of Louis Armstrong, which was music that I grew up loving. It was very, very pretty. And I happened to glance over, and I saw Dorrie sitting there. And I remember thinking to myself how terrific she was, and how much I loved her, and, I don't know, I guess it was just the combination of everything, the sound of the music and the breeze and how beautiful Dorrie looked to me. And for one brief moment everything just seemed to come together perfectly, and I felt happy, almost indestructible in a way. That's funny, that simple little moment of contact moved me in a very, very profound way. (Allen, 1980)

So, a man at the point of death – and beyond – still enjoying the use of his consciousness and memory, searches through all his experience for something

that gives meaning to his life: his knowledge, learning and philosophy, the movies he's made, friends, a creative life – and comes up with the face of the woman he loved, viewed in a redemptive moment. What this psychologically threatened character gets from the exquisite moment is not meaning, but intense happiness and the brief experience of immortality ('it made me feel indestructible').

Film charisma and redemptive force of the female come together in Michel Hazanavicius's film *The Artist* (2011). A splendid example of charismatic art, it is a (largely) silent movie about silent movies that plays in the era witnessing the change from silent films to 'talkies.' The plot turns on the fall of a big star of the silent films, George Valentin, who is made redundant when talking pictures replace silent. He dismisses sound and thinks silence is the only medium possible for films: 'If [sound] is the future, you can have it' (Hazanavicius, 2011). He loses everything in an ill-conceived late silent film that he writes, directs, and finances and in the stock market crash leading to the great depression. His marriage breaks up; he is alone and obscure, as forgotten as the medium itself, drinks too much, and attempts suicide twice. He is rescued by Peppy Miller (Bérénice Bejo), an ingénue whose movie career he launched by securing her a role in one of his films against the will of the producer; later, she rises to star status while George goes downhill. In the end, she rescues his career by forcing the same producer to put the broke and unemployed ex-star in one of her movies. His way back to stardom is dance. In a transformation of which we see none of the intermediate stages between down-and-out-and-suicidal and renewed stardom, he and Peppy become the Astaire and Rogers of Kinograph Studios.

The Artist gets its vitality, its cheerful optimism in part from its main characters. It is there in their faces. George Valentin (Jean Dujardin) oozes charm and confidence (Figure 6).

Figure 6: George and Uggie. Still from *The Artist* (Hazanavicius, 2011).

He combines the charm of his smile with the force and authority of his character, lightly wielded but irresistible, as in the scene where he contradicts the studio boss (John Goodman), who tells Peppy she cannot stay on the set. George faces the producer, hitches his eyebrows charmingly with a smile that says ‘why not?’ but also, its subtext: ‘this is what *I* want.’ The boss hesitates. The entire crew watches. The boss relents and walks away, leaving the decision to George. This scene of a power struggle waged with an ultimatum and a confident gaze is repeated later with roles reversed: Peppy refuses to act in a movie unless the now down-and-out George is given a role. Dujardin’s eyebrows have a range of flexibility that sets him off from most of mankind. His affability is irresistible. George’s star stature, celebrity aura, and narcissism are balanced by his *sprezzatura*: the more talented and the more celebrated the star is, the more he acts as one of the crowd. George jokes with the stage hands and fans as equals. They’re all a community of friends; and those ordinary mortals below him and admiring him are drawn up by that affability into the magic atmosphere surrounding the celebrity star. His indomitable smile is there to face every situation. In George’s films, his smile shows a heroic response to danger (it is also part of his Douglas Fairbanks-esque vitality: the escape from the Russian prison; hiding from the pursuing soldiers in the Zorro film – mugging, ‘I laugh at danger!’).

Peppy Miller (Bérénice Bejo) moves from the bottom of cast lists to the top. Her roles are flappers: charming, sassy young women out to get a man. With her button nose, cheery eyes, and slight overbite, she is a Clara Bow style comedienne, unsuited for dramatic roles. She gets her first part as an extra by showing she can dance. She steps out of the crowd of girls at a cattle-call-style audition and does a couple of warm-up steps, which become her signature: eyes wide and mouth comically open, smile frozen, like a clown or a kewpie doll, mugging, ‘Oh, what fun!’ or ‘This is just swell!’ (Figure 7). Everything bespeaks

Figure 7: Peppy’s audition. Still from *The Artist* (Hazanavicius, 2011).

an ambitious airhead. The name 'Peppy' stresses her combination of charm, vitality, and silliness.

Against the upward trend of her popular fatuousness in her films, her role in *The Artist* turns dramatic. She rescues George in the collapse of his career and life. She is the source of redemptive power, a clear rejection of the tragic end built into this story-type. We can give focus to the director's conception by comparing it to the movie(s) that furnished its plot line, *A Star is Born*. That movie had three versions – same story, same characters, different actors: 1937 with Janet Gaynor and Frederic March; 1954 with Judy Garland and James Mason; and 1976 with Barbara Streisand and Kris Kristofferson. In all three, the older male star discovers and falls in love with a young woman with great talent, and makes a star out of her. While she rises, he plummets. In each case, the woman is surprised by fame, but not corrupted, and she loves her man to the bitter end; in each, the once great star turns into a sloppy drunkard, clinging to his fading fame in ways that embarrass his wife, alienate friends, turn enmity to hatred, and lead to public humiliation. In each version of *A Star is Born,* the male hero is lost to recovery, and the love of his now very busy starlet wife cannot rescue him. Each ends in the suicide of the male character. The story precludes any other outcome. We might pity the man, but we have no sympathy with him.

Not so in *The Artist*. George Valentin falls low, descends into self-pity, drunkenness, and suicide (two attempts fail), but without the loss of dignity and without the public humiliation suffered by the male leads of *A Star is Born*. *The Artist* insists on the integrity of the main male character and gives the heroine a redemptive role in contrast to its model. The development that leads her to that role runs as follows:

Peppy is set up to be charmingly silly, but gains in moral depth and strength. When George descends into drunkenness, depression, suicide, she is there as a guardian angel (the title of one of her films). When he runs out of money, he sells all his possessions. Peppy secretly arranges to buy all the items at auction. She puts them in storage in her house anticipating that he will rise again and reclaim them, probably also just to give him some money without appearing to. The scene of Peppy watching from a distance as George leaves the auction hall shows a depth of feeling we would not have expected from the early scenes (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Peppy's tears. Still from *The Artist* (Hazanavicius, 2011).

A sweet, sentimental motif in the musical score plays in that moment, marking it as an emotional highpoint of the film. It returns in the hospital scene when George is recuperating from his first suicide attempt (he has burned all his library of films, and nearly burns himself up along with them); he's unconscious when Peppy arrives. A film can lies on the hospital dresser; he wouldn't let go of it, says the doctor. Peppy unrolls the film: the outtakes of 'A German Affair,' George dancing with Peppy, the moment when he fell in love with her. While she scans the film frame by frame, we see the scene played through. Peppy is rapt with love, nostalgia, compassion. The doctor and nurse watch and show relief and empathy with Peppy, as though their fond wish had been that some friend would come to recall George to life and health, and here is that person. The dynamics of the two images (Peppy watching the film, nurse and doctor watching Peppy) show a world enspirited by grace (in both senses), a beauty of behavior, and an atmosphere in which forgiveness, compassion, and redemptive force are the air that people breathe. The doctor puts George in her hands, and her response is a luminous smile (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Peppy in the hospital. Still from *The Artist* (Hazanavicius, 2011).

Peppy's joy at that moment is completely gratuitous, as is her compassion in general. Nothing other than gratitude and love motivates her to watch over George. Many young film stars swathed in furs and living in mansions could no doubt soften their consciences and dampen their affections for a loser sunk as low as George in this moment. Peppy turns out to be a magnanimous character who rescues George through love and compassion. She also rescues him by restoring his star-stature. The final scenes show a bright future opening for both of them as an Astaire-Rogers-style dance team.

So, a Hollywood happy ending. But also, charismatic magic – sometimes they coincide. The charismatic narrative operates – like Dante's Beatrice – by luring the viewer/reader to believe in the plausibility of the miraculous. The more unattainable the vision, the greater is the gravitational force pulling the viewer up into the charmed world of the hero and heroine. *The Artist* is a redemption

narrative (Jaeger, 2012). Recall our definition of 'redemption' as the rescue, in a moment of crisis, of life, freedom, and human dignity from a condition that suppresses or denies or threatens it. In *The Artist,* the redeeming woman intercedes in a critical emergency to rescue the threatened man. The film plays in an Astaire-Rogers world of highly talented, beautiful, fundamentally good characters flourishing in good times but driven to suicide in bad. Unquestionably a large part of the film's attraction was creating a compassionate world of charm, glamour, and innocence, and supplying a happy ending to tragic circumstances, mediated by the figure of the redemptive woman.

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