

Irving Penn: *Preserving the Myth of the American Woman*

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Marlene Dietrich blew into Irving Penn's Fifth Avenue studio to have her portrait taken for a 1948 issue of Vogue. "The first thing she said was 'you have to put the light there!' I said, 'Now, look: in this experience you be Dietrich and I'll be the photographer.' And, boy, she was boiled, but she stayed with it" (Fielden). To Penn's bewilderment, Dietrich ultimately was unhappy with the portrait and the next time she saw him she, "turned on her heel" and walked the other way (Fielden). Dietrich was a new brand of American celebrity. She had made a name for herself by bending the rules of gender representation, often wearing men's clothing in sexually provocative settings (Chauncey). To "be Dietrich" is for Marlene to control her self-presentation and expression. To forgo her agency is for her to hand her identity to its capturer. In his portrait of Marlene Dietrich, Irving Penn controls Dietrich's presentation thereby manipulating her identity and imposing an unwarranted sense of shame onto her body forcing her to conform to the myth of the midcentury American woman.



Portrait of Marlene Dietrich by Irving Penn, 1948

As a photographer for Vogue, Penn was a producer of American cultural standards. His images circulated widely throughout the country in a magazine that purports to establish the highest standards of female beauty in fashion. Penn endeavored to reveal the true "spirit" of his subjects in the world of high fashion and celebrity. He built strong relationships with his subjects who generally granted them a glimpse into their psychology (Rosenheim and Hamborg). However, Penn's shots were never candid and as such he was constantly manipulating how that true spirit of his subject was conveyed. Even if he was not claiming to present an idealized female he certainly depicted a particularly feminine representation of his subjects. Penn presented a mythic impression of truth that played into and established the ethos of American culture even if the myth did not truly get to the heart of the sitter.

Penn rendered concepts of femininity in his subjects in strikingly beautiful and soft images. For example, his 1951 portrait of Audrey Hepburn has a charming girlish quality to it.



Portrait of Audrey Hepburn by Irving Penn, 1951

Hepburn's lips are strongly defined with lipstick, she wears a form-fitting sweater and large earrings, and she smiles brightly while making direct eye contact with the viewer. The viewer and Penn have direct access to Hepburn whose face is beaming at the prospect of their attention. Dietrich, in contrast, just barely looks

towards the camera, refusing to make eye contact with the viewer. Penn begs Dietrich to reveal her feminine qualities and she almost acquiesces to his pleading, but not quite. She shows her made up face but refuses to turn her body towards the camera, obscuring any feminine contours.

In his book, *Hollywood Goes to High School*, Robert Bulman explores the American myths that cultural producers use to simplify national culture. He explains that, "one way in which we collectively manage to cope with the complexity and confusion of social life is to package reality and to represent it as fiction—to tell stories about our social world that make it more comprehensible" (Robert 4). As an arbiter of cultural norms, Penn authors these simplifying cultural myths, especially as they pertain to women and femininity. His photos for *Vogue* teach the American public what a woman should look like and how she should behave. His images serve as models of ideal feminine behavior. Dietrich complicates this narrative of feminine behavior and Penn effectively rewrites her self-presentation in order to maintain the myth.

One of the myths perpetuated by Penn is the same myth that Bulman recognizes in contemporary American film: men are allowed to be multifaceted with complex identities while a woman's identity must be static and position themselves in relation to the desires of men (Robert 95). By asking Dietrich to reveal her feminine qualities, Penn actively constructs the myth of the American woman as a typically feminine and welcoming presence. Dietrich actively challenged this notion of femininity during her career in pre-code films like *Morocco* (1930) where she wore men's clothing and flaunted her sexuality. Dietrich's refusal to conform to traditional gender roles jeopardized the pervasive conception of the twentieth century woman. By virtue of his employment at *Vogue*, Penn was invested in the preservation of this mythical American femininity and so, consciously or not, uses his photography to rebuke Dietrich's behavior and make it clear to the American public that there are consequences to transgressing the myth. In so doing, Penn tries to reconstruct Dietrich's femininity to make her better conform to the script of America's well-behaved women.

Dietrich was unhappy with Penn's attempt to

curate her presentation. Even Penn admits that the shoot was uncomfortable for Dietrich and she "was boiled the whole time." She wanted to control how the world would view her and Penn refused to grant her that autonomy. Her dissatisfaction with the situation is written on her face. She avoids the gaze of the viewer, looking just above the eye of the camera. The distant glance coupled with the scowl on her lips give the impression that Dietrich is both angry and on the verge of tears. The viewer is intruding. Penn's shining light illuminates the only recognizably feminine element of her presentation: her face. This is not the warm girlish face of Hepburn; this is the expression of someone who feels violated.

Penn demonstrates the consequences of gender-non-conformity in the mid twentieth century. To behave like Dietrich is to become vulnerable to the immense discomfort evident in her expression. It is easy to imagine a happier rendition of this photograph. Dietrich would be facing the viewer, inviting them into her world and psyche. Instead, Penn hides Dietrich's body in shame, turning her away from the camera, hunched over in a shapeless black mass. Her face emerges from the shadows as if she turned around, startled by the sound of the viewer walking into the room. Her expression is almost accusatory. This is one of few, possibly even the only, portrait Penn took of a woman from behind. All of his other portraits are either three quarter or full frontal views. By posing Dietrich with her back towards the viewer Penn effectively distances the viewer and subject, isolating her in the black mound of her androgynous black clothing and creating an overwhelming sense that the viewer is unwelcome in the space of the image.

Penn even further isolates Dietrich from the viewer in the composition by severing the connection between the subject and viewer with the marble patterned stage on which Dietrich is seated. Penn set the camera's field of clear focus to the edge of the stage, capturing Dietrich's face in sharp clarity while casting the rest of her body into an unfocused haze of blurred grey and black. The blurred surface of the stage on which Dietrich is perched dissolves into abstraction as it extends towards the viewer. By the time it reaches the photograph's bottom edge the stage is completely blurred and out of focus. Penn uses an aperture with such a shallow depth of field that everything but Dietrich's face is out of focus. Penn makes it impossible

for the viewer to pass into the world of the image without traversing a pool of abstract foreground. This is markedly distinct from Penn's portrait of Audrey Hepburn in which he uses a deep depth of field, creating sharp focus on every detail of her body and the background. The viewer can imagine stepping right up to Hepburn and feeling the woven texture of her sweater. In this way Hepburn is a "real" woman who could exist in the world of the viewer, while Dietrich is relegated to the mysterious world beyond the stage. Hepburn is approachable, what an American girl should strive to be, while Dietrich is isolated and broken. From her imaginary world Dietrich looks back to the viewer in anger over what could have been if only she had presented herself like Audrey; Penn implies she could have been the hero of the dominant American female myth but instead is the villain. Penn has effectively written her out of the narrative of American femininity and used her as a cautionary tale to women everywhere: beware of the consequences of nonconformity.

When viewed in the context of Penn's other portraits of female celebrities, it becomes clear why Dietrich was upset with the way she was represented. Long before Butler penned her now famous Gender Trouble, Dietrich understood that in the American imagination to be a woman was to act a certain way and present oneself as a woman to the world. Much of her career was spent shifting the conception of the American woman to something a bit more masculine. Her films created new myths of what a woman could be, slowly supplanting those that came before her. The rewriting of myth was initially thwarted by the 1934 film codes that censored her transgressive representations of female behavior. Now, with Penn, she once again had an opportunity to show herself to the world in a way that suited her, and again a man interested in preserving a typical conception of the American woman stopped her. Penn's representation of Dietrich is not only an act of violence against her, but is also a tool he uses to teach American women how to behave. Penn berates the American public with flattened presentations of well-behaved women for the public to emulate. The disappointment Dietrich felt is written on her face and captured in her actions. Now we can only wonder what we would see if Marlene was able to set her own photographic lighting and present herself to the world and teach the American public other ways to be a woman.

Works Cited:

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