

Making Faces *Playing* God

Identity and the Art of Transformational Makeup



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creases and crags. An extraordinary aspect of the makeup was the way in which the gray stubble of the character's beard was secured and anchored, hair by hair, in the prosthetic jowls and chin.

Another makeup demonstration, this one by Steve Johnson, was done for a Japanese book on the art of makeup. Daring himself to invent the most extreme transformation imaginable (given the limited resources of prosthetic appliances), Johnson turned a young white male into an elderly black woman blinded by cataracts. Again, the pictures speak for themselves. Johnson tries to express a personal history, a set of attitudes and experiences within the parameters of a new physiognomy.

Since Johnson was creating his character only for the still camera, he had leeway. The face did not have to move or speak. Johnson could control and limit the lighting of the photographs. One may have misgivings that the thickness of the prosthetic, made necessary by the radicalness of the change, would prevent the face from moving convincingly and being expressive. But makeup artists emphasize that every prosthetic makeup is a compromise with the limitations of the medium, and no project mimics real flesh and real movement in all lights and circumstances. Johnson's project remains exciting as a portrait in rubber.

One of the outstanding foreign craftsmen of makeup is Göran Lundström, whose Effects Studio is in Stockholm. Prominent in Lundström's portfolio is a transformation of Thomas Gylling, who is popular as a Swedish talk show host. For a skit on Swedish television, Lundström used beautifully sculpted foam latex to turn Gylling into an old man with a grandly expressive face.

Espionage

Disguises have a place in movies about criminals, undercover agents, and spies because, as most of us assume, they are used in the actual contexts of crime and espionage. The extent to which this is so can be a closely guarded secret. Both the police and the intelligence service have an understandable interest in keeping their methods to themselves.

What relevance does the work of Hollywood makeup artists have for American intelligence activities? Some, John Chambers for example, consulted with the CIA in the 1970s. It was rumored that the CIA had its own research laboratory, a facility that developed prosthetic masks as disguises more sophisticated than anything Hollywood had to offer.

Antonio Mendez, who ran the CIA's disguise operations for much of the 1980s, is now retired and, with the agency's consent and blessing, has begun giving interviews about his work. Mendez recently published an account of his adventures. Much information is, of course, still classified. It seems clear, however,

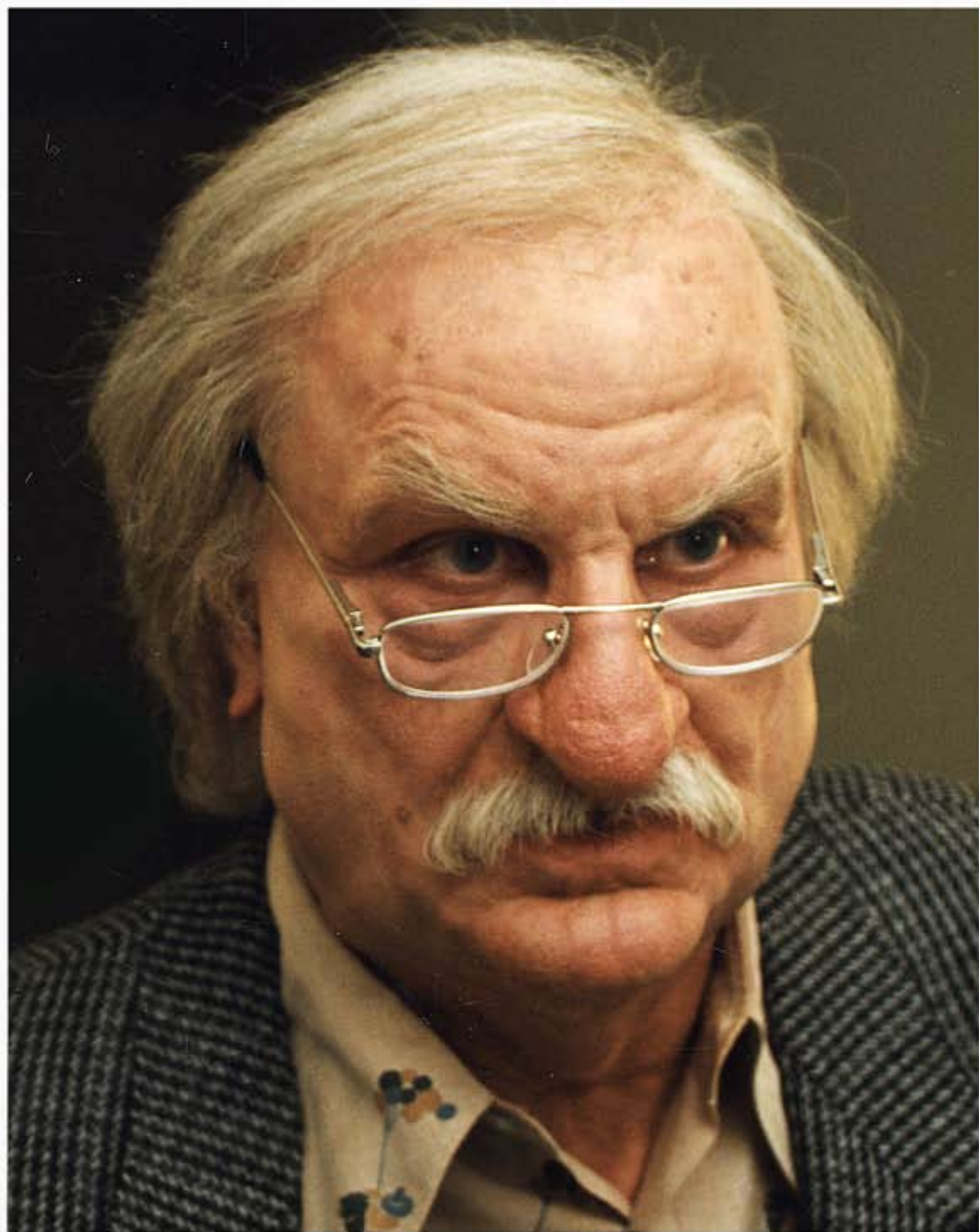


Figure 6.42. Gylling fully transformed. Makeup by Göran Lundström/Effects Studio. Hairwork by Jenny Martinpelto and Katrin Wahlber.

that Mendez and his associates advanced the state of the art of makeup. A variation of the old *Mission: Impossible* ideal was to create and use an entirely convincing false face that could be applied and removed almost instantaneously and would be reusable. Nothing in today's Hollywood arsenal meets that ideal. And yet the CIA's lab seems to have developed and used new materials with the aspiration to achieve such results.

In an interview with Mr. Mendez, I asked why the CIA, building in part on Hollywood's own experience, might have outdistanced the movie industry. The suggestive response was that the movies have never needed to do what may be essential to an intelligence agent's safety and survival. Transformational effects in the movies can be prepared over several hours. Lighting and camera angles can always be controlled. New prosthetic pieces can be prepared for each application. The agent in the field under surveillance has none of these options.

The preparation of realistic false faces was a small part of the CIA's expertise in disguise. Fooling an observer and adopting camouflage requires many skills and is necessary in varying contexts. Sometimes a new way of dressing or walking and gesturing will suffice to throw off scrutiny. Being disguised is as much a matter of psychology, of acting with conviction when one may never have had to act before, as it is a matter of wearing a false face. Mendez and his associates had to cover all these bases.

Interface

Thinking in general about disguise leads to questions about the means and ends of transformational makeup. We are in the habit of thinking of the art of transformation as a means. In myth and philosophical imagination, *actual* transformation—trading one's old body for a new one—is a means to immortality. In practical imagination, it is a means to fool others, to eavesdrop or play dirty tricks undetected. In the actual practice of transformational makeup artists, it is a means for producing demons and aliens on demand, for resurrecting Genghis Khan or Mark Twain, for portraying a single life from youth to extreme age.

But when we focus on disguise, it matters less what one becomes and more that one is no longer oneself. Transformation becomes largely an end in itself, a way of escaping from, toying with, and manipulating identity. Characters in movies need or want to put their own identity at arm's length. Actors such as Eddie Murphy seize opportunities to show their versatility, to be chameleons. And makeup artists themselves, like Kevin Yagher, Steve Johnson, and Göran Lundström, strain to show us not so much what their magical processes can yield but rather that the processes themselves have no limits, that makeup artists can in fact play God.