

From Geek to Glam: The Ubiquity of Incorrective Lenses by Elizabeth Peterson

I have to warn you: *Sahara* is dangerous. As one of the top-grossing films of the spring, scores of vulnerable people have already been subjected to its toxic message, so it's time to speak out. This film is part of a movement so insidious and widespread that we hardly notice it. Of course I'm talking about the misuse of glasses.

In the United States 150 million people have to use corrective eyewear, according to Prevent Blindness America, but you'd never know it by going to the movies. When a character does wear glasses, it's usually as a visual shorthand to emphasize certain personality characteristics. So when Penelope Cruz sports her specs in her first scene in *Sahara*, we know right away that she is intelligent and serious, probably even a little uptight. Never mind that she's an authoritative doctor with a good vocabulary, or that she doesn't seem to need them to read up close or to identify Matthew McConaughey's abs from a distance. The glasses appear at random in scenes when we apparently need reminding that she is a scientist, damn it, not just a hottie in a tank top.

When the good doctor loses her glasses in one of the film's many explosions, she miraculously never seems to need them again. Which turns out to be good, because she actually *was* a little too uptight, and without her glasses holding her back she is much more fun to hang out with. This personality shift, along with the aforementioned inconsistency, makes up the corrupted heart of this cinematic syndrome.

But there's more to it than lazy storytelling. Women, by far, suffer the brunt of this paradigm. From Mary Bailey's mousy librarian in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) to frumpy Toulou in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), Hollywood is full of women who use their glasses to hide from life and their true (badass) selves. The presumption is that wearing glasses is a choice, so women who don the hornrims deliberately make themselves unattractive. Once they ditch the spectacles (often without explanation), allowing their true beauty to shine, that's when life really begins. They fall in love, find better jobs, achieve good hair, sparkle with wittier dialogue, blah blah blah. And *Sahara* is just the tip of the sand dune.

Now, Voyager (1942) is a prime example. After recovering from a nervous breakdown, Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis) has gained enough shaky confidence to leave the sanitarium and face the world again. Only one barrier remains: her glasses. "The oculist says you don't need these anymore," her psychiatrist chides, taking them from her face. "But I feel so undressed without them," she insists, clinging to her limited self-image. "It's good for you to feel that way," he replies, snapping them in two. Her thick, black glasses were an essential accessory in her life as a humorless spinster; but her newfound inner strength has also given her the power to restore her vision, rendering the eyeglasses unnecessary.

The miracle also touches Marian the Librarian in *The Music Man* (1962). Marian is a prim, nearsighted gal who wears a corset both literally and figuratively, at least until the day she joins the

dancing teenagers in her library and reveals the hot tamale she really is. Awakened to the ineluctable joy of life, she flings away her glasses into the rigid past, never to need them again.

The list of newly self-assured, formerly myopic characters continues. Painfully shy Adrian from *Rocky* (1976) doesn't need laser surgery to correct her vision—she has the love of good man to do it for her. "Take off your glasses," Rocky breathes, offering to make her a whole person by making love to her. It works!

There is Tara, the frizzy-haired wallflower in *Strictly Ballroom* (1992). "You don't really need these do you?" her dashing dance partner asks of her big glasses. No, of course she doesn't. She just needed a handsome man to help her break her emotional dependence on them. Fortunately, she dances much better without her glasses.

In *Tank Girl* (1995), Jet Girl (a brunette Naomi Watts) can fix airplanes but she can't defend herself against the men who continually sexually harass her. Clad in her thick glasses, she shrinks from confrontation in fear and self-doubt. That is, until she goes adventuring with Tank Girl and learns how to speak up for herself and apply eye makeup. By the end of the movie, she is fully self-actualized, able to kick the butts of the jerks who used to torment her, and free of her glasses, literally and metaphorically.

Okay, the misuse of glasses is more annoying than dangerous. Civilization is not at risk. Concerned mothers of America will not likely start a committee to eradicate this scourge any time soon. And enough stuff blows up in *Sahara* to keep the viewer distracted from both the erratic use of glasses and the holes in the plot. Hollywood's use of mossy devices is certainly nothing new, so why grouse? In a world of fantasy, why be picky about this one bit of verisimilitude gone bad?

Because movies aren't entirely fantasy. Even the wildest science fiction contains the basic human emotions we can all relate to: despair, love, fear, greed. C-3PO and R2-D2 are not just robots; they are loyal, bickering friends we recognize from our own experience. Good storytelling has truth at its core. We love the movies because we can find parts of ourselves in the characters and events on the screen, even while the layers of imagination allow us to escape temporarily from reality. And the truth is millions of us put on our glasses or contact lenses every day whether we like it or not. If *Sahara* acknowledged this fact, perhaps more of us would still be engrossed, and *House of Wax* wouldn't have bumped it out of the top-10 at the box office. Right.

In any case it irks me to see yet another bespectacled woman portrayed as somehow stunted, her glasses a ham-fisted symbol of her fragmented potential. The message is that these stern chicks could become serious babes with perfect vision if they just weren't so lazy. All it takes is enough courage, verve, and style to live an integrated, clear-eyed life. You've just got to *want* it.

But there is some hope in movieland. Marilyn Monroe's paramour in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) finds her more attractive with the rhinestone rims than without, proving that glasses can enhance one's glamour. *Spellbound* (1945) always gets props for hiring Salvador Dali to design its famous dream sequence, but I admire this film for how Ingrid Bergman wears her glasses: with elegance and consistency. Even after she falls in love with her amnesiac patient and the bright vista of their future

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together unfurls, she nonetheless continues to need her glasses, with no loss of foxiness. Thank you, Mr. Hitchcock!

The greatest beacon comes from the small screen, however, in the character of Samantha Jones in *Sex and the City*, and I proclaim her the unofficial icon in the counter-movement against the misuse of glasses. She is gorgeous, smart, outspoken—and she wears Chanel specs to read the fine print on her sex toy packaging. “Yes,” she announces with her signature brazen pride, “I wear glasses and I am not ashamed. I have a sexy young man who likes to fuck me and I am fabulous.”