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"Actor Denied Straight Nose": Louis Wolheim and the Gendered Practice of Plastic Surgery in Silent-Era Hollywood

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"Actor Denied Straight Nose": Louis Wolheim and the Gendered Practice of Plastic Surgery in Silent-Era Hollywood

by HEATHER ADDISON

Abstract: Hollywood's embrace of plastic surgery as a means of sculpting performers' bodies to meet standards of youth and beauty is a long-standing phenomenon. Using archival materials available in the Howard Hughes Motion Picture Records at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, this article offers a case study of Louis Wolheim (1881–1931), a motion-picture star under contract to Caddo, Howard Hughes's production company, from the late 1920s until the time of his death. Wolheim caused a national sensation in 1927 when he told reporters about his plan to have his iconic "hard-boiled" facial features surgically altered.

Plastic Operations in Hollywood. Throughout the silent era, fan magazines highlighted motion-picture stars' pursuit of youth and beauty, particularly through the relatively new—and seemingly extreme—practice of plastic surgery, which entered the public's consciousness in the 1910s, when maxillofacial and other modern surgical techniques were developed and used to treat disfigured World War I veterans.¹ The reconstructive focus of this emerging field was quickly expanded to include "aesthetic" or cosmetic procedures, which, as Sander Gilman notes, physicians enacted on a model of "passing" in which individuals of various ethnic backgrounds reshaped their faces and physiques to pursue an ideal of youthful, slim, Anglo-Saxon attractiveness.² Early Hollywood was the epicenter of a new, beauty-conscious culture that embraced the practice of plastic surgery, especially for motion-picture stars.³ In 1929, Dorothy Manners announced that Los Angeles was being overrun by "beauty farms,

1 "History of Plastic Surgery," American Society of Plastic Surgeons, <https://www.plasticsurgery.org/about-asps/history-of-plastic-surgery>.

2 Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Plastic Surgery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 22–24.

3 Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Plastic Surgery* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 96.

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rejuvenation palaces and plastic surgery emporiums that have sprung up around the movie center like mushrooms in a shady glen. . . . They vary in type from the almost secrecy-guarded clinic-farms in the outlying suburbs . . . to the elaborate mansions along Wilshire Boulevard that advertise youth of face and form with electric-lighted billboards of semi-nude women.”⁴ As such venues proliferated, so, too, did the body-improvement methods in which they specialized. Manners expressed shock and sadness at the prospect of stars enduring hazardous procedures to be more attractive, yet she also attempted to titillate readers with gory details of botched operations: “A little flapper of the studios underwent a painful and dangerous operation for weight reduction—and all in vain. The bride of a comedy lot director is suing a surgeon for slicing her lips until she has lost all sensation of the mouth.”⁵

The rigors of remaining ever youthful and attractive constituted the “price” that motion-picture performers had to pay for fame, wealth, and power. Fan magazines emphasized the gendered nature of this beauty imperative, which targeted female stars and included not only plastic surgery but also never-ending routines of hygiene, diet, exercise, makeup, and fashion: “A plastic operation is done once and is over. Torturous at the time, often [producing] distressing after-effects, it is, nevertheless, something that may be done and completed. The daily task of keeping beautiful in Hollywood is never finished. And for each advancing year beauty demands more time, more courage, and more money.”⁶ Men were not exempt from pressure to achieve and maintain specific physical ideals for the camera, however. Manners devoted the bulk of her 1929 article to an interview with “reputable” plastic surgeon Dr. W. E. Balsinger, who gushed about the general popularity of plastic surgery in Hollywood and claimed that he operated on men as frequently as on women: “I do many face-lifting jobs for Hollywood people. I would rather not mention specific names here as most people are very sensitive about these operations, especially women. But don’t be surprised when I tell you that I do as many face-lifting jobs on men as on the weaker sex. I could give you the names of several important screen actresses and actors who came for that purpose. But I won’t. Why should they not wish to preserve their youth as long as they may? It is their bread and butter.”⁷ Here, Balsinger calls attention to the female-centered phenomenon of plastic surgery by blithely noting that most people would be “surprised” to learn that just as many men as women seek out “face-lifting jobs.” Gendered as female for many years, aesthetic surgery was not associated with masculine beauty standards until much later in the twentieth century.⁸ Balsinger also acknowledges the secrecy that surrounded the enterprise in Hollywood; despite the fact that stars openly shared their daily beauty or physical culture regimes (diet and exercise plans) in motion-picture fan magazines, surgical alteration to achieve or augment their attractiveness was coded as inauthentic, even shameful, perhaps because it represented a shortcut that too easily allowed them to remake their looks. Stars therefore avoided procedures that resulted

4 Dorothy Manners, “The Flesh and Blood Racket,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, April 1929, 34.

5 Manners, 35.

6 Katherine Albert, “They Must Suffer to Be Beautiful,” *Photoplay Magazine*, October 1929, 32.

7 Quoted in Albert, 118.

8 Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 32.

in obvious visual changes and were “very sensitive” about divulging whether they had had face-lifts, nose jobs, or fat-removal treatments—unless the personal suffering that such operations entailed could be foregrounded, as occurred with star Molly O’Day.

Known as the “little flapper of the studios,” O’Day was under contract to First National in the late 1920s.⁹ A “facial and physical disfigurement clause” allowed the studio to suspend her employment if she experienced any change “materially detracting from her appearance on the screen.”¹⁰ In 1927, First National invoked this clause when O’Day gained weight that she was not able to shed quickly through diet or exercise. The young star visited a surgeon, Dr. Robert B. Griffith, who performed an operation on her that was melodramatically detailed in a fan-magazine article by Katherine Albert:

The knife made long incisions on either leg and across the stomach and the fat was removed. Electric needles to melt the fat away were used. . . . She has suffered acutely, but the doctor assures her that there will be no scars left and that she will be from twelve to fifteen pounds lighter.

Will there be any ill effects from this? Will the fat return? That remains to be seen. . . . She is a splendid actress. Her director, her producer, her public know this. But unless she is more sylph-like her art will be wasted. This is the demand of the screen!

She has high hopes now. Wan and convalescent in the hospital, she smiled and expressed the wish that this drastic measure would allow her to continue her career.¹¹

O’Day, the article suggests, is worthy of readers’ sympathy because of the physical agony she endured to drop weight quickly. Weight-reduction operations were more likely to be reported than face-lifts or nose jobs, as cutting one’s skin open to “melt fat away” seemed to require a level of torment and personal fortitude that was not as immediately apparent in other aesthetically oriented surgical procedures.

Thus, fan-magazine discourse generally framed plastic surgery as a frequent but clandestine practice, with the presumption that females were under greater pressure to pursue it in order to attain the stringent standards of youth and beauty demanded by Hollywood. This dynamic is evident in the fascinating case of Louis Wolheim, a stage and screen star who was under contract to Howard Hughes’s production company, Caddo, in the late 1920s. In October 1927, Wolheim publicly announced his intention to have his signature “gargoylian countenance” rebuilt so that he could play romantic roles instead of hard-boiled characters.¹² His disclosure precipitated a tsunami of press coverage that alternately supported or denounced his plan, while the Caddo Company, claiming that Wolheim’s face was in fact a studio asset, quickly moved to block the

9 Manners, “Flesh and Blood Racket,” 34.

10 “Molly O’Day Contract File,” Warner Brothers / First National Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

11 Katherine Albert, “Diet—the Menace of Hollywood,” *Photoplay Magazine*, January 1929, 32.

12 “Movie Villain to Discard Face That Made Fortune for One of ‘Sheik’ Type,” *Seattle Star*, October 27, 1927, box 2816, Howard Hughes Motion Picture Records, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (hereafter Hughes Records—all newspaper clippings in the Hughes Records cited herein are located in box 2816).

surgery. Wolheim's quest to remake himself laid bare the cultural assumptions, film-industry forces, and legal questions surrounding the new practice of plastic surgery, especially in regard to its application to motion-picture stars. The clash of these often competing influences is documented in the Howard Hughes Motion Picture Records at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, which contains numerous volumes of press clippings, contracts, and legal correspondence related to Wolheim's career. These materials indicate that Wolheim's gender and his star persona made cosmetic surgery a virtual impossibility for him, despite its widespread availability in Hollywood and his strongly stated desire to pursue it.

"The Homeliest Man in the Movies." Born in New York City in 1881 to Jewish parents who had emigrated from Russian Poland, Louis R. Wolheim earned a degree in mechanical engineering from Cornell University in 1906 and thereafter taught mathematics at Cornell Preparatory School. Scholarly sources on Wolheim's life and screen career are scarce, although Jack Spears profiled him in *Films in Review* in 1972, characterizing him as a roughhousing college football player with a broken nose. Apocryphally, Wolheim encountered Lionel Barrymore while selling cigars at a hotel in Ithaca, and Barrymore convinced him that his memorable "ugliness" could bring him success as an actor. In the 1910s, Wolheim gradually began appearing on stage and screen, and soon became known for playing heavies, including "stokers, prizefighters, tough soldiers, sadists, gangsters, [and] killers" (Figure 1).¹³ He initially gained nationwide acclaim on the stage in the 1920s for lead roles in *The Hairy Ape* (Eugene O'Neill, 1922), as an uncivilized laborer who descends into animalistic behavior when his class consciousness rises, and in *What Price Glory?* (Maxwell Anderson and Lawrence Stallings, 1924), as a World War I marine captain whose crude, swaggering behavior offers a realistic portrait of war. Wolheim, though, worked in motion pictures as early as 1914 and leveraged his stage success to secure more significant parts, culminating with a lead role in Caddo's production of *Two Arabian Knights* (Lewis Milestone) in 1927, which was the basis for Wolheim's first movie contract. The original agreement, dated December 21, 1926, and signed by Howard R. Hughes and Louis Wolheim, notes, "The contract is for one motion picture (*Two Arabian Knights*), with an option to extend . . . for one year after the production is completed, and a second option to extend for a second year."¹⁴ Wolheim remained under contract to Hughes for the rest of his life, which ended unfortunately in 1931, when he was diagnosed with advanced stomach cancer, cutting short a burgeoning Hollywood career.

Wolheim's star persona was a contradictory hybrid of thuggishness and refinement. On-screen, he was a character actor whose roles alternately demanded villainy, brutality, compassion, and humor. Off-screen, news articles and publicity called attention to his rough-and-tumble background and his education in higher mathematics, thus functioning to reinforce his robust masculinity while simultaneously offering an

13 Jack Spears, "Louis Wolheim Made a Lucrative Career out of an Unprepossessing Face," *Films in Review*, March 1972, 158.

14 "Caddo Company with Louis Wolheim—Employment Agreement, December 21, 1926" (signed by Howard R. Hughes, president; Noah Dietrich, secretary; and Louis Wolheim), cabinet 27, drawer 1, Hughes Records.

Figure 1. Louis Wolheim as a soldier in *Two Arabian Knights* (United Artists, 1927). *Motion Picture Classic*, December 1927.

explanation for the underlying intelligence and sensitivity of his portrayals, the most enduring of which emerged when he starred as old soldier Stanislaus Katczinsky in the pacifist war drama *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930). *Motion Picture Classic* titled a December 1927 feature on Wolheim “Hard-Boiled but Educated,” and a newspaper article earlier that year explained: “Before he became an actor, Wolheim was a professor of mathematics at Cornell. [He was actually an instructor at the Cornell Preparatory School, not a university professor.] But his face was too distinctive to allow him to teach for any length of time.”¹⁵

Wolheim’s tough-guy pathos depended heavily on his peculiar facial features, which included a jutting chin and forehead and a large, misshapen nose whose provenance was a frequent subject of biographical articles (Figure 2). The most popular explanation for his crumpled facial appearance was that he had sustained injuries during his days as a college football player, a story that under-

scored his educational pedigree as well as his physical prowess.

One article asserted, “Wolheim is a Cornell graduate, where he played football on the first varsity line, and so energetically did he play that his features today look very much like he had for a term of years ground them into the dust.” Another contended: “Wolheim wasn’t born with his nose in the shape it is. You might say he achieved it. Or you might say it was thrust upon him, as it was, in a football game while he was a student at Cornell.”¹⁶ Wolheim himself played up his boisterous history, hinting that his injury was the result of being punched, perhaps in a barroom fight: “It [my nose] was broken and I had it straightened. . . . But another man didn’t like the shape one night, and look at what he did.”¹⁷ In his brief biography of Wolheim, Jack Spears noted that the star was reputed to be “a heavy drinker who was always ready for a brawl” and an “agent-provocateur who . . . loved to stir up trouble.”¹⁸

In the 1920s, newspapers persistently highlighted Wolheim’s ugliness and attributed his renown to his face, chiefly his nose, and suggested that the actor agreed. “Louis

15 Francis Gilmore, “Hard-Boiled but Educated: Louis Wolheim Says a Mouthful about This Here Movie Business,” *Motion Picture Classic*, December 1927; and “Wolheim, Ugly Villain, Wants to Play Romantic Hero—So He Has His Face Fixed,” *Pittsburgh (PA) Press*, November 6, 1927, Hughes Records.

16 “Wolheim Popular in Comedy,” *San Francisco Bulletin*, October 26, 1927, and George Davis, “Prettier Nose Desired by Wolheim: Beauty Surgeon Undertakes to Help Him Qualify for Handsome Hero Movie Roles,” *Cleveland (OH) Press*, November 3, 1927, Hughes Records.

17 Quoted in “Wolheim Still Determined on Acquiring New Nose in Face of Injunction Threat,” *Los Angeles News*, October 28, 1927, Hughes Records.

18 Spears, “Louis Wolheim Made a Lucrative Career,” 158–159.

Figure 2. A sketch of Louis Wolheim, the “homeliest man in the movies,” by John Decker in the *Los Angeles Record*, October 26, 1927.

Wolheim’s pugnacious nose, like Ben Turpin’s crossed eye, is winning him fame and fortune in the movies. [He] admits that it was his homely physiognomy as much as anything else which aided in putting him over in his first big screen role and won him a long term contract in pictures,” mused the *Denver News* in 1927.¹⁹ Wolheim was considered a character actor whose appearance suited him for rugged, coarse, or humorous parts but not heroics or romance. “Muscular, tending toward thick-set, Wolheim is disfigured facially by a flattened nose. His flattened nose fits all right, with a square, rather protruding lower jaw and chin, for brutal-character parts, but for a hero—it just isn’t done on the stage or screen,” declared the *Moscow Star Mirror*.²⁰ The narrow range of roles available to him proved a source of dissatisfaction for Wolheim, who decided to take matters

into his own hands and redirect his professional course. “There is nothing so cramping to one’s style in the art of acting, Mr. Wolheim finds, as to be the possessor of an ugly mug. So he is about to part with the face that has brought him fame and fortune in order to go on unimpeded in the playing of bigger and better roles,” announced the *Los Angeles Times* in October 1927. Rooted in his desire to expand his acting repertoire, the rationale for Wolheim’s proposal to remake himself displays internal contradictions that call attention to the conflicting influences governing his screen opportunities.

“Hard-Boiled Actor Wants Handsome Face.” On October 26, 1927, the national press began reporting—via stories carried by the wire services that were published and republished all across the United States—that screen star Louis Wolheim was planning to have nasal surgery to change his appearance. A series of lurid headlines trumpeted the news:

- Homeliest Man in the Movies Will Have His Face “Lifted” (*Los Angeles Record*, October 26, 1927)
- Actor to “Cut Off” Ugly Face That Gave Him Fortune (*San Francisco Daily News*, October 26, 1927)
- Wolheim to Have Face Remodeled: Character Star Weary of Plug-Ugly Roles (*Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1927)

19 “Wolheim’s Nose Winning Him Fame: His Massive Beezer Stands Out Like Sore Thumb in *Two Arabian Knights*,” *Denver (CO) News*, October 27, 1927, Hughes Records.

20 “Louis Wolheim’s Nose Goes to Court,” *Moscow (ID) Star Mirror*, November 3, 1927, Hughes Records.

- Hairy Ape to Go under Knife for Nose Like Jack's [a reference to Jack Dempsey, a fighter who had undergone plastic surgery] (*El Paso Times*, October 27, 1927)
- Wolheim's Nose to Be Bobbed: Will Undergo Operation for the Sake of Art (*New York Telegraph*, October 28, 1927)

The procedure was to be executed by Dr. W. E. Balsinger, "who revamped Jack Dempsey's nose several years ago, [and] who has made a specialty of re-making the faces of motion picture players and prize fighters. [He] stated the operation would be performed Monday [October 31, 1927]."²¹

At least one article noted that Wolheim had undergone a prior nose job, although that procedure had prompted no public comment or debate, as it predated his career as a Hollywood actor: "Science, which restored the shape of the Wolheim nose after the first accident [a fight?], is again to be called upon to correct the terrifying, crumpled mass made deliberately during a later disagreement."²² Most sources emphasized the aesthetic effect Wolheim hoped to achieve, although some also touted the health benefits of the surgery:

- "The beauty operation, for such it will be, will center mostly on the reshaping of his pugilistic nose. The project, it was said, will convert his unusual physiognomy into one of more normal proportions."²³
- "An operation which will confine itself to the straightening and beautifying of his [Wolheim's] nose and elimination of scar tissues will be performed."²⁴
- "[The operation] will make respiration a matter of less exertion."²⁵

The chief reason Wolheim cited for a surgical intervention was his wish to avoid being typecast as a thug or scoundrel:

I'm tired of being the tough villain. . . . People are under the impression that my homely mug has been responsible for my success on the stage and screen. Personally I believe I am an actor—and with my face remodeled I'll be able to get out of the rut of playing one type of role.

Right now I'm considered a "type." They think my looks carry me any place, and when there is a role that demands a terrible-looking creature—they think of me. I'm going to prove I'm an actor. I'm going to discard the face that has been my fortune and to some people a joy forever.²⁶

21 "Homeliest Man in the Movies Will Have His Face 'Lifted,'" *Los Angeles Record*, October 26, 1927, Hughes Records. Dr. W. E. Balsinger was the plastic-surgery expert interviewed by Dorothy Manners for her 1929 feature article in *Motion Picture Magazine*, "The Flesh and Blood Racket," cited earlier.

22 "Wolheim Still Determined on Acquiring New Nose in Face of Injunction Threat," *Los Angeles News*, October 28, 1927, Hughes Records.

23 "Homeliest Man in the Movies."

24 "Wolheim's Nose to Be Bobbed: Will Undergo Operation for the Sake of Art—Dr. Balsinger to Operate Monday," *New York Telegraph*, October 28, 1927, Hughes Records.

25 "Movie Contracts Prevent Wolheim from Fixing His Nose," *Hollister (CA) Free Lance*, October 27, 1927, Hughes Records.

26 Quoted in "Homeliest Man in the Movies."

More than simply evading “one type of role,” Wolheim was also aiming for a specific type: “I think I have the ability to play romantic roles as well as John Barrymore, Ronald Coleman, John Gilbert or any of those fellows. My face has been my only handicap,” he insisted.²⁷

Wolheim negotiated a narrow course in making his case for surgery, simultaneously claiming that he didn’t want his rough appearance to limit his roles as an actor and that the value of an actor did not depend on his (or her) looks:

- “Some people say my face is my fortune—and to a large extent it has been. But I am an actor and I don’t need an abnormally homely face to put me over.”²⁸
- “He [Wolheim] is going in for beauty, he says, because there are more and better roles for a hero with a straight nose than for one with a nose that’s crooked.”²⁹
- “I think I’m a good enough actor to make good . . . if I am good looking. If I can’t get a job as a handsome man—well, I’ll go back to teaching mathematics again.”³⁰

In fact, despite his substantial stage and screen roles and the gratitude he expressed for the opportunities he had been accorded, Wolheim’s public pronouncements suggested that he did not consider himself truly successful. “I may look like a prize fighter and my face may be my fortune, but no ugly man has made a success on the screen,” he declared.³¹ In other words, men who did not meet the standards of Anglo-Saxon attractiveness found it difficult to achieve stardom as motion-picture players. Such standards included an aquiline or Roman nose, thin with a slight bridge, inherited from Greek traditions of beauty. Yet Wolheim acknowledged his fame and fortune numerous times, making it clear that he had achieved at least some level of public recognition with “the toughest-looking face on the screen or stage” and its inimitable “cartilaginous olfactory protuberance.”³²

Wolheim’s physiognomy both limited and advantaged him. He claimed that he didn’t “need” an “abnormally homely face to put [him] over,” as he could rely on his acting proficiency. He wanted audiences to look beyond his face even as he argued that he needed a specific appearance for them to do so; an attractive visage was the blank slate upon which a talented actor could imprint a memorable character. Wolheim’s insistence that skill—and not appearance—was a key ingredient of screen success echoed a concern of many Hollywood stars of the period, who continually emphasized the labor involved in motion-picture acting, lest it seem no more than posing

27 A version of this quotation appeared in several articles, including “Wolheim to Have Face Remodeled: Character Star Weary of Plug-Ugly Roles and Longs for Romantic Parts,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1927; and “Wolheim, Ugly Villain”—both in the Hughes Records.

28 Quoted in “Wolheim’s Nose to Be Bobbed.”

29 Davis, “Prettier Nose Desired by Wolheim.”

30 Quoted in “Wolheim, Ugly Villain.”

31 Quoted in “Wolheim, Ugly Villain.”

32 “Court Order Halts Actor from Acquiring a Barrymore Profile,” *Columbus (OH) State Journal*, November 10, 1927; and “Court Rules against Actor’s New Nose,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 10, 1927, Hughes Records.

for the camera. As Richard deCordova notes in *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America*, the idea that motion-picture players actually performed rather than simply positioned themselves for the camera, as in a photograph, gained gradual acceptance in the 1910s.³³ Stars craved respect for their specialized efforts, and they wanted to prove that their labor was difficult enough to warrant the generous monetary rewards associated with it.

Of course, if hard work and performance expertise did trump appearance as a prerequisite for screen success, then an accomplished actor like Wolheim would have had no need to seek surgical alteration, as he could have competed for the romantic parts he coveted, roles modeled after characters played by stars like John Gilbert, Ronald Coleman, and Rudolph Valentino. Despite his rising fame as a character actor, Wolheim was precluded from consideration as a romantic lead, and reactions to his plan to reshape himself in order to secure such roles were surprisingly fierce—and divided.

Beautification Backlash. Wolheim's announcement that he would pursue surgery to repair and reshape his nose was met with a sustained wave of public response. Indeed, although the events related to his scheme transpired in late October and early November 1927, reports and editorial columns regarding the topic appeared regularly through December 1927 and even in January and February 1928, with newspapers representing the issue as if it were unfolding at the time of publication, even though in most cases they were simply rehashing information that they had previously received over the wire services. Thus, the intensity of the interest—and the controversy—surrounding Wolheim's proposed plastic surgery can be gauged at least partially by the persistent coverage it elicited. As represented in the press, opinions regarding Wolheim's operation were polarized between two apparently irreconcilable camps that either strongly supported or vigorously opposed the procedure.

The opposition was led by John Considine Jr., a production supervisor for Howard Hughes who was tasked with managing *Two Arabian Knights*, Louis Wolheim's first film for the Caddo Company. In mid- to late 1927, the period of concern for this article, there is evidence that the relationship between Considine and his employer, Hughes, became increasingly strained. For example, in a telegram dated July 9, 1927, Considine complains:

I am very sorry that you issued secret instructions to some of your employees to move the contents of the cuttingroom [*sic*] to another studio without at least showing me the courtesy of telling me why. Aside from other considerations you must know I am as sincerely interested in the picture [*Two Arabian Knights*] as you and regardless of arguments we have had I think you will admit that in most instances my judgement has been good enough to entitle you to have some confidence in it.³⁴

33 Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 34.

34 Telegram from John W. Considine Jr. to Howard Hughes at the Ambassador Hotel, July 9, 1927, cabinet 27, drawer 4, Hughes Records.

In August, Considine became further incensed at Hughes's decision to give producing credit for *Two Arabian Knights* to Caddo rather than to John W. Considine Jr. In a letter to Hughes's lawyer, Neil S. McCarthy, Considine complains, "If Howard were to use the words 'Produced by the Caddo Company,' to my way of thinking he would be taking away credit that is due me, to say nothing about breaking his word and contract."³⁵ Despite Considine's dissatisfaction with Hughes's handling of the producing credit for *Two Arabian Knights*, he continued working as a producer for Caddo, overseeing Wolheim's next film, *Tempest* (shot in 1927 and released in 1928), and spearheading the company's response when Wolheim announced his plastic surgery goal.

On October 28, 1927, two days after the initial newspaper reports appeared, Considine issued a statement to the press that expressed his dismay in no uncertain terms:

I am amazed at press accounts of a proposed facial operation upon Louis Wolheim, whom Howard Hughes of Caddo Productions and I have under contract. For the information of those concerned, I want to announce that we have a legal contract with Mr. Wolheim in which he pledges his service to us as an actor. We engaged Mr. Wolheim . . . because his services are unique and distinctive. I do not intend to have his personality ruined by a so-called plastic operation. . . . If Mr. Wolheim proceeds with his announced intention of "beautifying" himself by facial surgery, it will be a breach of his contract with me, and I will consider I have legal redress against both him and Dr. Balsinger.³⁶

Considine's argument against the operation depended on the claim that Wolheim's nose represented a noteworthy asset to the Caddo Company—an asset no longer wholly controlled by the actor, who was under contract as a motion-picture player.

The contract in question was dated May 26, 1927, and had been signed by Louis Wolheim and Howard Hughes. It contained at least two clauses that gave Considine potential legal recourse if Wolheim altered his appearance:

If at any time or times during said term [one year, with an option to renew] the appearance of the Artist in feature, poise, or form shall detrimentally change either by reason or habit or from natural or other causes, the Producer may terminate this contract. . . .

It is represented to the Producer by the Artist and it is agreed that the services of the Artist herein provided for are of a special, unique, unusual, extraordinary, and intellectual character, which gives them particular value, the loss of which cannot be reasonably or adequately compensated by damages in an action at law, and that in the event of the violation of any of the terms hereof, the Producer shall be entitled to secure an injunction to prevent the breach thereof.³⁷

35 Letter from John W. Considine Jr. to Neil S. McCarthy (attorney for Howard Hughes), 504 Sun Finance Building, Los Angeles, California, August 18, 1927, cabinet 27, drawer 4, Hughes Records.

36 Quoted in "Court May Halt Scheme to Re-Etch Actor's 'Burn Pan,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1927, Hughes Records.

37 Contract between Caddo Company and Louis Wolheim, May 26, 1927, cabinet 27, drawer 4, Hughes Records.

Considine's position reflected the more informal and widespread belief that Wolheim's face was the actor's—and therefore the Caddo Company's—fortune. Without it, Wolheim was worthless, or at least worth much less, as a screen performer. Extrapolating from this conviction, editorial writers could not understand why he would want to jeopardize the wealth his face was generating. “That Hollywood actor [Wolheim] had better bear with the face he has than fly to features he knows not of,” observed the *San Francisco Bulletin*.³⁸ “People are never satisfied with being what they are,” the *San Jose Mercury-Herald* concluded. “Mr. Wolheim will be made over by plastic surgery if the company with which he has a contract can't stop him from ruining his greatest asset.”³⁹ Even more strongly, the *Arkansas City Traveler* dismissively declared, “Wolheim had an assured future . . . and having his map changed is just silly.”⁴⁰

Some editorialists developed the argument even further, finding Wolheim ungrateful and even morally corrupt for being willing to turn his back on his good fortune, noting the rarity of his particular degree of “ugliness”:

- “What's this guy Wolheim kicking about? He's ugly, sure. But hasn't he this to be thankful for, that being ugly, he happens to be ugly enough to be famous? . . . His specialty is ugliness, and he's a world champion at it. The fool—he has had just enough success now to think what a failure he is. . . . Louis Wolheim gets to be the world's most famous ugly man, and now he wants to be beautiful. It would make a prize-fighter's manager break down and weep.”⁴¹
- “It is hard to understand why Louis Wolheim, the stage and screen actor, should want to have his features remodeled along classic lines. Heaven knows there is a plethora of beauty, both feminine and masculine, in Hollywood. . . . No, Mr. Wolheim. As a ‘hard-boiled egg’ you began, and as a ‘hard-boiled egg’ you must continue.”⁴²

Eschewing his singular degree of unsightliness would doom Wolheim to becoming something depressingly pedestrian: a dime-a-dozen romantic hero, thereby working against the laws of supply and demand and undermining his earning power. “The chances are 100 to 1 that Wolheim, with a conventionally molded face, would be a dismal screen flop,” insisted the *Syracuse Herald*. “After all, good looks are commonplace, but a face like the professor's—ah, 'tis a gift of the gods.”⁴³

Those who leaped onto the antisurgery bandwagon expressed discomfort at the prospect of a male screen star pursuing beautification. This unease was rarely stated as direct opposition but rather as a sustained note of emphasis on the troublesome pairing of Wolheim's rough-and-tumble persona with such phrases as “beauty operation,” “beauty surgery,” “beauty plans,” “beauty surgeon,” “pretty face,” and “prettier

38 “To Keep Him Ugly,” *San Francisco Bulletin*, October 29, 1927, Hughes Records.

39 “Beauty and Ugliness,” *San Jose (CA) Mercury-Herald*, October 29, 1927, Hughes Records.

40 Untitled editorial, *Arkansas City (KS) Traveler*, October 29, 1927, Hughes Records.

41 “Wolheim's Face,” *El Dorado (AK) News*, November 2, 1927, Hughes Records.

42 “On Beautifying Louis Wolheim,” *Hartford (CT) Courant*, November 3, 1927, Hughes Records.

43 Untitled editorial, *Syracuse (NY) Herald*, November 8, 1927, Hughes Records.

Figure 3. Quotation marks around "beautiful" and "pretty" in this photo headline and caption indicate the awkwardness of such terms as descriptors for Wolheim. From the *International Illustrated News*, as published in the *DuBois (PA) Express*, November 5, 1927.

nose." Often, quotation marks were deployed around beauty-related terms, signifying the foreignness of their application to a case like Wolheim's (Figure 3).

Wolheim's admirers were also quick to point out that the star, despite his striking appearance, was not truly repulsive and therefore did not require alteration. "This particular artist is far from repellent facially," the *Flushing (NY) Journal* reassured its readers.⁴⁴ "His Face Is Not His Own," an editorial reprinted in at least ten newspapers nationwide, described Wolheim as "beautifully ugly, financially ugly," and the *San Francisco Bulletin* claimed that Wolheim's attractive homeliness had earned him "fervent adoration among female motion-picture goers," implying that as a character actor Wolheim had already achieved the kind of female-centered fame typically reserved for matinee idols.⁴⁵ Thus, he had no need of a plastic operation to remake his features, as there was nothing for him to gain; he had both stardom and the admiration female fans typically reserved for more attractive men.

Finally, some newspapers wryly suggested that there would not be a surgery for Wolheim because his objective and the responses to it may have been staged for the purpose of publicity. These objections came despite the fact that Wolheim had directly and sincerely expressed his desire for the beautification surgery. "When [Wolheim's] managers heard of his desire to be beautified up to a par with Jack Barrymore and Jack Gilbert they threatened an injunction. At least, the press agent says they did!" commented the *Hoboken Observer* in "Wants His Face Re-Made So He'll Be Beautiful," a wire service article published in more than a dozen newspapers.⁴⁶ In addition to assuring Wolheim that good looks would not make him a screen success, a column in the *Syracuse Herald* also cast doubt on Wolheim's devotion to his proposed course of action: "Perhaps I am doing Prof. Wolheim an injustice, but I question whether Louis ever seriously contemplated a visit to Dr. W. E. Balingier's beauty parlor. I have a well-defined hunch that the story was conceived by Prof. Wolheim's press agent, and that the professor, with an eye to the front page[s] of the nation, obligingly said, 'Go ahead.'"⁴⁷ The *Redlands Daily Facts* went further, flatly

44 "What Price Beauty?," *Flushing (NY) Journal*, November 2, 1927, Hughes Records.

45 "His Face Is Not His Own," *Dunkirk Observer (NY)*, November 12, 1927; and "Wolheim Popular in Comedy," *San Francisco Bulletin*, October 26, 1927, Hughes Records.

46 "Wants His Face Re-Made So He'll Be Beautiful," *Hoboken (NJ) Observer*, November 9, 1927, Hughes Records.

47 Untitled editorial, *Syracuse Herald*.

declaring, "That was a pretty good piece of publicity pulled by Louis Wolheim and one of the film companies."⁴⁸

Some writers were quite strident in their publicity stunt accusations, particularly in regard to their scathing descriptions of press agents. In "The Press Agent Gets By," the *Glendale Press* sarcastically opined: "There is much to admire about the publicity promoter. The celerity with which he dresses a fake as news and gets it safely by the hard-boiled man at the desk shows him to have the mind of a diplomatist."⁴⁹ The *Chicago Daily Tribune* painted a darkly ironic picture of press agents casting an envious eye on Wolheim's successful bid for publicity: "Press agents of other actors are going up and down Main Street, Hollywood[,] gnashing their teeth because they did not think of it [the proposed plastic surgery] first."⁵⁰ Studio press agents did initiate or attempt to manage public discourse for many Hollywood stars, but in Wolheim's case, there is evidence that the Caddo Company, which held his contract, was blindsided by his stated desire for plastic surgery and took legal action to stop it, making it unlikely that his plan was solely a bid for publicity.

Notwithstanding the disparagement of publicity stunts and press agents expressed in such editorials, the most blistering and dismissive arguments against the surgery generally relied on Wolheim's temerity at rejecting the good fortune his unusual looks had brought him or the inappropriateness of a man pursuing facial beautification. Yet Wolheim's announcement also generated a flood of support that ran the gamut from grudging acceptance of aesthetic surgery for a man to stalwart defense of the actor's right to alter his face in any way he wished. Pragmatists conceded that Wolheim had no choice but to reshape his countenance if he wished to pursue romantic roles. "So long as he looks the brawny rough, how can he hope to be cast as the handsome hero?" asked the *Twin Falls News* pointedly.⁵¹ "The quintessence of a romantic actor is beauty of face," echoed the *Providence Tribune*. "Cyrano de Bergerac as Don Juan cannot be visualized. It matters not how much the ham a romantic actor is; if he has a pretty face managers will cast him."⁵² Such authors further hinted that perhaps Wolheim knew his own mind and should be left alone to pursue his proposed course of action. "Maybe he [Wolheim] nose best," ventured the *Oakland Post Inquirer*.⁵³ "May be [*sic*] Louis really is tired of being tough in appearance when his whole soul longs for true expression in the romantic," mused the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, shifting from pragmatism to poetry in its support for Wolheim's scheme.⁵⁴

A reverence for science was characteristic of the zeitgeist, and some commentators argued that Wolheim should be able to have the surgery simply because it was available. He was an ugly man who might experience adverse reactions because of his looks, and (thankfully) his unfortunate problem could be solved through the miracle

48 Untitled editorial, *Redlands (CA) Daily Facts*, November 3, 1927, Hughes Records.

49 "The Press Agent Gets By," *Glendale (CA) Press*, November 3, 1927, Hughes Records.

50 "The Press Agents Go to Law," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 1, 1927, Hughes Records.

51 "What's in a Face?," *Twin Falls (ID) News*, November 11, 1927, Hughes Records.

52 "Marvels of Science," *Providence (RI) Tribune*, October 29, 1927, Hughes Records.

53 "Actor Seeks Beauty: Maybe He Nose Best," *Oakland (CA) Post Inquirer*, October 27, 1927, Hughes Records.

54 "A Human Trait," *Buffalo (NY) Courier-Express*, November 1, 1927, Hughes Records.

of modern medical advancements: “The marvels of science are so great and appear so rapidly that the ordinary layman stands baffled and bewildered before them, like the country jay looking at the giraffe for the first time and doubting the testimony of his own eyes. . . . These marvels open interesting possibilities. Louis Wolheim admits it himself, he has a face that would frighten children. . . . Science is befriending the ugly man.”⁵⁵ Such rhetoric associated Wolheim’s choice with the traditionally male arena of science, implying that men who opted for plastic surgery were simply taking advantage of a new era of innovation. It also stressed the gravity of his case, and the noble imperative for his actions. Wolheim was not trying to become more attractive on a whim; his face was so disturbing that it put children at risk. Luckily, modern science could come to his aid.

Accepting that Wolheim’s looks constituted a “problem” was a prerequisite for those who wished to offer their support for plastic surgery, but many editorialists were loath to describe him as an “ugly” man who was trying to become “beautiful”—or even less ugly. As Elizabeth Haiken notes, Americans of this period “viewed plastic surgery as a gendered spectrum, with the reconstructive work men needed at one end and the cosmetic or aesthetic work women desired at the other.”⁵⁶ Men choosing to pursue such procedures solely to improve their appearance risked charges of effeminacy. Thus, although Wolheim’s supporters acknowledged the goal he was pursuing, they insisted that he was not being vain or taking excessive pride in his appearance. “So Louis Wolheim is going to have his crooked nose straightened, and reshaped into more nearly classic lines, by a beauty surgeon of Hollywood. What causes this? Vanity? No,” reported the *Cleveland Press*.⁵⁷ Similarly, the *St. Paul Dispatch* proclaimed: “It is surely not vanity which inspires Mr. Wolheim. On his visit to St. Paul [Minneapolis] two years ago he seemed the least vain of men. His decision must be accepted as one of those sacrifices to art of which so much is said.”⁵⁸ In other words, if not for the imperatives of his art, Wolheim would have no interest in improving his looks.

Like the fan-magazine articles that featured Molly O’Day’s fat-removal procedure, these editorials emphasized the personal sacrifice involved in Wolheim’s proposed action and the suffering that would be a likely outcome of the operation. The additional wrinkle for Wolheim, as a man, was that such articles had to recuperate his masculinity. The *Fremont Tribune* insisted that what Wolheim sought was a “manly beauty” and marveled at the fact that he wanted a facial transformation badly enough to undergo an operation, hinting at the fortitude and courage his resolve signified.⁵⁹ Both male and female stars who underwent plastic operations or other procedures designed to enhance their attractiveness needed to prove that they were not following an easy path to reshaping their appearance, but men had the added burden of demonstrating that they were making their choices purely for art, not for any predilection toward beauty or attractiveness, which was presumably a more passive, feminine trait. “Since

55 “Marvels of Science.”

56 Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 103.

57 Davis, “Prettier Nose Desired by Wolheim.”

58 “Wolheim’s New Nose,” *St. Paul (MN) Dispatch*, November 2, 1927, Hughes Records.

59 “The Face and the Fortune,” *Fremont (NE) Tribune*, November 10, 1927, Hughes Records.

aesthetic procedures (elective surgeries) are understood as the sign of vanity . . . they seem to be automatically associated with the feminine. Males who undertake aesthetic surgery are thus feminized,” theorizes Sander Gilman.⁶⁰ Much of the publicity around Wolheim’s proposed procedure downplayed his vanity and emphasized his active choices as a man.

In Wolheim’s favor was an argument rooted in a model of traditional masculinity and the inviolable personal freedom it implied. “We consider a man’s face, whether beautiful or otherwise, his own,” asserted the *Trenton State Gazette*. “If a man is not free to do as he pleases with his own face the last vestige of his ancient heritage of liberty must be considered as having been lost.”⁶¹ This approach was closely aligned with the notion that men were property owners whose bodies constituted their personal holdings. Thus, any limitation on their rights to that property ran contrary to the country’s principles of liberty. Manhood was also closely associated with economic independence, which seemed to depend at least partly on appearance in America’s emerging culture of self-improvement and competition.⁶²

A related justification was that motion-picture acting—and the contracts actors needed to sign—represented a form of discrimination. “A movie actor’s life is far from a bed of roses when he’s under contract with a producer,” observed the *Topeka Journal*. “The larger the contract, the less freedom he enjoys.”⁶³ The *New Orleans Item* went further, describing Wolheim as a victim of “undue discrimination” who “isn’t even permitted to change his face for the better.”⁶⁴ Such arguments reveal the complex gender dynamics that attended the emergent practice of aesthetic surgery in the early twentieth century—and its close association with Hollywood. Both male and female stars had facial and physical disfigurement clauses in their contracts and faced the personal restrictions noted here. But only in the case of a male star like Wolheim did the press bemoan the loss of his right to modify his appearance in accordance with his personal wishes.

The Battle Concludes. The outcome of the public wrangling over Wolheim’s facial features was described in the press as a “compromise” between the actor and the Caddo Company. Extrapolating from the numerous articles and editorials that emerged from October 1927 through February 1928, and relying on the earliest reported dates for developments in the case, I have constructed a timeline of the relevant events:

- *October 26, 1927:* Louis Wolheim announced his intention to undergo a nose operation that would improve his appearance.

60 Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, 36.

61 “A Man’s Right to His Face,” *Trenton (NJ) State Gazette*, November 2, 1927, Hughes Records.

62 Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 32–33, 94; for more discussion on this point, see Heather Addison, *Hollywood and the Rise of Physical Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

63 “The Thorny Side,” *Topeka (KS) Journal*, October 31, 1927, Hughes Records.

64 “Screened Constraint,” *New Orleans (LA) Item*, November 12, 1927, Hughes Records.

- *October 27, 1927*: Producer John Considine Jr. publicly cautioned that such a procedure would constitute breach of contract and declared his intention to seek legal redress if Wolheim proceeded.
- *October 29, 1927*: On behalf of the Caddo Company, Considine secured a restraining order from Superior Judge Charles Burnell of California, temporarily barring Wolheim from pursuing the surgery.
- *October 30, 1927*: Wolheim underwent an alternative operation that did not alter his appearance; instead, it restructured his nasal passages to allow him to breathe more freely.
- *November 7, 1927*: Superior Judge Gates of California granted Caddo Productions a permanent injunction, barring Louis Wolheim from pursuing any procedure that would visibly alter his facial features while he was under contract to the studio.

It is unclear whether the Caddo Company the modified operation that took place on October 30, but its result did not violate the terms of the restraining order or the subsequent permanent injunction (Figures 4, 5, and 6).

As the timeline makes clear, Wolheim's plan for cosmetic surgery was swiftly quashed, suggesting that the industry's position on preserving stars' physical assets and the jurisprudence required for enacting that protection were in place by the late 1920s. The Caddo Company was able to invoke two clauses in Wolheim's contract that gave

the company legal grounds to prevent any surgery that visibly altered his nose from taking place. Across the industry, both male and female stars were subject to some variation of a standard "facial and physical disfigurement clause" that allowed studios to end or temporarily suspend their employment if their appearance changed materially. Female stars were also likely to have "weight clauses" added to their contracts, making the terms of their employment more physically restrictive than those of their male counterparts—and magnifying the likelihood that they would opt for plastic surgery.⁶⁵ Before Wolheim's case, the goal of maintaining or recuperating a star's iconic appearance had prompted studios to encourage performers

Figure 4. Despite the fact that Wolheim's compromise operation did not alter his looks, some articles described it as a "beauty nap" from which he emerged with a new, more handsome profile. *Rochester (NY) Journal*, November 8, 1927.

65 See Addison, *Hollywood and the Rise of Physical Culture*.

Louis Wolheim, United Artists player, recently underwent a nasal operation which will enable him to breathe more easily. The less beautiful of the "Twa Arabian Knights" wears an expression of sadness or regret.

Don't get excited; they didn't do any cutting. Louis Wolheim was just about to have his face made à la Barrymore, as this photo shows, but Louis' boss claimed that there was money in that mug, so the alterations were postponed

Figures 5 and 6. Other publications used the photo in Figure 4 to highlight the fact that Wolheim's operation had simply allowed him to breathe more easily or implied that plastic surgery had been "postponed" indefinitely, as did *Motion Picture News*, November 11, 1927, and *Motion Picture Magazine*, February 1928.

to pursue plastic operations, or at least to look the other way if they chose that option. In the case of contract star Molly O'Day, mentioned earlier, First National threatened to discontinue her contract because of weight gain, and O'Day voluntarily underwent a painful procedure to remove excess fat from her body.

The novelty of Wolheim's situation was that a studio maneuvered to prevent him from undergoing aesthetic surgery, a course of action that highlighted the gendered nature of such procedures. It is true that Wolheim sought to change his appearance, while most female stars, including O'Day, were attempting to maintain their looks. Yet both Wolheim and his female counterparts were pursuing gendered ideals of attractiveness. Arguably, there was an outcry against Wolheim versus sympathy and support for O'Day because Wolheim's open desire for a beauty operation put his "tough guy" masculinity at risk, whereas O'Day's surgery merely reinforced her femininity. The courts validated the studio's strategy for legal intervention, suggesting that stars' bodies were corporate assets rather than inviolable personal

property. The principle that studios had the right to make decisions regarding the physical appearance of stars under contract, especially male stars, had yet to gain widespread cultural acceptance, and the fierce debate surrounding Wolheim's case was filtered through a paradigm in which the external control and potential beautification of male bodies were both potentially offensive prospects.

When Wolheim's aesthetic surgery was proscribed by Caddo Productions, first by a temporary court order and then by a permanent injunction, press responses reflected the bifurcated nature of the debate that surrounded his goals, ranging from indignant hand-wringing over the insensitivity of Hollywood studios to philosophical acknowledgment of a legal environment in which performers could not make unilateral

decisions regarding changes to their appearance. “Heartless Film Magnates Won’t Let Doctors Streamline Wolheim’s Nose!” screamed an accusatory headline in the *Syracuse American* when Wolheim’s studio was granted a temporary injunction.⁶⁶ Other newspapers were less insistent in assigning blame but staked out the same rhetorical ground, sympathizing with Wolheim while colorfully announcing the dramatic turn of events:

- “Hollywood’s Homeliest Ham—Pugnacious Proboscis Proves Popular—Start Suit So Slicings Stop” (*Tulare [CA] Advance Register*, October 28)
- “Actor Denied Straight Nose: Court Restrains Wolheim from Tampering with Appendage” (*Morning Olympian [WA]*, October 30)
- “‘Tough Boy’ Must Keep Ugly Mug” (*New Orleans Tribune*, October 30)
- “Film ‘Ugly Man’ Restrained from Altering Looks” (*Anaconda [MT] Standard*, October 31)
- “Actor’s Face Is His Fortune, but He Can’t Get It Changed” (*San Jose [CA] Mercury-Herald*, October 31)
- “Wolheim’s Nose Must Stay Humped or [He Will] Face \$1,000,000 Damage Suit: Classic Proboscis Idea Roils Film Villain’s Producers” (*Spokane [WA] Spokesman-Review*, November 6)
- “Star Told Not to Alter Nose: Wolheim Producers Claim Equity in Ugly Face of Actor” (*San Diego Sun*, November 9)
- “Wolheim Must Remain Ugly: Court Ruling Blasts Actor’s Dream of Becoming Handsome” (*Boston Traveler*, November 9)
- “Homely Is Told to Refrain from Beauty Shop” (*Medford [OR] News*, November 9)

Such headlines highlight the incongruousness of juxtaposing Wolheim’s exaggerated masculinity with beauty surgery and a lack of personal agency. Here was a homely, pugnacious tough boy seeking beautification, something difficult to justify for its own sake. Adding ironic insult to injury was the fact that this rugged, powerful man was not free to make decisions about altering his own body. Discussing the temporary injunction that had been issued because Wolheim’s production company claimed that the current \$1,000,000 film in which he was starring, *Tempest*, would be in jeopardy if he proceeded with the surgery, one editorial demanded, “Does a man run his own nose?,” and then flippantly called attention to Hollywood’s preoccupation with appearance and the impossibility of fully controlling every aspect of stars’ bodies: “If \$1,000,000 depends upon a man’s continuously enduring the same nose, false teeth, warts, or face worms [*sic*], for instance, it should be so specified in the contract and become one of the considerations. . . . Verily, unlimited specifications are a vital essential in dealing with noses, ears, mouth, or other features worn conspicuously in Los Angeles.”⁶⁷ Notably, this critique and others of its kind did not denounce the outcome of Wolheim’s case because the public was uneasy with Hollywood’s physical culture or the film industry’s

66 “Heartless Film Magnates Won’t Let Doctor Streamline Wolheim’s Nose,” *Syracuse (NY) American*, November 6, 1927, Hughes Records.

67 “Weakness of Contracts,” *Denver (CO) News*, November 6, 1927, Hughes Records.

close association with the emerging practice of plastic surgery. Rather, what America wrestled with in 1927 and 1928 was the unprecedented and uncomfortable reality that these phenomena might not only prompt a star with a hypermasculine persona to seek beautification but also deny him the power to control his body.

"A Man's Right to His Face." Whether reported with factual accuracy or not, Wolheim's case generated extensive publicity because it threatened to produce and then did produce an enfeebled tough guy. The initial aspect of that threat was beautification, an outcome thwarted by Caddo. And yet, in preventing Wolheim's "feminization," the studio and legal system enacted an alternate form of symbolic castration, demonstrating that a male star under contract in Hollywood did not have sufficient personal agency to "run his own nose." Significantly, prizefighters who pursued plastic surgery were not subject to the same dynamics that Wolheim faced as a Hollywood star. For example, there was no public outcry or court action when boxer Jack Dempsey had his nose reshaped by Dr. W. E. Balsinger several years before Wolheim sought a similar procedure.⁶⁸ Although Dempsey did engage in the feminine practice of beautification, his outsized masculinity was sufficient to recuperate and sustain his persona of strength because the legal and cultural considerations that restricted Wolheim did not apply to a prizefighter: Dempsey was not under contract to preserve a specific appearance, and his pugilism provided ongoing and obvious proof of his masculinity. Wolheim, by contrast, wished to employ his new nose to become a matinee idol, a potentially emasculating path.

The notion that male screen stars were more effeminate than their counterparts in other professions was not new, even in the 1920s, when there were suspicions that matinee idols like Rudolph Valentino were "woman-made"—discovered by female screenwriters and popularized by female fans who viewed them as sexual objects.⁶⁹ But accusations of effeminacy were typically limited to romantic stars, whose fame seemed at least partially dependent on pleasing, elegant features. Wolheim was a character actor whose persona incorporated a sense of refinement; as I have noted, his Ivy League education and experience as a mathematics instructor were repeatedly acknowledged and seemed to account for the nuance and intelligence of his screen portrayals. However, the key aspect of Wolheim's very masculine screen persona was the outsized ugliness of his face, which, as the press noted, involved a "massive bezer" that stood out "like a sore thumb" and suited him to play the "brawny rough."⁷⁰ Thus, his hard-boiled masculinity could not be contained by the civilizing potential of education; it was something raw and powerful. Yet when Wolheim declared that he wanted to be more attractive—a spurious prospect at the outset for a man with his screen persona—he very publicly discovered that he was not free to make decisions about his physical attributes.

68 "Esthetic Age in Boxing Reflected in New Noses," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1928, A5.

69 See Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), especially chap. 3, "'Optic Intoxication: Rudolph Valentino and Dance Madness,'" 150–198.

70 "Wolheim's Nose Winning Him Fame" and "What's in a Face?," *Twin Falls (ID) News*, November 11, 1927, Hughes Records.

Ethnicity may have also been a factor in reactions to Wolheim's plan. His heritage as a Jewish man was not directly acknowledged in the press, although code words around the size and misshapeness of his nose likely signified his Jewishness. Jewish noses have long been viewed as the sign of a "primitive nature" and have thus been targeted for surgical modification.⁷¹ Vaudeville star Fanny Brice, who had her nose scaled down in 1923, was applauded in the press for reducing her "conspicuous feature" to achieve "normalcy."⁷² Beauty was not a stated goal of her procedure, although, as a woman, Brice would likely have received praise for such a desired outcome. Wolheim's defenders noted his right to pursue nasal surgery, perhaps as a veiled admission that passing was a socially approved course of action for Jewish citizens. But Wolheim wanted to do more than "normalize" his facial features; he openly sought a diminutive facial profile worthy of a romantic matinee idol, thus potentially undermining the normative masculinity that a nose job could help him secure.

The possibility that one of Hollywood's toughest male stars would seek and then be denied beautification surgery was extraordinary, disturbing, and fascinating because of the seemingly irresolvable contradictions involved in Wolheim's proposed course of action and its outcome. Once the legal battle had concluded, Wolheim tried to return to a kind of prelapsarian gratitude for the screen success his ugliness afforded him. In a December 1927 feature in *Motion Picture Classic* that makes no mention of his failed surgical attempt, he says, "Naturally, a map like mine couldn't be cast as a hero, but . . . if they can use a map like mine permanently in the movies, I'm here to stay."⁷³ Yet the plastic surgery debate became a persistent element of Wolheim's persona. In February 1928, *Picture Play Magazine* revisited the issue when it did a profile of him, once again foregrounding his lack of agency: "Louis Wolheim had ambitions to become a romantic actor, but they were nipped in the bud. . . . The producer who has him under contract objected to his having his face changed in any way. . . . At latest reports, Wolheim still had his natural countenance though he was said to be fuming about it. And please believe us, he is one actor who *can* fume."

To fume is to be filled with intense but unexpressed anger, so it is an apt image for Wolheim, who could do little to combat the forces that buffeted him as he sought to beautify his face. Wolheim's battered persona demonstrated that Hollywood's star system, through the mechanisms of publicity that it entailed, could emasculate even the toughest of men. On-screen, Wolheim could assume highly active character roles that veered from the brutish to the comic, but fan magazines and newspapers continually acknowledged the inherent passivity of his position as a successful male screen actor in Hollywood, a man with limited rights to his own face. *

71 Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, 85.

72 "Fanny Brice's Nose to Be Scaled Down," *New York Times*, August 15, 1923, 10.

73 Gilmore, "Hard-Boiled but Educated."