

Brews and Brows: Shaping Stories from Eyebrows to Scousebrows

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The distinctive acting style of María Félix (1914–2002), the highest-paid star of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema between the 1930s and 1950s, combined expansive physical movements with an eyebrow arch that served as a self-referential synecdoche for her star persona. During the course of writing a monograph on Félix,¹ Thornton noticed the recurring use of the image of her eyebrow on the cover of several academic books, and yet it has rarely garnered any close analysis.² Félix moved between highly stylised masculine and feminine performativity throughout her career, and her arched eyebrow was central to these hard-to-read yet iconic performances (figure 1). Her performative style fell into the ambiguous space between drag and masquerade, similar to that identified by Martin Shingler in relation to Bette Davis's work on screen.³ Christine Geraghty has indicated that such gestures are an integral part of the tool-kit for actors to tell stories and convey emotion.⁴ In a recent edition of the textbook *Film Art*, David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Jeff Smith highlight the importance of eyebrows in shaping an actor's performance and how an actor is read. They outline various shapes, angles and thicknesses to the eyebrow and detail how it may change the actor's face.⁵ Beyond this, however, not much has been written in film studies about the significance of the brow to an actor's performance.

In order to understand the communicative function of the eyebrow and better comprehend Félix's star persona, it has been useful to draw upon the interdisciplinary field of gesture studies. Here patterns emerge that focus on gesture's temporality and mutability, as well as its relational and affective significance. Much of this foundational work has been carried out in linguistic and communication studies with the recognition that gestures do not have one single meaning but are contextual and situational.⁶ By itself a gesture carries no

meaning, but is understood best when considered within a complex signifying system. Often compared to a form of haunting,⁷ gestures alert us to the potential for an understanding beyond scripted language, which awaits completion through our own act of interpretation.⁸ Restrictive in scale yet loaded in meaning, eyebrow movements may most usefully be defined as micro-gestures.

However slight they may be, an actor's movements on screen take on a communicative significance that invites a response, be it conscious or subconscious, from the audience. Through the repetition and variation of conventionally read gestures or idiosyncratic movements, cinema and television have contributed to the re-inscription of how bodies are understood. Theorists such as Giorgio Agamben, Pasi Väliaho and Patricia Pisters have suggested that the body itself has been reconceptualized as cinema has evolved, and integral to that shift are the ways in which gesture may be interpreted, imitated and read.⁹ This is why the study of stars like Félix, focusing on the actor's distinctive use of gesture, is necessary. As Laura Mulvey's analysis of Marilyn Monroe reveals, 'gestures are not simply bodily re-presented but visibly technologically harnessed and mechanically modulated. At moments like this, cinema materialises, gesturing to its own being through its privileged relation to the gestures of the figure embodied within it.'¹⁰ Mulvey's look at Monroe's movements and gestures provides a way into considering smaller, but no less significant, micro-gestures such as Félix's brow arch, and asks what these say about visual language and star performance, and the wider contexts in which this may be read.

The need to understand the relationship between micro-gestures and their performative and storytelling functions led us both, as two Liverpool-based film studies academics, to create the interdisciplinary project *Brews and Brows: Shaping Stories from Eyebrows to Scousebrows*. The project was tasked with developing a taxonomy of the eyebrow and theorizing its significance in everyday life, in conjunction with colleagues in

film studies, filmmaking, facial depiction and recognition, forensic archaeology, fashion photography, human geography and plastic surgery who fall under the umbrella of STEAM subjects, that is, science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics.

Liverpool had relevance as the starting point for this research thanks to the eyebrow style known as the ‘scousebrow’,¹¹ which became popular through the reality television programme, *Desperate Scousewives* (E4, 2011–12). The ‘scousebrow’ describes a form of stylised make-up that is a shade darker and heavier than one’s ‘natural’ brow, drawn above and on the brow-line, particularly identified with one of the show’s stars, Jodie Lundstram. The scousebrow became a definable look, synonymous with Liverpool and widely adopted both in and beyond the city. From this premise we devised a storytelling project as a way to elicit responses from the public about their personal eyebrow grooming practices. The aim of *Brews and Brows* was to gain a deeper understanding of what people think about, and do to, their own brows, in order to consider a set of questions about identity and the city – and, in turn, about stars and their eyebrows.

Stories give people agency, and in this they proved to be an invaluable means of gaining insights into what a diverse cross-section of the Merseyside population thought about the eyebrow as a feature and its capacity to communicate. In considering how we would make a documentary film, we designed a video-diary booth in such a way that it provided a space for participants to talk privately, allowing them to start and stop the recording remotely (figure 2). Written consent was sought before participants entered the video-diary booth. The booth gave them the time and space to talk through their thoughts, feelings and ideas. Whilst considering the power of narrative in the documentary form, we reflected on the proposals in Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow’s ‘Beyond story: an online, community-based manifesto’, which suggest that there should be a shift away from the story-based documentary.¹² Juhasz and Lebow are critical of the ways story can limit the form through a privileging of affective

response, arguing that ‘Most story-driven docs come in a one-size-fits-all framework that is built to neatly hold a compelling cast of characters in their clear and coherent world’.¹³ We proposed instead to seek out stories that disrupted a homogenous understanding of the eyebrow. We wanted to create something that avoided the pitfalls outlined by Juhasz and Lebow, and instead formulate new, more pluralistic, ideas about identity and urban space. To achieve this we turned to the comedian and performer Mark Thomas, who repeatedly harnesses the power of personal narrative in his activism and reflective dramatic work. In his show *The Red Shed*, he states that ‘The stories we tell, the stories politicians tell, the stories communities tell don’t just declare who we are and where we are from but what our intentions are, what we are going to do. They shape our future.’¹⁴ We combined this committed engagement to storytelling with an understanding that the eyebrow as micro-gesture – be it in a star performance or in everyday life – can add layers to the ways that stories are comprehended.

As we explored the potential of the project on both theoretical and practical levels, it was clear that it needed to be interdisciplinary and to draw on expertise beyond film studies. Taking our cue from Stanley Fish’s observation in his essay, ‘Being interdisciplinary is so very hard to do’, that ‘Disciplinary ghettos contain the force of our actions and render them ineffectual on the world’s larger stage’, we realized that if we were to remain isolated in our disciplinary silos we would be unable either to reach or to satisfactorily analyse the full range of material we sought.¹⁵ We began by inviting Face Lab at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) – an interdisciplinary research group focusing on facial depiction and representation, headed by Caroline Wilkinson – to join the project, and worked closely with Sarah Shrimpton, a post-doctoral researcher at Face Lab and a specialist in 3D scanning. We were subsequently joined by Jacqui McAssey, a fashion photographer and Senior Lecturer at LJMU; two human geographers, Catherine Wilkinson (LJMU) and Samantha Wilkinson

(Manchester Metropolitan University, MMU); and, most recently, a plastic surgeon, Partha Vaiude, who is adjunct professor at LJMU and leads Surgical Arts, a project that aims to bring together medical surgery and the humanities.

We successfully bid for internal funding from LJMU and the University of Liverpool (UoL) and this was further enhanced with external funding from the AHRC and the ESRC, enabling us to recruit doctoral students and train them for our first event. Coming from a variety of arts and humanities disciplines, the doctoral students who provided support on the first event in FACT, Liverpool, from the 25–28 April 2018, were Emma Copestake (UoL), Emily Gibbs (UoL), Kerrie McGiveron (UoL), Holly Saron (Edge Hill University), Ekaterina Tarnovskaya (University of Essex) and Isabel Taube (MMU). The team provided the students with introductory training in social media, research with human subjects, use of the Face Lab equipment, and photography and documentary filming, thus offering them the opportunity to participate in the event across all of the disciplines. In order to encourage participation, and in recognition of how stories can be communicated through multiple forms, members of the public were invited to tell their stories in the video-diary booth; have their eyebrows 3D scanned and take away a digital image of their brows; have their portrait taken by a fashion photographer; join a focus group; get their eyebrows ‘done’; and sit down and enjoy a ‘brew’ (tea or coffee) and cake. At each event participants contributed stories to our video-diary booth (with 139 interviews to date), but this is not the only way in which stories have been gathered. As well as organizing two focus groups facilitated by Wilkinson and Wilkinson, we employed undergraduate students, Charlie Coles and Eilisha McNally (LJMU), who worked closely with one of us (Greene) in filming the events and a selection of interviews that took place beyond the booth. From these and subsequent events, we now have a considerable database of material, including 3D images that can be layered and analysed for patterns and differences, high-quality photographs, and hundreds of hours of documentary footage.

Following on from this first event we organized a symposium at FACT on 2 October 2018 (National Eyebrow Day), which allowed us to reflect on, and share, our initial findings. Penny Spikins (University of York), an evolutionary archaeologist, presented a keynote paper at the symposium based on her work on the significance of the brow to human evolution,¹⁶ further extending the disciplinary and temporal reach of the project. This keynote was followed by three presentations from the team, and a preview screening of our documentary on eyebrows.

The ‘brew’ element of the project, *Brews and Brows*, was integral to the style and approach of our events, where we provided a brew and cake to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere. We found that to sit with someone over a brew maximized interaction. As a result, some of the participants and collaborators who took part in the first FACT event also attended and engaged in the discussions at the follow-up symposium. One of the attendees at these two FACT events later took up a place to study in Higher Education, despite having never studied before, because, as she told us, we were able to make it look more relevant and accessible. A brow artist, who had performed treatments at the first event at FACT, came to the symposium to hear about the findings to enhance her own working practice, while another participant inspired us to organize a third event at the queer arts festival Homotopia, based on the specificity of their queer/trans experience of grooming.

At the Homotopia event, held at the Open Eye Gallery on 27 November 2018, we circled back to film studies with talks by one of us (Thornton) and Gary Needham (UoL) on the queer brow, with a focus on Félix and Divine. With the support of another doctoral student, Juliette Doman (UoL), we offered the public the same opportunities to tell their stories, join a focus group, have their brows scanned, and have their photographs taken while enjoying a brew and cake. On the back of the success of this event, Open Eye Gallery offered to host our video-diary booth in a residency from November 2018 to February 2019. Visitors

to the gallery recorded stories in the booth, demonstrating a broader willingness to participate in storytelling and contribute to the conversation about eyebrows outside of the specific events.

The final event at the Garstang Museum, at the University of Liverpool, on 17 May 2019, was part of LightNight, a free one-night arts and culture festival at which a number of institutions and cultural organizations open their doors late into the evening and invite the public to participate in a variety of events and activities across Liverpool. As well as gathering data through scanning, photography and the booth, for this event Surgical Arts devised a face mask that invited children to design brows, thus engaging them while their adult family members were contributing to the project. All of these events opened up a wider conversation around eyebrows in the city and led to a range of outcomes, some of which were unexpected and clearly speak to the power of the eyebrow as a malleable and uneasy signifier.

The stories gathered at the events were more varied and multifaceted than we were anticipating. For example, one middle-aged lesbian couple travelled from Derby to Liverpool specifically because they saw that it was a project about eyebrow stories and wanted to share theirs. One of the women had lost her eyebrows through alopecia, which had a significant effect on her identity and sense of self – as a butch she felt reticent about entering the usually hyper-feminine space of the beauty salon. This revealed a many-layered story about identity, centred on temporary tattoos and self-administered treatment born of financial constraint. Through her story and those of others, the eyebrow has emerged as integral to self-definition, as well as being key to communication with others. This has prompted reflection on the exclusionary nature of beauty spaces for some, such as our participant, and in turn these stories have invited us to consider how such spaces are indicative of a narrow conception of

gender identity. We encountered multiple stories detailing what the eyebrow means in terms of healthcare, ideas of beauty and identity in its many inflections.

As well as these sometimes fraught tales, we had cute stories from couples who simply wanted to say how much they loved each other's eyebrows; people who came into the booth and asserted that they had nothing to say about their brows, yet subsequently spent 15 minutes talking about their grooming practices; and younger participants who said that they did not identify with human sexuality and, instead, were drawn to an alien aesthetic. While many of these stories prompted reflection on the freighted, multi-layered and communicative function of the eyebrow, some also spoke more directly to our original source of inspiration for this project. We gained insight into the hyper-feminine performativity of María Félix through talking to The Nightbus, a drag queen performing at Homotopia (figure 3).¹⁷ She made connections between the performance of victimhood by divas and its value for the queer community, and asserted this as one of the reasons why drag queens are drawn towards the power of the high arched brow. The defined and precise nature of this grooming, and the attendant micro-gestures involved, point to the expressive value of excess.

The stories we gathered revealed how deliberate eyebrow grooming is found across a diverse demographic. This may be most obvious when the brow is highly stylised, but even where less evident grooming shapes and styles are involved, the eyebrow can still act as a marker of community or ethnic identity. Subject to the individual's identity and not necessarily the place they inhabit, several stories emerged of grooming advice sought from digital platforms offering a variety of global aesthetic practices.

Reaching a range of audiences has been a central concern of the project. We established some key digital means of communicating and engaging with a wide audience, through a Wordpress site to which participants and researchers have contributed, and through Twitter and Instagram accounts that are regularly updated.¹⁸ We received media exposure for

our events, some of which fully embraced the storytelling potential of the project. Most attention was given to the first event at FACT. Thornton was interviewed by BBC North West Tonight,¹⁹ while the local newspaper, the *Liverpool Echo*, ran a piece about our event.²⁰ We were both interviewed on BBC Merseyside *Upfront*, a music and interview radio programme for the area's black community.²¹ The Women's Organisation, an equality and training body, ran a blog about the project on its site.²² Whilst this coverage was generally positive, there was unexpected attention from the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, reflective of the negative attitudes towards grooming practices evident in mainstream media. *Private Eye* picked the project up as part of its regular 'Pseud's Corner' feature, which mocks elements of contemporary life it considers absurd.²³ This intervention is interesting, as the magazine accompanied our words with an image from the *Angry Birds*²⁴ game in its attempt to dismiss our research, thereby ignoring one of the project's key messages about difference, identity and self-expression. In *The Angry Birds Movie* (Clay Kaytis and Fergal Reilly, 2016), the protagonist has to overcome relentless bullying for his clearly defined and expressive brows, something he comes to terms with in the narrative. In lightly coded fashion, then, the magazine's inclusion of this image was inadvertently insightful.

Just as *Private Eye* looked to popular culture to describe its attitude to our research, many of our participants held strong opinions on film stars' brows: Roger Moore as James Bond was mentioned repeatedly, along with other stars, celebrities and influencers such as Cara Delevingne and Emilia Clarke. This linked back to our project's focus, and indicated how it offers a way for film studies academics to be able to connect with other scholars and the public by using the personae of specific film stars.

From the outset we had planned to make a documentary film. Given that we amassed 139 interviews in the booth, conducted two focus groups, and recorded a number of interviews with fellow researchers and the public, we now find ourselves with material for

more than one audiovisual outcome. Through the recurrence of star references we have been prompted to create an audiovisual essay. We are now also seeking funding for an interactive website to make the material accessible to a wide audience and to prompt further stories. We recognize the potential to expand this to other locations in north-west England, such as Manchester.

Outcomes from this project include work by our collaborators. As academics who are used to working alone on our research, we welcomed this opportunity to work alongside experts outside our fields. An openness to their contributions meant that the collaborative experience was collegiate, rewarding, and resulted in original findings. There is also a deliberate fluidity to the team, the composition of which has evolved in relation to the space, capacity and aims of each event. Each team member has been enabled to develop the outcomes of the project relevant to their areas of expertise and the requirements of their fields. Wilkinson, Wilkinson and Saron, for example, have published their initial findings drawing on the first focus group and participant observation.²⁵ This project has led us all to greater collaboration and improved connections between the arts and humanities and the sciences. There is clearly potential for other film scholars to think about interdisciplinary collaborations, since the approach we took and the tools we used could easily be replicated by researchers asking different questions.

Whilst the scousebrow is particular to Liverpool, it is clear that a sense of identity, place and community remained very important to all participants, wherever they came from. We were overwhelmed by the range, strength and depth of the stories we encountered. *Brews and Brows* is a project that has provoked some curious reactions, and indeed raised brows, but it soon became clear that everyone has an eyebrow story, even though their initial reaction may be one of bemusement. It facilitated a range of narratives from light-hearted tales of pranks and dares to stories of health, sexual identity and ageing. As well as pointing

to an ongoing need for more close readings of eyebrow performances and styling on screen, our findings have enabled new ways of comprehending the centrality of the eyebrow to identity, and how everyday grooming is integral to the projection of a self.

¹ Niamh Thornton, *María Félix: Mexican Film Icon* (Martlesham: Tamesis, forthcoming 2022).

² See, for example, Darlene J. Sadlier (ed.), *Latin American Melodrama: Passion, Pathos and Entertainment* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Robert McKee Irwin and Maricruz Castro Ricalde (eds), *Global Mexican Cinema: its Golden Age, 'el cine mexicano se impone'* (London: BFI Palgrave, 2013); Charles Ramírez Berg, *The Classical Mexican Cinema: The Poetics of the Exceptional Golden Age Films* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015).

³ Martin Shingler, 'Masquerade or drag? Bette Davis and the ambiguities of gender', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), pp. 179–92.

⁴ Christine Geraghty, 'Re-examining stardom: questions of texts, bodies and performance', in Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds), *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold, 2004), pp. 183–201.

⁵ David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education, 2016), pp. 122–34.

⁶ See Ray L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970); Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Deidre Sklar, 'Remembering kinesthesia: an inquiry into embodied cultural knowledge', in Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness (eds), *Migrations of Gesture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota

Press, 2008); Barbara Creed, 'Films, gestures, species', *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2015), pp. 43–55.

⁷ See Lesley Stern, 'Putting on a show, or the ghostliness of gesture', *Lola Journal*, no. 5 (2002), <http://www.lolajournal.com/5/putting_show.html> [accessed 1 September 2020](#);

Laura Mulvey, 'Cinematic gesture: the ghost in the machine', and David McNeill, 'Speech-gesture mimicry in performance: an actor→audience author→actor, audience→actor triangle', both *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2015), pp. 15–29, 6–14.

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁹ Ibid. See also Pasi Väliaho, *Mapping the Moving Image: Gesture, Thought and Cinema Circa 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010); Patricia Pisters, 'Image as gesture: notes on Aernout Mik's *Communitas* and the modern political film', *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2015), pp. 69–81.

¹⁰ Mulvey, 'Cinematic gesture', p. 10.

¹¹ 'Scouse' is an informal term for the dialect of the Liverpool/Merseyside region of north-west England.

¹² Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, 'Beyond story: an online, community-based manifesto', *World Records*, vol. 2 (2018), <<https://vols.worldrecordsjournal.org/02/03>> accessed 1 September 2020.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Mark Thomas, *The Liar's Quartet: Bravo Figaro!, Cuckooed, The Red Shed – Playscripts, Notes and Commentary* (Tewkesbury: September Publishing, 2017), Kindle edition, loc. 1739.

¹⁵ Stanley Fish, 'Being interdisciplinary is so very hard to do', *Issues in Integrative Studies*, no. 9 (1991), p. 100.

¹⁶ Penny Spikins, *How Compassion Made Us Human: The Evolutionary Origins of Tenderness, Trust and Morality* (Barnsley: Oxbow Books, 2015); Penny Spikins, 'The evolutionary advantage of having eyebrows', *The Conversation*, 9 April 2018, <<https://theconversation.com/the-evolutionary-advantage-of-having-eyebrows-94599>> accessed 1 September 2020.

¹⁷ See <<https://www.the-nightbus.com/>> accessed 1 September 2020.

¹⁸ Brews and Brows blog, <www.brewsnbrows.wordpress.com>; Twitter, @brewsbrows; Instagram, @brewsbrows.

¹⁹ Interview with Steven Saul, *BBC North West Tonight*, 27 April 2018.

²⁰ Lottie Gibbons, 'What do your eyebrows say about you? Have them analysed in Liverpool this week', *The Liverpool Echo*, 25 April 2018, <<https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/whats-on/whats-on-news/what-your-eyebrows-say-you-14575014>> accessed 1 September 2020.

²¹ Interview with Ngunan Adamu, *Upfront*, *BBC Merseyside*, 20 May 2018, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p066n9wy>> accessed 25 May 2018.

²² Liz Greene and Niamh Thornton, 'Brews and brows: shaping stories from eyebrows to scousebrows', The Women's Organisation, 8 June 2018, <<http://thewomensorganisation.blogspot.com/2018/06/brews-and-brows-shaping-stories-from.html>> accessed 14 July 2018.

²³ 'Pseud's Corner', *Private Eye*, 17 May 2018, p. 35.

²⁴ *Angry Birds* (Rovio Entertainment, 2009–).

²⁵ Catherine Wilkinson, Samantha Wilkinson and Holly Saron, "'Wearing me place on me face": scousebrows, placemaking and everyday creativity', *Fashion Theory: Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, 29 July 2019, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1628525>> accessed 1 September 2020.