

Striking poses: The fantastic figure of Yul Brynner. Forthcoming in *Screen*.

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Abstract

Since his successful 1956 appearances in the Hollywood films *The King and I* (Walter Lang), *Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille) and *Anastasia* (Anatole Litvak), Yul Brynner's star image emerged as elaborately masculine, foreign and exotic, as well as markedly flexible in the range of ethnicities that it was set to convey. Combined with his varying mythical tales of international origins and sexual prowess, Brynner's intense gestural register and striking body aesthetic, as encapsulated in the trademark baldness, rendered the actor a spectacular sight in 1950s Hollywood. In fact Brynner's mere physical presence dominates many of his films in ways suggestive of elasticity between acting and presence, role and actor – as well as of the centrality of screen presence more generally. This article explores Brynner's fantastic cinematic figure image in terms of its fabrication, flexibility and reappearance by examining both his film work and biographical accounts. It tracks transformations and continuities in Brynner's performance style with specific attention on its idiosyncratic and repetitive elements in terms of pose, gesture and motion, with the aim of foregrounding the role of physicality – both material and represented – in the creation of star image.

There he stands, Rameses, the future Pharaoh of Egypt, back straight, topless except for cape and heavy ornamental jewellery, glaring at Moses. There, the King of Siam pouts in his palace, decorative silk coat open to reveal an expanse of shaved, muscular torso. There, the brash Cossack Taras Bulba stands, enraged, his sleeves up and hairy chest exposed, pulling out a sword with angular motions. There, the Native American Chief Black Eagle impassively

yet boldly faces his prisoners, adorned in loincloth, armbands and a coat of copper-coloured body paint. Up on an island cliff, the savage pirate captain Jonathan Kongre sits mounted on an unlikely white horse, in black and silver, primed for violence. Dressed in nothing but a towel, the agent Pete Novak prowls a sauna, fixing his eyes on prey. And there, steadily, a gunslinger killer robot approaches, all in black, with metallic menace to his eyes.

Spanning more than two decades, these Yul Brynner film performances are built on idiosyncratic bodily stances, gestures and motions. Their displays of alpha masculinity and phallic authority are amplified by the actor's erect posture, low voice and trademark baldness. Brynner's body is rigid yet moves with sudden grace, occasionally bursting into song. The accentuated masculinity of his performances remains unaffected by ornate accessories or the frequently liberal applications of makeup, facial and other. The degree of stylisation, and indeed hyperbole, involved in Brynner's onscreen performances is such that, in a contemporary perspective, they easily come across as hammy – or even as plain camp. This impression can be further supported by the overall artifice of 1950s Hollywood cinema, the overblown hues of Technicolor and the lavishly designed sets of freely re-imagined historical ships, villages and royal abodes where his characters sulk, scheme and rule against the backdrop of hoards of extras building pyramids, fighting decisive battles and catering courtly entertainment.



FIG 1. Yul Brynner as Rameses in *Ten Commandments* (1956)

Brynner's career spanned from 1950s Hollywood epics to European co-productions of the 1970s. His star image was markedly flexible in the range of ethnicities it was applied to while also remaining unfixed in terms of the actor's own origins. Brynner's elastic positioning in Hollywood's racial taxonomy made him suitable for playing most types except for those of well-rounded, corn fed, all-American heroes. This flexibility resonated with, and was supplemented by his elaborately self-fabricated star image. The diverse variations of fantastic tales of origin crafted throughout Brynner's life afforded his screen appearances with additional exotic frisson and mythical aura even if, by the late 1960s, these stories also marked him as anachronistic in their manifest artificiality gesturing towards the studio era. The same applied to his muscular, gradually ageing body. For although Brynner's performances had long acted as invitations to enjoy his bodily splendour, his corporeal aesthetic remained a case apart from what Christopher R. Brown identifies as the increasingly fashionable 'wiry, untuned, hairy, and sweaty physiques' of New Hollywood.¹

Brynnner's acting style ranged from the markedly theatrical in *The King and I* (Walter Lang, 1956) to the more simplified in *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960), yet even these two appearances shared similar 'direct movement and almost rigidly upright posture'.² In fact Brynnner's intense physical screen presence – the mere spectacle of the actor himself – routinely eclipsed the nuances of character building or displays of emotional depth. Despite the relative variation in the roles that Brynnner played during his career, they were often repetitive and reliant on the force and appeal of his screen persona, which Cecil B. DeMille, director of *Ten Commandments* (1956), described as 'a cross between Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., Apollo, and a little bit of Hercules'.³ Actualised as pose, movement, bodily manner, voice and accent, Brynnner's onscreen presence cut across his oeuvre as a reverb of sorts. This reverb would be key to understanding his contemporaneous appeal, and possibly some of the disinterest with which his work has since been met.

The fantastic figure in my title refers to Brynnner's star image, as coined in biographical accounts, interviews, publicity materials and cinematic performances. It also foregrounds the aesthetics, physicality and materiality of his body as it re-emerged onscreen over the years. In what follows, I explore this figure in terms of its fabrication, flexibility and reappearance. My interest in Brynnner's flamboyantly pan-ethnic performances then concerns less his style of acting than the overall manner and style of his presence. In his discussion of the Hollywood extra, Will Straw conceptualises cinema as an archive of gestures, presence, performance styles, specific faces and bodies, as well as their transformation over time.⁴ Applying a similar approach to the performances of a lead actor such as Yul Brynnner allows for shifting analytical emphasis from their function in diegesis and narrative to the both repetitive and flexible aspects of bodily display as mattering elements in their own right. Starting with a discussion of the key components of Brynnner's pan-ethnic star image, this article moves to addressing his positioning as a sex symbol in 1950s Hollywood, the aesthetics of his recurrent

poses and motions, their flexibility in terms of cosmopolitanism and ethnic drag, as well as the ways in which they are currently remembered and replayed on online platforms.

The king incarnate

Even though he appeared in comedies, spy thrillers and dramas with characteristic panache over a film career spanning from 1949 to 1976, performances as kings, rulers, warriors, captains and gunslingers condense the essence of Brynner's star image as it was established between 1956 and 1960. Brynner remains most associated with his role as King Mongkut in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *The King and I*, both onscreen and off, a role for which he won both the Academy and Tony awards, and which he performed onstage over 4,600 times. The kingly trope continues in biographical overviews of his life, from the books *The Inscrutable King* and *The Man Who Would Be King* to the 1995 television documentary, *The Man Who Was King*, and even the 1983 *Yul Brynner Cookbook: Food Fit for the King and You*.⁵ These royal connotations echo Brynner's, own blatantly mythical tales of origin: 'My true name is Taidge Khan, Jr. (...) The blood of Ghengis Khan flows through my veins ... My father was a leading adviser to the Czar ... I ran away from home at age thirteen to join the circus ... I have a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne ... The money I earn from acting helps support my destitute gypsy family', began Brynner's introduction to journalist, and later biographer, Jhan Robbins.⁶ In another variation, his mother was a Romanian gypsy who either had or had not died at his birth.⁷ Brynner's proclivity to stories of mythic origins was well acknowledged already during his rise to stardom:

When this angular-faced, amber-eyed, flat-nosed Mongolian mountebank opens his mouth, *anything* is liable to come out of his mouth – and usually does (...)
At a swanky cocktail party in New York's theatrical district (...) Yul described

a childhood of Oriental splendor in a palace in Outer Mongolia, surrounded by dusky slaves and voluptuous, slant-eyed dancing girls. 'It was natural for me to play the role of the king in *The King and I*,' says Yul. 'I learned about being a king at a very early age.'⁸

In a 1959 French television interview, the journalist Pierre Dumayet inquired which of the dozen or so stories of origin then in circulation the actor himself preferred. With obvious glee, Brynner responded that his favourite was the one identifying him as a Swiss-Mongolian born in Brooklyn: 'C'est magnifique'. Richly embellished origin stories, combined with inventive artist names, would not have been precisely a novelty in Hollywood where fantastic personalities had been freely coined as a means of amplifying star glamour ever since the studios were first established in the 1920s. By the time Brynner ascended to stardom, foreign origins, both actual and fabricated, had long held erotic allure while also constraining careers in multiple ways.

Theodosia Goodman of Cincinnati, for example, had been 'transformed by Fox studio publicity into mysterious Theda Bara, daughter of an Arabian princess and an Italian sculptor, raised in "the shadow of the Sphinx"'.⁹ Bara, daughter of Polish and Swiss immigrants, was refashioned into the quintessential foreign vamp of early cinema while Rudolph Valentino's contemporaneous sex appeal was rooted in his Italian origins. Examining Valentino's star image, Gaylyn Studlar ties it in with 'a wider web of popular discourses that linked the exotic to the erotic in forging a contradictory sexual spectacle of male ethnic otherness within a xenophobic and nativist culture'.¹⁰ As Ernesto Chávez notes, since the 1920s, each 'national and ethnic group had its part in Hollywood's racial and racist script'¹¹ in ways that resulted in both stereotypical depiction and typecasting that locked performers into specific lines of roles. In some instances, the star's ethnic re-invention was a means to undo difference and to allow

for flexibility in casting. Perhaps most famously, Margarita Cansino was made over into Rita Hayworth, the ‘American Love Goddess’.¹²

Yul Brynner’s self-invention followed these patterns of artifice yet in a somewhat off-synch manner. His star image was no product of studio publicity already for the reason that its basic elements had been laid out during his Broadway career, launched with the 1945 *Lute Song* where he played a character of ‘Oriental quality’, and followed by the stage success of *The King and I* in 1951.¹³ Second, Brynner was not under exclusive contract for any studio but worked with Fox, Paramount, MGM and United Artists during the years 1956–1958 alone. Third, by the mid-1950s, obviously fabricated stories of dramatic and romantic origins, popular from the 1920 to the 1940s, had begun to grow passé as film acting was increasingly framed as a craft rather than an issue of unique star personality radiating its glow on film.¹⁴

Both the range and fantastic quality of Brynner’s origin stories suggest him not having had much investment in actually being believed. Yet even his more factual biography had more than a faint streak of romance to it. Born in 1920 as Yuliy Briner in Vladivostok close to the Chinese and Korean borders, of Russian, Mongolian, German and Swiss ancestry, he spent his formative years in Russia, China and France. Before immigrating to New York with his mother in 1940, Brynner worked in Paris as trapeze artist in Cirque d’hiver and as singer in a Roma cabaret, brushing shoulders with Jean Cocteau’s circle of artists and celebrities.¹⁵

Within 1950s American culture, Brynner, in his son’s words, ‘almost constituted a new species. Even his name was a mystery: one cannot confidently guess from which continent those three syllables emerged, for they are neither European nor Oriental.’¹⁶ The fluidity, inner contradictions and excess of Brynner’s autobiographical stories failed to precisely pin down his ethnic or national origins, hence rendering the issue one best guessed. This allowed for him to overcome typecasting as that which he demonstrably was, a first-generation Soviet-

Russian immigrant. Brynner's cross-continental, polyglot background functioned as springboard for his later self-fashioning as a cosmopolitan man of the world who, by implication, could take on the role of virtually any man in the world.

Firmly tapping into the Hollywood trope of eroticised and orientalist exotic male otherness, Brynner's artificial and malleable self-representation primed his applicability to roles covering a broad ethnic spectrum. Like George Chakiris, who played the son of a Mayan ruler in *Kings of the Sun* (J. Lee Thompson, 1963), and like Rita Moreno who was cast as the Burmese slave girl, Tuptim, in *The King and I*, Brynner, white yet possibly not entirely so, was a desirable studio-era proxy for performers whose explicit racial otherness prevented them from being cast in leading roles. Onscreen, Brynner body was Thai in *The King and I*, then Ukrainian in *Taras Bulba* (J. Lee Thompson, 1962), Yugoslav in *Battle of Neretva* (Veljko Bulajić, 1969), Russian in e.g. *Anastasia* (Anatole Litvak, 1956), *The Brothers Karamazov* (Richard Brooks, 1957) and *The Journey* (Anatole Litvak, 1959), Indian in *The Long Duel* (Ken Annakin, 1967), Mexican in *Villa Rides* (Buzz Kulik, 1968) and *Adíos, Sabata* (Frank Kramer, 1970), French in *The Buccaneer* (Anthony Quinn, 1958), Egyptian in *Ten Commandments*, Arab in *Escape from Zahrain* (Ronald Neame, 1962), Israeli in *Solomon and Sheba* (King Vidor, 1959) and *Cast a Giant Shadow* (Melville Shavelson, 1966) and German in *Morituri* (Bernhard Wicki, 1965) and *Triple Cross* (Terence Young, 1966).

When Brynner's characters were American, they came in an equally diverse range of ethnic hues as his body re-emerged as Native American in *Kings of the Sun*, Cajun in e.g. *The Magnificent Seven* and *Invitation to a Gunfighter* (Richard Wilson, 1964), Japanese-American in *Flight from Ashiya* (Michael Anderson, 1964), Italian-American in *Port of New York* (László Benedek, 1949) and *Death Rage* (Antonio Margheriti, 1976), Greek-American in *Surprise Package* (Stanley Donen, 1960) and French-American in *The Sound and the Fury*

(Martin Ritt, 1959). On some occasions – as in his role as the secret service agent Pete Novak in *The File of the Golden Goose* (Sam Wanamaker, 1969) or as CIA agent in *The Double Man* (Franklin J. Shaffner, 1967) – no specific explanation was given for his accent, which Noël Coward once characterised as ‘rhythmical Americanese marinated in borscht’.¹⁷

Starting from this accent, the sense of the unspecified alien was central to Brynner’s star image in ways that created both opportunities and obvious constraints: ‘His muscular body and exotic accent were unique but at the same time limiting. (...) He was not “an average clean-cut Mongolian kid” as he often joked. In fact, producers and directors never thought to cast him in conventional roles.’¹⁸ As early as the late 1950s, in the said French television interview, Brynner noted that Hollywood tends to create formulas for its stars: ‘And I think that the formula towards which I was most pushed was to play a type that is extremely hard, even mean, with a heart of gold. And that can become very boring.’ As the years progressed, as the studio era came to a close, as his stardom faded and as his roles grew less flamboyant in their ethnic displays, sets and scale, Brynner remained cast in hypermasculine roles short of playfulness or depth, and increasingly rife with violence. Some of these characters had hearts of gold whereas others failed to have any hearts whatsoever.



FIG 2. Black-hatted robot killer in *Westworld* (1973)

In addition to spy thrillers, Brynner's late film work featured him as Captain Kongre in *The Light at the Edge of the World* (Kevin Billington, 1971), as a post-apocalyptic fighter in *The Ultimate Warrior* (Robert Clouse, 1975), as a mysterious blackmailer in *Fuzz* (Richard A. Colla, 1972) and as robot in *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973) and *Futureworld* (Richard T. Heffron, 1976). The two robot appearances built on his well-known roles as black-hatted gunslingers in *The Magnificent Seven*, *Invitation to a Gunfighter* and *Return of the Seven* (Burt Kennedy, 1966) reconfigured in machine guise. Unlike these previous characters, the robot had no depth or purpose beyond that programmed into it – to perform a function in a theme park so that paying guests have the pleasure of shooting him down. As the robot begins to malfunction, its single purpose is to kill instead. The robot's mechanical motions and upright posture could be interpreted as commenting on the degree to which Brynner had repeated such gestures and poses, with only minor adjustments to the emotionally reserved and technically superior gunslingers, over two decades. A more accurate point would be that Brynner's stylised bodily presence afforded *Westworld* with much of its appeal precisely because of this verb.

Sex, sex, sex

In the sequel, *Futureworld*, the already once terminated killer robot reappears in a female protagonist's dream. Fixing his eyes of metal shimmer on her, with a slight smile playing on his lips, the robot is both a figure of predatory menace and, as the scene proceeds, object of female sexual desire – his eyes now implying a different kind of intent as the two fall into passionate embrace. The altered state of reality afforded by a dream sequence balances the threat of death with sensuous bliss, and menace with desire that transforms the killer machine

into something of a sex robot. In doing so, the scene brings together the elements of physical force, strangeness and sex appeal that were all elementary building blocks of Brynner's star image.

Brynner may have posed full frontal for George Platt Lynes' homoerotic photographic nudes early in his career, yet his star image was established as that of a staunchly and solidly heterosexual, insatiably virile Casanova. Heterosexual appeal and prowess surfaced as primary to Brynner's star image around the same time – and in equally mythical manner – as his fantastic narratives of origin. In a 1957 exposé, *Behind the Scene* magazine explored his habits of myth-making: 'According to Yul, who looks upon his boudoir battles as no more than the due of his invincible charm, the time he has spent horizontally occupied more have killed an ordinary man'.¹⁹ Quoting Deborah Kerr, Brynner's co-star in *The King and I*, describing his 'oodles of sex appeal', the article continues to address the difficulty of telling the man apart from the myth: 'Every one of Brynner's friends has a different story to tell about Yul and his exploits, and the different version have only one thing in common – they all invest Yul with the charm of a Don Juan, the strength of a Samson, and the morals of a tomcat'.²⁰ Brynner's biographies are similarly rife with tales of sexual adventure with lovers ranging from iconic female Hollywood stars of the era to four wives and an additional league of partners. An anonymous lover is quoted detailing his 'animal magnetism': 'he took complete command the moment he walked into a room. He didn't look at you – he stared at you. When you looked into his eyes you felt you had gone back centuries. It was as if a spell had suddenly been cast on you.'²¹ Another source attests to his 'unknown quality that makes you instantly want to surrender' while Brynner's son describes him as a 'sex symbol, the masculine counterpart to Marilyn Monroe'.²²



FIG 3. *Behind the Scenes* exposé (1957)

Brynner's star image was charged with physical energy, animal insatiability and carnal appetite also well beyond the sexual. A *Redbook* article following the release of *The King and I* addressed his gastronomic habits in fascinated, incredulous tones: 'This is the fabulous Yul Brynner ... who is being widely hailed as the most exciting male on the screen since Rudolph Valentino. (...) His breakfast consists of a large steak, sometimes two, washed down with coffee. Before nine o'clock, tigerish hunger smites him again and he tides himself over until 12 o'clock lunch with a few large meat sandwiches. For lunch he has chops, steak, turkey, or roast beef and this may get him by until two o'clock when he sends out for sandwiches and cake.'²³ Excess and penchant for bodily pleasure, in short, never loomed far away in the construction of Yul Brynner's fantastic figure.

Mark Gallagher conceptualises cinematic sex appeal as dependent on the 'exposure and display of the body, as well as on a range of performative signs that comprise his or her

idiolect'. Sex appeal then involves a set of traits repeated, highlighted and recognized across an actor's body of work, and possibly showcased or magnified through technical, narrative and tonal means.²⁴ Sex appeal results from bodily work and, as a component of star image, it can be bolstered through narrative accounts and descriptions of both the performer and his or her performances – as in the myriad accounts of Brynner's animal, primitive, mesmerising or barbaric magnetism, some of which have been cited above. Yet sex appeal alone would not a sex symbol make. Will Scheibel defines sex symbol as a 'celebrity image that derives its dominant meaning and affect from sex'. A sex symbol entails a truncation of a kind where sex overshadows the other characteristics and features that an actor may have, the degrees of thespian craft included.²⁵ Furthermore, John Mercer points out that a sex symbol is 'a symbol (or perhaps more accurately a synecdoche) for prevalent attitudes towards sex' and hence a matter of cultural norms and values: 'So rather than the assumption that sex symbols exist merely because they are "sexy", it is rather more that specific celebrities are (or become) containers into which sets of meanings and anxieties around sex and sexuality can be poured, or a metaphorical surface on to which desires can be projected.'²⁶

Like Valentino's sex-saturated star image some decades earlier, Brynner's was foreign in ways that set him apart from his contemporaries by 'promising the danger and excitement of everything that was uncommon'.²⁷ Yet, unlike Valentino, he was not cast in the roles of romantic lovers and many of his characters with more or less pronounced amorous intent – from King Mongkut to Rameses and the dandy Jules Gaspard d'Estaing of *Invitation to a Gunfighter* – died in the narrative closure. Steeped in myth, cosmopolitanism, exoticism and orientalism from the outset, Brynner's star image framed him as an imported good operating with a different kind of logic – and constraint – than that governing the lives of regular Americans. In terms of physical performance, this image was built on an unabashed display of bodily goods as well as on stylized poses complete with taut muscles and hard, fixed stares.

Whether adorned in elaborately decorated oriental costumes of silks and pelts, the elegant apparel of a Cajun gunfighter or little else but a loincloth, his body was designed to stand out.

Although he was equipped with a toupee for several roles, a clean shaved head was probably Brynner's most striking singular physical feature. Baldness set him apart from his contemporaneous male actors and rendered him instantaneously recognisable on the pages of any film magazine. Baldness was also extensively used as visual element in film posters and in articles addressing Brynner that occasionally coined word games to further highlight the state of his hairstyle. In the overblown phrasing of a biographer, Brynner 'had the amazing capacity to transform his baldness from a common blemish into an outstanding trademark. Suddenly, after a razor cut, Yul Brynner became one of the sexiest actors in film history, representing the most authentic and irresistible image of masculinity.'²⁸ There are not many Hollywood parallels until the much more recent careers of Ben Kingsley, Patrick Stewart, Bruce Willis, Dwayne Johnson or Vin Diesel. Eric von Stroheim performed bald – as well as with hair – but his star image was never either that of an oriental seducer or a man of action. Rather, he was recurrently cast as a European aristocrat. Telly Savalas, whose career picked up in the 1960s, became known not only for his baldness but also for his low voice and macho action roles. Some of these had flamboyant traits reminiscent of Brynner's exotic bluster, yet Savalas' fame remained on the much more modest scale of B-movies and television work.

It was certainly not only the dome of his head that Brynner so avidly displayed. From the 1950s studio epics to late work, his onscreen performances feature more bare-chested appearances than historical accuracy or narrative logic, no matter how fragile, would seem to demand. There is a topless shaving scene (*Brothers Karamazov*) and a short chain of sauna scenes (*The Double Man*). His characters freely appear topless both when fighting and without particular explanation. In some instances (e.g. *Ten Commandments*, *The King and I*,

Kings of the Sun), his chest was shaved ‘to facilitate the applications of oils and make-up to enhance its musculature’²⁹. Make-up was of course also central to his diverse performances of ethnicity and accentuated exoticness. Corporeal displays did not end, or actually even decrease, as Brynner got older: at the age of 55, he fought topless through much of the title role in *The Ultimate Warrior*. In his first scene, the warrior stands topless, two thick leather belts tight on his waist, immobile above a group of men who have come to ask for his services. Shot from below, Brynner, all 1,73 meters tall, towers as a monument of masculine force that people depend on in order to survive without saying a word himself. When we first see this body move, it takes on and defeats a band of attackers.

Brynner’s oeuvre belongs to genres that Ina Rae Hark describes as featuring men in conflict with other men which episodically make the male protagonist’s body into a spectacle: ‘Westerns, epics, swashbucklers, science fiction, sword and sorcery, war dramas, gangster and cop movies’.³⁰ Within these genres, displays of male flesh have offered visual gratification to viewers of diverse gender identifications and sexual orientations throughout film history. Yet the 1950s witnessed a notable range of white American leading men – from Kirk Douglas to Charlton Heston and Burt Lancaster – taking off their shirts in order to exhibit their muscles.³¹ This involved Heston being cast as a Greek hero in *Ulysses* (Mario Camerini and Mario Bava, 1954), as Nordic warrior in *The Vikings* (Richard Fleischer, 1958) and as Roman slave gladiator in *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960). Meanwhile, Heston played both Moses in *The Ten Commandments* and Judaic prince/gladiator slave in *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) and Lancaster an Italian archer hero in *The Flame and the Arrow* (Jacques Tourneur, 1950) and a Native American warrior in *Apache* (Robert Aldrich, 1954). All these performances relied on the centrality of the spectacle of the muscular, agile and athletic white male body posturing for the camera. Like Brynner, these actors were able

to occupy a range of foreign and exotic roles yet, unlike him, without being constrained by them.

As Hark points out, films centring on the spectacle of the exposed muscular white body have done so in scenes of combat but also in those of torture and humiliation that provide motivation for both the action and for the camera focusing on displays of male flesh. This has afforded a solution to what Mercer identifies as the enigma of male sex symbol's desirability – 'a puzzle that has to be worked out or made sense of in some kind of way'.³² This working out has involved the sexualisation of male bodies as indexes of masculinity and as markers of virility in the guise of violence and humour, as well as the heterosexualisation of these bodies in order to ward off any queer connotations arising from their display. It is nevertheless central that no threat, harm, violence or let alone humour was required to justify scenes revelling in Brynner's corporeal assets. His gratuitous displays of bodily bulk, strength and skill, as well as their frequent setting within the historical epic, all ring of the aesthetics of peplum but fail to be confined within it.³³ With the notable exception of a lingering scene in *Kings of the Sun*, where Brynner is seen writhing near-naked in body paint, injured, imprisoned and tied to the floor, his was not a body to be thrown down a gladiator pit, lashed with a whip or sold to slavery, as was repeatedly the case with Douglas and Heston. Brynner's off-white characters were more likely to be rulers ordering and overseeing such operations. In *Taras Bulba*, it would have been the son, played by Tony Curtis of *Spartacus* fame, and not the father, played by Brynner, to suffer flagellation in the hands of Polish clergy.

Striking the pose

Once a star of considerable fame and stature, Brynner has long since shifted to the more obscure realms of film history. Making a brief comeback from this fog of oblivion in a 2013

New York Times article on how posture affects people's moods and impressions, Brynner resurfaced as the master of authoritative pose: 'John Neffinger, a consultant to aspiring politicians and business leaders, advises spreading arms and legs to form an X like Yul Brynner in 'The King and I' before any stressful situation (...) "We've seen posing make a tremendous difference in people's presentation and performance," he said. "It gives you a boost of testosterone."'"³⁴

Brynner first introduced this pose exuding authority, masculinity and control – and arguably male sex hormone – in *Ten Commandments* to express Rameses' aggressive, intense and authoritative persona. In a scene following a conflict with his father, the Pharaoh, and his brother Moses, Rameses stands stiffly still in the pose as other characters gesture and as the camera moves closer. Brynner's statuesque stillness against the fluttering background accentuates Rameses' visual and narrative centrality. As Rameses begins to move and speak of his plans and lust for power, he does so rigidly, keeping hands to his hips and without altering any of his grimly pouting facial register. In his discussion of the male sex symbol, Mercer argues that they each have a 'defining performance, emblematic moment or (and probably most importantly) an iconic image that "symbolises" sex-symbol status'.³⁵ In the case of Brynner, it would probably be this pose that, soon after its introduction, found its most recognisable reiteration in *The King and I*: hands on hips, legs apart, chin up, eyebrows furrowed, glaring, topless with tense muscles. As a stylized display of masculine assertiveness, the pose in fact encapsulates much of Brynner's performance style and star image. Repeated throughout his career, it solidified him as a statue of flesh that, as vibrant, virile and agile as it might have been, often stood stationary while the world literally moved around him.



FIG 4. Brynner's signature pose in *The King and I* (1956)

If, following Straw, the film extra functions as 'graphic detail or as expressive human body',³⁶ then a lead actor would be the embodied cinematic centrepiece and highlight. As background, extras and supporting actors afford stars with much of their extraordinary presence onscreen.³⁷ The issue is one of 'scales of presence' where extras, as filmic ornament, become dissolved 'within a film's broader organization of graphic lines and shapes' as 'part of the rippling of graphic information outwards from a scene's central characters'.³⁸ In contrast, Brynner's frequently exposed and lavishly adorned body was showcased as a spectacle, or at least as a noteworthy sight, towards which attention meanders and upon which it fixates. His bodily presence dominated scenes in an independently spectacular vein.

Consider another scene from *Ten Commandments* where Heston's Moses occupies the visual foreground, topless, in chains, his tall, muscular body glistening with perspiration. Out of the two, Heston's body is the more exposed and bulky, and both actors are cast in roles far detached from their own origins. Born in Wilmette, Illinois, Heston is as unlikely a choice for an Israelite prophet as the Siberian-born Brynner for an Egyptian prince. Heston's trademark husky Americanness nevertheless translated as a lack of explicit sex appeal, which, despite

any bodily display, was fitting enough for a religious leader. Within this particular scene, visual attention travels towards Brynner's Rameses standing behind Moses, notably shorter and of a smaller frame, dressed in an elaborate, shiny gold-plated skirt, golden armbands and ornate headpiece, his other foot up on stairs for an impression of additional length and authority. Both men stand still with their legs apart, muscles tense, Brynner's motions stiff as he whisks their mutual love-interest Nefertiri (Anne Baxter) aside. This angularity and force of movement, combined with the statuesque stillness and grim facial expression of his erect body, conveys masculine assertiveness and power independent of the make-up, heavy bodily ornament and extravagantly decorated couture.



FIG 5. Charlton Heston, Brynner and Anne Baxter in *Ten Commandments*

Brynner's trademark power pose found many further variations in *The King and I*. Dressed in a blue silk jacket with rich gold trimming, the king stands with his legs apart, hands on hips, brows furled as a living statue, shirtless, chest bared. In gold-embroidered red silks, he reclines, sings and then strikes the pose again, shirtless. In pale-brown silk with elaborate

golden embroidery he thus poses, argumentative, chest exposed. In full royal red and gold regalia complete with a cap and golden slippers he stands, once again. When the king dances, he does so with exaggerated, aggressive stomping energy that leaves his partner breathless. A *New York Herald Tribune* film review of *The King and I* observed Brynner's notably corporeal performance style:

It is Brynner who gives the movie its animal spark ... He is every inch the Oriental king, from eloquent fingers that punctuate his commands to the sinewy legs and bare feet with which he stalks about the palace, like an impatient leopard.

His eyes glower with imperial rage, they widen with boyish curiosity, they dance with amusement at his own simple jokes, and on his death couch they are heavy with resignation and accumulated wisdom. This is a rare bit of acting – Brynner is the king, and you don't forget it for a second.³⁹

It is noteworthy that Brynner won the Academy best actor award for this extravagantly stylized performance as a tyrannical yet child-like Oriental ruler who expresses his thoughts and feelings in the form of song and dance – and that he did so over Douglas in *Lust for Life* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956), Laurence Olivier in *Richard III* (Laurence Olivier, 1955) and both James Dean and Rock Hudson in *The Giant* (George Stevens, 1956). Brynner was a trained stage actor yet traces of his skill are not necessarily easy to spot in the statuesque posing, theatrics and repetitions that punctuate his onscreen performances. Whatever the role was, his performance style was rarely subtle, albeit quickly recognisable. It blended acting into appearing and the role into presence largely since much of the creative expression occurred

through bodily stances, gestures and motions. Physical technique and movement vocabulary are standard features of any actor's skillset, yet Brynner's style was more intense than most.

A *New York Times* review for the musical's 1977 Broadway revival notes that 'Yul Brynner is a great actor – or at the very least a great acting presence – not because of what he does but because of what he is. He strides the stage caught in the invisible spotlight of his own personality. He gestures, articulates, and moves with the certainty of an automaton and the grace of a dancer.'⁴⁰ There are at least two ways to interpret this: that the actor, in the course of years of repetition, has internalised the role to the degree that it has become second skin, or that the performance primarily involves the actor taking pleasure in showcasing himself. Independent of which interpretation one opts for, the gap between the performance and the actor seems to have clearly closed up, if not disappeared. Iconic performances where star image is not subordinate to the demands of characterization but the opposite occurs, or where the two grow hard to tell apart from one another,⁴¹ characterise Brynner's portrayal of the king, as well as his work more broadly. As argued above, with few exceptions, his roles were both animated by and subsumed in idiosyncratic motions and gestures, while his screen presence overshadowed that of others performers – and not simply when he was in the centre of the frame.

Cosmopolitan mobility and ethnic drag



FIG 6. Brynner and Roman Polanski in *The Magic Christian* (1969)

In 1969, Brynner made a short cameo drag appearance as torch singer in Peter Sellers' *The Magic Christian*. The scene shows Brynner, glamorously made up, in a blonde wig, large crystal diamanté necklace and a pale yellow silky dress with pointy breasts. This blonde first fixes her eyes on Roman Polanski in a futuristic bar and softly inquires, 'do you want to buy a girl a drink, big boy?' Sipping on her cocktail, still focusing her seductive attention on Polanski ('here's to looking at you, mister') and gently stroking him with a gloved hand, she then moves into a brief yet highly emotional rendition of *Mad About the Boy*. As the song swells, she moves around the bar before lifting her hand to forehead in a final, studied gesture of despair. The singer's dramatically pained expression suddenly stills into a macho stare as she tugs off her wig, and the adoring eyes of the men around her shift into expressions of horror, witnessing the baldness beneath. One of the men exclaims, 'oh, no!', and as the singer replies with 'oh, yes', it is clear that the actress Miriam Karlin's sound work has been replaced by Brynner's own recognizable, low voice: end of cameo.

As Brown points out, *Mad About the Boy* ‘references the erotic appeal of male stardom (“on the silver screen / he melts my foolish heart in every single scene”) to women, but also to men: the song has homosexual connotations, having originally been written and recorded by Noël Coward as a love song to another man’.⁴² Dramatically singing of love for a boy on a screen, Brynner would then have also been serenading his own erotic star appeal. Operating in a decidedly different gestural register than Brynner’s other roles the same year as Yugoslav partisan in *Battle of Neretva* and as an American agent in *The File of the Gold Goose*, this playful take on masculine star image is undoubtedly the most drastic instance of flexibility in his performance style. The scene succeeds not only due to its achievements in dress, makeup and lip-synch, but because of the drastic rift separating Brynner’s customary poses, gestures, motions and expressions from the torch singer’s smooth, soft yet a little heavy body language as she leans on the bar, fondles her hair, focuses her eyes on, and casually caresses other patrons. It also brings to the foreground the humour that ripples through many of Brynner’s screen appearances in the form of smirks, amused looks and over-the-top gestures.

At this point in his career, being positioned as an object of desire – male or female, queer or straight – would have hardly been a novelty to Brynner. With the exception of a handful of commercially unsuccessful comedies and dramas, his roles had revolved around demonstrations of physical force and skill performed within the gestural registers of masculine bravado and within a broad spectrum of ethnic accents. Brynner’s only onscreen cross-dressing scene may be in *The Magic Christian* but his work was certainly rich in instances of ethnic drag – even if the main prop involved was regularly the actor’s own body. In one film after another, Brynner was positioned as an object to behold – even as an animal force of some kind that was both fascinating and fearsome in his unpredictability, dominance and violence. And, as noted above, his cosmopolitan, decidedly alien figure occupied a compromised position in the registers of whiteness in ways that aided its ornamental,

sexualised display yet limited its scope of available roles. As Hollywood film culture transformed, as different body aesthetics got pushed to the fore and as Brynner himself aged, these options grew even more limited and predictable.

In its cosmopolitanism, Brynner's star image had some resemblance to that of the Egyptian-born Omar Sharif who transitioned from Middle Eastern film stardom to Hollywood and European co-productions with his appearance as Sherif Ali in *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962). While Brynner, as Rameses, was the Pharaoh of Egypt, Sharif played Russian in *Doctor Zhivago* (David Lean, 1965) and *The Tamarind Seed* (Blake Edwards, 1974), and while Brynner envisioned himself as a direct descendant of the Mongol ruler, Ghengis Khan, Sharif was cast in the title role of *Ghengis Khan* (Henry Levin, 1965). At the very close of the studio era, and after, Sharif acted in range of exotic and foreign roles similar to those played by Brynner, from the King of Armenia in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Antony Mann, 1964) to a German major in *The Night of the Generals* (Anatole Litvak, 1967), the Crown Prince of Austria in *Mayerling* (Terence Young, 1968), a Mexican outlaw in *Mackenna's Gold* (J. Lee Thompson, 1969), a guerrilla leader in *Che!* (Richard Fleischer, 1969), an Afghan in *The Horsemen* (John Frankenheimer, 1971) and an Arab prince in *Ashanti* (Richard Fleischer, 1979). There was little commonality in the two actors' performance styles or physical aesthetics as such, yet the star images of both Brynner and Sharif were similarly malleably exotic, solidly masculine and cosmopolitan in ways that resulted in them being cast as foreigners and as diversely racialised others. Now portraying this ethnicity and then another, the onscreen bodies of both Brynner and Sharif functioned as shifting, fantastic and highly unstable signifiers of 'cultural uniqueness of nations and ethnicities'.⁴³

The cosmopolitanism central to both Brynner's and Sharif's star image involved the capacity to move between, and to cross, geographical and cultural boundaries with apparent ease, as

well as to occupy a range of positions without being bound to any single one of them – the ones connected to their national origins included. The flexibility of this ethnic casting found direct correlation in the international mobility of the actors themselves. Born in the Soviet Union, Brynner had a Swiss passport, was a long-term resident of France and a naturalised U.S. citizen from 1943 to 1965 (before giving up his citizenship for tax reasons). He regularly played aloof men of the world with sophisticated tastes in dress, art and cuisine in ways concurrent with his star image of a cosmopolitan polyglot gourmand womaniser with a penchant for designer clothing. The cosmopolitanism that Brynner performed was not that of a seasoned tourist, but suggestive of a deeper mastery of cultural nuance based on extensive social connections and diverse family roots facilitating instinctual insight into the intricacies of manner, habit, sensibility and style.

His introductions to the sections of *The Yul Brynner Cookbook* featuring his favourite recipes from Russian, Japanese, Gypsy, Swiss, Chinese, French and Thai cuisines are particularly illustrative in this respect. Detailing both Brynner's personal connections to the food cultures in question – his travels, palates and origins included – the introductions provide brief socio-historical sketches of each culinary and agricultural context. These contextual and factual vignettes, as well as their ample insider recommendations for dishes and drinks to try, are lodged in Brynner's experiences and memories, from the Northern Chinese 'chiao tze' dumplings reminiscent of his childhood to his love of fondue handed down from his father and his appreciation for Gypsy food culture inherited from his mother. 'I have worked and travelled all over the world', Brynner states. 'Of all the places I've been the country that captured my heart more than any other was France. I love the combination of gracious cosmopolitan elegance and ageless charm of gentle rural beauty that I have found in Normandy, the province where I maintain my real home.'⁴⁴

Encompassing constant, easy mobility, broad mastery of and affective affinity with global cultures, Brynner outlines an elegant and effortless kind of cosmopolitanism. As such, it is not entirely continuous with, or easy to pair with his elaborate, stylized onscreen performances as brash Cossacks and impervious alien rulers that do not convey much nuanced insight into the cultural settings that they claim to depict. There is characteristic, drag-like excess to Brynner's ethnic performances that dates them in unfavourable ways. The antiquated air of his historical epics and the flamboyance of his performances are unlikely to invite much contemporary recognition of cinematic artistry. But just as Brynner's performance style, or his mere corporeal presence, was often the key attraction in his films, these may have more longevity than most of the films in which he appeared. To the degree that Brynner is currently remembered, it is in terms of his bodily style and overall look.

A digital afterlife of gestures

One example of Yul Brynner's presence – or afterlife – in contemporary media culture involves the heterogeneous, ever accumulating archives of YouTube videos including not only his films but clips and snippets edited out of the cinematic whole with the idea of communicating something more specific concerning a film, an actor or some other issue entirely. There are fan tributes to Brynner as well as archival materials to explore, from television interviews to game-show appearances, his famous posthumous anti-smoking ads, Academy award acceptance speech, movie trailers, dance and performance scenes. One can watch a video comprised of every time someone says 'Moses' in *Ten Commandments*, the drag scene in *The Magic Christian*, the semi-naked imprisonment scene *From the Kings of the Sun*, select highlights from *The Ultimate Warrior*, *Westworld* and *Futureworld*, as well as the scene from *The File of the Gold Goose* where Brynner's character meanders through London's sauna establishments, looking for his man.

This contingent mass of data speaks of what people find worthy of sharing – independent of the limitations of copyright – for the purposes of titillation, appreciation, amusement, obscurity and commentary alike. If camp overtones emerge in many of the Yul Brynner videos uploaded on YouTube, then animated GIFs crafted from these clips, standardly a few seconds long, both further decontextualize the materials deployed and focus attention on their specific detail. In their perpetually looping motion, GIFs are based on repetition and hence afford a particular isolation and accentuation of singular gestures, postures and movements. This isolation makes it possible for them to capture and condense some of the gestural repertoires that define individual performance styles as expressions, motions and poses. In doing so, GIFs both extend and alter the storage capacities of cinema as an archive of gestures and their transformations.⁴⁵

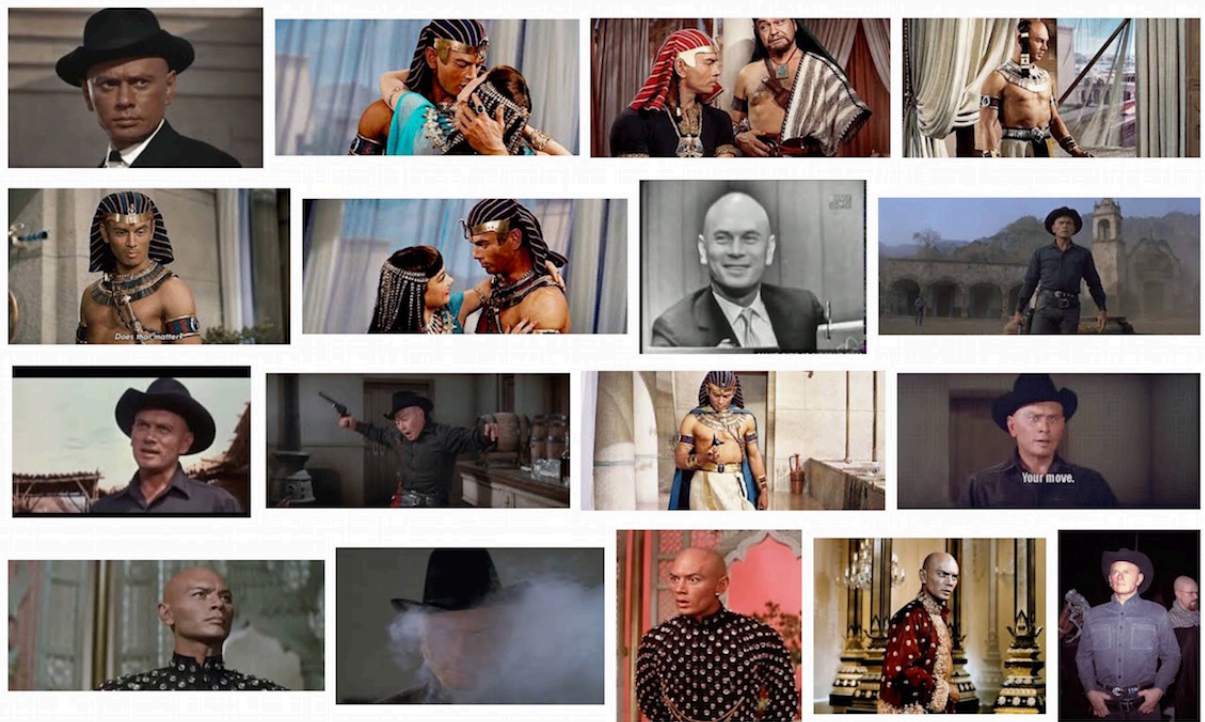


FIG 7. Google Image Search results for ‘Yul Brynner animated GIFs’, October 2017.

Browsing through Yul Brynner GIFs makes it possible to grasp what grabs people in his performances in the sense of attracting attention, interest and focus, as well as that which people grab from these performances by further editing the data.⁴⁶ This appropriation stresses some of the actor's more idiosyncratic expressions and, predictably, his best-known performances, displayed on looping replay. GIFs isolate gestures and motions, and consequently highlight the repetitive characteristics that cut through Brynner's onscreen appearances. At the same, time, these characteristics are reframed as enactments of mood, motion and style cut loose from narrative framework, character construction or the broader representational dynamics of any single film. Should the actors or films not be correctly identified, the GIFs remain freely applicable to conveying sentiment and opinion, as nonverbally communicated through actors' bodily performance. Since GIFs are regularly used as reactions to posts on social media, the gestures they capture become means of communicating and commenting on all kinds of emotional registers, responses and opinions to virtually any post or item. GIFs therefore make it possible to both perform affect and to demonstrate cultural knowledge.⁴⁷

Yul Brynner GIFs can be understood as ripples of cinema history that gesture towards the bodies of work they are derived from while also extending well beyond their original contexts and narrative frames as encapsulations of feeling, mood and register. What remains and thrives in such circulation and repurposing is also indicative of how the bodily performance styles pertaining to specific stars continue to be identified, remembered and possibly appreciated. Film star GIFs encapsulate their most recognisable, or even iconic, gestures and moments. So, there is Rameses, mocking, embracing Nefertiri and then turning away from her, revealing his muscular back and dramatically swinging his cape in protest. Here, gunslingers in black, on the prowl, falling down and shooting to kill, their robotic facial panels removed and smoking. And here, the king of Siam communicates exaggerated

astonishment, engages in a frenzied polka and, with one hand on hip, snaps his fingers in a simple gesture of regal command.

¹ Christopher R. Brown, 'Mad about the boy? Hollywood stardom and masculinity subverted in *The Swimmer*', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2012), pp. 362–363.

² Cynthia Baron, Cynthia, *Reframing Screen Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 151.

³ In Jhan Robbins, *Yul Brynner: The Inscrutable King* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1989), p. 65.

⁴ Will Straw, 'Scales of presence: Bess Flowers and the Hollywood extra', *Screen*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2011), pp. 121–127.

⁵ Robbins, *Yul Brynner*; Rock Brynner, *Yul: The Man Who Would Be King. A Memoir of Father and Son* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); Yul Brynner with Susan Reed, *The Yul Brynner Cookbook: Food Fit for the King and You* (New York: Stein and Day, 1983).

⁶ Robbins, *Yul Brynner*, pp. ix–x.

⁷ Brynner, *The Yul Brynner Cookbook*, p. 55; Michelangelo Capua, *Yul Brynner: A Biography* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), pp. 3–4.

⁸ John Martin, 'The awful truth about Yul Brynner', *Behind the Scenes*, vol. 3, no. 6 (1957), p. 19.

⁹ Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Fandom* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 62.

¹⁰ Gaylyn Studlar, 'Discourses of gender and ethnicity: The construction and de(con)struction of Rudolph Valentino as Other', *Film Criticism*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1989), p. 29.

¹¹ Ernesto Chávez, “‘Ramon is not one of these’: Race and sexuality in the construction of silent film actor Ramón Novarro’s star image’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2011), p. 523.

¹² Adrienne L. McLean, “‘I’m a Cansino’: Transformation, ethnicity, and authenticity in the construction of Rita Hayworth, American love goddess’, *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 44, no. 3/4 (1993), pp. 8–26.

¹³ Brynner, *Yul Brynner*, 40.

¹⁴ On transformations in understanding screen acting, see Cynthia Baron, ‘Crafting film performance: Acting in the Hollywood era’, in Pamela Robertson Wojcik (ed.), *Movie Acting: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 83–94.

¹⁵ Brynner, *Yul*, pp. 20–30.

¹⁶ Brynner, *Yul*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Robbins, *Yul Brynner*, p. 2.

¹⁸ Capua, *Yul Brynner*, p. 65.

¹⁹ Martin, ‘The awful truth about Yul Brynner’, p. 19.

²⁰ Martin, ‘The awful truth about Yul Brynner’, p. 56.

²¹ Robbins, *Yul Brynner*, p. 79.

²² Robbins, *Yul Brynner*, p. 99; Brynner, *Yul*, p. 101.

²³ Brynner, *Yul*, p. 91.

²⁴ Mark Gallagher, ‘On Javier Bardem’s sex appeal’, *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2014), p. 112.

²⁵ Will Scheibel, ‘Marilyn Monroe, “sex symbol”: Film performance, gender politics and 1950s Hollywood celebrity’, *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2013), p. 5.

²⁶ John Mercer, ‘The enigma of the male sex symbol’, *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2013), p. 86.

²⁷ Brynner, *Yul*, p. 83.

²⁸ Capua, *Yul Brynner*, p. 1.

²⁹ Michael Williams, 'The idol body: Stars, statuary and the classical epic', *Film & History*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2009), p. 46.

³⁰ Ina Rae Hark, 'Animals or Romans: Looking at masculinity in *Spartacus*', in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 151.

³¹ For extended discussions, see Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1983), pp. 2–16; Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997); Williams, 'The idol body'; Santiago Fouz-Hernández, 'Homer-otic: Male bodies in the epic film revival from *Gladiator* to *300*', in Alba del Pozo and Alba Serrano (eds), *La piel en la palestra: Estudios corporales II* (Barcelona: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2011), pp. 27–34.

³² Mercer, 'The enigma of the male sex symbol', p. 88.

³³ On the body aesthetics of peplum, see Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 165–169.

³⁴ Kate Murphy, Kate, 'The right pose can be reassuring', *The New York Times*, May 3, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/fashion/the-right-stance-can-be-reassuring-studied.html>.

³⁵ Mercer, 'The enigma of the male sex symbol', p. 87.

³⁶ Straw, 'Scales of presence', p. 125.

³⁷ Philip Drake, 'Reconceptualizing screen performance', *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 58, no. 1–2 (2006), pp. 92–93.

³⁸ Straw, 'Scales of presence', p. 125.

³⁹ In Brynner, *Yul Brynner*, p. 88.

⁴⁰ In Brynner, *Yul Brynner*, p. 203.

⁴¹ On iconic performances, see Drake, 'Reconceptualizing screen performance', pp. 85–86.

⁴² Brown, 'Mad about the boy?', p. 356.

⁴³ Motti Regev, 'Cultural uniqueness and aesthetic cosmopolitanism', *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2007), p. 125.

⁴⁴ Brynner, *The Yul Brynner Cookbook*, p. 137.

⁴⁵ Straw, 'Scales of presence', p. 126.

⁴⁶ On the notion of the grab (versus the gaze) online, see Theresa M. Senft, *CamGirls: Celebrity & Community In the Age of Social Networks* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 46–47.

⁴⁷ Kate Milter and Tim Highfield, 'Never gonna GIF you up: Analyzing the cultural significance of the animated GIF', *Social Media + Society* July–September (2017). p. 3.