Sylvia Scarlett: A Pivotal Moment for Queer Representation in Hollywood

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance of *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935) as a representation of queer women in Production Code cinema. It argues that two pre-code films, *Morocco* (1930) and *Queen Christina* (1933), set a precedent for the high level of queerness displayed in *Sylvia Scarlett* despite the strict Production Code censorship which prohibited what it termed 'sex perversion'. This too, marked an end to the joyful expressions of queerness in Production Code film, as shown by the ways in which queer women were subsequently depicted until the MPAA rating system was instituted in 1968. *Sylvia Scarlett* was a pivotal moment for queer representation in Hollywood, building upon the steps taken in films released under an initially loose version of the Production Code. It espouses a fluid approach to gender and sexuality, celebrating its unconventional protagonist, whereas queer-coded characters in Production Code films thereafter carried immoral connotations and were often punished for their queerness.

It has been said that *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935) was the queerest film that Hollywood ever made.[1] Directed by openly gay George Cukor, it features a female protagonist, portrayed by Katharine Hepburn, who poses as a young boy by cross-dressing, and a series of storylines wherein queer feelings are implied, yet it was released after strict censorship rules meant that queerness was forbidden in Hollywood largely due to heavy influence from the Catholic Church. This essay argues that *Sylvia Scarlett* was a cultural turning point for representations of queer women in Hollywood cinema, with two pre-code films, *Morocco* (1930) and *Queen Christina* (1933), setting the precedent for the high level of queerness displayed in *Sylvia Scarlett*. This was something which no Hollywood Studio would back again for decades, as shown by the ways in which queer women were subsequently depicted as villains or as tragically doomed, until the Production Code was replaced in 1968 with the MPAA rating system which is still in place today.

1 Elyce Rae Helford, "'A Queer Feeling When I Look at You': Gender and Sexuality in Three Films by George Cukor," *Journal of Bisexuality* 7, no 1-2 (2007), 105.

Queerness here refers to the act of pushing back against normative societal expectations, particularly norms pertaining to heteronormativity through the subversion of gender and sexuality, gender roles, gender expression and gender performativity. When the Motion Picture Production Code was passed in 1930 and strengthened in 1934 after protests from Christians in the US, it prohibited Hollywood films from telling certain stories. It was created to foster good public relations with and to avoid the threat of external censorship.[2] According to Production Code rules, 'sex perversion or any inference to it [was] forbidden.'[3] This meant that queerness was banned from Hollywood because it was seen as perverse, but this didn't stop filmmakers from including it in their films. As a way of getting around the Production Code rules, coding, a 'set of signals—words, forms, behaviors, signifiers of some kind— that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages,'[4] was used to signify queerness. This allowed Hollywood studios to continue to put queer characters and influences from queer culture into their films without fear of censorship, with several films using female cross-dressing as way to express queerness right under the censors' noses. A departure from heteronormativity could be identified through the queer gender expression of these characters, told through the visual cues of their costuming.

Morocco and *Queen Christina* were released during a time when the Production Code was in its early stages, before it was strengthened. They are often referred to as pre-Code films for this reason. However, *Sylvia Scarlett*, which was released in 1935 after this strengthening process, remains 'one of the queerest films ever made in Hollywood.'[5] Each of these films features a female protagonist who likes to dress in traditionally male clothing, either for burlesque-type performance, practical self-expression, or an attempt to temporarily pass as male. Each of these women share a kiss with another woman while dressed in traditionally masculine clothing, each is written as independent and strong-willed

2 Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 31.

3 Asu.edu, *The Motion Picture Production Code Of 1930 (Hays Code)*, 31 March, 1930.

4 Pauline Greenhill, "'The Snow Queen': Queer Coding in male Directors' Films". *Marvels & Tales*, 29, no. 1 (Special Issue 2015) pp. 111-112.

5 Helford, "'A Queer Feeling When I Look at You", *Journal of Bisexuality* 7, no 1-2 (2007), 105.

and each is portrayed by an actress for whom an aura of androgyny has often played a part in their public persona. The boldness in the queer-coding of these three films has a clear trajectory, which begins with Dietrich's gender performance in *Morocco*, is strengthened by Greta Garbo's queer expression in *Queen Christina*, and diminishes greatly after the release of Hepburn's turn in *Sylvia Scarlett*.

A scene in *Morocco* marked one of the first times a leading lady kissed another woman on screen in Hollywood. The film features Marlene Dietrich as Mademoiselle Amy Jolly, a nightclub singer who moves to Morocco to start a new life; and Gary Cooper as Private Tom Brown, a French Foreign Légionnaire who falls for her. The plot follows a love triangle between Jolly, Cooper and Monsieur La Bessière (Adolphe Menjou), a wealthy man with influence in the affairs of the French Foreign Legion. We see Dietrich wear a tailored tuxedo and top hat in her first performance after arriving in the country(von Sternberg 1930, 12:54 to 20:06). She emulates masculine mannerisms and flirts with her audience irrespective of their gender. During her performance she serenades a woman in the audience, leaving her with a scandalous kiss (von Sternberg 1930, 19:03 to 19:28). The cross-dressing here is not intended to imply that Dietrich's character is queer, but rather to use queer presentation as a way to intrigue her male suitors in the room. Although the rest of the film centres on a heterosexual love triangle, this kiss between Dietrich and a female audience member while Dietrich was dressed in her tuxedo is what is most remembered about Morocco, particularly by the queer community. It set a precedent under a loose version of the Production Code for a performative queerness which was deemed acceptable because of its 'artificiality,' with the conditions that it reflected heteronormativity through a butch-femme dynamic, and that heterosexual love was the apparent ultimate motivation behind the character's actions.

Queen Christina was released in 1933, just before the strengthening of the Production Code. It is a biographical film about Queen Christina of Sweden. The real Queen Christina dressed in men's clothes and her gender and sexuality has been called into question for centuries, with many historians believing she was a lesbian, encouraged by her refusal to marry and her close relationship with certain women such as a lady of her court, Ebba Sparre. Queen Christina wrote to her: '[h]ow happy I should be if only I could see you, Beautiful One. But I am condemned by Destiny to love and cherish you always without seeing you...I shall always be entirely devoted to you, as I always have been.'[6] Queen Christina is also remembered for her unusual habits: 'She dressed sometimes in men's clothes, sometimes in women's, often in a careless mixture of the two . . . She had nothing feminine about her but the sex.'[7]

In this 1933 film, Greta Garbo portrays Queen Christina as cross-dressing, reflecting the real Queen Christina's rejection of traditional femininity. When one character despairs, '[y]ou cannot die an old maid' (Wanger 1933, 20:53 to 20:56),[8] Christina declares in response, 'I have no intention to, Chancellor. I shall die a bachelor' (Wanger 1933, 20:58 to 21:03),[9] asserting her affinity for masculine gender. Her independent spirit would also have also been seen as a masculine trait, many women of the time incorporated masculine clothing into their wardrobe to project an image of autonomy.[10] In the film, Garbo exchanges two kisses with her female friend (Wanger 1933, 15:43 and 1:31:41), Ebba Sparre (Elizabeth Young), inspired by Queen Christina's real-life companion.[11] This relationship is played as overtly platonic, but the film's covert undertones were ones of at least a passionate 'romantic friendship' and at most some hidden representation that queer people had never before seen to this extent.[12] The inclusion in the 1933 film of any allusion to the speculated romance between the actual Queen Christina and Sparre is significant because it shows a desire to reflect the experience of real queer women despite the taboo quality of queerness in Hollywood.

6 Sarah Waters, "'A Girton Girl on a Throne': Queen Christina and Versions of Lesbianism, 1906-1933", *Feminist Review* Spring, no. 46 (1994), 42.

7 Ibid, 42.

8 Walter Wanger, *Queen Christina* (1933; California: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Film.

9 Ibid

10 Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 243.

11 Wanger, *Queen Christina* (1933: California: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Film.

12 Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), pp. 64-5.

Queen Christina also plays out a scenario in which the title character masquerades and socialises as a man in a local inn. She meets a Spanish envoy, Antonio (John Gilbert), and they spend the evening getting to know each other, with Antonio under the impression that Christina is a man. Antonio is very drawn to Christina and keen to share a bed with her both before and after he discovers her identity as a woman. *Queen Christina* leaned into the two precedents in *Morocco* — Dietrich's burlesque persona and the queer kiss — but added an element of gender fluidity through Christina's experimentation with gender identity, as well as sexual fluidity via Antonio's attraction to the male-presenting Christina. Whereas Dietrich's character cross-dressed both as a spectacle and to provoke playful outrage, the cross-dressing in *Queen Christina* is provoked by an innate desire to live life by performing masculinity. The queer kiss between Christina and Ebba is an expression of the character's closeness with another female character rather than bait to scandalise an audience, while the attraction between Christina and Antonio transcends gender. This is a step closer to overt representation of queerness and queer women in Hollywood cinema under the initial looser version of Production Code censorship.

Sylvia Scarlett (1935) was released after the Production Code began to be earnestly enforced. It stars Katharine Hepburn in the titular role, who spends most of the film dressed as Sylvester, a young French boy. For convenience, Sylvia/Sylvester will be referred to using he/him pronouns in quotation marks, to underline the ambiguity of 'his' gender in the film. When Sylvia/Sylvester's father (Edmund Gwenn) gets in trouble with the French law, 'he' cuts off his hair and dons boy's clothes so they can flee to England together more easily. They meet Cary Grant's character, Jimmy Monkley, on the boat, where all are established as swindling crooks. They work together to get by, at first through scams, and then through a travelling show, joined by Maudie (Dennie Moore), Monkley's promiscuous housemaid friend.

They meet the effeminate, arty Michael Fane (Brian Aherne) at one of their shows, who captures Sylvia/Sylvester's affections, leading to a queer-presenting love triangle between Sylvia/Sylvester, Fane and Monkley. Sylvia/Sylvester's identity as a woman remains a secret from all except 'his' father until the third act, also providing a source of comedy and suspense throughout the film.

Throughout *Sylvia Scarlett*, Sylvia/Sylvester is the object of attraction for both men and women. Similarly to *Queen Christina*, there is fluidity present in terms of both gender and sexuality, but *Sylvia Scarlett* exercises this fluidity with several characters and in a much more overt way. Three characters in particular are drawn to Sylvia/Sylvester in 'his' androgynous gender presentation: Maudie, Michael and Jimmy. In a poorly edited scene that speaks to the censorship battle which was likely to have been waged over its contents,[13] Maudie plants a kiss on 'his' lips ('When are you going to grow some whiskers? Your face is as smooth as a girl's!' (Cukor 1935, 34:33 to 34:38)[14]) from which Sylvia/Sylvester hastily jumps, rejecting Maudie's advances (Cukor 1935, 34:23 to 34:38).[15] This is one step further towards overt queerness than the same sex kisses in *Morocco* and *Queen Christina* because Maudie is openly attracted to Sylvia/Sylvester's drag presentation, and gambols a kiss. It is queer in that it is unclear whether Maudie's attraction is 'truly a woman for a presumed young man or a coded lesbian attraction of a femme for a butch'.[16] The two characters are alone in this scene, so Maudie's kiss is not performative for men's titillation like Dietrich's performance in *Morocco*, and rather than the familiar, friendly intention of Garbo's kiss in *Queen Christina*, Maudie kisses Sylvia/Sylvester out of genuine sexual and aesthetic attraction: 'I wonder what it'd be like to kiss anybody with a moustache like that. Let's try!' (Cukor 1935, 35:21 to 35:23).[17] Much like Dietrich's kiss in *Morocco*, the film's use of the comedic lens aided its journey past the censors, but the loss of its original, potentially more explicit form to the cutting room floor illustrates the censorship challenge this scene faced.[18]

13 Helford, "'A Queer Feeling When I Look at You", *Journal of Bisexuality* 7, no. 1-2 (2007), 107.

14 Cukor, *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935; California: RKO Radio Pictures), Film.

15 Ibid.

16 Helford, "A Queer Feeling When I Look at You", *Journal of Bisexuali-*

17 Cukor. *Sylvia Scarlett*. California: RKO Radio Pictures, 1935.

18 Helford, "A Queer Feeling When I Look at You", *Journal of Bisexuality* 7, no. 1-2 (2007), 107.

Sylvia Scarlett also represents male queerness through the characters of Monkley and Fane. They take part in a queer sort of love triangle with Sylvia/Sylvester. While still oblivious to Sylvia/Sylvester's female identity, Monkley is very attracted to the young individual masquerading as a boy, inviting 'him' to share a bed with him as his 'proper little hot water bottle' (Cukor 1935, 36:17 to 36:59). Cary Grant's Monkley is the hyper-masculine, charismatic bad boy in opposition to Aherne's Fane who plays the role of the 'queer third element'[19] in the love triangle which centres Hepburn's non-traditional femininity.[20] A lover of the arts, Fane is instantly drawn to Sylvia/Sylvester, and he too invites 'him' to share a bed without knowing 'his' female identity (Cukor 1935, 50:05 to 50:17).[21] Fane proclaims that 'his' face should be painted for its beauty (Cukor 1935, 49:37 to 49:50) and even verbally expresses the "queer feeling" he gets when he looks at 'him' (Cukor 1935, 49:29 to 49:36).[22] Upon discovering Sylvia/Sylvester's female identity, Fane admits he had been attracted to 'him' when 'he' was presenting as male: 'Oh I see, you're really a girl. I wondered why I was talking to you as I did!' (Cukor 1935, 53:28 to 53:38).[23] In a choice that subverts traditional heterosexuality on screen, audiences and critics alike were not happy when Sylvia/Sylvester chooses to run off with the effeminate Fane over the traditionally masculine Monkley.[24] While Sylvia/Sylvester does not show a romantic interest in women, 'he' does express a preference for a more queer existence, and thus when both men show an interest in the genderbending protagonist, 'he' prefers to embark on a relationship with the faye Fane over the manly Monkley.

Sylvia/Sylvester really seems to enjoy living as a man and the freedom that comes with it. Enhanced by Hepburn's own non-traditional femininity, even when presenting as a woman, 'he' sits wide-legged and masculine, unable or unwilling to perform the same femininity as someone like Maudie. 'He' expresses delight at his own appearance when Maudie draws a moustache on his face admiring 'himself' in the mirror

19 Ibid pp.105-108.

20 Ibid, 92.

21 Cukor. *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935; California: RKO Radio Pictures), Film.

22 Ibid

23 Ibid

24 Helford, "A Queer Feeling When I Look at You", *Journal of Bisexuality* 7, no. 1-2 (2007), 108.

(Cukor 1935, 35:15 to 35:19).[25] By the end, it is implied that Sylvia/Sylvester will be living as Sylvester beyond the events of the film, the queerness of this last scene is hard to deny. Fane and Sylvia/Sylvester decide to run away together with Sylvia/Sylvester choosing to return to 'his' masculine gender presentation despite all the key players knowing 'his' identity as female. In addition to an earlier scene where Fane rejects Sylvia/Sylvester while 'he' is presenting as more traditionally feminine, wearing a dress and sunhat and openly trying to flirt (Cukor 1935, 52:00 to 1:03:06),[26] this ending implies that Fane is more attracted to Sylvia/Sylvester in 'his' androgynous drag than with a more feminine appearance. It also implies that Sylvia/Sylvester 'himself' is more comfortable in this non-traditional, masculine gender performance than a more traditional femininity, and that 'he' is also less attracted to traditional masculinity. Fane and Sylvia/Sylvester literally leave traditional gender performance behind them when they exit the train. Under strict censorship rules *Sylvia Scarlett* represents an unusually queer story for Hollywood, its joyful freedom of expression and loose definition of gender pulling from the pre-code films, *Morocco* and *Queen Christina*, to bring a story to the screens which rejects normative gender performance and embraces an alternative way of life.

25 Cukor, *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935; California: RKO Radio Pictures), Film.

26 Ibid

The portrayal of women cross-dressing in Production Code films in general changed after the release of *Sylvia Scarlett*. Notable cross-dressers during this era of film were Doris Day in *Calamity Jane* (1953) and Joan Crawford in *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and while it could be argued that queer themes are present in both films—Calamity Jane's close relationship with the singer Katie Brown, and Joan Crawford's butch portrayal of Vienna and her tense rivalry with the 'even more butch Mercedes McCambridge'[27]—there would be no more kisses shared between two women in Hollywood cinema until films like *The Fox* (1967) and *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) which could portray lesbianism explicity due to the changes in the Production Code over the 1960s. However, even these films were heavily condemned by the Catholic Church, which limited their release and called for the removal of certain scenes for screenings in some locations.[28]

27 Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 103.

28 Ibid, 173.

In the throes of its most strict Production Code censorship, however, Hollywood found new ways to code women as queer on screen which were less overt and more associated with immorality. It was popular for both male and female villains to be coded as queer because queerness was associated with immorality and 'perversion'[29] in the eyes of the Production Code censors. In *Rebecca* (1940), Mrs Danvers (Judith Anderson), the maid at Manderley, is a queer-coded female villain[30]. She harbours strong feelings for Maxim de Winters' first wife, Rebecca, who died under mysterious circumstances. When she catches Maxim's second wife (Joan Fontaine) in Rebecca's old bedroom, she takes the opportunity to express her almost fetishistic enjoyment of Rebecca's old clothes, slowly caressing the other woman's face with a coat sleeve (Hitchcock 1940, 1:06:31 to 1:06:48).[31] She acts as a menace to Fontaine's character, always reminding her of how she is falling short of Rebecca's legacy. At the film's end Mrs Danvers burns down Manderley in a suicide and attempted murder: 'Mrs Danvers, she's gone mad. She said she'd rather destroy Manderley than see us happy here' (Hitchcock 1940, 2:03:50 to 2:04:39).[32] She is portrayed as a villain of the piece, driven 'mad' by her apparently perverse desire for a dead woman. For the female villains who were coded as queer, their bitter, hardened nature was seen as the result of a failed, pathetic attempt to perform traditionally male characteristics.[33] The characterisation of queer-coded women as evil and immoral marks a turn in the portrayal of queerness in Production Code cinema, from Hepburn's carefree Sylvia/Sylvester who gets to run away with the man 'he' loves, to the cold-hearted villain who deserves to be punished by the end, usually in the form of death.

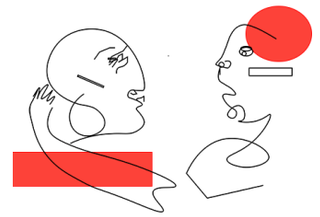
29 Asu.edu, *The Motion Picture Production Code Of 1930 (Hays Code)*, 31 March 1930.

30 Russo, *The Celluloid Closet'* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 256.

31 Alfred Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (1940: California: Selznick International Pictures), Film.

32 Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (1940: California: Selznick International Pictures), Film.

33 Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 100.



In the 1960s, the Catholic Church began to have less power over American audiences, so the Production Code went through a number of changes. It was now possible for gay people to appear explicitly onscreen.[34] A significant film for representations of female queerness in this regard is *The Children's Hour* (1961). It tells the story of two schoolmistresses, Martha (Shirley MacLaine) and Karen (Audrey Hepburn), whose careers are destroyed by rumours of their alleged romantic relationship with one another. This prompts Martha to confess her actual romantic feelings for Karen shortly before she hangs herself. It can be claimed that the film frames Martha's demise as her fault for being queer rather than that of the people who shunned her for her alleged 'perversion.'[35] *The Children's Hour* can arguably be attributed with the popularisation of the *Bury Your Gays* trope, as a tool to punish queer people for their identities, a damaging trope which has endured even to the present day all ending in the same tragic way: a queer character killed by suicide, murder or disease.[36] Whereas *Sylvia Scarlett* and its precursors, *Morocco* and *Queen Christina,* celebrate the queer presentation of the women at their centre; each is free to choose how she wants to live and survive as hero of the tale. Films like *The Children's Hour* and its offspring punish this quality in their protagonists, marking them as doomed by their 'perverse' desires.[37]

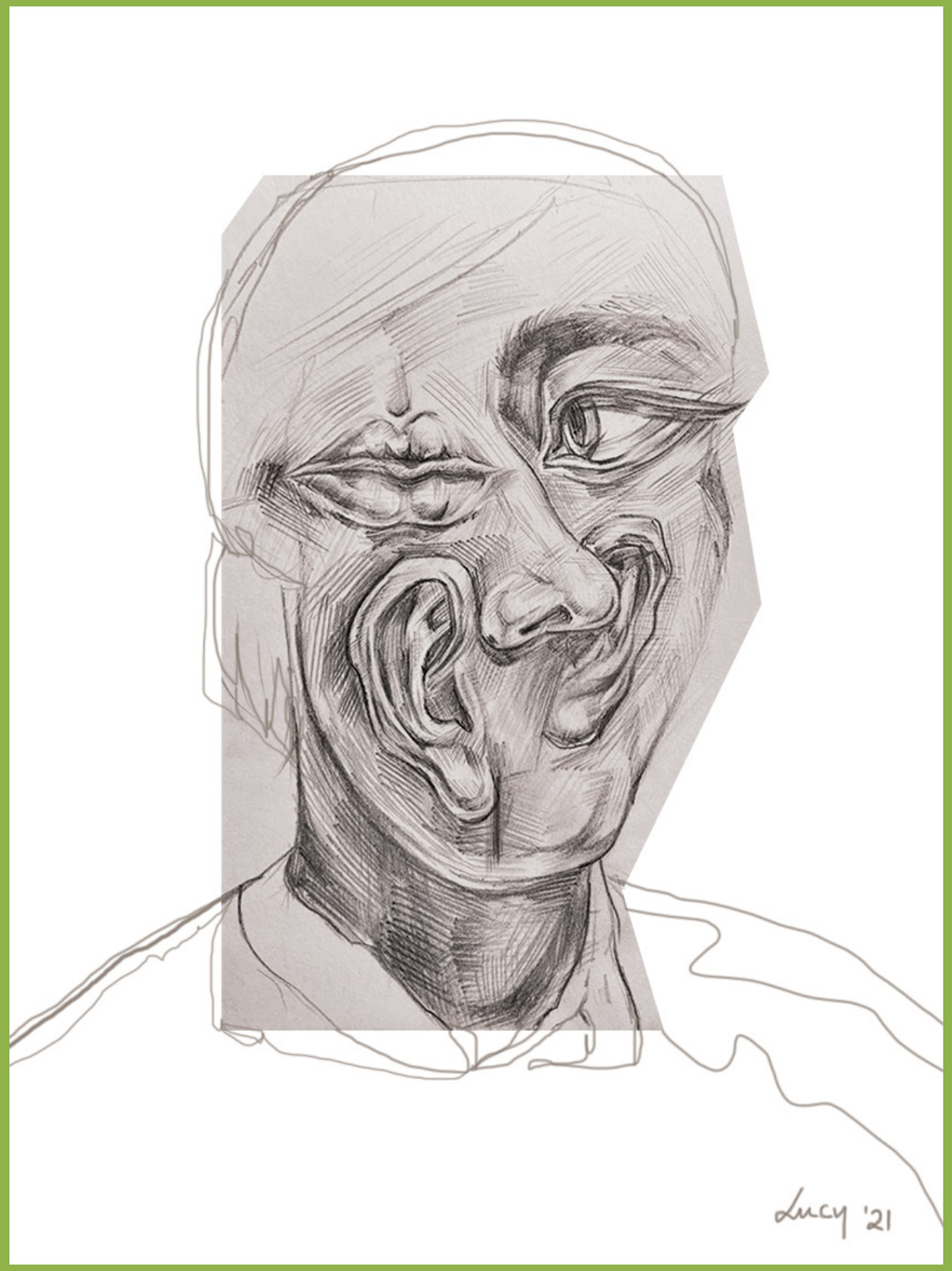
Sylvia Scarlett overcame the towering hurdle of strict Production Code censorship and brought to Hollywood screens a film which has queerness seeping from its every pore. It builds upon what *Morocco* and *Queen Christina* developed with their daring forays into queer expression and topped them with a representation of genderbending queerness that is rarely found in Hollywood's overwhelmingly heteronormative body of work. *Sylvia Scarlett* was a landmark for queer cinema in its illustration of both the arbitrary nature of gender roles and the fluidity of gender and sexuality, all despite the dominant forces in Hollywood which threatened to have those themes condemned.

34 Francis Bourdat, "Le code Hays: l'autocensure du cinéma américain" *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 15 (1987), 13.

35 Haley Hulan, "Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context", *McNair Scholars Journal*, 21, no. 2 (2017), 21.

36 Hulan, "Bury Your Gays", *McNair Scholars Journal*, 21, no. 2 (2017), 24.

37 Asu.edu, *The Motion Picture Production Code Of 1930 (Hays Code)*, 31 March 1930.



LUCY SHUYAO LU

words by Ava Chapman

'warm skin revelation, real skin, becomes other stranger, simulate experience'