

# Introduction

Zeus, the most powerful of Greek gods, had the ability to transform himself—into a bull, into a mortal. Even lesser gods were able to change their physical nature; it was the defining characteristic of Proteus.

Mortals, however, are doomed to inhabit one body with constant features. Bodies change, but changes tend to be gradual as we grow up and age, and the changes are hardly magical. But people have always fought these limits and tried to go beyond them. Alterations—tattoos, body piercings, and surgical reconstruction—have been part of every culture and are once more popular in ours. Festivals that seduce celebrants into assuming new identities—carnivals, Halloween—are universal. Although part of the purpose of self-change is decoration, enhancement, or beauty, the deeper and more radical purpose is transformation.

This book is about a group of artist-magicians who practice the art of transformation. Their talent and their job is the creation of new beings, human and almost human, and they succeed in doing so with disconcerting completeness. Their work shares many features with other artistic traditions; they are artists in the fullest sense. Their talent lies in sculpting and painting, but their material is not canvas or stone but rubber or other materials that have the character of near-flesh. Like architects, their designs are executed by teams of craftsmen and engineers and involve daunting technological challenges. Like performance artists, their work is not static, but ephemeral and animated. Like every other art, theirs is an art that conceals art; it works its magic only because it fools us into accepting what is created as a new and real entity.

What is unique about these artists is that their raw material includes not steel, glass, and bricks, not canvas and oil paint, but living, breathing human beings.

While there is very little shock value in comparing an empty canvas with a painting, or a warehouse of steel and glass with a finished building, there is a world of wonder in comparing the model with the wholly new being he or she has become. When the transformation works, we confront a person with a new life and history. We face a moribund beach bum in whose face we read a lifetime of hardship. Or a nearly human demon that reanimates the hellfire of medieval art. Or an ambassador from an otherworldly civilization that has followed its own independent but discernible course of evolution.

For most of these makeup artists, transformational makeup is only a small part of their bag of skills and tricks. Their talents extend to all kinds of horror effects, to the creation of animatronic creatures and body parts, to electronic and computer-based transformations, and so on. But most of these effects are designed to fool only the movie camera and not the eye. On the other hand, our main focus in this book is on the magical creation of freestanding new persons with whom one can shake hands, have lunch, and go for a walk.

The projects discussed in this book came about under varied circumstances. Some are demonstration makeups in which the artist tested the limits of his skills. Others were created as trials that never made it to the finished film. Still others are familiar successes, involving superstars and box office recognition.

The projects themselves are also dizzyingly varied. They include the step-by-step transformation of Tim Allen into Santa Claus, the creation of a universe of alien civilizations, the summoning of medieval demons, the reincarnation of historical figures, and triumphs of extreme aging.

For this kind of artistry, pictures are not just worth a thousand words; they are beyond worth. They are magical twice over. They allow us to savor in detail the artists' triumphs, to compare their aims with their successes. And they allow us to witness the transformation and see how persons are reinvented. The pictures in this book are unique in trying to do justice to the magic. But words are also needed—not just to tell the stories of the makeups but to raise tantalizing questions about the nature of acting, the relationship of appearance and identity, and the transcendence of self implicit in transformation.

For some curmudgeons, these stories are only about persons wearing pieces of rubber, just as paintings are only canvases with bits of pigment. For them, acting always comes “from inside” and needs no special effects. For them, transformation is not a daring way to challenge our limits, to challenge mortality. This book is for everyone else.