In a famous 1938 essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the German Jewish philosopher, literary theorist, and social critic Walter Benjamin comes up with a striking way to differentiate paintings from photographs. A painting is a singular work of art, surrounded by an “aura,” which only intensifies over time and reveals the extent to which regard for high art has borrowed from ritual and religion. Even if art increasingly cuts itself off from religious service starting sometime in the early modern period, the cult of beauty and art for art’s sake persists in a quasireligious mode. A photograph, on the other hand, is “mechanically reproducible” and involves an entirely different aesthetics and mode of reception. What the camera sees and captures differs significantly from what the artist’s eye perceives and the brush portrays. We know that the “Mona Lisa” is in the Louvre. But where is the original of a photograph? “To ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense,” writes Benjamin. “But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics” (224). Reproducible art never imagines a single beholder. It aims at a mass audience. And that is where politics comes in.

As an archetype of cinema, Lola operates at the point where painting and photography intersect. In some respects this is not surprising. The historical transition from aura to mechanical reproducibility coincides precisely with the life and “politics” of Lola Montez. And so there are paintings and photographs of Lola Montez. We almost get the feeling that Benjamin should have been writing about her, the singular Lola with her aura, in anticipation of the many Lolas to follow,
from Dietrich to Potente and beyond. Lola’s appeal is based on her unique and modern charms and her ability to wield her image as an invitation to genuine pleasure as well as to practice what I am tempted to call the “politics of aura.” Make no mistake about it, Lola and her image—painted, photographed, or on film (cinema is also an art form based on reproducibility and the technology of the camera)—can be political dynamite. Just ask Ludwig I, King of Bavaria. He knows.

All of which leads me to a question—was Robert Heyman (1879–1946) thinking about the relationship of painting to film when he wrote and directed the earliest extant Lola film, the 1918 *Lola Montez*? The film begins with a portrait of Lola in an ornately gilded frame that fills the screen. But hold it. Is that really a painting? Suddenly Lola smiles directly at us, looks to either side, and then winks. The aura of the static painting is broken. Her conspiratorial wink draws her audience into the magic of cinema. A new relationship is established. In a wink, Lola Montez, lover of kings, becomes the lover of us all. Leopoldine Konstantin, the actress who plays Lola, not only brings the portrait to cinematic life; she invites us, too—all of us, her mass audience—into the promise of her embrace.

As an author, screenwriter, and director living in Munich, the scene of the most scandalous chapter in Lola Montez’s life, Heymann was certainly familiar with the two existing portraits of Lola Montez, both commissioned by her lover Ludwig I, both painted in 1847 by notable German artists for whom Lola sat, and both still on display in Munich galleries. For Ludwig, the painting process was an occasion for spending long hours in admiring conversation with Lola and the respective artist in his studio. In other words, Ludwig’s desire as patron and lover is a contributing factor to the creation of the image. Although the portraits were painted in the same year and for the same patron, the politics of these two images could hardly be more different.

The first to paint Lola was the accomplished artist Joseph Stieler, who had already contributed numerous portraits of significant women in the king’s life for his “Gallery of Beauties” in the new wing of the Nymphenburg Palace outside Munich. Stieler was already well known for his portraits of Beethoven and Goethe, painted years earlier. After seeing the “Spaniard” dance, Ludwig was determined that she, too, must be immortalized in his gallery. Stieler painted her twice, though only the second portrait has been preserved. She is captured in three-quarter profile, eyes slightly raised and looking off to the viewer’s left. In a black dress with white lace around her neck and raven black hair, an otherwise serene portrait is electrified and knocked off kilter by the red flowers in her hair, the diagonal line of the red couch she is seated