The Loves of Hercules

*Hercules* (Francisci, 1958) constructs femininity in terms of distraction, incomprehension and danger. This representation of sexual difference is problematic on multiple levels. Maggie Günberg states that patriarchy associates ‘the feminine, domestic, familial, heterossexual sphere with passivity and inaction’ (Günsberg, 2005, p. 111). The early scenes of *Hercules* seem to validate this conservative and somewhat simplistic representation, the princess Iole depicted as a figure of vulnerability, fainting into Hercules's arms. Her slender figure, pale make-up, tailored white tunic and gold ornamentation stand in contrast to Hercules's muscular physique, black hair, tanned skin and dark animal-fur garment. The casting of a bodybuilder as Hercules serves to emphasise the difference between male and female. Anne Bolin argues that bodybuilding ‘exaggerates Western notions of gender difference—muscles denoting masculinity and signifying “biological” disparity between the genders’ (Bolin, 1996, p. 126). A strong, muscular figure can only be male, as women, by their nature, cannot attain this form, although there are female bodybuilders and, moreover, a physique achieved through bodybuilding is itself hardly natural. Hercules and Iole are the first characters to interact, and the repeated comparison of their bodies marks them as the film’s dominant masculine and feminine forms. Male strength, power and activity are contrasted with female weakness, powerlessness and passivity.

Steve Neale asserts that, in mainstream films, the look or gaze of the spectator is by implication male (Neale, 1993, p. 19). On a more general level, Laura Mulvey argues: ‘In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female’ (Mulvey, 1992, p. 27). While Neale and Mulvey take differing positions in this wide area of debate, both suggest that within a patriarchal society the male is the looker while the female is the looked-at. In the early scenes of *Hercules*, Iole is the object of both Hercules's and the viewer's gaze, the camera lingering on her prone body. Iole is the passive object of desire, Hercules the diegetic spectator and active agent.
This apparently straightforward representation of gender difference is, however, revealed as another performance that cannot disguise the fragility and artificiality of its construction. There is an ongoing tension between establishing Hercules and Iole as a conventional heterosexual pairing and distancing them from each other. Exchanges of looks and fleeting physical contact culminate in the classic embrace-and-kiss barely half an hour into the film. This moment is framed in a low-angle medium long shot that emphasises a backdrop of trees and sky, placing the union of Hercules and Iole in a context of nature and freedom far removed from the constraints, dictates and political tensions embodied by the city of Jolco. Günsberg argues that, in *Hercules*, ‘licit domesticated heterosexuality provides a framework for sexual desire...however, this framework is tokenistic and sketchy’ (Günsberg, 2005, p. 107). I argue further that the framework is shown as unsustainable. Far from resolving the Hercules-Iole relationship in orthodox heterosexual terms, the film works to dismantle it over the next sixty minutes’ running time. The split between the characters is reaffirmed on several levels, notably during a scene set in front of a fountain. This sequence opens with a long shot of the fountain, flanked by two stone pillars. Iole runs into the background of the shot, from right to left, followed by Hercules, who remains on the right of the frame in medium long shot. Placed on opposite sides of the fountain, Iole and Hercules are separated further by their respective sizes in the shot. The framing and composition of the shot, Iole keeping her back to Hercules, convey a sense of distance and isolation.

In the final scene, Hercules reclaims his place in the heterosexual, domesticated union with Iole that was established in the early part of the film. This conventional resolution is contradicted and subverted by the mise-en-scène. Placed in the centre of the frame, the reunited couple look off to the right, not at one another. On visual terms, at least, neither functions as the object of the other’s desire. Positioned behind Iole, Hercules places his hands on her shoulders, a minimal physical contact that stands in marked contrast to their earlier embrace and kiss. The scene is staged in semi-shadow, leaving the actors’ facial expressions obscured. While Iole turns her head to look at Hercules, she quickly looks away again to the right of the frame. Gazing in the same direction, rather than at each other, Hercules and Iole look beyond the diegetic space for a resolution of their relationship that the film itself is unable to provide.

This problematic union is seemingly resolved at the start of the sequel, *Hercules Unchained* (Francisci, 1959). Hercules and Iole are now married,