

Early Cosmetic Contact Lenses for Hollywood Film Actors

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Summary

The first use of contact lenses to alter the look of actors in Hollywood goes back to the year 1939. That year, the optometrist Reuben Greenspoon from Berverly Hills had presented a demonstration of ocular molding on the living eye for educational films. Later on he adapted colored contact lenses to the actor Henry Hull for the movie *Miracles of Sales* and also to the actor Walter Hampton for *North West Mounted Police*. The next year Greenspoon modified on that manner the aspect of the eyes of Orson Welles and of Joe Cotton for the famous film *Citizen Kane*. In 1945, Greenspoon modifies the eyes of actor Herbert Marshal into blind eyes in *The Enchanted Cottage*. Reuben Greenspoon became the expert and the reference for the adaptation of cosmetical contact lenses for the entertainment industry of Hollywood.

Key Words: Cosmetic contact lenses, film actors, Reuben Greenspoon.

Reuben Greenspoon, optometrist in Beverly Hills (California), acquired a reputation for supplying cosmetic contact lenses for Hollywood film actors.¹

Paramount's "*Popular Science*" (1940)

In fact, the relationship between lens technology and the movie industry began when two patients, Jerry Fairbanks and Bob Carlisle produced and directed respectively a film series named '*Popular Science*' and released by Paramount Pictures. They asked Reuben Greenspoon, to appear in a segment of the film that showed the procedures for making contact lenses from eye molds. The film was projected on 20th December 1940 and resulted in bringing contact lenses and special effects with contact lenses to the attention of the movie industry at Hollywood and, of course, the general public.²

Popular Science (1935–1949) was a series of short films, created by independent

film producer Jerry Fairbanks in 1935 and produced with the cooperation of the editor of *Popular Science Magazine*. The series (1935–1949) was filmed in Magnacolor, as a entertainment production to chronicle the progress of science, industry and popular culture during the first half of the 20th Century.³

Miracle of Sale (1939)

The first motion picture in which cosmetic contact lenses were used to create a special eye effect was '*Miracles for Sale*' produced by Tod Browning. The movie was adapted by Metro-Goldwin-Meyer to the screen from the novel '*Death from a Top Hat*' of Clayton Rawson. The story required the main character, played by Henry Hull, to have light blue eyes and his natural dark brown eyes at different times. In effect, the principal personage, Dave Duvallo, a master of deception, created an alibi for himself by playing the role and disguising himself as Professor Tauro, in spite of the fact that he had already murdered him. To achieve this deception, the actor modified the color of his eyes: sometimes blue, sometimes brown.

Greenspoon fit Henry Hull with plano trial-case contact lenses. The color was fused to the outside of the corneal section with blue ceramic material leaving a clear

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round pupillary aperture of four millimeters in diameter through which Hull could see. The fusing process was carried out in an oven at a Los Angeles bottle factory. The procedure and the special effect were highly successful. Cinema tests of various kinds were made upon the subject Hull and the results were pleasing to all concerned.⁴

Orson Welles "Citizen Kane" (1940)

In 1940, Orson Welles asked Greenspoon to fit him with contact shells and also to give the eyes of movie star Joe Cotton a more aged appearance for the movie 'Citizen Kane', distributed the following year by RKO Pictures.

Since the story takes place over 50 years, the actors aged greatly throughout the film; Kane, for example, ages from 25 to 78. Makeup artist Maurice Seiderman a junior member of RKO's makeup department invented many techniques to age the characters in the film. Not only did Kane's hair thin, his face sag with jowls and bags made of Seiderman from plastic, but Welles's body was reshaped with the plastic. Rather than just cover Welles with latex wrinkles and gray hair, he made a complete body cast and used it to create custom-fitting body pads and facial appliances that show Kane aging gradually over 27 different stages of his life. Welles had 72 different facial appliances, including hairlines, cheeks, jowls, bags under his eyes, and 16 different chins. Some pieces even had artificial pores that matched those in Welles own skin.

The final touch was Greenspoon's special milky bloodshot contact lenses that dimmed Welles's eyes.

Greenspoon relate :

"The famous actor director was looking for someone to change his eyes from those of a youth to the gray, faded blood-shot eyes of an old man. Orson Welles was to take the lead in a picture where he is shown as a young man who lives to the age of eighty. (...) Prominent scleral veins were etched onto the scleral portion of the contact lenses. A faint milky solution was used in place of the saline solution. This caused the iris to look faded

and aged. Several days later, actor Joe Cotton was sent to me to have his eyes aged. Mr. Cotton plays an important part with Mr. Welles in the R.K.O picture 'Citizen Kane'."

It is interesting to note, that his interest in plastics led later Maurice Seiderman into medical research. In 1964, he became part of a medical team looking into the use of artificial materials in humans. In the 1970's he produced materials for soft contact lenses, for intraocular lenses and artificial corneas.

C.B. De Mille's "North West Mounted Police"

(1940) (Figure 1)

In another 1940 movie, entitled 'North West Mounted Police' (Cecil B. De Mille's first film in Technicolor), actor Walter Hampden once used contact lenses to change the color of his blue eyes to brown. This was in order to play the part of an American Indian named 'Big Bear'. Hampden's make-up,



Figure 1

Contact lenses change actor's eye color. Greenspoon has given brown eyes to blue-eyed actor Walter Hampden to play the part of the Indian Chief Big Bear in the first Technicolor movie North-West Mounted Police.

like all of that applied to those actors playing Indians, including real Indians, was dark mahogany. However Hampden's eyes were blue and Paramount Picture said that they had to spend more than \$500 in fitting this blue-eyed actor with the early day set of contact

lenses in order to change the color of his eyes to brown.

"The Enchanted Cottage"

(1945) (Figure 2)

In 1945, Greenspoon was to have a new opportunity of fitting contact lenses for actor Herbert Marshall in order to give his eyes the appearance of blindness in the movie 'The Enchanted Cottage'.



Figure 2

Contact Lenses enable actor to portray blind man.

The actor Herbert Marshall (left), acting as a blinded veteran from World War I, wearing contact lenses to make his eyes appear blind in the movie The Enchanted Cottage.

The picture was taken after Mr. Marshall had worn the lenses most of that day;

Greenspoon (seen to the right) admires the splendid effect he created.

In this romantic film fantasy, Marshall, as Major John Hillgrove is a blinded veteran from World War I. He plays a piano concerto for the film and uses this as a tone poem to describe the story of the two protagonists to a gathering of people. Marshall, who had lost a leg in World War I, played the role of blind person with the help of special contact lenses.

Greenspoon made the following comment:

"In this picture Herbert Marshall portrays the part of John Hillgrove, a pianist who was blinded in World War I. The story of how the blinded pianist helps Oliver Bradford (Robert Young) and Laura Pennington (Dorothy McGuire) find happiness presents a wonderful theme describing those who returned from World War II injured in mind and body. The

*philosophy of a blind man as given to Oliver Bradford, who was disfigured in a plane crash, makes the R.K.O picture 'The Enchanted Cottage' well worth seeing. Mr. Marshall was fitted with my trial contact lenses in 45 minutes. The finished lenses were ready the next day. This was possible because I maintain an experimental research laboratory where I can mold contact lenses. The lenses were checked on Mr. Marshall's eyes and they fitted perfectly. The fact that he wore these lenses for five weeks although vision through them was extremely blurred attests to the accuracy of my fitting and molding method. Mr. Marshall asked that the vision through the lenses be extremely blurred so that it would help him play the part of a blind man much better than if he saw well."*⁵

Reuben Greenspoon' contact lens fittings

Greenspoon was more than happy to provide Hollywood stars with every kind of theatrical special effect lenses (rejuvenating, ageing, of giving the impression of being blind) after molding and provided these were well tolerated: *"Illusion of blindness, total or partial, cataract-dimmed eyes, eyes that result from a week of 'mornings-after' and the eyes of madness can be achieved by the simple device of slipping the made-to- order lenses under the lids."*

Reuben Greenspoon had acquired tremendous experience in the fitting of contact lenses, which he had been doing since 1933 with the classical contact shells of Zeiss. Later, he used eye moldings and plastic. For these fittings, Greenspoon followed a five-step process that he described as follows: *"Taking of an eye impression.- Pouring plastic into same to make eye molds. - Molded contact lens being fitted to eye model - Contact lens being worn by actress. - Creating eye defects and aging eyes."*

In 1939, he proposed performing fitting checks using a mixture of 10% Neo Silvol and three drops of 2% fluorescein. In 1943, Greenspoon presented a new trial set for fitting contact lenses issued, as a result of his collaboration with his friend Emerich Rakos for whom he had provided

hundreds of ocular moldings over a two-year period. In 1945, he refit a patient that he had followed for twelve years. The keratoconus of this patient had been fit in 1933 when he was 18 using classical ground glass Zeiss contact glasses. The patient was wearing these lenses for 16 hours a day. Similar lenses, then made from plastic, replaced them.

When he travelled to the United States in 1947, Norman Bier of London visited Reuben Greenspoon and noted:

*“Dr. Greenspoon’s practice proved most interesting and remarkable for the many cases who consult him from the film studios. I have the utmost admiration for his skill in creating the ocular characterizations needed for film work, this in addition to his general contact lens practice.... The unusual nature of his practice gives him the widest experience and entitles him to a preeminent place in the contact lens field.”*⁶

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