



# Hedy's Folly.

THE LIFE AND BREAKTHROUGH INVENTIONS OF

*Hedy Lamarr.*

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD

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THE LIFE AND BREAKTHROUGH INVENTIONS  
OF HEDY LAMARR, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL  
WOMAN IN THE WORLD

RICHARD RHODES

Doubleday  New York London Toronto Sydney Auckland

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Rhodes, Richard, 1937–

Hedy's folly : the life and breakthrough inventions of Hedy Lamarr, the most beautiful woman in the world / Richard Rhodes.—1st ed.

p. cm.

1. Lamarr, Hedy, 1913–2000. 2. Actresses—United States—Biography. 3. Motion picture actors and actresses—United States—Biography. 4. Spread spectrum communications. I. Title.

PN2287.L24R54 2011

791.430'28092—dc23

[B] 2011021746

eISBN: 978-0-385-53439-0

v3.1

A grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation supported the research for this book.

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## *Hedy Lamarr, Inventor*

Invention is a strange business. Is it creative, like painting or sculpture? It's certainly original by definition genuinely new, but it's also and fundamentally practical. Patent law says an idea must be "reduced to practice" to be patentable. That means an idea must be embodied in some new and useful mechanism or process or material. So invention is creative, but not in the same way the fine arts are. Usefulness isn't fundamental to a sculpture or a painting.

Is invention, then, scientific? Many inventions today are explicitly derived from scientific discoveries. The discovery that certain materials, stimulated in a particular way, would emit coherent light—light all of the same wavelength—led to the invention of the laser. The laser was a practical device that embodied the discovery, but it wasn't the discovery itself. The distinction is clear even in prescientific times: Fire was a discovery; the fireplace was an invention. That fire hardened clay was a discovery; pottery was an invention. Again, as with fine art, usefulness isn't a requirement for scientific discovery.

That invention is different from fine art or scientific discovery suggests that inventors might be different from artists or scientists. They are. Many inventors are technically trained, of course, especially those who invent professionally. Thomas Edison was home- and self-educated, but Nikola Tesla, the inventor of radio, was an electrical engineer. Some inventors have been artists. Samuel F. B. Morse, the co-inventor of the telegraph, was a professional painter. The same person might do science and invent. I knew such a person, a Nobel laureate American physicist named Luis Alvarez. Luis's many inventions won him a place in the National Inventors Hall of Fame. He told me once that he valued his recognition as an inventor more than the Nobel.

But many inventors, past and present, have been people with no obvious special qualifications for inventing. Come to think of it, there are no special qualifications for inventing. No school I know of offers such a degree. As a sculptor is someone who sculpts, and a writer is someone who writes, an inventor is someone who invents.

The 1940s Austrian-American movie star Hedy Lamarr was an inventor. The public relations department at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, where Hedy began her American film career, put out the claim that she was "the most beautiful woman in the world," and by Western standards she may have been. It annoyed her deeply, however, that few people saw beyond her beauty to her intelligence. "Any girl can be glamorous," she famously and acidly said. "All you have to do is stand still and look stupid."

Hedy invented as a hobby. Since she made two or three movies a year, each one taking about a month to shoot, she had spare time to fill. She didn't drink and she didn't like parties, so she took up inventing. When she was a girl, her father, a Viennese banker, had encouraged her interest in how the world worked, taking walks with her and explaining the mechanics of the machinery they encountered. As a young woman, before she emigrated from Austria to the United States, she married a munitions manufacturer and listened in on the technical discussions he held with his Austrian and German military clients. She also had a keen sense of the world's large and small failings, some of which she decided she could fix.



Hollywood she set up an inventor's corner in the drawing room of her house, complete with drafting table and lamp and all the necessary drafting tools.

Hedy conceived of her most important invention in 1941, in the dark years between the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 that finally impelled the United States to enter the war. She wanted to help her newly adopted country (where she was still technically an enemy alien) and saw the need for a weapon to attack the German submarines that were devastating North Atlantic shipping. It's characteristic of her confidence in her inventive gift that she believed she could devise such a weapon and help change the course of the war. Her belief was folly in two senses of that fine old word: extravagant in consequential invention, and founded on the foolish notion that the United States Navy would take correction from a Hollywood actress of great beauty in a matter about which it was not prepared to listen to its own submarine commanders.

Her unlikely, but ideal, partner in that work was an avant-garde composer and concert pianist named George Antheil, at five feet four a "cello-sized man," as *Time* magazine put it. A New Jersey native whose father owned a shoe store. Antheil was not, like Hedy, an amateur inventor, but he was nearly polymathic in his gifts. When Hedy revealed her idea to him, he immediately saw a way to give it practical form for the purpose of patenting it.

That practical form linked back to Antheil's most notorious composition, a twenty-minute rhythmic cacophony of grand pianos, electric bells, drums, xylophones, a siren, a gong, an airplane propeller, and sixteen synchronized player pianos called *Ballet mécanique*, which premiered in Paris in 1926. In his Paris days, before he moved to Hollywood to make a living writing film scores, Antheil was a good friend of Ernest Hemingway, Igor Stravinsky, the bookseller Sylvia Beach (the Antheils lived for ten years in a small apartment on the mezzanine of Beach's famous Shakespeare and Company bookstore), James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and most of the rest of the fabled crowd of expatriates who helped make Paris a world center of art, music, and literature in the years between the two world wars.

Hedy in Vienna, George in Paris, and then the two of them meeting up in Hollywood to invent a fundamental new wireless technology makes a remarkable story at the center of Hedy Lamarr's long and fascinating life. Except in the matter of her beauty, which she valued at least of all, people regularly underestimated her. She deserved better. The real story will amaze you.

## A Charming Austrian Girl

She was Viennese, not yet seventeen in the spring of 1931 but already a professional actress in rehearsal for a play. Hedwig Kiesler (pronounced *HAYD-vig KEES-lur*)—Hedy—had won a small role in the Berlin incarnation of *The Weaker Sex*, which the celebrated Austrian impresario Max Reinhardt was directing. When Reinhardt restaged the play in Vienna the following spring, she had single-mindedly quit the Berlin cast and followed him home. “Are you here too, Fraulein Kiesler?” he’d asked her in surprise. “Are you living with your family? All right, you can be the Americaness again.” Édouard Bourdet’s play was a comedy with a pair of boorish stage Americans as foils. Reinhardt had assigned the actor George Weller, Hedy’s husband in the play, to teach her some American songs. “I took this as a mandate to make an American out of Hedy Kiesler,” the young Bostonian recalled.

She was eager to be transformed. “Hedy had only the vaguest ideas of what the United States were,” Weller discovered, “except that they were grouped around Hollywood.” She idolized the California tennis star Helen Wills, “Little Miss Poker Face.” Wills, focused and unexpressive on the courts, all business, was the world’s number-one-ranked female tennis player, midway that year through an unbroken run of 180 victories. “Watch me look like Helen Wills,” Hedy teased Weller when they rehearsed together. “*Du, schau’ mal, hier bin ich die Kleine Poker Face.*” Her lively young face would grow calm, Weller remembered, “expressionless and assured, her brow would clarify, and for a moment she would really become an American woman.” Commandeering the property room, Hedy and George practiced singing “Yes, Sir, That’s My Baby,” “Yes, We Have No Bananas,” and an Austrian favorite, Al Jolson’s lugubrious “Sonny Boy.” It melted the matrons at matinees, many of them mothers with sons lost in the long slaughter of the Great War.

An only child, entertaining herself with her dolls, Hedy had dreamed since she was a little girl of becoming a movie star. “I had a little stage under my father’s desk,” she recalled, “where I would act out fairy tales. When someone would come into the room they would think my mind was really wandering. I was always talking to myself.” Her tall, handsome, vigorous father, Emil, an athlete as well as a successful banker, told her stories, read her books, and took her on walks in their tree-lined neighborhood and in the great park of the Wienerwald—the Vienna Woods. Wherever they went together, he explained to her how everything worked—“from printing presses to streetcars,” she said. Her father’s enthusiasm for technology links her lifelong interest in invention with cherished memories of her favorite parent.

Hedy’s mother was stricter, concerned that such a pretty, vivacious child would grow up spoiled unless she heard criticism as well as compliments. “She has always had everything,” Trude Kiesler said. “She never had to long for anything. First there was her father who, of course, adored her, and was very proud of her. He gave her all the comforts, pretty clothes, a fine home, parties, schools, sports. He looked always for the sports for her, and music.” Trude had trained as a concert pianist before motherhood intervened. In turn, she supervised Hedy’s lessons on the grand piano in the Kiesler salon. “I underemphasized praise and

flattery,” Trude determined, “hoping in this way to balance the scales for her.”

The Kieselers were assimilated Jews, Trude from Budapest, Emil from Lemberg (now known as Lviv). Hedy kept her Jewish heritage secret throughout her life; her son and daughter only learned of it after her death. In prewar Vienna it had hardly mattered. The Viennese population’s mixed legacy of Slavic, Germanic, Hungarian, Italian, and Jewish traditions was one of its glories, one reason for the city’s unique creative ferment in the first decades of the new century. Sigmund Freud’s daughters attended the same girls’ middle school that Hedy later did, and after the war Anna Freud taught there.

Vienna is an old city, with ruins dating to Roman times. The emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote his third book of *Meditations* on that rough Germanic frontier. Set in the broad Danube valley at the eastern terminus of the Alps, it grew across the centuries through great turmoil to become the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A wide ring boulevard supplanted its medieval wall after 1857, opening it up to its suburbs. By 1910, two million ethnically diverse Viennese, reading newspapers published in ten languages, took their leisure in sparkling coffeehouses, and the beneficence of the emperor Franz Josef had filled the city with twenty-one districts with parks, statues, and palaces. To the Viennese writer Stefan Zweig, his birthplace was “a city of a thousand attractions, a city with theatres, museums, bookstores, universities, music, a city in which each day brought new surprises.”

If Vienna was old, it made itself radically modern in the years around the Great War with music, theater, and art. Austrian culture had prepared the way, Zweig believed: “Precisely because the monarchy, because Austria itself for centuries had been neither politically ambitious nor particularly successful in military actions, the native pride had turned more strongly toward a desire for artistic supremacy.” Vienna was the arena of that desire. The roll call of important early-twentieth-century artists, musicians, writers, scientists, and philosophers active in the Viennese milieu is startling: the artists Gustav Klimt, Josef Hoffmann, Egon Schiele, and Oskar Kokoschka; the writers Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler, Robert Musil, and Joseph Roth; the composers Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, Anton von Webern, and Alban Berg. Sigmund Freud invented psychoanalysis in Vienna. Ludwig Boltzmann and Ernst Mach contributed importantly to physics there. Rudolf Carnap, Kurt Gödel, Otto Neurath, and, most famously, Ludwig Wittgenstein transformed philosophy.

“The whole city was at one,” Zweig saw, in its “receptivity for all that was colorful, festive, and resounding, in [its] pleasure in the theatrical, whether it was on the stage or in reality, both as theatre and as a mirror of life.” For Zweig, theater was the core Viennese experience.

It was not the military, nor the political, nor the commercial, that was predominant in the life of the individual and of the masses. The first glance of the average Viennese into his morning paper was not at the events in parliament, or world affairs, but at the repertoire of the theatre, which assumed so important a role in public life as hardly was possible in any other city. For the Imperial theatre, the Burgtheater, was for the Viennese and for the Austrian more than a stage upon which actors enacted parts; it was the microcosm that mirrored the macrocosm, the brightly colored reflection in which the city saw itself.... The stage, instead of being merely a place of entertainment, was a spoken and plastic guide of good behavior and correct pronunciation, and a nimbus of respect encircled like a halo everything that had even the faintest connection with the Imperial theatre.

What else but theater, and by extension motion pictures, would a bright, pretty, single-minded Viennese girl choose? “I acted all the time,” Hedy recalled. “I copied my mother. I copied the way she walked and the way she talked. I copied her mannerisms, her facial expression. I copied the guests who came to our house. I copied people I saw in the streets. I copied the servants. I was a little living copybook. I wrote people down on me.”

Acting was in the air. In his school classes, Zweig remembered, “in keeping with the Viennese atmosphere ... the impulse to creative production became positively epidemic. Each of us sought some talent within himself and endeavored to unfold it.” Four or five of Zweig’s classmates wanted to be actors. “They imitated the diction of the Imperial players, they recited and declaimed without ceasing, secretly took lessons in acting, and, during the recesses at school, distributed parts and improvised entire scenes from the classics, while the rest of us formed a curious but exacting audience.”

Hedy took more direct action, as her father had taught her. “He made me understand that I must make my own decisions,” she said, “mold my own character, think my own thoughts.” She had met Max Reinhardt, the director and impresario, at a party in 1929, when she was fifteen, and he had seemed interested in her. “He had encouraged me by telling me to hold fast to my dream and that if I held fast it would come true.” She held fast, and it did.

After an unhappy term at a Swiss finishing school that she finessed by running away home to Vienna, she scouted a motion-picture studio, Sascha-Film, the largest in the city. To buy time for her assault, she added a zero to a school absence request her mother had signed, turning one hour into ten—two school days. “I knew that the studio employed script girls. I did not have any idea of what script girls are supposed to do, but I knew that they were on the sets all the time watching the actors work—and that was enough for me.” She slipped into the studio and presented herself. “They asked me, ‘Do you know how to be a script girl?’ and I said, ‘No. But may I try?’ ” Probably because she was pretty as well as brash, the script supervisor laughed and took her on.

She had that day and one more to make good. The film then in production was called *Geld auf der Strasse* (*Money in the Streets*). There was a minor part for a girl in a nightclub scene. “I applied for it and right away I got it,” Hedy recalled. In this account, for an American magazine, she translates her starting salary as “five dollars a day.”

Then she had to tell her parents that she was dropping out of school at sixteen to become a professional actress. As she remembered the negotiation in 1938:

Well, it was not too bad. They were bewildered a little but not very surprised. They were never *surprised* at anything I did. And besides, I had been talking movies for so long that they were really prepared for this. My dear father finally laughed and said, “You have been an actress ever since you were a baby!” So my parents did not try to prevent me. They were willing to give me this great wish of my heart.

She recalled it differently later in life. She had persuaded the director, Georg Jacoby, to give her the part. Her parents, she wrote, “were much more difficult to persuade than [Jacoby] because it meant my dropping school. But at last they agreed. My father had never forbidden his little princess anything, and besides, he reasoned that I would soon enough quit of my own accord and go back to school.”

When *Geld auf der Strasse* wrapped, a better role followed as a secretary in *Sturm i*

*Wasserglas* (*Storm in a Water Glass*), another Jacoby project. Then Reinhardt cast her in *The Weaker Sex*. “Reinhardt made me read, meet people, attend plays.” She followed him back to Vienna when he restaged the play there. “Yes, we have no bananas.”

“When you dance with her,” George Weller remembered, “as I did every night for about three months, she is a trifle stiff to the touch. Reedlike, that’s what Hedy Kiesler is, sweet and reedlike, and when she wants to talk to you she doesn’t lean over your shoulder and arch herself out behind like a debutante.... She leans back from you [and] takes a good look at your eyes and a firm grip on your name before she will allow herself to say a word.”

Weller was present when Reinhardt gave Hedy her lifelong byname, a christening later claimed by the Hollywood studio head Louis B. Mayer:

It was at the rehearsal of a cafe scene in a comedy, and the *Regisseur* [that is, the director] was Reinhardt. There were Viennese newspapermen watching. Suddenly the Herr Professor, a man not given to superlatives, turned to the reporters and mildly pronounced these words: “Hedy Kiesler is the most beautiful girl in the world.” Instantly the reporters put it down. In five minutes the Herr Professor’s sentence, utter and absolute, had been telephoned to the newspapers of the [city center], to be dispatched by press services to other newspapers, other capitals, countries, continents.

*The Weaker Sex* played in Vienna for one month, from 8 May to 8 June 1931. “Almost before we knew it,” Weller recalled, “another play was in rehearsal.” Hollywood was buying up European actors as it rapidly expanded film production, a trend that would accelerate after 1933 when the Nazis took power in Germany and then in Austria, and Jews saw their civil rights stripped away. The play, *Film und Liebe* (*Film and Love*), satirized the earlier commercial phase of the exodus. Weller won the role of “a brash Hollywood director who thought ... that Central European talent could be seduced by American gold into immigrating to California.” The female lead as Weller remembered it called for a character “who simply recoiled at the sight of a Hollywood contract,” which would have been a stretch for Hedy. In any case the director offered her a smaller role.

She rejected it. “I’ve never been satisfied,” she explained. “I’ve no sooner done one thing than I am seething inside me to do another thing. And so, almost as soon as I was inside a studio I wanted to be acting in a studio. And as soon as I was acting in a studio, I wanted to be starring in a studio. I wanted to be famous.” Her stage roles had been limited and her reviews mixed. Weller thought she simply “decided for herself ... that she wanted no more stage.”

Berlin was the center of filmmaking, and to Berlin she returned that August 1931, looking for work. She found it with the Russian émigré director Alexis Granowsky, who cast her as the mayor’s daughter in a comedy, *Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.* (*The Trunks of Mr. O.F.*). The cast included her rising Austrian contemporary Peter Lorre in his fourth film role. When *Trunks* wrapped, in mid-October, Sascha-Film obligingly offered her the female lead in another comedy to be shot in Berlin, *Man braucht kein Geld* (*One Needs No Money*), opposite Heinrich Rühmann, a German film star. Hedy turned seventeen midway through the November production. *Die Koffer des Herrn O.F.* premiered in Berlin on 2 December. *Man braucht kein Geld* followed in Vienna on 22 December. “Excellent work by a cast of familiar German actors,” the *New York Times* would praise *Man braucht kein Geld* on its New York opening the

following fall, “reinforced by Hedy Kiesler, a charming Austrian girl.” It was her first American notice.

Then a truly starring role came to hand. The Czech director Gustav Machatý found Hedy Berlin and offered her the lead in a Czechoslovakian film, *Ekstase* (*Ecstasy*), a love story. She was thrilled. “When I had this opportunity to star in [the film],” she recalled, “it was the biggest opportunity I had had. I was mad for this chance, of course.” Shooting was scheduled for July 1932. To fill the intervening months, she replaced one of the four actors in Noël Coward’s comedy *Private Lives* at the Komödie Theatre.

Whether or not Hedy’s parents read the script of *Ekstase* isn’t clear from the remaining record. Since she was still a minor, however, they did try to protect her:

I could not go, my father said, unless my mother went too. But I did not want my mother to go.... I was young enough to want to be on my own. What kind of a baby, what kind of an amateur would they think me, I said, if I had to have my mother along to take care of me! Besides, I felt embarrassed when my mother was in the studio, was on the sets watching me. I felt stiff and self-conscious then. I could not feel free and grownup like that. I finally prevailed upon my father to allow me to go with the members of the company. There could be no harm in this.

Eventually, she revealed another reason she had insisted on traveling unaccompanied: “I went to Prague because I was in love with somebody.” She wanted no chaperoning mother to interfere.

Hedy’s performance as Eva in *Ekstase* would both promote and plague her professional career. Although the film includes a brief nude scene, it’s guileless rather than salacious. Her young wife, Eva, languishes in an unconsummated marriage to a fussy middle-aged man. Frustrated, she leaves him. Out riding one morning, enjoying her new freedom, she stops to swim in a woodland pond, parking her summer playsuit on the back of her unsaddled mare. While she’s swimming, her mare runs away, attracted to a stallion in the next pasture. Adam, a handsome engineer on a road construction crew, stripped to the waist and a-sweat, catches the runaway and goes looking for its rider. He finds Eva hiding behind a bush and tosses her playsuit to her. Dressed, disdainfully retrieving her horse, she trips and sprains her ankle. He splints it, necessarily handling her leg, and she slaps him for his familiarity. Back home, she realizes she’s drawn to him, struggles with her feelings, finally looks him up in his construction cabin and initiates a night of passion. Afterward the lovers happily plan another night together at a hotel.

The next day they go into town separately to avoid scandal. Adam catches a ride unknowingly with Eva’s husband, Emile, who recognizes as his estranged wife’s a necklaced Adam is fondling. Both men check into the same hotel. The engineer hires musicians to serenade Eva as they drink champagne and dance on the hotel terrace. Emile in his room overhead hears the music and agonizes. There’s a shot. The hotel staff crowds around the door to Emile’s room. Adam breaks in: Emile has killed himself, his fussy pince-nez lying broken on the floor. Adam and Eva go to the station to wait for the next train to Berlin. He falls asleep. She decides to return home and leaves him sleeping—their night of passion was deliverance but not an obligation.

In this simple and largely pantomimed story, only three brief scenes challenge what would

otherwise be at most a PG-13 rating today: a glimpse of Eva's breasts as she swims nude, long shot of her running nude through the woods, and a gauzy close-up of her face in passion during the couple's night of lovemaking. Not nudity but blatant Freudian symbolism communicates the film's sexual themes: a jackhammer drilling, a bee pollinating a flower, stallion rearing and snorting before servicing a mare off camera. More challenging than nudity or symbolism to the sexual canons of the day, in America in particular, was the story itself, which reversed the prevailing Victorian paternalism. Eva falls for Adam, seeks him out, seduces him, takes her pleasure, and drops him when she's done, while Emile, when he realizes he isn't vital enough for her, obligingly shoots himself. Had the film been released in the 1960s instead of the 1930s, it might have been hailed as feminist.

Certainly *Ekstase* embodied the new spirit of personal freedom which Zweig observed at that time and place. "The world began to take itself more youthfully," he writes, "and, in contrast to the world of my parents, was proud of being young.... To be young and fresh, and to get rid of pompous dignity, was the watchword of the day. The women threw off their corsets which had confined their breasts, and abjured parasols and veils since they no longer feared air and sunshine. They shortened their skirts so that they could use their legs freely in tennis, and were no longer bashful about displaying them if they were pretty ones. Fashion became more natural; men wore breeches, women dared to ride astride, and people no longer covered up and hid themselves from one another."

*Ekstase* illustrates these changes both in situation and in costume. It also dramatizes the corresponding changes in values that Zweig observed:

This health and self-confidence of the generation that succeeded mine won for itself freedom in modes and manners as well. For the first time girls were seen without governesses on excursions with their young friends, or participating in sports in frank, self-assured comradeship; they were no longer timid or prudish, they knew what they wanted and what they did not want. Freed from the anxious control of their parents, earning their own livelihood as secretaries or office workers, they seized the right to live their own lives. Prostitution, the only love institution which the old world sanctioned, declined markedly, for because of this newer and healthier freedom all manner of false modesty had become old-fashioned. In the swimming-places the wooden fences which had inexorably separated the women's section from the men's were torn down, and men and women were no longer ashamed to show how they were built. More freedom, more frankness, more spontaneity had been regained in these ten years [after the turn of the century] than in the previous hundred years.

As if confirming Zweig's insight, Hedy announced during the production of *Ekstase* that she had been offered a Hollywood contract and had turned it down. "I don't want to become the slave of film," she told an Austrian magazine grandly, "but rather want to make films or take breaks when I feel like it."

After filming *Ekstase*, she returned to Vienna. In November she celebrated her eighteenth birthday. She was ill with influenza and lost weight, enhancing her already striking beauty. When she recovered, she nearly won the role of Caroline Esterhazy, the young Hungarian countess whom Franz Schubert tutored and loved, in the film *Unfinished Symphony*. She was reluctantly passed over because the role required someone who could sing Schubert art songs.

and she was not a trained singer.

*Ekstase* premiered in Prague on 20 January 1933. At that distance it was relatively painless. A month later, its Vienna premiere simultaneously in four theaters drew large crowds—more than seventy thousand tickets sold in its first two weeks. Hedy prepared her parents for the experience by warning them that the film was “artistic,” but nothing prepared them for seeing their daughter nude or apparently having sex. “I wanted to run and hide,” she remembered. “My father solved the predicament. He simply rose and said grimly, ‘We will go.’ I gathered my belongings in one grab. My mother seemed angry, but somehow reluctant to walk out. Nevertheless, walk out we did.”

“My mother and father suffered about it,” Hedy acknowledged. “My father suffered even more than my mother, I think. It was the hurt look in his eyes that made me realize to the full how silly and ill-advised I had been.” They were told, she said, that they should “do something” about it, “that I was a minor and that the company had no right to ask such a thing of me.... But my father felt, and rightly, that to make a fuss about it would only attract more publicity to it.” She made him understand, she said, how when you’re young you’re “apt to do foolish things in an effort to appear experienced and of the world. And so, because they loved me very dearly, they did not speak of it any more.”

Publicity scandals that feel like the end of the world usually aren’t. Fritz Kreisler, the violinist and composer, had written a musical comedy about what *Time* magazine would describe as “the courtship of the young Emperor Franz Josef and Elizabeth, 16-year-old harum-scarum daughter of Bavaria’s Duke Max.” Elizabeth’s nickname was Sissy; she was, *Time* explained, “the favorite of her father who roved the forests with woodcutter friends, played the zither, behaved more like a peasant than a duke.” Sissy had opened in Vienna Theater an der Wien just at Christmas 1932; it would continue through hundreds of performances. Musical comedy didn’t require the classically trained singing voice that Schubert lieder did. Hedy understudied the role of Sissy beginning in early January 1933 and took over the lead in late March. “At first I felt reluctant about it,” she remembered. “I said to myself, ‘How will they accept me as the Austrian Queen after this ‘Ecstasy’? But the [theater] prevailed upon me and of course I really wanted to.” The audience welcomed her as did a reviewer: “She looks wonderful, tender and really attractive. And she performs with real charm too: simply without affectation, talking and singing with the high voice of a child.... In short, a delightful Sissy, without the stardom and pomp of a sophisticate, but with easy childlike tones.”

Flowers began to crowd Hedy’s dressing room that spring, tokens from a wealthy admirer. She wasn’t impressed. “From the first night Fritz Mandl saw me on the stage,” she recalled, “he tried, in every way, to get in touch with me. He sent me flowers, quantities of flowers. I sent them back to him.” Though she had never met him, Mandl was not unknown to her. She had heard of him, of course, as who in Austria had not? I knew of his high position, his wealth, his connection with the foreign powers. The flowers he sent me seemed like a ‘command performance.’ I did not like that.”

Friedrich “Fritz” Mandl was a heavyweight, thirty-three years old and the third-richest man in Austria. His wealth had originated in a family-owned ammunition factory in Hirtenberg, a small town about twenty-five miles southwest of Vienna, which had begun making rifle cartridges for the armies of Europe soon after their invention in America during the Civil



War. Mandl's father, Alexander, had hired him to rebuild the Hirtenberger Patronen-Fabrik the aftermath of its nearly complete destruction by arson during labor troubles in 1920, and in 1924 he became general manager. By the time Mandl began courting Hedy, a historian writes, "he had negotiated agreements with arms manufacturers in France, Germany, and Italy, and controlled arms plants in Poland, Switzerland, Austria, and the Netherlands."

Having failed to win Hedy's attention with notes and flowers, Mandl called her mother home. "He introduced himself," Hedy said, "and then he asked my mother if he might come to our house to meet me. My mother did not know how to say 'no' to what was, after all, a legitimate request." Trude Kiesler mentioned a day, and Mandl turned up hat in hand.

He was not a tall man; in photographs he appears to be no taller than Hedy, who was five feet seven. His head was large, his face fleshy, his body stocky and apparently powerful. *Time* would describe him at this point in his life as "a young viveur who gambled for high stakes and kept fancy apartments." He was half-Jewish; his Jewish father, Alexander, had fallen in love with a family chambermaid who was Catholic and had converted to her faith and married her after Fritz was born. By all accounts Fritz was a womanizer and an arrivist already once divorced. He was also a canny and ruthless businessman. "He was so powerful," Hedy said, "so influential, so rich, that always he had been able to arrange everything in his life just as he wished it.... The afternoon he first came I was, I am afraid, very rude to him. It was the first clash of our wills. There were to be many."

If Mandl had not been smitten before, Hedy's disdain beguiled him. The courtship began:

He asked me to go to dinner with him that night. But I would not go. He then telephoned to me every day, many times a day, and asked me to dine, to dance, after the theatre. At first I would not go. He would come again and again to my house, which was the only place where I would receive him. And every night he would be in the theatre. And every night and in the daytimes he would send great baskets and boxes of flowers.

When he came to my house he talked to me about hunting, which he loves and which I also love. He told me about his munitions factory. He explained how his father had built the factory but how when he, Fritz, was nineteen years old, the factory burned to the ground and much of the fortune was wiped out and how he had had to build it all up again, the factory and the fortune too. So that he had really made the fortune himself. This gave me a different idea of him from the one I had had. This was not inherited power. This was the stuff of power itself. I liked that.

Hedy's model of a man was her father, but if her father was a frigate, Mandl was battleship:

I began to feel attracted by the brain of the man, by his tremendous power, by his charm which, when he wished, could be as powerful as his brain. I love strength. I *love* it. I think that all women love strength in a man....

Then, suddenly, he was the most beautiful—no, I mean the most attractive—man in the world to me.

And I knew that I was in love with him, madly in love with him.

We became engaged as soon as I knew this and I was terribly happy. I was in love. I

was happy. I was proud. I was proud of him. I was proud of myself. I was proud of his brilliance and strength and power....

He had the most amazing brain.... There was nothing he did not know. There was not a question I, or anyone else, could ask him that he could not answer. Ask him a formula in chemistry and he would give it to you. Ask him about the habits of wild animals, how glass is made, what about the laws of gravitation—politics, of course, since he was so powerful a figure in world politics and—well, “I don’t know” was not in him. He knew *everything*.

So, then, he seemed to have everything, Fritz Mandl.

So, then, he had Hedwig Kiesler as well.

Hedy left the cast of *Sissy* at the end of July 1933 to prepare for her wedding. She remembered the 10 August event as “small and quiet.... I wanted it to be quiet,” she explained. “He was so well known. And I, too, was known. I did not want a carnival made of what belonged to him and to me alone.” But the setting for this small and quiet wedding was Vienna’s majestic eighteenth-century Baroque Karlskirche with its elongated dome and spiraled double columns, its extensive frescoes and marble-and-gold-leafed sanctuary flooded with light. Who was in attendance? Her mother and father? Friends from the theater? She doesn’t say. And Mandl? Hedy was a trophy wife. Wouldn’t he have wanted to present her in Vienna?

However many attended the wedding, the newlyweds went off afterward to the Lido, the fashionable barrier island that divides the lagoon of Venice from the sea, to honeymoon. “Almost at once,” Hedy realized, “I found that I was no longer Hedy Kiesler, an individual. But I was only the wife of Fritz Mandl.” Around this time Mandl is remembered to have said, “Democracy is a luxury that might be borne, perhaps, in prosperous periods.” One of the first things her new husband did, Hedy said, was “try to track down and buy up every print of *Ekstase*. He spent a fortune trying to buy up that picture so that no print of it could ever be seen again. It was an obsession with him.” *Time* would report Mandl spent “nearly \$300,000 snapping up prints of the film, which of course multiplied like rabbits. Eventually, he gave up, but Hedy lamented that “it became one of the sore spots of our married life. Every time we would have an argument, no matter what about, he would, of course, bring that picture up to me. He would never let me forget it.”

Nor would Mandl permit her to follow her career:

I knew very soon that I could never be an actress while I was his wife. When I was first married I did not think I would care. I thought, being so madly in love, that I could be content just as his wife. I soon found out that I could not be content anywhere but on the stage or screen. Perhaps if I had had children, perhaps if I had had something to *do*—but I was like a doll in a beautiful, jeweled case. I was watched and guarded and followed night and day. I could not go anywhere, not even to lunch with a woman friend, without being watched.

My husband bought a town house that was like a palace. Every piece in it was antique and priceless. We had also three hunting lodges. We had cars and planes and a yacht. We had many, many servants. I had furs and jewels and gowns beyond any girl’s wildest

dreams of luxury....

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[But] in my houses I had nothing to say. Not about anything.... He ordered the house and everything in it.... He was the absolute monarch in his own world. He was the absolute monarch in his marriage.... I was like a guest living in my own house. I was like a doll. I was like a thing, some object of art which had to be guarded—and imprisoned—having no mind, no life of its own.

As Frau Hedwig Kiesler Mandl turned nineteen that November 1933, she found herself locked into what she would call a “prison of gold.” Marriage to Fritz Mandl had seemed to be another kind of stardom, a stardom of the real world, radiant with power, but in its pursuit she had entered unsuspectingly into a golden prison. The question now was, how could she bear to live there? And if she couldn’t, how on earth could she get out?

## *Bad Boy of Music*

A young American composer whose path would intersect Hedy's in Hollywood was writing radical music in Paris while she was still a girl. Born with the century in Trenton, New Jersey, George Antheil (pronounced *ANT-hile*) had made his way to Europe in 1922 as a concert pianist performing both classical and modern works but emphasizing his own. He was small, about five feet four; *Time* would describe him colorfully as “a cello-sized man with blond hair and childlike blue eyes.” A nose flattened in a childhood accident made his choirboy face pugilistic, however, and his tireless intensity gave him scale. “He did nothing but write music and play it on the piano,” his playwright friend Ben Hecht recalled, “which he made sound like a calliope in a circus parade.” His fellow composer Aaron Copland assessed Antheil's technique more professionally: “When I first went to Paris I was jealous of Antheil's piano playing—it was so brilliant; he could demonstrate so well what he wanted to do.”

What Antheil wanted to do was to create a distinctively American music, an ambition he conceived at seventeen while still living at home:

Curiously enough, my springboard on this momentous occasion was not any American music I knew, nor American folksong, nor American composers of the past. It was, rather, a sudden acquaintanceship with the works of the Russian Five, that nationalist group of Russian composers chief amongst whom were Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov and, most of all composers, Tchaikovsky. Mussorgsky, particularly, charmed me, and I gathered at the Trenton, New Jersey, public library all the information about him and the Russian Five that was available.

The information that I gathered enchanted me; I was, at the time, completely ripe for the musical philosophy of nationalism which the Russian Five had once preached and lived.

Antheil's early ambition matched the program for American music championed by the New Yorker Paul Rosenfeld, the most influential music critic of the day. “I myself was present as a young man of 20,” Antheil recalled, “when ... Rosenfeld called a meeting of the four or five young American composers he then considered talented, in his apartment near Gramercy Place.... The upshot of that meeting was roughly something like this: ‘The Russian Five could do it; why can't we?’ It was, mainly, agreed that ... we needed a housecleaning and nationalist objective.”

Antheil found inspiration for his new American music not in the United States but in Europe. “When I was 17,” he wrote later, “in 1917, I used to go to sleep with a score of [Stravinsky's] ‘Sacre du Printemps’ and Schönberg's ‘Fünf Orchestra Stücke’ under my pillow.” The problem was how to get to Europe when he was without money or immediate prospects. In 1921 he was forced to go hungry even to pay for composition lessons until his teacher found out and generously refunded his fees. When the refund depleted in turn, he

went to see his mentor and former music teacher Constantin von Sternberg. “I told him I was broke and that I was getting rather tired of it,” Antheil recalled with more bravado than he felt at the time. Sternberg sent him to the Philadelphia Main Line with a sealed letter to wealthy American patron, Mary Louise Curtis Bok. Bok was the only child of Cyrus Curtis whose Curtis Publishing owned both the *Ladies’ Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. The letter she read while Antheil waited in her parlor that afternoon described him as “one of the richest and strongest talents for composition that I have ever met here or in Europe.” She asked her to give the young man “the means to hide himself for a year or two in some secluded spot ... where ... he could devote himself to his work without having to earn money for his bodily maintenance.”

Bok responded to Sternberg’s appeal, she told Antheil later, “on the basis of a young man possibly gifted for composition, actually a good pianist and very definitely an ill and starving boy.” She set him up as a teacher at the Settlement Music School in Philadelphia, with a generous monthly stipend of \$150—the equivalent of \$1,700 today.

The following spring, well fed and comfortable but no less eager to work abroad, Antheil seized his chance. Learning that a young concert pianist had fallen out with the impresario M. H. Hanson, leaving a hole in Hanson’s European concert commitments, Antheil set himself to practicing sixteen to twenty hours a day, soaking his hands in fishbowls of cold water when they swelled. “In this way,” he wrote, “I gained a technique which, when a month later I played for Hanson, took him off his feet.” Taking Hanson off his feet would have required great percussive force, which Antheil was already known for; the concert manager was “the exact duplicate of [the corpulent Hollywood actor] Sydney Greenstreet.”

Hanson needed money to finance an Antheil concert tour. The ambitious young pianist turned again to Mary Louise Bok, as he would repeatedly for the next fifteen years, until her remarkable patience with his wheedling finally ran out. He told her why concertizing around Europe would be good for him, then sicced Hanson on her. Hanson described two tours, plain and deluxe, at \$3,900 (\$44,000 today) or \$6,400 (\$72,000 today). Not wishing to seem ungenerous, Mrs. Bok chose the deluxe. Twenty-one-year-old George Antheil, child prodigy, high-school dropout, concert pianist, and incipient avant-garde composer, left for Europe in that style.

His *real* reason for going to Europe, he claimed long after, was to chase down a young woman he was in love with. Her mother had spirited her off to prevent their engagement, “either Italy or Germany, probably the latter.” But he also revealed that he had actually given up on her “the day she had disappeared without leaving me a clue.” If he encountered her, it would only be to “silently reproach her,” he fantasized, and then “sadly turn on my heel and walk away.” At another time he explained that he went to Europe because, “first, I wanted to learn how to write better music; secondly, I wanted that music to be heard by publics more likely to be receptive to it than any I was likely to encounter in the America of 1922; and thirdly, the little money I had would last longer in Europe.” None of these explanations were mutually exclusive. Europe—cheap, permissive, and reemergent—was a siren call for talented young Americans in the years after the Great War.

Antheil sailed with Hanson on the *Empress of Scotland* in May 1922. He performed in London to mixed reviews and detoured to southern Germany for an all-Teutonic music festival before setting up a base camp in Berlin. He spoke German like a native; his German

immigrant parents had spoken the language at home.

Hyperinflation was rapidly impoverishing the defeated citizens of Weimar Germany. The mark, which had stabilized at 320 to the U.S. dollar during the first half of 1922, would sink to 8,000 to the dollar by December, and that was only the beginning; by December 1923 the exchange rate would be 4.2 trillion marks to the dollar. That summer of 1922, Antheil remembered, “the girls and wives of some of the best families of Berlin were out on the street. Everything else had been hocked. Now they were hocking themselves, in order to eat. He was too young and too recently released from living at home not to take advantage of the opportunity. “There were just too many women. The men of Germany had mostly been killed off, or were crippled. In any case, the men left over were as poor and as starving as the women.” So, inevitably, “it was curious to be a young foreigner with money, enough money in Berlin in those days.”

To his credit, Antheil shared his income from performing with fellow artists. “George was a tremendously generous person and somewhat childlike,” his future wife would say of him “and he helped a lot of artists at this time by buying paintings, inviting them to dinner, even supporting a few. It was all rather odd because he himself had no money, except what he made off the concerts, but there was some arrangement with his manager that he was paid a few dollars, and dollars were at an incredible rate of exchange in the midst of the worst inflation.”

Igor Stravinsky, one of Antheil’s idols, turned up in Berlin that summer. He had been negotiating since the end of the Russian Revolution to reunite with his mother, still living in what was now the Soviet Union. The Soviet authorities had finally agreed to allow her to emigrate, and she was due to arrive on a Soviet ship at Stettin (now Szczecin, Poland), then a German port on the Baltic Sea, ninety miles northeast of Berlin. The Russian composer, who knew he had to meet his mother on the dock and personally shepherd her through German immigration or risk her deportation back to the U.S.S.R., had expected to wait in Berlin for no more than a week. Repeated delays in the ship’s departure kept him waiting there for two months. When Antheil presented himself one morning at the Russischer Hof as an American composer and an admirer, Stravinsky welcomed him. They had breakfast together; Antheil showed Stravinsky the most Stravinsky-like of his compositions; Stravinsky asked him to lunch the next day. “Thereafter,” Antheil perhaps exaggerates, “for two straight months, he and I had lunch together (and also, more often than not, breakfast, dinner, and supper) talking about everything in the contemporary world of music.” In particular they talked “about mechanistic and percussive music,” which was the kind Antheil was beginning to compose. When Stravinsky’s mother finally arrived and the composer prepared to return with her to Paris, he offered to arrange a piano concert there for Antheil. “You play my music exactly as I wish it to be played,” Antheil recalled him saying. “Really, I wish you would decide to come to Paris.”

And so Antheil would, but not just yet. Settled that late autumn in a furnished apartment in the Berlin suburbs, waiting out the weeks until his midwinter concert tour would begin, he bought himself “an enormous fur coat made of Siberian cat,” learned that the German fight ace Rudolf Schultz-Dornburg, now the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, wanted to perform his First Symphony, and fell in love with the young Hungarian woman who would share his life, “a certain girl called Boski.”

Boski (pronounced *BESH-key*) Markus was named after Elizabeth of Austria—Sissy, the same whom Hedy would play in Vienna in 1933. “I happened to be born in a little summer resort outside of Budapest,” she recalled, “which was the summer residence of the Empress Elizabeth of Hungary-Austria ... so my parents very imaginatively named me Elizabeth, which in Hungarian is *Erzsebet* or abbreviated: Boski.” Antheil first saw her in a café near his apartment; she was simply dressed, “dark, had high cheekbones, but otherwise was delicately, rather sensitively beautiful.” He asked around about her. A mutual acquaintance waved him off—she was “related to various well-to-do Viennese and Budapest families,” the woman told him, but had “turned radical and run away from her family.” She had been involved with the Communist revolution in Hungary after the war “and barely escaped Budapest with her life after its downfall.” She was “only eighteen or nineteen, wild and untamable,” a student at the University of Berlin. “She will hate you for an American capitalist,” the woman concluded. A man who liked a challenge, Antheil was sold.

He invited Boski to the premiere of his First Symphony, assuming she’d be impressed, but she didn’t like his music and left early. Undaunted, he arranged with their mutual friend to meet the two women for dinner two days before Christmas. He was due to leave on the midnight train to Paris, where Stravinsky had made good on his promise to set him up with a concert during Christmas week. When the mutual friend stepped out to make a phone call, Antheil sprang his plan on Boski: Christmas together in Paris. Nothing improper, he promised, just good fun. She confounded him by accepting the date but rejecting the location: the French were still denying visas to the citizens of their former Great War enemies, of which Hungary was one. Antheil was stuck. Either he played truant from performing for Stravinsky or he revealed to Boski that their trip to Paris was an addendum to a concert commitment. “I was thunderstruck,” he writes. “Boski Markus had said ‘All right.’ That was the main thing. Let Stravinsky wait.”

Stravinsky did not take kindly to waiting. He substituted a French pianist, Jean Wiener, whom he praises in his autobiography without mentioning Antheil. But George and Boski began a lifelong relationship across a Christmas spent on the farm of an aunt of his in Poland.

It took the rest of the winter to work past Boski’s resistance. “She represented much of the war-torn, disillusioned Europe of 1923,” Antheil writes; “I, a young, hopeful, but utterly naïve America of the same period.” Boski recalled that “everybody was terribly poor at that time in Germany, and very, very bitter.” The losses of the war, the punitive reparations that the victors had demanded, the worsening hyperinflation, all contributed to the German mood, which was turning violent. The Weimar Republic’s foreign minister Walther Rathenau, though a nationalist himself, had been assassinated by two ultranationalist army officers the previous June. The small but burgeoning Nazi Party was mobilizing ever-larger rallies. Boski’s conflict between head and heart was so severe that she deliberately overdosed on morphine in the early spring. Antheil, guilt stricken, took the near suicide for a sign he should quit concertizing and begin full-time composing. When Boski was back on her feet, he pledged himself to her and proposed they move to Paris and live together.

They did not move immediately. Antheil had several more concert engagements to fulfill and money in the bank. Across the spring he also found time to write a sonata he called *Death Machines* and another, for his new love, called *Sonata Sauvage*. “When I later played it in Paris,” he writes, “[it] caused a riot; if one may consider music able to represent anything

visual, one might poetically consider that it was a portrait of her ... because I habitual visualized her as a Mongolian-Hungarian amazon riding over an ancient 'pusta' full tilt." *Pusta* in Hungarian means plain, a broad grassland like the buffalo plains of North America. Boski was petite for an Amazon, barely five feet tall.

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"We arrived in Paris in the middle of June," she remembered, "and the first night we were there, we went to the Theatre Sarah Bernhardt to see and hear the Diaghilev ballet performing Stravinsky's *Les noces*. What a magical beginning." *Les noces*—*The Wedding*—has given Stravinsky great trouble. He put the libretto together himself, mining a collection of old Russian wedding songs. Conceiving a dance cantata—a ballet with song—he originally tried to score it for full orchestra, "which I gave up almost at once in view of the elaborate apparatus that the complexity of the form demanded." Next he tried a smaller ensemble. He began a score which required massed polyphonic effects: a mechanical piano and an electrically driven harmonium, a section of percussion instruments, and two Hungarian cimbaloms [that is, concert hammered dulcimers]." He worried that it would be difficult to synchronize the mechanical instruments with singers and the instruments played live by musicians. To see if the combination worked, he orchestrated the first two scenes. He was unhappy with the result; it "was all pure loss," he said, and he "did not touch *Les noces* again for four years." When Diaghilev asked for a new ballet for his Paris-based Ballets Russes, Stravinsky resuscitated *Les noces*, this time instrumenting it for multiple pianos, timbales, bells, and xylophones, "none of which instruments gives a precise note." Vaslav Nijinsky's sister, Bronislava, choreographed it. ("In contrast to her brother," Stravinsky writes acidly in his 1936 *Autobiography*, she was "gifted with a real talent for choreographic creation.") *Les noces* was performed that June 1923 to great acclaim. "Absolutely breathtaking," Boski praised it, "and the glitter and joyousness of the audience, after bleak Berlin, was like champagne."

Not only Berlin but also Vienna had been bleak. The war may not have affected Hedra Kiesler and her prosperous family; Boski, who had attended school in Vienna before beginning her university studies in Berlin, remembered an uglier reality. "When I went to school there," she writes, "after the First World War, Vienna and Austria were really terribly beaten, losing the war, losing their emperor, losing the illusion that they were the center of the universe. They were terribly poor, everything was rationed, and you had to wait in line for the simplest necessities of life."

Boski found Paris transforming:

Paris was like a carnival. I will never forget its busy ebullience on the early morning of our arrival: shops opened, housewives wearing slippers marketing, carrying shopping baskets for bread and milk, carts full of vegetables, noise, bustling, cheerful, sunny. We fell in love with it that instant ... even though I was not too sure whether I had made the right decision coming to Paris with George. Not because it was "improper," for we in our generation tried to kick over the conventional ideas. I was quite radically minded, quite believing in woman's equal rights, fiercely believing in independence of spirit ... and also slightly cynical about the world.... But George and Paris humanized me. I suddenly knew



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