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Blonde: Redefining Marilyn Monroe as Digital Artifact

Abstract

Andrew Dominik's biopic of Marilyn Monroe, Blonde *(2022), uses new digital technologies, including lenses, to redefine the star image of Marilyn Monroe. As Dominik mentions, the narrative of the film is drawn from the 'shards' of the biographical fiction novel which was written by Joyce Carol Oates in 2000. This article begins by considering the 'spectral' influence of Monroe that the filmmakers cited as a presence during the production of* Blonde. *It then contextualizes Monroe's screen persona with reference to research on stars that emerged during Hollywood's Golden Age. Much of this writing was contemporaneous with the height of Monroe's acting career. The article focuses on how* Blonde *revises Monroe's star's image, analyzing how a new digital screen persona is illuminated by flashes of light, lenses and framing that distorts and disembodies her image. It highlights how* Blonde *constructs Monroe primarily through the perspectives of other characters as a spectral image, one who is rarely afforded her own point of view.*

The 2022 biopic *Blonde* focuses on the enduring legacy of one of the highest profile stars of Hollywood's Golden Age, Marilyn Monroe. Director Andrew Dominik approached the adaptation "instinctively", describing the original novel by Joyce Carol Oates as, "a shattered mirror – there are all these little shards and it circles around, returning to certain memories. It's the feeling of being inside somebody's anxious thought process" (Newland). *Variety* classified *Blonde* as "a surrealist version of the life and death of the screen legends," citing Dominik's description of it as a "dream film, or a nightmare film" (D'Addiario). Ana De Armas plays Norma Jeane Mortenson and the larger-than-life film star Marilyn Monroe, highlighting the two distinct, but inextricably connected personas. De Armas describes the approach as one in which, "We're telling her story, from her point of view. I'm making people feel what she felt. When we had to shoot these kinds of scenes, like the one with Kennedy, it was difficult for everybody. But at the same time, I knew I had to go there to find the truth" (D'Addiario). Much of the publicity surrounding *Blonde* highlights the impact of the star's continued presence during shooting.

Principal photography began on the 4th of August 2019, the anniversary of Monroe's death ("Blonde Press Conference: 79th Venice International Film Festival"). Dominik says that Monroe's legacy continued to assert its presence, saying that "her dust is everywhere in Los Angeles" ("Blonde Press Conference: 79th Venice International Film Festival"). Ana de Armas says that at times during production the film felt "like a séance," that Monroe's presence was "in the air," and that the film was made "in her service" ("Blonde Press Conference: 79th Venice International Film Festival").

Blonde includes historical source material, cutting in sequences from some of Monroe's films, and re-creating scenes from others. This film uses archival photographs and posters, and scenes that are shot on significant locations, including the apartment that Norma Jeane lived in as a child, and later the bedroom which was the site of her death. However, *Blonde* is less interested in presenting a faithful, indexical reiteration of the life of the star as a biopic might, and more invested in engaging with the mythology that surrounds her. It approaches this mythology using digital effects to depict Monroe's inner world, experiences, senses,

and emotions; and includes scenes that present disarmingly intimate investigations of Monroe's body. One way to contextualize this new, digital version of Monroe is to examine how the star is remade using the aesthetics of Golden Age cinema. This article will begin by exploring some of the most influential research on stars that emerged during Hollywood's Golden Age, contemporaneous with Monroe's career. It will focus on Monroe's star image specifically, analyzing how the image is constructed through the perspectives of other characters and shaped by lenses, lighting, framing and effects that recall the aesthetics of Classical Hollywood cinema.

Roland Barthes identified how stars function as icons within the machine of mass culture. In *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes wrote about the role that popular culture plays in not only identifying which stars are worthy of attention, but also in shaping the image of stars as objects of desire. Barthes' approach to popular mythologies invited a very direct analysis, one that was dedicated to "the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse, which, in my view, is hidden there" (11). Barthes analyses its surfaces, shapes and curves; he writes that Garbo's face, "represents this fragile moment when the cinema is about to draw an existential from an essential beauty" (Barthes 63). A similar fascination with the flesh and its interior, is the central concern of *Blonde*. It is precisely the obsession with the flesh, its 'shapes and curves', the 'repeated fragile moments' in Monroe's story that impede a comprehensive expression of this star's agency and legacy.

Throughout *Blonde*, the image of Monroe as movie star and the lived experience of Norma Jeane Mortenson gradually intertwine, dramatically colliding and dissolving the split between the star image and Norma Jeane's reality. This dissociation is depicted in sequences that recreate Monroe's performances on film. An early shot of a mesmerized Marilyn Monroe holding a razor blade to her neck is accompanied by an interior maternal voiceover encouraging her to cut her throat. Only retrospectively is this revealed to be Monroe's performance from *Don't Bother to Knock* (Baker 1952). Once the camera recedes, it provides the perspective required to recognize the multiple layers of fantasy presented in this moment. Throughout *Blonde*, Norma Jeane struggles to separate illusion and reality. When she asserts that "Marilyn doesn't exist. When I come out of my dressing room, I'm Norma Jeane. I'm still her when the camera is rolling. Marilyn Monroe only exists on the screen," she is highlighting the illusion of the star,

an impression constituted by projected light.

Another misapprehension appears earlier in Blonde. Deliberately, or perhaps by accident, the photograph that informs Norma Jeane's memories of her father is altered across two scenes. The photograph of the father figure that is placed on the wall by Gladys, Norma Jeane's mother, transforms in its placement on the wall, and in relation to the details of the photograph itself. The use of iris framing draws attention to the photograph by masking the edges of the frame. When the film returns to this photograph, its placement has been altered, and the crack on the wall has moved. Details within the photograph have been reversed. The white patches that were initially on the left of the father's hat now appear on the right. Whilst we might be tempted to rationalize this as a

Figure 1. Gladys hanging the photograph.

Figure 2. The altered photograph, appearing later in the film.

marker of the passing of time, it could also be an error in continuity, or an attempt to establish the fragmentary, mirrored, and distorted perspective that defines both the star and the film itself. The ways that Monroe's star image is understood by Norma Jean as illusory is underscored by the visual instability of these photographic images. Historically, photographic imagery has been understood as the basic unit of celluloid film, an index of truth. *Blonde* eschews authenticity in favor of the illusion.

Edgar Morin understands the position of Hollywood stars after 1930 as less magical or transcendent, but instead able to "participate in the daily life of mortals; they are no longer inaccessible; they are mediators between the screen-heaven and earth" (32). He identifies the oscillation between proximity and distance that maintains the ideal star image. Writing on Monroe's relationship to Hollywood specifically, Morin notes that, "[t]he star system seems to be ruled by a thermostat: if the humanizing tendency that reduces the star to the human scale brushes everyday life a little too closely, an internal mechanism re-establishes her distance, a new artifice exalts her, she recovers altitude" (32). Morin thinks about this expansively, writing that, "considered as a total phenomenon, the history of the stars repeats, in its own proportion, the history of the gods. Before the gods (before the stars) the mythical universe (the screen) was peopled with spectres or phantoms endowed with the glamour and magic of the double" (34). *Blonde* replicates a similar focus on the myth of Monroe;, however, the latest incarnation moves into a new realm in its desire to explore the star in increasingly intimate detail.

A sequence depicting a sexual interlude with Charlie Chaplin Jr. and Edward G. Robinson Jr. distorts, stretches, and blurs their bodies. Subsequent shots frame the repetitive, lateral movement of Norma Jeane's head, an absurd indication of the sexual impact on the body. The concluding shot of this sequence replaces Norma Jeane with the star image of Marilyn Monroe. The sexual interlude with 'The Juniors' segues into the banner image for *Niagara* (Hathaway 1953), as Marilyn's bed magically transforms into a rushing waterfall. *Blonde* uses digital compositing to update the matte shot and position of Monroe languishing at the edge of Niagara Falls. This shot connects Golden Age Hollywood with digital cinema, blending *Blonde* and the billboard for *Niagara* into one shot. Morin emphasizes the importance of sexuality in shaping Hollywood after 1947, and referencing the original film, states: "Marilyn Monroe, the torrid

vamp of *Niagara*, naked under her red dress, with her ferocious sexuality and her sulky face, is the perfect symbol for the star system's recovery" (31).

Richard Dyer's influential research highlights the plural, sometimes contradictory aspects that define the central paradox of stardom, arguing that stars are ordinary and glamorous, like and unlike us, people and commodities, real and imagined, public and private (1979). It is the public destabilization of these oppositions that characterizes the mythology around Monroe. Media industries continue to devote themselves to speculation around aspects of Monroe's life, all intent on exploring, but never quite filling, this epistemological gap. Dyer argues that much interest in Hollywood lies in the "process of contradiction and its 'management' and those moments when hegemony is not, or is only uneasily, secured" (1979 3). For Dyer, "the star's image is so powerful that all signs may be read in terms of it" (1979 148). Monroe remains a polysemic 'hyper-sign' and many of these aspects are visualized in *Blonde*.

Norma Jeane's character embodies Dyer's notion of contradiction as confusion builds between the star image and her sense of self. Dialogue like: "She doesn't have any well-being, she's only a career" uses more contemporary phrasing to describe the power of the celluloid image. A similar fragmentation is expressed using film language as the protagonist struggles to control her image. This contradiction is articulated in the initial meeting with Joe Di Maggio when Norma Jeane tells him that "in the movies they chop you all to bits. Cut, cut, cut, it's a jigsaw puzzle. But you're not the one to put the pieces together". The version of Monroe played by De Armas is also built on the corporeal signs that define the star: breathy dialogue, platinum blonde hair, lowered eyelids, parted lips, and a precarious sense of self. The star's identity finally replaces Norma Jeane in what might otherwise be viewed as an aside right at the end of the film, a detail that might go unnoticed. When Charlie Chaplin Jr.'s parcel arrives, Norma Jeane signs for the delivery as Marilyn Monroe. This simple gesture indicates the overwhelming presence of the star, and the dissolution of Norma Jeane Mortenson.

In *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, Richard Dyer reads Monroe's screen image as a range of discourses that encapsulate "clusters of ideas, notions, feelings, images, attitudes and assumptions that, taken together, make up distinctive ways of thinking and feeling about things, of making a particular sense of the world" (2004 19). Monroe's image is configured by a range of media discourses

that include pinups, photographs, images in *Playboy* magazine, advertisements, and theatre; as well as her film appearances, beginning with *The Dangerous Years* (Arthur Pierson 1947), and ending with the incomplete film *Something's Gotta Give* (George Cukor 1962) The public impression of Marilyn Monroe is also derived from 'unofficial' discourses that circulate across broader media forms: in newspapers, calendars, gossip columns, within art movements like Andy Warhol's screen prints, Joyce Carol Oates' book, Dominik's film, and popular cultural movements, particularly postmodernism. All media ultimately contribute to build the image of Monroe as a polysemic hyper-sign. For Dyer, "Monroe = sexuality is a message that ran all the way from what the media made of her in the pin-ups and movies to how her image became a reference point for sexuality in the coinage of everyday speech" (2004 20). During the 1950s, Monroe's star image represented a level of glamour and sexuality that was diametrically opposed to the stereotype of domestic femininity. Monroe's influence on film production during Hollywood's Golden Age was less well known. Her influence within the film industry was rarely credited, with one example being her role as executive producer for Laurence Olivier's *Prince and the Showgirl* (1957). S. Paige Baty calls Monroe a "representative character," a cultural figure through whom the character of political life is articulated (1995). However, whilst representative characters are often idealized stars embodying achievement and success, they can also display their struggles publicly. The influence of representative characters is not limited to their lifetime. Screen personas like Monroe's transform across time, particularly as their re-constructions are based on recollection and imagination. The digital version of Monroe in *Blonde* is shaped through the eyes of other characters, and illuminated by both analog and digital technologies.

Dyer writes that Monroe "is knitted into the fabric of the film through point-of-view shots located in male characters - even in the later films, and virtually always in the earlier ones, she is set up as an object of male sexual gaze" (2004 21). In addition, the intersection of sexuality, gender, and cultural background defines the image of this star. Dyer writes, "[t]o be the ideal Monroe had to be white, and not just white, but blonde, the most unambiguously white you can get..." and that "[b]londeness, especially platinum (peroxide) Blondeness is the ultimate sign of whiteness" (2004 42-3). Some sequences of *Blonde* amplify that whiteness in makeup, costume, and by framing Monroe centrally as the lightest point in

wide shots of audiences. In one instance, Monroe's luminous presence is the only source of light in a sea of gray outfits and faces. Dominik's camera disrupts the light beam that projects the film, looking back at the star as the lights in the cinema come up. Another sequence in *Blonde* begins with a performance from *The Seven Year Itch* (Billy Wilder, 1955), and extends cinematic artifice beyond the cut to recreate one of the hyper-signs associated with Monroe. This is the famous image wherein she is positioned over a subway grate, the warm air below billowing her dress out like a giant white mushroom. *Blonde* blends the film performance with 'media moments' as a crowd of photographers surround Monroe: watching, photographing, their eyes widening, seemingly expanding in the frames, illustrating the lascivious gaze that Dyer describes. As flashes illuminate her presence, an expanding mob of male photographers with analogue cameras frame and sculpt one of the images that defines Monroe's career. This scene is reminiscent of Maria's dance in *Metropolis* (Lang 1927), a performance that was constructed similarly with increasing close up shots of the widening eyes of a male audience watching the performance. Both films perpetuate an illusion of femininity that has been 'knitted' into the fabric of both celluloid and digital films, primarily using reaction shots of lustful male viewers.

When *Blonde* offers Monroe's own perspective, it is one that includes her within the frame, rarely showing what she sees herself. A fish eye lens expresses Monroe's increasing delirium as she drives through the streets of Hollywood, where the palm trees curve in to surround her. As the camera tracks behind Monroe walking down her own garden path, a similar visual distortion is combined with high exposure to depict her surroundings as cylindrical, almost as if she is walking through a pipe. *Blonde* develops confronting perspectives that imagine the star from the inside. Internal images of Norma Jeane's body are depicted on a microscopic level. Eggs and sperm unite, cells grow and divide, and a fetus is shown hovering inside her uterus. Two specific images of Norma Jeane focus on her uterus, showing the viscous movement of the uterine walls as they respond to the insertion of a speculum. The second centralizes the eye of the gynecologist who peers inside. The shots that expose the internal organs and position the surgeon's eye centrally contrast with the distance and objective observation that defines the "medical gaze" (Foucault 1963). Another is the view from inside an airplane's toilet, a vessel that captures a view of Monroe's vomit

as she throws up mid-flight. These perspectives of the internal body, its cells, organs, and fluids, 'chop her to bits' and contribute to the dissolution of the star image.

Lighting also plays an important role in establishing and dissolving the star image. *Blonde* uses light in expressive ways during sequences of Monroe attending film premieres. Flashes timed with the shutters of analogue cameras punctuate these sequences, adding a new form of editing between shots. One of the flashes explodes and hits her body. Monroe reacts by moving in an ungainly, circular pattern. These blinding and dangerous flashes recall the history of chemical powders or magnesium strips that also formed the base for fireworks. In *Blonde*, flashes are caused by single use globes that explode at the peak of their intensity. Lighting becomes a hyperconscious sensory link in other moments in *Blonde*. Intense sounds of burning light globes are discernable in the audio mix, amplifying as she passes them in on a studio set. Refracted lighting dominates a 'behind the scenes' shot as Monroe steps away from a scene, overwhelmed by her perceived slippage

Figure 3. Monroe attending a film premiere.

Figure 4. The lighting creates a visual impression of dissociation.

between present and past events of her life. Here, a lateral shaft of refracted light dominates the foreground, providing an intense point of illumination. This refracted, distorted light amplifies the sense of dissociation. Further light abstractions surround and almost obliterate the star image as she freshens up before meeting President Kennedy. Lighting effects that originate from flashes or refraction are reminiscent of the original technologies that shaped Monroe.

Blonde is the first film distributed on Netflix to have been given an American NC17 classification, which resulted in a limited theatrical release and advertising. This may be due to the dehumanizing visions of Monroe's body, but also to an early sequence depicting a rape, one that is contextualized as part of a meeting with the studio mogul "Mr Z." The sexual assault is filmed as a monochromatic, silent indication of the abusive power relations at play in Hollywood. It also reveals the temporal mix that is characteristic of *Blonde*, one that emphasizes a traumatic past inflecting the present, the silence and power that shaped her career. In relation to this scene, Dominik says, "It just happens, it's almost glossed over, and then the feeling follows her later" (Newland). Dominik argues that the film is indebted to the #MeToo movement, "because nobody was interested in that sort of shit, what it's like to be an unloved girl, or what it's like to go through the Hollywood meat-grinder" (Bergson). Interviewing Dominik, Christina Newland emphasizes what is glossed over or left out of *Blonde*. She says, "I feel there are cultural repercussions to making certain choices in terms of how we present a figure from the past. What does it say to an audience that we're not seeing that she formed her own production company, or that she was involved in opposing the anti-communist witch-hunts by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s? Or that she fought against segregation on behalf of Ella Fitzgerald, and so on?" (Newland). As Dominik reveals in his reply, in *Blonde* reality is less important than the images (Newland).

Susan Griffith perceives Marilyn Monroe as the paradigmatic representation of woman's relationship to "the pornographic consciousness," arguing that Monroe is a tragic figure because she was forced to impersonate a pornographic image of feminine sexuality, particularly in the image of the bombshell (1981). Griffith writes that beneath every pornographic image is the notion that the woman doesn't really exist (214). Baty sees the original Monroe as a self-referential image, suggesting that "she mediates the real by being a simulation of herself" (24). More

broadly, Slavoj Žižek understands the presence of the classical femme fatale in Golden Age Cinema as elusive and spectral (2000). Others have seen the latest incarnation of Monroe in similar ways. Joyce Carol Oates said of Ana de Armas, "the wonderful actress who plays her, I think it took her like four hours of make-up. So when you see them on screen, they don't really exist. It's like a fantastic image" (Barleycorn).

This erasure is expressed in a shot at the end of the film which begins by centralizing Monroe in her bedroom, before tracking outside where she also appears sitting by the pool. The temporal continuity implied by the movement through space is another 'fantastic image,' one that positions Monroe within the interior and exterior simultaneously. Focus softens to reveal abstract light and color as detail dissolves into planes of colored light, creating impressions of Monroe's life slipping away. In its obsession with these 'fantastic images,' and with the shapes and surfaces of the body and its interiors, Blonde creates the image of the star as an effect of lighting, framing, and lenses that reference classical Hollywood aesthetics, erasing the star in the process. In *Blonde*, the star image is ultimately shown to be a spectral illusion, an indication of the multiple ways that filmmakers can nostalgically re-animate the star and simultaneously display the continued presence of Golden Age filmmaking on contemporary screens.

Wendy Haslem is an Associate Professor in Screen Studies at The University of Melbourne, Australia. Her research investigates new approaches to the history of the cinema in the digital age. The research monograph From Méliès to New Media: Spectral Projections (Intellect/University of Chicago Press, 2019) examines the intersections of celluloid and digital, focusing on traces of celluloid materiality on digital screens, the ethics of digital restoration, color and illumination, cinema outside of the theatre and the creation of a new experiential spectatorship. She has produced 60+ research, scholarly and engagement publications including: two single authored monographs; two edited anthologies, articles and chapters in journals and books, along with invited papers and translations.

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