Celebrity Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcel20

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Published online: 06 Mar 2013.

To cite this article: Will Scheibel (2013) Marilyn Monroe, ‘sex symbol’: film performance, gender politics and 1950s Hollywood celebrity, Celebrity Studies, 4:1, 4-13, DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2012.750095

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2012.750095

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Marilyn Monroe, ‘sex symbol’: film performance, gender politics and 1950s Hollywood celebrity

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Introduction

Marilyn Monroe is not only one of the most iconic and talked-about figures of the twentieth century, but also the quintessential female sex symbol of 1950s Hollywood. Any star study or biography of the actress risks uncritically perpetuating that reputation. While there has certainly been productive academic work on Monroe,¹ scholars have yet to interrogate fully the political implications of her status as a ‘sex symbol’ in ways that are both historically situated and aesthetically responsive to account for its profound staying power. Focusing on the first years of her career as a movie star between 1952 and 1954, while she worked under contract at 20th Century Fox, I want to consider how this particular celebrity image

Keywords: Marilyn Monroe; sex symbol; female performance; post-war US culture

Publicised, promoted and received as an erotic female object, Marilyn Monroe’s celebrity image represented both ‘pure’ femininity and ‘immoral’ female sexuality for post-war American culture. However, her film performances reveal an embodied female subject, and the self-awareness, irony and contradiction in her roles often elicit sympathetic female identification. Focusing on the first years of her career as a star between 1952 and 1954, while she worked under contract at 20th Century Fox, this essay will account for the mechanisms by which the industry positioned and contained Monroe as a ‘sex symbol’ who broke social taboos, but never dismantled the ideological hegemony of straight, male sexuality. At the same time, this essay will investigate the extent to which her performances expose the patriarchal identificatory systems that helped commodify and circulate her image as a metonym for normative female sexuality in the 1950s.

Monroe, as a female star, seems to dramatise the conflict within women between the opposing pressures to be an object for men and a subject for themselves. Monroe, as a sex symbol, has attracted perspectives of male heterosexual response to the image: very rarely do writers consider what it means for a woman to embody this symbol, nor for other women to have to come to terms with this embodiment.

Graham McCann 1988, p. 10

I am very definitely a woman and I enjoy it.

Marilyn Monroe, quoted in Life 1952, p. 104
was publicised, promoted and received, as well as how her film performances thematise and further complicate the construction of her image in post-war American culture.

What I am calling Monroe’s ‘sex symbol text’ can be traced back to a range of well-documented discursive threads: her cheesecake modelling; her typecast roles as the ‘dumb blonde’ and ‘blonde bombshell’; the exploitation of her body as an erotic object in film and popular culture; her famous hip-swinging walk, breathy voice, ecstatic laugh and quivering upper lip; her historical reception in chiefly sexualised terms; and her alternately deified and infantilised reputation, as a glamour goddess and vulnerable innocent respectively.2

However, her performances in films such as Don’t Bother to Knock (1952), Niagara (1953) and Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953) reveal another image less readily acknowledged – one of self-awareness, irony and contradiction, often sympathetic to female subjectivity and sexuality, pleasure and desire, and frustration and suffering. In this essay, I will therefore look at the mechanisms by which Hollywood positioned and contained Monroe as a sex symbol who broke social taboos but never dismantled the ideological hegemony of straight, male sexuality. At the same time, I will investigate the extent to which her performances negotiate and critically lay bare the patriarchal identificatory systems that helped commodify and circulate her image as a metonym for female sexuality in the 1950s, culminating in 1955 with The Seven Year Itch. I will argue that the potentially non-normative aspects of her performances destabilise the media’s efforts to regulate her sexual identity in the public sphere, while belying the unfair assumptions about her talent as a performer.

The term ‘sex symbol text’ refers to the ways in which various mass-produced media texts – such as films, criticism and commentaries, interviews and biographical legends, and promotional and publicity material – together manufacture and manage a celebrity image that derives its dominant meaning and affect from sex.3 Drawing from Richard Dyer’s methodology in his authoritative Stars (1998), we can read Monroe in semiological terms as ‘a complex configuration of visual, verbal and aural signs’ (1998, p. 34), which may signify in the films themselves according to performance codes and character types, or outside the films in reviews, studio announcements, press hand-outs, trailers, magazine ads and information uncovered by the press. Further, we can read Monroe in Dyer’s sociological terms as a kind of social reality, indicating that ‘no matter where one chooses to put the emphasis in terms of the stars’ place in the production/consumption dialectic of the cinema, that place can still only be fully understood ideologically’ (p. 34). Dyer explains how stars are embedded in a complex network of relationships among social values and structures. By embodying sets of politics, he claims, stars may either function to uphold the status quo or expose and even subvert the ideological tensions around them through their public personas.

In this latter capacity, Monroe burst on to the screen at the same cultural moment in America as the mainstream popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis, the Kinsey reports on the sexual behaviour of men (1948) and women (1953), and the rise of a more sexually explicit American cinema as a result of competition with international films and privatised leisure entertainments. Playboy was first published in 1953 featuring Monroe on the cover, and inside ran a full-colour calendar centrefold graced with her infamous nude photograph titled Golden Dreams.4 Dyer sensitively historicises and analyses her stardom alongside these post-war discourses in Heavenly Bodies (2004), contending that in its relevance for the new ‘playboy’ lifestyle and clinical ‘questions’ about female sexuality, ‘Monroe’s image spoke to and articulated the particular ways that sexuality was thought about and felt in the period’ (p. 24). But what sorts of sexual discourses directly surrounded Monroe herself and inscribed her celebrity image?
Marilyn Monroe, the star

Monroe’s enormous popularity lay at the intersections of a post-war hyper-masculinity and the new femininity it promoted in American culture, in which female sexuality was as much a cause of titillation as angst. While Monroe and Playboy adopted a liberal attitude that accepted her sexual expression as guiltless and natural, Hollywood was scandalised by its association with nude pin-ups (Dyer 2004, p. 29). The perception of her body as a threatening sexual force did not end with the pages of Playboy. For example, in a typical memo to Fox, censor Joseph Breen, the administrator of the Motion Picture Production Code, remarked that one of Monroe’s costumes in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes ‘does not seem acceptable in that it does not cover the breasts’ (Motion Picture Production Code Administration, 1952). Women’s clubs and other organisations complained about Monroe’s role in Niagara as an adulterer plotting to murder her husband, which encouraged Fox to postpone the release of her seductive recording of ‘Kiss’, the torch ballad she sings backed by the Starlighters Quartet, written for the film by Lionel Newman and Haven Gillespie (Time 1953b). By the time Fox began shooting The Seven Year Itch, the Herald Tribune, Hearst’s Journal-American and the major tabloids bore Monroe’s now-famous pose over a New York City subway grate as her white dress suggestively billows upwards in front of a lustful Tom Ewell. The Catholic weekly America (1954) chastised the press for its ‘over-age adolescence’ and described the shooting of the scene as ‘New York’s disgrace’ (p. 3).

Attempts to rein in Monroe’s seemingly illicit sexuality even reached the US Army, which banned a photograph taken of her in 1952 with four servicewomen while she served as grand marshal of the Beauty Pageant parade, part of a drive to recruit women. An Army spokesperson said Monroe’s ‘plunging neckline might give parents of potential women the “wrong conception” of life in the service’ (Los Angeles Times 1952b, p. 31). When Monroe visited US troops in Korea in 1954, military critic Hanson W. Baldwin (1954) accused the soldiers of showing weakness in their hysteria over a woman. Baldwin writes, ‘[T]roops rioted madly and behaved like bobby-soxers in Time Square, not like soldiers proud of their uniform. Their conduct must have delighted the Communists and all who hope for signs of degradation and decline in the United States’ (p. 2). On the other side of the political spectrum, the Soviet zone’s Berliner Illustrierte called Monroe ‘an agent of Sen. McCarthy, [whose] charms are being employed to help Americans forget about the tribulations of life in the United States’ (cited in Los Angeles Times 1953, p. A10).

If Monroe’s expression of her sexuality aroused discomfort over undomesticated femininity and liberated female sexuality for post-war America, her popularity somewhat paradoxically reflects the celebration of a bourgeois feminine and sexual ideal during this period, as well. Graham McCann (1988) notes how Fox ambivalently dealt with this situation by ‘attaching Monroe’s image to certain, ideologically acceptable images of female sexuality: coping with the threat of sex by displacing it (glamour), excusing it (the “dumb blonde” syndrome), or punishing it (the femme fatale image, the suffering motif)’ (p. 93). The feminine ideal Monroe represented also has important racial and economic connotations. As Dyer (2004, p. 40) maintains, ‘[T]he white woman is offered as the most highly prized possession of the white man, and the envy of all other races’, while platinum (peroxide) blondeness often signifies wealth. More generally, she could be gazed at from a safe distance as a fetish object, passive and fixed, unable to equal the sum of her parts: hair, breasts, legs, hips, buttocks. According to a list of the top female figures compiled by a leading brassiere manufacturer in 1952, Monroe was a man’s idea of physical perfection in a woman (Los Angeles Times 1952a, p. 34). Fashion experts at the time predicted a ‘new
buxom era’ inspired by Monroe’s hourglass chassis (Thomas 1952, p. 48), and sweatersy bathing suits designed to show off women’s curves came into vogue on the heels of her voluptuous ‘sweater girl’ look and ‘bathing beauty’ photographs (Hayes 1954, p. S3).

Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, Monroe appeared as a bit player in a series of modest productions, but she started to attract attention when she landed more substantial parts in higher-profile films such as John Huston’s The Asphalt Jungle (1950), Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s All About Eve (1950) and Fritz Lang’s Clash by Night (1952). A pair of workmanlike noir thrillers gave Monroe her first leading roles: Don’t Bother to Knock, in which she co-starred with Richard Widmark, and Niagara, in which she received top billing ahead of Joseph Cotten and Jean Peters. Although she would continue to take supporting roles during the first years of the 1950s – We’re Not Married! (1952), O. Henry’s Full House (1952), Monkey Business (1952), There’s No Business Like Show Business (1954) – the publicity and promotion machine cemented her standing as a hot new presence in Eisenhower-era Hollywood.

Articles in publications ranging from Time and Newsweek to Colliers and Esquire covered her rise to stardom, frequently reporting on her brief relationship with Yankee hero Joe DiMaggio, whom she married and divorced in 1954. Readers could also find sketches of her childhood in foster homes and her humble beginnings as a model and actress, which planted the seeds of her biographical legend. The vast majority of this journalistic fascination yielded writings that treated her almost exclusively as physical fodder for sexual appetites. In Coronet, Grady Johnson (1952) calls her a ‘luscious blonde with the tree-ripened sex appeal’ (p. 83) and a ‘full-lipped, full-breasted girl, who has hitched a sex wagon to Hollywood’s fastest climbing star’ (p. 84), going as far as to state that she ‘is developing a singularly unnecessary skill as an actress’ (p. 84). Pointing to her breakout role as the sultry girlfriend of a corrupt lawyer in The Asphalt Jungle, whom she refers to as her ‘uncle’, Los Angeles Times film reviewer Philip K. Scheuer (1950) writes:

Blue-eyed, blond, 5-foot 5 1/2-inch Marilyn is a slick chick off screen as well as on. She also has the kind of poise that should protect her in the clinches. I mention this, to be sure, merely in the spirit of a kindly uncle.

p. 5

Florabel Muir in the Chicago Daily Tribune (1952a) describes her as a ‘provocative, 118-pound bundle of sex appeal’, another ‘it’ girl in the mould of Clara Bow and Jean Harlow who can ‘make men’s hearts beat faster at the sight of her’ (p. C10).

When the image-building machinery at Fox placed Monroe herself in the press as ‘whistle bait’, she played her assigned part. Talking with Muir (1952b), she discusses strategies for dealing with ‘wolves’ (p. C7), and in another interview with Arlene Dahl for the Chicago Daily Tribune (1952), she offers beauty secrets to female readers (p. D4). Lydia Lane in the Los Angeles Times (1952) relates Monroe’s tips for looking attractive to men, including exercises to tighten flabby upper arms, streamline ankles and legs, and build up and firm breasts (p. D16). As part of its cover story in a 1952 issue, Life spotlights her ‘natural’ approach to a Hollywood job in a series of photographs depicting Monroe wearing a short skirt and tight sweater, flirting with an older studio executive behind a desk (pp. 102–103). She told the magazine, ‘I dress for men. A woman looks at your clothes critically. A man appreciates them’ (p. 104). Born from conceptions of both ‘pure’ feminine beauty and ‘immoral’ female sexuality, Monroe’s sex-symbol text took shape as a contested locus of political meaning, a site for competing definitions of the culturally ‘correct’ American woman in the 1950s.
Marilyn Monroe, the actress

Monroe became a household name when she entered her first star vehicles – Don’t Bother to Knock, Niagara, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, How to Marry a Millionaire (1953) and River of No Return (1954) – and it is necessary to keep in mind that even her name was part of her image-making process. Norma Jean Baker dyed her hair blonde and assumed the moniker Marilyn Monroe when she began her acting career at Fox, inventing a popular character through performance and mediated image-construction. Turning our attention to her film work, we see how Baker’s performance as Monroe is only the first level of the meta-theatrical spaces the star inhabits. Writing on the topic of reflexive role-playing and personality in Monroe’s films, Matthew Solomon (2010) tells us that ‘Monroe slips between performances and performances-within-performances onscreen’ (p. 108). Monroe collapses the boundaries between public and private selves, he explains, and her films require her ‘to embody characters who make their living as performers onstage, but who lead the rest of their lives offstage. In this way, Monroe’s metaperformances often reflect on her own acting and the construction of her stardom’ (p. 109). Marilyn Monroe, the name, is thus an empty, floating signifier of stardom itself, just as Marilyn Monroe, the body, is the physical presence and total image of celebrity. Shot in close-up and framed, she is a Warhol mask waiting to be filled with meaning, but a meaning still bounded by Monroe the ‘lost little girl’ and Monroe the ‘sex kitten’. It is no surprise that the pop artist would render her face in his famous silkscreens after her death.

Indeed, she has played a showgirl in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, River of No Return, Bus Stop (1956), The Prince and the Showgirl (1957) and Some Like It Hot (1959), a model in How to Marry a Millionaire and The Seven Year Itch, and an off-Broadway actress in Let’s Make Love (1960), but to expand on Solomon’s point, her performances also have more subtle dimensions of reflexivity that critically speak to the ways in which her sex-symbol text operates in film and popular culture. The deception and repression in Monroe’s acting is not unique, however; it is part of a larger tradition in realistic film acting. James Naremore defines ‘metaperformance’ in his seminal Acting in the Cinema (1988) as the product of the contrary demands that the drama imposes upon the players: ‘the need to maintain a unified narrative image, a coherent person, is matched by an equally strong need to exhibit dissonance or expressive incoherence within the characterization’ (p. 72).

What is unique and particularly complex about Monroe’s performances is how they play out the Chinese boxes of her gendered and sexual-identity conflicts both in and outside the films, giving voice and flesh to her sex-symbol text. The reflexivity of Monroe’s performance as gold-digging showgirl Lorelei Lee in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, her most heavily publicised and promoted film of the early 1950s, is not just a case of ‘expressive incoherence’ (Monroe playing Lorelei, a performance-within-a-performance), but the nexus point for a series of performances: Norma Jean playing ‘Marilyn’ – the larger formation of Monroe’s star persona – Monroe playing Lorelei, and Lorelei playing a sweet, dim-witted sexpot – just a ‘little girl from Little Rock’ – who dupes wealthy, lecherous men on board a cruise ship to Paris. Foregrounding the layers of Monroe’s performance, each more ironic than the last, the film as a whole ‘performs’ a clever burlesque of Monroe’s own celebrity image and the theatrical world of the entertainment industry, even while she remains imprisoned by this same image.

Based on Anita Loos’ jazz-age novella of the same name, which had previously become a successful stage musical, the film was directed by Howard Hawks and updated the source material to a mid-century context. Jane Russell co-starred with Monroe as Lorelei’s more sophisticated brunette partner Dorothy. Best known for her role as Billy the Kid’s buxom
girlfriend in *The Outlaw* (1943), the notorious ‘sex Western’ from Howard Hughes, Russell was a popular sex symbol in her own right. As a full-page ad in *Variety* proclaimed under the film’s well-endowed female stars in showgirl corsets, *Blondes* featured ‘the biggest attraction in the industry today’ (20th Century Fox 1953, p. 12) and was marketed as a showcase for Russell and Monroe. Monroe’s blonde whiteness is again at the centre of her sex-symbol text, but as Dyer (2004) writes, ‘[t]he white woman is not only the most prized possession of white patriarchy, she is also part of the symbolism of sexuality itself’ (p. 42). The film, to the contrary, is less concerned with reinforcing Dorothy/Russell and Monroe/Lorelei as subordinates to a straight, male-scopic regime than with playfully undermining the patriarchal viewing economy that the film (and its discursive surround) sets up for the spectator.

Whereas *How to Marry a Millionaire*, Fox’s conservative sister film, shot in CinemaScope and released later the same year, equates female autonomy with consumerism and ultimately finds its characters in accord with gender norms, the meta-critical edge to the female performances in *Blondes* establishes identification not with the male characters or an implied male film-maker, but with Lorelei and Dorothy as intimate female friends, whose mobility and sources of pleasure are altogether independent from men. Most of the male characters in the film are objects of ridicule – milquetoasts (Lorelei’s nerdy fiancé played by Tommy Noonan), grotesque caricatures of masculinity (the aging, bloated diamond mine-owner nicknamed ‘Piggy’ played by Charles Coburn), unscrupulous types (the private detective played by Elliott Reed, hired to spy on Dorothy and Lorelei), or little boys (Lorelei’s precocious young admirer played by George Winslow) – and they are confounded by these strong women at every turn, rendered at least figuratively impotent. The film’s musical numbers, from the opening ‘Two Little Girls from Little Rock’ (in which Russell and Monroe dance together onstage) to the famous ‘Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend’ (in which Monroe fans away suicidal male suitors in her iconic pink dress), are empowering public performances and stylish expressions of the women’s solidarity, sexuality and agency.

In a dramatic film such as *Don’t Bother to Knock*, Monroe’s sex-symbol text is not so much parodied for its absurd superficiality as it is made visible for an implicit critique of its sexist trappings. Originally titled *Whistle Bait*, a title nixed by the Breen Office (Hopper 1951, p. 8), this adaptation of Charlotte Armstrong’s 1951 novel *Mischief* was marketed as a sexy film to show off Fox’s new headlining attraction. Starring as a mentally disturbed babysitter, Monroe triumphs not through subversive satire, but through a poignant articulation of female grief and rage. Reviewers panned the film, and, as usual, trivialised Monroe’s acting by writing about her in a misogynist sexual framework. *Time* (1952) dismissed her as ‘an inexpert actress but a talented woman’ and Philip K. Scheuer of the *Los Angeles Times* (1952) lambasted her portrayal as one ‘reinforced by virtually no acting resources whatsoever’ (p. A7). Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* (1952) commented, ‘[A]ll the equipment that Miss Monroe has to handle the job are a childishly blank expression and a provokingly feeble, hollow voice’ (p. 8). One of the most scathing criticisms came from Orval Hopkins of *The Washington Post* (1952), who wrote, ‘I have no idea whether Miss Monroe is a very good actress or a singularly poor one. She looks blank, lisps a little, her mouth falls open, her eyes swim. […] But then maybe that’s the way she always is, in which case it’s not acting at all’ (Hopkins 1952, p. 27).

Directed by Roy Baker, *Don’t Bother to Knock* is a low-budget, black-and-white suspense film in which Monroe plays Nell Forbes, an attractive but painfully shy young woman recovering from a suicide attempt. We learn that Nell is still grieving over the loss of her fiancé Philip, a pilot in World War II who died in the Pacific, and that she has recently been released from a mental institution. When her uncle (Elisha Cook, Jr.), an elevator operator
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at a posh New York City hotel, helps her land a job as a babysitter, a wealthy couple staying at the hotel (Jim Backus and Lurene Tuttle) hire her for an evening to watch their daughter Bunny. Nell catches the attention of commercial airline pilot Jed Towers (Richard Widmark), a guest across the court, but after she invites him to her room for drinks, Nell begins confusing him with her deceased lover. As Nell comes to fear that Bunny will interfere in their romance, Jed quickly suspects that Nell may be capable of murder to prevent Bunny from keeping them apart.

On the surface, the film’s politics are consistent with the sort of traditional Hollywood genre fare that marginalises the woman as a disruption of normalcy and figure of guilt, as the Other who must be disavowed. Nell is introduced as the eroticised and villainised femme fatale, or dangerous woman, who must be punished for her predatory sexual transgressions which lure the male hero to his possible demise (Monroe as monstrous woman). During the second half of the film, as we learn of Nell’s attempted suicide, her psychiatric treatment and even her abuse from her parents as a child, she is marked – quite literally by the scars on her wrists – as abject, a suffering victim who must be rescued and redeemed by the male hero (Monroe as infantile woman). Monroe’s celebrity image was constituted by these same objectifying representations of ‘immoral’ sexuality and ‘pure’ femininity. Yet she performs the role not as a psychopath or a child, but as a female subject dreaming of escape from medical, legal, social and ideological institutionalisation. Not until John Huston’s The Misfits (1961), her final completed film, would she be given a role that allowed her to demonstrate her full potential as a dramatic performer.

Forced to conform to her prescribed roles, Nell, like Monroe’s celebrity image, can be read as a blank canvas on to which heterosexual men project, a sign that signifies according to patriarchal fears and desires (‘I’ll be any way you want me to be,’ she says to Jed). The reviewers that addressed the ‘blankness’ in Monroe’s performance were actually spot-on in this regard, but missed how it accentuates the hollowness of her character as a wounded woman whose emotions have been contained and ‘corrected’. The conventional ending restores the order that Nell threatens, as she is taken to a hospital in New York and Jed reunites with his girlfriend, the ‘good woman’ (Anne Bancroft). Throughout the film, however, Monroe makes Nell an embodied sexual subject and a sympathetic point of female identification in her longing for Philip (vis-à-vis Jed) and in her almost auto-erotic pleasure in being a woman. Nell dresses up in lacy negligee and fine jewellery belonging to Bunny’s mother, tries her perfume and admires herself in the mirror; it is a kind of private and personal inversion of the colourful public spectacles Monroe would go on to enact in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.

Monroe’s following performance in Niagara met similar derision from reviewers, whose awe of her physical beauty seemed to demand their condemnation of her acting ability, a symptom of the ideologies of gender that enabled her stardom in both its production and reception. ‘She doesn’t act,’ wrote Hopkins (1953), ‘yet she is by no means a displeasing young lady’ (p. 44). Time (1953a) declared, ‘Niagara allows Marilyn Monroe to parade about in revealing negligees and to take a shower in silhouette. But this is just about the full range of her performance.’ In a backhanded compliment aimed at Monroe, director Henry Hathaway and cinematographer Joe MacDonald, The New York Times submitted the following: ‘Perhaps Miss Monroe is not the perfect actress at this point. But neither the director nor the gentlemen who handled the camera appeared to be concerned with this’ (1953, p. 20).

Niagara stars Monroe as another femme fatale, Rose Loomis, a very different character from Nell Forbes, but no less haunted. Rose has been vacationing in Niagara Falls with her husband George (Joseph Cotton), a moody, neurotic Korean War veteran, but she is sleeping with a younger man (Richard Allan), whom she plans to have murder George.
When a younger couple on their honeymoon, Polly and Ray Cutler (Jean Peters and Casey Adams), arrive at the motel cabin next door, they learn of Rose’s affair. George thwarts Rose’s plans by killing her paramour and switching identities with the dead man to elude the police, but Polly accidentally discovers that George is still alive and seeking revenge on Rose. Shot in Technicolor and mostly on location in Ontario, Canada, the film was a much more ambitious project for Fox than *Don’t Bother to Knock*, with Monroe poised at the threshold of superstardom. Her silhouette in the nude shower scene to which *Time* refers had already been a topic of controversy, a scene the Breen Office rejected that was retained anyway, and needed to be edited in several states. Like Monroe’s previous film, though, it undercuts the politics of its own narrative and genre conventions.

The film might be easily attacked as a reactionary view of female sexuality, bifurcating female roles into a virgin-and-whore (white innocence-and-white trash) dichotomy. Once again, the sexually desiring woman is coded as evil and must be punished (George manages to kill Rose roughly 20 minutes before the end) while the ‘good wife’, Polly, emerges virtuously, or so it would seem. Although *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* looks upon Lorelei as a hip, modern woman and *Don’t Bother to Knock* generates pathos and empathy for the fragile Nell, it would be a stretch to argue that *Niagara* affirms Rose’s efforts to murder her husband as necessarily admirable. Instead, it is more useful to think of Monroe’s character as anti-heroic, much like the male protagonists of *noir*. If *Niagara* is more about George than it is about Rose, this is because it is about post-war America’s masculinity in crisis. George is an insecure and unlikable male character, afraid of Monroe’s aggressive sexuality and also obsessed with possessing her. Unable to satisfy her, he is perhaps literally impotent. When Rose dons a hot-pink dress and joins the motel party singing ‘Kiss’, George flies into a jealous fit and breaks the record, hinting at a streak of violence in their relationship. Under the guise of a convoluted crime movie, *Niagara* not only taps into the misogyny of American culture after World War II, but also expresses female anxiety and desperation over the institutions of marriage and family. The ‘happy ending’, in which George plummets to his death in the Falls and Polly resumes her life with the smarmy and buffoonish Ray, is therefore compromised at best.

**Conclusion**

Already a box-office draw, Monroe continued striving to grow in her acting career, forming her own production company in 1954 and studying under Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio in 1955. US reviewers still refused to take her seriously as an actress and, as Graham McCann (1988) observes, she became tired of her ‘dumb blonde’ roles and ‘resentful of studio publicity which depicted her as a fairly frivolous, fairly foolish young woman’ (p. 99). Otto Preminger’s CinemaScope Western *River of No Return*, co-starring Robert Mitchum, did little to change her image as ‘only’ a sex symbol, casting her as a saloon singer whom Mitchum domesticates to make a mother for his son (at one point, he even attempts to rape her). While the film practically turns Monroe into part of the gorgeous mountain scenery of Alberta, Canada, even in something as silly as *River* she evokes wells of sadness, struggling with Mitchum and systems of exploitation, all the while de-eroticising her role in surprising ways. Monroe’s melancholy rendition of the title song at the end is actually uncomfortable to watch, the ‘river of no return’ suggesting an inevitable death.

Over the course of this essay, I have tried not to ‘save’ Monroe from exploitation only to ‘use’ this historical person in the service of an exploitative and impersonal scholarly project, which Wendy Lesser (1991) wisely cautions in her own essay on the star. As a male
critic writing on Monroe today, I also would never presume to ventriloquise this deceased female subject. Far from achieving a complete or definitive understanding of her life or career, I want to embrace her ambiguity and polysemy as a star, too often either dismissed in reductive terms as a sex symbol or simplified to a saintly martyr. Moreover, I hope I have opened a much-needed conversation as to what the misleading label of ‘sex symbol’ means in the context of her films and career as a female professional. Lesser (1991) reminds us of the following:

[T]he closer you look at Marilyn Monroe, the harder it is to see her. As you peer through the structure and wreckage of all the news stories, biographies, gossip columns, and literary take-offs, not to mention the movies themselves, you begin to get the feeling that she’s not really there at all. At the centre of all this commotion, where there should be some tremendous motivating force, there is instead an empty hole.

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Rather than staking claim to historical or textual absolutes in an effort to capture the ‘real’ Marilyn Monroe, I am presenting her stardom as a heterogeneous, deeply vexed and ideologically inescapable phenomenon, one that is both mobile and the product of specific cultural conditions. As a volatile ‘sex symbol’, Monroe epitomises the post-war feminine ideal, and also reflects the burdens of such a title through gestures of resistance. She represents a certain idea of a liberated sexuality, and also the ways in which sexuality is narrowly defined and policed by institutions of power. Quoting Richard Widmark’s Jed in Don’t Bother to Knock, her celebrity image is ‘silk on one side and sandpaper on the other’.

Notes
2. Monroe was one of several ‘glamour goddesses’ of the 1950s, including Rita Hayworth, Lana Turner, Ava Gardner and Elizabeth Taylor. Why she gained the reputation as the sex symbol of the decade is a subject for further research, but this essay will focus on the gender politics that conditioned her reputation as a sex symbol and the ideological problems this reputation presents.
3. I will look at films, reviews, and promotion and publicity articles that correspond to her rise to stardom between 1950 and 1954.
4. Originally shot in 1949 by Tom Kelley, along with a rarer photo titled A New Wrinkle, it had already been used in several different calendars.
5. For more on the relationship between Monroe’s desirability and her blonde whiteness, see Banner 2008.
6. The film even invites a queer reading of the relationship between the two women that further challenges its ostensibly straight male address. See Doty 2000, pp. 131–153.
7. For more on the wider, diachronic circulation of Monroe’s celebrity image in popular culture, see Baty 1995.

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Gentlemen prefer blondes, 1953. Film. Directed by Howard Hawks. USA: 20th Century Fox.


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