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‘This industry lives on gossip and scandal’: female star narratives and the Marilyn Monroe biopic

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the migration of the female star narrative, a staple of the backstudio picture during the studio era, from theatrical fictional films to biopics on cable and broadcast TV. I focus in particular on the cycle of Marilyn Monroe biopics, which has served as a primary means by which Hollywood now makes female stardom legible as a narrative, one that disregards the star’s talent and hard work while emphasising her glamour and erotic value on one hand and her pathology and abjection on the other. The Monroe biographies stand out from those about celebrities in other professions or one-offs about other female stars because their sheer number over the past several decades gives them a coherence of their own as a cycle of biopics that, for all their claims of factuality, follow conventions of those older star narratives built around fictional protagonists. The cycle thus reiterates an anachronistic impression of stardom that disavows female labour while perpetuating the mystique of Hollywood in ways that are consistent with the industry’s masculinist biases and anxieties about female stardom.

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Introduction

‘This industry lives on gossip and scandal’, Agatha Murphy (Shelley Winters), a fictionalised gossip monger on TV, declares to sexy blonde starlet Kelly Williams (Connie Stevens) in *The Sex Symbol* (1974), an ABC movie of the week adapted by former blacklisted writer Alvah Bessie from his 1966 novel, which in turn was ‘inspired’ by the life of a well-known, deceased, very blonde film star in real-life Hollywood.¹ Despite ABC’s insistence that *The Sex Symbol* was ‘wholly fictional’, even *Variety* derided the network’s explanation that the film could have been based on the life of, say, Jayne Mansfield, who had married an ‘athlete’ much as Kelly Williams does.² For as Joyce Haber noted in her *Los Angeles Times* gossip column, ‘the film ... shows Connie Stevens [who portrays Kelly] as the closest thing to the late Marilyn Monroe since Joe DiMaggio’ (Haber 1974, p. G12).

The Sex Symbol, which Douglas Cramer, then Haber’s husband, produced for Columbia Pictures Television, was itself momentarily notorious for promoting gossip and scandal, as Haber reported in her daily column, not sparing readers any of the juicy details. In addition to exploiting and fictionalising public knowledge about Monroe’s

career, failed marriages to a football (read 'baseball') player and artist (read 'playwright'), a longer theatrical version meant for Europe featured Stevens in full frontal nudity, while her character's sprawling suicide pose for American television pushed against broadcast standards by openly displaying the actress's nude body from the rear. A giant billboard on the Sunset Strip also paraded that imagery. Furthermore, for his screenplay Bessie invented a married lover of Kelly Williams, a Senator with an Irish surname played by Don Murray (Monroe's co-star in *Bus Stop* [1956], as it happened). Gossip in the press automatically assumed that the politician in the film was meant to be Bobby Kennedy, not Jack, possibly because Norman Mailer's biography of Monroe, a patchwork of other accounts and his own speculation, had appeared just the year before. It was there that Mailer apparently fabricated his account of the star's affair with the younger Kennedy brother and theorised that the CIA and FBI murdered Monroe as a consequence.³ Although those events have never been substantiated, both have subsequently become semi-canonical in the Monroe biography.

Press accounts speculated that the sex scenes, or the female nudity at the end, or, most likely, the need to appease the Kennedy family was the unstated reason for ABC's abrupt postponement of the 90-minute telefilm shortly before its initially scheduled broadcast date on 5 March 1974. A re-edited version of *The Sex Symbol* with much of the politician's backstory eliminated and Connie Stevens' bare bottom covered up was finally broadcast later that year on 17 September, when it won the night for ABC with a 37 share of the audience, but garnered no Emmy nomination for Stevens, as Haber and the actress's entourage had predicted.⁴

While undistinguished by its script, direction by David Lowell Rich, and Stevens' performance, *The Sex Symbol* is still notable for registering the migration to American television of the female star narrative, from the 1920s through the 1960s a staple of theatrical 'backstudio' pictures – what, writing in 1937, *New York Times* film reviewer and later screenwriter Frank S. Nugent dubbed the movie about making movies in Hollywood (Nugent 1937, p. X5).⁵ I begin this article with *The Sex Symbol* in order to reflect upon how this relocation from theatres to the small screen intersected with treatments of Monroe's biography, itself rife with gossip and scandal. In comparison with the previous five decades of fictional female star narratives, from the 1970s to the present day the Monroe biopic has served as a primary means by which Hollywood makes female stardom legible as a narrative. Still characterised today by its blurring of facts and fictions, rumours and records, contradictions and controversies, Monroe's life story has raised her biographically-based star narrative to the level of cultural myth, to be sure; more important for my argument here, the template of her life, personally and professionally, has become central to how Hollywood has perpetuated its own mystique by repeating an anachronistic image of female stardom, with the star's glamour and sexuality made inseparable from her abjection and pathology. The industry still runs on gossip and scandal, indeed.

The Hollywood backstudio picture

At its simplest, a backstudio picture represents the inner workings of Hollywood in one of two ways, either by glamourising or satirising the industry's present-day conditions or by remembering its history with affectionate mockery or nostalgia. To be sure,

backstudio pictures also appear in the guise of many other, more formally discernible genres: the biopic, musical, melodrama, comedy, film noir, even horror. But these films are simultaneously legible as backstudios due to their shared setting in the movie industry and their plots that focus on making a motion picture or, if the plots move characters beyond the soundstages of Hollywood, on dramatising the impact of the industry as it liberates or inspires, warps or overwhelms the agency or personalities of individuals working in Hollywood.

Truth be told, too, from the silent era to the present century, many backstudio pictures have featured male protagonists, just as many of the most famous of these – *Sullivan's Travels* (1942), *In a Lonely Place* (1950), or *The Player* (1992) – view acting as secondary in importance to producing, writing, or directing. But a cursory glance at the long list of movies about Hollywood reveals the frequency with which female star narratives dominated this genre's output through the end of the 1960s. Stories about young women working in the film industry became popular in the 1920s with films such as *The Extra Girl* (1923), *Souls for Sale* (1923), *Ella Cinders* (1926), and *Show People* (1928) and then flourished in the 1930s with the likes of *Show Girl in Hollywood* (1930), *What Price Hollywood?* (1932), *Bombshell* (1933), *Let's Fall in Love* (1933), *Music Is Magic* (1935), *Hollywood Hotel* (1937), *A Star Is Born* (1937), and *Star Dust* (1940). As the films comprising this early cycle depict it, the mystique of the movie industry draws young women to Los Angeles in search of fame and fortune, or just employment and escape from the social restrictions of small-town life, so it requires backstudio narratives that dramatise female independence through stardom. At the same time, any backstudio dealing with female stardom also must reckon in some way with the industry's ambivalence about women working in Hollywood. Consequently, the female protagonists of early backstudios are at once industrial workers empowered by their eventual stardom and single women whose agency must be restricted by an institution that reinforces patriarchy, as the films' closures insist upon underscoring. Backstudios in the first cycle typically bring this contradictory understanding of female stardom to the forefront of their narratives, emphasising a young actress's innate star quality yet letting her ambition and determination drive the story – but within the confines of the studio system.

After the double impact in 1950 of *Sunset Boulevard* onscreen and, offscreen, of MGM's firing of Judy Garland and her subsequent well-publicised suicide attempt, Hollywood's exploitation of its emotionally dysfunctional female stars became fodder for the press, fan magazines, and a second major cycle of backstudio pictures about stardom. Whereas the first cycle of star narratives generally took as their protagonists naïve yet opportunistic young women crashing Hollywood in search of stardom, a second cycle produced during the 1950s and '60s focused more directly on narcissistic, self-indulgent, has-been female stars crashing in a Hollywood that first created and now callously abandoned them. After *Sunset Boulevard* came *The Star* (1952), *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954), *The Fuzzy Pink Nightgown* (1957), *The Goddess* (1958), *The Female Animal* (1958), *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *Inside Daisy Clover* (1965), *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), and *The Legend of Lylah Clare* (1968). Additionally, *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1962), and *The Carpetbaggers* (1964) featured mature female stars as leading characters in narratives otherwise centred on male protagonists.

Framed on one hand by *Sunset Boulevard* and Garland's suicide attempt in 1950 and on the other by Marilyn Monroe's and Garland's deaths in 1962 and 1969, respectively, this second cycle of backstudios equated the fictional star with the moribund studio system, locating Hollywood's excesses, insularity, and obsolescence in her figure. The Garland and Monroe stories, of course, were just two markers of stardom's unhappy, unhealthy downside, but they were flagship moments in a new era of scandalous sexual revelations and gossip half-truths about stars' alcoholism, drug use, secret affairs, and infidelities published in *Confidential* magazine and its imitators (Desjardins 2015, pp. 99–141). This second cycle of star narratives, moreover, tended to vilify the studio system's female victim for her driving ambition, which is, in turn, portrayed as unhealthy and excessive, hence 'monstrous', female desiring. The shift in narrative focus to narcissistic and self-destructive women reflected the maturation of the star system and the industry alike, as *Sunset Boulevard* illustrates through the effects of industrial obsolescence on silent-era star Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), and as *Singin' in the Rain* likewise does through its satire of defunct silent screen star Lena Lamont (Jean Hagen).

These two cycles viewed Hollywood stardom differently, to be sure, but they each represent stardom through fictionalised backstudio narratives that portray female stars as 'actors "with biographies"', to borrow the apt phrasing of Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery (1985, p. 172), which is also to say that these are narratives about the making or breaking of women's careers in the movie business. The fictional star biographies of each cycle trace the shifting yet always contradictory status of female stars as well-compensated and powerful Hollywood women working throughout the studio era. Both cycles of female star narratives consequently manifest studio-era Hollywood's efforts to manipulate and so contain the discursive excess that signifies female stardom – in accounts of their independence, their glamour, their sexuality, their consuming, and their determination to control their own labour. The difference between the two cycles, with the first pretty much celebrating Hollywood and the second pretty openly damning it, therefore resides in their specific historical moment of production regarding the studio system's dominance or its dissolution.

After about 1970, as male stars themselves increasingly dominated studio output and female stars were correspondingly diminished in their value and box-office clout, and as the film industry pretty much lost interest in its female audiences, the fictionalised female star narrative ceased to distinguish the backstudio picture made for theatres; and while tales of female stardom had pretty much carried the weight in the backstudio picture's representation of Hollywood during the studio era, starting in the 1970s and '80s the genre revolved almost exclusively around fictional male directors, writers, and producers – much as it still does today.

A move to broadcast and cable TV then revived the female star narrative but in the form of biopics that recounted the scandalous lives of real-life stars. After *The Jayne Mansfield Story* aired on CBS in 1980 it was followed by *Rita Hayworth: The Love Goddess* (CBS, 1983), *White Hot: The Mysterious Murder of Thelma Todd* (NBC, 1991), *Liz: The Elizabeth Taylor Story* (NBC, 1995), *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (HBO, 1999), *The Audrey Hepburn Story* (ABC, 2000), *Life With Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows* (ABC, 2001), and *The Mystery of Natalie Wood* (ABC, 2004). At this time, too, several basic cable networks such as A&E and Lifetime filled their schedules with

documentary biographies, and many of the subjects in these were major and minor female stars from the past with some sort of iconic following or scandalous history, or both.

The Monroe bio-persona

Not counting the numerous documentaries about her, Marilyn Monroe's life story in particular has been an endless source of backstudios about film stars on television, with a new one appearing on broadcast or cable with almost clock-like regularity: a fictionalised movie of the week in the form of *The Sex Symbol* on ABC in 1974; Arthur Miller's autobiographical *After the Fall* (1974) on NBC that same year; *Marilyn: The Untold Story* (1980), a three-hour adaptation of Norman Mailer's highly speculative biography on The ABC Sunday Night Movie; still another ABC movie called *Marilyn and Me* (1991), this time dwelling on Monroe's supposed secret marriage to Robert Slatzer; an account of her rumoured affair with Robert Kennedy on the US network in *Marilyn & Bobby: Her Final Affair* (1993); the HBO biopic *Norma Jean & Marilyn* (1996); the two-night mini-series *Blonde* (2001) on CBS based on Joyce Carol Oates' novelised account of the star's life; and, most recently, Lifetime's two-part *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe* (2015). I also should not forget that during its two-season run, the NBC series *Smash* (2012–2013) centred on the creation, casting, and production of a musicalised version of Monroe's life for the stage entitled *Bombshell*.

Nor has the Monroe story been entirely neglected by theatrical backstudios. A few years before the star's death, the lead character of Paddy Chayefsky's *The Goddess* (1958) followed the known early family biography, the marriage to a sports figure, and the professional and public breakdowns already being reported about the star. A quickie exploitation film *Goodbye, Norma Jean* (1976) appeared, and the same writer-director returned to Monroe's death over a dozen years later with *Goodnight, Sweet Marilyn* (1989), incorporating footage from the earlier treatment while casting a new actress in the lead role. Monroe was the cultural icon behind the figure of 'The Actress' in Nicholas Roeg's *Insignificance* (1985). A somewhat fictionalised account of Monroe filming *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1957) with Laurence Olivier on location in England was the subject of the indie theatrical release *My Week with Marilyn* (2011); and a theatrical film version of Oates' *Blonde* has been in development for several years with Jessica Chastain at one time rumoured to play Monroe. As for theatre, *Smash* did not invent the musicalised Monroe biography. An earlier musical, *Marilyn: An American Fable*, was a celebrated flop in 1983, and an altogether different production, *Marilyn! The Musical*, opened in London to a bit more success that same year. Mailer's *Strawhead* was a 1986 play about the star, and *Marilyn Forever Blonde*, a one-woman play with music, had limited runs in Hollywood and London in 2007. *Bombshell* itself was performed as a benefit concert for The Actors Fund in June 2015, and there has been talk of bringing the show to Broadway but nothing has so far materialised on that front.

It ought to go without saying that I am not bothering to list the scores of Monroe biographies in print nor the Internet fan sites, discussion boards, and Facebook pages that, debating their merits, rigorously sort out truth from fiction in those many published accounts.

Why this obvious and unyielding fascination with Monroe as inspiration for or subject of a backstudio picture about female stardom? According to Sarah Churchwell's

insightful analysis of what she calls ‘the many lives of Marilyn Monroe’ as recounted by those numerous, often competing books (Churchwell does not pay much attention to the biopics), ‘these very different writers have told precisely the same story: “Marilyn” was not a real person, but a product invented for the gratification of men in the 1950s’ (Churchwell 2004, p. 3). Monroe’s star image is consequently one of desirability and femininity but also one of controversy, pathology, fatality, and, most of all, uncertainty. ‘Uncertainty is the story of Marilyn’s biographical life’, Churchwell points out: ‘we don’t know nearly as much about her as people may assume’ (2004, p. 3; original emphasis). That ‘uncertainty’, some of it apparently perpetuated by Monroe herself, invites the speculation and fabrication – the gossip and scandal alluded to by *The Sex Symbol* – motivating the many efforts to recount the life story and explain the person anew. As Churchwell goes on to demonstrate with her side-by-side readings of the major retellings of the star’s life story, the familiar elements that appear to pull together the Monroe biography as a coherent tale only pull the subject apart, which may be why the life story never appears whole and finished, why it promises the truth but only ends up ‘telling us what we already think we know’ (2004, p. 5), and why Hollywood may feel that the audience’s hunger for it is never sated, offering us one ‘untold story’ and ‘secret life’ after another.

As the many TV movies and mini-series base their claims of authenticity on one or more of the print biographies that Churchwell analyses, they draw on a controversial documentary record, much of it complicated by the gossip and scandal that shape what I call, to reference the merging of fact and fiction, ‘the Monroe bio-persona’. To be sure, one can readily tick off the familiar thematic elements, most of which are invariably present in nearly every biopic of the star: the family romance of the crazy mother and absent father; the Cinderella-like transformation of Norma Jeane (the preferred spelling from her birth certificate) into ‘Marilyn’ and its negative image of the star’s divided self; the marketing of female sexuality, the objectification of the female body, and Monroe’s unashamed nudity; the suspicions about her promiscuity, abortions, and frigidity, which are juxtaposed to her innocence and naiveté, her ‘natural’ attitudes towards sex, and her unsuccessful efforts to become a mother; the marriages or love affairs of an iconic sex symbol with equally iconic masculine types personifying patriarchy – sports hero, intellectual, politician; and, finally, the unresolvable mystery of her death.

In one way or another, the biopics all share an underlying anxiety about female agency that motivates the constant retelling of Monroe’s story – and our culture’s obsession with it – and that still informs the complexity and currency of her bio-persona. As Churchwell (2004, p. 215) puts it about the numerous books: ‘The biographies respond on the whole by vitiating [Monroe’s] power: she is trembling target of studio head wrath; passive beneficiary of the counsel offered by older, wiser, male heads; or a coy manipulator who exploits female sympathies’. Adding to this aspect of her bio-persona, the conspiracy theories arising from and around Monroe’s death in 1962 are, in effect, practically demanded by the perceived causal logic of her biography due to its uncertainty and ‘its sense of a secret, manipulative authority’ – the studio, patriarchy, the Kennedys, possibly even Monroe herself – insofar as the theories posit ‘an author, someone ... in charge, and in most of these stories it is not Monroe. Rather she is a character in her own life story, one being authored by other powerful people, who themselves are authored by the biographer’ (2004, p. 318).

That, upon Monroe's death, her bio-persona provided a readymade template for a star narrative was already evident from two 1965 biopics about an earlier blonde bombshell, Jean Harlow. In fact, before Monroe's death, producer Jerry Wald had wanted her to play Harlow in a biopic of the star for their studio, Twentieth Century-Fox, but the project never got off the ground (Parsons 1956, p. C7, Scheuer 1965, p. N1). In any event, the two accounts of Harlow's life were dramatically different. Carroll Baker starred in a glossy, big-budget, highly publicised version from Paramount and producer Joseph E. Levine. Carol Lynley headlined a black-and-white version filmed with television cameras and rushed to independent theatres in advance of the other one.⁶ The duelling *Harlow* (1965a, 1965b) biopics anticipated what would be the indifference of post-studio-era Hollywood to female stardom, star narratives, and audiences.⁷ But as much to the point, in their different modes of production, the duelling biopics predicted the star narrative's demise as theatrical fare and its simultaneous move to television.

Using bits and pieces of Monroe's life to fill in gaps created by the effacement of facts about Harlow's, *Harlow* (1965b) with Carroll Baker refracts its subject's own scandal-marked life through the Monroe bio-persona. This *Harlow* characterises the famous MGM star as virginal and frigid yet with a pure intent regarding her career as a sex symbol, since, almost quoting Monroe verbatim (and predicting a major theme of her biopics), Baker's Jean Harlow claims that she wants to be a person but is being treated like a thing. 'You have the body of a woman and the emotions of a child', her agent tells Jean as he discovers how to sell her star persona when she confesses that she is not afraid of men but fearful of her own desires: 'A sweet beautiful girl next door. But on fire inside. Afraid to trust herself. Afraid of what she'll become. Provocative. Sensual. To a point. Then the doors close. Drives men mad.' Far from evoking the pre-Code Jean Harlow, this description more readily calls to mind Fox's invention of 'Marilyn Monroe', especially as it culminated for her persona with the role of The Girl in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955). Likewise, after making a big impression in *Hells' Angels* (1930), the Howard Hughes-type movie mogul observes that Harlow obviously cannot act yet the audience 'went for her as a woman. A sex symbol'. To build upon that reception, Harlow is then sent on tour where, on stage as a vaudeville act and at junkets with the press, she repeats bland 'Monroeisms', the kind of witty, sexually suggestive quips for which Monroe was known from her press interviews.

When this Harlow then moves to the film's fictionalised version of MGM, the Louis B. Mayer figure does not immediately take a liking to his new star, much as Darryl F. Zanuck was reported to detest or disrespect Monroe, but he nonetheless decides to feature his new acquisition in 'sex films for the family', so that she will be a sex symbol yet personify 'good clean sex'. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the betrayal of Harlow by Paul Bern (Peter Lawford) on their wedding night, when she discovers his impotence and he then beats her, causes her mental and physical downward spiral. Irving Schulman's sensational account of Bern's suicide was the big money moment in pushing his biography of Harlow to bestseller lists (and the reason for both renewed interest in her life and Paramount's and Levine's discomfort with the book whose rights they had purchased).⁸ On film, however, much as in reports about Monroe's state of mind after reading Arthur Miller's stinging putdowns of her in his diary, Bern's suicide destroys the virginal Harlow's illusions about romantic sex in marriage; in response she turns to alcohol and makes the rounds of Hollywood watering holes in search of

satisfaction from men. Missing out on the true love she craves, poor Jean ends up alone on the beach, catches a chill after indulging in too much booze and sex, and dies of pneumonia. Cue the Neal Hefti theme song, 'Lonely Girl'.

Appearing at almost the same time as Paramount's biopic was the other version of *Harlow* (1965a). A quickly production with its own publicised gossip – in the role of Mama Jean, Ginger Rogers replaced Eleanor Parker who had replaced the originally cast Judy Garland – this version follows the biographical record of Harlow's life with a bit more fidelity. However, here too elements of Monroe's bio-persona intrude upon the characterisation. For instance, we learn about this Harlow that 'no man ever satisfied her', and that she is a 'sex queen [who] hates sex', as some of the biopics say about Monroe. Likewise, Marie Dressler (Hermione Baddeley) tells Harlow that she needs to believe in herself and her talent, so, just like Monroe, the star leaves her family and her studio to study acting in New York.

But equally important for how the Monroe bio-persona would come to structure the migration of the star narrative to TV were the industrial conditions under which these two productions were made. First, the two *Harlow* biopics registered the declining clout of female movie stars. Although never as big a star as Monroe, both Carroll Baker and Carol Lynley were her contemporaries, blonde starlets under contract to major studios at the end of the studio era, Baker at Warners and Lynley at Fox. Neither star got much traction for her career from playing Harlow. Baker successfully sued Paramount and Levine for cancelling their contract with her but ended up making films in Italy; aside from *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and a few B pictures, Lynley's work afterwards was pretty much on the small screen. Second, the different modes of production made for an important index of the fate of female star narratives. Whereas the version with Baker was produced by Paramount in colour and widescreen on a big budget, displaying its production values on screen and parading them at press junkets that treated Baker as a glamour queen, the version with Lynley was made in just a little over a week and shot on black-and-white video with several television cameras in a process called 'Electronvision'.

Nearly a decade later in 1974 *The Sex Symbol* then crystallised the transition to television of the pseudo-factual female star narrative, epitomised by both versions of *Harlow*, in a fictionalised account that explicitly drew upon the Monroe bio-persona. Kelly's agent and mentor, this movie's Johnny Hyde, tells her, much as Harlow's agent declared, 'There's something pure about you. That can't be changed – or violated'. 'I was once', Kelly breathlessly replies. And while she insists 'never again', as she makes a three-week press tour to promote her first big role she collects 17 older men as lovers during her travels. Neither Kelly, the fictionalised Monroe, nor either of the fictionalised Harlows displays the genuine comedic talent for which the real Monroe and Harlow were admired. Rather, like those two Harlows, Kelly's star value is depicted solely in terms of her body, which she learns is her currency in Hollywood, so her demise is the price she pays for fleeting stardom.

The Monroe biopics produced for TV and cable after *The Sex Symbol* make female stardom legible in ways consistent with the masculinist biases and institutional anxieties of Hollywood because, as the template for a star narrative, the bio-persona also papers over Monroe's agency as a working actress. Rarely in the biopics is Monroe's inability to remember lines, her failure to show up, or her reliance on having her acting coach with

her on set interpreted as her means of asserting herself, of doing a scene her way – although truth to tell *Blonde* at least gestures towards this viewpoint by having Monroe ask several times to rewrite her own dialogue or claim to know her character better than the director. As a template for representing female stardom in narrative terms, the Monroe bio-persona takes a female star who had mastered her craft even while personifying glamour and sexuality, and fixes her permanently as the archetypal ‘sex symbol’ for the ages, whose skill and intelligence are called into question and who is a victim of her own disturbed psyche and emotional instability, not patriarchal Hollywood and its sexist exploitation of women. Moreover, while the Monroe biopics equate their subject with her sexualised and eventually highly drugged body, most also follow fundamental conventions of the theatrical female star narratives from the studio era more closely than do either *The Sex Symbol* or the two *Harlow* biopics. To illustrate I shall mostly confine myself to the three most recent and complex of the lot – *Norma Jean & Marilyn, Blonde*, and *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe*.

The Monroe star narrative

As already noted, the star narratives of the first cycle in the 1920s and ‘30s are typically built around the industrially charged figure of an ambitious girl seeking the economic, social, and sexual mobility that stardom affords. This fictionalised Hollywood star, furthermore, is usually a progeny of fandom: what stands out in the first cycle is the frequency with which at the start of her story a wannabe star is herself a diehard movie fan who travels to Hollywood. This first cycle of star narratives, then, seeks to overcome the otherwise impassable gulf separating the manufacturers of Hollywood product from its avid consumers by imagining the continuity between fans and their objects of adoration and emulation; the determined and ambitious fan girl Esther Blodgett (Janet Gaynor) in *A Star Is Born* is the inchoate and docile star Vicki Lester just waiting to be born. Likewise, *What Price Hollywood?* begins very memorably by deferring the expected facial close-up of star Constance Bennett in order to establish immediately the Hollywood aspirations of her character, Mary Evans, through Mary’s movie fandom. She models her appearance on the stars, imaginatively treating them as a kind of composite alter ego. Her fandom, like Esther’s, still registers industrial anxiety beginning in the teens and early twenties about ‘the extra girl’ or ‘studio girl’ or ‘movie-struck girl’, as such wannabes were called (Anselo-Sequeira 2015, Stamp 2000, Kenaga 2006, 2011). But far from simply catering to fan girls as a means of reinforcing their investment as consumers in Hollywood stardom, backstudio pictures from the 1920s and ‘30s feature strong, active, and desiring young women set in counterpoint to the manipulative or paternal-minded men running the industry and for whom stars are commodities.

The second cycle inverts this pattern, locating the excesses of a studio system about to collapse in an older or former star’s excessive behaviour. Imagined as such ‘monstrous’ figures of abjection, post-war backstudios about fictional female stars from *Sunset Boulevard* in 1950 to *The Legend of Lylah Clare* in 1968 challenge the male power structure organising Hollywood even though, at this same time, that system of production was imploding. When commenting on *Sunset Boulevard*, Robert Sklar (2012, p. 80) notes that ‘the need to control and regulate the behaviour of female stars’ is a ‘persistent’ trope of movies about the movies. *Sunset Boulevard* and the star narratives

following it generally position their fictional female stars outside studio control, and the lack of male regulation enables these mature women to become excessive in their oversized egos, intense passions, and unrealistic ambitions. This characterisation shifts blame to a star's psychology, in other words, in order 'to focus our attention on individuals rather than institutions', as Sklar (2012, p. 90) also comments. However, even as a star's excessive behaviour may be psychologised, it is made symptomatic of the many insecurities and delusions caused by stardom as a Hollywood institution. Viewed in this light, the second cycle's star narratives justify the female star's waning importance for the studio system as valuable labour, rationalising in narrative terms her economic marginalisation by the industry, a marginalisation that would become even more pronounced in successive decades.

Monroe's early life and relatively brief career resonate with the different institutional anxieties operating upon those two earlier theatrical cycles, and while her death gave her biography a determinate end, it continues to give the story a false closure since it opens up the life to seemingly endless speculations informed by 'gossip and scandal'. Beginning with movie fandom as Norma Jeane's inspiration for alleviating, through her hopes of stardom, the abuse and sense of abandonment experienced during her youth and, once she becomes a star, then focusing on Marilyn Monroe's insecurities, addictions, and over-determined relations with men, the biopics fuse the 'star is born' and 'star is worn' trajectories of those two earlier theatrical cycles, allowing the templates of each to be combined into a single storyline. 'Norma Jeane' is like the ambitious, movie-struck heroine of the first cycle, whereas 'Marilyn' resembles the excessive, tormented heroines of the second. Put a bit differently, the abandoned 'Norma Jeane' grows up in the shadow of Old Hollywood during the 1940s, 'Marilyn' in the '50s is the last of the Hollywood glamour girls, and the turmoil of *The Misfits* (1961) and the unfinished *Something's Got to Give* in the early '60s symptomatically registers the dismantling of that mode of production and the star system it had supported. Along with this star's nostalgic value, then (which admittedly is considerable), for the biopics 'Norma Jeane' looks to the promise of Hollywood as an escape from an unhappy life and 'Marilyn Monroe' ultimately confirms the institution's inability to live up to that promise.

Formally speaking, too, star narratives in both cycles tend to divide the fictional star, giving her an onscreen double or foil to imply the fractured psyches created by the Hollywood machine. At the very least, this doubling occurs when the star exchanges her birth name and biography (Esther Blodgett, say) for a newly manufactured identity and screen personality (Vicki Lester, say), but often the doubling shapes an entire narrative, matching the star with another character whose storyline reflects upon hers. She may be befriended by an older female counterpart, as in *Show Girl in Hollywood*, or compete for a part with an older, established rival, as in *Music Is Magic*. In some the doubling is obvious. In *Hollywood Hotel* the real-life Lane sisters play literal doubles, with Rosemary's character, Hollywood hopeful Virginia Stanton, substituting for Lola's character, screen star Mona Marshall, when the latter retaliates against her studio by refusing to attend the premiere of her new picture.

Similar doubling patterns occur in the second cycle, too, if only due to the splitting of stars' (usually) unhappy offscreen histories from their glamorous screen personae, as in *The Goddess*. But also recall the paralleled efforts of Norma Desmond and Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olson) to reinvent themselves for Hollywood by collaborating on a script with

Joe Gillis (William Holden) in *Sunset Boulevard*, the substitution of ingénue Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds) for a clueless Lina Lamont in *Singing' in the Rain*, and the moulding of Elsa Brinkman (Kim Novak) into 'Elsa Campbell' so she can star in a biography of her literal double, the deceased Lylah Clare (also Novak), in *The Legend of Lylah Clare*. However framed in the star's fictional biography, the doubling in either cycle tracks different career paths to or from stardom, deepening an understanding of the main character's rise or fall in Hollywood.

Much like those earlier backstudios that double their fictional stars with a secondary character who functions as a mirror, foil, or antithesis, the Monroe biopics emphasise the divided self resulting from the transformation of Norma Jeane Baker into Marilyn Monroe. *Norma Jean & Marilyn* exemplifies this split subjectivity by having two actresses in the leading role, with Ashley Judd playing a driven and manipulative Norma Jean and Mira Sorvino playing a version of Monroe based on her dumb-blond persona. 'You're going to be famous even if it kills me', Norma Jean says to Monroe after the name change. Together, the two figures do not make the star coherent and whole since even after stardom Norma Jean still resides in Marilyn as a scolding and divisive inner self. Similarly, in *Blonde* characters refer to Monroe (Poppy Montgomery) as Norma Jeane in private while treating Marilyn as a construct or persona invented by the studio, her management, and Monroe herself. 'Marilyn was mine, Marilyn was beautiful, and you had no right to spoil her', Monroe's agent, a surrogate for Johnny Hyde, exclaims after the nude calendar shots get discovered and publicised. 'I swear, Whitey', the star later declares to her make-up artist, 'I am a slave to Marilyn Monroe'.

Conversely, in *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe* one actress, Kelli Garner, plays Monroe, who is consistently called Marilyn after she changes her name, but this treatment instead emphasises her relationship with her mother, Gladys, played by top-billed Susan Sarandon. Forgoing the usual longing for the absent, unknown father as the motive for why Monroe craves to be loved, *The Secret Life* pairs mother and daughter through their shared paranoid schizophrenia, so Gladys functions as Monroe's doppelgänger in this account. 'I don't want to become like my mother', Monroe screams, but she begins to hear voices almost as soon as she becomes noticed in pictures and ends up as distraught and confused as her mother. Late in this mini-series the daughter even has a fantasy of Gladys appearing in a platinum-blond wig. If Marilyn in other biopics does not want to be treated like a joke but becomes one to the men in Hollywood, this one does not want to be like her mother, a destiny she likewise cannot avoid.

Finally, the 'uncertainty' that Churchwell notes as being crucial to the Monroe biography allows for a high degree of fictionalisation, so while the basic story remains the same in the biopics, details and even major events are fabricated, drawing on 'gossip and scandal' for inspiration. For instance, who introduced Monroe to drugs? In *Norma Jean & Marilyn* she gets them from Ted Lewis. In *Blonde* a lover, Cass (Patrick Dempsey), introduces her to pills. In *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe*, Johnny Hyde (Tony Nardi) gives her drugs to calm her down on the set of *All About Eve* (1950).

Blonde may be the most obviously fictionalised. Drawing on its source in Oates' 'novelization' of the biography, both parts of the mini-series begin with this disclaimer: 'Although the following film depicts some actual persons and events, it is a work of fiction'. In addition to moments of fantasy on Monroe's part and characters speaking directly to the camera, many major figures in her life either have made-up names, such

as I.E. Shin (Wallace Shawn) for Johnny Hyde or Mr. R for Darryl F. Zanuck, or are referred to as a type, such as The Baseball Player (Titus Welliver) or The Playwright (Griffin Dunne). A major story point here, moreover, which is absent in the other biopics, is Monroe's supposed sexual relation with 'Cass' or Charles Chaplin, Jr and 'Eddie G' or Edward G. Robinson, Jr (Jensen Ackles). Living with both men in a threesome arrangement, she gets pregnant by one of them but has an abortion when she realises neither man will grow up and handle his drug addiction.

The other biopics similarly trade upon the uncertainty inherent in Monroe's bio-persona. Whereas in *Norma Jean & Marilyn* and *Blonde* her foster mother Grace (respectively, Beth Grant and Kirstie Alley as the surrogate version called 'Elsie') sets up Monroe's first marriage to get the nubile 16 year old out of the house and away from the lascivious interest of Grace's husband, in *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe* Grace (Emily Watson) does so because she and her husband are moving away. In all instances, the reason for the marriage is the same, since otherwise the 16-year-old Norma Jeane would have to return to the orphanage. By contrast, in *Marilyn: The Untold Story* Norma Jeane (Catherine Hicks) and James Dougherty marry because they are in love and he has joined the Merchant Marines in wartime.

Other expressions of the uncertainty at the heart of the Monroe bio-persona involve the indeterminate knowledge of her mental state throughout her life. *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe* recounts how her growing schizophrenia begins earlier than in the other biopics; Monroe already hears voices and cannot concentrate when preparing for her audition for *All About Eve*, so she starts taking the drugs from Hyde, as mentioned previously, to escape her voices. Whereas in *Blonde* the miscarriage of her baby with Arthur Miller occurs because she falls down the basement stairs when hallucinating that animals are there, in *Secret Life* the foetus starves, according to Miller's taunts, because of Monroe's addiction to drugs and liquor. As well as explicitly splitting Monroe into two distinctive figures, with Norma Jean present to her in so many scenes of Marilyn's life, whether at home or the studio, *Norma Jean & Marilyn* plays at times like a dreamy record of the tormented Monroe's fantasies. The film opens with a dream in which an adult Norma Jean is nude in church and goes on to feature many fantasised scenes, such as when Norma Jean and Marilyn team up to seduce and murder Monroe's biological father. As filmed, such fantasies first appear to be playing out as reality and only at their end is their imaginary basis revealed. This biopic, drawn from Ted Jordon's book about his purported relation with Monroe, features his surrogate Eddie Jordon (Josh Charles), who supplies a moral yardstick that at the same time distinguishes between masculine and feminine modes of achieving success in Hollywood. A lover whom Norma Jean deserts for his uncle, Ted Lewis, although the couple remain somewhat friendly and intimate afterwards, Eddie wants to be a serious actor while, as Norma Jean avows, she will get in the movies 'if I have to fuck Bela Lugosi to do it'. Jordan does not appear in the other biopics.

For all their simultaneous inventions and adherence to the 'record', the TV biopics do not focus upon Monroe's professional success but, although they attribute different causes, instead dwell upon her personal failures, her inability to be a fulfilled and normal woman, and these are failures for which she pretty much gets the blame – because as a child she was traumatised by her mother's absence and possibly molested or raped; because she shamelessly flaunted her body; because she was promiscuous and had

abortions; because she was an alcoholic and drug addict; or because she was mentally disturbed, even clinically insane. In all of the biopics, Monroe's excesses are rendered upon her famous, desirable, vulnerable, and very damaged body.

By contrast, the biopics dramatise Monroe's work by stressing her erotic value, which is manufactured by various men and shown to be hindered first by her insecurity as an ingénue, then by her ambition to become a serious actor, and finally by her excessive tardiness and inability to remember lines. 'Don't make me a joke', Monroe pleads more than once to the men responsible for creating 'Marilyn' in *Blonde*. Also, at the end of that mini-series, as she approaches the stage of Madison Square Garden to sing 'Happy Birthday' to JFK, she mutters 'Here I am. The President's wound-up sex toy'. But by the same token, all this Monroe does throughout *Blonde* is giggle girlishly or sob uncontrollably, so she does come off as something of a joke and sex toy. In *Norma Jean & Marilyn* one persona is as hardnosed as a Joan Crawford character while the other is all soft and fuzzy-minded. *The Secret Life* at times shows Monroe focused intently on her work – given her messy private life, her career is finally all she has, as she states – but she is doomed by her DNA, inheriting her mother's and grandmother's mental illnesses. Somewhat similarly, even while making more of an effort to understand her self-destructive behaviour, the earlier *Monroe: The Untold Story* pretty much races through events in Monroe's life but then pauses towards the very end to dramatise all of the difficulties she caused on location for *The Misfits*.

Concluding thoughts

The Monroe biopics stand out from those about celebrities in other professions, such as sports or politics, because their sheer number over the past several decades gives them a coherence of their own as a series of backstudio pictures that follow the conventions of earlier star narratives built around fictional protagonists. In this way, as well, the Monroe biopics differ from the one-offs about female stars like Hayworth or Taylor. To be sure, the significance of the Monroe biopics has a lot to do with how the particularities of her star image, her life story, and the surrounding discourses have intersected over time; but, as important, the biopics use Monroe to signify 'Hollywood' in an equally particular way.

The Monroe bio-persona, recycled in one TV biopic after another that claims to disclose new revelations and insights but mainly reiterates a lot of the same old ones, has been kept current and seemingly 'authentic' through the ongoing gossip and speculation about her 'scandalous' sexual life. Hence the paradoxical grounding of uncertainty as the hallmark of her bio-persona. Monroe died when only in her thirties, moreover, so her visual image remains forever youthful as the eternal epitome of the glamorous movie star and the Hollywood system that produced her. Imagery of her face or body appears in poster reproductions, on home video covers, in photographs and books, on coffee mugs, t-shirts, shower curtains, and other forms of memorabilia and merchandise, not to mention in auctions of her own clothing and possessions. The gossip about her affairs, abortions, and (possible or impossible) assassination reinforces her immortality, too, because their truthfulness is always disputable and debatable, giving her life story its sense of ongoing currency. Yet Monroe's life and career also have a definitive time line in the 1940s and '50s with an equally fixed end point in the

early '60s. Due to this double temporality, the Monroe bio-persona perpetuates the Hollywood glamour – and the pathos – that she epitomises as simultaneously historical, through her indelible association with the studio system and the periodisation of her career, and timeless, through the omnipresence of her iconic imagery, which each biopic carefully reproduces, and the uncertainty of her inconclusive biography.

However, as the protagonist in a narrative about female stardom in the heyday of Hollywood, 'Marilyn Monroe' also supplies an institutional perspective for shaping the older theatrical star-narrative template into a cautionary tale for today about an ambitious woman who tries to overstep her restricted position in the industry as a sex object. The importance of the Monroe biopics as an industrial product churned out with a high degree of regularity has little to do with what these films tell us about her life or career since they recount a familiar story; rather, even though aimed at a predominantly female audience and shown on television, the biopics use Monroe to keep the mystique of Hollywood in continuous play. Here the wider perspective offered by the backstudio picture's history is significant. The mystique of Hollywood as the epitome of consuming, leisure, sexual freedom, class mobility, and modernity has been central to this genre from its beginnings to the present day. Furthermore, regardless of how it no longer refers only to a specific place in the Los Angeles region, 'Hollywood' is still most immediately recognisable onscreen through imagery of the studio compound – the backlot, sound stages, front office, and gated entry – just as the infrastructure of the studio system often provides the ground for backstudios to comment on the present-day conditions of Hollywood when a film is set in the past. With their attention to detail through settings, costume, hairstyles, automobiles, and iconic imagery of the star in signature moments from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), *The Seven Year Itch*, and *Some Like It Hot* (1959), the Monroe biopics similarly present an anachronistic view of Hollywood that likewise resonates as today's Hollywood.

Notes

1. For a comparison of Bessie's novel and teleplay, see Miller (1984).
2. 'ABC resets delayed "Sex Symbol"; not Marilyn takeoff, sez Stoddard', *Variety*, 7 August 1974, 31.
3. According to the Wikipedia entry on Mailer's *Marilyn Monroe: A Biography*, when interviewed by Mike Wallace on *60 Minutes* on 13 July 1973, 'Mailer admitted to Wallace that he wrote the book for money and that the Kennedy murder scenario made the book more salable' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marilyn:_A_Biography [Accessed 14 June 2016]). Furthermore, Sarah Churchwell reports about this interview that 'under pressure [Mailer] conceded it was, in his opinion, "ten to one" that Monroe died of "an accidental suicide." When then asked about his speculation about Kennedy, Mailer replied, "I needed money very badly"' (Churchwell 2004, p. 290).
4. "'Fiddler" doesn't reach roof as "Columbo" helps NBC win week', *Variety*, 25 September 1974, 43.
5. Since it originates in the silent era with shorts by Charles Chaplin and Mack Sennett appearing in the 1910s, and extends to the present day with films such as *Hail, Caesar!* (2016) and *Rules Don't Apply* (2016), the backstudio picture ought rightly to be considered a genre. But no name describing this genre has stuck. Because of its comparability with the backstage musical, I choose to use Nugent's 'backstudio' designation even though, when Dargis (2011) revived the term, it has apparently not caught on with scholars, other reviewers, or filmmakers.
6. On the race for the two biopics to get to theatres, see Hopper (1964) and Bart (1964, 1965).

7. It is worth noting that a later biopic produced for theatres, Paramount's *Mommie Dearest* (1981) with Faye Dunaway as Joan Crawford, then pretty much confirmed the complete fadeout of female star narratives as a theatrical product from the major studios. A box-office failure panned by reviewers, *Mommie Dearest* purportedly started Dunaway's decline in stature as an actress and popularity as a movie star although it has since acquired a major camp following.
8. According to A.T. McKenna's (2010) examination of studio records, Levine and his associates at Paramount kept revising the script with the double intent of, on one hand, avoiding litigation and Production Code Administration censorship, and, on the other, assuring that their product was received as big-budget, glossy, and respectable Hollywood fare – all the while publicising yet disavowing the film's source in the lurid Shulman biography.

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