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Aestheticization of Victimhood in Andrew Dominik's *Blonde*

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By

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Letter of Recommendation

It is my pleasure to recommend the thesis entitled "Aestheticization of Victimhood in Andrew Dominik's *Blonde*" submitted by Ms. Shreya Khawas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.This thesis represents Ms. Khawas's original research and demonstrates her strong analytical skills, academic commitment, and ability to engage with complex feminist and cinematic theories. The work has been carried out under my supervision, and I can confidently affirm its authenticity and academic integrity. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree at any institution. I strongly endorse this thesis for evaluation and commend Ms. Khawas's scholarly dedication throughout the research process.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Aestheticization of Victimhood in Andrew Dominik's *Blonde*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Shreya Khawas has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Aestheticization of Victimhood in Andrew Dominik's *Blonde*

Andrew Dominik's Blonde *(2022) claims to critique Hollywood's exploitation of Marilyn Monroe, yet its visual and narrative strategies aestheticize her victimhood, reducing her trauma to a patriarchal spectacle. This study interrogates how the film employs the male gaze—through fragmented reflections, voyeuristic violence, and infantilizing narratives—to commodify Monroe's suffering as cinematic entertainment. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's theory of visual objectification and Richard Dyer's analysis of stardom, the paper reveals how* Blonde *reinforces patriarchal norms by prioritizing Monroe's sexualized body over her agency or intellect. Key scenes, such as the JFK assault sequence and the recurring mirror imagery, exemplify the film's paradoxical glorification of her victimization, framing her pain as consumable art rather than interrogating systemic misogyny. Contrasted with feminist works like* Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, which center female subjectivity,* Blonde *underscores the ethical pitfalls of biopics that mythologize trauma while silencing historical nuance. Ultimately, the film's aestheticization of victimhood recycles the exploitation it purports to critique, demanding a reclamation of Monroe's legacy beyond patriarchal commodification.*

Keywords: Aestheticizing Victimhood, Male Gaze, Marilyn Monroe, Trauma Commodification, Patriarchal Cinema.

The 2022 film *Blonde*, directed by Andrew Dominik, presents itself as a haunting portrayal of Marilyn Monroe's life, seemingly offering insight into her emotional suffering and inner world. Yet, beneath its striking visuals and non-linear storytelling lies a paradox that challenges the viewer's expectations: while the film claims to expose the exploitation Monroe endured, it simultaneously aestheticizes that very trauma, turning her pain into spectacle. This study interrogates that contradiction

by analyzing how *Blonde* uses the stylistic conventions of the biopic genre and the cinematic male gaze to repackage Monroe's suffering as a consumable image. By combining feminist film theory and biopic studies, the research explores how the film, despite its intention to critique Hollywood's objectification of Monroe, ends up reinforcing the same structures of commodification and voyeurism that defined her stardom.

What prompted this study was the dissonance between how *Blonde* was anticipated and how it ultimately functions. Based on Joyce Carol Oates's fictionalized novel and supported by director Dominik's claim that he was "not interested in reality" but rather in "how childhood trauma shapes an adult's perception of the world," (Dominik)many viewers expected a psychologically rich exploration of Monroe's inner life. Instead, the film's visual metaphors and fragmented structure foreground Monroe's body and emotional breakdowns, sidelining her voice. Monroe herself was acutely aware of her image and the expectations placed on her. In one widely quoted statement, she remarked, "I can be smart when it's important. But most men don't like it," revealing her strategic performance of femininity in a patriarchal system. However, Blonde largely neglects this self-awareness, portraying her more as a passive victim than a woman navigating and manipulating her image for survival.

This paper argues that Blonde fails to subvert the structures of objectification it sets out to critique. Instead, it mirrors the same male gaze and narrative silencing that characterized Monroe's experience in the Hollywood system. Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is central here, particularly her assertion that women in cinema are positioned as "passive" objects of visual pleasure while men remain "active" agents of narrative control (Mulvey 62). This dynamic is evident from the film's opening moments: Monroe is introduced from behind in a white dress, her face

hidden, as the camera lingers on the curves of her body (Blonde 00:00:34–00:00:38). The visual framing reduces her to an erotic image before she is ever established as a subject.

Sigmund Freud's concept of scopophilia—the pleasure of looking—further explains the film's fixation on her sexualized body over her voice or intellect. Even during a traumatic childhood scene, Monroe's identity is denied: her mother tells her, "That man is your father… no one knows or no one must know," reinforcing her as fatherless and rootless (Blonde 00:01:52–00:02:50). This moment is followed by a disturbing bathtub sequence in which her mother tries to drown her—narrated not by Monroe herself, but by an omniscient voice explaining, "Because the very father of the child had wished it not to be born" (Blonde 00:11:30–00:12:06). Rather than giving her interiority, the film projects her trauma outward, aestheticizing it for viewer consumption.

The scene in Blonde where Cass Chaplin declares, "The human body is meant to be seen, admired, and desired, not hidden away," (Blonde 00:39:13 - 00:42:49) while looking at their naked reflection in the mirror, directly ties into the concept of the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey. Mulvey argues that in traditional cinema, women are positioned as passive objects of visual pleasure, existing primarily for the heterosexual male spectator rather than as active agents in the narrative. This moment in *Blonde* reinforces that idea, as Monroe's body becomes an object of visual consumption, both within the diegesis of the film and for the audience. The act of looking at oneself in the mirror, as Cass states, "I like to watch myself in the mirror… only in the mirror I see myself," echoes Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, which posits that individuals form a sense of self by recognizing their image in a reflection. In cinema, this idea extends to how male protagonists serve as reflections

for the audience, reinforcing a male-centered subjectivity that aligns with Mulvey's discussion of film spectatorship. The camera's lingering focus on Monroe's nude body throughout Blonde not only subjects her to the gaze of the male characters within the film but also to the audience's gaze, further objectifying her. This aligns with the ideas explored by Basia Sliwinska, who examines how women's bodies have historically been framed as visual spectacles in both art and media, reinforcing patriarchal ideologies that emphasize women's visibility over their agency.

These visual representations of Monroe's suffering are part of a larger pattern in which the film uses the camera to exploit her vulnerability. The male gaze positions Monroe as something to be consumed visually, aligning her identity with the external reflection in the mirror that Lacan describes. The mirror here becomes a symbol of her objectification—she is not only seen through the eyes of others but, in the process, also becomes complicit in her own objectification, as reflected in the words of Cass: "Look Norma Jeane, there she is" (Blonde 00:40:48). Monroe is reduced to her image, a mere visual object for the audience and the male characters, reinforcing the power imbalance that defines the male gaze in both cinema and society at large. Through these mechanisms, *Blonde* perpetuates the gendered dynamics of the male gaze, making Monroe's character not only a victim of her circumstances but also of the very system of representation that shapes how women are portrayed in film.

In analyzing how *Blonde* repackages Monroe's trauma as spectacle, Richard Dyer's concept of stardom as cultural construction is essential. In Heavenly Bodies, Dyer argues that stars like Monroe are commodified to reflect dominant fantasies—especially those rooted in male desire. Blonde reinforces this, presenting Monroe's body as an object of aestheticized suffering, aligning with what Dyer calls the transformation of female celebrities into consumable ideals. From a biopic

perspective, George Custen notes that biopics often prioritize public myth over personal truth, shaping figures like Monroe to fit familiar cultural narratives. Together, Dyer and Custen help reveal how *Blonde* fails to restore Monroe's agency, instead reinforcing the same ideological forces that defined her stardom.

Ultimately, Blonde replays the systems it critiques. It dresses up Monroe's suffering in cinematic beauty, immersing the viewer in a stylized world where her trauma is displayed, not interrogated. By reinforcing the male gaze and mythologizing victimhood, the film transforms Monroe into a spectacle once again—just as Hollywood once did. This study, then, reveals how Blonde does not liberate Monroe's legacy, but re-commodifies her pain for modern audiences, all under the guise of artistic tribute.

Since its release, *Blonde* has generated significant critical attention, especially around its depiction of Marilyn Monroe's trauma and its ethical approach to fictionalizing her life. Scholars like Yitong Shen have pointed out that the film reduces Monroe to a spectacle, emphasizing her body over her emotional depth. However, Shen's focus remains on thematic content—such as sex symbolism and victimhood—rather than the cinematic techniques or formal strategies that visually structure Monroe's objectification. As a result, the analysis misses how elements like camera angles, narration, and biopic conventions themselves contribute to the aestheticization of her suffering. This is precisely where your research intervenes: by foregrounding how form, not just content, sustains Monroe's objectification, your work reveals a deeper, structural complicity within the film.

Critics like Yitong Shen argue that *Blonde* fails Monroe by perpetuating the very objectification it claims to critique, "In *Blonde*, Dominik emphasizes Monroe's physicality while neglecting her emotional depth, transforming her suffering into

voyeuristic entertainment" (Shen 5). While *Blonde* emphasizes Monroe's victimhood, it often fails to capture her emotional complexity. He claims that the film reduces Monroe to a mere spectacle: "In Blonde, Dominik emphasizes Monroe's physicality while neglecting her emotional depth, transforming her suffering into voyeuristic entertainment" (Shen). This observation underscores how the film leans heavily on the objectification of Monroe, aligning with Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which posits that women in cinema are often depicted as passive objects to be looked at and consumed by male spectators.

Lauren Bryant's critique of *Blonde* in *Empoword Journalism* raises pressing ethical concerns regarding the fictionalization of real-life suffering, particularly when it involves an iconic and often misunderstood figure like Marilyn Monroe. Bryant argues that the film "fabricates and fetishizes Monroe's trauma under the guise of artistic exploration," (Bryant) noting that Andrew Dominik's adaptation uses shock value rather than empathy to drive its narrative. Rather than offering insight into Monroe's internal world, *Blonde* collapses her complex identity into a series of exaggerated and dramatized breakdowns, often unmoored from historical accuracy. Bryant critiques this as a form of exploitation, writing that "the film serves more as an endurance test for viewers than a tribute to Monroe's legacy," (Bryant) ultimately re-inflicting pain on a woman whose image has long been co-opted by others. Her assessment aligns with this thesis's claim that *Blonde* reduces Monroe to a consumable object of suffering, aestheticizing her trauma for visual pleasure rather than illuminating it with nuance.

Simran Barai offers a similarly critical view, arguing that *Blonde* is an example of "faux feminism"—a cultural product that masquerades as feminist while subtly reinforcing patriarchal ideologies. In her analysis, Barai states, "Rather than

reclaiming Monroe's image, *Blonde* indulges in the same misogynistic tropes that plagued her career, rebranding them as high art" (Barai). By dwelling obsessively on Monroe's body and pain, the film undermines the very empowerment it purports to deliver. Barai situates *Blonde* within a broader trend of media that commodifies women's suffering as a form of aesthetic or emotional spectacle, cautioning that this tactic risks "turning victimhood into a visual brand rather than interrogating the structures that produce it" (Barai). Her observations support this study's central argument: that despite its stylistic sophistication and supposed feminist intentions, *Blonde* reasserts the same mechanisms of the male gaze and narrative passivity that originally silenced Monroe.

Mireia Mullor Vicedo deepens this critique by focusing on the psychological and representational impact of *Blonde*'s portrayal of Monroe. She contends that the film's emphasis on Monroe's suffering "strips her of her complexity, painting her solely as a victim rather than a woman of ambition, intelligence, and calculated self-awareness" (Vicedo). By constantly highlighting her helplessness and trauma, the film denies her the very agency that Monroe so often fought to reclaim in her lifetime. Vicedo further argues that *Blonde* "re-victimizes Monroe for a new generation, turning her into a symbol of endless suffering, rather than honoring her legacy as a multifaceted performer and strategist of her own image" (Vicedo). This reading parallels Laura Mulvey's notion of narrative control being stripped from female characters, reinforcing how *Blonde* uses Monroe's trauma not to confront injustice but to perpetuate her symbolic objectification. In this way, Vicedo's critique reinforces the thesis's position that *Blonde* aestheticizes trauma at the expense of historical and feminist integrity.

Although *Blonde* has been widely discussed for its disturbing imagery and NC-17 rating, fewer critics have questioned how its visual style contributes to the very objectification it seeks to expose. Much of the discourse focuses on the film's emotional impact rather than its formal choices, overlooking how its cinematography, editing, and narrative structure replicate the male gaze. This study intervenes by shifting attention from viewer response to the film's underlying visual logic, revealing how *Blonde*—despite its feminist posture—re-inscribes patriarchal ideologies. Through a close analysis of key scenes, grounded in feminist film theory and psychoanalysis, this research exposes how Monroe's trauma is not just portrayed but commodified, making *Blonde* a striking example of how formal techniques can undermine a film's critical intentions.

In *Blonde*, the male gaze operates not simply as a visual style but as a cultural ideology reinforcing patriarchal dominance. A striking example is the scene where Monroe is assaulted by Joe DiMaggio after the publication of her nude photos. Rather than protecting her, Cass Chaplin and Eddy Robinson Jr. exploit the moment, with Cass declaring, "High-class lady," implying Monroe is now tainted and no longer "on the market" (Blonde 01:23:59–01:25:13). This interaction reduces Monroe to a commodified sexual object whose value is controlled and negotiated by men, silencing her autonomy and illustrating how the film replicates patriarchal structures it ostensibly critiques.

Dominik's cinematic choices further emphasize Monroe's disempowerment by positioning the camera from the perspective of those who consume her image, rather than Monroe herself. The use of disjointed voiceovers, dreamlike sequences, and extreme close-ups of Monroe's crying face or exposed body fragments her subjectivity, denying her emotional coherence. As Donna Przybylow explains,

femininity is mystified and sexual identity naturalized to sustain male dominance, a dynamic evident as Monroe is punished for her sexuality yet expected to perform it for approval. Her pain is aestheticized and flattened into spectacle, reinforcing patriarchal norms under the guise of feminist critique.

A recurring image in *Blonde* is Monroe laughing in the face of cruelty, only for the sound to turn hollow, forced, or exaggerated. In one poignant moment on set, after being ridiculed by a director, Monroe performs joy: “Wasn’t that funny? I thought it was funny. I mean, you laughed, didn’t you? I want you to laugh. That’s what I’m here for.”(*Blonde* 00:59:00–01:00:10). Her laughter becomes a survival tactic—an echo of the “dumb blonde” persona forced upon her. As Donna Przybylow argues, “the mystification of femininity masks the performative labor women must undertake to survive within hegemonic power structures” (259). Monroe’s laughter is not joy but a strategic deflection that sustains male pleasure while hollowing out her own identity.

The film’s failure is grounded in this contradiction: while it claims to expose Monroe’s exploitation, it simultaneously enacts it by dramatizing her suffering without granting her narrative agency. Her life unfolds as symbolic imagery—fetuses talking to her, the bathtub drowning scene, fragmented mirror reflections—where beauty masks brutality and encourages voyeuristic consumption rather than understanding. Yitong Shen observes, “Dominik emphasizes Monroe’s physicality while neglecting her emotional depth, transforming her suffering into voyeuristic entertainment” (Shen). This aligns with Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, which frames women as passive objects of visual pleasure dominated by male narrative control. Even Monroe’s own words in the film, “Do you want Marilyn or Norma Jeane? I can be whoever you want me to be,” (Blonde, script) are framed as despair, not empowerment, confirming her total subjugation to male fantasy.

Richard Dyer’s analysis of Monroe’s public persona highlights the erasure of her complexity in *Blonde*. Whereas Monroe’s sexual self-presentation—posing for calendars, wearing revealing gowns—was a form of engagement and control, the film reduces her to a broken icon, omitting her wit and charm. This simplification mirrors star commodification, rendering Monroe a marketable image devoid of self-definition. The film’s shifting visual styles—from black and white to color, distortion to hyperrealism—reflect psychological fragmentation but deny Monroe a stable viewpoint, confining her to the role of beautiful victim and perpetual spectacle.

In contrast, films like *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* demonstrate the female gaze’s potential to center mutual desire and subjectivity. Unlike *Blonde*, which depicts Monroe’s sexuality through coercion and spectacle, Sciamma’s film allows characters emotional depth and autonomy. The absence of such counter-perspectives in *Blonde* confirms its reification of the male gaze rather than its subversion.

One of the film’s most insidious mechanisms of objectification is its persistent infantilization of Monroe, portraying her as emotionally stunted and dependent on male figures. This extends beyond visual imagery into dialogue that strips Monroe of intellectual and emotional depth. A particularly troubling moment occurs during a fictionalized letter exchange where Monroe, speaking to her imagined father, reverts to childlike language and neediness: “Dear Daddy,/Are you really there? Are you watching over me?/ I was a good girl today. I wore the dress you liked./ I was so pretty they clapped when I smiled. I wish you’d been there./ Everyone says I look like Mama now, but I try not to be sad like her./Maybe if I’m good, you’ll come back./Love, your little girl”(*Blonde* 00:31:04–00:32:12).This fictional letter collapses Monroe’s adult identity into a child’s plea for validation, undercutting any agency she might possess. Rather than portraying her psychological resilience or complex

emotions, the film reduces her internal world to childlike longing. This trope, often used in cinema to conflate sexualization with innocence, reinforces what Laura Mulvey describes as "to-be-looked-at-ness" (62) through regression rather than growth. The choice to frame Monroe's desire for love as daddy-obsessed fantasy rather than adult emotional need aligns with patriarchal narrative strategies that both eroticize and belittle female vulnerability.

In *Blonde*, Monroe's identity is so splintered that she dissociates even from her own name, calling herself "Marilyn" only when others demand it. This dissociation is rendered visually through mirror imagery and metaphorically through her dialogue, particularly in a sequence where she confronts her reflection. The camera remains fixed as Monroe speaks aloud to herself in the third person, a moment of internal rupture masked as self-acknowledgment: "There she is. Marilyn. Not me, not Norma. Marilyn is for them. Look how they look at her—all those eyes, mouths open. I walk into a room and they're not even talking anymore. I don't even need to speak. And if I cry, that's just more Marilyn. I want to stop, but she keeps smiling. It's not acting—it's surviving."(*Blonde* 00:58:42–01:00:12)This monologue not only reveals Monroe's psychological fragmentation but also exposes how her trauma is repackaged as performance. As Linda Williams contends in *Hard Core*, "female subjectivity is often eclipsed by a frenzy of the visible, where performance becomes the site of both consumption and erasure" (189). In this scene, the line between performance and reality disintegrates, but the audience is not invited into her emotional space; instead, her pain becomes another act. Monroe's awareness of her own objectification— "I don't even need to speak"—demonstrates how fame silenced her inner world while rewarding her visual availability.

Throughout *Blonde*, Monroe's miscarriages and abortions are depicted with haunting visual metaphors that punish her body and desire for motherhood. In one disturbing dream sequence, her unborn fetus confronts her: "You won't kill me again, will you? You killed me once already. You don't get a second chance. This time, I'm staying" (*Blonde* 01:34:50–01:36:10). By allowing a fetus to shame Monroe in her own hallucination, the film externalizes guilt and makes her suffering grotesquely visible. Rather than exploring reproductive trauma with empathy, the film enacts what Barbara Creed calls the "monstrous-feminine" (Creed 3)—turning female biological processes into horror tropes. The fetus becomes a symbol of retribution, reinforcing the film's tendency to pathologize Monroe's femininity.

One of the most disturbing scenes in *Blonde* features Monroe's coerced sexual encounter with President John F. Kennedy. Rather than presenting the assault through Monroe's psychological or emotional perspective, the camera locks onto her body as she is dragged, stripped, and assaulted in near silence. Her agency is entirely removed while the dialogue reduces her to a sexual tool: "Get on. No, up here—That's right, you know how this works. Don't make me call the others. You've done this before. Smile, sweetheart. Jesus, you were better in the movies. Just keep your mouth open. Don't worry, they've seen everything before"(*Blonde* 02:10:30–02:12:45). This grotesque power play not only robs Monroe of voice but eroticizes her helplessness. The film does not cut away or mediate this violence through critique—it immerses the viewer in it. Richard Brody rightly observes that *Blonde* "gazes at Monroe the way the worst men in her life did" (The New Yorker). The camera becomes complicit in the assault, lingering on Monroe's naked form while muting her inner world. As bell hooks argues, the dominant cinematic gaze "constructs the Black and female body as a site of violence, pleasure, and control" (hooks 122)—and while Monroe is white, the

intersection of gender and power renders her similarly disposable. The absence of subjectivity here is not neutral—it reinforces a patriarchal fantasy of access and silence.

Linda Williams' concept of the "frenzy of the visible" is particularly apt in describing *Blonde*'s visual logic, where Monroe's body is hyper visible but her interiority erased. The recreation of the iconic subway grate scene (01:23:15–01:25:30), which lingers on Monroe's legs and breasts while male onlookers leer, exemplifies this aggressive viewing, transforming Monroe into fragmented eroticized parts for scopophilic pleasure (Williams 189). Similarly, scenes of full-frontal nudity during her fictional affair with JFK (02:10:30–02:12:45) and a striptease for Mr. Z (00:47:20–00:49:50) present sexual violence as spectacle rather than trauma, eroticizing Monroe's vulnerability and conflating her pain with pleasure. Rather than challenging patriarchal power, *Blonde* perpetuates it by aestheticizing suffering and silencing Monroe's voice.

This is starkly contrasted by Monroe's own autobiography *My Story*, which reveals her critical awareness of Hollywood's exploitative machinery. Monroe reflects, "In Hollywood, a girl's virtue is much less important than her hair-do… They'll pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss and fifty cents for your soul" (Monroe and Hecht 62). Monroe claims, "They paid me for my face, but I wanted them to pay me for my mind" (56) which unlike the film's victim narrative, her memoir offers a complex figure who critiques commodification and asserts intellectual desire.

One of the most dehumanizing scenes in *Blonde* occurs when Monroe is treated like a commodity by studio executives. The film doesn't show her negotiating roles or decisions; rather, it shows her as a mute object being appraised. A fictional Mr. Z welcomes her with cruel detachment: "Sit. You know why you're here, don't

you? You know what you have to do. You want to work in this town? Then you'll be a good girl."(*Blonde* 00:47:40–00:49:50)This sequence, portrayed without Monroe's voice or resistance, exemplifies what Richard Dyer describes in *Heavenly Bodies*: "The star is a structured image, made for consumption, positioned within a system of production and exchange" (5). Monroe is not depicted as a collaborator but as property—stripped of personhood and submitted for use. The film's passive framing reinforces this dynamic rather than challenging it.

The fictionalized casting couch scene with "Mr. Z" illustrates Monroe's coerced participation in a spectacle of humiliation. While earlier paragraphs critique aestheticized trauma in general, this paragraph focuses on how this moment enacts a ritual of submission, revealing how Monroe is forced to perform vulnerability for male pleasure. The film lingers in silence while Monroe is asked to undress, her voice barely audible, while the producer remains indifferent: "Can you take that off? You know what I mean. The dress. Come closer. Smile a little. You want the part, don't you? This industry's full of girls who look just like you. What makes you different? That's right, just turn around… slow. You're not here to talk, sweetheart"(*Blonde* 00:47:20–00:49:50).This sequence enacts what Laura Mulvey calls "the woman as spectacle"—the female body displayed for visual pleasure rather than narrative importance (62). Monroe's silence and discomfort are not shielded or explored; they are exploited. The scene doesn't condemn the predator—it merely aestheticizes the violence. As Linda Williams argues in *Hard Core*, "the frenzy of the visible makes the female body hyper visible while silencing its voice" (189). Instead of granting her interiority, the film collapses Monroe's identity into a visual function of male desire.

The film's fictionalized scenes frequently erase Monroe's agency. For example, during her marriage to James Dougherty, *Blonde* narrates, "She did it to

survive. It wasn't love; it was necessity," denying her internal conflict (00:15:00–00:20:00). Conversely, *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe* portrays Monroe explicitly stating, "I didn't marry Jimmy because I loved him. I married him because I needed to get out" (Episode 1, 00:10:00–00:15:00), acknowledging her strategic agency rather than treating her as passive.

Similarly, the calendar shoot scene in *Blonde* (00:55:00–00:57:20) pairs Monroe's nudity with discordant music to evoke shame, whereas *My Story* describes the event pragmatically: "It would be different if you were a starlet… Then somebody might recognize you" (68). The film omits Monroe's resistance during the Mr. Z audition, where she claims in her memoir, "I socked him in the eye, jumped up, kicked him, and banged my heel down on his toes—and ran out of the building" (61), portraying instead submission and victimhood.

Monroe's sexual violence and psychological breakdown are similarly aestheticized. The JFK scene shows Monroe's naked, silent body as an object of male desire, offering no insight into her experience (02:10:30–02:12:45). Childhood molestation is filmed from her abuser's perspective, implicating viewers in voyeurism and silencing her subjectivity (00:22:10–00:23:30). Richard Brody observes that *Blonde* "gazes at Monroe the way the worst men in her life did," (Brody)exploiting her pain as cinematic texture rather than addressing it.

Mirrors recur throughout the film, notably before Monroe's overdose (02:01:40–02:03:10), symbolizing her fractured identity and performance for male desire. In contrast, Monroe's memoir insists, "I was never just a mirror for men's desires. I was always myself. They tried to write my story, but I lived it on my own terms" (203). This juxtaposition highlights *Blonde*'s confinement of Monroe within spectacle, whereas her own words affirm her complexity and resistance.

Finally, *The Secret Life of Marilyn Monroe* offers a more nuanced portrayal of Monroe's relationships, mental health, and career, avoiding gratuitous stylization and allowing for agency and emotional depth. Taraborrelli's biography notes Monroe "didn't have much choice," but "agreed, though reluctantly," suggesting both constraint and will (Taraborrelli 78). This balanced depiction contrasts sharply with *Blonde*'s one-dimensional victimhood.

In *Blonde*, silence is repeatedly used not as space for contemplation but as a tool of suppression. Monroe is shown either sobbing or staring blankly while others speak for her—suggesting not introspection, but erasure. One emotionally charged example is her confrontation with Arthur Miller, where she pleads for recognition, only to be emotionally invalidated. She responds with forced composure as Miller narrates her pain for her: "You're not her. You're something else—you're damage I couldn't imagine. You cry and smile at the same time. What kind of person does that?"(*Blonde* 01:16:00–01:17:20)Rather than defending herself or voicing dissent, Monroe's silence is mistaken for emotional depth, when in fact it marks a loss of autonomy. The scene affirms bell hooks' claim that "being silenced is a condition of oppression" (hooks 120). Even in intimate relationships, Monroe is narrated over, explained, and interpreted—denied access to her own emotional narrative.

In the film's final moments, Monroe is seen alone in her bedroom, looking at herself one last time in the mirror before taking pills. Her final words are not spoken aloud but implied in voiceover, a dissociative monologue that collapses identity and spectacle: "Is she still there? The girl they wanted? Was I ever her at all? She's gone now, isn't she? And no one even knew me."(*Blonde* 02:01:40–02:03:10)The mirror reflects a vanishing self—a woman whose constructed identity has consumed her humanity. As Jacques Lacan theorized, the mirror stage creates a misrecognition of

the self-based on external image (Lacan 2). Here, Monroe's final gaze doesn't affirm recognition but the permanent loss of it. The audience is not left with catharsis, but with voyeuristic closure—her image intact, her subjectivity erased.

Throughout *Blonde*, Monroe's ability to articulate herself is undercut by how others label, rename, and rewrite her identity. Even in scenes where she speaks, her words are minimized, corrected, or ignored. In one fictionalized sequence with DiMaggio, Monroe tries to assert herself—but her attempt is overwritten by his domination of the conversation. The scene crescendos with verbal control:

> Monroe: "I want to choose. I'm not just the girl in the photos."/DiMaggio: "You think those photos didn't make you? / That dress, that smile—without them, who are you? /You're not Norma anymore. Norma's dead. /You're Marilyn. And Marilyn is mine. /You don't get to choose now. /You want to walk out of here?/Then walk out naked, without your name."(*Blonde* 01:26:00–01:28:10)

This monologue encapsulates the violence of narrative control. Monroe's attempt at self-definition is erased by linguistic possession. As George Custen explains in *Bio/Pics*, the biopic often "subordinates' historical fact to mythic structure," turning real people into symbols (36). Here, Monroe becomes the battleground for competing fantasies—none of which are her own. The tension between "Norma" and "Marilyn" symbolizes her inability to reconcile who she was with what others made of her. The film reinforces this erasure by never allowing Norma Jeane's voice to carry the narrative—it's always being spoken over or redefined by others.

Had *Blonde* been directed through a female gaze and remained authentic to Monroe's own voice, it would have radically altered the film's structure, tone, and purpose. Rather than reducing Monroe to a tragic sex symbol, the narrative would

have emphasized her agency, intellect, and resistance. As Monroe herself once stated, "I was never just a mirror for men's desires. I was always myself. They tried to write my story, but I lived it on my own terms" (Monroe and Hecht 203). This assertion reveals her acute awareness of the objectification she endured and her desire to reclaim her narrative. A female-gaze approach would center Monroe's subjectivity, presenting her sexuality not as spectacle but as strategic self-expression. Jill Soloway explains that the female gaze "privileges the subjective experience" and fosters "an empathetic connection" between the character and the viewer (Soloway 00:10:45; 00:15:32). Unlike Dominik's *Blonde*, which lingers on nudity and emotional breakdowns for aesthetic pleasure, a film rooted in the female gaze would resist voyeurism and foreground Monroe's inner life—her ambitions, fears, and resilience. As bell hooks argues, "The gaze has always been political" (hooks 115); reclaiming it is a form of resistance. Therefore, by silencing Monroe's voice and aestheticizing her trauma, *Blonde* reproduces the very mechanisms of the male gaze it purports to critique, whereas a female-gaze retelling would have sought to dismantle them through narrative empathy, visual restraint, and emotional authenticity.

Blonde constantly shifts between black-and-white and saturated color, a stylistic decision that reflects Monroe's fractured psyche rather than historical accuracy. These jarring visual changes mirror emotional disorientation, not just aesthetic mood. For instance, scenes with Norma Jeane's lovers or public appearances often shift to hyper-saturated pinks, reds, or golds, invoking the glamorized Monroe persona, while the monochrome palette dominates private or traumatic moments. In one scene after a sexual assault, she emerges from the studio into blinding white light, her skirt bloodied and face numb, but the scene is in black and white, stripping the moment of warmth or reality. It says, "Walking out, passing by his secretary…

hobbling in pain & makeup streaked & bleeding through the back of her dress & too ashamed to raise her eyes" (*Blonde* 35). The absence of color here does not sanitize the moment; rather, it presents her trauma as clinical and cold, highlighting her dissociation. As theorist Laura Marks notes, "Color in cinema is often used not to heighten realism but to indicate emotional or psychological registers" (Marks 41). Dominik's visual shifts signal Monroe's collapse into a world that refuses her stability, reinforcing the theme of identity splintering.

The film employs fire as a recurring visual metaphor that straddles both destruction and transformation. In a surreal childhood sequence, Norma Jeane imagines her home engulfed in flames as she crawls naked and terrified through the inferno, "Walls of flame, twenty feet high, leap across coastal highways… Birds burst into flame in midair… Norma Jeane, naked and sobbing, crawling through the flames to hide behind the spinet piano" (*Blonde* 6–13).This imagery reflects the conflation of maternal violence, loss, and early trauma. Fire consumes both mother and daughter, foreshadowing the psychological toll Monroe will bear in adulthood. The biblical allusions ("like the wrath of Jehova") signal moral judgment and a descent into chaos. Yet, fire also serves as rebirth—a cleansing motif later repeated when Monroe undergoes abortion procedures under glaring white light. The fire is never contained; it reappears in dream sequences and hallucinations, suggesting that Monroe's trauma is cyclical, not linear, and cannot be easily purged or resolved.

The Little Striped Tiger—Norma Jeane's childhood toy—functions as a totem of innocence and emotional continuity throughout the film. Though it first appears harmless, it gradually becomes a haunting symbol, reminding the viewer of unresolved trauma. After her mother's breakdown and abandonment, the tiger resurfaces decades later. She says, "And there it is, abandoned on the sidewalk: The

Little Striped Tiger" (*Blonde* 59).Even after becoming Marilyn Monroe, the presence of the tiger—burned, scarred, and glassy-eyed—remains a mute witness to Monroe's internal suffering. Its reappearance coincides with Monroe's pregnancy and miscarriage, symbolizing the perpetual return of childhood trauma during moments of potential healing. The tiger, once a source of comfort, becomes a mirror of Monroe herself: physically beautiful but emotionally disfigured by repeated neglect. In Freudian terms, the tiger is a fetish object—an attempt to freeze a moment of pre-traumatic safety—but one that increasingly fails to protect her.

The film's visual design often splits Monroe between her public image and inner reality, most literally through mirrors and billboards. In a particularly harrowing scene, Monroe sees her own massive billboard on Sunset Boulevard where she is described as "most spectacular of all; approaching on the towering billboard… her voluptuous body, her beautiful taunting face, her red-glistening lips parted so suggestively…" (*Blonde* 60). Dominik transforms Monroe's celebrity into a monstrous, looming presence—larger than life, yet fundamentally alien to her. The image does not inspire pride but dread. Similarly, the use of mirrors throughout the film reveals Monroe's dissociation. When she speaks to her reflection ("She's not me. Marilyn is for them"), the audience witnesses what Jacques Lacan would call the "misrecognition of the self," a moment when the image in the mirror becomes a tyrannical double. The billboard and mirror imagery imply that Monroe is haunted by her own construction, imprisoned by the persona of "Marilyn" which promises adoration but denies authenticity.

In *Blonde*, sound is not simply atmospheric—it functions as a tool of psychological destabilization. The film frequently uses distorted, ambient noise, whispered voices, and echo effects to convey Monroe's disassociation and lack of

control over her environment. In scenes of public performance or private anguish, Monroe’s voice is often drowned out by external sounds: camera shutters, crowd noise, or surreal hums. For instance, in a scene following her miscarriage, the voice of a phantom fetus invades the soundtrack, speaking in eerie, childlike tones, “Why did you do it? You said you wanted me. You lied. You killed me, didn’t you?”(*Blonde* 103).These imagined accusations blur the line between internal guilt and external judgment, a technique that recalls Michel Chion’s theory of “acousmatic sound,” where a disembodied voice gains power through its invisibility. Here, sound becomes the embodiment of shame and internalized misogyny. The film doesn’t allow Monroe to speak back to these voices; it silences her with her own imagined self-blame, reinforcing her emotional erasure.

One of *Blonde*’s most disorienting formal strategies is its use of non-linear time to evoke Monroe’s psychological fragmentation, not as a gesture of empathy, but as a mechanism of entrapment. The film weaponizes temporal collapse—merging childhood trauma with adult crises—to suggest that Monroe is incapable of escaping her past. Rather than allowing the character to develop or transform, *Blonde* locks her in a recursive loop of suffering. This is exemplified in an extended sequence where Monroe’s breakdown is rendered not as a moment of clarity or emotional confrontation, but as an overwhelming visual spiral, collapsing decades of trauma into seconds:

> SCREAMING MONTAGE:
>
> Flashbulbs bursting—sound distorted—camera shutters.
>
> Red carpet. Applause. Monroe smiling but eyes vacant.
>
> Cut to: her mother screaming in the hospital. Electroshock. Straps.
>
> The ocean, rushing in and out, in black and white.

Roses rotting in extreme close-up.

Little Norma Jeane crouched behind a door, fingers in ears.

Cut to: JFK's hotel room. She's vomiting in the sink.

Flashback: fetus heartbeat echoing, then silence.

Crossfade: dead tiger toy on the sidewalk.

Screaming again. Mother in flames.

Monroe at the premiere, dazed.

Voiceover: "She's not me. She never was."

Image burns out, leaving white screen. (*Blonde* 01:52:10–01:54:30)

This sequence operates not as narrative progression but as emotional collapse. The montage refuses chronological clarity, instead emphasizing the simultaneity of Monroe's trauma. As Laura Marks observes, "haptic visuality in cinema can dissolve linearity, producing sensations of memory and loss through touch and affect rather than plot" (Marks 74). Yet *Blonde* does not use this affective structure to invite intimacy with Monroe—it uses it to engulf her. She becomes unstuck in time, her identity consumed by unresolved trauma. This aligns with bell hooks' observation that "fragmentation without context can be a form of disempowerment" (hooks 118). In *Blonde*, the breakdown of time functions as narrative foreclosure, denying Monroe continuity, evolution, or healing.

The editing of *Blonde* rejects conventional biopic chronology in favor of a fragmented, associative sequence of memories, hallucinations, and dreams, which destabilizes narrative coherence. Scenes jump abruptly between decades, locations, and emotional states without warning, mirroring Monroe's increasing sense of unreality. In one sequence, Monroe is seen attending a film premiere, then suddenly experiencing her mother's institutionalization in a flickering series of cuts and blurs,

creating an overwhelming impression of collapsed time. "SCREAMING MONTAGE: Flashbulbs… red carpet… Mother restrained… the ocean… roses rotting… little Norma Jeane behind the door… JFK's hotel room… blood in the sink…" (*Blonde* 128)conveys that Monroe cannot organize her trauma into a linear story. Her past continuously intrudes upon her present. As bell hooks notes, "the absence of a coherent narrative can itself be a form of resistance—but also of disempowerment" (hooks 118). The audience is trapped in Monroe's fractured subjectivity, yet not invited to make sense of it. Instead of reclaiming her narrative, *Blonde* aestheticizes its fragmentation, denying her a coherent identity in both life and death.

Andrew Dominik's *Blonde* postures as a radical deconstruction of Marilyn Monroe's mythos, but upon close examination, it emerges not as a liberatory feminist intervention but as a visually seductive recapitulation of the very ideologies it claims to expose. Throughout the film, Monroe's suffering is repackaged as aesthetic texture—filtered through slow motion, high contrast cinematography, haunting sound design, and disjointed editing that mimic psychological fracture without offering emotional interiority. Rather than granting Monroe a voice, *Blonde* buries it beneath spectacle, rendering her an object of pathos, voyeurism, and symbolic meaning. By aestheticizing her breakdowns, distorting time to amplify helplessness, and eroticizing trauma through scenes like the JFK assault, the film participates in what Laura Mulvey calls the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of women in cinema—placing the female body at the center of visual pleasure while stripping it of agency or authorship.

What becomes clear is that *Blonde* confuses exposure with critique. It assumes that by showing pain, it is condemning exploitation. But the uncritical reproduction of abuse—without subjectivity, resistance, or emotional depth—serves not as a challenge to patriarchal systems, but as their perpetuation. Dominik's directorial

choices implicate the audience in Monroe’s objectification, inviting them to gaze at her without providing tools for critical distance or empathy. Monroe is either infantilized, as in the imagined letters to her father; sexualized and silenced, as in her interactions with powerful men; or flattened into symbolic imagery, as in the surreal sequences with fetuses, fire, or mirrors. The film’s fragmented editing and shifting visual styles mimic trauma but also aestheticize it, reducing Monroe’s historical and emotional truth to cinematic artifice.

Moreover, the film’s reliance on Monroe’s body—repeated nudity, stylized crying, and passive expressions—foregrounds the male gaze not only as a narrative device but as a cinematic worldview. Monroe is rarely shown acting on her own terms. Her relationships, career choices, and breakdowns are filtered through the perceptions of others—husbands, directors, lovers, and audiences. Even her inner voice is mediated through third-person narration or stylized monologues that emphasize confusion and longing rather than resolve. This treatment mirrors what Richard Dyer critiques in *Heavenly Bodies*: the transformation of female stars into consumable fantasies molded by collective desire rather than personal authenticity. *Blonde* continues this tradition, positioning Monroe less as a historical figure and more as an archetype of broken femininity.

Contrasting *Blonde* with feminist cinematic works like Céline Sciamma’s *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* or autobiographical texts like Monroe’s *My Story* reveals the missed potential of Dominik’s project. Where Sciamma grants her female characters full emotional agency and mutual desire, Dominik subjects Monroe to symbolic torment and narrative passivity. Where Monroe’s own writings exhibit intelligence, humor, and strategic awareness of her commodified image, *Blonde* portrays her as a voiceless icon drowning in trauma. Even when the film attempts to

visualize her internal world—through dream sequences or hallucinations—it chooses metaphor over meaning, spectacle over subjectivity.

This thesis has demonstrated that *Blonde* is less a reclamation of Marilyn Monroe's story than a reiteration of her silencing. By analyzing the film through the lenses of feminist film theory, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies, it becomes evident that Dominik's aesthetic choices do not liberate Monroe from her cinematic prison; they reinforce it. The film's formal brilliance—its striking imagery, nonlinear editing, and immersive sound—cannot compensate for its ethical failure to represent Monroe as a whole person. Instead, it re-inscribes her into a cycle of symbolic violence that Hollywood has historically used to control and consume women.

As we continue to engage with stories of women in media—especially those shaped by trauma, fame, and myth—we must ask who is telling the story, from what gaze, and to what end. Films like *Blonde* remind us that intention does not absolve impact. It is not enough to depict suffering; one must interrogate the structures that produce and sustain it. Monroe's legacy deserves more than another retelling that lingers on her pain while muting her power. It demands narrative approaches that foreground complexity, resist voyeurism, and, most importantly, restore her agency—not through idealization or victimization, but through truth, voice, and perspective. Only then can cinema move from replication to resistance, and from spectacle to subjectivity.

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