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POLS 421-002

April 29, 2022

Reframing Marilyn Monroe as a Feminist Icon

To many in the 1950s, and even still today, a photograph exposing the underwear of a woman is a far cry from female empowerment — it is representative of pandering to the male gaze. However, is it possible for somebody to pander to the male gaze while simultaneously confronting it? The iconic 1954 scene of Marilyn Monroe standing on the streets of New York City while a white dress billows over her exposing her crotch to a mass of photographers did exactly that. The white of her form-hugging dress symbolized her perceived feminine purity, while her actions demonstrated sensuality and sexual liberation.

Ironically, the very photo that has come to encapsulate Monroe's legacy as America's ever-lasting sex symbol is also the photo that demonstrates the dichotomy she represents for all women; that owning and taking pride in your sexuality does not negate your intelligence or political influence. Monroe's adherence to this concept throughout her career is why she is one of Hollywood's earliest and America's most important feminist icons.

Before dissecting this claim and analyzing Monroe's life and career, it is critical that the socio-political environment under which she lived is addressed. What was considered advancements for women in the Twentieth Century would now be seen as mere common courtesy. For example, something as simple as the Nineteenth Amendment was implemented only six years before Monroe was born. Further, sex-based discrimination in the workplace was not prohibited until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and sexual harassment in the workplace was not a legitimate legal concern until 1976 (Cohen, 2016) — respectively two and ten years after Monroe's death. The availability of both of these legal concepts would have

mitigated some of Monroe's deepest struggles had she only had the time to reap the benefits. Putting these events, and bearing others in mind, relative to each other in time and at what point in Monroe's existence they occurred, shows how today's standards of a "feminist" cannot be compared to those of one hundred years ago. Therefore, one cannot dub somebody alive from 1926 to 1962 a "feminist" if that title is solely based upon modern criteria.

To understand what happened throughout the course of Monroe's professional life, one must first have a basic understanding of her childhood and upbringing. She was born Norma Jeane Baker on June 1, 1926, in a suburb of Hollywood. From birth, Monroe's mother projected her life's frustrations onto her while being sporadically admitted to mental institutions. Not only did she never have a father figure in her life, she never knew who her father was and often pretended it was Abraham Lincoln because of how much she admired him. She was brought up in the foster care system, cycling through different homes where she faced sexual assault at least three times by the time she was just twelve years old. After each instance, she was removed from the home and blamed for her own abuse as she was chastised for being too provocative of a child. On the other hand, she was "encouraged to believe it was precisely her beauty and sexuality that would eventually win her better treatment" (Leaming, 13). Having been brought up on the idea that sexual abuse is the fault of the victim, beauty has a direct correlation to success, and that her future was destined for Hollywood studios, young Norma Jeane went on to carry these beliefs with her throughout her chaotic life. (Leaming)

Norma Jeane became "Marilyn Monroe" solely because of her feminist inclinations. As World War II took the American male labor force overseas, first-wave feminists at home entered the labor force for the first time working in factories to support the war effort. One day in 1945, a photojournalist assigned to cover the female-liberation trend enlisted Norma Jeane as a model

after spotting her working in a factory and being taken back by her beauty and comfortability in front of a camera. He requested she pose for a nude calendar shoot, the shots of which would eight years later be used without her permission on the cover of the first issue of *Playboy Magazine*. By 1952 she had changed her name and bleached her hair to be more palatable as she became more well-known, but the public started to recognize her as the model on the cover of *Playboy*. She was advised by her agents and others to deny she was in the photographs to prevent her career from ending before it ever really started. However, not only did Monroe refuse to deny it was her, but she refused to even apologize for it, saying in a press statement, “I'm not ashamed of it. I've done nothing wrong. I was told I should deny I'd posed...but I'd rather be honest about it”(Leaming, 41). Contrast this scenario with modern attitudes towards female celebrities posing nude and Monroe's progressively feminist position is undeniable. (Leaming)

As a young starlet auditioning for various roles, she noticed a trend in male executives only taking interest in her for “sex-pot” roles. Once she recognized just how patriarchal and misogynistic Hollywood was, she remembered what she had been told as a child; that her physical appeal was what would make her successful. Growing increasingly frustrated by her involuntary categorization and perception, she took advantage of her opponents' weaknesses and started forming romantic and sexual relationships with many top film executives. However, not all were consensual; “She recalled being held down in an upstairs bedroom as a group of men tried to rape her...she recalled the sexual assaults to which she had been subjected in the foster homes she had lived in as a child” (Leaming, 366-377). Bearing in mind that sexual assault and harassment were not viable legal options at this point in time, it is privileged to assert that this strategy taken by Monroe is anti-feminist. While “sleeping your way to the top” is now a euphemism for slut-shaming because of the progress made since the 1950s, this practice was the

brutal reality for female actresses like Monroe, whose participation was merely a recognition of how to best take advantage of and infiltrate a hyper-patriarchal industry given the circumstances.

The line between sexual empowerment and sexual objectification is all too often blurred — especially in Monroe's case. Yes, she was unapologetically sexual, but she tried her best to avoid objectification. As she was cast in exclusively sexual roles in order to drive box office sales with the tagline “bombshell blonde,” she began to intentionally self-destruct. She would make herself unappealing for specific roles like Cherie from “Bus Stop” where “Marilyn's insistence on clownish, pearly white makeup and ratty, decidedly unglamorous clothes made clear that she intended to function as an actress, not just a movie star” (Leaming, 210-211). Monroe was willing to ruin the very thing she loved if it would allow her to focus on roles requiring serious and dramatic acting abilities.

While the earlier half of the 1950s marks her meteoric rise to fame, it cost her her dignity and most genuine aspirations of being respected for her mind over her body. Monroe became so frustrated by this that she broke her contract with Twentieth Century Fox to form her own production company in 1955 to gain control of the roles she was cast in. The financial hit she took from this bold move drew criticisms from her old company, the media, and those closest to her as they did not understand that a deep-seated desire to be respected for her intelligence fueled Monroe far more than money ever would.

Monroe put everything she had into acting; her reputation, physical health, mental health, and personal relationships often suffered due to how much she invested into her career. This trait would lead to the end of her nine-month marriage with Joe DiMaggio, who not only never believed in Monroe's ability to be seen as more than a sexual prop, but would physically, psychologically, and mentally abuse Monroe when she embraced her sexuality. One instance of

DiMaggio's anger reaching a dangerous peak was when Monroe returned to the United States after performing for soldiers fighting in the Korean War. At this pivotal point in her career, her husband constantly undermined her ambitions because he "never thought that Marilyn had much acting talent; the husband's principal concern, like that of her agents and lawyers, was to maximize her income" (Leaming, 117).

Monroe's plethora of underlying mental health concerns surfaced following her dramatic and highly-publicized split from DiMaggio. She turned to alcohol, self-medication, sex, and engulfed herself in her work like never before. However, the misogyny that continued to saturate even her self-owned production company caused Monroe to become increasingly disillusioned with the prospect of becoming a "real" actress. A co-star once recalled the extent of Monroe's depression at this time: "'On the word 'Action!' her face would light up and the eyes got bright and she did the scene. With the word 'Cut!' she drooped in the most desperate depression'" (Leaming, 353).

Pulling her out of this state was her relationship with American Playwrite Arthur Miller starting in 1956. Much of Monroe's infatuation with Miller was because of their shared passions for intellectual development and socio-political activism. Miller was a subject of the federal government's McCarthyism era during the 1950s, being called on by Congress frequently to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Despite Miller and Monroe's public relationship and conversations over matters the committee may have found particularly interesting, Monroe was never asked to testify because congressmen assumed she was just a dumb blonde bombshell. (Rothman, 2016)

The time period between 1956 and her untimely death in 1962 is when Monroe is most recognizable as a feminist. She was constantly seeking out insights from top experts in fields

such as economics, religion, politics, and the arts. After taking various courses at UCLA and expressing her intent to attend Columbia University Law School, in 1960 she became a founding member of the Hollywood branch of the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, an organization made up of pacifists and anti-nuclear activists that worked closely with individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. (Banner, 2012). Later that same year, she was elected as an alternate delegate to Connecticut's Democratic Caucus. The FBI kept frequent tabs on Monroe because of her affiliation with Miller, and in 1962 wrote: "Subject's views are very positively and concisely leftist; however, if she is being actively used by the Communist Party, it is not general knowledge among those working with the movement in Los Angeles" (Kettler, 2020). Monroe attended rallies protesting civil rights violations during the McCarthyism era, was unabashed in advocating her pro-Castro views on Cuba, worked closely with and donated frequently to various child-focused charities, was an outspoken advocate of the Civil Rights Movement, and so much more. (Rothman, 2016)

Eventually, Monroe and Miller split in 1960, leading Monroe to spend the final two years of her life in on-again, off-again affairs with President John F. Kennedy and his brother Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. Showing her commitment to political activism is her denial of a White House invitation less than two months before her death; "Dear Attorney General and Mrs. Robert Kennedy: I would have been delighted to accept your invitation...Unfortunately, I am involved in a freedom ride protesting the loss of the minority rights belonging to the few remaining earthbound stars. After all, all we demanded was our right to twinkle" (Langley, 2012). The fact that she turned down a chance to be in the company of two men who she swore she would go on to marry in favor of participating in a political demonstration in the early days

of the Civil Rights Movement proves that she valued social activism over sexual or romantic endeavors.

Monroe's feminism does not fit nicely into any singular wave, as she was able to reap the advancements made by the first wave but did not have the time to experience the second. She was an obvious proponent of many aspects of first-wave feminism, such as equal rights and property ownership, as proven by her highly unconventional move to create her own production company and thus own the products of her own labor. However, she would have vehemently disagreed with first-wave feminists' approach to racial exclusion. It would be naive to say that because she died just two years into second-wave feminism's existence that she had no influence on its evolution; if not for her continued demonstrations of sexual liberation, social activism, inclusivity, scholarship, and humanity, second, third, fourth, and all other waves of feminist thought to come thereafter would not be possible.

Although some will deny Monroe's status as a feminist icon because of her sexualized nature and embracement of said nature, one must understand all of the outside factors that influenced every decision she made throughout her life and the social constraints she had no choice but to conform to. So, while Monroe may not be a poster girl for today's visualization of radical feminism, she is the reason why modern fourth-wave feminism evolved to emphasize unapologetic sexual expression; "America remains at heart a puritanical culture, threatened by the power of sex and quick to point an accusing finger at anyone who may have transgressed. In the middle of all that, the vivid image of Marilyn Monroe sends out a contrary message; its power is in proportion to the depth of our own fears" (Leaming, 431).

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