



Marilyn Monroe’s Star Canon: American Consumerism and the Semiotics of Stardom

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Abstract

In an age of mass consumerism, celebrity images dominate the potent force of mass production. As a prolific contemporary American writer, Joyce Carol Oates has created a large number of works with comprehensive and inclusive topics covering race, ethnicity, violence, historical events and politic. Her novel *Blonde* (2000), a fictional depiction of Marilyn Monroe’s life, demonstrates Monroe’s and her. Joyce Carol Oates unflinchingly unfolds the 20th century American capitalizing and consumerism penetrating world in *Blonde*. Monroe as a monumental cultural figure embodies the American mass consumer culture symbols. Monroe was a powerful but simplifies public image; an indicator of a particular historical and social context; and an embodiment of significant cultural debates. This article aims to decipher Monroe’s screen persona and off-screen life in resistance to conventional value, extensively reveals how Monroe embodied the contradictions inherit in the American mass consumer culture and history.

Key words: Social Identity; Consuming Celebrity Images; Semiotics of Stardom

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1. THEORIZING CONSUMERISM AND POP CULTURE IN THE 50’S AMERICAN CULTURE

American Sociologist Robert G. Dunn, *In Identifying Consumption: Subject and Objects in Consumer Society*, described consumerism as “an ideology seductively binds people to the system” of mass production. (Nicki, p.1) He argues that this ideology turns consumption “from a means to an end,” so that acquiring goods becomes the basis of our identity and sense of self. As such, “at its extreme, consumerism reduces consumption to a therapeutic program of compensation for life’s ills, even a road to personal salvation. Consumerism shapes our wants, desires, and longings in such a way that we do not want simply to acquire simply goods because they are useful, but more so, because of what they say about us. With the boom in the 50’s, Americans were given brand new ways to entertain themselves and new were given more convenience in their lives. The browsing, selection and purchase of goods and commodities have become one of the defining activities of modern urban life. While in this consumer culture, mass media also have become a crucial ritual for shaping and transforming our identities. Artists have always been fascinated and intrigued by the consumer culture and the way it shapes our society. Yet, this relationship between art and the distribution and consumption of commodities has always been a complicated one.

It was the mid-1950s when the art world got a new movement which, oddly, both celebrated and criticized consumption choices and mass production. The movement in question, better known as pop art, saw familiar imagery and products around us as an inspiration — famous brands, movie star, icon, paparazzi photos of celebrities, the visual language of advertising. As the post-war era was marked by the inevitable period of prosperity and the rise of new liberal capitalism, a particular consumer lifestyle started to

emerge in the United States. In the society that promoted the lifestyle of leisure and consumption, material objects and consumer goods as well as mass media products crept into the art world as never before. Immersing themselves completely into the mundane living experience, mass media created something that is beyond our expectation and imagination: Movies and artworks talking about our everyday lives and experiences. It was all about capitalism, the unlimited markets, sex, spending money, having it all, and always wanting more.

This presence of well-known corporate symbols and mass-produced goods in modern art reflected the commercialization of popular culture. Common objects of our wealthy society were taken out of context and scrutinized for their symbolic value. By celebrating commonplace objects and people of everyday life, mass media and pop art aimed to elevate popular culture to the level of fine art. Incorporating various aspects of the mass culture such as advertisements, comic books and movie stars labeling in different social identities, these media or movie producers and artists created kitschy combinations of commercialized and recognizable elements. Pop art represented the modern consumer landscape by portraying visions of the good life.

2. JOYCE CAROL OATES AND *BLONDE*

Joyce Carol Oates is the most productive and creative American novelist, she is definitely the influential writer to appear in 20th century American Literature since Faulkner. Oates' prolific extends in comprehensive panoramic view of American daily life, having brought out more than fifty novels and novellas as well as the collections of "Balzac-prize-honored" short stories. One of Joyce Carol Oates' great accomplishments as a contemporary writer representing the American landscape and unfolding the closest side of American life for last few decades is her rich documentation of social and cultural shifts in America. Oates distinguishes from many of her less productive contemporaries in a more important sense, however. Unlike Phillip Roth and Thomas Pynchon or Donald Barthelme, (Johnson, p.5) she has not violated the conventional structures of language. Although her fiction sometimes fail to capture the peculiar social texture of a given time and place, it brilliantly illumines the emotional lives of her characters, be they migrant workers or wealthy farmers, suburban executives or lower class urbanities, and evokes an overwhelming sense of those psychological pressures in American life which produce our obsessions and frustrations, our dreams of love and power, our struggle to understand the world and ourselves.

Blonde is Joyce Carol Oates' longest novel. The novel has been exposed to us too well in its various published versions: Norma Jean Baker is abandoned by her mad mother and grows up in orphanage and foster home, escapes to a teenage marriage, poses nude as a

calendar pin-up, and plucked up by an exploiting studio. She explained to Greg Johnson (Carrard, p.7) that she intended to write a story to "give life to a lost, lone girl" in a photograph, a seventeen-year-old named Norma Jean Baker. (Kouvoros, p.6) At the outset, she planned to cover her character's childhood and adolescence and then to conclude the book when Norma Jean adopts the studio name Marilyn Monroe. "The mode of storytelling would have been fairy-tale like," she explained, and as poetic as I could make appropriate." (Kouvoros, p.6) Across the pond in America, poor Marilyn Monroe didn't fare much better – neither in fact and certainly nor in fiction. Oates is absolutely unflinching in her depiction of Norma Jeane, who was transformed from winsome young woman into blonde bombshell, the fairest in the land. Gazing at the photograph of seventeen-year-old innocent, Joyce Carol Oates start to write and what she eventually produced is that "quasi autobiography of Monroe". It can easily be argued that Marilyn Monroe is one of the truly iconic figures of the twentieth century. Even twenty-first-century college students who have trouble identifying recent past presidents have little trouble rattling off both the Blonde Bombshell's physical characteristics and her husbands' names. Monroe's rather sad, vulnerable and alternately girlish and sex-pot large screen presence remains vivid not only in playboy coverage but in the culture at large.

There have been scores of articles, biographies and tell-all tales published since the actress's death since 1962, and most of us are fairly familiar with the rudiments of Norma Jean Baker a.k.a. Marilyn Monroe's life: the mad mother, the orphanage, the foster homes, the calendars, the early films, the husbands, the abuse of the drugs, and the varied scenarios surrounding her maybe-yes, maybe-no suicidal death, as Gloria Steinem pointed out in her 1997 book *Marilyn*, the most desired woman in the world died alone, on a Saturday night without a date. Yet the biography and even the raw material of Norma Jean Baker — the interviews, the photographs, the gowns on display at Sotheby's — have delivered an iconography and a legend rather than an interior subject, an actual person inside the dazzling cultural artifact, person and image. Oates dramatizes the Norma Jean/ Marilyn Monroe story as layerings of illusion and desire — Norma Jean's, her mother's, her studio's, the photographer's, the movie's, the culture's. Joyce Carol Oates brilliantly folds the fantasies and images into the texture of a fully realized character. The stunning part of the novel is that it combines fact and fantasy in the fabrication of "Marilyn Monroe". The title *Blonde* summarizes the paradox of contempt and desire, racial aristocracy and trashy gaudiness of Marilyn image. The Norma Jean character of this novel knows exactly what the epithet "Blonde" means. The Girl Upstairs, Showgirl, Chick, Fish. As a lover tells her, "Fish' only just means female. The sticky scales, the classic stink.... It's nothing personal." "Blonde" is generic for "female," Norma Jean learns, and the novel vividly imagines and

embodies midcentury white female experience in multiple registers of psychology, politics, biology and visual culture. But what we don't know and can only imagine is what Joyce Carol Oates creates in her mesmerizing novel: the inner struggle of Norma Jean or character called Marilyn Monroe. She is the perfect subject for Oates. In Marilyn she has found a character, and the practical approaches to Marilyn's life has been brilliantly dispersed and penetrated in the detailed analysis.

3. DUALISM ON BODY VARIATION AND ALTERNATIVE IDENTITY OF MONROE

This dissertation looks particularly at how her construction of Marilyn Monroe's images as a 'consuming artifact' in Hollywood. In this term, Monroe's voluptuous body on the calendar and movie screen becomes the pursuing and following target of the audience at that time. Her body changes seemed not to be the representation of the private identity of Monroe but the tendency of becoming the public identity in social recognizing ranges as a consuming artifact. Indeed, in its 700-plus pages, *Blonde* engages us with a female body that became perhaps the female body of the American twentieth century. The first major section of the book, "The Child 1932-1938," ends with the chapter "The Curse," suggesting not just body changes but the attractive young woman's physical growth to a mature phase. The chapter begins with a faceless taunt: "Look at the ass on that one, the little blonde!" Oates attempted to manifest that Norma's body changes becomes obvious for people to comments like a products instead of the human being's natural beauty of the body to be purely appreciated. When Norma grew up to an attractive adolescent, her identity turned from an abandoned orphan into a normal girl. Yet, there are still plenty of words and sentences put to describe Norma Jean's body changes beyond the consciousness of her own on body awareness.

Truly, I had no pride! And no shame! Grateful for any kind word or any guy's stare. My young body is so strange to me like a bulb in the earth swelling to burst. For certainly she was well aware of her chubby growing breasts and the widening of her thighs, hips, "ass" – as that part of the anatomy, when female was called with approval and a kind of jocular affection. What a sweet ass, look at that sweet ass. Oh! Baby, baby! Who is she? Jailbait. Frightened of such change in her body. (Oates, p.89)

Later, after the studio has invented the persona Marilyn Monroe, Norma Jean fights to be taken seriously, to be listened to rather than looked at. But her famous body has taken on cultural lives of its own; at one point, her second husband realizes "her body seemed to him not a woman's beautiful voluptuous body but a responsibility they jointly shared, like a giant baby." According to Nietzsche's perspectivism,

Norma's body's distinguished changes turn to its physical self-worth. However Norma herself fails to

recognize her private identity in her this physical changes, still live in her abandoned — adopted identity.

As such, Norma's body changes lead her to an alternative life like Norma's four pursuers and her first teenage marriage. Since her body become seductive to her foster father Warren, and threatens her foster parent's marriage and love, so her foster mother Aunt Elsie arranged 15 years old Norma and the marriage with her young teenage husband Bucky (Oates, pp.113-137)

Body extends to her two identities Norma Jean abandoned orphan and Marilyn Monroe – a famous film star, and there is the description of body of Norma Jean and the description of body of Marilyn in the novel. Monroe's body is delineated as a public identity or public image (actor). Norma's public image-her voluptuous body, blonde and striking red-lipstick invented to Marilyn Monroe by photographer Otto Ose and her Hollywood agent I. E. Shinn.

"Miss Golden Dream 1949", Marilyn's nude photos on calendar, magazines like playboy entertained current desirous consumers and made much fortune to media agents, but Marilyn only paid by \$ 50. A lush-bodied girl in the prime of her physical beauty....The ivory-crepe sundresses is floating and flimsy as magic. The dress is magic, without the dress the girl would be female meat, raw and exposed. (Oates, p.472)

Norma lost her private identity in her public identity "Marilyn Monroe", using drugs to comfort her anxiety and fear of exposing private identity to the public and construct her secret public identity in the way of movies acting and in adoration of the publics. Norma's life was overshadowed by her onscreen persona—Marilyn Monroe. The body changes of Norma Jean bring about the transformation from the private identity of Norma Jean to public identity of Marilyn Monroe.

Plato's idealism on dualism of body and soul involves that the superiority of soul overwhelms the physical body. To Marilyn Monroe, a public—hailed blonde, lost the way in the intersection of her physical body and her mind, only her voluptuous body wrapped in public image covers her broken soul. Monroe seemed to represent the 20th century American even world's new appreciative trends for female images, figure and body. While, under the objectification culture raving, Monroe is objectified as an entertainment object. A point of reference for advertisers and artist worldwide, her image is so well known that it can work by synecdoche, just show a certain pair of lips, a skirt blown up in the wind, and Marilyn Monroe comes to mind an actual person inside the dazzling cultural artifact. Through masterful shifts in narrative approaches, delivers not only her character's interior self but also the culture's – the we or they – point of view. For example, we see an American truth via Hollywood as the child sees the director of the orphanage close-up: "with movie eyes Norma Jean saw these startling imperfections. So, along with the character Monroe's perceptions, Oates provides us with interpretation that moves us to consider how much we live

in movie-made America. Both the reference of the term icon and the representation of it simultaneously unfold the female's shape choice tendency and male's appreciation of female beauty. The icon becomes the measuring criteria for relatively young people to distinguish whether the one is beautiful or under the normal level.

4. CONSUMERISM AND CELEBRITY IDENTITY VALUE IN *BLONDE*

Along with the emergence of pop culture, the 1950s introduced many new stars, professional musicians, TV shows and magazines/books to entertain themselves with. Among these movie stars was Marilyn Monroe. She starred in various movies. Her role as a beautiful woman popularized sexuality during the 50s. With WWII finally over American's lifestyle changed from a life of worry into a life of leisure, with this came the large expenditures on movies and TV to entertain. Moreover, in America, people can be turned into consumer items to as well. The best example that comes into mind is Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde*, Norma Jean went from a beautiful brunette girl to being the most famous blonde in the world: Marilyn Monroe. She was hounded by paparazzi and constantly scrutinized by the media. Andy Warhol's print (Warhol, p.99), "Marilyn Monroe Diptych" (1962) is a really interesting response to the phenomenon of a person being treated as a commodity. The print features Marilyn Monroe's headshot repeated dozens of times. It appears in different colors and with different shading. She is not a person anymore; she no longer belongs to herself since she chose to calendar cover pictures taken and movie filming. She is for sale, and everyone feels like they should get a piece of Marilyn. Joyce Carol Oates unflinchingly delineates as following in the novel *Blonde*

Norma Jean fumbled to adjust her clothing..., like a guilty child she contemplated her flushed face in the mirror..., dreading to see Norma Jean's plain yearning face inside the beautiful cosmetic face of "Marilyn Monroe." Inside the carefully made-up eyes of "Marilyn Monroe" was the role she had to play, at least for the evening, at least in public, she'd prepared elaborately for it." (Oates, p.248)

Ironically, the art that Andy Warhol created to comment on a society that turn people into consumer goods has been plastered onto consumer goods. "Marilyn Monroe Diptych" can be found on shower curtain, beach towel, paper napkins, and T-shirts. Unfortunately, it has not ceased with Marilyn Monroe. If anything, this treatment of the people in the public eyes has only gotten worse. In *Blonde*, it is the business interview of Monroe and her second husband to Japan, the overwhelming greetings and reactions of the Japanese audience and fans of Monroe as well as Monroe's sole journey to US soldier camp in Korea, to the soldiers, Monroe is seen and invented as a sexpot for them to entertain, there is a vivid description of this part in *Blonde*:

It was the Ex-Athlete who'd been officially invited to Japan to launch the 1954 Japanese baseball season, but it was the Blonde Actress whom reporters, photographers, and TV people were wild to see, it was the Blonde Actress whom large crowds were wild to glimpse. ... In eerie near-unison like robots they chanted "Mon-chan! Mon-chan! Mon-chan! (Oates, p.465)

So the whole culture of pop art and media continues to feed people's thirst for information about celebrities. The struggles of celebrities' lives have been turned into a spectator sport. Who is battling addiction? Guess who has the best/worst body? Everyone watches them, but no one cares about them. They are not real people like us, but they are entertainment. How many people will we do this to? How many Marilyns will we end up with? For my part, we have been enormously de-sensitized toward much of these.

"With movie eyes Norma Jean saw the startling imperfections. For, in movie logic, aesthetics had the authority of ethics: to be less than beautiful is sad, but to be willfully less than beautiful is immoral." (Oates, p.91) The two words that stuck out the most in this passage were "movie eyes". Norma looks over this woman in such a way, highlighting her imperfection, suggests how these separate pair of eyes are more critical and judgmental ones based on superficial ideals. Her discernment further imply that Norma uses these eyes on herself as well as on other around her because she seems very familiar with them. She holds this fictitious, movie magic world to such a standard that it dictates the way people sees, both metaphorically and physically. They are the eyes of Hollywood and the superficial people that surround it. Standards that have become more than just opinions for little Norma Jean but actual logic, the narrator uses the words "movie logic" that are a step up from "movie eyes". Norma can see through them but also admire the fact that this woman does not seem to care about vanity. This, obviously, violates the ethics of "beauty" for "to be willfully less than beautiful is immoral" but Norma still admires this woman for her indifference. I cannot say the same for Norma herself, I predict these separate pair of eyes blending into one and becoming the source for all insecurities that grow heavy and heavier in Norma's mind. Negative thoughts and viewpoints follow directly behind these Hollywood eyes and an American Icon.

Many people know Marilyn as "an image and an icon" but not as an actress. Monroe was an epitome of a certain kind of feminine ideal. Who authors the celebrity? Where does identity receive its authorization? While Monroe in *Blonde*, maintains her positive social identity and indicates her positive inner self and self-esteem in the public. I shall argue that the celebrity image is a cultural lode of multiple meanings, mined for its symbolic resonances, and, simultaneously, a floating signifier, invested with libidinal energies, social longings, and political aspirations. (Coombe, p.2) Focusing on cultural practices that engage, reproduce, irony, and transform the meaning and value of

celebrity personas to assert alternative gender identities, in that case, celebrity is authored in a multiplicity of sites of discursive practices, and that in the process unauthorized identities are produced, both for the celebrity and for her diverse authors. Through its prohibitions the law produces the means by which unauthorized identities are engendered and endangered. Then, what Oates strive to transit in *Blonde* is that although Marilyn Monroe is an authorized celebrity in her studio or Hollywood, but her alternative identity —social identity generates the dramatic impacts on her private psychological struggles. In so doing, I will argue that mass media's series of commercial-purpose activities practiced by blonde bombshell Monroe highlight her pseudonym social identity as in public, but in fact, Monroe lost herself being a normal American movie star.

Popular cultural practices that engage celebrity images in innovative fashions will then be explored to demonstrate the vibrant roles played by these icons in the self-authoring of subaltern social groups. So the images of Marilyn Monroe appeared in the fan magazine are practices that rewrite media imagery in subversive but materialistic and consumer expressive fashions. Investing celebrity personas with new and often oppositional meanings, these subordinates groups assert unauthorized social identity. Liberal notions of freedom of expression fail to grasp the nature of modern cultural politics.

In an age of mass production and mass communications technologies, the celebrity persona is a potent force with which to market goods. Marilyn Monroe as a celebrity persona was a potent force for those studio directors and magazine designers to fully employ her potential leading market value to open the great economic gate. These potential commercial values are generally offered as reason in itself to protect the star's control over her identity through the allocation of exclusive property rights; because such interests have market value, they deserve protection. Moreover, the star image is authorized by its consumers as well as its producers.

The audiences make the celebrity images the unique phenomena that it is. Oates vividly demonstrates many parts in the novel *Blonde* about Monroe's celebrity image being the fashion phenomena. Selecting from the complexities of the images and texts they encounter, they produce new values for the celebrity and find in star sources of significance that speak to their own experiences. These new meanings are freely mined by media producers of the star's image to further enhance its market value. To quote Marilyn Monroe's last recorded words in public, "I want to say that the people — if I am a star — the people made me a star, no studio, no person, but the people did" (Coombe, p.6)

The star image is authored by multitudes of personas engaged in diverse activities. Moreover, stars and their fames are never manufactured from whole cloth — a successful image is frequently a form of cultural

phenomena that improvises with a social history of symbolic forms. Clearly the characterizations involved creative activity, but Marilyn Monroe's creation and success as icon in popular culture derives from her own creative reworkings of her own social identity. Take the image of Marilyn Monroe, an icon whose meaning and value lies partially in its evocation and ironic recognition of several twenty- century sex goddesses that speaks with multiple tongues to diverse audiences. In an era characterized by nostalgia for the golden age of the silver screen and that generation's fascination with the television culture of its youth, successful images are often those which mass media and commercial- purpose consumers.

Some celebrity images seem so deeply embedded in the North American social imaginary that they might be said to constitute parts of a collective cultural heritage. Such images should not be subject to control by parochial interests of celebrity's social identity. Oates explores the cultural and psychological significance of Monroe in *Blonde*, with American media images manifests itself in pilgrimages that have turned Marilyn into twentieth-century icon. The social value and cultural meaning of the celebrity images has its genesis in the same historical conditions that created the possibility of its economic value. In his illuminating essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin suggested that technologies of mechanical reproduction and systems of mass production changed modes of human perception and evaluation, fundamentally altering our aesthetic responses. These changes, for my part, are integrally related to the cultural values of the celebrity images in contemporary social life. What Oates delineated in the novel *Blonde* helps us to understand the cultural significance of the celebrity image. Oates alludes to the possibility of Monroe's social identity recognition and the psychological approaches to estimates the value that her celebrity images produce as well as the various shifts that Monroe experienced. With the alternative understanding of celebrity images and Monroe's social identity under the circumstance of mass consumerism evokes her re-establishment of her identity.

CONCLUSION

What Monroe in *Blonde* reaches us to the wide ranges of fields is the consumer culture in pop art penetrating whole American even the world. Marilyn Monroe dominated the age of movie star to become, without question, one of the most famous women in the 20th century. The social identity of Monroe represents the commercial trends to lead the market and artists to create and produce artifacts to attract followers. She was more than just a movie star or glorious bombshell. A global sensation in her lifetime, Marilyn's popularity has extended beyond star status to icon. Today, the name "Marilyn Monroe" is closely associated with beauty and sensuality and effervescence.

She remains a divine inspiration to all who strive to defeat personal obstacles for the goal of acquiring greatness. For her image become, her empire. She is the world's most photographed stars of the 20th century.

Approaching the *Blonde* as textual constructs, I will address several issues that concern the character, the consciousness of private identity shifts of Norma Jean to the social identity of Marilyn Monroe bring out the effects of mass consumer culture on American society. In *Transparent Minds*, Cohn (Carrard, p.34) distinguishes the modes for representing consciousness in fiction: the character's consciousness and the character's mental discourse. Oates, as a rule, is very careful in her use of psycho-narration. Most of her description of Monroe's consciousness is scrupulously referred to her thorough insides, thus, the glimpses into Monroe's mind toward lovers and husbands and her mom. Although Monroe led an independent life in the glistening Hollywood movie world, she has lost herself in this "screen life", since Monroe herself should persuade her inner self to live forward and being irresistible. Oates has been exploring Marilyn's inner life in depth, and sometimes extrapolating upon it, because Monroe herself valued that life and sought to integrate it into her life's work. Since the details of one's inner, "personal life" are particularly meaningful, they must be accounted for any price. Monroe seemed to persuade 'Norma Jean' to accept her social identity in her movie world even among her husbands, friends, lovers, and her colleagues. She strives to confidently show her glorious and energetic social identity in front of the public instead of 'Norma Jean' who convulses and scrambles in the restroom without others' attention and knowledge. When Marilyn exists, then Norma Jean could not be allowed to act in public, in this case, Marilyn's private identity 'Norma Jean' is supposed to cease living. In *Blonde*, when Monroe visited her mad mother in the hospital, Marilyn presents her mother many of her own magazines and photos that taken in the movie or company for commercial purpose. Another example is the time when Monroe is offered an opportunity to return to her orphanage to gift orphans as her before at Christmas. She demonstrates her social identity to the orphans, but not her private identity 'Norma Jean'.

It is sometimes difficult to tell whether *Blonde* is a fictionalized biography or the creation of a totally new character, but what is certain is that Oates, through rather

masterful shifts in psychological approaches, delivers not only her character' interior self but also the culture's — the we or they — psychological changes and development. Ultimately, though, *Blonde* makes the reader extraordinary empathetic toward the character Marilyn Monroe and her longing for acceptance and a home of her own. Maybe unintentionally, it also has the effect of striking the same feeling of us when confronting and solving identical psychological variation in our current life. While, the star is historically situated and lives her life in historical and social conditions that give her image its meaning, resonance, and authority. Monroe's celebrity image's value might also be seen to reside in its characters as a particular human embodiment of a connection to a social history that provokes its beholder to reflect upon her own relationship to the cultural tradition in which the star's popularity is embedded. We all consider celebrity from different social positions. I am unable to perceive Marilyn Monroe without reflecting upon my own troubled relationship to male definitions of female sexuality, the images auctioned in the mass consumerism markets for commercial value.

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