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Jocelyn Dupont

► **To cite this version:**

Jocelyn Dupont. The 11-Year Itch: Exploitation as Sublimation in Blonde (Oates, 2000/ Dominik, 2022). Specters of Feminism in the works of Joyce Carol Oates, Tanya Tromble-Giraud; Nicolas Boileau, Mar 2024, Aix (Aix-Marseille Université), France. hal-04500806

HAL Id: hal-04500806

<https://hal.science/hal-04500806>

Submitted on 12 Mar 2024

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The 11-Year Itch: Exploitation as Sublimation in Blonde (Oates, 2000, Dominik, 2022)

INTRO

In this paper, I intend to discuss Andrew Dominik's recent and much-criticized adaptation of Oates novel *Blonde*, released on the Netflix in September 2022. My aim is to re-assess the movie in the light of its hypotext, which I believe, has been unfairly left out of much of the debate surrounding the release and critical reception of the film. In a first part, I will briefly address the stakes of Dominik's adaptation, which are actually quite complex, given the extreme iconicity of its subject, even more so than its subject matter. This will allow me to approach the thorny issue of femininity and feminism as found in the book and transposed in the film. Then, I will attempt a close transemiotic reading of one specific particular sequence, the famous "subway grate" scene – or rather photograph – initially thought of as a publicity stunt for Billy Wilder's 1954 romantic comedy *The Seven-Year Itch*, very probably one of the least memorable films of the director but whose "silly little dress", as well as the body it both covers and reveals, have left a burning impress on the collective memories of viewers and non-viewers alike.

I. Andrew Dominik's impossible adaptation

In 2007, New-Zealand born director Andrew Dominik (b. 1967) reached unexpected cinematographic fame with his second feature, the post-western movie *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, starring Casey Affleck and Brad Pitt in the lead roles but mostly demonstrating a very fine authorial control and singular aesthetics. The movie, bordering on the experimental, proved a dream-like, aestheticized and crepuscular take on the fate of one of the most famous bandits of the American West as well as the less well-known figure of his killer.

Hailed as an *auteur* feat, the movie nevertheless found its source in the fictionalized biography of Jesse James' final days by American historical novelist Ron Hansen, a book originally published in 1983, yet very much eclipsed by Dominik's stylistic showmanship and his actors' remarkable performances.

Halfway between the work of a western historian and novelistic license, Hansen's fictional biography of an American mythical figure thus shares a number of defining characteristics with Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde*, a monster of a book that also feeds creatively on a very documented biography as well as a purloined one, namely that of Norma Jean Baker, more commonly known as Marilyn Monroe, the most famous Blonde in American history. More crucially, both *The Assassination* and *Blonde* address American mythical figures, and tackle the issue of American historiographic mythography from an intermedial perspective.

However, what crucially distinguishes Jesse James from Marilyn Monroe is their respective degrees of iconicity. While there are possibly a dozen existing pictures of Jesse James taken during his lifetime and beyond, including a rather striking post-mortem one which, to some extent, acted as the starting point of Hansen's project, there are thousands, not to say *millions* of pictures of Marilyn Monroe circulating and very possibly saturating our visual environment. That iconic circulation has been going on for over half a century, and shows little sign of slowing down.

Monroe, a model of glamour pushed to the level of *sex symbol* (and even more grossly '*sex pot*', as she is occasionally referred to in the film¹), fully belongs to the shift from the literary to the visual, caught in the early, triumphant days of "the society of the spectacle", as Guy Debord would define it in the late 60s. Even before she became Marilyn, Norma Jeane Baker appeared throughout the 1940s as a glamorous pin-up on postcards, magazine covers and calendars. The whole of the novel's second ("The Girl") as well as the first half of its third section ("The Woman") fully register this pre-cinematographic dimension of Baker's career. Oates' *Blonde* never abandons it, constantly returning to phrases such as "The Girl of Your Dreams" or "The Calendar Girl" in the later sections of the novel.

On the other hand, Dominik's movie, whose project of adapting *Blonde* began as early as 2010, seems somewhat ill-at-ease with these original iconic chapters of Monroe's life, rather abruptly shifting from Norma Jeane's early childhood to the blond period of *Blonde*, so to speak. Of course, the bulk of the original hypotext made it difficult to include all the elements of Norma Jeane's trajectory from a traumatic childhood to stardom, yet it is evident here that deliberate choices were made by Andrew Dominik (who single-handedly authored the screenplay) to focus primarily on the most glittery cinematographic days of the lead actress of commercial movies such as *Don't Bother to Knock*, *Niagara*, *How to Marry a Millionaire*, and of course *The Seven Year Itch*².

¹ But not, as far as I can recall, in Oates' novel.

² The director's almost exclusive focus on that period of extreme popular fame might be subjected to questioning. Indeed, in the movie *Blonde*, there is hardly any mention of *The Asphalt Jungle*, the 1950 John Huston movie that launched Monroe's career, nor of the infamous making of *The Misfits*, also by Huston, that closed it. Such omissions deserve to be questioned, yet for want of time and space, they will not be detailed

II. Femininity and iconicity in *Blonde*

Critics have already tackled the issue of femininity in Oates' 'synechdocal appropriation' of Monroe's biography, and the writer herself has never made any secret of her wish to set her up as an emblem of the female of the species evolving in the golden days of Hollywood glamour and the early days of television. In a much-quoted 2001 interview with Greg Johnson, she explains that she wanted to address the myth of Marilyn Monroe in an *epic* form, to make her an Emma Bovary of America in the 1950s:

After I abandoned the novella form, I created an "epic" form to accommodate the complexities of the life. It was my intention to create a female portrait of her time and place just as Emma Bovary was of hers. (Oates, 2001: 16)

Interestingly, what Oates refers to as "the complexities" of Monroe's life, were, in their own time, totally eclipsed by the existing show-business apparatus that considered her a crucial asset in the performance of desirable femininity as the key to achieving box-office success. In many ways, Monroe was the most perfectly shaped consumer product and her official fairy-tale narrative had to be calibrated in such a fashion.

The irony and cruelty of that process of great falsification did not escape Oates, who elaborated her own narrative from the shadows, and strove to intertwine the glitter and the filth in her characteristic fist, mingling the sordid and the dazzling, the beautiful and the ugly, the wondrous with the abject. This is one the reasons why the experience of the book is often contradictory, swaying as it does between the fairy tale register and dirty realism, with occasional forays into the most graphic and unsettling account of mental and physical violence. In the book, Oates navigates between the enchanting and the lurid and, as one French critic has it, she ultimately sublimates the actress' body through literary creativity, and even alchemy: « *A l'instar des alchimistes du Moyen Âge, elle distille le corps de l'actrice pour le volatiliser dans son **appareil littéraire sublimatoire**.* »³

here. Instead, I would like to address a few points that relate directly to the topic of our conference, that is to say the issue of feminism and femininity in *Blonde*, both as a novel and a movie.

³ *Blonde* ou les fragments de la psyche féminine. Isabelle Van Peteghem-Tréard, *Herne*, 220-6.

Such poetic transubstantiation is located at the core of Oates' writing. To Nancy Huston's eyes, it is precisely what makes Marilyn Monroe's the perfect other to Joyce Carol Oates. As their superficial polarities collude through the performance of Oates' literary prose, both become One through literary sublimation. Huston writes:

Ayant lu [*Blonde*], on ne peut plus penser Marilyn sans passer par la Norma Jeane Baker de Joyce Carol Oates. L'une s'est faite l'autre, miraculeusement. (186)

The Flesh thus made Word. Beyond *Blonde*, this might well be a motto for Joyce Carol Oates' general poetics of physicality, masterfully acted out in her fictional biography of the most represented and desired physical envelope of the mid-twentieth century, namely, Marilyn Monroe's body.

In an article published for *The New York Times* in 1975, British Catholic novelist Anthony Burgess, seizing on the trope of the eucharist in the process of film adaptation, insisted upon the appetite for the written word to be made flesh, and the almost natural appeal of filmmakers (and studio producers) to turn novels into films. As clichéd as that statement might feel today, it nonetheless redoubles the stakes of adapting Marilyn Monroe's fictional biography on screen, as before the word was the flesh – and not just any words, nor any flesh.

This impossible tension between the graphic, the physical and the iconographic is unquestionably what makes Dominik's adaptation problematic and hard to fathom for viewers and critics alike, who, in their vast majority, have utterly failed to register the significance of Oates' poetic prose on the making of the film. A good illustration of this flaw can be found in the highly respectable French film journal *Positif*, whose reviewers were all too keen on slandering Dominik's film, tagging it as a purely exploitative TV film that feasted on desacralizing the memory of Monroe's film career⁴.

As a matter of fact, it is fairly easy, browsing reviews of the film, to detect who, among the critics, had any knowledge of its literary hypotext and who did not – and it might come as no surprise to observe that, in most cases, critics had absolutely no idea of what Oates' fictional *un*-biography was about.

Perhaps even more regrettably, Dominik's movie was also swiftly condemned, especially on social media and the general press, for portraying Monroe as a passive victim of a totalitarian phallocratic system whereas in the post *MeToo* days, it would have been more appropriate and politically correct to show her loaded with some kind of overt feminist agency, as of wont in many of contemporary movies or TV series found specifically – and not without some irony – on the Netflix streaming platform, where the film is exclusively available.

⁴ Christian Viviani unleashed his fury at Dominik, tagging him as an *infâme profanateur de sépulture* who relished in a rotten film thinly disguised as compassionate. (see *Positif* n°741, p. 53)

Opting for a rather solemn stance, Leslie Felsperin wrote in *The Guardian* that “this is a portrait of Monroe that accentuates her suffering and anguish, canonising her into a feminist saint who died for our scopophilic sins, that we might feast on her beauty and talent.” The image of Marilyn as a saint or even a *martyr* of phallocracy might be a convenient one for the reviewer, but it does not tally with Oates’ complex mingling of opposites when it comes to writing about bodies and desire. The novelist herself has always been very clear about the non-feminist slant of her novel, stating: “I certainly hope that my portrait of her transcends sex and gender, and that male readers can identify as readily with her as female readers. (18)”

In keeping with that wariness towards dichotomous feminism, Canadian novelist Nancy Huston, discussing Oates’ work in general and *Blonde* in particular, rightly observes:

Impossible, ici, d’enfourcher le dada féministe de la dénonciation, persécution et punition du coupable. Impossible et inutile. Si c’était simple – si l’on pouvait dire : *moi*, innocente, pure, bonne : *lui*, coupable, mauvais, corrompu – les conséquences seraient moins lourdes. Mais, pour le plus grand malheur des fillettes et le plus grand bonheur des romanciers, ce n’est pas ainsi que cela se passe, car les motivations, émotions et pulsions autour du désir humain forment en nous un lacis inextricable. (187)

The image of entanglement brought forward by Huston is doubtless a thorny one in the days of antagonistic post-feminism that make up, for better or for worse, a significant part of our contemporary western cultural discursive environment. This, I believe, along with sheer ignorance of Oates’ initial literary project, also partly explains why Dominik’s take on *Blonde* was overall misunderstood and dismissed as mere exploitation. Yet the horror in that biographic tale, if there is one, is not so much located in Marilyn’s one-sided exploitation by the classic Hollywood patriarchal system but rather in the constant push and pull between abjection and sublimation that constitutes the driving force of *Blonde*, both in filmic and literary form, a very gothic one indeed.⁵

⁵ “at its heart this is a gothic melodrama, a fever dream of childhood trauma haunting adult life, replete with skin-crawlingly cruel visions of inquisitorial torture, brutal ordeals and hellish infernos – more *Nightmare on Elm Street* than *My Week With Marilyn*” (M. Kermode)

III. The Subway grate revisited ; or how to cool off more than just ankles

Of all the iconic moments dotting Marilyn Monroe's career and often seized upon with great skill in Oates' novel, the subway grate photograph is the most emblematic. The picture, or rather the *many pictures* of Marilyn standing on the corner of Lexington Avenue and 52nd Street in Manhattan, her white crepe dress lifting as underground trains rumble past beneath her, has become one of the defining icons of desirability made in USA as well as movie history. The picture was taken in context of the making of *The 7-Year Itch* by Billy Wilder, yet it is rather ironic to register that, so to speak, the picture ultimately remained out of the picture, since none of the 14 takes taken in Manhattan that night of September, 1954, eventually made it to the final cut of Wilder's film and had eventually to be re-shot in the Fox studio lot, in Los Angeles, presumably on account of the diktats of acceptability and the unflinching supervision of the influential Catholic Legion of Decency.

Here, thus, is what viewers of Wilder's movie ultimately got to see in the film version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flh6HDeXKGY>

Evidently, something here seems to be lacking, in spite of the colorful contrast with the famous black and white photograph that crystalized those moments of delightfully scandalous public exhibition that rocked one Manhattan street corner in 1954 and made Monroe the ultimate sex symbol of her age.

In Oates' novel, the reconstruction of the photo shoot occupies the space of one whole chapter in the fourth section of the book. Although it is one of the shortest sub-chapters composing the novel, its title is remarkably long and explicit – "The American Goddess of Love on the Subway Grating. New York City, 1954". The impact of the excerpt on readers is also very powerful.

Oates' prose is here extremely crafted, with a fine and precarious balance between an exaltation of pure, shimmering beauty on the one hand and, on the other, a sense of over-exposure of flesh, of "female meat, raw and exposed" (1.8), very likely in danger of sexual predation. While the lexical fields of brightness and rapture ignite the passage's dynamics, they soon enter a competition with that of forced sexual intercourse and physical abuse, with the phrase "legs apart" repeated four times and a gradual sense of danger looming as the "men in a pack" are aroused (the adjective is strategically repeated twice in the excerpt) and closing dangerously in on the American Goddess of Love, whose "bleached crotch" is almost at hand, and certainly at risk, beneath her "white cotton American-girl panties".

Thus, in her literary re-construction of what has been collectively displayed as an iconic apex of female beauty for seven decades, Oates builds up no less than the isotopy of collective rape to sully what in the text remains, out of literary necessity, a paradoxical mental image, internalized⁶ and obscene and at the same time shared by all through transnational and transgenerational iconic dissemination.

- ***Dominik's take***

In the movie version of the scene, obscenity is not an option, neither in the common meaning of the word as dirty, rude and offensive nor in its etymological sense that would it imply it should remain off-screen and thus *un-seen*. On the contrary, the scene gains extreme visibility in a film that is already very rich in terms of visual tropes, unashamedly embracing contemporary film *mannerism*.

The sequence⁷ is located almost exactly halfway through the film. Lasting over three minutes, it is quantitatively more significant in the movie than in the book, which comes as no real surprise, given the extreme degree of iconicity of this fragment, climactic in many ways, and certainly expected by viewers. At this crucial filmic moment, Dominik opts for a strategy of extreme visibility, a form of cinematographic sublimation, yet filled with a growing sense of unease due to the protagonist's gradual self-consciousness as the *object* of desire she is made to be gradually becomes a lucid subject of the desire of others which, at that precise moment, seems on the verge of turning into potentially harmful lust.

The sequence is composed of over thirty shots, and can be divided into three parts. The opening is astutely meta-filmic, as the viewer is propelled not so much on the photo shoot of the publicity shots, but rather in the very making of scene of Wilder's movie, shot this time in black and white⁸. As the director's "cut!" is heard and leaves Marilyn (Ana de Armas) alone and somewhat stranded in the limelight, the sequence moves to its second part, very different in mood, tone and style. It begins with a sweeping pan to the left in slow-motion, revealing the excited pack of male photographers present for the occasion. A soaring extradiegetic music envelops the scene. As it rises, the camera returns to Marilyn's body in medium shot, swirling around her waist and her lifting skirt, in low-angle. The low angle shot is extremely significant in terms of repressed scopophilia, as the official existing pictures of

⁶ Both by the reader and the character.

⁷ 1h27'42s – 1h30'23s

⁸ *Blonde* mingles with no real method sequences in colors and others in black and white.

Monroe from 1954 never dared glimpse all the way *under* the skirt whereas it is rather obvious that, somehow, they all yearned to.

Cut, and the medium shot becomes a full shot of the film set, still in black and white, with Marilyn exposed frontally. As a slow zoom-out begins, it is suddenly interrupted by a series of flashing images, in colors, close shots showing repeatedly the skirt lifting and blooming around the actress' legs like so many white flowers springing open. As Marilyn quotes her famous "*isn't it delicious?*" line, there is a sharp return to black and white photography and a 2-second frontal close shot on her crotch and white panties in slow-motion, followed this time by 4 medium or close shots on unidentified men's faces, staring, leering, applauding, "at the edge of civility". The "smoldering, angry mood" of Oates' original text is somewhat played down, notably on account of the slow-motion and smooth, tuneless music, yet the ravenous sexual appetite is blatant.

Another cut, and this time the scene, entering its third stage, is captured from a bird's eye view, in a vertical, high-angle long shot which, as it tilts forward a little, reveals Marilyn's whiteness as a magnet, captivating "the rogue-elephant crowd, restless and aroused" stretching almost endlessly before her. *Cut*, and the tireless camera is back on the American Goddess' body in medium shot, this time stealing in from behind for another view of her panties, in a symphony of flashlights, before a slow zoom-in and a change of focus allows us to identify her husband Joe di Maggio (Bobby Cannavale) glaring at her from the crowd of faces, and thereby connecting very well with the depiction of the scene in Oates' hypotext.

CONCLUSION

Discussing Dominik's third feature film *Killing Them Softly*, released in 2012, a film that had very little visibility in France when it came out, Stéphane Delorme argued that a new generation of filmmakers, including directors such as David Fincher, Alejandro Inarritu and, of course, Andrew Dominik, could be seen as *expert* filmmakers rather than *auteurs*. The nuance is certainly to be heeded, and I would argue, along with Delorme, that the movie *Blonde* is certainly a symptom of expertise, yet one that does not attempt to reach its ambitions. It might be that Dominik's sights were set too high when he approached Oates' masterful un-biography of the most iconic figure of desirable femininity in the second half of the twentieth century. Published at its very close, *Blonde* by Joyce Carol Oates was no doubt a literary *tour de force* and remains a major book in the author's vast production. The same might not be said of Dominik's adaptation, an ambitious project that might have taken too long a time to come to fruition, and somewhat incongruously landed on Netflix as a flawed movie, trapped both discursively and aesthetically. Still, it might be a successful adaptation nonetheless, if one is to follow Robert Giddings as he writes that "a successful adaptation of a novel should not be the book. Nor should it be a substitute for the book. If it is truly successful, it should be a work of art in its own right which excites the reader to go re-experience that work in another medium: the novel".