

**Configuring a Cultural Icon:  
Interdisciplinary/Interarts Theory and  
the Example of Marilyn Monroe**

by

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A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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University of Manitoba  
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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree  
of  
Master of Arts**

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## **Abstract**

In Western society, an icon is predominantly understood as an image, the visual “contrary to the verbal sign” (Mitchell, *Iconology* 56). To accept this definition, however, is to ignore the historical definition of icon, which admits its status as a configuration of both visual and verbal media. Although the duality of the icon has been readily reclaimed by technology, most visibly in the case of computer icons, other disciplines have been more reluctant to accept it. In a world where many images admit a wide range of possible interpretations, and in a world where we observe and are told that “image is everything,” it becomes increasingly important to encourage dialogue about images. As a society and as individuals, we need to examine especially those instances when images seem to be narrowly defined and manipulated so as to elicit particular responses. This thesis chooses to trace a path along which a particular icon, Marilyn Monroe, has evolved, in order to develop an insight into the changing role of women.

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*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking  
new landscapes but in having new eyes.*

*Marcel Proust*

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## **Introduction: Why Marilyn?**

*In Mirror Mirror: Images of Women Reflected in Popular Culture,*

Kathryn Weibel explains that her book is intended “to help close the currently incomplete loop between the popular culture image and the individual” who perceives/receives it, for without “some type of evaluation of popular culture images, the relationship between the media and the individual is a one-way street. The image bombards the individual” (xxi). As she sees it, because popular culture images are the means through which a society indoctrinates the public, if we are to be more than passive consumers we need critically to assess “the motivations and values behind these reflections” which are extended to us through popular fiction, television, movies, magazines, and advertisements (xx). For Weibel, insofar as popular culture images involve the female subject, they function as a means of control, a way that an advantaged “they” at the top of the power structure coerce women in a direction that conforms with “their” opinion of femininity. Thus, if women are to be interactive or proactive, it follows that the first step involves a questioning of the political structures and motivations that lie behind the generation of these images.

Interarts theorizing has much to contribute to this kind of investigation, for interarts critics are also very much concerned with hierarchical ordering and with ways that gendering is encoded in discussions of visual/verbal relations; moreover, interarts



theorizing is particularly concerned with the nature of the icon, which, in essence, is what the popular culture image really constitutes. Indeed, the connections between politics/ideology and iconology/iconography are central — if implicit — in the classical theorizing of G.E. Lessing, and explicitly foregrounded in the work of recent theorists like W.J.T. Mitchell and Wendy Steiner.

In turn, there would seem to be no better contemporary example of a popular culture icon who seems ideal to illustrate how an interarts approach might conjoin with a consideration of popular culture images of women than Marilyn Monroe. Reminders of her surround us in almost every medium imaginable: on our TV screens, in movies re-released in video-tape format and in biographical documentaries; in the coffee-table compilation of the Niagara shoot; in numerous magazines and journals, from the *Charisma*® advertisement in *Victoria* (June 1997), to the “never-seen photos” in *American Photo* (May/June 1997); in Hallmark® stores, as a sequin-clad “Marilyn” Christmas ornament; in calendars and posters; in blank-interior greeting cards featuring prints of paintings by Andy Warhol and other famous artists; in the “cyberspace” world of 3D modelling, undertaken by Daniel and Nadia Thalmann (originally of Montréal) in Geneva; in Connie Willis’s science-fiction novel, *Remake*; in U.S. postage stamps; in the poetry of Canadians Marilyn Bowering and Nellie McClung (granddaughter of Nellie McClung, suffragette); in the lyrics of Elton John’s “Candle in the Wind”; in the Marilyn look-alikes and “wanna-bes,” such as Madonna; and, of course, in the various biographies that attempt to account for the rise and fall of an international Hollywood celebrity — “America’s ultimate icon” (*American Photo*, cover).

Estella Lauter, whose particular interest concerns “Images of Women in Contemporary Arts,” asserts that patterns across the arts require one’s attention:

Distinctions among arts of space and time, or the relative power of an artistic medium to represent, abstract, or combine with other media, become tools that an artist can use to move an audience into a new perspective. The differences among the arts become complementary channels in which new ideas can find expression, often by being introduced in one medium and developed in another, sometimes in conscious dialogue. The fact that patterns exist across different artistic media becomes an indication that an image is sufficiently important to require exploration to the full depths of human capacity for understanding.

(133-34)

Such patterns are not only evident in high culture’s definition of “art,” but they exist in popular culture’s “art,” too. Since the patterns within popular culture influence more people, due to the mass production of popular art products, it becomes even more important to explore what these patterns signify.

In my thesis, therefore, I wish to analyze the components of the popular culture image by conjoining a theoretical interarts/interdisciplinary framework with the concrete example of the “Marilyn” phenomenon, raising such questions as: what type of aesthetic activity is involved in the transformation of a human into an icon; what politics are at work, overtly or covertly, in originating the celebrity “image” and in reviving it at a later

date; how does the medium through which such images are presented affect our perception and response to them?

Specifically, my thesis has a three-part structure. In the first chapter, I will arrive at a working definition of “icon,” and here I want to target the duality of the icon, its problematic fusion of verbal and visual media, enlisting the theories of such critics as Walter Benjamin, Charles Peirce, Nelson Goodman, and Roland Barthes, as well as Lessing, Steiner, and Mitchell. Walter Benjamin’s theorizing about the “aura” of an artwork, and how the art of the icon is affected in the “age of mechanical reproduction” factors into the equation at this point as well. The examples in the following chapters offer insights into the ways the roles of women in general, and women celebrities in particular, have been understood over time and in different media.

The second chapter, for instance, focuses upon how Monroe entered popular culture as an icon: it explores how her iconic performance as a “dumb blonde” in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* revises an earlier literary stereotype, changing it so that it both suits her generation and opens up other possibilities. First, I discuss the Howard Hawks-directed film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, whose 1950s showgirl is incongruous with Anita Loos’s 1920s flapper in the original novel of the same name, despite their shared adeptness at gold-digging. Additionally, then, I address the manner in which Marilyn Monroe’s portrayal of Lorelei Lee reinvents the stereotype of the “dumb blonde,” sealing her stardom and exemplifying Benjamin’s theory concerning the “artificial build-up of the ‘personality’” (581) as well as Mitchell’s on present-day fetishism.

The third chapter again explores works which feature Monroe, but here I discuss how new forms of ekphrastic, biographical representation reactivate the icon at the point where nationality and genderedness converge. By comparing and contrasting the approaches of Brenda Longfellow and Marilyn Bowering, I will consider how through deliberate and concentrated efforts to convey “voice” and kinesthetics in documentary film and poetry, each generates a new collaborative style of the biographic or life-writing genre in response to a need for Canadian perspectives of images of women in the media. Bowering’s ekphrastic poetry lends the Monroe icon a posthumous academic or intellectual “voice” unavailable to the actress, and Longfellow’s experimental documentary film, a truly multi-media production, juxtaposes Canadian icon Marilyn Bell with the American Monroe.

My choice of these works has to do with the way that, traditionally, “woman” has been aligned with “silent picture,” whereas “man” has been aligned with “spoken word,” just as all too frequently, Monroe-the-icon is portrayed as a mute and static visual object, rather than as a vocal and dynamic subject. Finally, since Marilyn was frequently identified in her lifetime as the “ultimate female,” and since she is perhaps the best-known female figure to have achieved near-universal celebrity status, one of my overall concerns will be to suggest what a revived Monroe in the 1990s might imply for the “femininity” of our time.

I bring no formal background in film studies to this project, only an amateur interest in the way that film and multimedia increasingly exert such influence over our twenty-first century lives, coupled with the belief that the apparent predominance of

visual media in no way absolves one from responsibly discussing them. In fact, because images and texts are always bound together, the only way of realizing the potential of one is through its other.

Popular culture icons, because they are widely circulated, provide an excellent starting point from which to address the politics involved in image/text combinations. Individuals who would not feel comfortable discussing their opinions of high art, for example, are willing to discuss popular culture icons. This inquiry into the popular culture icon, then, attempts to erode some of the perceived boundaries between the “academic” world and the “mainstream,” and tries to relate intellectual, theoretical pursuits to practical, experiential matters.

## Chapter 1

### Popular Culture Icons: Replacing the “Cult” in Culture

Amidst the steadily growing popularity of home computers and World Wide Web access, it is difficult to imagine a time before the fusion of media facilitated by the Internet, a time when *icon* was not a household word. A computer icon is, of course, a miniature picture accompanied by a descriptive word or phrase which represents a document, file, command, or program. The image and its label remain static on the desktop surface, while in the depths of the computer, the processor carries out particular tasks or activities. So prominent in contemporary society ever since the mid-1980s is this use of *icon* that it is easy to overlook its alternate meanings. While the interdependence of pictures and words, of verbal and visual components have become commonplace on a computer screen, only in recent years has a resurgence of the idea that *icon* is both image and text concurrently become evident in disciplines other than technology.

Long before the computer age appropriated the term, the earliest recorded English use of *icon*, traced back to 1572, refers to “a picture, ‘cut,’ or illustration in a book.” By 1579 common usage extends the definition to include the concept of a “realistic representation or description *in writing*” (*OED*; emphasis added). This revised definition is not unprecedented, given that *icon* etymologically descends from the Greek *eikon*, which yields a rather amorphous definition of “likeness, image, portrait, semblance,

similitude, [or] simile” (*OED*). It is often much easier to list examples of icons than it is to succinctly define what one is. More often than not, however, individuals encounter the word *icon* in a religious context.

While dictionary authorities liberally admit *icon* as “any picture or image,” people apply the word more frequently to, say, “a sacred picture or image,” such as a painting or statue of “Christ, an angel, a saint,” and/or martyrs (*Gage*). These religious icons depict ordinary human beings whose behavior is considered extraordinary or superhuman.

Usually such an individual has given his/her life, either literally or figuratively, to or for a special cause, and admirers later honor the memory of this person by commissioning a work of art as a reminder of the deceased’s selfless sacrifice. The icon, however, is not important in and of itself as an object; rather, it is valued for the action or behavior that it demonstrates or to which it points. In other words, a visual representation of the individual who demonstrates “beauty-holiness” or “divine likeness” (abstract terms that refer to altruistic, self-abnegating actions, not to extraordinary physical attractiveness as one at might first assume) “preserv[es] a direct and living link with the person whom the icon represents” (Ouspensky 191, 196, 218).

Although religious icons are by and large meaningless in today’s world, human beings still seek to “connect with the divine”; they do so by replacing “defunct” traditional images with “new and vital ones,” explains Michael Phillips (53, 58), whose interarts study addresses the religious and political tensions inherently encoded in word and image combinations. It is by way of “the story-telling process,” Phillips asserts, “that the visual image becomes revered,” that it achieves spiritual significance (53-54) —

deliberately using the passive voice, I suspect, to suggest that society seems to want to erase any sense of its agency in icon formation. So although dictionary authorities also liberally admit *icon* as “any picture or image,” Phillips counters that “[a]n image is not necessarily an icon,” but that that an icon is the locus “where image meets word” (52): a joint venture. These words echo Wendy Steiner’s assertion that “values depend on the connecting of images to stories” (*Pictures of Romance* 174). I will follow W.J.T. Mitchell’s lead and use *image/text* to refer to this fusion of word and image. The icon, then, acts as a type of shorthand, condensing a narrative into an image. Popular culture icons, in particular, exhibit this kind of coding.

At first, icons served to promote community between people and their Deity or deities, and among fellow human beings as well. In “The Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin relates that the earliest works of art were “ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult.” Ancient society’s statues or paintings were specifically designed for use in a special ceremony steeped in magic or in religion, and would have been accessible only to select individuals. Objects were valued not on the basis of their aesthetic appeal, but for their existence, and in proportion to their function, which was to forge a bond between a tangible, physical world and an intangible, spiritual world (Benjamin 575-77). The cult object knit human beings into a collective. Due to the amount of time and energy expended on the manufacture of an art object in these earlier societies, and given that manual reproduction requires painstaking detail and cannot yield identical objects, each work of art in this type of society radiates an *aura* of authority, a sense of its participation in an historical tradition of spiritual connectedness, a



sense of “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (573-74).

As a society exchanges the handmade in favor of the mechanical reproduction of art objects, the *cult value* (functionality) of a ritual object gives way to *exhibition value* (aesthetic appeal) (Benjamin 577). The “plurality of copies” generated by mechanical reproduction separates an art object from its ritual purpose, says Benjamin, with twofold results. On the one hand, the multiple copies detract from and depreciate an object’s aura; no longer is it unique (574). Furthermore, exhibition value proves less endearing/enduring than cult value, so that “[t]o an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility” (576).

On the other hand, widespread distribution “reactivates the object reproduced,” so that the reproduced object is able to inhabit different times and spaces, to “meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation” (573). The more copies circulated, the greater is the number of individuals who are exposed to and have opportunity to appreciate the art object. But whereas ritual effects a high level of interpretative uniformity and conformity in its participants, because they are well-versed in what an cult object represents, an “exhibitible” object lies at a far remove from its cult and functional narrative, and therefore relies upon captions for its context (Benjamin 578).

Consequently, the emphasis upon art shifts from its production to its consumption, and from ritual to politics.

Still, despite the obvious shift in emphasis from production to consumption, from ritual to politics, Benjamin advances that art is “never entirely separated from its ritual

function” (575). Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of popular culture icons, a special sub-set of icons. Similar to other icons, the popular culture icon resists and eludes a precise definition. Like its religious and magical predecessors, the popular culture icon attempts to preserve a link with the person it represents. Such persons may be political leaders (John F. Kennedy in the United States, Pierre Elliot Trudeau in Canada), religious leaders (Billy Graham), social visionaries (Martin Luther King, Gandhi), domestic experts (Martha Stewart), but more often than not they will be celebrities (actors, actresses, musicians, models, and athletes make up the majority of popular culture icons) from the entertainment world, such as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, James Dean, Audrey Hepburn, Princess Diana, Frank Sinatra, Cindy Crawford, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Cher, and Wayne Gretzky, to cite only a few. In any event, a popular culture icon must represent a human being that actually exists, or has existed.

Technically, the celebrity him/herself is not an icon. The icon is an inanimate object that represents an animate subject. It is more accurate to identify a popular culture icon as a visual representation — in many cases a poster, or magazine cover photograph. Yet in contemporary use, *icon* refers interchangeably to both the human being and his/her popular image. The transference occurs because a person makes him/herself over so as to achieve a particular star image, and thus a particular longevity. Pop icons may apply make-up a certain way (e.g., Boy George), cultivate a distinctive style of clothing (e.g., Liberace) or set of mannerisms (e.g., Madonna, Billy Idol), emphasize a trademark

facial feature (e.g., Farrah Fawcett's toothy grin, Tom Cruise's "million-dollar smile"), or develop a specific "sound" (e.g., The Beatles, ABBA).

In essence, celebrities transform themselves into works of art, and become the human equivalent of G.E. Lessing's "gods and spiritual beings," those "personified abstractions which must always retain the same characteristics if they are to be recognized" (52). Benjamin identifies this transformation as the "artificial build-up of the 'personality.'" He laments that the worth of the irreproducible person (579) is cashed in for the "'spell of personality,' the phony spell of a commodity" (581). In order to avoid confusion between famous persons and popular culture icons proper, I wish to reserve *icon* to indicate those images that Benjamin calls "separable, transportable" (580), and not the persons themselves, whom I will refer to as *celebrities*.

Even in today's allegedly politically-enlightened society, the terminology we apply to celebrities and their popular culture icons still heavily reflects ritual, and contains evidence of spiritual associations attributed to them. Consider photography and film, two of Benjamin's specific interests, for example. Portraits, and photographs in particular, retain traces of cult value, or as Benjamin so eloquently phrases it, "The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture" (577). Contemporary artists sometimes imbue their paintings or photographs of popular icons with haloes and other lighting that suggests "aura" (Goldberg 14). Or take film, wherein the very language by which the general public refers to movie stars retains vestiges of cult value, even though these popular culture icons are best known for their exhibitable qualities: the masses "worship" or "revere" superlative actors and actresses,

they hail them as “screen idols” and “goddesses of the screen.” These words and actions recall times past when people staged rituals to invoke and/or honor deities. In fact, movie theatres, concert halls, and sports arenas offer the modern-day equivalent of past ceremonies which united their participants “in spirit.” Thus the popular culture icon demonstrates its nostalgic bent not only for the absent person it represents, but for the sense of community established through ritual.

Under the circumstances, one might very well insist that the popular culture icon is a phenomenon residing in Jung’s “collective unconscious,” for it belongs to the people “not only in the sense that it has popular support, but in the deeper sense that the people as a whole participate in it and use it” (Miller & Nowak 107). In other words, a portion of society’s members agree, explicitly and/or implicitly, unconsciously and/or consciously, that a particular icon is of value to them. The icon is a collective phenomenon in relation to its production, but also with respect to its consumption; that is, it takes the combined effort of screenwriter, actor/actress, director, producer, wardrobe designer, cosmetician, and so on to produce a character in a movie, but members of the public, too, shape the icon to a large extent, for it fulfills their needs, their desires, in some way.

The supply and demand of popular icons are a part of *culture* as we know it, insofar as we mean the “characteristics of a community, people, or nation” (Gage). *Culture*, however, may also refer to the “fineness of [one’s] ... tastes, [and] manners” (Gage), and therein one catches a glimpse of how the popular culture icon represents not just a far-flung collective interest, but also many deeply personal interests. A balance

between the two must be struck: there must be enough personal interest to gain collective momentum, and there must in turn be a collective force strong enough to fuel personal interest. Frequently, though, to its detriment, the phrase *popular culture* is employed as an epithet by those who wish to keep “undefiled” the “refined” tastes of “high culture” from the influence of the common masses’ pastimes, which are considered “low culture.”

Theoretically, because they originate in “low culture,” popular cultural icons are “disposable” (Mitchell, *Iconology* 91; Lakoff & Scherr 113). In practice, however, popular culture icons have a surprising amount of staying power. They manage to capture and hold our imaginations. Their narratives are of key importance to their longevity, for in any visual art, “one needs a repeated subject in order to have narrativity, but if the repetitions are identical, one has not story but design,” observes Steiner, a theorist who specializes in Renaissance paintings (*Pictures of Romance* 51).

Andy Warhol toys with this idea in his silk-screen prints of Marilyn Monroe, Jacqueline Kennedy, and other famous persons: he essentially repeats the same image over and over, but applies different tints to select images within the series. His technique pushes the prints into a category between stasis, arrested or stopped time, and story time.

A popular culture icon also inhabits middle ground. It achieves its iconicity via “textual” or narrative permanence, in addition to visual permanence, which throws into question Steiner’s neat story/design distinction. That is, the popular culture icon’s stylized image is accompanied by an equally stylized story, condensed into a name and/or an abbreviated biographical insight. Like Lessing’s poet “who treats of a well-known story or well-known characters” and therefore “can omit the hundred pedantic details

which would otherwise be indispensable to an understanding of the whole..." (64), a popular culture icon, too, holds an advantageous position in that people extract meaning from it without having to know all the "details." Of course, only a chosen few celebrities are ever granted "full-fledged icon status," for whether or not one receives such an honor depends upon the manner in which "a star enters the public consciousness," states Phillips (59). As he demonstrates using the example of Audrey Hepburn, it is not enough to have a certain "look"; a celebrity's life story must also contain mythic undercurrents. It is commonplace for iconized celebrities to have overcome a set of difficult circumstances, and thereby thwart or exceed societal expectations. They usually attribute their success to their determination, hard work, and perseverance (the "Protestant work ethic"; or, if one prefers, a "rags-to-riches, Cinderella-*sans*-fairy-godmother"), for it would not do to admit that beauty, muscularity, or some physical trait is the source of one's success.

Because of the multiple disciplines that inform them (sociology, psychology, politics, history, economics, and so forth), and especially because of their ritual and "spiritual" significance, all icons are potentially controversial. "More than any other art form," claims Phillips, "icons draw our attention to the way that aesthetic discussions are ultimately ideologically coded" (79-80). Mitchell certainly demonstrates this point when he traces interarts issues, first in *Iconology*, then in *Picture Theory*. According to him, not just icons but all concepts and ideas are actually visual and verbal hybrids, which means that visual art never entirely suppresses its narrative component, just as verbal art never entirely suppresses its visual component.

Unfortunately, human minds display an inability to grasp concepts in anything other than binary oppositions. Coining the term “image/text” to acknowledge this “problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation,” Mitchell offers that the struggle to comprehend the duality of the icon dates back at least as far as the recorded beginnings of the Judeo-Christian world, where the God of Genesis creates the first human beings “in his own image,” leaving subsequent generations to debate whether human beings physically resemble God, or whether their “aliqueness” stems from the fact “that we can say similar things about” God and his creations (*Iconology* 83, 2, 36).

All too often, inhabitants of the Western world have elevated the verbal component of representation above the visual half. As Roland Barthes informs us, there are two main streams of thought: “there are those who think that the image is an extremely rudimentary system in comparison with language and those who think that signification cannot exhaust the image’s ineffable richness”; either starting point leaves the image “weak in respect of meaning” (*Image-Music-Text* 32). Furthermore, such a rationale regards the icon as an unequivocally visual representation — “the traditional contrary,” in other words, “to the verbal sign” (Mitchell, *Iconology* 7, 33-35, 56, 197-98).

In this schema, the Fall of the human race is “always understood as a fall into idolatry” (*Iconology* 198). Thus, two groups will disparage each other’s members for “worshipping” or “idolizing” a certain ‘false’ image or set of images, while each professes that its members do not worship images, or, perhaps, that its images “are purer or truer than those of mere idolaters” (*Iconology* 198; Ouspensky 41-43). This impulse stems from and reciprocally heightens the skewed perceptions of an “us”/“them”

distinction that result in political skirmishes. No wonder, then, that at the heart of political conflicts in “eighth- and ninth-century Byzantium” and the Catholic/Protestant clash of the seventeenth century was the desire to gain control over images (*Iconology* 7). It seems individuals have always been, and remain, divided over how the signifier, the art object, relates to what it signifies, or what it represents.

In the late 1890s and early 1900s, for instance, semiotician Charles Peirce formulates a definition that lists the icon, along with the index and the symbol, as a subset of “signs,” but whereas an index is a sign “by an actual connection” to its object, and a symbol is a sign by its conventionality, that is, by its dependence “upon habit (acquired or inborn)” and “without regard to the motives which originally governed its selection,” the icon is a sign which substitutes “for anything that it is like”; this “conception of ‘substitute,’” writes Peirce, “involves that of a purpose” (Peirce, *Collected Papers* 160-61, 167, 172, 157). The icon, for Peirce, may represent “[a]nything whatever, be it quality, existent individual, or law ... in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it” (Peirce, “Logic” 8). This model assumes that the icon’s signified is somehow more immediate, or more closely related to its sign than either the index or symbol. Other theorists take exception to such a definition of the icon. Mitchell counters that “similarity is such a capacious relationship that almost anything can be assimilated into it. Everything in the world is similar to everything else in some respects, if we look hard enough” (*Iconology* 56-57). “Nor is resemblance *necessary* for reference; almost anything may stand for anything else,” Goodman claims in *Languages of Art*, reminding us that “nothing is ever represented either shorn of or in the fullness of its properties,”



and that icons are no less conventionally understood than the signs that Peirce classifies as symbols or indexes (5, 9).

In fact, in formulating his discontent with Peirce's system in *Iconology*, Mitchell enlists Goodman as an ally: he liberally quotes from *Languages of Art*, a text that proposes "extreme conventionalism" as the means whereby to address differences between visual and verbal representations without invoking the usual "natural" versus "artificial" argument (*Iconology* 65). In this system, both images and texts are conventional representations; Goodman thereby "levels the playing field" between verbal and visual arts, and avoids the tendency of other theorists (Ernst Gombrich and Umberto Eco, for instance) to identify images as "immediate" or "motivated" signs, signs with a "natural, necessary connection with what they signify" (*Iconology* 58). Instead, he recasts distinctions between verbal and visual as graduated and ungraduated, differentiated and dense, digital and analog, allographic and autographic systems (*Iconology* 66-69).

In Goodman's theory, Mitchell summarizes, verbal art is graduated, differentiated, and digital, which means that every difference makes a difference: differences are measurable. "Allographic" here means a disregard for "the inscriptional authenticity and history of production"; whether or not a text is a forgery "is not an issue" (*Iconology* 68-69). Visual art, in comparison, is best described as ungraduated, dense, analog, and autographic; here every difference makes a difference only as it relates to the whole (*Iconology* 67). Goodman designates visual art as "autographic," since he feels it does make a difference whether paintings and engravings are originals or copies. In a

valiant attempt to maintain a “value-free” approach, Goodman concentrates on the differences one finds “between kinds of conventions,” on hybrid verbal/visual works — exactly the sort of works that Mitchell finds attractive (*Iconology* 69-71).

Goodman’s theory falls short of satisfactory on more than one account, however. First, he treats the verbal/visual interaction as though it is a closed system existing entirely apart from ideology. Second, he sponsors relative “realism,” even though certain artistic styles (Mitchell holds up Cubism and Surrealism as examples) may achieve predominance without “ever laying claim to ‘realism’” (*Iconology* 72-74). Moreover, this approach in general is not applicable to studies of popular culture icons, which is my overarching interest here. For one, a popular culture icon is driven by ideology — history, politics, censorship, and the like. Then, in contrast to a painting, engraving, or statue, for which “the inscriptional authenticity and history of production is ... an issue” (Goodman 69), popular culture icons are largely comprised of images pre-designed for mass production (e.g., photographs and posters); therefore, it would be ridiculous to distinguish between “authentic” or “fake” in such a case. Finally, without relating discussions of image and text to politics, no matter how cleverly one chooses to phrase it, the simple result is that one arrives back at the banal conclusion that words and pictures, the verbal and visual arts, are similar and yet different, or as Lessing sums up, that “colors are not sounds and ears not eyes” (76).

One way to avoid such a tautology is, of course, to study composite works — works which Mitchell describes as “actual conjunctions of words and images in illustrated texts or in mixed media such as film, television, and drama” — examining the

point at which these two similar yet different representational systems intersect (“Against Comparison” 32). He favors this technique because

[i]t is dialectical in that it treats images and texts as contraries engaged in patterns not just of difference and similarity but of struggles between domination and subversion, of relations of independence, collaboration, and (occasionally) equality. I see texts and images, in other words, as semiotic practices bound together in something like mutual patterns of social otherness or alterity. (“Against Comparison” 31)

Within this framework, there can be neither “pure image” nor “pure text,” for each already relies on its “other.” Because it scrutinizes the political manipulation of “image” and “text,” this theory potentially enables one to break free of the circumlocution that images and texts are similar (equally conventional) yet different (completely separate semiotic systems) — if, that is, one does not “buy into” images “blindly,” but instead interrogates the narrative values encapsulating concepts or ideas (image/texts) held up to it by the more powerful members of society (Steiner, *Pictures of Romance* 6, 174; Weibel xx).

For centuries, Simonides’s supposition that “poetry is like painting” — *ut pictura poesis* — “effectually obliterated the demarcation line between the two arts” (McCormick xii). In *Laocoön*, a collection of essays that loosely resemble journal entries, Lessing tactfully rejects Simonides’ ubiquitous axiom. Although he concedes that both “create an illusion” of “absent things as being present and appearance as reality” (3), Lessing contends that painting and poetry — terms he substitutes

synecdochically for “visual” and “verbal” arts, respectively — differ in degree (75). He grants that painting and poetry each have their proper sphere of representation, and that each accomplishes something with greater ease than the other: painting, the representation of bodies (spatial objects); poetry, the representation of actions (temporal objects). Painting and poetry, Lessing conjectures at one point, resemble neighbors:

But as two equitable and friendly neighbors do not permit the one to take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other’s domain, yet on their extreme frontiers practice a mutual forbearance by which both sides make peaceful compensation for those slight aggressions which, in haste and from force of circumstance, the one finds himself compelled to make on the other’s privilege: so also with painting and poetry. (91)

In effect, he has already contradicted himself by insisting that some neighbors are “*more equal*” than others, for earlier he writes that “poetry has a wider range, that there are beauties at its command which painting is never able to attain” (50), and that the visual artists are constrained by a necessity that poetry overcomes by invention (60-62).

Lessing further clinches his bias in favor of poetry with his hypothesis that “if the lesser cannot contain the greater, it can itself be contained in the greater.” He hereby asserts that descriptive poetry (“the greater”) possesses the capability to incorporate “every trait” of the visual art (“the lesser”) into itself; apparently the inverse does not hold true for painting (41). Because he subscribes to the idea that there is an “immediacy” to images, a “natural” connection between an image and one’s

understanding of it, Lessing implicates not just producers, but consumers of visual arts, too, as somehow “simpler” than their counterparts in the verbal arts.

Yet if something as “simple” as a smile can potentially be misinterpreted as a “universal sign of pleasure,” as Steiner records (*Colors of Rhetoric* 25), then how much more so are “complex” visual cues contained in paintings, drawings, engravings, statuary, photographs, film, and video subject to multiple interpretations. Mitchell elaborates: “[C]ontrary to common belief, images ‘proper’ are not stable, static, or permanent in any metaphysical sense; they are not perceived in the same way by viewers any more than are dream images; and they are not exclusively visual in any important way, but involve multisensory apprehension and interpretation” (*Iconology* 13-14). Those who argue for the superiority of text over images need to be reminded that ever since the fourteenth-century invention of the printing press, language has been inextricably linked to visual representation; speech relies heavily on printed words for its transmission. Thus, in order to read, one must inevitably look “through” printed arrangements of the alphabet. Although society on the whole accentuates the fact that one learns to read by matching sounds to visual characteristics of first the alphabet, then consonant-vowel combinations, and finally word strings, it often minimizes any correspondent cumulative development in visual perception. (In an effort to counterbalance that oversight, a number of museums now offer tours that teach visitors how to “see” and appreciate works of art by teaching them a vocabulary that allows them to articulate what they see.)

Essentially, the notion that images are simpler and more immediate than words is a throwback to ritual practices. In primitive rituals, participants identify the spiritual

significance and signification of a ceremonial object with its actual, material existence, so that the object seems “an instrument of magic” in and of itself (Benjamin 577). The signified is ignored while the signifier is venerated. Contemporary society offers a parallel in that more often than not an objectified celebrity — and his/her popular culture icon, in turn — “becomes a fetish ... in the root sense of an object believed to have magical power” (Shumway 138). The object’s (or objectified celebrity’s) value no longer derives from what it represents, but it resides in the object (or celebrity) itself; in other words, the object becomes a fetish. Moreover, because of its supposed “immediacy,” the image is thought to acquire a seductive power of its own, and to charm its viewers into “unreasoning reverence or devotion” (*Gage*).

Present-day fetishism, however, diverges from its precursor’s pattern via an economic investment. Unlike a primitive society which readily acknowledges that an object is magical, a capitalist society constantly “projects” special “consciousness” and abilities onto and into commodities and then deliberately forget “that act of projection,” going so far as to deny that their fetishes are fetishes, and “that there is anything magical about [them]” (Mitchell, *Iconology* 192-93). Peter Stromberg applies his theory directly to popular culture icons in “Elvis Alive?: The Ideology of American Consumerism.” Convinced that popular culture icons signify more than a “throwback” to religious ideology, Stromberg asserts that star-gazing incites not a belief in “supernatural beings,” but rather in “a larger framework ... that imparts to that experience some sort of [economic] meaning” (12). According to this theory, popular culture icons mediate

between this “mundane earth” and a “perfect version of the future,” holding out a hope of an attainable “better life” in the here and now through purchases (13, 17-18).

Stromberg and Mitchell thus implicitly support Benjamin’s observation that in the avid collector — even in the casual collector, one might add — one detects vestiges of the fetishist (Benjamin 575n8). Collectors treat collectibles with reverence, just as though the “magic” that transformed another human being into a spectacular celebrity somehow resides in these material objects and could transform them as well. Consider the 27 October 1999 auction sale of Monroe’s property which fetched over \$13 million (Christie’s) for items ranging from Monroe’s Connecticut driver’s licence to the Jean Louis dress she wore when she sang “Happy Birthday” to President Kennedy (“Golden Girl” 52-65). The urge to connect spiritually or emotionally with popular culture icons is often mysteriously generated by the purchase of concrete items associated with them.

Out of the many objects human beings fetishize and then “forget” that they fetishize, photographs are likely the most popular. A person often proudly says of a snapshot, “This is my family,” or “This is Parliament Hill,” for example. The individual assumes that others will understand that these are, in fact, representations of people and places. And in the case of a popular culture icon, whereas most individuals do not believe that a poster or photograph is actually a celebrity, their manner of describing this popular art form betrays them, for they say, for example, “That’s Marilyn Monroe.” No one believes that the flat, two-dimensional paper object is Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962), but on the surface, the metaphor/metonym implies exactly this: the picture is the (absent) body. Conveniently enough, everyone forgets the “fetishization.”

Although other media allow for image-fetishizing, the photograph, according to Barthes, is an exception, for “*it is a message without a code.*” All visual representations, he asserts in *Image—Music—Text*, are comprised of a denoted message and a connoted message: The first term Barthes identifies as the *analogon*, the physical thing that the visual representation represents; the second term refers to the societal or cultural meanings attached to the image (17). As he further explains:

Of all the structures of information, the photograph appears as the only one that is exclusively constituted and occupied by a “denoted” message, a message which totally exhausts its mode of existence. In front of a photograph, the feeling of “denotation”, or, if one prefers, of analogical plenitude, is so great that the description of a photograph is literally impossible; *to describe* consists precisely in joining to the denoted message ... a connotation; to describe is thus not simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is to change structures, to signify something different to what is shown. (*Image-Music-Text* 18-19)

The difficulty with such a definition of the photograph, as Barthes himself acknowledges, is that coded and non-coded messages cannot be separated from each other, for they “share the same (iconic) substance,” with the result that “the viewer of the image receives *at one and the same time* the perceptual message and the cultural message” (*Image-Music-Text* 36).

No message can be strictly “perceptual,” then, according to Barthes, since a viewer’s perception of images is itself already culturally influenced. Mitchell, in fact,



makes a similar statement when he relates that Alberti's introduction of "artificial perspective" circa 1435 has so influenced subsequent generations that its "artificiality" is now accepted as the "natural" choice of representation (*Iconology* 37). By the same token, certain popular culture icons are so intertwined with the overall North American culture that it seems only "natural" that others should recognize them, too.

To allay his uneasiness about the photograph's place within the larger scope of representation — an uneasiness that prompts Benjamin to shy away from photography and write instead about film — Barthes chooses to concentrate on photographs in the press and in advertisements because they appear alongside text and therefore express "intentional" signification (*Image-Music-Text* 33). According to Barthes, the verbal text, be it a headline, a caption, or an article, accompanying the two types of photographs "remote-controls" the perceiver towards certain economic or ideological ends (*Image-Music-Text* 19, 40). Like Mitchell, Barthes, and Benjamin, I prefer to address composite image/texts — images that are very obviously related to texts — in discussing popular culture icons. Because the "intentionality" is more readily decipherable in those instances, perhaps language does not co-opt the images to the extent that it would if there were no text visibly associated with them.

Earlier, I mentioned that when the image is fetishized, it signifies both material "immediacy" and the danger of one being attracted to it and seduced by it. The comparative terms theorists employ in the image/text relationship debate further complicate the issue. In Mitchell's opinion, the strict limits or boundaries which Lessing's *Laocoön* imposes upon artistic genres and which are then picked up as

touchstones by subsequent interarts theorists (*Iconology* 96) rest on “probably the most fundamental ideological basis ... namely, the laws of gender” (*Iconology* 109). After combing *Laocoön* for embedded binaries, Mitchell concludes that Lessing’s incessant pursuit of artistic “decorum” arises from an implicit attempt to define “proper sex roles” (*Iconology* 109). The following chart (abridged from *Iconology* 110) underscores that “arguments about the arts” indeed “tend to be displaced discussions of other matters” (Hinz, “Introduction” iii). Lessing aligns the arts in this way:

Painting	Poetry
Space	Time
Natural signs	Arbitrary (man-made) signs
Body	Mind
Silent	Eloquent
Beauty	Sublimity
Eye	Ear
Feminine	Masculine
Blurred genres	Distinct genres

Lessing’s overriding purpose in *Laocoön* is to encourage his fellow Germans to pattern their art after the “manliness” of German and English models, and to avoid French “effeminate” art with its “play of pretty eyes” at any cost (Mitchell, *Iconology* 105; Lessing 27, 31). Note that he aligns “poetry” and “eloquent” with “masculine,” while “painting” and “silent” line up with “feminine.” In direct contrast to Simonides, who before him promoted generic similarities, Lessing champions generic differences, with the result that for centuries after *him*, still deeply ingrained in the Western imagination is a tendency to reserve the function of the active artist, the eloquent subject, for

“masculine” persons, and to privilege it over the silent, passive art object, construed as “feminine.” It is a short leap, furthermore, to replace “feminine” with “women,” since members of society for the most part still expect gender, that is, socialized sexual behavior, to correspond to biology (genetic sexual identity). This model has frequently been manipulated so as to render women as dangerously seductive, simple-minded, and feeble-bodied objects.

Various feminist theorists (and I use “feminist” in the broadest sense of the term possible) have devised strategies to challenge the long-standing notion, popularized by Lessing, that aligns woman with “silent picture” and man with “spoken word.” They encounter great difficulty, however, when they try to undercut or overturn this idea, for binary terms are more often than not used to construct woman in negative terms. For example, if we align “feminine” with “natural,” then what is “feminine” appears to be more immediately accessible, less complex, to the extent that it may seem “simple” or “base.” But on the other hand, if we insist that “feminine” is not “natural,” the feminine either becomes “masculinized,” or is construed as feminine but “duplicitous.” Although a gendered division of characteristics such as the one above affects all individuals, men as well as women, women celebrities especially are “always ‘on trial’ for their femininity” (Haskell 44). This is no new concept: already by the eighteenth century the way for actresses to establish their “personal credibility” was “through the trope of motherhood” and biographers of that era “frequently seem palpably relieved when their subjects’ sexual lives conform more or less comfortably to domestic roles” (Straub 93).

While the boundaries that delimit “proper sex roles” are certainly more relaxed now than they once were, twentieth-century individuals have struggled within themselves and against each other in relation to where they stand on this particular political issue. As Estella Lauter argues in describing a course she designed entitled “Images of Women in Contemporary Arts: Interart Discourse with a Social Dimension,” we need to recognize “the arts as vehicles for cultural change” (130). And since “many women in the arts have drawn their creative inspiration or courage from female figures imagined or real,” Lauter emphasizes that we need to examine “the ways women have intervened in the image-making process to extend and change culturally accepted images” (130-33).

In addition to masking Lessing’s distaste for indistinct gender roles, his arguments for artistic decorum contain nationalist undercurrents, as well, for he frequently aligns poetry with German and English “manliness” and painting with French “refinement” (Mitchell, *Iconology* 110). It is not merely coincidental, then, that the French, Germany’s “friendly neighbors” to the West, receive the brunt of Lessing’s “slight aggressions.” Even the primary conversation piece of Lessing’s essay accentuates the connection between nationalism and art: he selects a statue depicting Laocoön, the priest who in book two of *The Aeneid* voices suspicion of gift-bearing Greeks and strikes out against the Trojan Horse. As a result of Laocoön’s resistance to the plot from which a new nation, the Roman Empire, will ensue, sea-serpents strangle Laocoön and his sons. So although Lessing believes that the goal of the arts is, first and foremost, to impart pleasure, he demonstrates an awareness of the “inevitable influence they exert on the character of a nation” (14-15).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Dumb Blondes & Wisecracking Brunettes: Iconic Performance in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes***

The “dumb blonde” is as endearing a stereotype as she is an enduring one within Western folklore. Her towheadedness is interpreted as a sign of light-headedness, making her the brunt of many a joke that emphasizes her physical attractiveness while denigrating her sensibility, sexuality, and intellect. It was in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, her twentieth film, that Marilyn Monroe, in acting the part of the gold-digger Lorelei Lee, became the most memorable blonde in the twentieth century up to that date. In introducing a televised replay of the movie, one in a series of 1997 special broadcasts by Women’s Television Network that celebrated “women of the screen,” Arvel Gray noted that this film represented a milestone in Monroe’s career for two reasons: it provided Monroe with her “first starring role in a musical,” and it “helped establish a formula of the dumb and convenient blonde,” a role that Monroe reprised in a number of subsequent movies.

As a matter of fact, the actress was so successful in the role that audiences and critics and theorists alike regarded the performance as inseparable from Monroe herself. One such critic at the time, for example, was Philip Hartung who, in a review of the film that appeared in the 7 August 1953 issue of *Commonweal*, declared that Monroe’s “build and empty, pretty face are the very personification of” Lorelei (442). With this film,

Monroe became the new sex symbol, the American icon of 1950s womanhood. Further “cementing” her stardom was an invitation to commemorate *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, together with co-star Jane Russell, in a long-standing Hollywood tradition: they left their handprints, footprints, and autographs in wet concrete in the forecourt of Grauman’s Chinese Theatre.

In order to appreciate the significance of the Monroe icon for femininity in the twenty-first century, one should begin by noting that until recently, locating strong icons of womanhood in films like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was, it seems, an unthinkable or absurd undertaking. In theory, such films perpetuate the dominant male culture: featuring showgirls, they so obviously indulge the male gaze that fixes women as objects of fantasy. Only within the last ten to twenty years or so have theorists, especially feminist film theorists, begun to consider new ways of looking at old films in order to “recoup from male culture some of the pleasure” of the performance (Arbuthnot & Seneca 112). In the case of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, for instance, reclamation has stressed the collaborative allegiance of the two female protagonists and their denial of the male gaze, and has tried to discover feminist subversiveness in the visual and kinesthetic components of film — “the hourglass figure, the lush, full body of Fifties fashion,” (Turim 106), body language, use of space, costume, camera angles, and lighting (Arbuthnot & Seneca 121-22). While this focus on the visual is understandable, given that the conventional and more telling label for films is “motion pictures,” such visual aspects need to be evaluated in conjunction with carefully scripted and scored dialogic and lyrical components to a greater extent than what they have been. Real women

require representations of womanhood that are not only visible, but visibly vocal, voicing women's desires.

Before it became the film touted as the vehicle that launched Marilyn Monroe's career, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* went through other incarnations, and began indeed in a verbal medium — as a short satirical sketch by Anita Loos. In "The Biography of a Book," her 1963 introduction to the novel, Loos recounts that she penned the satire after noting that the "entire male assemblage" in whose company she was travelling from New York to Los Angeles, "waited on, catered to and cajoled" a "witless blonde" actress for the length of the journey (11). Loos's blonde heroine was loosely based upon one of the many blonde romantic partners of her friend H.L. Mencken, who when he read "the rumpled and smudged pages of [her] little critique" good-humoredly encouraged Loos to publish it. Other stories followed, serialized in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1925 (Loos 14-16). The collection of simulated diary entries were shortly thereafter published in book form, also in 1925, which Loos and her husband, John Emerson, later transcribed into a Broadway play starring June Walker in 1926. Two years later, in 1928, Paramount Studios made a silent film of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in which Ruth Taylor, an unknown actress, starred, and Malcom St. Clair directed. Following that, Loos and Joseph Fields wrote the adaptation for the 1949 Broadway musical starring Carol Channing (Turim 101-02; Mantle 388; Chapman 363-64; Mulvey, "Gentlemen" 217). In 1953, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* once again underwent a transformation at the hand of Charles Lederer and emerged on the big screen as a musical comedy, in Technicolor, under the direction of Howard Hawks.

Loos's 1925 novel details the exploits of flappers and former cinema starlets Lorelei Lee and Dorothy Shaw, as Lorelei records them in her diary, a gift from one of her many male admirers. The two women "hunger to be fully accepted into society" (Barreca vii), and invest an enormous amount of energy in persuading rich gentlemen to take them shopping and dancing. In response to Lorelei's declaration that she intends to marry one of her many wealthy suitors, Gus Eisman, her "sugar daddy" and self-appointed educational programmer, discourages her, convincing her instead to take an "educational" tour of London and Paris with Dorothy. The two gold-diggers soon teach European gentlemen that kisses on the hand may make girls "feel very very good but a diamond and safire bracelet lasts forever" (Loos 80). Lorelei's greatest feat is to manipulate Sir Francis "Piggie" Beekman into purchasing a diamond tiara for her, which doesn't rest well with Lady Beekman. Lorelei and Dorothy outwit Lady Beekman with an "imitation" diamond tiara just as surely as they outwit the rest of society by imitating certain attitudes and emotions to gain the upper hand in other similar situations. Finally, Lorelei meets up with Mr. Henry H. Spoffard, the "very very wealthy" Pennsylvanian Presbyterian censor on a train in Central Europe, out of whom she charms a marriage proposal in short order (Loos 104). After weighing her alternatives, Lorelei ultimately agrees to marry Henry, whom she straightaway persuades to finance her return to the screen.

Loos's heroines are calculating young women who rely on a veneer of vulnerability to "commandeer power while seeming to wield none" (Barreca viii). Lorelei's journal entries reveal a psychic mixture of naiveté and shrewdness: on the one



hand, she writes that she was told by one Judge Hibbard that “my name ought to be Lorelei which is the name of a girl who became famous for sitting on a rock in Germany” (Loos 48), a quintessential “dumb blonde” remark. On the other hand, she constructs a Miltonic argument about her past escapades, recording that she told Spoffard “that I thought a girl was really more reformed if she knew what it was to be unreformed than if she was born reformed and never really knew what was the matter with her” (123). Furthermore, as a smart gold-digger, she photographs Spoffard’s letter containing the marriage proposal as a precautionary measure, should Spoffard happen to “change his mind, and desert a girl,” for then “it would only be right if a girl should sue him for a breach of promise” (129). As Regina Barreca’s introduction to the 1998 reprint of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* explains, Lorelei and Dorothy, “are far from professional courtesans. Of equal importance is the fact that they are also as far as can be imagined from the pitifully bedraggled fallen women penned (and penned in) by male novelists. Loos’s Lorelei and Dorothy didn’t fall into vice; they jumped. The leap was a fortunate one” (xvii).

By contrast, Howard Hawks’s 1953 musical lacks the “brittle, petty humour of Anita Loos’s book,” according to Robin Wood (qtd. in Mulvey, “*Gentlemen*” 215), perhaps because whereas Loos’s novel undermines the status quo, Hawk’s film appears to follow the “screwball comedy” formula, which “by and large celebrated the sanctity of marriage, class distinction and the domination of women by men” (Sklar 187-88). According to Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak’s overview of the United States in *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, that status quo was defined by consensus and

consumerism (128-29). Describing the American milieu of this period, they note that post-war big business flourished, religious interest hit an “all-time high,” and men and women were taught to “function properly” in accordance with their “sexual roles” (127, 85, 151). For women this meant centring their attentions on “men, marriage, and family,” and Miller and Nowak observe that Hollywood did its best to reflect and reinforce “the dominant sexism of the age” (330).

Nevertheless, in comparing Hawk’s film to Loos’s novel, film theorist Laura Mulvey enthusiastically notes that “as an auteur director, with his idiosyncratic attitude to women and to comedy, [Hawks] was able to preserve something of the liberated 20s into the repressive 50s” (“*Gentlemen*” 215). The auteur director was regarded as an “artist” in his own right, in control of the movie, although Hawks, it is said, encouraged “his collaborators to throw out ideas until he got a scene exactly the way he wanted it. He rarely stuck strictly to his script while shooting, always looking for ways of introducing a new element into familiar material, trying to improve material which had already passed the test of time” (Wollen 1, 3). Perhaps no one would be more surprised than Hawks himself at the interest *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* still generates among film and literary theorists with regard to the creation of Monroe and Russell as sex symbols. On his part, the film “was a complete caricature, a travesty on sex. It didn’t have normal sex. [. . .] We purposely made the picture as loud and bright as we could, and completely vulgar in costumes and everything” (Bogdanovich 63).

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the musical comedy, features five songs in total, only three of which derive from the sixteen included in the 1949 Broadway version. Loos’s

original narrative plot underlies the film, but changes to details — some subtle, others not-so-subtle — make it palatable for the 1950s. The film's premise casts Lorelei (Marilyn Monroe) and Dorothy (Jane Russell) as two showgirls, whose voices are just as important as their bodies — “objects continually on display for us” (Turim 101). In this version, too, the women embark on a “trans-atlantic sea voyage” financed by Mr. Gus Esmond (Arbuthnot & Seneca 116); however, along with the new anglicized surname (it was formerly Eisman), Gus (actor Tommy Noonan) has undergone a change of heart. Instead of the influential Button King businessman of 1925, who is, as Loos's Lorelei pronounces, “against a girl being in the cinema because his mother is authrodox” (22), this 1950s Gus is Lorelei's timid fiancé, looking to obtain his wealthy father's blessing upon his upcoming nuptials. Gus arranges for Russell/Dorothy to chaperone Monroe/Lorelei until he can meet up with them in Europe for the wedding ceremony.

Her own future settled, Monroe/Lorelei determines to locate a wealthy husband for her best friend and stage partner; Russell/Dorothy, however, is more interested in marrying for love than money, and with the U.S. Olympic team on-board as fellow passengers, her prospects increase. Meanwhile Detective Ernie Malone (Elliott Reid) has been hired by Mr. Esmond, Sr. to keep an eye on gold-digging blonde Monroe/Lorelei, and to report anything of a “scandalous” nature — anything to prevent his son from marrying “that monster” — but finds himself developing a romantic attachment to her brunette friend, thereby placing his investigation in jeopardy of discovery. The diamond-collecting Monroe/Lorelei manages to charm Sir Francis “Piggie” Beekman into presenting her with Lady Beekman's tiara, but not before Malone has snapped some

incriminating photographs of the two. This sets in motion a string of events that leave the two heroines without credit in France, so they once again fall back on their stage performances. At the precise moment that Gus reappears only to insist that he is through with Monroe/Lorelei once and for all, the police come to arrest her for theft of the diamond tiara. Russell/Dorothy substitutes herself for Monroe/Lorelei at the trial, mimicking the attire and mannerisms of her friend; with Malone's help she procures an acquittal for Monroe/Lorelei. Meanwhile, at the same time, at another location, Monroe/Lorelei manages to win over the senior Mr. Esmond, winning his consent in the matter of her marriage to Gus. An elaborate double-wedding scene on-board ship concludes the movie: Russell/Dorothy and Malone, and the reconciled Gus and Monroe/Lorelei "commit holy matrimony" (Russell/Dorothy's earlier quip).

\* \* \* \* \*

The film retains the very basic plot established in the novel — blonde goes on and ocean voyage, blonde finds herself in trouble because of diamond tiara, blonde's trouble resolved, blonde marries a wealthy gentleman — a tribute to Loos's remarkable sense of playfulness towards convention. In both novel and film, Lorelei and Dorothy undertake the journey, the mythic quest: in so doing, they resist a tradition dating back to Homer's Odyssey, in which the male embarks upon a voyage, while his female counterpart remains stationary, or as Barthes writes: "Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises)" (*A Lover's Discourse* 13-14). Woman's fidelity, not man's, is suspect throughout the novel and

film. The mythical voyage is further reversed insofar as Lorelei and Dorothy are setting out for the old world, just as they try to break into the world of old society. Nevertheless, changes in the details and in other characters update the 1920s novel for a 1950s film audience, and in so doing have an impact on the significance of femininity that has not gone unnoticed by a number of film theorists, many of whom find attractive the ways in which Monroe as Lorelei and Russell as Dorothy offer alternatives within conventional 1950s gender roles.

Describing traditional standards, for example, Laura Mulvey notes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. (“Visual Pleasure” 19)

This alignment of active/male/verbal and passive/female/visual has, however, prompted two opposite reactions. In the last twenty or so years, film theorists like Mulvey, Maureen Turim, and the more militant Amy Lawrence, have suggested that resistance to male objectification should take the form of speech, and thus entail realignment and downplaying of the visual. In contrast, looking back to the early years of film in the

1920s, Paul Tiessen discovers a positive and even self-asserted affinity of women and the visual. As he sees it, male modernist writers were generally opposed to film, which they felt threatened to “vulgarize art,” while female modernist writers of the time expressed “active and explicit enthusiasm” for the new medium, regarding film as potentially “stimulating a narrative form that existed outside the realm of verbal discourse,” that is, “free of spoken or written language” (18-19, 22). For such female modernists, it was the female, rather than the male, who was whole, continuous, and cohesive, and it was within such a literary environment that Loos wrote *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*; coincidentally, it also corresponds to the time that Hawks’s Hollywood career began (Mulvey, “*Gentlemen*” 215-16). Theorists like Lucie Arbutnot and Gail Seneca recognize the value of this second approach, and so they applaud the ways in which *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* checks male desire through visual and not verbal cues: through women’s body language, in other words (113).

In spite of the 1950s conservative attitude towards sexuality, especially women’s sexuality — manifested in the strict movie censorship code of the time that even went so far as to specify with regard to bumps and grinds that “bumps may only go backward and not forward; grinds must grind from side to side and not around and around” (Alpert 28) — Mulvey finds that the 1953 *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* manages to retain “something of the liberated 20s” (“*Gentlemen*” 215), at least for the female characters. In fact, the film reinvents the femininity of the 1920s for the 1950s by elaborating upon the relationships within and between the sexes of Loos’s 1925 novel. First, and most conspicuously, the film depends upon not one but two female leads, with the result that

Dorothy becomes a character in her own right. Wise-cracking Dorothy is present in the novel, and receives more attention its sequel, *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, but only insofar as Lorelei chooses to record in her diary her dismay at her friend's "unrefined" words and behavior. By contrast, the film distributes power more equally between the two. Other than that Monroe/Lorelei is blonde and Russell/Dorothy brunette, the two women are fairly evenly matched: in physical proportions — both are buxom which represents the "mammary madness," or fixation upon female breasts, common of, but not limited to, the 1950s (Mulvey, "*Gentlemen*" 215; Arbuthnot & Seneca 118); in their singing ability; and in their comedic abilities.

As showgirls, who actively invite the male gaze, Arbuthnot and Seneca note that Monroe/Lorelei and Russell/Dorothy return it, too. They write:

Socially it is the prerogative of men to gaze at women and the requirement of women to avert our eyes in submission. The initiation of the gaze signals superiority over the subordinate. Clearly, in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, men do gaze at women; Monroe and Russell are spectacles for male attention. However, Monroe and Russell refuse to signal submission by averting their eyes; rather, they return the look. As Monroe and Russell walk through a sea of admiring spectators, they also actively search the crowd. Through their active and searching look, they appropriate the space around them, refusing to yield it to the male gaze.

(116-17)

As they go on to note, not only do Monroe/Lorelei and Russell/Dorothy contest the male gaze, but they validate the female gaze: they exchange knowing glances, and “[e]ven when they are with men, their gaze reflects their affection for each other”; moreover, in their musical numbers together, “their look signals their focus on each other” (121).

Arbuthnot and Seneca find that directorial choices for camera angles, costume, and lighting underscore the female characters’ allegiance to, and protectiveness of, each other in the plot, such as in the scene in which Russell/Dorothy stands trial in Monroe/Lorelei’s stead. Arbuthnot and Seneca approve of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* because it “presents women who not only resist male objectification, but who also cherish deeply their connections with each other”; this possibility, they claim, “invites the female viewer to join them, through identification, in valuing other women” (113). In other words, even though Russell/Dorothy and Monroe/Lorelei are inversions or alter egos of each other, they do take steps toward introducing feminine diversity.

Selected secondary male characters of the novel are also fleshed out in the 1950s version, but in such a way as to diminish their importance and elevate the women’s. Time and again, their “masculinity” is undermined in the film. In fact, in the very first scene of the film, Gus’s “thick glasses” and “timid wave” (Mulvey, “*Gentlemen*” 225) effectually disarm him of authoritative male gaze and action; this is further suggested by the way that he kowtows to his wealth-wielding father’s wishes. Hawks’s version also tidies up the relationship between Gus and Monroe/Lorelei, by making him her fiancé, and by projecting the 1925 Esmond’s “dishonorable intentions” (i.e., sexual “education”



outside of marriage) onto Sir Francis Beekman. From a 1925 “sugar daddy” Gus transforms into a 1953 “daddy’s boy.”

Likewise, Sir Francis Beekman, better known as “Piggie,” undergoes a transformation from a penny-pinching stand-offish chap to a jolly, elderly man of portly bearing (who to all appearances enjoys his port; “Note the ruby red eyes,” jokes one fellow passenger). The Piggie of the film, like the Piggie of the novel, is a pushover — a perfect “pigeon,” one gentleman at the bar points out to Russell/Dorothy, and in both the film and novel, Lorelei persuades Piggie to present her with a diamond tiara in relatively short order. Despite his questionable intentions, Hawks’s “doddering old fool” with his diminutive animal nickname poses no real threat to Monroe/Lorelei’s supposed sexual innocence. The same can be said of Malone, a detective hired by Mr. Esmond, Sr., to shadow Monroe/Lorelei and report any instances of her sexual impropriety. Malone’s romantic inclinations tend not towards Monroe/Lorelei but towards Russell/Dorothy, not to mention that his lack of wealth would equate him with male impotence in the former’s opinion (Mulvey, “*Gentlemen*” 226). Nevertheless, if Malone detects “even a hint of scandal,” Monroe/Lorelei stands to lose her innocent reputation in the eyes of her fiancé and her father-in-law-to-be. As it turns out, Malone does take incriminating photographs of Monroe/Lorelei, but the women, in the process of retrieving the photographic film, metaphorically emasculate him by stealing his pants and dressing him in Russell/Dorothy’s frilly bathrobe, further compromising his masculinity (Mulvey, “*Gentlemen*” 226).

Additionally, Mr. Henry Spoffard of Pennsylvania, Lorelei's rich suitor and eventual husband in 1925, is replaced in 1953 by a young child of approximately eight years of age (played by George Winslow), who despite his youth exemplifies a maturity beyond his years. He tells Russell/Dorothy that he is "old enough to know a pretty girl" when he sees one, and then adds, "This promises to be quite a trip." In a later scene, he chides Monroe/Lorelei for spending time with that "doddering old fool," Piggie: "Can't you see his intentions are not honorable?" he asks. In any event, whether they are too old, too young, or even just the right age for the women, "the male characters are all," in one way or another, "drained of erotic allure" observes Mulvey ("*Gentlemen*" 225): nary a one is a match for the dynamic duo of Monroe/Lorelei and Russell/Dorothy.

Aside from studying the implications for femininity that occur as a result of crossing from one time and medium to another, one can also approach the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as a synthesis of image, text, and music, to note how the inherent tensions between these media are used to promote a strong identity for the two female leads. Convention states that the 1950s male is in control of the gaze, that his word is authoritative, that he is the active half of the male/female binary: Monroe/Lorelei and Russell/Dorothy set out to change all that. Frequently, for instance, the traditionally female "object" draws the male gaze towards herself in a deliberate move, thereby controlling the male gaze, and avoiding becoming controlled by it (Sikov 67, 76); body language is essential to this strategy. At other times, she speaks into, around, and overtop of the speaking male(s), interrupting or disrupting male authority; puns and wisecracks are her weapons. Still at other times, she both postures and sings, sending mixed media

signals and mixed signals of intent; the musical numbers provide evidence. All are tactics of resistance to male domination which are used in varying combinations throughout the film.

One of the first of these examples of female resistance to male authority occurs when Gus is taking leave of Monroe/Lorelei on-board ship. Gus means to impart to his betrothed a few last-minute instructions on proper behavior, so that his father will have no cause to object to his son's engagement to her. His fiancée, however, curtails Gus's admonitions with her inattention: she is enrapt in testing the bedsprings' bounce. By using body language to "distract" Gus, Monroe/Lorelei actively impedes Gus's voice, indexical of the father's (his financially influential father's) desires and commands.

The speaking male subject is effectively silenced a second time to advance women's positions and grant them permission to speak, when Monroe/Lorelei and Russell/Dorothy make their grand entrance to the dining-room for their first dinner aboard ship, rendering the garrulous Piggie suddenly speechless, arrested in mid-anecdote. "Well, go on," urges Lady Beekman. Piggie, however, gazes, jaw agape, at the two women, Monroe/Lorelei in a striking strapless orange gown, Russell/Dorothy in a black, deep v-necked one (both designed to enhance their feminine allure). The violinist in the orchestra, too, is affected: he leans to his right for a better view, mistakenly striking his bow against the neighboring cellist's instrument, for which he receives an exasperated glare.

While such visual shenanigans lead the viewer to expect little more than that the two women will figure as decorative centrepieces at their dinner table where five male

guests await them, once introductions have been dispensed with, Monroe/Lorelei initiates dinner conversation, rattling off successive questions at rapid-fire speed: “You’re Mr. Franklin, aren’t you? Are you enjoying your trip?” “How many times have you crossed?” “Don’t you feel alone out on a big ocean?” Without granting any of the gentlemen sufficient time to answer completely, she instead smiles winsomely and remarks, “I just adore conversation, don’t you?” (see Fig. 1). Following this one-sided colloquy, the maitre d’ announces the arrival of Mr. Henry Spoffard the Third. Monroe/Lorelei, with a quick “Pardon me for whispering” to the men, pleads with Russell/Dorothy to “make a good impression” upon their new dinner companion. Since the camera moves in for a close-up of the women’s faces during this brief aside, there is no way to confirm whether the males continue their earlier dinner conversation, but one can hear no background voice.

Mr. Henry Spoffard III turns out to be a young boy (with impeccable table manners), a twist of fate that leaves Monroe/Lorelei herself speechless, aghast that her good intentions on her friend’s behalf have gone amiss. Russell/Dorothy, however, never misses a beat. Echoing Monroe/Lorelei’s earlier flattering words to Piggie, she exchanges pleasantries with Mr. Spoffard III: “Pardon my saying so, but having heard so much about you and all, I was expecting you to be much older.” To which he replies, “I’m old enough to know a pretty girl when I see one, and this promises to be quite the trip,” to which in turn she shoots a “How’m I doing?” over his head to Monroe/Lorelei. Four times within a matter of minutes, then, females disarm male dominance: once via body language that controls the male gaze; once by means of direct speech, which refuses

to admit the male voice; once via the indirect speech of a whisper that conceals female intention; and once by imitating an earlier pattern of female speech that had already proven effective at weakening masculine defenses.

No doubt it is Monroe/Lorelei's third effort to stifle the male voice that leads many viewers to superimpose the character of Lorelei upon Monroe herself, especially since Monroe/Lorelei's mention of the "terrible troubles" that she has survived are reminiscent of some of the interviews in which Monroe claimed she had been beset by difficulties on account of the various men — studio executives, directors, producers, her three husbands — who tried to control her. In this scene, Gus has learned of Monroe/Lorelei's flirtatious relationship with Piggie from Malone, and has consequently cancelled the women's hotel reservations, refusing to take further financial responsibility for them. During Gus's visit to the backstage dressing-room at Chez Louis, Lorelei coolly informs Gus that she "won't let [her]self fall in love with a man who won't trust [her] no matter what [she] might do." As she flounces off to wardrobe, she answers his charge that she is unreasonable with, "It's men like *you* who have made *me* the way *I* am, and if *you* loved *me* at all *you'd* feel sorry for the terrible troubles *I've* been through, instead of holding them against *me*. No, don't say another word" (emphasis mine).

A bemused Gus, his eyebrows raised and his lips opening and closing as if he would like to retort but cannot find the words, turns towards Russell/Dorothy. "I wasn't gonna' say anything," he offers abjectly. Whereas Monroe/Lorelei uses the pronoun "you" three times, she uses the two pronouns "I" and "me" five times within this harangue; as well, she checks any anticipated words from Gus. Her words and actions

have a cumulative effect: by the end of this scene, the audience is aware that Monroe/Lorelei is determined to be in control of her own narrative. Asserting her own subjectivity, she refuses to be contained within that sphere that the Esmonds (Sr. and Jr.) have deemed “woman.”

As a brunette, Russell/Dorothy’s political victories pale in comparison to Monroe/Lorelei’s, primarily because she does not need to struggle against the “dumb blonde” stereotype; the film is entitled *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, after all. Russell/Dorothy’s intelligence is never a point in question, but if accordingly she is given more leeway with respect to behavior and speech, what she conversely valiantly attempts to guard behind her image and words is her tendency to lose her heart too easily to handsome young men. As a self-protective measure she puts up verbal resistance to male dominance, although her body language sometimes betrays her. Near the beginning of the film, for instance, Russell/Dorothy finds Monroe/Lorelei reclining in a deck chair, reviewing the ship’s passenger list:

LORELEI: Mr. Amos Jones and valet. Mr. Alfred Lowman and valet.

DOROTHY: What are you doing?

LORELEI: Mr. Eugene Martin and valet.

DOROTHY: Why the sudden interest in valets?

LORELEI: When a man has “and valet” after his name, he’s definitely worthwhile. I’m simply trying to find a suitable gentleman escort for you.

They exchange a few words on the topic of love and marriage in the interim, during which time it becomes plainly evident that Russell/Dorothy wants romantic, sexual love, whereas Monroe/Lorelei want a relationship that is financially secure. They return to the earlier conversational thread:

LORELEI: Here's a good one: Henry Spoffard the Third and valet. I remember reading the Spoffard family owns practically a whole state. A big one, too. I think it's Pennsylvania.

DOROTHY: (Dorothy applies lipstick.) Well, I guess I could settle for Pennsylvania.

LORELEI: Hello there, Mrs. Henry Spoffard the Third.

DOROTHY: Mrs. Henry Spoffard the Third *and valet*. He's not going to have anything I don't have.

Malone, who has at this point already expressed interest in Russell/Dorothy, and is skulking near the doorway, is privy to this declaration, so if Russell/Dorothy has observed his reflection in her compact mirror while applying lipstick, she issues these lines as a challenge to him. The lipstick functions as both an invitation (to romantic kisses) and as a defiant "war paint," suggesting thereby that Russell/Dorothy is decreeing that she will not consider a relationship that is anything less than fully egalitarian. If she has detected the eavesdropping detective, as one suspects she has, her words are meant to be a test of his intentions towards her.

There are, of course, other instances when Russell/Dorothy resists the dominant male narrative. When she and Malone stroll along the deck in the moonlight, she denies

him the right to speak ill of Monroe/Lorelei: "Nobody talks about Lorelei but me," she confronts him. As a means of diverting the conversation, she impishly suggests that she would like to talk about Ernie Malone for a change. While his response is designed to curtail this line of inquiry — he says he has been thinking about kissing her — she, in turn, effectively silences any further thoughts that Malone might want to reveal by "initiat[ing] the kiss," as Arbuthnot and Seneca point out. They add that despite the film's quick cut to a shot privileging Malone's completion of the action, Russell/Dorothy, like Monroe/Lorelei, initiates relationships with men, which "make[s] it impossible for men to act upon them" (117, 119).

Perhaps Russell/Dorothy's role as active and undermining agent is best observed in the courtroom scene, when she masquerades in a blonde wig as Monroe/Lorelei, and convinces the presiding Judge that "she" has not stolen the Beekmans' diamond tiara. The case is dismissed after Russell/Dorothy-as-Lorelei successfully persuades Malone to protect Monroe/Lorelei and to conceal the true identity of Russell/Dorothy. Her special brand of persuasion is to confess, as a well-bred woman of the times should not, that "Dorothy thinks she's falling in love with him." Immediately, Malone retracts his earlier interruption and resigns from his investigation with the words, "Judge, I've changed my mind. I haven't anything to say." Russell/Dorothy renders Malone speechless with her speech, thereby escaping judgment, and saving herself and Monroe/Lorelei from incarceration. One wonders whether the circumstances do not conspire in Russell/Dorothy's favor, because her disguise and her necessary use of the third-person



afford her some protection when she declares her love; fortunately, Malone seems to understand.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apparently the 1949 Broadway musical version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, starring Carol Channing as Lorelei Lee, “followed the pattern of the old-fashioned musicals, which shunted plot aside to make way for elaborate musical production numbers,” according to Abe Laufe (qtd. in Turim 101-02). Not so the 1953 version. Since Russell/Dorothy and Monroe/Lorelei are showgirls by profession, and since the musical numbers are clustered towards the beginning and the end of the film, they do not disrupt the narrative and cause the action to grind to a halt as do so many staged musicals. Music sutures together otherwise disjunctive images and texts, and as Turim discerns, in this case lyrics are instrumental in creating the ambiguity of the “sophisticated tease.” The musical numbers, in particular, portray “an opposition between the sexual display made of [Russell/Dorothy and Monroe/Lorelei] (their exploitation as objects within the film’s narrative and for the film’s appeal) and the women’s expressed cynicism and cleverness (the satire in which the objects take on the role of critical subjects)” (103). One might say that what Turim recognizes is the tension between the way that the image serves as a “come on” and text as a “put down.” “Bye, Bye, Baby,” “Anyone Here for Love?” and “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” contain the most obvious examples of images and texts which behave in that fashion.

“Bye, Bye, Baby” is the second musical number of the film, and it takes place as the skipper rings the first bell, indicating “all ashore that’s going ashore.” Gus is in the (lengthy) process of taking leave of Monroe/Lorelei, while Russell/Dorothy in the meantime invites the entire U.S. men’s Olympic team (all of whom she admired at first sight) and a handful of women who appear to be team members’ girlfriends into the stateroom she shares with Monroe/Lorelei. Russell/Dorothy breaks into “Bye, Bye, Baby,” a song between sweethearts in which one requests of the other:

Bye bye baby, remember you’re my baby

When they give you the eye.

Although I know that you care, won’t you write and declare

That though on the loose, you are still on the square.

Ironically, no one is seeing Russell/Dorothy off, and this would explain why she can sing the song at a quick tempo, with a smile on her face: she’ll have the “entire Olympic team all to herself” as soon as they say “bye bye” to their “pretty babies.” The men counterpoint her melody with a lively rendition of two lines from an old hymn: “In the Sweet By and By, we shall meet on that beautiful shore.” Both songs contain the concept of reunion, it is true, but to incorporate part of the sacred old hymn that anticipates a meeting with the transcendent “Father [who] waits over the way” into a kicky little number seems an impertinence, a slight against the patriarchy.

The absent Father coincides with the implied immaturity of the men Russell/Dorothy sings to, the “babies,” for as she learns in a later scene, the whole Olympic team eats supper at six o’clock only to turn in at 9 o’clock. “That’s just when

life begins," she exclaims; "Not for us," they reply, again emphasizing their arrested state of manhood. Only thirteen words of the hymn find their way into "Bye Bye Baby" before the Russell/Dorothy-led melody dominates once again. Not only is the female voice orally/aurally dominant for the most part, but the men assume a subordinate posture, kneeling on one knee (in the traditional pose of the proposing suitor), crouching, or even placing her on top a chest of drawers, pedestal-like, so that their faces appear below hers. Yet if she is placed on a metaphorical pedestal, she does not remain there: she jumps off.

In contrast to Russell/Dorothy's quick-tempoed verses, the sirenic Monroe/Lorelei seduces baby-faced Gus with a much slower rendition, as she leads him to a love seat, partially drawing a sliding door to ensure a more private farewell. The tempo of "Bye Bye Baby" slows drastically in order to defer an affectionate leave-taking between the affianced couple, but in an inverse of conventional scenarios of the 1950s, it is the female who makes sexual advances upon the male. Monroe/Lorelei's words alone are not overtly seductive, but her sexual posturing makes them so: she leans in close to Gus, her breasts brushing his arm, and frequently guides his eyes back to her face with the touch of her hand. Complete with quivering lips, misty eyes, and fluttering eyelashes she croons, "I'll be in my room alone every post-meridian, And I'll be with my diary and that book by Mr. Gideon." That "book by Mr. Gideon" is none other than the Gideon Bible, a semiotic index of the Judeo-Christian Word. However, the image of Monroe/Lorelei here contradicts the lyrics of innocence and spirituality of which she sings; she confirms, visually, that she privileges body over spirit. Consequently, both

Russell/Dorothy and Monroe/Lorelei, as a team, assert an active femininity by opposing themselves against a transcendent “Word of the Father.” Both renounce positions of powerlessness and place themselves in positions of power, verbally and visually.

If “Bye, Bye, Baby” is slyly and subtly subversive, “Anyone Here for Love?” is overtly and aggressively so. Russell/Dorothy’s pool-side number commences as the Olympic team begins their work-out (see Fig. 2). As she invades the men’s space she enumerates her inabilities and inadequacies:

I can’t play tennis, my golf’s a menace,  
I just can’t do the Australian crawl,  
and I’m no better at volleyball  
.....  
I’m apathetic, and non-athletic,  
can’t keep up in a marathon,  
I need some shoulder to lean upon  
And a couple of arms to hold me  
.....  
I’m not in condition to wrestle,  
I’ve never trained in a gym  
But show me a man who can nestle,  
And I’ll pin a medal on him  
I need some chappy to make me happy  
And he don’t have to be Hercules  
Don’t anyone know about birds’n’bees?  
.....  
I like big muscles and red corpuscles  
I like a beautiful hunk of man

But I'm no physical culture fan

Ain't there anyone here for love? Sweet love?

Ain't there anyone here for love?

As much as she might claim to be “no physical culture fan,” however, Russell/Dorothy “actively displays a body in training for sexual activity,” flinging herself “at the oblivious musclemen” (Turim 105), “looking the men over, squeezing their muscles, pulling one man down into her lap by his hair” (Arbuthnot & Seneca 117). Moreover, her aggressive “body language” and husky voice belie the “image” of helpless subordination which her words conjure up. Nor is this the only evidence of role reversal: here, instead of a “female form displayed for [male] enjoyment” (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure” 21), we observe the men leaping, somersaulting, cartwheeling, and performing synchronized sit-ups and leg kicks reminiscent of chorus girls’ antics. The mens’ athletic shorts with front seams and black piping at the thigh are “nude beige” in color and suggest that they are of the same indeterminate sex as a Ken® doll. Russell/Dorothy attempts to wedge apart the double standard that allows men to view women erotically, and which denies an analogous desirous gaze to women. Thus, while Turim is probably right in suggesting that Russell/Dorothy’s question “Ain’t there anyone here for love? Sweet love?” expresses a certain “cynicism” about love (103), one should also note that it is conveyed by her rolling her eyes in an appeal to heaven to rescue her from the obvious futility of finding love and/or sexual fulfillment in this “sterile” and “homoerotic” environment (Mulvey, “Gentlemen” 225).

“Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” broaches desire, as well, but not the desire for romantic, sexual love that Russell/Dorothy seeks. The lyrics of this song counsel young women to pursue security in the form of diamonds, a valuable commodity (Turim 105). As Monroe/Lorelei performs, she offers her own body as a sexual commodity, displaying it to provoke reactions from her fellow male performers as well as from Gus, whom she knows is seated in the audience, and whom she “told off” just moments before in the dressing room (see Fig. 3). Her words, however, instruct females to resist romantic/sexual desire for its own sake; desire for money only is justifiable. She simultaneously does and yet does not permit herself to be objectified. Take, for instance, the black fan that she flirtatiously wields as she contemplates a number of potential suitors. Historically, a fan was used by a woman to conceal her blushes from a man; as a defensive maneuver, she would lower her eyelids and partially cover her face to avoid the male gaze. Here Monroe/Lorelei uses the fan offensively, to reject the gentlemen and the cardboard hearts they hold out to her. In a string of negatives, varying her pitch with each successive, “No,” she taps some suitors lightly on the cheek, and raps others smartly on their temples in an attitude of mock indignation. When she says “No,” Monroe/Lorelei’s half-closed eyelids, graceful hand movements, and seductive pout suggest that her denials really mean “Yes.”

Following the fan foreplay, Monroe/Lorelei breaks into the “prologue” of “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend”: “The French are glad to die for love, they delight in fighting duels, but I prefer a man who lives and gives expensive jewels.” She pauses slightly before “die” and “duels” to call our attention to the sexual puns she utters, and to

the concurrent gestures she presents. First, she opens her arms wide at “die,” bringing to mind the Renaissance use of the word as a euphemism for orgasm. Second, at “duels” she peers at us from the corners of narrowed eyes, alerting us to the fact that she is familiar with “duels,” just as Russell/Dorothy, earlier, wielding two tennis rackets, extended the invitation, “Doubles, anyone? Court’s free!” So, although Monroe/Lorelei contends that she “prefers a man who lives and gives expensive jewels,” because of her actions, the audience cues into the double-entendres, as well as the ambiguity inherent in her performance. As she proceeds to sing, “But square-cut or pear-shaped, these rocks don’t lose their shape,” she supposedly refers to her heavily studded, braceleted wrists; but with the words “these rocks” she rests her fingers just above her breasts, on the skin exposed by her strapless gown. During the preceding line, “Men grow cold as girls grow old, and we all lose our charms in the end,” she suggestively points towards her hips and *derrière*. So although the words of the song urge women to secure their economic futures, to control their romantic fantasies, the actions accompanying the lyrics function, overall, as a retraction. Ultimately, the images lead us to believe that a woman’s erotic appeal and sexual desirability are important assets when negotiating with men for the financial security that the lyrics prescribe.

Throughout the “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” segment, Monroe/Lorelei stands out in contrast to the other women on stage. Whereas she is first pictured in a static and statue-like position, she quickly assumes full mobility, unlike the women who appear on the chandeliers and lampposts, “all rigidly held in position with black leather halters and chains” in a version of “[s]adistic fantasy [. . .] personified” (Arbutnot &

Seneca 118). Near the beginning, when two men grasp her by the elbows and propel her towards the top of a staircase, she terminates their manipulative behavior in short order. This implies that although she may draw attention to herself as object, she is intent upon doing so by her own will; she will not be bullied into passivity or submission as these men may fantasize.

Many people, especially feminist theorists, do not know what to make of “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend.” The disturbing images of women in bondage hanging from the chandeliers, in particular, threatens to undo all the positive models of active womanhood in the film up to that point (see Fig. 4). To better understand the image, one needs to take into consideration the scene that follows immediately after the song. Once back in the dressing room, Monroe/Lorelei has a confession to make to Russell/Dorothy:

LORELEI: He is sweet, isn’t he? I really do love Gus.

DOROTHY: You do? Really?

LORELEI: There’s not another millionaire in the world with such a gentle disposition. He never wins an argument; always does anything I ask; he’s got the money to do it with. How can I help loving a man like that?

Monroe/Lorelei’s love may stem from more practical considerations than Russell/Dorothy’s romantic ones (the former is content with life’s “prose” while the latter wants “poetry”), but the fact that she loves Gus in her own pragmatic way — and, more importantly, that he truly loves her — means that after they make up, she is not doomed



to be caught in any of those restrictive positions that the chandelier-women find themselves in. Gus's love represents freedom from strife, freedom from financial constraint, freedom from submission for Monroe/Lorelei because *he* is the one who submits.

The concluding double wedding scene once again shows Monroe/Lorelei's and Russell/Dorothy's use of lyrics to undercut the this traditional image of closure: on a day when the bride is expected to be the central silent spectacle, the two women enter the ship's dining-room, decorated in pristine white, with a song on their lips. "Remember," Russell/Dorothy instructs Monroe/Lorelei, as they pause at the top of the stairway, "it's OK to say 'yes' on your wedding day." They then descend the stairs and proceed down the aisle, side by side, singing "But at last we won the big crusade, looks like we finally made the grade" in a reprise of "Little Rock." So even on a day when the audience anticipates that they will behave as silent objects — silent as they walk the aisle, anyway — they defy convention. And they sing of their conquests, for they have "won the big crusade": they have successfully converted suitors to husbands, and they have successfully secured financial and romantic/sexual stability.

Furthermore, the women's "friendship survives," even when they find the right men, and their double ceremony "underscores the depth of their friendship" (Arbuthnot & Seneca 120). That is, the camera "tracks in to a two-shot" of Monroe/Lorelei and Russell/Dorothy "smiling at each other," excluding the two grooms from the final frame (122). Arbuthnot and Seneca correlate this visual effect with the women's renunciation of "the social powerlessness of women" and the converse "celebrat[ion] [of] their

primary allegiance to each other” (119). Until the very end women’s resistance to male dominance manifests itself in various visual and verbal exchanges.

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If we admit, then, that the roles played by Monroe and Russell are partnerships of image and text, and if we give as much credit to the verbal medium as we do to the visual, then what we are presented with are characters that challenge the traditional stereotype of women. Or, at least, we are given characters who unearth the tensions between what women want, what women want of men, what men want of women, what men think women want of men, and what women think men want of women. One thing is certain: Neither Russell/Dorothy nor Monroe/Lorelei qualifies as “dumb,” so far as it is defined as “not understanding,” “foolish,” “stupid,” or “ignorant” (*OED*).

Russell/Dorothy is, to all appearances, the more intelligent of the two, primarily because viewers can see that she dons the charade of the “dumb blonde” when it befits her purposes (e.g., court room scene). The viewer does not ever see the same change come over Monroe/Lorelei, who by contrast, seems to retain an aura of innocence about her, as in the scene when she enters the ship’s stateroom and upon noticing the portholes exclaims, “My, this is like a room, isn’t it? Oh, look — round windows!” Yet while Monroe/Lorelei’s is not a conventional “wisdom,” it reflects a good sense of survival tactics. (She later narrowly escapes one precarious situation by squeezing through a porthole.) If Russell/Dorothy’s is a deliberate and applied wisdom — she was supposed

to “represent sanity,” according to Hawks (Bogdanovich 63) — then Monroe’s wisdom appears to be an “unconscious” or unaffected kind, a “non-sense” that makes sense.

In the confrontation with Gus’s father, for instance, Monroe/Lorelei convinces the cantankerous old gentleman, who is, at heart, only looking out for his son’s best interests, to consent to the marriage. The dialogue progresses as follows:

ESMOND, SR.: Young lady, you don’t fool me one bit.

LORELEI: I’m not trying to. But I bet I could though.

ESMOND, SR.: No, you might convince this jackass that you love him, but you’ll never convince me.

LORELEI: But I do.

ESMOND, SR.: Have you got the nerve to stand there and expect me to believe that you *don’t* want to marry my son for his money?

LORELEI: It’s true.

ESMOND, SR.: Then what do you want to marry him for?

LORELEI: I want to marry him for *your* money.

Esmond, Sr., is visibly caught aback by her honesty.

ESMOND, SR.: You admit that all you’re after is money?

LORELEI: No, I don’t. Aren’t you funny! Don’t you know that a man being rich is like a girl being pretty? You might not marry a girl just because she is pretty, but my goodness, doesn’t it *help*? And if you had a daughter, wouldn’t you rather she didn’t marry a poor man?

ESMOND, SR.: But I was ...

LORELEI: You'd want her to have the most *wonderful* things in the world and to be very happy. Oh why is it wrong for *me* to want those things?

ESMOND, SR.: Well, I can see that — Say ... they told me you were stupid. You don't sound stupid to me.

LORELEI: I can be smart when it's important. But most men don't like it. Except Gus. He's always been interested in my brains.

ESMOND, SR.: No. No, that much of a fool he's not.

The preceding sequence once again illustrates the verbal and visual tug-of-war. Despite Monroe/Lorelei's rhetorical strategy, and despite Esmond, Sr.'s affirmation of her intelligence, the scene closes with words that reconfirm the woman as exhibitable object. Herein lies a revelation about the societal discourse surrounding male-female interaction in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*: even though Esmond, Sr. acknowledges Monroe/Lorelei's "brains," he, like "most men," values her for her appearance. Moreover, one suspects that Monroe/Lorelei frequently suppresses any expression of her brand of intellect, pretending that her only goal is to please men. Undeniably, though, her duplicity secures her the father's blessing.

Just as Russell/Dorothy and Monroe/Lorelei do not qualify as "stupid," neither do they adhere to the other definition of "dumb," that is, "mute": they prove themselves the very opposite of "destitute of the faculty of speech." Nor do they "remain persistently silent; little addicted to speech" (*OED*). All the evidence above points to the contrary.

Not once throughout the movie are they bereft of witty repartees. Still, because of their visual appeal, we may argue that Russell/Dorothy and Monroe/Lorelei do have difficulty in “making their voices effectively heard” (*OED*) — the latter, in particular, since she is the blonde, and popular opinion construes the “dumb blonde” as a woman who should be seen and not heard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Satire works in mysterious ways. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* began as a humorous experiment; it was never intended to champion any new conceptualization of women’s roles. To director Hawks, “*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was only a joke. In the other films, you have two men who go out and try to find some pretty girls in order to have a good time. We thought of the opposite and took two girls who go out and find some men to have a good time: a perfectly modern story. It pleased me, it was funny” (qtd. in Turim 104-5). Hawks could not fathom how people found his two leads “sexy,” for to him the roles they played were “very amusing” and the film itself “was a complete caricature, a travesty on sex” (Bogdanovich 63). Apparently the intent of the role reversals was to ridicule the feminine appropriation of power and keep the status quo “safe”; the actual result portrays the men as more ridiculous-looking than the women. Perceived as a comedy, then, the film’s bestowal of power on women is a sly way to introduce change into society. By means of a synthesis of image, music, and text, in a medium that was becoming more and more popular, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in 1953 captures the spirit of Loos’s 1925 flappers, reactivating the independence and autonomy

of the “dumb blonde,” and promoting collaboration between women — no jealous rivalry exists between Lorelei and Dorothy, neither in the 1925 novel, nor in the 1953 film. As part of a larger cultural change, it contributes to a wider-spread reconsideration and refashioning of gender roles that “ushers in the sexual revolution” by the end of the decade (Goldberg 14).

Despite its playfulness and verve, the movie prompts a deeper consideration of what it means to be a successful woman in a predominantly male world. It upholds feminine wiles and the masquerade as the means by which women can say and get what they want. In effect, this lesson is encapsulated in Emily Dickinson’s poem that begins, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant — / Success in circuit lies” (Dickinson 506). Loos herself is quoted as saying: “The people I’m furious with are the women’s liberationists. They keep getting up on soapboxes and proclaiming that women are brighter than men. That’s true, but it should be kept quiet or it ruins the whole racket” (Simpson 212). There is, finally, a measure of protection, a means of self-defense, offered to women by their duplicity.

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The stereotype of the “dumb and convenient blonde” that she so convincingly played in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was one that Marilyn Monroe later came to resent. According to the numerous biographers that have picked up her story, she wanted to break free and become a serious dramatic actress, not just a comedienne. Despite testimonies of producers, actors, and close personal friends that confirmed her talent and

her intelligence, that recognition never arrived in her own time. Her iconic performance testifies to the deep and lasting impression that an image can make; and yet, as Steiner writes, “image-products require narratives in order to have value” (*Pictures* 6). For the longest time, Monroe’s narrative never progressed, it always remained tied to the beginning of the story (the “dumb blonde”), or to the end (her death), to a certain extent facilitated by the majority of biographies in the 1960s and 1970s, most of them written by men. The “images” or metaphors embedded in these narratives tended to perpetuate the myth of Monroe as a seductive child/woman, someone that required constant protection and supervision.

By the time the 1980s arrived, that particular perception of Monroe as feeble-minded, helpless, and concerned with pleasing men — the superficial Monroe/Lorelei image — was growing stale, and slowly gave way to the image of a Monroe that could pose as a “dumb blonde” when it seemed that to do so was in her best interest, whether on-screen or off. More women began to communicate what the Monroe icon meant to them, generally siding with the latter value. One such person was pop star Madonna whose 1980s music video “Material Girl” parodied the costume, setting, and lighting of Monroe’s “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend” performance, inviting comparisons between Monroe and herself, the reigning queen of masquerade. Gloria Steinem was another: she published a feminist perspective of Monroe’s life in 1986. By taking the icon out of its best-known context, by choosing a new narrative for it, these women reactivated it, revitalized it. It is extremely important, however, to realize that the grounds for a new narrative were already encoded *in the iconic performance itself*.

## Chapter 3

### ***Our Marilyn and Anyone Can See I Love You: Icons in Documentary Film and Ekphrastic Poetry***

In 1985, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission commissioned a study of *The Portrayal of Sex Roles in Canadian Television Programming*. Researchers George Spears and Kasia Seydegart set out to determine the ratio of roles played by men versus roles played by women in Canadian, American, and foreign “drama” programs, a genre which, for their purposes, comprised action shows, sitcoms, soap operas, “other TV dramas,” and movies (54). According to the statistics arrived at by Spears and Seydegart, of the total dramas produced, 82% were American in origin, 6% were Canadian, and the remaining 12% were produced in other countries (53). They also discovered that drama programs produced in Canada portrayed “the smallest proportion of women,” a mere 26%, compared to productions from the United States and other foreign countries, which boasted 41% and 55%, respectively (56). Not only did these results show that women were, on the whole, disproportionately represented, but also that the high percentage of imported programs limited the availability of Canadian perspectives on women. The findings led to the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission’s (CRTC) immediate recommendation that members



of the industry correct the disparity and “reflect a realistic balance in the use of men and women as voice overs and as experts and authorities” (Spears & Seydegart 180).

Possibly, like Lessing’s concern that German literature was being contaminated by foreign elements, the CRTC’s decision was motivated (at least in part) in response to a perceived threat from a neighboring country. Canadians in the latter half of the 1980s, already feeling that their country was highly saturated with American influences, were anxious lest the last vestiges of their national identity be completely eradicated should ongoing negotiations result in a Canada/U.S. Free Trade Agreement. Certainly CRTC’s decision participates in what Mitchell deems “the age of the pictorial turn,” a post-postmodernism of sorts (*Picture Theory* 366). That is, while Mitchell applauds postmodernist philosophies and theories for calling attention to the political tensions inherent in works of art, he proposes that, as of the 1980s, the pictorial turn reaches beyond postmodernism so that “we have moved into an era when the point about pictures is not just to interpret them, but to change them” (*Picture Theory* 369). Mitchell means not just physical pictures, of course, but, more essentially, mental pictures, ideologies — and the way to change these, of course, is by reviewing the images and revising narratives where necessary.

The pictorial turn with its desire to “change pictures” may also be responsible for the renewed interest in the late 1980s in “life-writing,” a genre which encompasses biography, autobiography, journals, diaries, and letters — styles of writing traditionally perceived as less meritorious than others because they more readily admit personal and private treatment. Historically, “personal” is a choice adjective more frequently than not

“attributed to texts written by women, whether or not the authors strove to write in an impersonal way” (Booth 89). Not surprisingly, life-writing attracts a number of scholars, critics, and artists who wish to squelch practices that equate “personal” artistic expressions — especially those of women — with “unmeritorious.”

One such proponent of life-writing is Sharon O’Brien, who, in the spirit of the pictorial turn, invites biographers, especially feminist biographers, to reconsider “the traditional power relationship between biographer and subject,” to disrupt “chronology and linearity,” and to acknowledge “the different ways in which [the subject] is used or interpreted by different groups” (129-31); she thereby encourages “anti-biography” which eschews the portrayal of an “essential self” (126). There are, however, two oversights in O’Brien’s call for a feminist biography. First, she subscribes to the “biography as fiction” metaphor (124), whereas her directive to biographers to perform “the miracle of incarnation,” and to “dramatize” biographical narratives (124, 130) clearly should have led her to build upon the “biography as drama” model proposed by Evelyn J. Hinz (“Mimesis” 195-96). Second, O’Brien laments that “no feminist as yet has taken up the notion or form of anti-biography” (126). Because she is inclined to favor biology rather than gender as the determinant of “feminist” behavior, O’Brien hereby means that she knows of no woman who has attempted anti-biography. Unbeknownst to her, two Canadian women had already conceived of ways to refresh auto/biography as a genre, and they were doing so via the dramatic model.

As so often happens prior to an exciting artistic innovation, a number of factors conspired to set the scene in this instance. The cumulative effect of the investigation into

Canadian television's portrayal of sex roles, the looming threat of utter "Americanization," and the affirmation of life-writing provided an opportune setting in which an independent filmmaker and a poet could experiment; art, after all, does not exist in a cultural vacuum. Brenda Longfellow and Marilyn Bowering, each within her respective area of artistic expertise, found themselves, in 1987, at the point where feminism, nationalism, and auto/biography converged in iconic representation. Contrary to Lessing, who had vigilantly imposed limits upon the "sister arts" in an attempt to protect their aesthetic integrity and defend national borders, Longfellow and Bowering enthusiastically combine different media and both incorporate American pop icon Marilyn Monroe into their art — she figures centrally in Bowering's work and as a counterpoint to the Canadian swimmer, Marilyn Bell, in Longfellow's film.

While Monroe has been and remains an incontestably popular icon, and while Longfellow and Bowering chose their subjects independently of each other, their respective choices may very well have been indirectly influenced by the larger cultural interests of the time. Three years earlier, in 1984, Madonna had crafted her "Material Girl" video, appropriating the Monroe look from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The following year, "the bestselling biography of 1985" was Anthony Summers's *Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe*: it "ranked 24<sup>th</sup> among non-fiction titles" at that time (Nadel 137; *Bowker Annual* 542). Finally, 1987 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of Monroe's death, and such a commemorative occasion must have spawned various and sundry Monroe projects. Into this cultural context, then, Bowering and Longfellow projected their Canadian insights.

Despite similarities in the techniques they use to infuse new relevance into the auto/biographies of exhausted icons, Longfellow and Bowering begin with opposite premises. As an historian and film theorist, Longfellow no doubt is aware of early modernists' split reaction to film, which can be sorted into gendered camps, the males denouncing it as a "vulgarization of art," the females embracing its potential to be "free of containment by spoken or written language" (Tiessen 18-22). Although Longfellow uses voice and text in highly unconventional ways, what is of greater importance is the way in which she demonstrates a historical connection to those early female modernists by making images extremely disconcerting: they refuse to "behave" according to expectations, they refuse to be easily discernible. Whereas Longfellow relies upon images to do what words cannot, Bowering relies upon words to create metaphorical images that do what pictures cannot, and adopts poetry rather than the traditional prose medium for her auto/biography. While not completely unheard of, especially in Canadian circles (Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Cooley's *Bloody Jack* come to mind), such techniques are still uncommon — although something in 1987 prompted an outbreak of "more than one hundred volumes of [Canadian] poetry," of which a large proportion "deal with historical figures or incidents" (Hatch 44). Bowering's poems further "stand out" due to the use of color and kinesthetics that shape them ekphrastically; in other words, it is as if her poetry, a verbal medium, is intent upon transforming itself into another medium, in this case visual images. Mainly, however, as an author and playwright, and thus someone accustomed to playing with words, Bowering privileges "voice," the selection of diction, tone, and style that simulates (to the

extent that words on the page can do so) an actual human being's idiosyncrasies of speech, so that the persona, the "I" in the poem, appears as an entity separate from its author/creator.

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Brenda Longfellow's *Our Marilyn* is one of the films contained in *What is a Documentary? & Ways of Storytelling*, which in turn is part of a 1993 video series produced by the National Film Board of Canada entitled *Constructing Reality: Exploring Media Issues in Documentary*. An accompanying resource book by Arlene Moscovitch includes an assortment of articles, interviews with persons involved in various aspects of the production of such films, background information on filmmaking tools and techniques, and other discussion aids. Targetted towards senior high school students and educators, as well as the general public, the series encourages its viewer-listeners to delve into the documentary genre, which so often passes off itself and the icons it may treat as immediate and unmediated. The purpose of the series, therefore, is to

consider some critical concepts that an encounter with a passionate, playful or provocative exploration of "real life" can engender. Such concepts include: the relationship between fact and fiction; objectivity; truth; point of view; voice; and the construction of reality. The urge to document social injustice as a way of working towards social change, and the retelling of history, are also part of the tapestry. (Moscovitch ix)

The series unapologetically propels its viewers away from a passive acceptance of film, and towards an active examination of it.

Given such an agenda, it is not difficult to see why Longfellow's work should have been selected for inclusion. Whether in the capacity of writer, director, producer, or any combination thereof, Longfellow generates films that showcase her passions for history, feminism, and nationalism. Her credits include *Shadow Maker: Gwendolyn MacEwen, Poet*, a collaboration with Anita Herczeg, which received the "Best Short Documentary" Genie Award at the 19th Annual Ceremonies in February 1999 (The Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television); *A Balkan Journey: Fragments From The Other Side Of War*, nominated for "Best Documentary Short" of 1996 (Fung); *Gerda* (1992) (Internet Movie Database); *Breaking Out* (1985), a docu/drama about a marriage breakdown (National Film Board); and, of course, *Our Marilyn*, which received "The Prix du Publique at The 4e Festival International de Film et Videos de Femmes de Montreal and a shared Grand Prix at The Oberhausen International Film Festival" (Feldman 172). Significantly, Longfellow's success may have something to do with the fact that she is both an independent filmmaker and an associate professor of Film Studies/Social and Political Thought at York University, a dual role that provides her with the ideal opportunity to maintain a balance between practice and theory.

In an interview for the *Constructing Reality* series, Longfellow acknowledges that her training as an historian, and her inclinations towards feminism and film led her to interrogate "public images of women and what they mean in terms of how we construct certain mythologies about women" (Moscovitch 45). She elsewhere expresses a keen

interest in how nationalism becomes “highly coded with respect to gender,” especially because a nation frequently is mythologized in maternal terms (“Gendering the Nation” 163-64). These complementary strains of thought come together in *Our Marilyn*.

Longfellow recounts:

So I thought I would do something quirky about Marilyn Bell who was a 50s icon of ideal Canadian womanhood, young and virginal and full of stamina. I wanted to make something that was very hokey and tongue-in-cheek, but once I started to get into the material, I realized how fabulous her feat really was — to swim across Lake Ontario for 21 hours.

(Moscovitch 45)

On the one hand, Longfellow’s use of the adjectives “quirky,” “hokey,” and “tongue-in-cheek” retain echoes of the deprecatory tone that Canadians allegedly assume towards their own interests, their own fellow Canadians, and towards any overtly patriotic display; on the other hand, they also bespeak Longfellow’s playfulness and humor. It is unclear whether Longfellow describes the film as “quirky” primarily because of her subject choice or because her approach veers from conventional methods of documentary. What is without doubt, however, is that her initial intent to exaggerate Bell’s impact on the Canadian psyche, and to render ironically the making of the icon, gave way to an empathetic endeavor to represent Bell’s incredible physical exertion.

Only twenty-seven minutes in length, *Our Marilyn*, released in 1987, was “more than three years in the making” (Moscovitch 43). The film purports to document teenage Marilyn Bell’s gruelling 32-mile (51.5 km), twenty-one hour swim from Youngstown,

New York, to the CNE breakwater at Toronto on September 8-9, 1954 (Callwood 200). (Records of the swim time vary slightly: Longfellow reports Bell's swim lasted twenty-one hours and three minutes; Callwood clocks it at twenty hours and fifty-nine minutes.) Appropriately enough, the opening shots of Longfellow's film are those of lake water, and its first sounds are those of splashing and heavy breathing. These initial sights and sounds are followed a few frames later by black and white images of Bell (see Fig. 5), the first pictures in which facial features are discernible (in spite of their "grainy" or "noisy" quality). Simultaneously, as the pictures of Bell appear on-screen, a female voice discloses, "I was named after her." This narrator — whom we never see and whom I will call "contemporary Marilyn" — then proceeds to recount how her birth coincided with radio broadcasts following Bell's progress across Lake Ontario, and how her mother had determined that if Bell could survive the bodily demand of the swim, she could survive the labor of childbirth. This slack connection between swimmer Bell and her namesake — "Marilyn (contemporary)," as the credits christen her — emerges early on, and first diverts the single-mindedness of traditional bio-documentary (which fixes and potentially fixates upon one person) by fastening the tenuous threads of history and memory to a life contingent to that of the popular icon's.

Shortly thereafter, the narrator reflects upon another lifestory contingent to Bell's and her own: that of Marilyn Monroe's. Addressing Bell, contemporary Marilyn says:

There were always two pictures on my wall: one of you and one of *her*, the other Marilyn, the one I *wasn't* named after, *their* Marilyn. Somehow the two images kept merging in my mind, your body against the flag, hers



against the red satin sheet of a Playboy centrefold. Growing up between your bodies, I could never decide what was the difference. I'm trying to remember.

Though viewers might expect to see a provocative picture of Monroe at this point, the film opts, instead, first to detour past a color shot of an unidentifiable swimmer first; next, the film's title appears as a folk singer commences crooning about "the sweetheart of Canada, Marilyn"; finally, a black and white photo of a youthful, nude Monroe on satin sheets spins round at the centre of the screen. The narrator speaks again, this time to Monroe's image:

Against the stifling smugness of our Presbyterian home, you carried an aura of wickedness, a delicious complicity. You were irresistible. When I was fourteen, I grew breasts, stopped swimming, and bleached my hair. I wanted to be as translucent as you.

A little further on, *Our Marilyn* incorporates 1954 newsreel footage of Monroe entertaining American troops in Korea with song, all the while "braving the chilly climate in a strapless dress and open-toed sandals." In essence, Monroe's lifestory — "too well known," pronounces contemporary Marilyn — plays out alongside Bell's as a counterpoint. Whereas at first nationality seems a dominant theme, positing "*our* Marilyn" against "*their* Marilyn," as the film progresses, the emphasis upon nationality recedes into the background while the importance of the icons' shared gender seems to rise.

Incidentally, Longfellow's inclusion of Monroe was precipitated by sheer serendipity. During her quest to track down film clips of Bell, Longfellow by "complete accident" stumbled across the footage of Monroe in Korea — the newsreels of Bell and Monroe were located "almost back to back" — and the prospects of this happy chance thrilled her (Moscovitch 46). As Longfellow explains in an interview, the shared first name of the two icons is a backdrop against which she contrasts their perceived personalities: "Monroe, the beautiful sex goddess — blonde, vulnerable, weak, exploitable — and the Canadian icon of femininity, which is the little virginal person of stamina and endurance. For us, these are great Canadian qualities — not as snazzy as Monroe, but nevertheless they seem to be part of the way we collectively think about our heroes" (Moscovitch 46-47).

On the basis of this interview, we might believe that the film's purpose is merely to remind us of a Canadian hero, to restore a sense of national pride, to assert that Canada, too, has its celebrities (so there, United States!). The film's ending itself, however, throws such a straightforward conclusion into question, for we learn that Bell "married a parole officer at age 20, and moved to New Jersey." The beloved Canadian goes American and shares a fate that parallels Monroe's: both icons are used as commodities, both bodies become commercial endorsements, one for wholesomeness, one for "wickedness." The film seems to suggest that the experiences of women transcend nationality, that they are too often reduced to images that places them on either side of the virgin/whore dichotomy. Or perhaps it questions to what extent Canadian values pattern themselves upon, or lead to another version of, "the American dream."

Accordingly, as much as *Our Marilyn* celebrates Bell, “the Canadian icon of femininity,” and compares/contrasts her to Monroe, America’s “beautiful sex goddess” (Moscovitch 46), it also highlights the third Marilyn, poised, hemmed in, wavering, between contiguous narratives and images, “between two bodies.” More importantly, the film teases out contemporary Marilyn’s wistful dreams to unravel the myths surrounding two internationally acclaimed popular icons and subsequently to make contact with the actual individuals, with the selves they “withheld from the world,” to experience their bodies “in motion, moving, beyond naming, ... beyond the familiar masquerade.” Essentially, the film conveys the multiple and sometimes conflicting myths of the icons with its wash of multimedia: alternating color and black-and-white motion and still segments, snapshots of newspaper articles, smarmy folk songs, and “crawls” or “creepers” (printed text or typeface that scrolls vertically up the screen) that relay the swim in minute-by-minute detail, radio reportage, and multiple voices. It thereby captures the degree to which the world becomes so saturated with the “‘spell of personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity” (Benjamin 581), that the reality of Bell and Monroe as persons is diluted and swept away in ever-widening concentric circles. Note that Bell, for instance, the “nobody” who won “a place in history and in the hearts of the nation” (Moscovitch 43), is eventually commodified and reduced to some *body* that endorses Crown Brand corn syrup (the film includes a shot of the advertisement).

In contrast, the narrator — contemporary Marilyn — offers respite from the flood of media by way of her own personal interpretations: she anchors “reality” not in the “spell of personality,” or the static conceptions of icons, but in the recognition of the

physicality and person-ability of Bell and Monroe. With its contiguous relationships and celebration of the “aura of the person” (Benjamin 581), *Our Marilyn* accomplishes the very alternative anticipated by contemporary Marilyn at its conclusion, when she says to the absent Bell and Monroe, “Your bodies always moving before me. Growing up between your bodies, never one without the other, I kept moving and dreamed of another story.” “Another story” is made possible in the process of retelling the myths, or, more accurately, telling them in a different way.

From the very outset, *Our Marilyn* declines to imitate traditional documentary format. A far cry from the impersonal, detached, and superior-bordering-upon-omniscient tone of the lone, “authoritative male narrator” so frequently associated with documentary (Moscovitch 44), the first-person narration that contemporary Marilyn supplies ingenuously acknowledges her own personal, emotional investment in the stories and images of Bell and Monroe that fold into each other. Contemporary Marilyn’s personal asides, interjected throughout the film, alleviate what might otherwise be a straightforward chronological representation of events; they administer an antidote to the predictable style of documentary that contains little besides stale, dry facts. Despite their importance to the film’s overall structure, contemporary Marilyn’s musings do not dominate the film; rather, they drift in and out of earshot.

In the intervals, moreover, Longfellow incorporates additional voices: those of the folk singers who laud Bell as “the sweetheart” and “the pride” of Canada; that of Coach Gus Ryder, which at times is faintly audible in the background, calling “Marilyn! Marilyn!”; and that presumably of Bell singing, counting, breathing, and occasionally

making surreal observations, but which is actually a recreation of her voice by teenage actress Brigitte Cauthery who follows the script that Longfellow pieced together from interviews with, and journals of, marathon swimmers (Moscovitch 45). Only once do we hear Bell's own voice, and this is to declare that she "doesn't remember finishing" the swim. The multiple voices in *Our Marilyn* prevent the narrator from assuming superiority and omniscience; consequently, since the narrator does not presume to impose narrative coherence upon the media, this technique encourages the audience to forego its usual passivity and to actively make sense of what they see and hear. It is in this same spirit of collaboration that Longfellow chooses as her documentary's title *Our Marilyn*: the first-person plural possessive pronoun shares generously; it does not claim the icon in a singularly selfish manner.

Likewise, just as Longfellow makes no attempt to pass off the film as an authoritative or complete statement about Bell's life or accomplishments, neither does she pass it off as an eyewitness account of a documentary "in the making." For one thing, contemporary Marilyn is not a contemporary of Bell's or Monroe's, so she derives from others or from her own imperfect memory the mythologies of the two women that she in turn transmits to her listeners. *Our Marilyn*'s fuzzy images appear to reinforce the nebulosity of memory filtered through multiple consciousnesses. The "hallucinatory and dreamlike" sequences, especially, are a stark departure from sharp-edged "documentary reality" (Moscovitch 45). Additionally, contemporary Marilyn is a construct, a fictional character, played by Linda Griffiths. Although the film defers the viewer's knowledge on this point until the end credits, this fabrication most certainly

challenges conceptions of documentary, for convention dictates that the “Narrator” listed in the credits be a real person, not an imaginary one.

*Our Marilyn*, moreover, shies away from traditional eye-witness even more flagrantly. Since archival research yielded “images of Marilyn [Bell] leaping off the dock and images of her being pulled out at the end, but ... no coverage of that whole middle process of the swim,” Longfellow arranged to have herself filmed swimming in Lake Ontario (Moscovitch 45-46; see Fig. 6). Thus, the documentary does not even contain original footage of Bell’s actual swim! And the director/producer acts as a substitute for her own subject! Of course, just because the swimmer and narrator are not “real” (i.e., historically authentic) does not mean they are not *realistic*. The film’s purpose is in no way compromised by these revelations; on the contrary, they give viewers and auditors “in the know” an even more compelling reason to consider the relationship of “truth” to popular icons. In all these ways, then, director/producer Longfellow does not adhere to the conventional “power relationship between biographer [documentarist, in this case] and subject,” and although *Our Marilyn* probably does not overturn the power structure to the extent that O’Brien advocates in her bid for anti-biography, it does rock the boat!

Longfellow’s experimental film techniques also call into question the very concept of “eye witness,” since the frequency of indiscernible shapes renders suspect one’s ability to rely on eyesight to interpret accurately what one sees. By means of a process known as optical printing, for instance, Longfellow transfers images from one type of film to another, so as to slow down the action, maximize contrast, and minimize

details (Moscovitch 46-47). The resulting decelerated action, along with the repetition of select clips and photographic stills contribute to the impression that one is the swimmer, suspended in slow-motion, disoriented, paddling about in circles. Specific sequences within the film (its opening shots, for example) afford only a glimpse of a murky tangle disrupted by occasional white ripples, whereby one scarcely distinguishes a body of water and a human head bobbing rhythmically up and down. These perceptions manifest themselves not so much visually as aurally; that is, it becomes difficult to focus on the over-exposed and over-processed images, so the audible sounds of splashing and heavy breathing draw listeners' attention and connote the presence of a human body.

These effects convey precisely what Longfellow envisions when she asserts that her primary goal is to bring the “bodied presence into the film but ... via the soundtrack rather than via the images” (Moscovitch 47). To comprehend what Longfellow essentially means, one need only examine some commonplace expressions, as Rabbi Shmuley Boteach did in an 8 February 2000 television interview on Canada AM, in which he outlined some of the principles of emotional and physical intimacy as presented in his two most recent books on relationships. Sight, he said, is often used as a metaphor to convey distance, while the other senses — sound, smell, taste, and touch — are used to convey proximity. For instance, when an individual declares that s/he is “seeing someone,” that phrase imposes a greater emotional distance upon the significant other than if the individual acknowledges s/he is “dating someone.” Boteach then asked the viewer audience to consider further the ramifications if one were to say that s/he is casually “smelling someone”: the implied level of intimacy would increase drastically.

Consider, too, other “self-help” authors, Oprah Winfrey, and the numerous holistic health advocates who encourage people to “listen” to their bodies, their inner spirits, their true selves. Insofar as sight, then, more often than not connotes distance, whereas the other senses connote intimacy, by decreasing the resolution of visual stimuli while simultaneously heightening auditory stimuli and manufacturing the illusion of kinesthetics, Longfellow encourages viewers imaginatively to enter the swimmer’s body, thereby delivering the “visceral feeling” that she strives to generate (Moscovitch 46).

When it serves Longfellow’s purpose, however, the visual and verbal contents of the film do not always so obligingly cooperate with or complement each other. Occasionally, Longfellow deliberately sets media squarely in competition with each other, sometimes for humorous effect, sometimes just for the sake of evoking “[p]ure sensory overload” (Moscovitch 47). The best example of media in conflict occurs at the point where Bell nears the Toronto shoreline. Here the creepers (the scrolling texts) record a minute-by-minute breakdown of Bell’s actions, right down to the sip of orange juice she takes at 10:10, while a voice-over tries to keep pace with the text. A folksinger simultaneously belts out his tribute to the feisty Canadian. Whereas in most documentaries, music would play at a subdued volume in the background whenever a voice speaks, here it competes with the text. Similarly, conventionally one assumes that when text appear on the screen, the viewers will read it silently, or the narrator will read it in a concurrent fashion. Thwarting such expectations, at one point in the film, for instance, Coach Ryder shouts, “Marilyn, the lake is all yours!” approximately three minutes after the screen shows “The lake is all yours” in white letters on a black



background — a disjunction that is wryly amusing. Each medium here vies with the others for dominance, which makes concentrating on any one extremely difficult. Watchers and listeners are bombarded by multiple versions of the myth of Marilyn Bell, none of the versions in complete accord, and all given to exaggerating Bell's achievement, rather than celebrating the process whereby she arrived at it.

With respect to Longfellow's own achievement and the process it entailed, a glimpse behind the scenes à la Moscovitch reveals to what extent this documentary is truly a work of art in the "age of mechanical reproduction." Besides the intriguing optical printing process and the capability to display multiple media simultaneously, the exponential advances of technology since the 1939 inception of the National Film Board enable Longfellow to master other effects. The waves, for example, the sounds of which alternately swell and subside over the course of the film, are a result of the careful editing of sound bites from a special effects library, as are the folk tunes by Canadian crooners, and a portion of the radio excerpts. Longfellow herself scripted additional "radio bits" to emphasize the Canadian National Exhibition's cool disregard of its fellow countrywoman — it championed American Florence Chadwick instead (Moscovitch 47).

Given the film's unconventional approaches to documentary, and its apparent careful technological construction, it is understandable why one might be tempted to label it self-reflexive, for it certainly calls attention to its own manufacture. Longfellow herself, however, would prefer to deflect attention away from this aspect, and direct it towards documentary's ability (whether it is innovative or not) to evoke "a range of response, a greater emotional investment in images of real people and real events that

comes from our knowledge as viewers or as people who read history or as people who've heard of Marilyn Bell or Marilyn Monroe" (Moscovitch 48). As part and parcel of tapping the vast "range of response," Longfellow attempts to portray not only the conscious but also the unconscious, with its store of commingling, fluid associations.

At one point during the swim, for example, in the almost complete darkness that represents night, the exhausted "Bell" hallucinates. In a high-pitched whisper, she claims, "They're watching me now. Monsters down there. I've seen them. Fins, shiny tentacles, waiting for me to drop. Bodies of others down there, too, bodies like fins, fish eyes, glassy, wide open, waiting." Thereafter follows a period of stillness, as if the swimmer has drifted into unconsciousness from sheer exhaustion mixed with terror of the unknown depths below her. Another means whereby Longfellow reinforces the idea not of linear but of circular or fluid association is through repetition of certain footage, or certain themes. For instance, near the beginning there appear a few frames of a four-woman synchronized team swimming round and round. A similar example is that of the nude Monroe pin-up spinning as though it were affixed to a record player's turntable.

Numerous undercurrents may be present, of course, but the greater issue that resides in the film's depths and occasionally surfaces in the narrator's words is the reverence due women's physical bodies. The film first pays homage to the maternal body. Our narrator's "poor mother, delirious, fourteen hours into labor ... heaving and sweating with the strain of bringing one ten-pound daughter into the world," empathizes so closely with the physical trauma of the swimmer that she names the newborn "Marilyn." From this early maternal body, *Our Marilyn* moves us to the central

celebration of Bell's body, a body beleaguered by rain, the darkness of night, the 20 miles-per-hour wind, the four-foot-high waves, lamprey eels, oil pollution, and a water temperature that reached a low of 51°F (Callwood 200) — a body “all aching arms and legs, all tortured lungs and turning stomach” that continues to push forward, marvels contemporary Marilyn, because it is “easier to go on” than to pause even briefly and have to start again. By the same token, Monroe's body is honored for its ability to withstand the demands placed upon her. Contemporary Marilyn says of the actress, “in the seamless perfection of an image, you bear no trace of effort, the hundred of takes, the long, sweaty hours, the gestures repeated until you were about to drop.”

*Our Marilyn*, in short, redeems the contributions of Bell and Monroe by locating them in the “space between the images,” and it redeems the persons, by configuring them as “bodies in motion” rather than static symbols. Through animation these bodies achieve a complexity that rises above and beyond a label or name affixed to an icon, and the worth of the person spills out and over the narrow channel of stereotype.

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Unaware of Longfellow's 1987 documentary and its unusual approach towards the representation and perception of icons (e-mail to author), Marilyn Bowering contemporaneously addresses some of the same concerns that *Our Marilyn* raises, but in a slim volume of poetry entitled *Anyone Can See I Love You*. Born in Winnipeg, but raised and educated in Victoria, Bowering has authored three novels, three radio dramas, one stage drama, the script of a National Film Board animated short, and nine collections

of poetry in addition to the radio, stage, and poetic formats of *Anyone Can See I Love You*. The first indications of Bowering's on-going preoccupation with conveying "voice" in print appear in one of her earliest projects, *Many Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Indian Poetry* (1977), for which, along with co-editor David Day, she selected for inclusion only such poems that could "speak for themselves," that resonated with "merit and 'voice'" (preface).

More than merely prolific and multi-generic, Bowering has also accumulated an impressive number of nominations and awards for her work. Her most recent novel, *Visible Worlds* (1997), was shortlisted for the Orange Prize in 1999, and the previous year won the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. For her 1996 collection of poems entitled *Autobiography* Bowering received the League of Canadian Poets Pat Lowther Award (1997) as well as nominations for the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize and the Governor General's Award. *To All Appearances a Lady* (1989) was nominated for the Books in Canada First Novel Award as well as the B.C. Book Prize. Her collaboration with BBC Scotland on *Grandfather Was A Soldier* (1987) garnered her a nomination for the Prix Italia, a prestigious broadcasting award. *The Sunday Before Winter: New and Selected Poems* (1984) was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award. Additionally, she was a recipient of the *Malahat Review* Long Poem Prize (1994), and twice received the National Magazine Award for poetry (1978, 1989). Academically located like Longfellow, Bowering teaches creative writing at the University of Victoria, and has been a writer-in-residence at universities in Canada and abroad, both physically and virtually, via e-mail — through the WIER (Writers in Electronic Residence) program

(*Canadian Who's Who*; Beach Holme; WIER; The Writers' Union of Canada; Davis, Hyland-Russell, and Rickey).

As in the case of Longfellow's serendipitous discovery of Monroe footage in a film vault, Bowering's focus on Monroe in *Anyone Can See I Love You* was the result of a chance encounter and whimsical decision, which then turned into a "deliberate empathic effort" (e-mail to author). Nor was it with respect to this collection of poetry that her attention was first drawn to Monroe, but rather in the course of searching for a main character for the radio play that BBC Radio Scotland had commissioned her to write. As Bowering explains:

The subject was chosen after my producer Marilyn Imrie and I had failed to come up with anything we both wanted to work on. We hadn't worked together before but felt that given the kind of thing each was inter[e]sted in, we would like to. At some point Marilyn Imrie just said, "Well, we're both called Marilyn, why not Marilyn Monroe?" I responded to that because the shared name had had an effect on me when I was growing up. There were inevitable comparisons along the line of "Hubba Hubba" ....  
(e-mail to author)

Once again, an intuitive hunch proved worthwhile, for the Marilyns' collaboration evolved into the radio play entitled *Anyone Can See I Love You*, which, after its initial broadcast, "received wide critical acclaim and was nominated for the Sony Award" (The Writers' Union of Canada).

According to Bowering, both the radio play and the stage version subsequently commissioned by actress Hetty Baynes (who played Monroe in the radio play) and performed by The Bastion Theatre, “use music extensively” (e-mail to author; The Writers’ Union of Canada). Not only do both plays incorporate many of the songs Monroe sang and recorded, but they also feature three jazz musicians who play the parts of Monroe’s three husbands (e-mail to author). In keeping with the strong musical influence, the title shared by the plays reflects the first song Monroe sang in a film — “Anyone Can See I Love You” in *Ladies of the Chorus* — for which she received a brief but favorable review from Tibor Krekes of the *Motion Picture Herald* mentioning her “pleasing voice” (Spoto 172-74).

Initially, the play proved difficult for Bowering to write until she discovered that she could facilitate the scripting process if she first penned the patchwork of lyric and narrative fragments that later were published as a collection of poems, and it is this collection, its title identical to that shared by the two plays, that I wish to address in greater detail here. For these poems, Bowering adopts the persona of Marilyn Monroe and employs first-person narration, conscious that she is constructing the foundation for the radio play. As a result, *Anyone Can See I Love You* reads as one long dramatic monologue, or a series of soliloquies. Equally predominant, however, is the lyricism of the poetry, which may be attributed to the fact that, during the time she wrote *Anyone Can See I Love You*, Bowering listened “extensively” to recordings of Monroe’s voice (e-mail to author). Not surprisingly, then, “voice” is a term that appears frequently in assessments of the collection — as when, for instance, Constance Rooke in her jacket

cover synopsis of Bowering's achievement, praises the way she "gives us the luminescence of Monroe, embodies her in the rhythm of voice," or when Phil Hall, in his review, remarks upon Bowering's ability to "create an ... intensity of woman's voice" (28). Poetry, of course, originated in oral form, and by "voice" one usually metaphorically refers to a combination of diction, tone, and style that creates the illusion that there is a physical person with a physical voice that is speaking or has spoken the words one reads on the page. In Bowering's case, it further implies her ability to sustain the illusion that the "I" in the poem is actually Marilyn "speaking": in essence it means that one receives such a strong sense of the persona Bowering has adopted, that it is *as if* Bowering's Marilyn has the ability to speak independently of her author. It is, in turn, this vocal resonance that enables the reader to enter imaginatively the actress's body, and thereby transform a popular culture icon from an impersonal image into a multi-dimensional human being.

And the poems do make it easy to imagine Bowering's Marilyn physically present. The first-person narration, along with the free verse form and a sprinkling of "words attributed to Marilyn Monroe," appropriated from Fred Lawrence Guiles's *Norma Jean* (1969) and Roger Taylor's *Marilyn Monroe In Her Own Words* (1983) (colophon) and incorporated smoothly into Bowering's text, set the stage for the guileless and beguiling voice that alternately commands and begs attention throughout *Anyone Can See I Love You*. In the volume, Bowering traces the swift transformation of a young, naive, teenage Norma Jean into the glamorous Hollywood screen idol and sex symbol Marilyn Monroe in the midst of 1950s culture with its narrowly defined gender

prescriptions: man in this historical context is the desirer, the speaking subject voicing desire; woman is the silent object of desire. As Bowering presents her, though she is comfortable with her own body, Marilyn never feels quite at home with her iconic or public role in society at large because she is divided between her need to be desired and her need to voice her own desire at a time when it is considered unfeminine (unnatural) for her to do so, and it is this struggle to understand her place as an icon of womanhood, both on- and off-camera impacts upon and possibly accounts for her three marriages and subsequent divorces.

As a means of sanctioning Marilyn's expressions of desire, which are "out of place" in her own society, Bowering arranges for her to speak into the present from her "crypt small as a bug box" (76) in the "Corridor of Memories" (77) <sup>1</sup>, as one learns in the final poem of the collection. Like the slaves of Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, who gain mastery over their past by narrating it (194), only by actively re-telling the past, only by having "final say" over her remembered history, can Bowering's Marilyn disengage herself from the "passive object" role and take control. Throughout the text, Marilyn switches easily between past and present tense as she reminisces, just as though she were pouring over snapshots in an album or scenes from a home movie, which tactic, however, effects a critical distance between the "speaking I" (a present self) and the "spoken I" (a past self). This self-reflexivity, or self-awareness, dispels the "dumb blonde" stereotype that surrounds the Monroe icon, and lends a posthumous "academic" or "intellectual" voice to the woman, which may account for the "freshness" ascribed by Hall to *Anyone*



*Can See I Love You*, a book whose subject matter — the Monroe legend — he had considered “squeezed of all freshness” (28).

Perhaps it is also by way of this self-reflexivity and concern with an active re-telling of the past that Bowering’s Marilyn encourages the “deliberate empathic effort” on the part of Canadians, although in contrast to Longfellow’s film, Bowering’s collection focuses much less conspicuously on nationality. Possibly, however, this very feature gives the work a Canadian edge, in the sense that until recently, the real Marilyn’s tenuous connections to Canada received little attention, despite the facts that *River of No Return* (1954) was filmed in Banff, and the posters for *Niagara* (1953) featured “Monroe spread sensuously and surrealistically across the top of the roaring [Canadian horseshoe] falls” (Kobal 15). In any event, it could be said that there is a certain measure of Canadian-ness, albeit covert, in Bowering’s Marilyn, who struggles with the desire to locate herself, to determine “where” she belongs, and where home is — a recurrent theme in Canadian literature from the time of Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* to Deborah Keahey’s more recent *Making it Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature*. “The state of being ‘at home,’” Keahey counsels, “has several interconnected dimensions”: a physical and material sense, a psychological sense, a social sense, and an intellectual sense (ix-x).

The Marilyn in Bowering’s poems yearns for “home” in all of these dimensions. Imitating Canadians, who have an historically split identity (British/American, Francophone/Anglophone), she finds herself divided between two selves — Norma Jean and Marilyn — with the problem of a dual identity aggravated still further by a 1950s mentality that prescribes cut-and-dried behaviors to individuals based upon gender.

“Home” is an elusive place and space in which Bowering’s Marilyn hopes to find emotional stability. “I had no home,” she laments, “Someone had lost me at the beginning” (8-9). Ultimately, however, it is the need to be completely “at home” that is at issue, and this rests upon her ability to come to terms with her femininity.

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Exploring issues like these, of course, requires a certain degree of identification, and in this context one might note how the very cover of *Anyone Can See I Love You* openly declares and prefigures its participation in what O’Brien terms “anti-biography” — or, as I prefer to think of it, “alter/biography.” In direct contrast to the usual biographical format, which affixes a picture of a celebrity’s face on a book’s front cover and a photograph of its author on the back (the latter as a “signature” or seal of authority, a claim to intellectual property), *Anyone Can See I Love You* positions Bowering seated alongside a poster of Monroe (see Fig. 7). This cover balances Bowering’s foregrounded body, clad in a garish saffron gown and bold fire-engine red belt and boots, against a monochromatic, larger-than-life close-up poster of Monroe, thereby acknowledging Bowering’s attempt to merge with legendary actress at the point of the persona. Such a collaborative approach is further reinforced by the fact that Monroe is pictured with an open mouth, whereas Bowering’s is closed, thereby granting “speaking potential” to the former rather than the latter. Not only that, but Bowering plants herself in the space traditionally reserved for “elevated” figures: she perches atop a rectangular, box-like pillar or pedestal, the type of stand normally reserved for art objects on display. In

addition, she mimics Monroe's physical attributes: her half-closed eyes, which initiate, attract, and repel the gaze; her mouth, dramatically defined in lipstick; the forward roll of her left shoulder; and the slight tilt to her head.

Despite this identification, however, the cover also emphasizes difference, as Lydia Wevers observes:

Where the viewer's eye is drawn, and where real comparison is invited ... is in the two faces, arranged side by side. Monroe's expression of knowing seduction, the gift of herself as both challenge and demand, is countered by Bowering's, her face equally made up and composed, but self possessed, quizzical, an invitation to think first. (260)

Since publisher Tim Inkster gave Bowering final say over the final cover design (e-mail to author), these visually clear-cut distinctions may perhaps serve as Bowering's admission that regardless of how closely she identifies with the icon, regardless of how sensitively she writes of her, she will never be able to escape superimposing herself upon her subject to some degree, a point further emphasized by the way that the vibrant colors of her portrait make Monroe's "fade" into the background. And even if a non-sympathetic critic might conclude that what one has here is a case of trying to "upstage," all the more does this support what I see as an up-front "admission" that is deliberately designed to poke fun at the objectivity that so many a traditional biographer would lay claim to: the supposedly "objective" biographies run the gamut from Norman Mailer's Marilyn, a fantasy "ice cream goddess" of sex (15) to Gloria Steinem's Norma Jeane,

whose “neglected inner child” arrests her growth as both a woman and an actress, leaving for posterity only “lost possibilities” (152, 180).

Ironically, however, *Anyone Can See I Love You* does owe a great deal to the many auto/biographies preceding it, since their dissemination of Monroe’s story enables Bowering to abbreviate her version. Yet it is not merely this “public knowledge” that accounts for the way that the scant seventy-seven pages and approximately fifty poems of Bowering’s volume contrasts conspicuously with the two- to eight-hundred word compilations by noteworthies such as Fred Lawrence Guiles, Anthony Summers, Norman Mailer, Gloria Steinem, and Donald Spoto. In their efforts to “bring to life” the woman behind the legend, many authors, even of the most recent Marilyn Monroe books on the market — be they biographies *per se* (Barbara Leaming, 1998) or biographical fiction (Joyce Carol Oates, 2000) — feel that they must write as much as they can about the subject. Apparently popular opinion holds that the more one writes, the more familiar s/he is with his/her subject. Each writer wants to be the one to reveal who the person behind the icon “really” was, to write the “definitive” biography, to (re)produce some previously unreleased anecdotes, interviews, photographs, film footage, or documentation not already culturally accessible that will complete Monroe’s story once and for all. Highest praise from a reviewer, then, might take the form of this sentence featured on the back cover of the Victor Gollancz edition of Summers’s text: “With *Goddess*, all previous books on Marilyn Monroe become redundant.”

Bowering’s text does not pretend to compete in these one-upmanship games. What it does, instead, is to lift a few words or phrases from multiple sources — a heading

from an interview, the title of a movie, a few of Monroe's "own words," a few of Guiles's or Taylor's words — and then blend them in with Bowering's. Given that something of the icon remains forever elusive, that what one can know must be reconstructed from fragments, and especially that the icon arises out of a collective experience, Bowering's intertextual representation with all its gaps and omissions seems somehow more in keeping with the actual formation of the icon.

Also aiding Bowering here, of course, is the genre in which she is writing, in the sense that convention encourages readers to expect a "compactness" to manifest itself in a poet's diction. The poet may elide thoughts and phrases, for example, use words that denote multiple meanings, or omit articles and conjunctions, thereby essentially functioning as a type of "shorthand." Since poetry generally contains figurative or abstract speech, as opposed to the verified "facts" of biography, it is also supposedly more flexible when it comes to representing "truths." Ultimately, no one expects Bowering to "tell all" about Monroe; as a matter of fact, sometimes less is more. In this case, the poems actually reinforce the mystery of the person inside the famous face and body, for as Phil Hall remarks, "The reading is full of harrowing reminders of the little we know [about Monroe]" (29). So instead of rendering all other texts about Monroe redundant, *Anyone Can See I Love You* stirs up a curious and paradoxical desire to read more about this celebrity: its poetic diction encourages intertextuality.

Yet it is not only as "poetic biography" that Bowering's work differs from others, as one can see from glancing at Ernesto Cardenal's 1965 "Prayer for Marilyn Monroe," or Sharon Olds's 1978 "The Death of Marilyn Monroe," which commemorate Marilyn in

omniscient third-person, predominantly narrative poetry, in contrast to the mix of lyric, dramatic, and confessional styles that Bowering uses. Essentially, it is her use of first-person narration that distinguishes her work, the effect of which is to collapse the emotional distance between herself and her Marilyn. Like Norma Jean who “change[s] skins,” and “wriggle[s] in to ‘Marilyn,’” as Bowering phrases it in the second poem of *Anyone Can See I Love You* (8-10), so Bowering virtually “wriggles into Monroe’s skin and speaks, at times almost self-reflectively, with the actress’ voice” observes Terry Johnson (50).

Not only does first-person narration remove distance between Bowering and her Marilyn, but it also seduces the reader into identifying more closely with this Marilyn’s testimony or “I”/eyewitness account. For Hall, it is as if “one Marilyn uses another Marilyn as anchor and binocular (bio-ocular) to create an almost anonymous intensity of woman’s voice” (28), an alter/biographical twist which the cover photograph anticipates. The angle at which the camera lens captures Bowering and the Monroe icon produces the illusion that they gaze out from a privileged vantage point, that each one’s gaze extends beyond her own frame of reference, and that they conspiratorially seek eye contact not with each other, but with their perceiver(s). The title’s bright-red lettering stands as an invitation to the reader to activate desire: “Anyone Can See I Love You” — to complete the third corner of the “love triangle.”

In direct contrast to the front, the back cover is devoid of all human figures. Instead, it sports a graytone photograph of Monroe’s Hollywood square of fame in front of Grauman’s Chinese Theatre; it bears her autograph and impressions of her hands and

feet. The imprints offer “concrete” evidence of her former presence, but just as surely they offer concrete evidence of her absence now. The photograph reminds us, on the one hand, that there is nothing concrete left, that Monroe’s physical body is intangible and inaccessible. On the other hand, the photograph reminds us that there is nothing *but* the concrete, nothing but material traces of Monroe. The back cover further forecasts the ekphrastic nature of the text, for not only is the poetic subject, Monroe, “out of the picture,” thus enabling the viewer to insert him/herself into her place, but the titular subject of the movie that made her famous is also conspicuously absent. That is, the word “*Gentlemen*” on the concrete square adjacent to Monroe’s is outside the frame of this photograph, so that the effect of this maneuver, whether intentional or not, calls into question the agency behind the preference — *Who* prefers blondes? — and opens it up to new possibilities that include viewers others than just “Gentlemen.” Either way, *Anyone Can See I Love You* invites its viewers to insert themselves into the text and become active readers, participants in the re-enactment of a life.

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“The typical ekphrastic text,” declares Mitchell, “might be said to speak to or for a semiotic ‘other’ — an image, visual object, or spectacle — usually *in the presence* of that object” (*Picture Theory* 184). In *Anyone Can See I Love You*, a voice speaks from underneath the covers and between the sheets to the picture on its front cover: a poster of a “picture-perfect” Marilyn, the stuff of which legends and fantasies are made. The cover Marilyn appears to “have it all together”: the one on the inside does not. Bowering

attempts to recreate this inner woman, the person beneath the glamorous personality, and insofar as this iconic Marilyn begins with this sultry pose and ends with a tangible absence, what Bowering writes is the middle of the story. Striking a careful balance between the visible and the hidden, *Anyone Can See I Love You* tries to locate where, beneath the public facade of Marilyn, lies Norma Jean, the “real” person “inside looking out.” Although it might be more appropriate to indicate the divided self of Bowering’s Marilyn as “Norma Jean/Marilyn,” this combination is not all that “reader-friendly,” so I will use “Marilyn” instead.

Reflecting this division of the self, thirty-six of the approximately fifty poems are titled, while the remainder are untitled. The poems chronologically follow events in Marilyn’s life (as recorded by biographers), but it is often difficult to tell where one poem leaves off and another begins, for they are composed in free verse and therefore vary in length from the longest which is four pages to the shortest which is only nine brief lines. It is by way of recurring images, such as the nightmarish wild animal, the hunted deer (as victim and stalker), and the fractured jelly glasses that the text makes a move towards the alter/biographical tendency to disrupt chronology, for recurring images establish a cyclical “design” that threatens to impede narrative progression. Usually the stanzas are made up of lines clustered two or three together; however, three poems — two untitled that begin, “Did I tell you” (7) and “I have this dream” (50), and one entitled “Dr. Kris: Interpreting Dreams” (52) — contain stanzas which are unusually compressed, as if to represent the private, inner world of Marilyn, that consists of pleasant memories, nightmares, or fantasies.



Already in the very first poem, untitled, that begins with “Did I tell you” (7), subtle nuances hint at the identity and gender issues with which Norma Jean will grapple as the icon Marilyn. Here an anonymous voice, an unnamed “I,” who identifies herself in the next poem entitled “Norma Jean” (8-10), strolls “down by the pier in Santa Monica where [her] mother used to go to find her dates.” Addressing the reader with a conversational “Did I tell you the most beautiful thing I ever saw?” the speaker assumes the role of a verbal artist. In child-like wonder she marvels over the sunset that turns the sky “pink — like a birthday cake.” Her “artistic eye” — her appreciation for beauty, that is — also manifests itself. A nondescript grey rock upon which she stubs her toe fascinates her with its pinkish-hued glow when she holds it up to the light: “It was like everything in the / world was that way, and all you had to do was pick / it up, touch it.” Norma Jean transforms this ordinary childhood experience into a glamorous one, whereby this narrative provides a model for the subsequent transformation from Norma Jean into Marilyn Monroe. The pink hues here are pale shades of the vivid red that will later define Marilyn as a pin-up girl in the poem “Miss Golden Dreams Calendar” (15), just as her mother’s rendezvous at the pier is a shadow that dogs her after she marries Jim Dougherty at age sixteen. As she tells us in the poem entitled “Norma Jean” (8-10):

We had a dog, a house.  
I kept the house clean,  
I walked the dog  
oh long walks all the way to the pier  
where the sailors were.

The mundane domestic tasks Marilyn recollects Norma Jean attending to in this marriage, such as cleaning house, skinning rabbits, and cutting up fish do not satisfy her need to belong: “But how could I stop knowing what I knew? / I had no home. I had no one. / He [Jim] couldn’t change that.”

Not “at home” with the traditional homemaker role, and with gender roles upset by the war, Norma Jean goes to work on an assembly line. There in a “fated encounter” with a cameraman, a photogenic starlet is born, and thus begins her struggle to come to terms with her public and private selves. She soon discovers that Hollywood measures out movie contracts and job offers according to the laws of supply and demand, according to what “sells.” A bemused Marilyn asks of her earlier self,

So how did I know I had to change,  
sense that I was born blond  
but that someone had made a mistake with the colour,  
like mixing beer with champagne?

Femininity, by these Hollywood standards, is a commodity “rooted” in (or fixed in and hence fixed upon) physical/sexual desirability, and all too frequently, achieving this desirability involves an exchange of what is natural, what is “home-y” (even “home-ly”), for what is artificial. Once again in the “Norma Jean” poem (8-10), for instance, Marilyn remarks upon the uncanniness of having had to recreate herself:

I lightened my hair, closed my smile a little.  
They said they needed to see my mouth quiver ...  
  
alteration so minor ....

It was right.

It was hopeless.

You change skins,  
you wriggle in to 'Marilyn',  
it's the real you inside looking out,

but Norma Jean is somewhere asking —

did anybody love her? —

Never.

In resigned acceptance of Hollywood conventions, of what a dominant “they” recommend, Norma Jean dyes her hair blonde, “wiggles” into clothing designed to emphasize her womanly figure (the poems attend to fashion details), and effects the “closed smile” of the silent object in order to attract the male gaze. Nevertheless, there is a trace of subversiveness in Marilyn’s tone when she informs us that she “closed [her] smile a little.” She will not keep her mouth entirely shut like an obedient “good little girl.” She is learning how to affect a guise of compliance.

After divorcing first husband Jim Dougherty, Marilyn becomes more economically viable, or, as she puts it in a poem entitled “Summer 1946” (13), she becomes “more negotiable” because her physical attractiveness is accompanied by her (hypothetical) sexual accessibility. A certain political leverage is hers to be had based upon this sex appeal, as the poem “Miss Golden Dreams Calendar” demonstrates (15). The title of this ekphrastic piece refers to the (in)famous calendar photo for which

Marilyn posed nude, so it comes as no surprise that the first stanza locates the reader in a dominant, voyeuristic role, and Marilyn in a passive statue-like pose, as she describes:

I lie down on red velvet —  
my body is an alabaster arc,  
my head is thrown back — blond  
hair like a vortex,  
red lips and nipples,  
perfect thighs tapering  
to perfect toes.

The second stanza abruptly undercuts the statue-like stasis of the first: The iconic calendar girl claims agency; she aligns herself with artists.

It was how I imagined  
I would look. I could feel  
men want to touch  
through the lens:

what they wouldn't unlock  
for me!

All the hands  
that couldn't touch.

In a commentary that switches from present tense to past tense, Marilyn acknowledges the intention and action behind the modelling posture she adopts, as well as her control over the situation, which enables her to gain “the world [she] wanted” (15), to gain the upper hand over male viewers, those men that “wanted to touch” yet “couldn't touch.”

I lay back satisfied.  
For the first time in months  
I slept.

Artists said it was perfect symmetry.

I lay down naked on red velvet,  
and for a moment the world I wanted  
began,

and the other one stopped.

Because Marilyn controls the narrative, she controls the reader's gaze. With its speaker "mediated and distance by memory" and the description that becomes the "dominant rhetorical feature," this poem shares patterns with Mitchell's slave narratives. Only later on, however, will the "indications of a blankness in memory," that is, the excision and/or "destruction of memory," that he finds in such works (*Picture Theory* 186-87) become more pervasive throughout the text in the form of parenthetical remarks, dashes, and especially lines that trail off into ellipses, which serve to deflect attention away from Marilyn, or conceal and suppress memories that are too painful or would show her up in a unfavorable light.

On the whole, the commercial success of Marilyn's "artistic" triumph works to her disadvantage. Society sees the public role the actress plays, and superimposes that public identity onto her private life. Again and again she protests the pre-scripted and prescriptive narratives that would reduce her to silent, subordinate sex object, but it

becomes increasingly difficult for her to maintain the separation of her private and public selves, especially in the marriage arena. In “Summer 1946” (13), for example, her first husband, Jim Dougherty, becomes upset when he telephones Marilyn after their apparently effortless and amicable divorce (or perhaps the divorce is one of the “blanks” in her memory):

I kept Jim's car.  
He phoned me once and asked,  
'Are you happy?'

I said I was lonely at night.

This made him angry,  
and he disappeared,  
forever,  
out of my life.

Presumably Jim cannot reconcile the lonely Norma Jean and her unspoken and unsatiated romantic/sexual desire with her popular Marilyn alter ego. Later attempts by Marilyn to accustom second husband Joe DiMaggio and third husband Arthur Miller to her public “sex symbol” image are equally unsuccessful. Neither one ever feels quite at home with her.

For example, when she asserts her artistry a second time in “The Divorce, October 1954” (26), Marilyn begins by enumerating her chief complaints against estranged husband DiMaggio:

He didn't talk to me.

He was cold.

He was indifferent to me as a human being  
and an artist.

He didn't want me to have friends of my own.

He didn't want me to do my work.

He watched television instead of talking to me.

We just lived in two different worlds.

The DiMaggio portrayed here is guilty of exerting his male gaze as a means of objectifying his wife. Rather than validating her as a “human being” and “artist” through interactive dialogue, DiMaggio rivets his attention on the uni-directional visual pleasures of TV. In this particular memory, it is not Marilyn but DiMaggio who winds up as a static object, “cold” and “indifferent.” In a later poem entitled “Second Baby, November 1958” (40), in recalling how yet another attempt at homemaking crumbles, as a result of two miscarriages, she describes her third husband playwright Arthur Miller in similar terms, as “a distant husband.” By ever so subtly laying the blame at their doors, Marilyn diverts attention away from her failure to bear children, and cons the reader into taking her side.

Sometimes Marilyn's memory leads to contradictory descriptions of a kind similar to those of slave narratives that lead Mitchell to conclude that “representation (in memory, in verbal descriptions, in images) not only ‘mediates’ our knowledge . . . but obstructs, fragments, and negates that knowledge” (*Picture Theory* 186, 188). In “Fairy

Tale Marriage / January 14, 1954" (21) which precedes "The Divorce," Marilyn describes herself and DiMaggio as newlyweds:

For luck Joe had on  
the same polka-dot tie  
he'd worn when we met,

and a dark suit,  
a white shirt,  
glossy black shoes.

The Sex Queen  
and  
The Slugger:

Joe was one story,  
I was another.

He was the Yankee Clipper,  
the Power Hitter,  
my Slugger with the ideal  
batting average.

And I was Cinderella,  
out of tinsel,  
in a high-necked brown suit  
with ermine collar.



Even though the poem is cast as a “fairy tale” romance, Marilyn’s glamour is subdued, her attire unusually demure. Cinderella’s “muted” appearance suggests that she harbors a desire to break with spectacle, but the title she initially gives herself, “Sex Queen,” conjures up a bawdy image that is quite at odds with a fairy tale princess. Moreover, much as DiMaggio in his suit might well be cast as the all-American Prince Charming playing opposite her Cinderella, his nickname, “The Slugger,” carries with it ominous undertones. In any event, Marilyn hits home the fact that there is more to the famous couple than either images or labels can convey, but in this case, visual and verbal representations actually negate knowledge by cancelling each other out.

Situated between “Fairy Tale Marriage” and “The Divorce, October 1954,” a poem entitled “Precious Little Girl” (22) recounts Marilyn’s and DiMaggio’s honeymoon in Tokyo less than ten years after the end of World War II. Marilyn empathizes with the adoring fans that turn out to greet her upon her arrival,

the people  
(faces pale with anguish  
and grief — they are a nation  
of self-immolation)

With its “sweet, sweet scent / of bombs and mutilation,” its “confetti / for mourning,” Marilyn regards Japan as “the right country to come to / after the wedding” because just as Japan after the war is trying to rebuild itself, so she, too, is trying to rebuild herself by taking on a new role, a new identity. Due to its polysyllabic words and rhymes, this poem lends an enormous amount of intelligence and contemplation to Marilyn’s voice,

thereby establishing a counter-narrative to both the “dumb blonde” stereotype, and the “Monchan! Monchan! / Precious Little Girl!” title that the Japanese bestow upon her. The latter, remarks Marilyn, “wasn’t [Joe’s] idea of his wife.” DiMaggio may be justified in objecting to the diminutive nickname, but she implies that what he really opposes is a narrative that allots her an identity apart from him.

Perhaps Miller means well in “The Misfits, Reno, Nevada,” when he creates a screenplay for Marilyn, but the gesture becomes the epitome of betrayal. “Arthur has written me a script” she remarks (45), but it is a script wherein she “plays [her]self / with no centre, drifting / on set and off” (46). With all his literary *savoir-faire*, Miller, like Dougherty and DiMaggio before him, cannot separate Norma Jean and Marilyn, and ends up rewriting Marilyn back into the same familiar iconic pattern. At the same time, as much as she wants to break free of her constrictive image, Marilyn sometimes slips back into her place as an object because it is available to her, because she enjoys the attention that she attracts, and because she finds that being aligned with what is visual grants her power. In “Dr. Kris: Interpreting Dreams” (52), for example, she confesses that her fantasy would be to “walk [naked, in church] down the aisle while the minister / goes on preaching”; she imagines that, based on the visual pleasure she gives, “[e]veryone smiles, / everyone loves me.” Similarly, in “The Dress” (58), she is gratified when a female says of her, “I would like to look like that,” or when “a man was struck dumb” upon seeing her. Bowering’s Marilyn truly enjoys wielding a power that exceeds the power of words.

After “Westside Hospital, L.A., August 1960” (47) which follows “The Misfits, Reno Nevada,” the poems take on a more surrealistic, hallucinatory quality so as to

emphasize Marilyn's breakdown and the related psychoanalysis she undergoes and the medication she is prescribed. Certain images crop up throughout the book, but now they take on a surreal quality. Previously, Marilyn has revealed that her mother is "mad" and in an asylum (8, 13), but in the poem entitled "Method Acting" (48), she imagines she sees her mother before her, "scratching at her wrist / with a knife," or, in "Red Stockings" (63-64), sending her "*a smoke signal of warning*" (64). In the untitled poem (50) which begins, "I have this dream in which men in white jackets / come into the house and they put me in a strait jacket," and goes on to describe the men's "wearing white masks" and putting her "into a white hearse," Marilyn's fear of being confined in an institution, be it the orphanage in her past or the insane asylum of her mother's, is evident.

Even water imagery, which often holds connotations of femininity and motherhood — as it did in Longfellow's documentary, for example — holds a threat for Bowering's Marilyn. What begins harmlessly enough in "After Arthur/ Payne-Whitney Clinic/ Winter 1961" (53-55) as "white paper flags" of "mist and frost" waving messages shortly thereafter becomes a threatening undertow. Reflecting on the price of her success in re-inventing herself, Marilyn recalls Aimee Semple McPherson, a woman "born-again" (i.e., recreated and made-over) like herself, but one who was thought "drowned" when she had actually "just run away with a man." By comparison, Marilyn is not so fortunate, for her attempt to convince "Bobby [Kennedy]" to run away to her in the poem entitled "Red Stockings" (63-64) results in a rejection that makes her feel she is drowning not physically, but metaphorically, under the weight of all the expectations which she cannot live up to. The water imagery finally culminates in the following poem, the

longest of the collection, "This is My House, Spring 1962" (65-69), in which Marilyn jumps from one subject to another, and a casual reference to her swimming pool leads her to ask: "If you felt water rising, / what would you do?" (68).

It becomes increasingly difficult, as well, to distinguish Marilyn's nightmares from her reality. Near the beginning of her relationship with DiMaggio, Marilyn describes in an untitled poem a "dream" involving a menacing "wild animal" that threatens to kill first Marilyn and then DiMaggio (19-20). As a result of Miller's later betrayal, this "wild animal" nightmare recurs in "On the Farm in Connecticut, 1956-57" (36-38), wherein italics represent Miller's voice as asking:

*What would you do, Marilyn  
if you met a wild animal  
while you were out on your own —  
remember there's no man with a gun —*

*and this creature runs on all fours towards you?  
Think about it.  
The animal is black,  
it is hungry,  
it doesn't know who you are.*

She responds,

I would give it water, Arthur.  
I would give it my face to hold in its paws.  
I would unstitch the hair from my head, the dark  
and the light.  
I would put my bare head into its mouth.

I would look as far inside as I could.

Then I would scream,

then I would die, Miller.

Do you call that suicide?

That's what I thought I said.

Then I went into the hospital.

Then we moved back to New York.

Whereas "Fairy Tale Marriage" referred to "Cinderella," this nightmare or hallucination has more in common with "Little Red Riding Hood." There is something extremely disquieting about this predatory, shadowy "wild animal": perhaps a surrogate for the absent "man with a gun," it identifies Marilyn as its victim, and its "hunger" carries undertones of sexual desire. Not until the last four or five lines does the scenario break down completely with her broken admission of uncertainty. Thus, Bowering spares us neither the triumphs nor the terrors of her Marilyn's experiences.

Certainly, then, there can be no question of Bowering's ability to render the humanity of the woman behind or within the Marilyn Monroe icon, and the depth and breadth of emotions and sensations Marilyn "voices" prompts Terry Johnson to note the character's "intriguing combination of sinfulness and purity, narcissism and expansiveness" (50). In other words, Bowering presents us with a Marilyn poised between binaric extremes, who is neither a vamp intent upon unravelling the fabric of morality, nor is she "an innocent, brutally manipulated by a patriarchal society," as

Johnson claims a “trite feminist portrayal” would have one believe (50). Ultimately, Bowering’s Marilyn is “successful” because she inhabits the space somewhere in-between. As Johnson summarizes, she “is innocent . . . she’s surely exploited . . . but she’s driven from marriage to marriage to self-destruction as much by her own childish self-indulgence as by the insensitive demands of her husbands, employers and image makers” (50). Put more positively, but still avoiding white-washing, one might say that what Bowering gives us is a Marilyn who is not merely acted upon by others, but also acts upon others, in that she exerts control over the images and the narrative: she determines what we “see” and what we “hear.” In essence, Bowering’s perspective extrapolates from that of Gloria Steinem, whose *Marilyn: Norma Jean* was first published in 1986 (one year prior to *Anyone Can See I Love You*) leaves off. According to Steinem:

By the time she had become a star, this artificial creation of a woman called Marilyn Monroe had become so complete and so practiced that she could turn it on or off in a minute. Actor Eli Wallach is one of many colleagues who remember her walking down the street completely unnoticed, and then making heads turn in sudden recognition by assuming her famous mannerisms. “I just felt like being Marilyn for a moment,” she would explain. (159)

Of course, the real “truth” about Monroe remains forever elusive; what is important, however, is the extent to which artistry can introduce new insights that fall beyond the means of factual records.

Ultimately, in turn, this is the real achievement of Longfellow and Bowering. In different media and by different means, they re-present the persons behind the icons whose past societal significance has lost its relevance. These women “recuperate” the icons; that is, they help them “get back to a former state or condition” (*Gage*), by restoring special meaning or significance to them. Since, of course, an icon is a product of shared experience, such a recuperation, in turn, means that an icon metaphorically links the present to the past, that it enables one who values it to transcend his/her own time and place and person to some extent. By experimenting with “voice” and kinesthetics in documentary film and poetry, Longfellow and Bowering put one imaginatively inside the icon’s mind and body. As a result, both reconceptualize the old stories to make possible “other stories.”

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers in parentheses refer to the page(s) on which a poem appears rather than line numbers, since Bowering’s poems are generally quite short. Additionally, all ellipses in quotations taken from the poems are her own.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis arose out of a very personal curiosity to know why and with what consequences popular culture icons get “recycled” from one generation to another. Especially in this current “age of mechanical reproduction,” where icons and other images are easily mass-produced, and easily placed into new situations (witness Marilyn Monroe with Abraham Lincoln on the cover of *Scientific American*, 1994), they have lost some of their original ability to “signify” the potential for change that they once did; that is, because of their pervasiveness, and due to their commodification, they appear as “designs” rather than dynamic signifiers of transformation. Sometimes one has to uncover the history (or, some would insist, the herstory) — the narrative component — of an icon to appreciate how important it was at the time, how it fulfilled a particular “spiritual” need. And sometimes the best way to reintroduce old or exhausted values is in the guise of something new.

It is also here that innovative artistic techniques can play a key role, in both the visual and verbal media, and especially when this innovation takes the form of crossing the traditional boundaries or conjoining word and image in the “composite” art form. As Estella Lauter’s observes in explaining the importance of an interarts approach in dealing with images of women and their social significance:



Distinctions among arts ... become tools that an artist can use to move an audience into a new perspective. The differences among the arts become complementary channels in which new ideas can find expression, often by being introduced in one medium and developed in another, sometimes in conscious dialogue. (133)

Each of the works I have explored in this study demonstrate this strategy very well, and in affording insights into the dynamics of icon formation and their fascination they could also be said to have adapted the advice of President John F. Kennedy, himself another famous icon: "Ask not what icons can do for you, but what you can do for icons."

Although in this thesis I have chosen to concentrate on what sort of "femininity" the icon of Marilyn Monroe might embody for women, one should bear in mind that what an icon represents and how it is represented has much to do with issues of gender, nationality, race, age, and socioeconomic status; thus, there are numerous questions raised by my thesis and numerous interarts/interdisciplinary slants one might pursue. For example, perhaps studying a black American icon, such as Dorothy Dandridge, a contemporary of Monroe's, and whose life parallels Monroe's in a number of points, would help to introduce another perspective on the 1950s ideal of femininity. Similarly, one might focus on movie posters, and consider differences in the ways that various nationalities — say American versus French — have depicted Marilyn Monroe. Or again, one might look closely at the 1998 edition of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: The Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady* which includes the original illustrations by

Ralph Barton, and explore whether image and text support each other, or whether they generate interarts, and by extension political tensions.

To the extent that studying icons requires attention to the time factor, including constancy and change, another area that could be explored is evolution or adaptability. Because of her early demise, for example, Monroe's public image remained relatively static, so by way of considering how this impacted on her immediate and perpetuated appeal, one might study an icon who has undergone a number of incarnations. Here, Madonna would seem to be the most obvious choice, although someone like Jamie Lee Curtis might also prove interesting, given her illustrious parentage. In a recent interview for *Celebrity Profile*, Curtis noted that throughout her career thus far, she has been alternately known as "the daughter of Janet Leigh and Tony Curtis," "The Scream Queen," "The Body," and "The Comedienne." In terms of artworks or texts, one might similarly examine various incarnations of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, to discover what sort of songs were excised in the transfer from the Broadway production to the big screen and how they would change a performance.

Closer to home, one might address the seeming reluctance of Canadians to promote their icons, and why the eulogizing of the late Pierre Elliott Trudeau suggests that he was a clear exception. On a related note, and prompted by Longfellow's rediscovery of Marilyn Bell, one might wonder if there are not many other Canadian icons that might lend themselves to iconization via an interarts approach. Especially in the light of the numerous Canadian stars who seem to lose their local appeal and lustre when they cross over into the United States, one might investigate how iconic status is

contingent upon “patriotism,” if not “provinciality,” whereby, in turn, one might consider whether this requirement might be changing in light of rapid globalization. Focusing on questions of nationality and artistic preference, one might explore why Canada seems to be especially rich in musical talent — Stompin’ Tom, Alanis Morissette, Anne Murray, Celine Dion, Neil Young, Burton Cummings, Shania Twain — and whether this phenomenon might have anything to do with the hierarchy of the arts. One could consider, too, where “androgynous” Canadian icons such as Carole Pope and k.d. lang might fit into the Canadian cultural narrative.

Last but not least, one could consider all the issues arising from Elton John’s “Candle In the Wind,” a song whose lyrics (written by Bernie Taupin) originally commemorated Marilyn Monroe (1974), but were then rewritten in 1997 following the tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales. One can well imagine the dissatisfaction such a revision may have generated among Americans, who may have felt that the British pop singer, in mourning Diana with this song, somehow desecrated or cancelled out the importance of their beloved Hollywood icon. It certainly made John’s fellow countryman, Keith Richards of the legendary Rolling Stones, uneasy: “I find it jars a little,” he said, “After all, it was written for Marilyn Monroe. This is writing songs for dead blondes” (“Elton John Tribute”). Perhaps what Richards attempted to articulate was the feeling of a number of individuals, that a song written as a tribute should be as unique in its melody as it is in its lyrics — and definitely not “recycled,” as that tarnishes the images of both human beings so commemorated.

Within Great Britain itself, nationalistic tensions took a slightly different turn, with Scottish and Welsh people voicing their objection to John's new lyrics, which bade farewell to "England's Rose." "Complaints were made to national newspapers and Buckingham Palace as soon as the lyrics were published," read one *Times* article, on the grounds that "Diana was the People's Princess and not just England's" (Fresco 6). Meanwhile, funeral organizers, very much aware of the ways in which Diana had acted as the "People's Princess," mediating between commoners and royalty, were unsure of whether or not to invite John to perform, because they were afraid he "might not set the right tone" (Elliott 2). In other words, they appear to have been sceptical of whether a popular song was appropriately funereal, and to have felt that it might, somehow, compromise the solemnity, the religious significance, of the occasion. Ultimately, John was invited to perform, for organizers had thought better of allowing the service to reflect the "informality" that characterized the Princess's lifestyle.

On a more spiritually personal level, a comparison of the 1974 and 1997 lyrics reveals two versions that differ quite radically in what they denote and connote in terms of changing concepts of femininity. Perhaps most notably, John's original opening line, simple in its use of Marilyn's real name, "Goodbye, Norma Jean," was replaced with "Goodbye, England's Rose" in the tribute to Diana, a more formal title which bespeaks respect, and yet projects an image that deftly blends together both the romance and the royalty that the flower symbolizes. Whereas John sings of Norma Jean, "You had the grace to hold yourself while those around you crawled," of Diana he sings, "You were the grace that placed itself where lives were torn apart"; he portrays the latter woman as

proactive, driven by a compassion for others, while the former woman, by comparison, models a more reactive, self-defensive “grace.” The same distinction is evident in the comparison of the women to candles, for whereas Norma Jean is compared to “a candle in the wind, never knowing who to cling to when the rain set in,” Diana is a candle “never fading with the sunset when the rain set in.” Perhaps the most telling change of the 1997 revision, however, is the one that substitutes for Marilyn — who vaguely represented “something more than sexual” — a Princess whose country will be “lost without [her] *soul*” (emphasis mine). Beauty of soul, rather than bodily beauty is the measure of loss, in this case. Elton John’s revision, then, proves to be ever so much more than just a dirge for another beautiful blonde woman whose life was tragically cut short: it bestows on Diana the dignity that seemed always to elude Marilyn, and by bestowing dignity on an icon of femininity, the 1997 “Candle In the Wind” by extension grants a greater dignity to all women.

All things considered, it seems that popular culture icons have about them a particular quality, whether it is their perceived “immediacy” or “disposability,” that encourages individuals to think about and to talk about the values reflected by and shaped by these representations, without feeling intimidated. A popular culture icon is, in that sense, a microcosm of Interarts/interdisciplinary approaches which want to encourage thought and discussion about the values that are transmitted in a wide variety of shapes and forms. Interdisciplinary/interarts theory, like any icon, holds out a hope of transcending what is familiar and delighting in what is unfamiliar.

## **Appendix — Visual Illustrations**



Fig. 1. "I just adore conversation, don't you?" Marilyn Monroe as Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953).



Fig. 2. Jane Russell as Dorothy Shaw performs "Ain't There Anyone Here for Love?" *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953).



Fig. 3. "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend," *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953).



Fig. 4. Human female chandelier in "Diamonds are a Girls' Best Friend," *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953).





Fig. 5. Marilyn Bell, *Our Marilyn* (Full Frame, 1987).

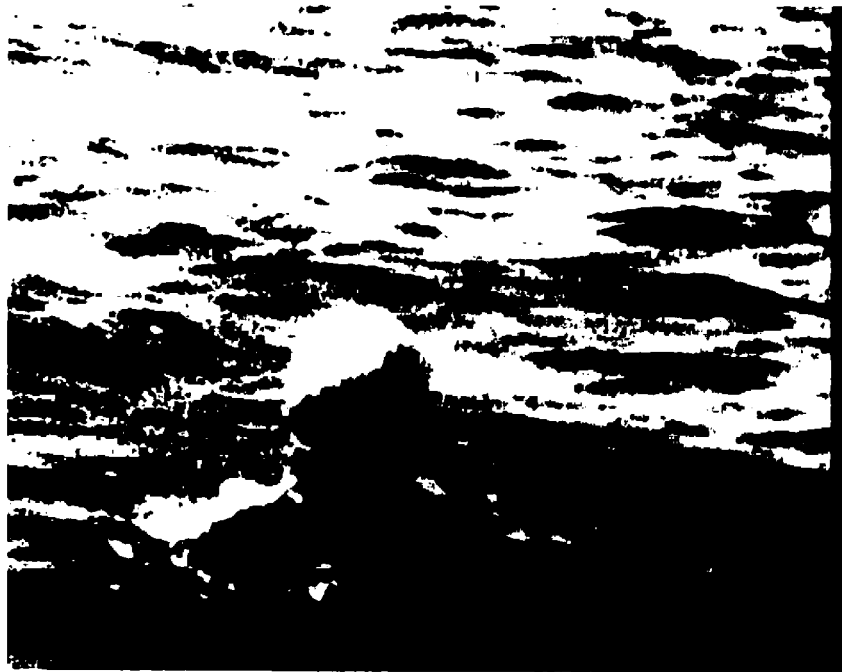


Fig. 6. Brenda Longfellow recreates “middle portion” of Marilyn Bell’s swim, *Our Marilyn* (Full Frame, 1987).

# *Anyone Can See I Love You*



*Marilyn Bowering*



In this extraordinary cycle of poems, we hear and are spell-bound by the voice of Marilyn Monroe. Her vulnerability and toughness, her narcissism and immaturity, and above all the mystery of Monroe's innocence are perfectly conveyed. Bowering sees both that her character's suffering is genuine and that it is self-indulgent. She gives us the luminousness of Monroe, embodies her in the rhythm of voice and in the visual images of self and world through which Monroe lived. She gives us Monroe's darkness, and also her faith in perfect love, her belief that there is no sin, no death, that nothing really bad can happen.

*Constance Rooks*

10 1987  
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\$7.95

Fig. 7. Front and back covers, *Anyone Can See I Love You* (Erin, ON: Porcupine's Quill, 1989).

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