

Let's Make Love: Whiteness, Cleanliness and Sexuality in the French Reception of Marilyn Monroe.

Abstract:

Richard Dyer's seminal work on whiteness in film considers Marilyn Monroe as the epitome of an institutionally racist Hollywood system that imagines the most desirable woman to be blonde, given that bloneness is understood as a guarantee of whiteness. This article adds to other recent scholarship on Monroe that has sought to complicate this reading by examining other meanings that can be attributed to her bleached blonde hair. By closely analysing media texts that discussed Monroe in 1950s France, this article demonstrates the way in which her performance of ideal American female sexuality was read through the prism of Monroe as icon of cleanliness and (linked) modernity. It examines the way in which Monroe's modernity allowed her to escape partially the traditional feminine private sphere and it concludes that Monroe's bleached blonde hair can be seen in this context as having liberatory potential.

Keywords:

Marilyn Monroe

Blonde

White

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Introduction:

In his classic study of Marilyn Monroe's star image, Richard Dyer argues that her dyed platinum blonde hair is key to her sexual appeal, particularly as it was constructed through the 'playboy' discourses of the 1950s: 'Monroe conforms to, and is part of the construction of, what constitutes desirability in women [...] for the most desirable woman is a white woman. The typical playmate is white, and most often blonde [...] to be ideal Monroe had to be white, and not only white but blonde, the most unambiguously white you can get' (Dyer 1987: 42-3). As a blonde in the 1950s Hollywood film industry, Monroe is considered to be the sexual and racial embodiment of perfection. In an era of civil rights movements, decolonisation and race rebellion, Hollywood's vision of female sexual desirability is a glowing white icon.

Whiteness has multiple connotations: the white race, figured as the most civilised and advanced of all races; white goods, the products filling the suburban homes of 1950s America (and France); cleanliness, both in the white colour of detergent and washing powder, and in its metaphorical connotations of sexual purity and virginity. White women were offered as the most desirable of all women and blondes, as the most white, as the most desirable of all. Monroe's sexual desirability and commercial value owe much to her white-blonde hair, a relentless re-construction of perfect whiteness (during filming, her hair was retinted every four days), which associates her repeatedly with the colour white in her films.ⁱ In *The Seven Year Itch* (Wilder, 1955), where she is an American pin-up girl made flesh, Monroe is also a blur of floating whiteness – most famously in the New York subway grill scene, but also lounging in a sudsy bath and advertising 'Dazzledent' toothpaste. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Hawks, 1953), she may start the story as a vamp clothed in a bright red dress, but she marries in white to secure the dazzling translucent diamonds she covets. In *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder, 1959) Joe/Curtis and Jerry/Lemmon, in drag, burst into the women's toilet and surprise Sugar/Monroe, who is having a quick swig of brandy. All three are wearing black dresses, but the men also have black hats in contrast to Sugar's blonde hair, which is lit from above, the side and below, so that her head is almost ball of light. In *Let's Make Love* (Cukor, 1960), in the title song's

fantasy sequence, Monroe knits a silky, shiny white fabric, rather than the pink, holed-filled jumper than she is knitting in the film's diegetic 'real world'.

As Laura Mulvey comments, her whiteness confirms Monroe as the embodiment of a highly exportable American ideal. Through the multiple connotations of white, she suggests the technical advancement of 'white goods'; cleanliness achieved through detergent, shampoo and washing powder; and safe 'suburban' sexuality of young brides and 'gated' neighbourhoods.

If America was to export the democracy of glamour into post-war, impoverished Europe, the movies could be its shop window [...] Marilyn Monroe, with her all American attributes and streamlined sexuality, came to epitomise in a single image this complex interface of the economic, the political, and the erotic. By the mid 1950s, she stood for a brand of classless glamour, available to anyone using American cosmetics, nylons and peroxide (Mulvey 1996: 216).

It is the meanings of Monroe's whiteness in relation to her export to France that this article will examine, in order to complicate Dyer's reading that Monroe's whiteness speaks only of the institutional racism that characterised 1950s Hollywood. As Lois W. Banner argues, 'it is possible that most blonde, fair-skinned actresses, like Dyer's Monroe, represented a racist ideology. Yet, without further investigation, that conclusion is premature, for it slights different historical contexts, the agency of the women involved, and cultural categories other than race' (2008: 6). Banner goes on to analyse the ways in which Monroe's white star image intersects with other aspects of difference as articulated, for example, by feminist and civil rights concerns. She concludes that, in her native America, Monroe was an ethnic white and that 'following this interpretation, the Monroe image could be seen as one of ethnic cohesion, a bridge between minorities' (Banner 2008: 18). It is not my intention to dispute Banner's convincing reading of Monroe's image, but rather to follow up her suggestion that to fully come to grips with the meanings of Monroe's blonde hair and fair skin necessitates the investigation of 'cultural categories other than race'. This article argues that Monroe's bloneness comes to have very specific meanings in the French context that it does not have elsewhere, and thus that readings of such cultural signs as hair colour need to take into account national as well as racial difference. It will examine the way in which hair and its colour and cleanliness became an object of

intense investigation and interest in 1950s France; the manner in which Monroe was discussed in the French press; and the way in which Monroe's affair with the French star Yves Montand in 1960 allowed the French press to compare the French female and the American female star. This article thus aims to interpret Monroe's blondeness not as universal, but as a contingent factor in her star persona and therefore is conceived as a dialectical response to other studies of Monroe as a white-blond star.

Blondeness in 1950s France – an overview

Shining blonde hair functioned in 1950s France not primarily as a racially determined sign but as a sign of modernity and modernization, and linked cleanliness. Within French discussion of the everyday, exemplified by the work of Roland Barthes, Henri Lefebvre, and Edgar Morin, great attention was paid to the prevalence of shining surfaces, gleaming new cars, and the sale of washing powders and detergents. Barthes, in his classic study of 'everyday' objects and their hidden, mythological significance, *Mythologies*, turned his attention to detergents, face creams, the whiteness of milk and the translucence of diamonds. All France seemed converted to shiny, glistening surfaces: from the inedible but beautifully-presented food on the pages of *Elle* magazine that was adorned with glazes to the smooth, streamlined gloss of the new Citroën (Barthes 1957). Kristin Ross concludes that 'Barthes's ideologeme around detergent reveals a France with a desperate yen to be clean, to rid itself of decay of the teeth, the blood, the skin, and the breath' (Ross 1996: 73). Lefebvre's analysis of detergent advertisements similarly draws our attention to the purifying qualities of the colour white: 'It's the symbolic value of whiteness, with all it suggests, all its connotations of purity, of virginity, of the immaculate in the soul; it's whiteness as symbol that is used to sell such or such a detergent, and people are taken in – they buy it' (Lefebvre 1962: 71).ⁱⁱ It is Edgar Morin who seems particularly sensitive to the ways in which this discourse of cleanliness is particularly targeted at women. It is women who are exhorted to keep their homes and bodies clean, through the deployment of products such as washing powder, hair dye and shampoo, developed through new chemical processes. In his study of the Breton village Plodémet, he labels women 'the secret agents of modernity' (Morin 1967: 164). Whereas a man who modernises his farming equipment remains a peasant, a woman who modernises her home embraces new and different concerns influenced by the mass media and

popular culture. Morin's work addresses the female peasant condition as one that, with modernisation, creates a split or divided self. The condition is associated with dirt, no longer a sign of authenticity and hard work, but a site of repugnance and disgust.

Overwhelmed by her many tasks, the peasant woman first of all seeks to lighten the burden of domestic labour. She [...] asks for a washing machine, which replaces the wash house, and precedes by far the refrigerator [...] These first modern infiltrations are no longer provoked only by usefulness or suitability, they create new motivations for comfort and crystallise a desire to create an 'interior'. The interior is thus opposed to the dirty exterior [...] which becomes repugnant. A dirt complex develops which creates a new domestic model in feminine psychology and is felt by all young peasant women as disgust for the peasant condition (Morin 1967: 166).

The former neglect of body and clothing during working days has thus been replaced by a preoccupation with daily hygiene, health, and making a pleasing appearance. In contrast to the patriarch Toto Poullan, who boasts of the sturdiness of his fine black teeth never sullied by toothpaste, Morin noted that clean teeth, feet and nails had become the rule amongst young people, along with the use of shampoo. The women had abandoned traditional clothes for a variety of styles, experimented with make-up and beauty products, and went to the hairdresser to have a set once or even twice a week, even in the most rural areas, with the two hairdressing salons in the town expanding rapidly. According to one of the hairdressers, her clientele had increased by 50 percent each year since 1959 (Morin 1967: 172).

It is women rather than men that are driving this modernisation through cleanliness and hygiene, symbolised by their visits to the hairdresser. Clean hair is particularly associated with American femininity, and the visit to the hairdresser has modernizing and Americanising connotations. Françoise Giroud, recalling the influence ideas about American women had on the launch of *Elle* magazine, explains that 'an American woman at that time was a woman who always had newly washed, really shiny hair, and who was wearing a new hat and a smile' (Giroud 1973: 123).

Simone de Beauvoir is struck by the cleanliness of the young women's hair at Vassar college on her trip to America. 'This dulling heat, then, is America; and this orange juice handed to me by a young woman with shiny hair and a practiced smile is also America' (de Beauvoir 1996: 20).

In fact, the frequent washing of hair was relatively recent in America. For many years, soap was the primary cleansing agent in shampoos. It has many drawbacks: it lathers poorly in hard water and tends to deposit a dulling film of insoluble calcium. As a result, especially in hard water areas of the Mid-West, people limited the frequency of their hair washing to, at the most, once a week. Due to animal fat shortages in the Second World War, research was carried out into alternatives to soap and in 1947 synthetic detergent shampoos hit the American market and quickly supplanted soap shampoos, as they lathered copiously and rinsed freely. Manufacturers were delighted by the synthetic detergents' ability to be tailored specifically to different products, and they were used in developing bath foam, shower gels, and hair conditioners as well as shampoo. In just two years between 1949 and 1951, the value of the shampoo market increased by some twenty million dollars in America alone (Urbano 1995: 85-104).

Procter and Gamble (who developed their 'syndet' shampoo, *Prell*, in 1949) began manufacturing in France in 1954 and in the same year an international 'syndet' congress was held in Paris. Synthetic detergent shampoos were widely available in France from the mid 1950s. A shampoo advert from a May 1955 edition of *Elle* magazine shows that the identifiably American product of shampoo was available to all French women, so they could care for their hair in the way American women did. The slogan proclaims 'Les Américaines ont les cheveux les mieux soignés du monde!' [American women have the best cared for hair in the world!] Technological improvements in the United States (thanks to Helena Rubenstein in this instance) allow American women to care for their hair better than any other nationality; hair cleanliness becomes a source of national pride. Once these new (better, scientifically developed) products are available in France, French women can also care for their hair in this way that is worthy of national pride. Needless to say, the owner of these sumptuously cared for, sparkling clean locks is a blonde.

Being blonde was also more attainable and fashionable than ever before. In 1950, Clairol developed the Miss Clairol Hair Color Bath that required no pre-bleaching and could be used at home. Clairol's color bath was cleverly advertised in a

campaign devised by Shirley Polykoff that featured a blonde woman and the slogan 'Does She or Doesn't She...Only her hairdresser knows...', a campaign named as one of the twenty most influential campaigns in twentieth century America (Twitchell 2000: 115-119). Ruth Turner Wilcox, commenting on contemporary hair-styles in the 1950s, compares them to 'the glamorous fancies of Marie-Antoinette', only with the advantages of modern technology meaning that it is easy to tint or dye one's hair without using messy powders or suffering social stigma.

Not only women but men too, take advantage of the modern rinses, tints and dyes. One can change to the color of one's dreams in short time by having it done in the hairdresser's salon, or quite simply, by doing the job's one's self. One's hair can be lightened with a bleach. Gone is the terror of choosing the wrong color, because tint or rinse can be washed out. Gone is the day when to change the hair color was a stigma in society. Manufacturers of the magic formulas claim that at least seventy-five percent of the feminine world has rinsed, dyed or bleached because science has eliminated guess-work (Wilcox 1959: 329-331).

The dyeing of one's hair is presented as a normal desire, aided and abetted by technology. Thanks to the developments of science, one no longer needs to be a member of a privileged elite living in Versailles to dye one's hair. This is a Hollywood glamour available to anybody who can afford a cheap bottle of hair dye, and thus turns hairdressing from the preserve of the few to a mass-market endeavour. A L'Oréal advert placed in *Madame Express* magazine on 7 April 1960 associated the desire to colour one's hair with a reaction to the stresses and strains of modern life, a way of rejuvenating one's self and adding 'joie de vivre' to one's life. Where ten years ago, women were reluctant to risk dying their hair (fearing both social rejection and disastrous results), they were now 're-assured' and 'conquered' by improved technology and changing social mœurs which allow every woman to participate in a 'a modern fairy-tale where twentieth century alchemists create colour.'

Marilyn Monroe's shining clean, bleached blonde hair thus connotes the modern, American way of life being promoted in France through a combination of commercial pressures and industrial-technological developments. Monroe's star

image was continuing a long tradition of stars being used to showcase commodities (see Eckert 1995: 30-39). The difference with Marilyn Monroe was that she was selling not just another product but the American way of life. With her shiny blonde hair and her sparkling diamonds, Marilyn Monroe is the most obvious example of an exportation of American values of cleanliness and technological enhancement, and their perceived link to whiteness as the representative of these values.

Marilyn Monroe in France

Marilyn Monroe was discussed as the representation of the ideal American woman: as *L'Express* succinctly expressed it on 20 June 1953, 'she incarnates the feminine ideal in the United States' (Anon 1953a: 57). Monroe's star body was thus analysed both in the popular press and in critical and theoretical writings as articulating a peculiarly American set of ideas concerning female sexuality and its representation in the cinema. Her white-blond hair, with its contradictory connotations of innocence and purity or the sexy vamp, is read as expressing the contradictions containing American female sexuality in a society that is understood as both more Puritanical and more commodified than that of France.

Monroe as the ideal blonde star was widely reported in France. *L'Express* reviewed *Don't Bother to Knock* (Baker, 1952) in June 1953. The film starred Anne Bancroft and Richard Widmark; Marilyn Monroe had a relatively minor role as a troubled babysitter, but she clearly fascinated the anonymous reviewer, who dedicates most of his(?) article to this new American star 'who is practically unknown in France.' Monroe's appeal is located in her appearance of 'a naïve face on a perverse body' and her dominant trait is this vampy-yet-girlish sexuality. This overt sexuality is reported as disturbing to America's right-wing Puritan streak: 'Senator McCarthy, a moral as well as a political reformer, wants to ban some of her films.' Monroe is introduced as a contradiction, with her image already thought to connote both innocence and sexuality, a combination echoed in her film role: a fresh young American playgirl plays a disturbed babysitter. 'Don't fool yourself. It's not Marilyn who takes on the haggard appearance of mental breakdown, it's the girl she plays who takes on the fresh, curvy aspect of Marilyn' (Anon 1953a: 58).

The release of *Niagara* (Hathaway, 1953) later that year confirmed Monroe's highly sexualized star persona. Analysis of *Niagara* read Monroe as the vamp, the

sexual woman par excellence, and her expression of American female sexuality was considered in relation to Hollywood censorship, Puritanism, and the recently released Kinsey Report. Edgar Morin, for example, sees Monroe as the apogee of the 1950s Hollywood star system. Presented to us in *Niagara*, ‘naked under her red dress, with her devouring sex and massacring mouth’ (Morin 1957: 34) she is the sexually voracious woman. The image projected by Monroe in *Niagara* firmly establishes her in the French imagination as the sexual American woman, whose existence had just been confirmed by the publishing of the Kinsey Report.ⁱⁱⁱ *L’Express* magazine reviews *Niagara* and the Kinsey Report on the same page in its 19 September 1953 edition, creating an inevitable link between the release of the film and the study. Monroe and *Niagara* are figured in terms that make them part of the natural American landscape: ‘for his latest film, Hathaway has put Marilyn Monroe, prodigy of cinema screens, in competition with Niagara Falls, prodigy of nature’ (Anon 1953b: 19). *L’Express* wonders if there could be a French version of the Kinsey Report. The report on men (published in 1948) had aroused little indignation, and the magazine attributes this to ‘good moral health.’ It suggests that rather than carrying out scientific enquiry, the sexual behaviour of women is a ‘subject on which it might be fun to acquire some information one’s self.’ The French man, with his good moral standing and skill, doesn’t need a Dr Kinsey. Furthermore, French/European cultural superiority renders an investigation such as Kinsey’s unnecessary. Georges Izard comments that: ‘here, we’ve had Laclos, de Sade, Freud. We seek in novels the valuable interpretation of guessed-at statistics. I think we’ve crossed Kinsey’s threshold by having looked beyond him with a literature that doesn’t blush at difficult subjects or crude words’ (Anon 1953c: 19).

Daniel Guérin, in his enthusiastic response to the Report, considers the links it illuminates between sexuality and capitalism. American female sexuality, explicitly linked by Guérin to Monroe, is exploited for profit in films, books, periodicals and especially advertising (selling goods through sex appeal). Puritanism, Guérin argues, denies sexual response, yet capitalism ensures a constant state of sexual excitement: ‘you don’t have the right to touch a woman (other than your spouse), but her image follows you everywhere. The ‘pin-up’ girl is offered to the young male as a substitute for a real partner’ (Guérin 1955: 119). Monroe’s overt sexuality, far from being a contradiction in a puritanical society, is a product of it, the return of the repressed exploited for profit.^{iv}

André Bazin further argues that puritanical censorship forced Henry Hathaway to develop a subtle system of allusions to and metaphors of eroticism in *Niagara*. Water is important thematically in the film. The dialogue figures it as a dramatic symbol of tumultuous passion but, as Bazin argues ‘it is not the dynamic strength of the water in the falls that counts here, but the damp misty spray in the air all around. The protagonists are soaked by and suffer under this spray, but it becomes a very quality of the heroine’s skin and akin to the transference of our touch’ (Bazin 1961: 64). Monroe’s body is covered in skin tight clothing that suggests she is wearing no underwear, or she is shown stepping out of a shower, or in bed under tousled sheets: she is always naked under something. Censorship, rather than being a restriction, is an excitement to the imagination.

Furthermore, this is a typical use of feminine sexuality in Hollywood cinema according to Bazin. In an article on censorship, he considers the comparisons made between films and dreams and argues that censorship can be seen as determining the form and function of both. Whilst cinematic censorship is largely decided by judicial and social rules, and dream censorship by the superego, censorship determines what may and may not be seen. The things that are most revealing about a society are not therefore what is on the censor’s floor, but what censorship allows to remain, just as the residue of the superego’s censorship, the dream, is revealing of our psychic states.

So, in relation to Marilyn Monroe, the photograph that made her a star was not from the calendar where she posed naked [...], but the famous scene from *The Seven Year Itch* where a gust of wind from the subway lifted her skirt. This great idea could only have been born in the context of a cinema that possess a long, rich, Byzantine culture of censorship (Bazin 1961: 74-75).

Monroe’s eroticism, a blend of innocence and knowingness, related to the multiple connotations of her white-blond hair, is thus also formed in the specific national mould of puritanical Hollywood cinema. Censorship creates an image whose sexiness is located not in overt nudity but in an innocent sexuality which is not aware of its own power. Within Hollywood’s depiction of female sexuality, it is entirely logical that Monroe did not remain a *Niagara* style vamp for long. In order to become a viable star within the commercial system she needed to offer not simply an image of fatal female sexuality but to blend this sexual promise with maternity and childlike naivety to offer an image of the ‘good-bad girl’ – the girl with whom sex was exciting,

but also safe, reassuring and pure. After *Niagara* and *River of No Return* (Preminger, 1954), her fetish colour moves from red to white. Edgar Morin attributes this to the need for the star to embody a goddess-like purity. Moral and physical beauty are seen as one and the same, and the true beautiful female star cannot be a vamp. ‘She lives her passions sincerely [...] she protects children and respects the elderly. From the *Niagara* vamp, Marilyn Monroe became a star by unveiling the maternal heart that was hidden by her generous bust in *River Of No Return*’ (Morin 1957: 46). Monroe’s sexy vamp necessarily dissolved into the good-bad girl ideal. By the time she stars in *The Seven Year Itch* Monroe is no longer in a tight red dress, but clothed in floating white dresses. Her literal move from the red to the white makes her a Hollywood ideal. This ideal is recalled and referenced through her colouring, as her white-blond hair has contradictory connotations of purity and sexiness. Here, Monroe’s bloneness is interpreted as a product of an American, puritanically inflected censorship system in which sexuality is both denied and alluded to in images of women. Such female American sexuality became an object of intense interest in France when Monroe embarked upon a film with French star Yves Montand, who was the husband of French star Simone Signoret.

The Monroe-Montand couple vs the Signoret-Montand couple

My analysis of Marilyn Monroe’s performance in *Let’s Make Love* and its interpretation in a French context will consider the production context of the film as well as textual consideration of how the film alluded to the modernity of the American woman through the Amanda Dell/Marilyn Monroe and Jean-Marc Clément/Yves Montand relationship. There were reports from the set of the film throughout 1960 in the French press which kept the film and the Monroe-Montand couple an object of interest and speculation (see especially Anon 1960c and 1960d for detailed reports from the set). There was no significant shift in the meanings attributed to Monroe’s star image (she still connoted American female good-bad girl innocent sexiness), and given that the film’s most famous song, *My Heart Belongs to Daddy*, plays directly to these ideas, this is hardly surprising. My interest here then is in how Monroe’s image, and in particular her blonde hair and whiteness, work in comparison to a French man and (blonde) French woman at a historical and cinematic moment that allows this comparison to take place in relation to a specific, located couple. My

conclusion is that by reading Monroe's bloneness against Signoret's, her bloneness can work to signify the ways in which the American's woman modernity can be read as potentially liberating. The connotations associated with Monroe's bloneness in France become particularly complex here, as she can read as an icon of puritanical sexiness and yet, possibly, agency and self-determination in comparison to the French woman who is far more trapped within a traditionally feminine space of the domestic.

Yves Montand and Simone Signoret came to America in the Autumn of 1959. Following a tour of the Eastern bloc countries (Russia, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia), Montand was offered the chance to undertake a singing tour on the other side of the Iron Curtain in the United States. Norman Granz, an American impresario who was relatively well known in France, approached him and after some difficulty with visas for him and his wife, Simone Signoret, due to their connections with the left-wing CGT, a Broadway tour was organised for Montand (Signoret 1978: 120).^v In fact, at this time, following the success of the British film *Room At the Top* (Clayton, 1959), for which she would win the Oscar in April 1960, Signoret was better known than her husband in America. Signoret and Montand's arrival in America thus occurs in a context that troubles traditional gender relations, in which Signoret can be seen as having greater professional success than Montand. Whereas Monroe is considered professionally superior to Montand in terms of fame, at least, and her agency in choosing him as her co-star is celebrated in the French press, Signoret herself welcomes the fact that Montand's success on Broadway re-adjusted the power balance within their relationship as he became better known than her in America. Signoret seems to believe this is the 'correct' way for a husband-wife relationship to be perceived. Her interviewer in this *L'Express* article, Jean Cau, remarks upon her acceptance (and even pride) in this as being evidence of her love for her husband. She refers to Montand affectionately as 'mon bonhomme' and this is taken as a further indicator of the strength of the Signoret- Montand relationship. This portrayal of their relationship is particularly interesting given the context in which it occurs. Signoret, despite her considerable professional success in winning an Oscar, is willing to take the usual 'wifely' role within the relationship, being an appendage of her husband. Her true pride and success is not in the Oscar she has won, but in her husband's remarkable success in America – she is affirmed through him (Cau 1960: 57-63).

In contrast, Monroe's enormous influence and prestige place her in a position of professional agency over Montand. This is particularly complex in its reporting by the French press who stress how Monroe chose her co-star. *Paris-Match* reproduced a photograph of the couple smiling, with the headline 'I choose Montand'. The blurb underneath the photograph reads 'For her latest film, *Let's Make Love*, Gregory Peck, Fred Astaire and Rock Hudson were suggested to her. She preferred Yves Montand' (Anon 1960a). *L'Express* reports in a similar vein: 'The Montand couple have become the darlings of Hollywood, have been feted everywhere and Marilyn Monroe preferred Yves Montand to Gregory Peck to film *Let's Make Love*' (Anon 1960b: 27). Monroe's choice is reported as a triumph for Montand over other, more established Hollywood stars and presents the partnership as a matter of Monroe's personal preferences rather than commercial pressures. It also places Monroe firmly in a position of authority and control in their relationship.^{vi}

In contrast, the French man and woman fall into pre-determined gender roles. Signoret is presented as the willing housewife to Montand. She is the embodiment of the domestic ideal and content to be considered as Mme Montand. She consciously rejects the star status that could possibly follow her Oscar win: 'it's nice to be popular. I'm starting to drink that subtle poison, but I'm too lazy to be a big star and to sacrifice my private life for anything' (Cau 1960: 62). This image of the private, domestic-oriented Signoret is enhanced in later *Paris-Match* reports of the reunion between Signoret and Montand when the latter returned from Hollywood to rejoin his wife who had been filming in Italy. They are pictured embracing in the doorway of their home, and the text breathlessly recounts Signoret's joy at being back at their house in Autheuil, far from the bright lights of Hollywood (Anon 1960f). The following week, the magazine imagines an argument between Signoret and Montand over his return to the United States that casts Signoret firmly in the role of the home-loving housewife. It imagines an angry Montand telling his wife, 'Simone Signoret might prefer her life at home to her career as an actress! Well, I don't! I have my career and I have to dedicate myself to it!' (Anon 1960e). Signoret's attachment to her home and her marriage was presented as 'natural' in the ideology of the time.^{vii} Although Signoret is not as contained within the domestic space as the ideal of the period required, she is talked of as someone who loves her 'foyer', her home comforts, and photographs of Montand's return to France show Signoret snuggled up on a sofa wearing her dressing gown, laughing with joy helping Montand unpack his bags and

cooking spaghetti for the family meal. (Anon 1960f). She therefore combines her career with the role of dedicated wife and mother.

There seems to be no such easy combination of the private life of a wife and mother and being an actress for Monroe. The Hollywood system cancels out the opportunity for Monroe to enjoy Signoret's 'normal' femininity. Talking about her early marriage to Jim Dougherty at the age of 16 (this is not atypical for the period – such was the strength of ideology that stressed a domestic role for women, the late 1940s and early 1950s were characterised by early marriage and a dramatically rising birth rate),^{viii} her French biographer Claude Duffau writes: 'we have problems imagining the girl that was to become Marilyn Monroe against a backdrop of household appliances or following her husband on a weekend hunting rabbits. Moreover, this husband understood nothing of the dreams of this young girl upon whom domestic happiness soon weighed heavily' (Duffau 1978: 23). Monroe, with her dreams of stardom, cannot even be imagined washing floors or cooking. Her second marriage to Joe di Maggio is also characterized by this ambivalence towards marriage as a state of natural happiness for women, and Monroe's inability to function as housewife due to her stardom. *Paris-Match* labels it an American fairy-tale, but Monroe is unable to be a housewife and serves 'raw potatoes and burned steak' for dinner. She did in fact master the art of cooking spaghetti, but wanted to continue to be a star. The magazine comments that di Maggio was too Italian 'to imagine a woman could be happy anywhere other than the home' and thus the marriage failed (Anon 1960d).

As Lisa Cohen argues, Monroe's star image articulates a paradoxical relationship to the private sphere and the role of women in 1950s America. Cohen maps this paradox onto the contradictory way in which Monroe's sex appeal is characterized both as a force of nature and simultaneously as completely artificial – as a parody of what is posited as some more 'real' femininity. Cohen explores this contradiction within American post war culture and argues that Monroe is an oxymoron of nature and technology, containment and excess, an embodiment of the ironies of suburban sexuality in which the female home-maker is both relentlessly inscribed into the wholly private sphere of the domestic space whilst being made increasingly visible and available in women's magazines, *Playboy*, scientific and technological discourse (the invention of labour-saving devices) and political ideology

(debates on the role of the working women in committees such as White House Conference on Effective Uses of Woman Power, 1955: see Riley 1986: 126). The home, the private space, is thus labeled by Cohen as ‘a peculiar theatre of the gaze’, with women as both visible and invisible members of the family.

Monroe’s contradictory sexuality is therefore typical of the way ideal femininity was constructed along mutually incompatible lines as to be both contained and hidden and yet visible and praised. She embodies a particularly modern and inherently contradictory form of femininity that is constituted through the twin poles of domesticity (women’s ‘natural’ place) and glamour (the ‘artificial’ delights of the feminine)(Cohen 1998: 259-288). Reading Monroe’s image against Signoret’s allows us to extend Cohen’s argument beyond the American context in which she sets it. By facilitating sustained contrast of Monroe and Signoret in the French press, the film *Let’s Make Love* and its associated promotion and publicity emphasized the difference between Signoret’s French femininity which, presented as less sexually alluring, was talked of in terms of a very traditional view of the female role. In the French context, Monroe’s artificial modernity, combined with her natural sexiness, symbolised by her bleached blonde hair, signals a possible liberation from the idealization of the domestic sphere that still contains French female cinema stars.

Let’s Make Love: Montand and Marilyn on film

Let’s Make Love further adds to the idea of the American star as a fantasy figure that escapes attempts to be contained and the European as being grounded within tradition and domesticity. The rather flimsy plot concerns a French billionaire, Jean-Marc Clément/ Montand, who learns that an off-Broadway show is going to spoof him. He visits the set in disguise to try and foil their plans, but when he meets performer Amanda Dell/Monroe falls in love. The show’s producer decides that the disguised Clément could be excellent at playing himself, and in order to spend more time with Amanda, Clément agrees and undertakes a series of lessons to turn him into a better performer. In keeping with French emphasis on Monroe’s agency in Montand’s engagement, this plot device makes him – initially at least – inferior to Monroe, who instructs him on how to become a better performer.

The film further insists on Europe as a place of history and authenticity compared to America as a place of performance and fantasy. The film opens with a

map of seventeenth century France, giving a sense of time and space, then moves on to a series of lithographs accompanied by a voice-over describing the origins of the Clément family and their huge wealth. This wealth is absolutely linked to the history and traditions of France. A talentless farmer ‘who couldn’t grow mud’ the first Clément was lucky enough to discover a chest of gold on his property. The Clément’s family fortune then becomes intimately linked with the fate of France: manufacturing balloons (invented by the Montgolfier brothers); supplying munitions through the Napoleonic wars; persuading a Mr. Eiffel to build ‘some kind of sight-seeing tower’ and amassing a fortune of one billion dollars as they do so. Clément/ Montand and his nation are linked together: he has built his wealth through French history. Further details throughout the film serve to make Clément an icon of Frenchness, cradled within French tradition, history, and culture. His manager says ‘I’ve been worrying about you since your christening at Notre Dame’; Clément collects art; when he is desperately searching for a stage name to hide his true identity, he calls himself ‘Alexandre Dumas’; and he speaks with a heavy French accent. This is added to by Montand’s own star image and persona; *Variety*, praising Fox for a shrewd move in acquiring a new French star, compares him to Maurice Chevalier, another French show man (Anon 1960g: 98). The trailer goes so far as to describe Montand as ‘the greatest gift the French have sent us since the Statue of Liberty.’

The film plays with Monroe’s star image as well, giving her character, Amanda Dell, many of Monroe’s traits. She is a performer, but she is going to a night school in an attempt to better herself. In an oblique reference to Monroe’s time at the Actor’s Lab, and her ‘artistic pretensions’ Clément asks ‘I suppose you want to play Shakespeare and Greek tragedy?’; obviously a fantasy figure for Hollywood executives as well as the audience, Dell replies ‘oh no, this is my favourite kind of show’, even though Monroe struggled against playing in ‘dumb blonde’ vehicles. She specifically claims ‘I’m weak in history’ when chatting about her night school work – compare this to Clément’s introduction which locates him in a family of seven generations.

Monroe and her character Dell, and the myths, fantasies and anecdotes surrounding Monroe become even more conflated during the performance of the show number ‘Let’s Make Love’. Dramatically interrupting the narrative flow of the film, the song allows full indulgence in Monroe as spectacle. She is ethereal, dressed in a

shiny bluish evening dress, silver shoes, and bathed in white-blue light. She is presented in her typical fantasy configuration with a darker man – Tony/Vaughan with black hair and dressed in a dark suit. The images of the song are intercut with shots to Clément/Montand, his eyes closed and a beatific smile upon his face. The confusion between the performance of the song and erotic fantasy is complete. The song begins with Tony turning off a television set, and Amanda/ Monroe sings: ‘No don’t turn the TV on/ Instead just turn me on/ I light up like neon/ Let’s make love.’ Monroe is here figured as the cinema itself. The star designed to lure audiences away from the television screen invites them to see her be lit up: not just projected onto a cinema screen, the song suggests, but as translucent as it. The song cleverly elides sexual possession with voyeurism, linking the ‘turning off’ of a television set to go and see a Monroe film with the possibility that one could ‘turn her on’. Monroe also had a highly publicised battle against the lure of the television in her private life, as Joe di Maggio’s obsessive love of television was cited as a reason for their marriage breakdown in court proceedings (Zolotow 1961: 211). Monroe the private individual, Monroe the star, and the character she is playing, Amanda Dell, become one and Jean Domarchi in his review of the film considered it to be a biographical film on the subject of Monroe (Domarchi 1960: 112).

However, if within the fantasy setting of *Let’s Make Love*, the French billionaire Clément does get his showgirl Amanda Dell, asserting the natural order of things (after his initial indebtedness to her acting skills, Dell is the one who is duped by Clément pretending to be a poor actor; after rejecting his sexual advances, she submits and allows herself to be seduced), the complex play of gender and national identity in the film’s production contexts were not so easily resolved. In the French context, Monroe’s bloneness connotes not only her sexuality, but also her modern rejection of domesticity in favour of glamour, performance and visibility. Signoret offers authenticity and tradition, offering a compromise between career ambition and housewifely duties. Susan Hayward argues that Signoret’s ‘performativity’ – i.e. her star persona’s body as a site of (gendered and sexual) performance plays with gender fixity. ‘Signoret was aware that the body text, once on display, was potentially an unliberating text to inhabit’(Hayward 2001: 123). As Hayward argues, Signoret’s work did signal an ambiguity concerning gender stereotyping, as she embodies an active, even predatory sexuality. Yet Signoret is clearly contained within a domestic space in contrast to Monroe, and during the spring and summer of 1960, these two

female stars were implicitly and explicitly contrasted in the French press. Monroe's white-blonde hair connotes her mythical qualities of American modernity, cleanliness, and luxury in contrast to Signoret's authenticity, tradition and modesty, which can be linked also to her darker, more natural hair. If Monroe can in some ways be seen as a victim of her bodily text, so relentlessly on display, she can also be seen through the chemical artifice of her dyed blonde hair to be open to altering that body, manipulating it, and suggesting the ways in which femininity itself is a constructed performance. She flaunts her body, rejecting the way in which a retreat to the private sphere would make her invisible and remaining very much within the public gaze. Monroe will not be a housewife, and her white-blonde hair, dazzling in its brilliance and signaling her star status, becomes an icon of that embrace of fantasy, artifice and the public sphere over the natural, the authentic and the domestic setting.

Conclusion

Richard Dyer asserts that star images are important to analyse because 'being interested in stars is being interested in how we are human now. We're fascinated by stars because they enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism) with its particular organization of life into public and private spheres' (Dyer 1986: 15). Monroe's star image enacted a particular relationship to the private and the public sphere which came to have an unusual resonance in the France of 1960 when her affair with Yves Montand and their casting in *Let's Make Love* allowed her off-screen star image to be substantially investigated by the French press and compared to that of Simone Signoret. Signoret's off-screen image at this time stressed her domesticity, her desire to downplay her own professional success in relation to her husband, and the joys that domesticity could bring. Monroe's off-screen image stressed her good-bad girl sexiness, her glamour, and her modernity, all in some ways encapsulated in her chemically treated shining white-blonde hair. This (Americanised) modernity did not find its place within the domestic sphere but remained defiantly visible and public, challenging the myth that the domestic space was the privileged space of the feminine ideal and refusing to be wholly contained within it. Monroe's whiteness drew on ongoing racist ideas of white women's superiority, in an institutionally racist Hollywood. Yet this was not the only meaning of her white-blonde hair, which in the French context marked Monroe as

liberated and modern in a way that was as yet unavailable to French female film stars. If Signoret's image demonstrates that the bodily text was potentially an unliberating text to inhabit, Monroe's image similarly critiqued the domestic idyll, offering a chance to escape domesticity, in however contingent and problematic a manner.

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Notes

ⁱ Her choice of colourist inserted Monroe firmly into a Hollywood history of blondeness, as the colourist she used was the same women who had coloured Jean Harlow's hair. As Simone Signoret notes, such a gesture demonstrates Monroe's awareness of the way Hollywood stardom depended on obscure, often forgotten labour. (Signoret 1978: 280). For further discussion of Monroe in relation to her Hollywood precedents, see Banner 2008: 12-13.

ⁱⁱ All translations in this article from French are my own, unless otherwise acknowledged.

ⁱⁱⁱ The link between the emergence of Monroe as star and the Kinsey report is made by Richard Dyer (1986: 26).

^{iv} The Kinsey Reports on male sexuality and female sexuality were very quickly translated into French: *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* appeared in translation in December 1948, just eight months after its American publication and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* in 1954, the year following publication in America. Such unusually rapid translation is testament to the interest the Reports provoked in Europe as well as America. For further discussion of the reception of Kinsey in France, see Sylvie Chaperon 2002: 91-110.

^v The CGT, or *Confédération Générale du Travail*, was a Trade Union body that had associations with the French Communist party. Both Montand and Signoret were well known for their strident, left-wing political views.

^{vi} In fact, the choice of Montand as co-star for Monroe was more likely to have been taken by Jerry Wald, the producer, who had a difficult time finding a male co-star for Monroe. Tony Curtis had been highly unflattering towards Monroe when she was his co-star in *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder, 1959) considering that her habit of asking for many takes killed his spontaneous style. By now, her tardiness on set was legendary. Maurice Zolotow further reports that Arthur Miller re-wrote Krasna's script for *Let's Make Love*, fattening up Monroe's part so that Gregory Peck, originally cast to play opposite her, felt his role was too much diminished, and he resigned. Production was suspended as Wald was reduced to desperately searching for a new lead, including approaching Universal for the loan out of Rock Hudson (Zolotow 1961: 271).

^{vii} See Claire Duchon 1994: 65-96. Duchon discusses the ideological importance of the home for women in France in this period. In fact, however, the fact that Signoret worked was by no means atypical – 4 out of ten French women worked in this period, twice the number of American women.

^{viii} In the years following the war, the average age for marriage fell to 20. By 1951, one in three women married by age 19. And by 1958, more women married between the ages of 15 and 19 than any other age category. (Riley 2007: 122).