

## *BLONDE*: PRELIMINARY MATERIALS FOR A THEORY OF THE BOMBSHELL

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The face itself is redundancy

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

The uproarious response to Andrew Dominik's divisive biopic/horror film *Blonde* (2022), imagining the unseen torments of Marilyn Monroe, at once points to the inherently contested nature of Monroe's existence (doe-eyed sacred victim versus shrewd, talented businesswoman) and more fundamentally to the very question of misrecognition itself: the route by which every speaking subject must come to inhabit existence. Virtually every scene of the film confronts us with a form of doubling, both in Marilyn's own facial image and in her relationship to us as voracious spectators and adoring fans. Her body is simultaneously deified, adored, invaded, colonized, raped and aborted; a feminist observation so trite as to become barely remarkable. But what is the function of the 'Bombshell' today as the force of sexual power under capitalism? And how does the face as a concept relate to the Bombshell? A Theory of the Bombshell, a reference to Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, would attempt to conceptualise the Bombshell as that which (in contrast to the entrepreneurial self) embodies the explosive existential potential of Monroe as a fatherless, motherless being who gave birth to itself.

It is often the most familiar ideas that can fool us into thinking we understand something. In a way Marilyn Monroe is one of these most familiar ideas. We all likely have an opinion on her significance and value as a movie star, cultural icon, or even feminist figure. If the film *Blonde* shows us anything other than that people have very divergent ideas about what Monroe was and should continue to be, it is that she is more than a person, she is a concept; one which has taken on a status so foundational to the way we conceive of modern femininity that we forget its origins and wider implications.

Through its surreal and stylised approach *Blonde* deliberately avoids trying to tell a true story or a realistic behind the scenes account of Monroe's everyday life. Instead, it takes the Baudrillardian credo to its logical conclusion and gives us a Marilyn whose image is more real than reality. In effect the only Marilyn that exists. By recreating and reanimating all the iconic images we have culturally imbibed over the last 60-odd years in such uncanny high-definition verisimilitude, we get the uneasy feeling of having our own memories rewritten. True, the film does not give us the talents of Monroe on a plate, or attempt to honour her memory, but surely that does not have to be the aim of a piece of critical cinema? Dominik merely confronts us with all the nasty bits surrounding the production of these beautiful images that we would really prefer not to see. As a piece of critique should, it makes visible what hides in plain sight.

First published in 1999 Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* diagnoses and makes visible the concept of the Young-Girl as consumer society's total product and model citizen, a citizen whose main task is to seduce and who can only seduce through consuming. Through the language of French women's magazines, referring to Proust's figure of Albertine, teenage romantic angst in Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, Pierre Klossowski's notion of living currency and libidinal economy, and various fragments of advertising and marketing blurbs, the text reveals the rapacious forces which are at work in shaping the Young-Girl as that which, under Empire, is perpetually consuming and consumed, is in constant demand and is constantly demanding, knows precisely her exchange value but may never, ever truly love unconditionally as such.

Every line of the text is quotable, but here are just a few:

The Young-Girl is the figure of the total and sovereign consumer; she carries herself as such in every domain of existence.

The Young-Girl knows so very well the value of things.

Often, before her decay has become too obvious, the Young-Girl gets married. The Young-Girl is only good for consuming, pleasure or work, it doesn't matter.

The intimacy of the Young-Girl, now equivalent to all intimacy, has become something anonymous and exterior, an object.

The Young-Girl never creates anything; All in all, she only recreates herself.

Tiqqun 2012: 24

Or again:

The Young-Girl does not perceive the passage of time any more than she is moved by its 'consequences'. Otherwise, how else could she speak of aging with such indignation, as though it were a crime committed against her?

Even when she isn't trying to seduce. the Young-Girl acts like a seductress.

There is something professional about everything the Young-Girl does.

The Young-Girl will never stop flattering herself for having 'Common Sense.'

In the Young-Girl, even the most insipid moralisms have the air of prostitution.

The Young-Girl possesses all the severity of the economy. However, the Young-Girl is more ignorant of abandon than anything else.

The Young-Girl is the entire reality of the Spectacle's abstract codes.

The Young-Girl occupies the central node of the present system of desire.

Tiqqun 2012: 41-42

In short, the Young-Girl is the most luxurious of goods that circulates in the market of perishable commodities. The flagship product of contemporary capitalism that serves to sell all other products.

Marilyn Monroe partakes of all the trappings of the Young-Girl and we could say she is the perfect specimen. The tragic figure of an eternally infantilized woman, who can never really love or be loved but stands in for a whole regime of aesthetic and fantasmatic consumption. But it is in her crystallisation as the ageless and explosive yearned for object of desire that Monroe's status becomes interesting. Norma Jeane, the child of an abusive and psychologically unwell mother and absent father who spent most of her childhood in orphanages and

children's homes invents a persona as a way of shielding herself from the depths of sadness and in the vein hope of luring her father back through her sheer luminous beauty. This curious and beguiling mixture of childlike vulnerability and showstopping glamour became the hallmark of Monroe's faux-naïve performances as gold digging sirens. She was the original dumb blonde (alongside arguably Jean Harlow, Jayne Mansfield and Diana Dors) an epithet that is shorthand for a woman who is not literally dumb but who cultivates her physical attributes and plays on her supposed lack of intelligence to fool people into giving her more power/money/influence. This type of feigned stupidity has been imitated, parodied and marketed to death ever since. We could say that the dumb blonde archetype (one which is heavily layered with racialized, hierarchical white femininity) culminates in today's Girl Boss trope; an entrepreneurial form of subjectivity that cultivates hyper-femininity in order to accrue power and status. It is a term that supposedly started off as a compliment for some and quickly became an insult.

But Marilyn's status as dumb blonde was, as we know, far from beneficial to her. It was the very thing that caused her death, either by suicide or (as is rumoured) at the hands of the CIA or Secret Service. Her banishment from the inner circle and love tryst of President John F. Kennedy and his Attorney General brother Robert is speculated in Emma Cooper's 2022 Netflix documentary *The Mystery of Marilyn Monroe: The Unheard Tapes* as the catalyst for her demise. The suggestion seems to be that she knew too much and specifically had the knowledge of their atomic plans, which could just as easily be whispered into the ears of Fidel Castro over one too many martinis.

*Blonde* is accused of exploiting Monroe's trauma and repeating her degradation, although it's hard to see how the painful depiction of her relentless dismissal as anything other than a 'nice ass' is anything but critical. At one point Marilyn mentions Dostoyevsky to a director at an audition and he laughs in her face. Everyone she meets is incapable of seeing her as anything other than an image and her distress at this self-inflicted prison is palpable. Clearly, any intellectual ambitions she had were impossible to articulate through the glamorous titanium shield she had built around her.

*Blonde* not only caused outrage because of its gruelling depiction of Monroe's abusive treatment and traumatic episodes, but also because of the alleged pro-life agenda smuggled into the plot. Monroe's talking foetus, if we can look beyond the bad taste aspects of it and appreciate the surreal and macabre effect, gives us another perspective on Monroe as a being

split in two through alienation and separation (like all of us), but unlike all of us whose very public imaginary gestalt was the only thing that kept her from disintegrating. Her several enforced abortions are heart rending to watch, but separately from the current necessary outcry about the revoking of abortion rights, we should be able to understand that Marilyn's relation to the notion of motherhood is one charged with timeless cultural significance. The implicit accusation seems to be: is she really a fully complete woman if she never had a child? The question and the fantasy of the unborn, never conceived, or aborted child as a source of (often unspoken) guilt for women is a very real thing, bringing it to attention does not make the film pro-life propaganda any more than a film depicting murder makes it pro-murder. Rather, Monroe's female body and psyche as a site of permanent invasion and scrutiny is metaphorized in our voyeuristic position literally inside her womb, examining and evaluating her as a woman. If anything, we the viewers are the accusatory babies.

In order to unpack Monroe's status as Atomic Bombshell and the elements contained within it, I first want to explore the concept of Marilyn Monroe as a face. It is after all the face of Monroe that the film *Blonde* most focuses on, and of course why wouldn't it? Her extreme beauty is simulated and performed expertly not just by Ana de Armas, but by the stunningly accurate cinematography of Chayse Irvin who recreates in every minor detail all the most famous looks and scenes of Marilyn's life both on and off screen. Interestingly, even though we are most familiar with Monroe's face as the erotic gaze, the film does not heavily focus on her face in a sexualised demeanour, apart from the surreal dreamlike scenes of her threesomes with Charlie Chaplin Jr. and Edward Robinson Jr. One could argue even that this is a particularly subversive and indeed feminist form of sex for Monroe to be shown having given the epoch; unlike most of the other encounters she has, she does not appear to be on the receiving end of aggressive male domination but rather receives the adoration she so craves from two men at once.

Other than this, we are confronted with close up after close up of de Armas' pained and lost visage in the nearly three hour film, but it is ironically Marilyn's beautiful face that dehumanises her for all the men she encounters. The more beautiful she becomes the more horrors are inflicted upon her. Most violently and degradingly depicted by her deep throat camera angle fellatio of J.F.K. Even Marilyn's perfect million-dollar facade is shown to be easily penetrable. Perhaps what makes it so shocking to those morally outraged by the film is precisely the fact that it should be the exquisite polish of Monroe that is besmirched for us, as opposed to any poor old 'prostitute' that the audience may have cared less about, who perhaps

came in and out of the same presidential suite. And since Monroe dies before her face could lose perfection, she remains a timeless unblemished beauty. Ultimately, Monroe as Bombshell was a dangerous force which literally threatened to blow up in everyone's face including her own. So, what is the Bombshell exactly? The Bombshell, simply put, is an explosive potential which threatens destruction at any given moment, a self-propelling entity which destroys itself along with everyone else if it needs to.

The permeability of the face, the face as a site of multiple abyssal orifices, is taken up by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* in the chapter entitled *Year Zero: Faciality*. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the face is a product of signifying regimes. They ask:

When does the abstract machine of faciality enter into play? When is it triggered? Take some examples: the maternal power operating through the face during nursing; the passional power operating through the face of a loved one, even in caresses, the political power operating through the face of the leader...the power of film operating through the face of the star and the close up.

Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 205

Counterintuitively, they argue for a concept of faciality as that which is inhuman on the human body, in fact they say that the face is not even part of the human body unlike the head.

It would be an error to proceed as if the face only became inhuman beyond a certain threshold: closeup, extreme magnification, recondite expression etc. The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start. It is by nature a close up.

Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 199-200

This is why in primitive societies (note the anthropological thrust) the head was more privileged than the face, hence the use of masks and other headgear that obscured the facial features. Furthermore, they argue that faciality extends beyond the face and can take up and overcode the whole body, or parts of it.

[T]he entire body can also be facialized, comes to be facialized as part of an inevitable process. When the mouth and nose, but first the eyes, become a holey surface, all the other volumes and cavities of the body follow. An operation worthy of Doctor Moreau; horrible and magnificent. Hand, breast, stomach, penis and vagina, thigh, leg and foot

all come to be facialized. Fetishism, erotomania, are all inseparable from these processes of facialization.

Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 199

The abstract machine of the face, as they put it, is made up of two poles: the white wall and the black hole. These two poles also represent the semiotic systems of *signifiance* and subjectification, which Deleuze and Guattari elaborate in relation to the Body Without Organs.

*Signifiance* is never without a white wall upon which it inscribes its signs and redundancies. Subjectification is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passion and redundancies. Since all semiotics are mixed and strata come in at least twos, it should come as no surprise that a very special mechanism is situated at their intersection. Oddly enough it is a face: *The white wall/black hole system*. A broad face with white cheeks, a chalk face with eyes cut in for a black hole. Clown head, white clown, moon-white mime, angel of death, Holy Shroud.

Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 196

The white wall/black hole relationship is the abstract functioning of faciality: white wall as the surface on to which the face of signification is inscribed, and black hole as the hole which absorbs all these subjective imperatives and creates subjects. The face therefore comes into being by the interpenetration of the two semiotic systems. Or topologically speaking, it is in the act of making a boundary around a penetrable abyss that a face becomes formed. These black holes are the formless boundless depths from which the face becomes enshrined in the white wall, not of anyone's choice but by sheer contingency. As they put it, 'you don't so much have a face as slide into one' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 207). Our task as human subjects according to Deleuze and Guattari should be to dismantle the face we were born into.

Faces are not basically individual; they define zones of frequency or probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations.

Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 196

The face therefore is an index of racism and sexism. This is why the title of the text, *Year Zero* is so named because we measure time from the invention of the archetypal face, which for the authors is none other than that of Jesus Christ, from whom the whole capitalist regime sprung.

This in turn means that racism is not so much a question of exclusion of an other, but rather that of deviance from the white man's face, which functions in degrees. Here's how they put it:

[I]f it is possible to assign the faciality machine a date – the year zero of Christ and the historical development of the White Man – it is because that is when the mixture ceased to be a splicing or an intertwining, becoming a total interpenetration in which each element suffuses the other like drops of red-black wine in white water. Our semiotic of modern White Men, the semiotic of capitalism, has attained this state of mixture in which signification and subjectification effectively interpenetrate. Thus, it is in this semiotic that faciality, or the white wall/black hole system assumes its full scope.

Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 182

The birth of Christ then is the date of the inception of the faciality machine, the moment that defines and solidifies the historical privilege of the white man, which in turn defines the semiotics of capitalism, solidifying the categories that enable the system to function more effectively; father/son, boss/worker, husband/wife, etc. 2000 years later we could say that the face of Monroe and the face of Christ both perform a similar role, instantiating an image of ecstatic and more importantly, sacrificial jouissance in the service of which we all must work. Whilst Christ's face is one of transcendent suffering, the thousands of images of Monroe, head tilted back with a look of benevolence, bring to mind the absolute indifference of God, the reign of peace and beatitude; in Lacanian terms, pure feminine jouissance.

If faciality is a machine that functions by creating and distributing signifiers on the white wall and solidifying subjects in the black hole. Deleuze and Guattari are determined to answer the question: how can we break this white wall and disavow this black hole? As long as there is a defining face such as that of Christ (or indeed Monroe), supposedly all other faces will be seen to lack something. Faciality is the source of racism, classism and sexism. So, they advocate to dismantle the face and create a new exploratory face. If the face is a politics, as they put it, dismantling this face is also a politics which involves 'real becomings, an entire becoming-clandestine' (Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 220).

The solution they propose is to take faciality even further to produce the 'probe-head machine'. What this could mean in practical terms (unsurprisingly) is not fully explained. But maybe the complete erasure of individual facial features is what this would eventually entail? If the



phenomenon of surgically enhanced Instagram face is the direction in which beauty is going – the complete standardisation of features and algorithmic plotting of the perfectly harmonious non-descript Eurasian dimensions – the progressive Kim Kardashianisation of the face is perhaps a stage in this process, the probe-head in the making? Like many Deleuzo-Guattarian ambitions then, they are not always so liberatory as fantasised.

Roland Barthes (2009) writes of the face of Garbo as one which produced the Platonic ideal of the human creature. Here we can clearly see the white face/black hole regime in action, as instantiating the degree to which any given human may deviate from the perfection of the white woman's face. He says her face is virtually sexless without being dubious, an intellectual perfection even. This he contrasts to Audrey Hepburn the woman as child or the woman as kitten, whose Bambi like countenance is constituted by an 'infinite complexity of morphological functions' (Barthes 2009: 63). Barthes writes: 'As a Language, Garbo's singularity was of a conceptual order, Audrey Hepburn's of a substantial order. Garbo's Face is an idea, that of Hepburn an event' (2009: 63). So here we have it: Idea, Event, Bombshell...

To return to the face of Marilyn, the face of the Bombshell, the elements which were cultivated in order for her to make the transition from the homespun prettiness of Norma Jeane to the spellbinding beauty of Monroe have become such a paradigm of Western beauty, that imitation of which only produces comical parody. Her most iconic look, the platinum blonde hair of course frames the picture, the elongation of the lash line to create a slinky languid gaze, the raised eyebrows creating that doe-like surprise, the gleaming red mouth and the quivering lower lip, the rumoured enhanced chin and refined tip of the nose, and of course the real *objet petit a*: the black beauty spot just above the mouth.

Fast forward to compare to today's equivalent manufactured bombshell, Kim Kardashian, her face meanwhile has been created in accordance with the Baudrillardian simulacrum of simulacra, an imitation of imitations with no original, the ratios already pre-given by a racialized, pornified algorithm which plots the exact proportions for optimum consumption. To quote *Theory of the Young-Girl*:

THE YOUNG-GIRL RESEMBLES HER PHOTO.

Insofar as her appearance entirely exhausts her essence, as her representation does her reality, the Young-Girl is that which is entirely expressible, perfectly predictable, and absolutely neutralized.

The Young-Girl exists only in proportion to the desire that THEY have for her, and knows herself only by what THEY say she is.

The Young-Girl appears as the product and the principal outcome of the formidable surplus crisis of capitalist modernity. She is the proof and the support of the limitless pursuit of the process of valorization when the process of accumulation proves limited (by the limits of the planet itself, ecological catastrophe, or social implosion).

Tiqqun 2012: 33-34

Whilst Lacan had no theory of aesthetics per se, beauty he considered to function as a veil against the horror of the Thing, or *das Ding*. In other words, the function of beauty is always as a barrier against anxiety. If we take the beauty of Marilyn and of Kim as indexes of their time perhaps each standard expresses a particular reaction to the specific anxiety of the epoch. In Kim's case a becoming-clandestine in Deleuze and Guattari's terms certainly seems to be an end goal of standardisation. As her appearance in 2021 at the Met Gala in a Balenciaga black balaclava dress would seem to suggest, she went-full probe-head<sup>1</sup>.

But before we can understand what the 'probe-head' might mean, we must come to terms with how science and technology convene in the pursuit of the perfection of the female form. The search for the sublime ratio reflected in the growing desire for plastic surgery, cosmetic operations and body modification serves to obscure an abstract point of impossibility of the feminine as such. This impossibility is not in fact one of absolute female beauty, but the impossibility of feminine knowledge itself: the imaginary point outside of science. So how can we reconsider the question of the sublime as science replaces the mythical contingency of feminine beauty?

This is the supposedly mystical knowledge of Woman in the Lacanian sense. A mystical knowledge which is transformed into what I would call patipolitical production of bodily hysteria. The paradigm of the patipolitical (a concept I'm developing in my next book, from

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to my recent conversation with Cooper Cherry and Taylor Adkins on Machinic Unconscious Happy Hour podcast who reminded me of this particular event.

the Latin *patior*, to suffer), is a form of governance of suffering or more accurately of enjoyment. One which is built on the notion of the ambivalent, paradoxical and traumatic realm of the sexual as a psychoanalytic and philosophical concept. The patipolitical is another form of domination which is perhaps not yet even seen as a form of governmentality at all, and in some of its guises may even be perceived as liberatory. In our so called ‘pornographic age’ (Badiou 2013) in which sexuality is no longer an illicit or secretive activity there is another dimension to this governance of bodies which is becoming more apparent. Arguably we require a new paradigm to come to terms with the ways in which it is not just biological life, nor even political death that power administers, but more specifically regimes of enjoyment, which is often indistinguishable from suffering.

The notion of patipolitics originates out of the concern for the status of the enjoying body and its new configurations under technocapitalism. The productions of these forms happen and have happened historically at various levels or, sites of governance, both synchronically and diachronically including in the family, the school, the workplace, social media, religious institutions, the culture industry and of course the sex industry. The ways in which an individual may be subjected to patipolitical modes of governance will be dependent on socio-economic, ethnic, cultural, religious and gendered forms of identification but are not fully determined or predictable according to any of those factors. These sites of governance produce the multiple vectors of the enjoying body such as: self-image, object choice, identification, erogenous zones, taboos, fetishes, modes of shame, sexual pride, codes of sexual morality, inhibitions and disinhibitions, forms of aggression and violence, and bodily abjection. It is the ways in which these different modalities are harnessed and instrumentalised by power/knowledge/technology structures which makes them patipolitical as such.

Marilyn Monroe as a fatherless, motherless being who gave birth to herself could have been the ultimate threat, a child who has no origins is capable of going anywhere or doing anything. But in patipolitical terms, like any Young-Girl who dreams of becoming a Bombshell they are trained to be their own biggest existential threat, they after all are the demographic most likely to cannibalise or immolate themselves through anorexia or self-harm. So, what designates the transition from Young-Girl to Bombshell? Is the Bombshell merely the fully matured unit of sexual currency or does it contain within the potential for something else?

One of the most common criticisms of the film *Blonde* was the way in which it neglected to display Marilyn’s capability as a powerful businesswoman or her autonomy over her

professional life. In other words, her entrepreneurial skills. But surely this can't be the aspect of Marilyn that we mourn or that we loved her for? Isn't it precisely the vulnerability and existential desolation that drove her which made us such voracious consumers of her talents? Or, put less cynically, perhaps what makes her so irresistible is precisely the fragile malleability of her; she had nothing and therefore could be anything, could create herself, although what was available for her to become was limited by the oppressive phallic enjoyment that everywhere she was made to embody.

Though every Young-Girl's aim is to become the Bombshell, naturally this spot is reserved only for one. Society's greatest pleasure is to enact the vicious spectacle of seeing which Young-Girl wins the contest. The Bombshell, once selected has one job only and that is to explode, a vacuum of nothingness sucking everything up into oblivion. *Theory of The Young-Girl* states:

Seduction as war. THEY speak of 'bombshells' using a metaphor derived less and less from aesthetic discourse, and more and more from that of ballistics.

Among the troops occupying all visibility, Young-Girls are the infantry, the rank-and-file of the current dictatorship of appearances.

Tiqun 2012: 106

But can we not find a better meaning for the Bombshell? Can't the Bombshell put its atomic potential to better use? Isn't inside of the Bombshell the capacity not just to self-destruct but rather to create oneself? Marilyn Monroe collapsed under the weight of her own nuclear-powered beauty, unable to fully give birth to herself, her potentials reterritorialized back into the tyrannical machine of faciality.

But how can the so-called beauty of a woman ever belong to her when it is always imposed via the facialization machine? As Deleuze and Guattari put it:

[I]f human beings have a destiny it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine...freckles dashing toward the horizon, hair carried off by the wind, eyes you traverse instead of seeing yourself in, or gazing into those glum face-to face encounters between signifying subjectivities.

Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 200

Deleuze and Guattari end the chapter thus:

*Face, my love, you have finally become a probe-head...Year Zen. year omega, year ω...Must we leave it at that, three states, and no more: primitive states, Christ-face and probe-heads?*

Deleuze and Guattari 2013: 223

We must then wonder: how can the abstract point of beauty ever be reached without a total implosion into a black hole? Perhaps this is what Monroe's tantalising beauty spot was dragging her into all along...

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