

Contexts and Histories of Adaptation:
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (Howard Hawks, USA, 1953)

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Research at the Bill Douglas Centre:

This essay was written for a third year English Studies module called ‘Film and Literature: Textual Transformations,’ in which I had to examine up to five artefacts on a chosen film adaptation from the collection at the Bill Douglas Centre. The objective was to study the way in which these artefacts comment on the contexts and histories of, in my case, Howard Hawks’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. With such a rich and wide variety of artefacts to choose from, from sheet music to cigarette cards to mirrors and stocking packaging, the Bill Douglas Centre made this project a thrilling and enlightening one. In the end, selecting just five artefacts was the hardest part. With direct access to nearly all the centre’s material, I was able to look through first hand old newspaper clippings and magazines such as *Picturegoer* from the 1950s, providing a unique insight- often unavailable in books, into contemporary representations and opinions of, for example, Marilyn Monroe and her films. I was amazed at how these non-literary artefacts informed me about the film’s contexts and histories, but as the saying goes: ‘Pictures speak a thousand words.’ Studying relevant artefacts from the Bill Douglas Collection will definitely make all the difference for anyone writing an English or Film Studies essay in the future.

The Two M-M-Marvels Of Our Age In the Wonder Musical Of The World.
(Promotional Tagline for Hawks’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*)



Figure 1

Emerging in the wake of post-World War II, Howard Hawks' musical film adaptation of Anita Loos' 1926 novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is the product of a 'Hollywood faced with large-scale social forces that represented a significant threat to the industry.'ⁱ Such artefacts as the sheet music of the film's famous song, 'Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend,' and Hawks' biography by Todd McCarthy highlight the importance of the musical genre and its cinematic tropes in this period of falling cinema audiences, while several artefacts on Marilyn Monroe in the role of Lorelei help to theorize the historical debate concerning the post-war woman in the face of rising feminist criticism. The film is rich in comic narrative and character, rendering it the perfect example of the utopian spectacle employed by Hollywood in an attempt to, 'improve and rebuild human beings exhausted with the realities of life,'ⁱⁱ or more specifically, the aftermath of war.

The *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* sheet music (Figure 1) confirms the musical as a marketing scheme adopted by Hollywood to battle the severe industrial crisis of the early 1950s; the spread of television and the post-war economic boom meant that both 20th Century Fox and MGM ⁱⁱⁱ adopted the genre as a means of winning audiences back to the cinema. Exploiting such technical innovations as Technicolor, which were unavailable to television thus provided an appealing alternative to the small-screen, as well as emphasizing what Richard Dyer claims to be the 'escapist'^{iv} status of the musical, imperative for the 'rebuilding of human beings' in the post-war period.

The *Blondes* sheet music certifies the film as a transformative musical adaptation of the novel and addresses the importance of these musical aesthetics for Hollywood studios. While stating the music is ‘from the Musical Picture,’ also credited are Leo Robin and Jule Styne who wrote the lyrics and music for the 1949 stage musical, from which the song is directly taken. The song’s famous chorus line is reminiscent of Lorelei’s original conjecture in the novel that, ‘Kissing your hand may make you feel very good but a diamond bracelet lasts forever,’^v indicating an attempt to retain elements of the novel and Broadway musical; Loos herself maintained that ‘*Blondes* was a story people wanted to hear,’^{vi} while the musical starring Carol Channing was also an instant stage hit. The choice of a musical adaptation therefore provided promise of income in a time of economic duress in Hollywood.

The bold typography of ‘Technicolor’ written under the film’s title further visually illustrates its importance as another crucial marketing technique. The extravagance of the musical and use of Technicolor presents its often vaudeville spectacle appeal, however it also suggests fidelity to the ‘carnavalesque’^{vii} nature of the novel itself, injecting the film with greater narrative credit; the striking use of Technicolor in the ‘Diamonds’ number, in which the rouge background and Lorelei’s sugar pink dress are juxtaposed with diamonds and black suits (Figure 2), confirm the artificiality of the colour and Lorelei’s intentions as a ‘dumb’ gold-digger. The sheet music cover, itself highly carnivalesque with the women in revealing costumes against explosions of hearts and stars, also illustrates the musical’s encouragement of the characters to, ‘dazzle, confuse and indulge the willingness of their audience to suspend belief.’^{viii}



Figure 2:

The ‘reprise’ of ‘Diamonds’ by Dorothy (Russell) in the court scene also reveals a narrative depth that belies *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*’ ‘escapist’ status; dark surrounding colours illuminate Russell’s costume and wig (Figure 3), comically drawing attention via tassels to the ‘assets’ that the audience associates with Monroe. Loos’ loud, brash and ‘very unrefined’^{ix} Dorothy is therefore captured perfectly by this carnivalesque musical number that through its vibrancy allows the audience to indulge entirely in the film’s comic utopia. As Hawks himself noted on the impact of Technicolor in his film: ‘The girls were unreal, the story was unreal. We were working with complete fantasy.’^x



Figure 3

The sheet music and *Blondes* tagline (see opening quotation) link together the two major selling points of the film; the musical genre, discussed above, and the impact of the female ‘marvels.’ Where the musical may not make money, Fox had a fail-safe:

Marilyn Monroe. With her undeniable sex appeal, Monroe put glamour back into the movies on a large scale. ‘These glitzy images sold,’^{xi} and Hollywood needed it. Monroe therefore became crucial to Fox’s marketing campaigns to win audiences back to their big screen, her success in which is summed up in a 1950s newspaper competition (Figure

Figure 4



4) to 'make up a sentence about Marilyn Monroe using all the letters of her name'. A reader sent the following: 'lovelY exciting Marilyn Never faiLs tO dRaw An admiring audience wheRever shE gOes.'

Even Hawks, who despised Monroe as being 'so goddamn dumb,'^{xii} knew that she would sell tickets; 'I think the overdeveloped quality in that little girl is going to be quite funny.'^{xiii} And it was. Fox exploited Monroe as both a 'dumb blonde' and sex symbol as their key marketing tool to attract audiences. A newspaper advertisement for *Bus Stop* in 1956 (Figure 5) with Monroe's name in bold letters exposes the sweet blonde image



Figure 5

(centre) against the alluring femme fatale (right) capturing the myth of Monroe's simultaneous innocence and provocative sex appeal. She therefore both 'Tickles and Tantalizes,'^{xiv} her success in doing so meaning that, 'representations of women soon became the commodities that film producers were able to exchange in return for money.'^{xv}



Figure 6: 'Bust 68- You're bigger Than Marilyn Monroe!'

A variety of comic postcards printed in the late 1950s also advertise through their risqué taglines (Figure 6), the appeal and use of the female body as a commodity to make money. Being printed in England and with one translated into French, they prove the worldwide reputation and therefore monetary value of these female stars. They also draw attention to the decision during the 1950s to distribute and film further abroad, hoping that new exotic settings would lure people back to the cinema.

The emphasis on the female sex symbol in these artefacts also remarks on the invention of the oral contraceptive pill in the mid 1950s and its positive impact in the film industry; women no longer existed purely for procreation, but epitomized sex for pleasure as well. This context is exemplified by the transformation of the novel from the 1920s to the 1950s: ‘The sexual costumery that literally hid the flapper’s sexuality was now replaced by the larger-than-life feminine ideal of the postwar period: big, buxom, glittery.’^{xvi} Monroe’s casting is therefore significant because it meant that her costumes could be exploited to their full sex appeal. The adaptation also made the film more accessible to both sexes; women could admire the lavish costumes favoured by the modern musical and learn how to become like Marilyn, the ‘perfect’ woman; a ‘New Hiltone’ blond hair dye advertisement (Figure 7) based on the film’s title, proves how women could – and should – look like Marilyn for just ‘\$5.’

Figure 7



The appeal for men is surely an obvious one, now without the threat of a baby.

‘Monroe epitomized the objectification of women in the post-war period – whilst the woman inspires and provokes, the male dominates.’^{xvii} However, there is a conflict between the artificial nature of these artifacts and Monroe’s subversive narrative as Lorelei, disclosing the historical antagonism between the state’s ideal glamorous housewife and the independent working woman emerging from the war.



Figure 8

The production of Marilyn Monroe soap dishes (Figure 8- date unknown) nevertheless confirms the absolute commodification of her body and betrays the artificiality of her

image; as illustrated by the postcards, Marilyn's body is up for sale and like the empty dish, the media suggest that as society's myth of the 'perfect' woman, you can open her up and make her whatever you want her to be.

Figure 9:



The media attempted to apply this same 'Stepford wife' syndrome to all women in the early 1950s; in the first two years after the war, two million women lost their jobs to return to the kitchen as 'happy home-makers.' Like Monroe, they were expected to be feminine and glamorous- trousers and masculine attire donned for the war was lost in favour of full skirts, nipped waists and stiletto heels, even in the kitchen (Figure 9). While Monroe is rarely seen domesticated, the advertising campaigns for her movies echo those for contemporary consumer goods, emphasizing the importance of appearance and obedience to male hegemony – whether the Hollywood studio system or a husband.



Figure 10: 1956 Advert for Stainless Steel kitchenware.

Just as Monroe is shown caught by Don Murray in a lasso in the *Bus Stop* poster, the glamorous 1950s housewife built in her image was also believed to be the ‘perfect catch.’ While the media fashioned Monroe’s image as a commodity to make money for anything from films to hair dye, the new culture of consumerism also constructed a view of women as the ‘stainless’ home-wives to sell their products to (Figure 10).



Figure 11

However, the representation of Lorelei (Monroe) and Dorothy (Russell) can subvert such assumptions about the post-war woman; the doubling of Monroe and Russell both in their costumes and pose on the sheet music and throughout the film itself (Figure 11), communicates an alliance to each other that undermines the expectations of the musical. Musical numbers usually displayed the male/female couple dancing together as a signification of their romance, however in what has been called ‘a profoundly feminist text,’^{xviii} *Blondes*’ exclusively female numbers celebrate unfailing female companionship at the expense of men. Just as the female doubling alongside Monroe’s own image gave women a profile in the male-dominated Hollywood, a selection of women in contemporary society were given government posts as Ambassadors and Secretaries of the state,^{xix} a small but significant achievement for American women. Others were also able to learn the meaning of ‘women’s liberation,’ thanks to the 1953 American publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist critique, *The Second Sex*, thus entering them into the rising feminist debates of the 20th Century.

Therefore, these various artefacts divulge the historical and industrial conflicts of the 1950s and their manifestations in the films of the period. While the musical raised income for Hollywood in its competition against television, the studios’ true success proved to lie in the recognition that, ‘the vanguard of feminine attractiveness stood at the level of the heart.’^{xx} Exploit this, and it was hard to fail.

Artefacts Studied From the Bill Douglas Centre

- ‘Diamonds Are A Girl’s Best Friend,’ Sheet Music: (50408)
- Group of articles on Marilyn Monroe: Press Cutting: (20097)
- Marilyn Monroe China Dish: (74148)
- Marilyn Comic Postcards: (87738)
- McCarthy, Todd. *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood*. (Grove Press, New York, 1997) : (27549)

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Filmography

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. Howard Hawks. US, 20th Century Fox, 1953.

Pictures

All *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* still shots were taken by me using the programme 'InterWind DVD,' from the DVD of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* ©Twentieth Century Fox

All photographs of artefacts were taken with permission in the Bill Douglas Centre.

Figure 9: 'Happy Homemaker' www.mediabistro.com/unbeige/original/50shousewife

Figure 10: 'Stainless Housewife' www.plan59.com/prints/stainless60.jpg.

Notes

ⁱ Geoff King. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. (I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2004) pg 24.

ⁱⁱ The Production/ Hayes Code, 1930/1951

ⁱⁱⁱ With *An American in Paris*, (Minnelli, 1951.) *Singin in the Rain*. (Donen, 1952). *The Band Wagon*. (Minnelli, 1953).

^{iv} Qtd. Steve Neale. *Genre and Hollywood*. (London: Routledge, 2000) pg. 111.

^v Loos, Anita. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. (London: Penguin Books, 1998) pg. 57.

^{vi} Regina Barreca. 'Introduction.' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. pg x.

^{vii} Regina Barreca. 'Introduction' pg xi.

^{viii} Loos. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Introduction, pg xvii.

^{ix} Loos. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. pg. 77.

^x Qtd. McCarthy. Pg 507.

^{xi} Anna Louise Felstead, 'Hollywood Women: Icons.' www.orsonwelles.co.uk/HollywoodWomen.htm

^{xii} Qtd. McCarthy. Pg. 497

^{xiii} Qtd. McCarthy. To Cary Grant on the set of *Monkey Business*. pg 498.

^{xiv} Taken from *The Seven Year Itch* tagline: ‘It Tickles and Tantalizes – the funniest comedy since laughter began!’

^{xv} Annette Kuhn qtd. Felstead. *Hollywood Women website*.

^{xvi} Susan Hegeman. *Taking ‘Blondes’ Seriously*, pg 547.

^{xvii} Felstead.

^{xviii} Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, ‘Pretext and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. pg 781.

^{xix} Clare Boothe appointed Ambassador to Italy, 1953 and Overton Culp Hobby first Secretary of Health Education and Welfare, 1953.

^{xx} Andre Bazin. Qtd. Hegeman pg. 547.