The (Im)mortality of the Lived-Body: Marilyn Monroe’s Screen Presence in *The Misfits*

ANA SALZBERG
*University of Edinburgh*

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes sets forth that the point of divergence between photography and cinema lies in their respective relationships to movement: where the stillness of the pose defines the photographic image, cinema requires the constant motion of its subjects – thus creating an aesthetic contrast between the stasis of the photograph and the dynamic ephemerality of the filmic “passing” (1993 [1982], p.78) before the eye of the camera. According to Barthes, the photograph stands complete and unto itself within the context of its frame, while the restless film “is impelled, ceaselessly drawn” (1993 [1982], p.90) forward in its search to depict other phenomena. In both diegetic and extra-diegetic terms, John Huston’s 1961 film *The Misfits* captures this sense of the elusive that the cinematic image represents. The screenplay, written by Arthur Miller, traces the desultory quest of four individuals as they search for a place of belonging in the shifting world around them. Incarnating three of these wanderers are stars who would soon pass not only in front of the lens but from life itself: Clark Gable suffered a fatal heart attack only days after the film completed shooting; Montgomery Clift died in 1966; and Marilyn Monroe died in 1962. *The Misfits* would be her final completed film.

Watching *The Misfits* with the knowledge of this extra-filmic reality, the viewer confronts what Barthes terms the *punctum*, or point of striking awareness, of the aura of death that haunts photographic imagery: for the camera depicts both “*this will be* and *this has been*” [the spectator] observe[s]…an anterior future of which death is the stake” (1993 [1982], p.96). In the photograph, argues Barthes, “a simple click” (1993 [1982], p.96) of the camera provides the boundary between life, present at the moment of the shot, and death, shadowing the final, developed composition; yet in Huston’s film, life and death represent not oppositions in a tense dichotomy, but
Articulating and, more precisely, embodying this flux between life and death is Monroe herself, a figure whose very “live” presence in any of her films exists simultaneously with the fact of her tragic death at the age of thirty-six. Indeed, with a myriad of conspiracy theories attempting to make sense of her untimely passing, Monroe’s death matches her life as a source of fascination and Hollywood legend. Beyond questions of mythic lore, however, Monroe’s performance as divorcée Roslyn Taber in The Misfits represents an emblematic expression of her singular ability to incarnate on-screen a reconciliatory force superseding the boundaries set forth not only between life and death, but also corporeality and ethereality. Captured by the black-and-white of Huston’s camera, the mortal physicality of Monroe’s “flesh impact” (Arnold, 2005, p.26) has never been more evident; nor has the immortal Barthesian “air”, or “luminous shadow” (Barthes, 1993[1982], p.110) of spirit that radiates from her person. The work reflects, ultimately, an awareness of Monroe as an entity bearing a dual identity comprised of her ideal star persona and off-screen reality. Examining the film’s simultaneous evocation and blurring of the boundaries that divide the registers of human experience, this paper will unite the phenomenological terms of Vivian Sobchack’s notion of the “lived-body” with theorist Edgar Morin’s more abstract understanding of the star in an effort to conceptualize The Misfits as the site within which the this will be and this has been of Monroe’s screen presence reaches its apex.

In The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience, Sobchack argues that film itself should be understood as a viewing subject as well as a viewed object (1992, p.21-22), citing film’s ability to perceive phenomena directly and subsequently convey them to the spectator: “A film presents and represents acts of seeing, hearing, and moving as both the original structures of existential being and the mediating structures of language” (1992, p.11). The film-as-subject envisioned by Sobchack gains depth and a quality of animation through the active presence of “lived movement” within the frame, in this way “becom[ing] the situation of an existence” (1992, p.61-62); in other words, becoming the situation of the star's/character's subjecthood as it is incarnated by the “lived-body” (1992, p.63). Sobchack defines the lived-body as one whose dimensions enable the subject to negotiate the world surrounding him/her, and therefore to know his/her place in the space of that world as both “an objective subject and a subjective object” (2004, p.2). As she maintains, “[a]ll
lived-bodies are material, intentional, motile, and finitely and perspectively situated” (1992, p.159).

In examining the lived-body in the context of Hollywood stars, the more ethereal qualities these figures bear also stand as defining factors in their filmic existence. Morin’s concept in his 1957 work The Stars as a “corporeal and yet elusive” (emphasis mine; 2005 [1957], p.126) double of off-screen humanity thus addresses the presence of the Barthesian luminous “air” in the construction of the projected world of the film. Morin describes the star as a sublime double created by the passion of the fan in an effort to transcend the banality of reality. For Morin, then, the star stands as the ultimate “fantastic construction of man by man” – an “autonomous specter” (2005 [1955], p.26) symbolizing the individual’s need for a sense of immortality in a world bounded by the parameters of a mortal physicality. As Morin writes, “[t]he star is plunged into the mirror of dreams and brought back into view on the level of tangible reality” (2005 [1955], p.82).

The conjunction of Sobchack and Morin’s theories, then, will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of Monroe’s presence in The Misfits – a theoretical intersection that parallels the actress’s own on-screen dimensionality as ideal star, diegetic character, and real woman. For in this film, Monroe transcends the boundary between the corporeal – and implicitly mortal – lived-body and the ethereal – and inherently immortal – star-as-double. Stripped of the Technicolor veil borne by most of her films, Monroe’s almost startling proximity to the camera in The Misfits reveals her unique ability to radiate the auras of both life and death. Indeed, the punctum of Monroe’s performance lies in her negotiation and ultimate reconciliation of this duality.

Reflection and reality

The opening moments of Monroe’s first scene definitively establish the flux between the modes of corporeality and ethereality that guides her performance throughout the film. Framed in medium-shot, Roslyn/Monroe sits before her dressing-table mirror, applying make-up with shaking hands as she nervously rehearses her statements for

---

1 In her discussion of this concept, Sobchack analyzes in particular the place of the female body and the limitations imposed upon it by a patriarchal culture, comparing this confined and confining physicality to images of isolation in “women’s films” such as Stella Dallas (King Vidor, 1937) (1992, p.151-59).
an impending appearance in divorce court. The focus of the shot lies in the reflection of Monroe’s face in the mirror to the left of the frame, whilst she herself is seated to the right with her back to the camera. Monroe’s reflection makes literal Morin’s assertion that “the universal magic of the mirror...is nothing other than that of the double” (2005 [1955], p.28); and certainly Monroe’s mirrored form projects the universal magic of the Hollywood star as a divine double for the enraptured spectator. Captured in the luminosity of the looking-glass, Monroe’s visage appears in all its iconic beauty as an image of ideal femininity – simply, she looks like “Marilyn Monroe”, movie star.

As Monroe finally turns away from the mirror to face the lens directly, however, the camera’s pan to the right reveals a somewhat different figure than the one presented in the reflection: here, Monroe finds herself in a medium close-up that offers no softening of the swelling under her eyes or the lines around them; the strain on her face so diffused in the reflection now becomes altogether apparent. Monroe does not linger in this framing, and stands up restlessly to walk out of the shot – a motion that allows the camera to capture her torso, robed in a silk slip. Rejecting the idealizing distance presented by the mirrored Monroe, this close-up bears an immediate proximity to the actress’s lived-body in all its exhausted reality.

Whereas Monroe’s reflection presents an illuminated smoothness to the camera, the image of her actual person introduces an attention to the texture of the human form that persists throughout the film. Not only does the camera record Monroe’s lived-body as it negotiates the space of the frame, but it also insists upon depicting the character of that body’s surface. Unlike the reflected Monroe, a representation of traditional Hollywood star-imagery, this close-up makes visible the various factors that construct the star’s ideality: as it takes in Monroe’s strands of platinum hair, fake eyelashes, and even the freckles on her arms, the camera highlights the lived-body’s significance as the material channel through which the intangible “universal magic” of the double radiates.

If these moments subtly subvert the spectator’s conception of Monroe as simply an idealized double, another scene towards the middle of the film addresses Monroe’s own relationship to herself as a star. Whereas Monroe’s first moments on-screen establish the situation of her existence as a lived-body beyond the veneer of Hollywood, this later scene explicitly presents the situation of a more problematic co-existence between “Marilyn” the star and Monroe the actress. It opens with a medium-shot of six pin-ups of Monroe from her various glamour-girl incarnations hanging in the bedroom closet of her home. As Roslyn shows another character, Guido (Eli Wallach), the
bedroom, he stops before the door to stare at the photographs. Embarrassed, she closes the closet door saying: “Don’t look at those, they’re nothing…a joke”. She finally pushes the fascinated man out of the room, and exits the scene herself by passing close to the camera as she walks out of the frame with a worried, frustrated expression on her face.

In this sequence, the spectator observes a kind of meta-dialogue between Monroe and yet another reflection: that of her past selves. Caught in these pin-ups in her most clichéd poses of female stardom, Monroe represents what Laura Mulvey describes as an object “cut to the measure” of the male gaze (1999, p.843) – a one-dimensional figure existing on-screen to satisfy the scopophilic fantasies of the masculine subject. Yet though Wallach’s character clearly incarnates the fetishizing male subject, the Monroe who literally shuts the door on these reflections stands in contrast to the pinned-up woman. Truly, with her hair in braids and dressed in jeans with little make-up, she is nearly unrecognizable as such. Sobchack writes that a phenomenological concern with the lived-body entails an understanding of the human form not simply “as an abstracted object belonging always to someone else...but” as the physical shape of “the concrete, extroverted, and spirited subjects we all objectively are” (2004, p.1). Accordingly, what is most significant in this scene is not Monroe’s exchange with Wallach, but rather her interaction with those reflections of her past as an objectified abstraction. No longer the passive object of desire theorized by Mulvey, here Monroe assumes the role of a “spirited” and active subject who wants to belong to herself.

Such a juxtaposition between the pin-ups and Monroe herself recalls Barthes’s contention that photographed figures “do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies” (1993 [1982], p.55 and 57) in contrast to cinematic subjects who pass through and beyond the frame in their animated existence. To place this concept in feminist terms, certainly *The Misfits* is not wholly innocent of momentary alliances with the Mulveyan reductive and possessive male gaze associated with the still photos; there are, in fact, several male point-of-view shots that anesthetize and fasten-down aspects of Monroe’s famous body in a fetishistic manner. Yet such shots hardly define the Marilyn Monroe of *The Misfits*. Instead, the power of the film lies in its prevailing focus on Monroe’s expressive emergence from the fixed one-dimensionality of a frozen past. Reflecting on the extra-diegetic level Roslyn’s hope for a different future, Monroe-the-actress evades the Barthesian aura of death that haunts the pin-ups and implicitly chooses life. Though Monroe would face her own mortality only a year after this passing
before the movie camera, it is that same movie camera that captures her moment of decision and, in so doing, ensures her very immortality as a star.

**Space and the self**

In his study on Monroe, Graham McCann describes the character of Roslyn as having “the abstraction, and the intimacy, of a figure and an object in a dream” (1988, p.155). Undoubtedly the film acknowledges on both an aesthetic and diegetic level the oneiric qualities of Monroe/Roslyn, yet throughout the work, Monroe drifts back and forth across the boundary dividing the realm of abstraction from the more material plane. Indeed, the vision of the movie as a whole seems to gesture towards an understanding of Monroe and her character as the ultimate misfit, an individual unable to completely find her place in either the ideal or the real. As Montgomery Clift’s character remarks: “I can’t figure you floating around here like this”; to which Roslyn replies: “I don’t know where I belong”.

Such a concern with notions of place and belonging finds a theoretical counterpart in Kaja Silverman’s discussion of psychoanalyst Henri Wallon’s concept of proprioceptivity, or the body’s awareness of the space it occupies and claims as its own (1996, p.16). With an awareness of the human form’s dimensions and limitations, the individual engages with the surrounding world in an effort to identify those spaces that belong to or beyond the lived-body. Silverman also uses the vocabulary of Lacan’s mirror stage to describe the “mode of ‘altogetherness’” (1996, p.17), or presence, that arrives when the je of the subject’s proprioceptive ego unites with the moi of ideality presented within the visual *imago*. In the first third of the film, two sequences explore dual aspects of Monroe/Roslyn’s search to “fit” in the reality around her: one depicting her need to connect proprioceptively with the physical world, the other revealing the fragility of the mode of altogetherness that defines star-presentation.

In the first of these scenes, Monroe/Roslyn stumbles outside in the moonlight after an impromptu party with the cowboys to celebrate her divorce. Laughingly withdrawing from Guido’s drunken attempt to kiss her, Roslyn begins to dance in a graceful drifting movement towards a tree that stands in the middle of the yard. At first, the camera pans to the left to follow this desultory ballet, but soon it remains motionless as Roslyn moves further away and finally embraces the tree, collapsing her body against it. There is undoubtedly an eerie quality to this sequence, highlighted by the minor tones and discordance that shape the extra-diegetic music to
which Monroe appears to be dancing; and the camera’s static pose signifies a reluctance to follow the woman any deeper into what quickly becomes an utterly private and non-performative moment. Indeed, here Monroe’s haunting and haunted presence seems to make literal Morin’s description of the star as an “autonomous specter”, one now beyond the grasp of the camera or the spectator.

Yet the very elements of nature with which Monroe so desperately seeks to bond prevent the scene’s complete immersion in surreality. As she sways closer to the tree, Monroe seems to merge with the very landscape – her hair, her skin, and even the black of her dress becoming additional layers of texture to the dynamic palette of a frame already filled with moonlight and moving leaves. The sequence, then, is not supernatural but hyper-natural. In this way, Sobchack’s theory of the “unity of the look” is especially appropriate: with the eye of the camera offering equal attention to phenomena beyond simply the human figure, Sobchack argues, film may reveal a “unity of transcendent being…in the flesh of the world” (2004, p.301) – a transcendent unity for which Monroe longs. In clinging to the tree, she has proprioceptively claimed nature as the space within which and to which her body belongs.

The following sequence, however, shifts from an understanding of the proprioceptive ego to an exploration of the mode of altogetherness resulting from the union between real and ideal – a coming together never more evident than in the figure of the Hollywood star. In this way, cinema itself offers another kind of haven for Monroe: that dimension of the immaterial in which, as Morin writes, the star may engage the passion of the spectator and subsequently “focus…love’s magic on” herself (2005 [1955], p.30). Furthermore, the presence of the star signifies that the boundaries of the spectator’s reality may be transformed from the ordinary to the extraordinary through the mythic power of the ideal. In the scene in which Gay/Gable convinces Roslyn to stay in Reno, the poetic naturalism that characterized the previous sequence gives way to a classic Hollywood aesthetic that emphasizes the beauty of the film’s star; and for these moments, _The Misfits_ captures the myth of “Marilyn” and so purifies the actress of the limitations of mortal physicality.

The scene opens in a standard medium two-shot of Roslyn and Gay seated in a car. The next shot, however, begins a series of shot-reverse-shots in medium close-up that lasts throughout the remainder of the sequence. Unlike in the previous scene, here the camera’s eye concerns itself not with the “unity of the look” granting equal attention to the “flesh of the world” (Sobchack, 2004, p.301), but rather with the woman who, as Gay says, “shines” in her beauty. As in the reflection
that introduces her to the film, these shots present a diffused, glamorous Monroe who, to return to Morin’s words, stands as a “fantastic construction of man by man” – the emblem of cinema’s ability to create and capture an ideal double of humanity. Not drifting or “floating around” as a lost soul, here Monroe briefly returns to Morin’s mirror of dreams to play the part of a movie star.

But at the conclusion of the scene, the theme of misfitting and wandering returns. Roslyn asks Gay whether he has a home, to which he replies: “Sure I do... Right here”. He nods towards the desolate Nevada landscape through which they are driving, and Roslyn follows his gaze disbelievingly. The sequence ends with a fade-out on a close-up of Monroe’s face, looking out the window at the scenery that rushes by; the deserted space that her lover calls home. Whereas a kind of balance had existed earlier in the scene, the realization of Gay’s drifting ways upsets the confident equilibrium of Roslyn/Monroe’s mode of altogetherness. Ultimately, the tree and the idealizing frame of the medium close-up offer only impermanent sanctuaries from the restlessness of life, and from a narrative that demands that Roslyn/Monroe continue her journey towards an uncertain future.

Exceeding parameters

In The Imaginary Signifier, Christian Metz describes film as “a beautiful closed object... whose contours remain intact and which cannot therefore be torn open into an inside and an outside” (1982 [1977], p.94). Throughout The Misfits, however, Huston consistently seeks to break open the self-contained world of the film, quietly challenging the aesthetic boundaries of a more illusionist classic Hollywood cinema with his realist sensibilities. Clearly this decision to reveal the “inside and outside” of the film extends to the transformation of Monroe herself from a beautiful closed object of the star system to a fluid figure negotiating the modes of subjectivity and objectivity, corporeality and ethereality; and near the end of the film, Huston stages a climactic sequence in the Nevada desert that definitively tests the parameters of the film and its female star.

The last third of The Misfits follows Monroe and the three cowboys into the country surrounding Reno, where the men plan to capture wild mustangs and sell them to a company that will kill them for dog food. The cowboys see the venture as an expression of their independence from the banal working-day world; Monroe, however, finds the idea horrifying. After witnessing the almost grotesque spectacle of the men roping and tying up a mare and her foal, Roslyn
breaks from a medium shot and runs into the desert. She is next seen in long shot, a solitary figure against the panorama of the desert sand, distant mountains, and blank sky. Shouting into her surroundings, she calls the men “killers... murderers... liars. You’re only happy when you can see something die”.

As they listen to these words, the men are positioned in a medium shot that appears tight and almost claustrophobic in comparison to the long shot to which Monroe belongs – what Carl Rollyson describes as a “deliberately awkward” (1990, p.213) technique that highlights the distance between the guilty triumvirate and Monroe’s outrage. Here Monroe once again becomes part of the landscape, though this time in a moment of assertion and independence. Sobchack writes of the camera’s ability to find the “sublime and spiritual in the open indeterminacy of the world’s materiality” (2004, p.301); and as Huston’s camera seeks out Roslyn/Monroe’s catharsis, it designates the vast expanse of the natural world a place of potentiality and liberation contrasting the prison within which the men are framed. As her voice, a disembodied force unto itself demanding that she be not only acknowledged but heard, carries through the vista, Roslyn/Monroe has – like the filmic object which serves as the situation of her existence – broken open.

Conclusion

Early in the film, Monroe-as-Roslyn quietly laments her divorce and wonders what her future will hold: “The trouble is, I always end up back where I started”. This sequence, however, marks the end of this cycle of displacement and unrest. The horses are freed, and Monroe and Clark Gable leave the desert to start out on a shared life. She asks him how they will find their “way back in the dark”; but perhaps what they seek now together is a way out of the dark. As the lovers follow the star in the night sky that will lead them to the highway home, The Misfits closes not with a traditionally happy ending, but with a hopeful one.

The final image focuses on that guiding light in the sky, the same star that, earlier in the film, Wallach’s character pointed to as he remarked: “That star is so far away, that by the time the light from it reaches us here on earth, it might not even be up there anymore”. How well that statement defines the fascinating and enigmatic presence of any great cinematic star – but of Marilyn Monroe especially. The spectator watches Monroe in any of her films with an admiration for her talent and photogénie, all the while understanding that, as Barthes puts forth, the “luminous shadow” on-screen is just
that. Death will be and life has been. But in The Misfits, Huston allows the spectator to see the woman casting that luminous shadow, the lived-body from which such ethereality emanates. In a moment of grace, the camera suspends that "simple click" between this will be and this has been, and Marilyn Monroe is.

Works Cited