

Elisenda Díaz

Autonomous University of Barcelona.

Orcid: 0009-0000-9092-9427

Biopics of Female Hollywood Stars Speak to #MeToo Era: The Case of *Judy* (2019) and *Blonde* (2022)

Abstract

This article analyzes two recent biopics, *Judy* (2019, Rupert Goold) and *Blonde* (2022, Andrew Dominik), which reimagine the icons from the Hollywood Golden Era, Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe respectively, under the prism of the #MeToo movement. By examining the way in which these movies treat abusive experiences within the film industry, along with their placement in the public arena, this paper exposes how contemporary biopics dedicated to female movie stars face the consequences of #MeToo in Hollywood.

In terms of textual construction, both movies presumptively adopt a female perspective in portraying actresses' experiences of exploitation –such as sexual harassment, eating disorders, substance abuse, and more– under a male-dominated Hollywood studio system. Meanwhile, directors' articulated intentions, promotional campaigns, reviews, and film critiques seeking to convincingly place the films in the domain of public discussion around #MeToo.

Despite this 'feminist' assumption, this article will argue that these movies, while appearing to confront and re-address injustices in Hollywood through revisiting the mythical narratives of well-known female stars, fail to challenge the

melodramatic victimization plot familiar in traditional biopics about women. In doing so, it will explore how they reinforce a representation of the female Hollywood star after #MeToo as a mentally troubled woman struggling to survive in an exploitative film industry.

Key words:

Female biopics, Hollywood Golden Era, Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Stardom, #MeToo.

Introducing female biopics and biopics of actresses

At first glance, one might say that over the last two decades of the 21st century, the production of biographical films has increased. In particular, after the success of *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018, Bryan Singer), the genre has gained recognition and prestige among audiences and film institutions (Brown & Vidal, 2014, p. 2). However, it should be noted that this renewed interest is specifically focused on depicting the lives of popular women. Every year, a significant number of female biopics are made. Some of them are movies about scientists such as *Marie Curie* (2016, Marie Noëlle) or *Radioactive* (2019, Marjane Satrapi); writers like *Violette* (2013, Martin Provost), *Colette* (2018, Wash Westmoreland), or *Shirley* (2020, Josephine Decker); political figures like *Jackie* (2016, Pablo Larraín) or *Simone, le voyage du siècle* (2022, Olivier Dahan); and royalty icons, such as in *Spencer* (2021, Pablo Larraín) or *Corsage* (2022, Marie Kreutzer); while other portrayals focus on singers, philosophers, artists, and actresses.

Experts on the genre have previously pointed out the particularities of biopics about women, considering these as a specific subgenre. Dennis Bingham (2013) provides a theoretical distinction based on gender differentiating the biopics dedicated to great (white) men in history as epic and celebratory tales while women's biopics are "weighted down by myths of suffering, victimization, and failure perpetuated by a culture whose films reveal an acute fear of women in the public realm" (Bingham, 2013, p. 10). Considering the films mentioned above, both career and gender arise as sociocultural categories relevant to the biographical genre. As signaled by Custen, this genre considers men because of their talent while treating women based on their gender (1992, p. 106). This implies that women are first portrayed as women and, only then, as female artists, scientists, or politicians. An overview of the diverse biopics dedicated to historical actresses would allow us to infer the peculiarities of this

subgenre, its narratives and thematic elements, as well as the construction of what a female movie star is.

Actresses' lives emerged on the screen in the pessimistic context of the aftermath of World War II. Previously, biopics enjoyed a golden age encouraging hagiographic and heroic portrayals of royalty personalities, entrepreneurs, inventors, or politicians which conform to Leo Löwenthal's notion of pre-second world war 'idols of production' (Custen, 1992, p. 26). However, during the fifties, the subject of biopics shifted towards 'idols of consumption' –artists, singers, actors, or athletes–, all of them managing tumultuous and eccentric lives which were usually disclosed by gossip press in real-time.

Embracing the melodramatic code, the psycho-drama, and the social problem films altogether, movies like *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955, Charles Vidor) and *I'll Cry Tomorrow* (1955, Daniel Mann) are exemplary post-war warts-and-all entertainers' biopics (Bingham, 2010, p. 220). *I'll Cry Tomorrow* focuses on Lillian Roth's downward spiral through alcoholism, from which she would only gain public rehabilitation by intimately exposing herself on the TV misery show *This is Your Life* in 1953. In parallel, *Love Me or Leave Me* portrays Ruth Etting's life reduced to a romantic plot as she is trapped in an abusive marriage. Both movies describe the pitiful process of a woman's degradation as the main character, who once was at the peak of her success, loses everything and falls into hellish addiction and mad misadventures with exaggerated emotionalism. These characteristics link biopics about actresses to melodrama¹, with this alliance endorsing the deployment of victimization narratives along with a predilection for tragic female protagonists.

These early biopics appeared concurrently with stardom movies like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, Billy Wilder), *The Star* (1952, Stuart Heisler), and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962, Robert Aldrich). Since that time², both genres have consolidated the myth of the female Hollywood star through different tropes. Whether belonging to the historical or mythical realm, the Hollywood star was depicted as vain, alcoholic, mentally unstable, suicidal, lonely, behaving unruly and grotesquely, and holding complicated mother-daughter relationships. In addition, simulating the decay of the star system, biopics about stars shifted

¹ The influence of melodrama on women biopics is detailed by Dennis Bingham (2013, p. 218) and Sonia Amalia Haiduc (in Cartmell and Polascheck, 2020, pp. 23-44).

² According to McNally, the mythology displayed in stardom movies is incorporated into the biopic, particularly, in the context of the decline of the star system (2020, p. 92). However, the confusion between fact and fiction is always present in the portray of the star as certain stardom movies can be read as veiled biopics, as McNally argues (2020, p. 79-90).

from big screen to TV during the late sixties³ (Cohan, 2019, p. 142). Aside from TV production, it was during that period that *Mommie Dearest* (1981, Frank Perry) appeared, based on Joan Crawford's daughter's memoirs, and portraying the star in a monstrous and ridiculous way as an abusive mother. The next year *Frances* (1982, Graeme Clifford) was released, recounting the trajectory of Frances Farmer from a rebellious socialist teenager to a madwoman who is finally rescued from the asylum by a heterosexual romance.

Considering the releases of biopics about actresses during the last two decades, the preference for tragic figures conjugated with the victimology fetish seems to prevail. Although the ostensible economy of empowerment regarding female figures is exploited in contemporary mainstream narratives, there have been no attempts to explore the sober, intelligent, mature, and non-problematic lives of actresses such as Lillian Gish, Katharine Hepburn, or Olivia de Havilland. Tragic destinies are described in *Film Stars don't Die in Liverpool* (2017, Paul McGuigan), where last days of Gloria Grahame suffering from breast cancer are depicted. Moreover, in *Seberg* (2019, Benedict Andrews), a childlike Jean Seberg is crucified and set on fire in Preminger's set, and because of her political involvement she's turned to paranoid under FBI persecution. Aside from the Hollywood environment, in *Three Days in Quiberon* (2018, Emily Atef), Romy Schneider confronts the adversities of her private life in an interview granted in a mental asylum where she is staying to give up alcohol.

This overview may lead to the conclusion that biopics about female movie stars align perfectly with Bingham's understanding of the film lives of women as a dramatization of women's suffering or, in drastic cases, as a spectacle of female degradation (Bingham, 2013, p. 220). At this juncture, Hollinger clarified that, despite the depiction of female entertainers:

[...] as manipulated, even victimized by an exploitive movie industry, most often represented by producers, agents, stage mothers, and jealous husbands, the thematic emphasis is not so much on their victimization as on their ability to survive and even triumph over this victimization (Hollinger, 2020, p. 77).

Hollinger introduces a distinction in the actresses' downward trajectory previously articulated by Bingham: they are not mere victims because they struggle in a male industry in order to survive, that is, to succeed. These are tales about

³ There is an abundance of television films and cable series dedicated to Hollywood stars produced by diverse networks like CBS, ABC, or HBO among others. Just to mention some examples: *The Jayne Mansfield Story* (Dirk Lowry, 1980), *Mae West* (1982, Lee Philips), and *Lucy and Desi: Before the Laughter* (1991, Charles Jarrot).

how a woman wielding mediatic and economic power, devoted to her professional ambition, defying the 'feminine' imperatives of marriage and motherhood, challenges female agency in front of a patriarchal institution like Hollywood. Following Hollinger's reading, which also considers the female audiences' appreciation, the sense of overcoming and confronting the abusive film industry prevails over the victimization in entertainers' biopics (Hollinger, 2020, p. 80). However, the main character is usually damaged on her way to succeed to perish at the end of the film prematurely and tragically.

Biopics of movie stars as a critique of the Hollywood film industry

Biographies of actresses act as a gateway to the inner workings of Hollywood, providing the perfect pretext to delve into the realm of the behind-the-scenes. In the study *Hollywood by Hollywood: The Backstudio Picture and the Mystique of Making Movies*, Steven Cohan analyzes the ideological aspects of the film-in-film genre, attempting to mirror the Hollywood film industry. Over the decades, Cohan has identified various self-reflexive film discourses concerning the magic of movie making, but, as a rule, these discourses serve to promote a specific perspective on the Hollywood machinery:

The backstudio picture's history as a genre reveals the extent to which the Hollywood mystique not only determined how the old studio era imagined itself on screen *in the past* but still determines how the new Hollywood of giant multi-media conglomerated wants to think of itself *in the present* (Cohan, 2019, p. 17).

This quote allows us to inquire about Hollywood's current intentions regarding the depiction of historical actresses' lives. Following Cohan's assumptions, Hollywood has self-portrayed differently depending on the socio-cultural climate of the time, usually balancing criticism and nostalgia. At present, an undeniable seismic event has shaken the Hollywood film industry. In 2017, *The New York Times* journalists Megan Twohey and Jodi Kantor published an article in which several actresses and other former employees of Miramax broke the prevailing pact of silence and publicly reported sexual harassment perpetrated by the Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. This article will argue that the multiple accusations led by the media hashtag #MeToo have affected the Hollywood fairy tale and, furthermore, have triggered a crisis in the imagery surrounding female stardom.

The context of #MeToo has provided the conditions for reexamining the lives of historical actresses through a different lens. Nowadays, when sexual abuse is no longer an open secret, the private sphere of film personalities has become

a place from where to shed light on abusive experiences, beyond sexual harassment, that have never been addressed. While previous biopics showed actresses navigating a series of tragic misfortunes, now that some of these experiences are publicly framed as sexist abuses, how do these films take a stand regarding the biopic strategies traditionally devoted to female victimology? To address this question, the article presents an analysis of two biopics released after 2017 which production and reception established a public dialogue with the #MeToo movement: *Judy* and *Blonde*.

New abuses in the film industry: eating disorder, insomnia and substance abuse in *Judy*

The film *Judy* focuses on the last days of Judy Garland. When her glorious days are far behind, she is portrayed as a suffering, neglectful mother facing financial difficulties. Her career is no longer sustained by the film business, as there are no more Dorothy-like appearances and her 1950s successful comebacks –such as *Summer Stock* (1950, Charles Walters) and, most notably, *A Star is Born* (1954, George Cukor)– are already behind. For that reason, she is recycling her talent in music shows. While in the USA, she must perform with her children Lorna and Joey to survive economically and publicly, and she then receives an offer to perform in London. The scenes of her last concerts in 1968 are overlaid with sequences of her experiences during the set of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, Victor Fleming), when she was still a minor. These images constitute the site of trauma: on the one hand, they serve to expose the exploitative working condition for child stars in the Hollywood studio system and, on the other, they justify a decaying Judy Garland in the late sixties.

The presentation of the main character seems to align with Richard Dyer's definition of Garland's roles during the fifties⁴: the neurotic female performer mirroring the star's off-screen image for coetaneous audiences (Dyer in Gledhill, 1991, p. 142). Following Dyer, since her failed marriages, episodes of depression, the 1950 suicidal attempt, and other scandals, Garland has been perceived as neurotic, vulnerable, and suffering. Therefore, one might state that *A Star is Born* set the basis for Garland's biopics such as *Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows* (2001, Robert Allan Ackerman) and *Judy*. Considering that Judy Garland's weak and neurotic side was of public domain during her lifetime, we should ask what *Judy* is updating in the context of #MeToo when depicting a series of abusive practices during her beginnings in film industry.

⁴ In particular, musical films like *Easter Parade* (1948, Charles Walters), *Summer Stock*, and *A Star is Born* in which Garland embodied female artists in showbusiness.

First, the biopic reports the eating disorder she suffered during her entire life. During a set break with Mickey Rooney, after swallowing a French fry, a starving Judy aims to continue with her meal. Her manager, a figure of discipline present during all the child scenes, says out loud: “No hamburger. Mr. Mayer said very specifically you were not to eat the food”. When Judy complains, her publicist hands her a pill, to which Judy answers: “No, I gotta sleep tonight”. In turn, the publicist replies: “Halpert will give you something for that later”. This scene shows the control of the studio over Garland’s physical appearance, her weight, and, ultimately, her personal growth. The publicist, Louis B. Mayer’s right-hand, corrects Judy’s conduct and biological desires –eating and sleeping– by offering pills. As she takes them, this scene ends with her resentfully eating Mickey’s burger. These flashbacks portray a disobedient teenager who is no longer a submissive puppet of the studio, while she is suffering from enormous pressure and constraint over her young life. Her rebellious attempts highlight awareness of her own oppression as a child star, although she is portrayed as powerless against the authority of the studio.

The consequences of drug habit led her to insomnia. The spectator witnesses multiple scenes where mature Judy is handling sleepless nights, that eventually drive her to alcoholism and substance abuse. The drug taking is contextualized in scenes from her childhood showing Judy being given amphetamines –also referred to as ‘pep’ pills or ‘vitamin shots’– to improve her productivity on set, as well as sleeping pills to ensure her rest during a few hours. In the Hollywood Golden Era, when movie stars represented a significant investment for studios, administrating drugs was a common practice to sustain actors through extended workdays and, consequently, to guarantee their economic profitability (O’Hara, 2021, p. 48). In this context, as McLean has highlighted, the studio tried to manipulate Garland’s non-standard teenage body to fit American beauty ideals, effectuating a series of corrections “with heavy corsets and harnesses as well as dieting and the destruction of her ego” (McLean, 2002, p. 8). Her body, gestures and movements (key elements for American film musical) were affected in perpetuity, providing arguments for judging her body as suffering and vulnerable. Drug dependence was a life problem for Garland, and it was this addiction that finally took her away prematurely. During her life, as portrayed in the film, this problem had an impact on her ability to perform and, ultimately, on her confidence regarding her talent.

Throughout the film, the figure of Louis B. Mayer is depicted as a metonymy of studio control over the actress’ physical appearance, her productivity, as well as her rest. Various scenes portraying the relationship between Judy Garland and

Louis B. Mayer suggest an abusive liaison. After Garland's being rebellious on set, she confronts Mayer, stating: "I did 18 hours yesterday. I mean, I couldn't hardly remember my own name". Mayer quickly replies: "Your name is Frances Gumm (...) We like you loyal". By recalling her birth name, Mayer emphasizes 'Judy Garland' as his creation and investment. As Helen O'Hara explains, the Hollywood archetype of the male mentor is often read as a 'Svengali'⁵: a man exhibiting Pygmalion's syndrome⁶, intending to sculpt his own creature for both economic and sexual profit (2021, p. 116). The end of this sequence suggests sexual abuse when Mayer says to Judy: "You sing from the heart, Judy. You know where the heart is? It's there." —all while approaching his hand over her breast and touching it. Even though this disturbing approach should elicit rage, a melodramatic musical arrangement instigates compassion in the spectator. After the girl defiantly challenges the control exerted by the studio, in the end she is portrayed as a pitiful victim totally manipulated by the Hollywood mogul who menacingly reminds her: "Don't ever hold up a film of mine". Despite her initial attempts at insurgence, under the influence of an imbalanced and toxic power relationship the young actress ultimately shows gratitude and loyalty to Mayer, dedicating all her efforts to conform to the demands of the show business. In doing so, the movie justifies her later suffering through the rhetoric of the 'price of fame' that she accepted to be a glorious star. In relation to this scene the screenwriter of the biopic, Tom Edge, declares being inspired by Judy Garland's own words, as reproduced in the biography *Get a Happy Life* by Gerald Clarke:

Whenever he complimented her on her voice —she sang from the heart, he said— Mayer would invariably place his hand on her left breast to show just where her heart was. 'I often thought I was lucky,' observed Judy, 'that I didn't sing with another part of my anatomy' (Clarke, 2000, p. 69).

In Garland's handwritten notes, Clarke discovers the actress complaining about sexual misconduct during her first years at M.G.M., even affirming that Mayer "was one of the worst of the sexual predators" (*op. cit.*, p. 69). It is important to observe that literary biographies and autobiographies about actresses have been shedding light on sexual misconducts in the film industry for years, as exemplified in this case. However, as Karen Boyle emphasizes in *#MeToo, Weinstein, and Feminism* (2019), what is inherent to the #MeToo movement is less the speaking out, but "the extent to which some of these stories have been widely

⁵ Svengali is a character from the novel *Trilby* (George du Maurier, 1894), exemplary in manipulating and exploiting her *protégée*.

⁶ In Greek mythology, Pygmalion is a sculptor who falls in love with his own creation because it embodies his ideal of feminine beauty. The aspect of domination lies in the fact that he created her, thus possessing her, and in the myth, he ultimately marries the sculpture.

heard” (2019, p. 5). While this incident, along with other well-known tales of Garland being molested during the shooting of *The Wizard of Oz*, have been historically understood as mere anecdotes from the Hollywood studio era, after the #MeToo seism these experiences are reframed as abuses. We should draw attention to the fact that, even though the #MeToo movement emerged in response to allegations of sexual misconduct perpetrated by Weinstein, its impact extends far beyond the Weinstein affair⁷. The 2017 accusations not only brought attention to the issue of sexual abuse but also call for a re-evaluation of the hierarchical relationships that are intrinsic to the industry and sustain this abuse of power (whether sexual or otherwise, affecting the actors’ bodies). In this regard, biopics of actresses in the #MeToo era do not merely address sexual exploitation but aim to re-examine the misogynist structure lying in Hollywood studio system, a system perpetuating multiple sexist abuses, as depicted in films like *Judy* and *Seberg*.

Although *Judy* acknowledges patriarchal abuse of power in the film industry, it fails to challenge the commonplace warts-and-all narrative found in biopics about women. By reproducing the same old victimology formula, the movie reduces a major movie star to a helpless victim during her teen star days, while in maturity she is portrayed like an alcoholic and drug addict, who is incapable of caring for her children, mentally unstable, and throwing herself into the arms of a young and charming, economically interested man. At this stage, it seems that *Judy* echoes the suffering and vulnerability in Garland’s star image (as deployed on and off-screen) as a marker of authenticity as Dyer understands it (Dyer in Gledhill, 1991, p. 141): the ultimate truth is that she *really* suffered from the very beginning to the tragic end. However, the biopic neglects the ‘positive’ qualities, such as survival, passion, parody and strength, that also articulated Garland’s star image by solely embracing the melodramatic tone in the portrayal of the abuses related to her body.

The reception of *Judy*, both through positive and disapproving film critiques, has framed the film in the public arena endorsed by the #MeToo movement. For example, one can read in the review published by *Variety*: “Steering away from lurid fallen-angel cliché, it recontextualizes Garland’s story for a post-#MeToo audience mindful of women abused and disempowered by the industry” (Lodge, 2019). In the same way, the queer *Xtra Magazine* welcomes *Judy*’s recognition

⁷ Throughout the history of cinema there have been multiple similar cases, such as those involving Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle, Roman Polanski, and Woody Allen, among others. These cases were framed by the press as sexual scandals that, ultimately, did not challenge the power dynamics in the film industry.

of LGBT+ audiences⁸, a community always faithful to Garland's icon, with the following summarizing title: "Judy' biopic speaks to the #MeToo era. Starring Renée Zellweger as Judy Garland, the movie examines Hollywood abuse and exploitation" (Bowness, 2019). Negative critiques, on their part, are concerned about the impact on socio-cultural conceptions of abuse victims that *Judy* might induce. The review of *Screen Queens* argues that the movie, by revisiting Garland's press gossip and portraying a tortured mature woman, reproduces dynamics of victim-blaming with the commonplace of the 'price of fame'. This critique also highlights a new trend in this post-#MeToo era of confining female characters to victimhood while avoiding any exploration of survival tales.

Addressing Hollywood's open secret: the portrayal of the casting couch in *Blonde*

There is an excess of biographical content regarding Marilyn Monroe's persona. The popular fascination and the constant retelling of her life has elevated her to the status of a cultural myth, as noted by Cohan (2019, p. 211). Instances of the particular subgenre of Monroe-bio persona include the first veiled biopic made while she was alive, *The Goddess* (1958, John Cromwell), and subsequent TV productions like *The Sex Symbol* (1974, David Lowell), *The Year's Blonde* (1980, John Erman), *Goodnight, Sweet Marilyn* (1989, Larry Buchanan), *Norma Jean & Marilyn* (1996, Tim Fywell), *Blonde* (2001, Joyce Chopra), and *My Week with Marilyn* (2011, Simon Curtis), among others. Biopics about Monroe present a consistent narrative and reiterate certain thematic elements: a Dickensian childhood, three failed marriages, a desperate quest for love accompanied by sexual exploitation, multiple abortions, drug addiction, possible schizophrenia, and finally, her tragic and mysterious death. By delving into the vulnerable façade behind the sex symbol, these biographical films align with the inherent objective of biopics to unveil the dark side of a famous personality. Following Cohan's analysis, Monroe biopics commonly challenge the bombshell stereotype by offering a spectacle of the suffering beauty whose failure is due to her "own disturbed psyche and emotional instability, not patriarchal Hollywood and its sexist exploitation of women" (2019, p. 213).

In his analysis of Monroe, Dyer recognizes a 'biographical vulnerability' in the sex icon due to the conjunction of the life events previously enumerated, her premature death, and the articulation of female sexuality (2006, p. 46). While performing an open sexuality, innocent and childlike, uncomplicated and free of guilt, she appeared as totally exposed, desperately seeking love, attention and ap-

⁸ This is particularly reflected in a scene where Judy spends a joyful evening with a couple of gay men fans. It is one of the few scenes portraying the actress happy, comfortable, and uninhibited.

proval. Besides the suffering caused by painful menstruation, various miscarriages, and the impossibility of becoming a loving wife and mother, Monroe seemed fragile as her fate as a sex object, constrained to Hollywood's dumb blonde, was to be publicly mocked with suspicion in every attempt she made to become a serious actress⁹. Her famous last words, "Please, don't make me a joke", was a plea to redeem her sex symbol condition from public scorn. Her vulnerability was the condition for being a global object of desire (Dyer, 2006, p. 43) but also to emerge as the perfect blonde victim, the Hollywood martyr par excellence. This conflict is the starting point for biopics about Monroe.

Among this biographical preference for victimhood and fatality, the fiction novel *Blonde* written by Joyce Carol Oates in 2000 introduces a shift in the portrayal of Hollywood as a patriarchal institution when the casting couch is addressed. The chapter titled 'Hummingbird' narrates the encounter with Mr. Z.¹⁰ and the transformation from the girl-next-door Norma Jean to the bombshell Marilyn Monroe. Sexual abuse is the experience that consolidates this Cinderella transformation, and it's recounted in posttraumatic terms in Norma Jean's diary:

Mr Z pushed me toward a white fur rug saying *Get down Blondie [...]* & then up inside me like a beak plunging in *In, in* as far *in* as it will go I wouldnt remember how long was required for Mr Z to collapse like a swimmer upon the beach panting & moaning I was in terror the old man wld have a heart attack or a stroke (Oates, 2000, p. 214, spelling mistakes are from the original source).

At the end of the chapter, the character is reborn: "*My new life! My new life has begun! Today it began! Telling myself It's only now beginning, I am twenty-one years old & I am MARILYN MONROE*" (Oates, 2000, p. 218). This chapter constitutes the emergence of a new genealogy in stardom imagery: a star is born when she is sexually abused.

A year after the publication of the novel, *Blonde* (2001, Joyce Chopra) was adapted into a two-part miniseries. In this version, the casting couch is framed as a mandatory rite of passage to enter show business. During the first meeting with the studio chief, Norma Jean is suggested to recline on the white fur carpet; she

⁹ After 1954, Monroe made a series of decisions to escape from the sex objectification perpetuated by Hollywood. She moved to New York to study acting with Lee Strasberg, married writer Arthur Miller, and founded Marilyn Monroe Productions with Milton Greene to gain control over her roles, movies, and salary. These events, emphasizing agency, control and empowerment, are often overshadowed by the more widespread Cinderella tale.

¹⁰ Supposedly, Mr. Z. refers to Darryl F. Zanuck, an important studio executive and film producer. He met Monroe when he was the head of studio at 20th Century-Fox and is a recurring character in Monroe biopics. Historically, Zanuck was sceptic about the potential of Monroe's star image. Consequently, he labelled her as a pin-up and limited her roles to dumb-blonde characters.

understands, obeys, and starts to undress herself. In the ‘real’ audition, she gets the part without playing the lines, leaving her confused but eventually happy. This is one of the multiple scenes where she understands the (sexual) ‘price of fame’ she must pay to become a movie star. Similarly, other previous biopics like *Norma Jean & Marilyn* include dialogues about female stardom and the sexual element of working conditions: “Oh, you think girls get movie contracts because somebody respects their talent, Eddie? I’ll tell you how girls get movie contracts, they f*** the right people, that’s how. And that’s exactly what I’m gonna do”. Even documentaries about Monroe, like *The Mystery of Marilyn Monroe: The Untold Tapes* (2022, Emma Cooper), acknowledge the existence of a black book guiding casting directors to call actresses who “could be laid”, in other words, actresses that were sexually available. And, supposedly, Monroe’s name appeared in there.

At this point, as the casting couch is addressed in previous movies about Monroe, it might seem that the post-#MeToo version would not introduce anything new. While the song “Every baby needs a da da daddy”¹¹ plays, Norma Jean attends the rendezvous with the producer Mr. Z. where, after reading a few lines, she is *explicitly* sexually abused. Similarly, in the ‘real’ audition, she is told: “You don’t have to read. You’re cast. If your name is Marilyn Monroe.”

The following scene serves to consolidate the connection between the actress fulfilling the desires of men in the film industry and the achievement of a star career. During the premiere of *All About Eve* (1950, Joseph L. Mankiewicz), the audience witnessed this sequence:

Addison DeWitt (George Sanders): Do you see that man? That’s Max Fabian, the producer. Now go and do yourself some good.

Miss Casswell (Marilyn Monroe): Why do they always look like unhappy rabbits?

Addison DeWitt: Because that’s what they are. Now go and make him happy.

Meanwhile, among the audience, Mr. Shinn¹², Monroe’s agent who facilitated the interview with Mr. Z., extends his hand over her leg in a Svengali manner: he has right over her, she owes her star status to him. Considering the previous examples addressing the institutionalized sexual harassment that structures the

¹¹ This is a famous song from *Ladies of the Chorus* (1948, Phil Karlson), one of the first Monroe appearances on screen. It is interesting to draw attention to the lyrics, which explain that a woman has to be linked to a man for protection and love, using the paternalistic metaphor of a baby needing a daddy. The lyrics also envisage a woman’s capability to give love (read, sex) in exchange for economic support.

¹² This fictional character corresponds with Monroe’s talent agent, Dan Butler.

film industry, the 2022 version of *Blonde* introduces a difference by portraying sexual violence on screen. Given the relocation of this scene to porn websites like *Forced cinema* under the title of “Ana de Armas being raped”, we should ask if it was necessary to stage an explicit rape scene of the twentieth-century sexual icon.

By considering the narrative purposes of this sequence, one might state that the rape of the blonde icon has no consequences on the character’s transformation or on the accounting of events. *Blonde* deviates from the rape and revenge genre by presenting a spectacular and non-narratological function of sexual violence on screen. Through the lens of feminist film analysis, Dominik’s intentions can be compared to a certain European tradition of ‘extreme’ filmmakers who have previously raised ethical questions by portraying sexual violence, as seen in movies like *Last Tango in Paris* (1972, Bernardo Bertolucci), *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1976, Pier Paolo Pasolini), *Dogville* (2003, Lars von Trier), and *Irréversible* (2002, Gaspar Noé). However, while these *cinema provocateurs* are defined by pushing the limits of what can be represented in film through extended and disturbing sequences (Russell, 2010, p. 4), Dominik’s purpose is directed at exposing the ‘raw truth’ lying behind the figure of the Hollywood glamorous sex boom. In doing so, Dominik adheres to biopic principles, thus inquiring: “Do you want to see the warts-and-all version or do you want to see that sanitized version?” (Ebiri, 2022).

However, the exhibition of episodes of violence cannot ensure historical justice. According to post-feminist scholars, the economy of visibility does not guarantee a deep challenge of hegemonic power relations (Banet-Wieser, Rottenberg, and Gill, 2019). On the contrary, *Blonde* seems to adhere to the traditional elements of female biopic –the warts-and-all narrative, the victimology fetishism, the mentally unstable and desperate women in front of the corrupted and misogynist Hollywood– while reproducing the sexist violence on screen that can be consumed as pornography later on. Despite these problematic depictions of sexual violence, which the director has described as “situations that are ambiguous” (Ebiri, 2022), according to Dominik’s statements in another interview, it appears that #MeToo provided the suitable conditions to address the injustices suffered by Monroe in the film industry:

It was really #MeToo that allowed *Blonde* to happen. It was a gold moment where you had to believe a woman’s perspective no matter what. Whereas before I think people were really uncomfortable with how *Blonde* portrayed certain American sacred cows. And then it became a gold moment where it didn’t matter if they were sacred cows or not, and that’s why it got made, what allowed it to happen in the end (Pérez, 2022).

Paraphrasing the expert on the historical film genre Robert Rosenstone, what defines the historical approach is not the interest in certain ‘real’ facts but the aim to reinterpret the meaning some events suggest in present times (1995, p. 10). In this sense, the intentions of *Blonde* to revisit what these male privileged positions masked in American culture are justified. This argument can also excuse the director’s irritated reactions to NC-17 rating, labelling this Netflix measure as censorship. Similarly, what he identifies as “today’s audience sensibility” (Ebiri, 2022) reinforces the commitment of the movie to unveil Hollywood’s –and America’s, by extend– bad practices perpetrated by the once sacred cows.

Nevertheless, when public and legal allegations issued from #MeToo have made an effort to contextualize sexual harassment in the film industry and other workplaces, the recent biopic of Marilyn Monroe seems to fail to consider the ‘female point of view’ of history. When Dominik is asked about sexual violence and female victimhood, he has little to say. In his opinion, sexual abuse “just happens, it’s almost glossed over, and then the feeling follows her later. I guess in a way I don’t see the film as essentially female. I see it as being about an unloved child” (Newland, 2022). At the end, according to Dominik, *Blonde* is interested in the weak, vulnerable, and suicidal Norma Jean (Newland, 2022). Finally, by reproducing the common formula of female biopics and contributing to the portrait of the star as a martyr of the Hollywood system, *Blonde* introduces a new sterile image for the #MeToo movement and women’s rights: the rape of the most popular sexual icon of the twentieth century.

Conclusions

Considering the contributions of these two contemporary biopics about female movie stars, *Judy* and *Blonde*, one can notice that Hollywood sexist abuses, far from being disavowed, are addressed. This article aimed to analyze the way in which this historical exploitation was treated in terms of narrative and thematic properties traditionally fostered by biographical pictures. As previously exposed, both films perpetuate the victimology fetish common in biopics about women but, at this crossroad, gain another layer of complexity. On the one hand, these films are no longer dealing with a series of tragic misfortunes but with certain abusive practices perpetuated through film history and, at present, under public and legal scrutiny. On the other hand, as other contemporary biopics dedicated to women’s lives, these are films attempting to restore Hollywood injustices and damages. In her article analyzing *Seberg* and *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019, Quentin Tarantino), Tincknell realizes the proliferation of ‘exploitation narratives’ in the post-#MeToo era as

a restorative way to cinematically conceal the discriminations, oppressions and multiple violence women have historically suffered:

The temptation to believe that past injustices are only now coming to light because of contemporary campaigns or movements is deeply problematic. So too is the assumption that focusing on women's experience of exploitation is, by definition, a feminist project. (Tincknell, 2022, p. 14).

Considering these biopics, one can notice the current ideological interests of Hollywood in portraying the Golden Era with the aim of redeeming its own history through active *pink-washing*. However, it appears that these films merely recycle the lives of actresses by reproducing cautionary tales, reminiscent of previous biopics, which convey a warning message about the evil patriarchal threat to women's ambition in their professional environment. It seems that Hollywood's newfound self-awareness of its exploitative and abusive past is a convenient position, allowing it to superficially adhere to the popular feminist agenda without fundamentally challenging the film economy of representation.

As we have previously explained, the figures of Garland and Monroe emphasized vulnerability in their on and off-screen images. Despite suffering sexist exploitation in film industry, they were also women devoted to career, exerting public influence and achieving economic independence in a context where female ambitions were relegated to domesticity. Current memories might tend to see them as victims of abuses they didn't (or couldn't) report, but these narratives shouldn't forget that they were exemplary women challenging passive feminine roles and embodying strength and empowerment. Moreover, we shouldn't forget that both were aware of the exploitation they were suffering. As mentioned, Garland identified Mayer as a harasser, and Monroe, aside from her efforts to not become a sex object, she explained the rules of Hollywood game in the article «Wolves I Have Known» published in *Motion Picture* (1953) and in conversations with Jaik Rosenstein in 1960 where she admitted: "You know that when a producer calls an actress into his office to discuss a script, that isn't all he has in mind" (Barris and Steinem, 1986: p. 69). To contemplate the actress' self-awareness might endorse narratives of overcoming, promoting what Hollinger fingered (2020, p. 77), while will defy the fruitless portray of the star as a passive female victim.

Considering that these statements were already recorded in pre-#MeToo biographies, we should inquire about the intentions of contemporary biopics in exploring sexual harassment and their alignment with the #MeToo movement as a 'feminist' campaign. In this respect, Cartmell and Polascheck's evaluation of

‘progressive’ or ‘feminist’ biopics about women ultimately concludes that there are no ‘feminist’ themes or attributes in a film (2020, p. 20). Regarding *Judy* and *Blonde*, one might argue that these biopics are ‘feminists’ because they address gendered abuses perpetuated by Hollywood. Similarly, their production and reception discourses are placed in the #MeToo public debate. However, perhaps the ‘feminist’ aspect of these films, as well as of contemporary biopics about women at large, lies in audience demands. Acknowledging the popular expectations for these biopics –which were publicly pressured to deal with the abuses massively denounced since 2017–, and recognizing the wish of the global fans of Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe to witness the revival of their movie icons through the #MeToo lens, allows us to assert that, while these films reproduce the same old victimology formula, society is demanding new ways of representing social issues such as sexual harassment in the film industry.

References

- Banet-Weiser, S., Gill, R., and Rottenberg, C. (2019). Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation. *Feminist Theory*, 21(1): pp. 3-24.
- Barris, G. and Steinem, G. (1986). *Marilyn. Text by Gloria Steinem and Photographs by George Barris*, New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Bingham, D. (2013). *Whose lives are they anyway? The biopic as contemporary film genre*, London: Rutgers University Press.
- Boyle, K. (2019). *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, Glasgow: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bowness, G. (2019). ‘Judy’ biopic speaks to the #MeToo era. *Xtramagazine*, 27 September. Available at: <https://xtramagazine.com/culture/judy-biopic-speaks-to-the-metoo-era-162637> [Accessed February 20, 2024].
- Brown, T. and Vidal, B. (eds.) (2014). *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Cartmell, D. and Polascheck, A. D. (eds.) (2020). *A Companion to the Biopic*, Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons.
- Clarke, G. (2000). *Get Happy. The Life of Judy Garland*, New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks.
- Carol Oates, J. (2001). *Blonde*, London: 4th Estate.
- Cohan, S. (2019). *Hollywood by Hollywood. The Backstudio Picture and the Mystique of Making Movies*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Custen, G. F. (1992). *Bio/Pics. How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Dyer, R. (2006). *Heavenly Bodies. Film stars and society*, London & New York: Routledge. (1991). *A Star is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity, in: C. Gledhill, ed. *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Dominique, R. (ed.) (2010). *Rape in Art Cinema*, New York: Bloomsbury.

- Ebiri, B. (2022). Lessons from Filming Nick Cave's Journey Through Grief. *Vulture*, 11 May. Available at: <https://www.vulture.com/2022/05/andrew-dominik-on-blonde-and-filming-nick-caves-grief.html> [Accessed February 26, 2024].
- Harrison, R. (2019). How Biopic 'Judy' Silences Garland. And Why That Matters to Survivors. *Screen Queens*, 4 October. Available at: <https://screen-queens.com/2019/10/04/how-biopic-judy-silences-garland-and-why-that-matters-for-survivors/> [Accessed February 20, 2024].
- Hollinger, K. (2020). *Biopics of Women*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Kantor, J. and Twohey, M. (2017). Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades. *The New York Times*, 5 October. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html> [Accessed February 20, 2024].
- Lodge, G. (2019). Film Review: Renée Zellweger in 'Judy'. *Variety*, 30 August. Available at: <https://variety.com/2019/film/reviews/judy-review-renee-zellweger-1203316871/> [Accessed February 20, 2024].
- Löwenthal, L. (1944). Biographies in Popular Magazines. In P. F. Lazarsfeld and F. Stanton, eds. *Radio research*, 1942–43 (pp. 507–548), New York: Duell, Sloan, & Pearce.
- McLean, A. (2002). Feeling and the Filmed Body: Judy Garland and the Kinesics of Suffering. *Film Quarterly*, 55(3), pp. 2-15.
- Newland, C. (2022). 'I'm not Interested in Reality, I'm Interested in Images': Andrew Dominik on 'Blonde'. *Sight and Sound*, 27 September. Available at: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/im-not-interested-reality-im-interested-images-andrew-dominik-blonde> [Accessed February 21, 2024].
- O'Hara, H. (2021). *Women vs. Hollywood. The Fall and Rise of Women in Film*, London: Robinson.
- Pérez, R. (2022). Andrew Dominik says 'Blonde' Is About 'All The Unloved Children Of The World', Doesn't Deserve Its NC-17 Rating & More. *The Playlist*, 11 May. Available at: <https://theplaylist.net/andrew-dominik-says-blonde-is-about-all-the-unloved-children-of-the-world-doesnt-deserve-its-nc-17-rating-more-20220511/> [Accessed February 20, 2024].
- Rosenstone, R. A. (1995). *Visions of the Past. Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, London: Harvard University Press.
- Russell, D. (ed.) (2010). *Rape in Art Cinema*, New York: Bloomsbury.
- Tincknell, E. (2022). Tragic Blondes, Hollywood, and the 'Radical Sixties' Myth: 'Seberg' and 'Once Upon a Time in Hollywood' as Revisionist and Reparative Biopic. *Celebrity Studies*, 14, pp. 568-583.