

The “Norma Jean Paradigm”: Hollywood Naming as Hollywood Story-Telling*

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*I knew I belonged to the public and to the world,
not because I was talented or even beautiful,
but because I had never belonged to anything or anyone else.*

Marilyn Monroe

The act of naming has proved foundational for the Hollywood star system.¹ It separated the early practices of industrial film production from the era when the actresses and actors emerged as the true revolutionary commodities of the time. For a long time, naming the stars has supported and enlarged the capitalist principle of production and consumption.² It has stemmed from a convergence between the consumers’ curiosity about the protagonists of films and the producers’ will to sell their products. In this negotiation, the actresses’ and actors’ names functioned as the sites of symbolic meaning, facilitating power transactions and economic exchanges. Marilyn Monroe’s name participated in many of the social, cultural and economic complexities of this machinery. It also marked a turning point in the power relationship between the actress and the studios at the end of Hollywood’s golden age. Finally, its implied meanings have propagated in multiple directions of contemporary entertainment: film, music, body culture, fashion and luxury branding.

As I wish to demonstrate, the actress’s birth name, Norma Jeane (turned into Norma Jean), played a pivotal role in her stardom as Monroe, allowing her to extend into many spheres that were unusual for the classical Hollywood star. During the actress’s life, this name shared the podium with Marilyn. It did so according to Hollywood’s principle of using names as brands: that is, as vehicles of easy identification of appealing commodities. After her death, it survived very effectively as a sort of counter-cultural sub-brand of Marilyn.

With the advent of film “players” (in the jargon of the time) in the 1910s, actresses and actors started to be involved in a new dynamic relationship with spectators. They began to *belong* to the public in an unprecedented way, in comparison to stage players, prompting a connection to viewers generated *in absentia*. As Richard DeCordova underlines, relying on the evidence given by observers of the time, very soon film viewers started expressing their curiosity about their movie favorites to theatre managers and in magazines, including requests for pictures and enquiries about their names. Viewers also created *branded* names,

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¹ Richard DeCordova, *Picture Personality. The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana and Chicago: Illinois University Press, 1990).

² Paul McDonald, *Hollywood Stardom* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

as in the case of the Vitagraph Girl and the Biograph Girl, which are considered examples of a stardom accomplished without the intervention of film producers.³ Naming the stars, therefore, marked a meeting point between the behavior of consumers and the industry's need to become increasingly visible. A distinct private quality in the relationship between film spectator and stars also led to "the familiarity of first names and the dropping of honorific titles."⁴ The Miss, Mr., Mrs., and Madam or Sir dropped in favor of abbreviations, simplifications and nicknames, an enduring practice from Charlie Chaplin to Brad Pitt.

Hollywood naming is an act of adoption and endorsement. Be it the outcome of the manufacturers' selling strategy or the public's invention, giving a name has gained importance in the Hollywood myth as an act of creation or self-creation. While always involving an interaction between manufacturers and users, it nevertheless originates from a variety of circumstances. In the early silent era, star names may have appeared as a vehicle of self-promotion for the emerging studios in the power conflict with Trust members. This was the case of Florence Lawrence's name, which Carl Laemmle manipulatively made known in 1913 while his Imp Company was struggling to gain dominion over the Motion Picture Patents Company. In that context, making her name known was hailed as revolutionary. It fit into a set of innovative business practices geared towards the public's demand and establishing the use of the "player" as cultural capital. Publicizing the actress's name was emphasized as a way of giving the audience precisely what it wanted. Thus, the player was made to appear as a social resource. Emancipated from the status of employee with no reputation to lose, Lawrence gained a higher status based on public recognition. The players, therefore, started to be turned into credentials and qualifications. When the press announced that Lawrence, the "Biograph Girl," as her fans called her, was now "an Imp," it was clear that the actress was as much a property of the film producing company as a good in the public's hands. The rhetoric used by the press and manufacturers implied that the star was being created by the public's demand of insight and information about players as much as by the industry's effort of producing films with them. Notably, in these circumstances, the stars did not publicly express their interest in the choice of their names, and therefore in the names' influence on their fame. Marilyn Monroe changed this trend, introducing, as we shall see, a discourse about Norma Jean.

The mid-1930s marked a significant turning point in the use and meaning of star names. The star system had established itself during the silent era. In the following period, the shaping of film stars adjusted to different economic, therefore cultural, conditions dictated by the 1929 crisis. Prompted by the reduced buying power and lifestyle of the majority of film consumers, stardom normalized its standards and the industry developed a different tone in film publicity. As we shall see, an important part of the Norma Jean/Marilyn phenomenon is rooted in this change. In that epoch, the number of stars increased, and the

³ DeCordova, *Picture Personality*, 2. This interpretation on the birth of cinematic stardom is reported here as Frank E. Wood's point of view, who replied to viewers' letters on the moving picture section of the *New York Dramatic Mirror* in the 1910s.

⁴ Eileen Bowser, *The transformation of Cinema. 1907-1915* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, [1990] 1994), 18.

sphere of meaning attached to them multiplied. A better articulated and massive publicity was set in motion, drawing increasingly on extra-filmic resources, like gossip magazines, women magazines, men's magazines, erotic photography and artistic photography. Consequently, the stars' influence expanded into a variety of areas of social life and behaviors, from the public to the private. Consider, for example, the cheesecake photographs that nobody, neither man nor woman, could escape. The bathing suit photographs were a requirement of the publicity department that Monroe easily fit in.

Starting in the 1930s and for the rest of the following decade, precisely when Marilyn began her Hollywood career, the Studios scattered their talent scouts everywhere across the U.S. and abroad. Everybody could be turned into a star: this is a major sociocultural root of what I define here as the "Norma Jean paradigm." This transformative agenda applied openly to Monroe. From the very beginning, the Studios publicity talked about her movement from helpless misery toward the Hollywood milieu, the "new big family" that could endow Marilyn with the means to overcome all her deprivations.

I draw here a parallel between the concepts of branding (interrogating especially who is responsible of the act of imprinting a brand name onto an industrial product) and brand management in a consumerist society, and the use of the name "Norma Jean" in public discourse about Marilyn Monroe (Studios' publicity, Marilyn's interviews and autobiography, fictional and paratextual commentaries circulating during her life and after her death). The efficacy of successful brands relies on their capacity to catalyze the consumer's search for a valuable experience through consumption. This helps illustrate the role of "Norma Jean" in the construction of Marilyn's appeal. A tale of transformation, the melodrama of an actress hunted by her origins, and the pinup imagery are crucial meanings associated with the name "Norma Jean." These meanings participated in the promotional machinery that induced identification, projection and endorsement on the part of audiences and readers in a peculiar period of Hollywood history: the start of its decline, marked by its negotiations between the stars' universality and splendor on the one hand, and private consumption, humiliation, exploitation on the other. Rather than sustaining a contrast between Marilyn and Norma Jean, I suggest the profitable bond that the two names – and implied meanings – have propagated until our times.

Branding and Story Telling

The power of denomination was blatant in classical Hollywood. Naming in Hollywood has been bound to the power of storytelling, channeled through films or through publicity materials. Signaling the players' names in the press along with their images was the ultimate official act of their public validation. This was already the case in early magazines like *Photoplay*, *Picture Play Magazine*, or *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, and later in Louella Parson's Hollywood gossip columns on *New York Morning Telegraph*. This activity expanded in the post-sound era with more magazines, weekly or daily, and more gossip, among which

*Modern Screen, Silver screen, Hollywood, Daily Variety, The New Movie Magazine, Movie Classic, Motion Picture Daily, Motion Picture Herald.*⁵

Star naming contributed to Hollywood's mythmaking. The star's name had to be simple and effective in the first place. Secondly, because actresses/actors were a Studio's investment, they needed to be differentiated from one another. Therefore, the name was applied as a label, signaling a specific type that the audience could endorse. It could convey a variety of social and cultural meanings: allure, masculine energy or mellow femininity, exoticism, pureness, or sophistication. It could inspire authority, freedom, and remind the public of an American icon, even a president (as Monroe's name has sometimes been mistakenly interpreted), or have an attractive musicality. In most cases, naming was the result of an accurate manufacturing involving the Studio's—and actresses'/actors'—constant awareness of the audience's potential "use of the star." Names were created so that the public could endorse them. As demonstrated by Jeanine Basinger's wide-ranging discussion on the star machine of classical Hollywood, Hollywood Studios' considered audiences' personal responses to a star's name worthy of careful attention (would the name encourage identification on the basis of class, gender, ethnicity? Was it right for the times?) as much as the star's screen impact.⁶ The name change was the verbal sign of the star being a creative invention.

Hollywood names functioned, therefore, as brands sustaining the marketing of the star-as-commodity, and they still do. As recent scholarly work on branding as cultural machinery has pointed out,⁷ brands are conceived to highlight uniqueness – their difference from other brands. Brands are also supposed to distinguish mediocrity from quality. Their appeal to distinctiveness is used to urge consumers to recognize themselves in them. Finally, brands are associated with artificially framed styles of life that adapt very well to consumer society. The way star names materialized in the public domain in the heyday of classical Hollywood, from playbills to daily news, illustrates the functioning of mass consumer society: that is, a consumption based on the curiosity raised by a new product, aroused by the spirit of imitation provoked by a well-marketed product, and sustained by the product's responsiveness to a collective search for authority and influence.

A brand is a complex of values, feelings and motives evoked by a product, most often conjured up by images. The classic stars emerged, in effect, as appealing models of normalized behavior. They were advertised and exploited as merchandized testimonials. Marilyn was no exception. She appeared in women magazines' beauty advertisements, as well as in men's magazines.⁸ On screen, her film persona championed a transparent style of deliberate self-exposure – from her early secondary characters, as in *All about Eve* (J. L.

⁵ Anthony Slyde, *Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine. A History of Star Makers, Fabricators, and Gossip Mongers* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010); David Desser and Garth S. Jowett eds., *Hollywood Goes Shopping* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁶ Jeanine Basinger, *Star Machine* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

⁷ Adam Arvidsson, *Brands, Meaning and Value in Media Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁸ She even appeared on the cover of the July 1956 issue of *GUNS Magazine* containing an article about "The Man Who teaches Hollywood Stars to Shoot."

Mankiewicz, 1950), to her lead roles, as in *Niagara* (H. Hathaway, 1953). Off screen, she was audience-flattering and easily reachable. As soon as a growing crowd of admirers responded positively to this combination, the industry promptly reacted by investing in her stardom. On February, 9, 1953, *Photoplay Magazine* awarded Monroe with the “Fastest Rising Star of 1952” award.

Brands revolve around a concept. They arouse desires of symbolic closeness to an idea associated with a product, stimulating identification with traits contained in this product that are capable of resonating with the consumer’s personal experience. Star names likewise contain an idea about the subject, allow for easy identification and arouse fantasies that they are approachable. The brand’s capacity to compose the power tensions between the production of serial goods and the consumers’ search for valuable experiences and life-style patterns has adapted to the different eras of consumer society. During Hollywood’s golden age, naming became constitutive of a particular synergy in which spectators could sense their active participation in a meaningful world that was somehow available and within their reach. The viewers’ knowledge of the stars expanded, and Hollywood’s rhetoric imposed a pattern of discovery (the star was discovered fortuitously), inferring that becoming a star was a chance everybody could take.

In the darkest days of the Depression, the star continued to appear as a dream of unreachable perfection for only a few years, as in the case of the aristocratic masculinity of John Gilbert and the indestructible positive energy of Douglas Fairbanks, or the divine allure of Greta Garbo and the extreme sophistication of Gloria Swanson. On screen, the star represented a material and spiritual privilege that the public could reach inside movie theaters, paying only a few pennies and forgetting for a while the austerity of their real life.⁹ Starting in the mid-thirties, and for the rest of the classical Hollywood era, a new practice of regulation of the actors’ godly aura took place. Naming the stars was influenced by the industry’s effort to normalize them and multiply their number. The eccentricity, exoticism, and divinity of the stardom of the 1920s started to fade away, and so did the criteria of perfection, distance, superiority associated to a few of the stars’ names. Born Greta Gustafsson, Greta Garbo, for example, rid herself of her ordinary surname so as to distinguish herself from “normality” and endow herself with an exotic, foreign air, supported by the manipulation of the (invented) Hungarian Gabòr. In the aftermath of the Great Depression, on the other hand, a different negotiation between normality and exceptionality started. The entire Hollywood system of storytelling and mythmaking focused on restoring the public’s faith in the *real* world, as the New Deal proposed a celebration of the earthly virtues at the basis of the American ideal, and fostered the individual’s positive contribution to the common well-being.¹⁰ The Hollywood Olympus existed, but the increasingly orchestrated publicity around it, including an enlargement of the number of Hollywood

⁹ Cristina Jandelli, *Breve storia del divismo cinematografico* (Venezia: Marsilio, [2007] 2011), 82.

¹⁰ Franco La Polla, *Sogno e realtà americana nel cinema di Hollywood* (Milano: Il Castoro, 2004); Andrew Bergman, *We’re in the money. Depression America and its films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

magazines, created a discourse about the stars as people who were extremely lucky but, in the end, not so different from ordinary people.¹¹

Throughout the New Deal, the stars' names adapted to a need for contingency and normality, to a dream of achievement based on a perfect combination of fortune, personal skills and adaptability. Accomplishment required personal commitment and collective efforts. Hollywood success was a fantasy based on discipline and sacrifice. This enduring myth is described in *A Star is Born* (William Wellman, 1937), a film sprung from the imagination of Wellman and Robert Carson, but also from the uncredited input of six additional authors (David O. Selznick, Ben Hecht, Ring Lardner Jr., John Lee Mahin, Budd Schulberg, and Adela Rogers St. John). In the first place, the protagonist Vicky (Janet Gaynor), an orphan determined to "become somebody," is a fervent filmgoer and movie magazine reader. Secondly, a difficult but fortunate path leads her to fame. Finally, her story celebrates communal self-sacrifice for the sake of show business, which even includes suicide: Norman Maine (Fredric March), the heroine's husband, is a disgraced celebrity who drowns himself in the ocean so as not to obstruct her success. Vicki does not forget those who have helped her. She stigmatizes this liability with an act of naming: at the premiere of her film at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, when she is asked to say a few words to her many fans, she announces: "Hello everybody. This is Mrs. Norman Maine." Using her dead husband's name as an act of self-assertion, she implicitly pays homage to the milieu of show business.

A Star is Born (1937) shows that Hollywood myths depicted name changing as an act of self-determination and rebirth, rooted in Hollywood exceptionalism. Monroe's name underwent this procedure of making meaning during the unstable conjunction of the Hollywood crisis of the 1950s. What makes her story exceptional is that both names, Marilyn and Norma Jean, were used meaningfully in public discourse during her long parable of success. These names exaggerated the premises of Hollywood's star machinery, turning it into a phantasmagoria. As I wish to demonstrate, Marilyn impersonated a fantasy, whereas Norma Jean became the symbol of merciless need and was turned into an emblem of all the willful victims of a glamorous system of exploitation.

Name changing

Marilyn Monroe was "one of the last – if not actually the last – truly big female star to be built by the star machine the old-fashioned way."¹² However, she introduced an anomaly in the classic star-making machinery. This anomaly is Norma Jean, a name that was soon made known. This name became eloquent to the adoring audiences, contributed to building her public persona, and was endorsed by the studios, which promptly exploited it in advertisements, as did a variety of venues of public discourse. Norma Jean, a name that, as we shall see, denoted throughout the years the actress's humble background, represents a

¹¹ Steven Gundle, "L'età d'oro dello Star System," in Gian Piero Brunetta ed., *Storia del cinema mondiale* vol II, tomo I (Torino: Einaudi, 1999), 695-744.

¹² Basinger, *Star Machine*, 124.

crucial ingredient in Monroe's stardom. It suggested she was haunted by her origins, sometimes dismissing them, sometimes acknowledging them.

The Hollywood star-making machinery was in full force in 1946, when Norma Jean Dougherty eagerly obtained her screen tests for 20th Century Fox. In the heydays of the studio system, creating stars was a matter of "fixing them up"¹³ according to normative standards. The screen test was the very first stage in this construction. Screen tests showed how a candidate looked, sounded, and moved on film. It was the beginning of the creation of a personality, which included alterations of the body and name. This personality had a few exceptional traits, but otherwise had to embody normality and be recognizable within an average physical and social framework. For example, Tyron Power's eyebrows were considered too thick and Alan Ladd was judged too short. Facial retouching, makeup, and camera angles or devices prepared on the set, such as elevated walkways, were designed to compensate these inadequacies. In 1946, Norma Jean was already a popular model appearing on dozens of magazine covers, such as *Parade*, *Glamorous Models Personal Romances*, *Pageant*, *Peek*, *Laff*, and *U.S. Camera*.¹⁴ She had already undergone a few transformations required by the Blue Book modeling agency and soon after was advised by her agent Jonny Hyde to undergo surgery. She was thus fitted to the standard of bathing beauties.

The name change was imperative in Hollywood when physical appearance, personality, and name were at odds. The star's individuality and his/her name had to be appropriate to the times and to fit the player naturally. The type "needed to become so welded to the star that it seemed not to be a role at all but a secret peek into what that actor was really like."¹⁵ For example, when Hollywood performers had a specific artistic or professional background (for instance, when they were already singers or dancers), changing their names could even be unproductive. This was the case of dancer and singer Eleanor Powell, for example, who did not undergo a name change due to her previous notoriety. There were also cases in which the choice of name was the result of a populist communication strategy. Lucille Le Sueur's name was deemed "too difficult to pronounce" and "too French" by her studio, which arranged a national fan magazine contest to help rename the actress, offering a prize for the chosen entry. That is how Joan Crawford was "born."

While modeling for the Blue Book Model Agency in Los Angeles, Norma Jean used her husband's surname. 20th Century Fox's casting director Ben Lyon suggested using Marilyn as her first name, after the 1920s stage and film actress Marilyn Miller, a curly blond, vivacious tap-dancer and singer. Norma Jean picked her mother's maiden surname. Choosing one's art name and being born as a picture personality was a negotiation with the industry that implied approving one's own commodification. This included the crucial factor of valuing the audience's response as a primary resource for the star's survival in the show business. Customarily, after the name changing, the Studios started to construct the stars'

¹³ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴ Donald Spoto, *Marilyn Monroe. The Biography* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1993), 95.

¹⁵ Basinger, *Star Machine*, 73-74.

biographies: eliminating what appeared boring or unsavory about their past and enhancing what was considered attractive and “tasty.” From the beginning, when “Marilyn Monroe” was created, Norma Jean appeared in the short profiles circulated by publicity materials. She was presented as “someone artificially called Marilyn Monroe who is really called Norma Jean. The name change was part of the story because it had to be a tale of transformation.”¹⁶ Marilyn’s name change was necessary to start an acting career after her career in modeling. Her pinup images had vastly circulated before her Hollywood debut, but they were meant for a more restricted, private consumption, as compared to the movies, and this was not enough to build a powerful universal female personality appropriate for a star.

Marilyn’s name change was an ambitious young woman’s act of self-commodification. She was ready to impersonate an accurately fashioned public character that might have the chance to be turned into a product intended for a mass audience. However, the studio had not planned on constructing a star when it contracted her for the first time. Marilyn belonged, instead, to a storehouse of types suitable for minor parts, giving color to particular scenes, brightening them up, or introducing a humorous touch. These minor parts were meant, as was often the case, to test the audience’s response to the newcomer.

The Norma Jean/Marilyn pair

The Norma-Jean side of Marilyn’s story started to become profitable due to her pictures’ impact on the audience. Many of her pinup photos escaped the Studios’ control because produced while Hollywood studios had not yet directly invested in her stardom. It can be said that the Norma Jean side of Marilyn’s stardom originated in a gap in the studio’s influence on her public persona. The images that facilitated her popularity showed her nude or in the “cheesecake” style – a sort of refined sexy pose, like those taken in 1949 by Bruno Bernard at the Racquet Club of Palm Springs, which created the first contact with her future agent. Many of these images were produced in the time lapse between her first and second contract with 20th Century Fox, between 1946 and 1950. During this period, Marilyn was moving precariously from one studio to another, getting minimal roles, although not all unnoticeable. In those years, her acting career was connected to her career as a model and was supervised by the vice-president of the William Morris Agency, Johnny Hyde.

Norma Jean’s success as a model, and her appearance on about 30 magazine covers before ever acting in a film, set the foundations of her relationship with the public. The pinup personality is one of the major driving forces of Marilyn’s appeal. As a matter of fact, when 20th Century Fox contracted her for the second time in December 1950, the studio publicist Roy Craft advertised Monroe with pinup portraits. As a result, the studio received thousands of fan letters, many asking what movie Monroe was going to appear in next. This

¹⁶ Sarah Churchwell, *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* (New York: Picador, 2004), 76. When Marilyn became an international celebrity, her biographies kept following the same pattern: the story of a poor orphan girl, raised in foster homes. See also Lois Banner, *Marilyn: The Passion and the Paradox* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

made the Monroe paradigm similar to that of many Hollywood beauties. To understand how Monroe was different from other stars, two crucial facts should be considered. The first is a special allegiance to specific photographers, which played a crucial role in stylizing her sex appeal in a way that would characterize the upcoming 1950s.¹⁷ The second is Marilyn's capacity to handle the scandal of her nude calendar in 1952. On this occasion, she chose a candid attitude, introducing a melodramatic touch that enriched her personality and gave new flavor to the pinup gaiety, conquering the public for good, from housewives to single men. These two factors proved to be the motors of a stardom that was shown to be durable.

As for Marilyn's allegiance to photographers, her encounter with Bruno Bernard in 1946 proved pivotal for the makeup of her onscreen appearance. In the series of photos that Bernard took before 1950, Norma Jean's public persona appears entrenched in a standard of gay self-exposure of female beauty that could be pinned up on the wall. This kind of picture had become very popular in the mid-1940s; during WWII, the pinup images would peep out from airplanes fuselages and even become part of the soldiers' equipment. In a 1951 photo-shoot, Bernard even introduced a retro touch: 10-year older Betty Grable – the number one pinup girl of the war era – is the prototype of Marilyn's poses, hairstyle, and bathing suit outfits. On the other hand, when, at the very beginning of their collaboration, Norma Jean asked Bernard to do a sexy portfolio for the Hollywood Studios, Bernard refused. As a glamour photographer, he was an expert in presenting polished versions of undressed girls to be sold to the studios. His participation in the transformation of sex-appeal codes was significant and would continue into the next decade – the 1950s – when glamour and sex-appeal became strictly correlated. A glamour photographer was a specialist in euphemism, achievable by refining the nude.¹⁸ Therefore, Bernard suggested that Norma Jean could counterbalance her curvy figure with a gaze of complete innocence. This mixture of waif and Venus¹⁹ would change her baby prostitute look into a variety of woman-child expressions that became Marilyn's trademark.

The fusion of the purposive, coquettish woman and the orphan child was thus devised during Marilyn's early photographic sittings. It would later sustain the bond between Norma Jean and Marilyn. Photography was, in fact, the source of a bodily codification of the available and trusty Norma Jean hiding behind Marilyn. Based on this iconography, a story about the star could develop that would incorporate the Norma Jean pattern: Norma Jean was approachable, comprehensible, and later even pitiful. Because of his long closeness to Monroe, Bernard also became an expert in taking candid photos that contributed to building up the Marilyn/Norma Jean melodramatic contradiction. He would take pictures on the film sets that would reveal Norma Jean as child, such as the "fake-stolen" photos on the set of *Seven Year Itch* (Billy Wilder, 1955), catching Marilyn's playful performance with her gown. He would also catch intimate moments of Norma Jean's agony, like the pictures taken right after she got divorced from Di Maggio in 1954. Similarly, Richard Avedon caught a few aloof or unaware moments at the end of a well-known photo shoot he made in 1956. These

¹⁷ A.A.V.V., *Marilyn Monroe and the Camera* (London: Shirmer Art Books, 1989).

¹⁸ Stephen Gundle, *Glamour. A History* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 261-262.

¹⁹ Susan Bernard ed., *Bernard of Hollywood's Marilyn* (London: Boxtree, 1993), 7.

particular pictures became extremely meaningful. An advocate of the search of the model's vital energy among U.S. fashion photographers, after a four-hour sitting with Monroe, Avedon succeeded in stripping off Marilyn and revealing Norma Jean: a loose, melancholy girl. These pictures are among the many that became very popular, surviving in the collective memory to this day.²⁰

Norma Jean, the earthly and non-glamorous side of Marilyn's sex-appeal, became relevant in 1953 with the very first issue of *Playboy*. One of the famous nude pictures made for the "Golden Dreams" calendar, and taken in 1949 by Tom Kelley, was chosen for the magazine's inauguration. The magazine wonders how "little Norma Jean" distinguishes herself from other sexy girls. The author maintains that Norma Jean's sexual attractiveness is girly, while Marilyn's sinuous movements on the screen or in public venues make her exceptional. The calendar had entered public domain in 1952, when Marilyn was on her way to becoming a major star. The scandal that followed led her to make declarations about her humble origins and about her need to pose nude in order to survive. This particular circumstance complicated the pinup matrix of her picture personality with a melodramatic shade that proved very profitable. The particular circumstances leading her to pose for the calendar became part of the Hollywood narrative, and her sincerity in commenting on them exceeded the boundaries of the studios' direct control of her persona, though without contradicting the industry's criteria of using publicity to enhance the brand's impact on consumers.

The special flavor of this melodramatic sincerity is what I call here the "Norma Jean pattern." It contained erotic exploitation and sexual abuse, a cocktail especially exploited by men's magazines like *Playboy*, *Sir*, *Man to Man*, and *3-D Star Pinup*. It had the new key to 1950s glamour – a shiny mixture of the orphan and the sex goddess – and celebrated the willful, self-disciplined woman at the core of the classic star.

The melodramatic element of Monroe's star-fashioning emphasized poverty, brutality, and loneliness. This narrative set her apart from the other blonde sex symbols of her time: her sex appeal came from a background of parental deprivations and extreme conditions. The story of an exploited woman was enticing, pitiful, and admirable. A propensity for melodrama is revealed in Monroe's autobiography, dictated to a writer like Ben Hecht, a meaningful contributor to Hollywood's normative imagination.²¹ It was conceived in 1954 by producer Joseph Schenk while her fame was rising spectacularly. The book describes her early wish to be "liberated from Norma Jeane," and adumbrates a split personality. It emphasizes her deep hunger for love and the hardships she went through to make her dreams come true. Similar aspects were foregrounded in her publicity in film journals in the early and mid-1950s (*Modern Screen*, *People Today*, *Screen Stars*, *Movie World*, *Rave*, *Screen Stories*) and in other periodicals of various kinds, from *Cheesecake*

²⁰ See, for example, how bloggers collecting images and curiosities under the archway of "chic" quote Avedon's work on Marilyn: <http://www.messynessychic.com/2013/07/11/norma-jean-not-marilyn/>

²¹ Giaime Alonge, *Scrivere per Hollywood. Ben Hecht e la sceneggiatura nel cinema americano classico* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2012).

(1953), to *Collier* (1954), and *Look* (1956). Journals and magazines of that period illustrate her regeneration and self-improvement. This discourse continued until her death.

By the time her autobiography was being written, Marilyn was moving towards a new awareness and control over her own public persona. The shackling contractual conditions with 20th Century Fox would come to an end in 1955, giving her more liberty regarding her movements, her persona and artistic ambitions. Moreover, she was experimenting a newborn alliance with photographer Milton Greene, who operated far from Hollywood's sphere of influence, and whose sophisticated style, allied to fashion photography, was about to construct a new, stylish and refined iconography of the actress. An unsuspected space of self-determination was unfolding, transforming the orphan into a self-entrepreneur. This self-affirmation constructed the second part of Marilyn's parable, from 1955 until her death. It included the adventure of Marilyn the producer and Marilyn the New Yorker involved in the drama milieu and the fashion entourage.

Other actresses had made strenuous efforts to gain autonomy and develop a personal style under the studio system, as was the case of Bette Davis or Olivia de Havilland, for example,²² although many of these actresses had not succeeded in obtaining publicity for their power fights with the industry, and their stardom had not capitalized on this particular off-screen part of their accomplishments. As a plethora of rumors, comments, and testimonies have reported during the 1950s and 1960s, Monroe's self-determination was achievable at the bottom of a male-dominated, vertically regulated industrial system. It was due to the power of Norma Jean's desperation. The Norma Jean story even became a paradigm of self-liberation, based on steely determination. It had to wait a few years after her death to emerge in full force, although it was already present in the public discourse when she was alive, as in Maurice Zolotow's *Marilyn Monroe* (1960), or in gossip magazines like the July 1961 issue of *On the Q.T.*, for instance, in which Monroe appears on the cover, entitled "Marilyn's Hidden Story." The concealed side of the actress contained the potential for dramatic overthrows. Her early post-mortem fictional biographies, like Fred Laurence Guiles's screenplay *Goodbye Norma Jean* (1963), posited that Marilyn's drive for self-improvement and independence was fatally contaminated by solitude and self-destructive impulses.

In other words, the "Norma Jean" melodramatic pattern comprises a narrative of the desire for self-development and a repeated makeover process. In the subsequent steps of Monroe's parable, we find a continuous reenactment of the "Norma Jean" transformational scheme: a change of status from orphan to pinup to actress, from sex symbol to fiancée and wife; a movement from the Hollywood movie industry to the world of theatre and fashion and back, from the Los Angeles Olympus to the streets of New York; an upturning from acclaimed to suicidal. This pattern implied a movement on- and off-screen that transferred resources and fantasies from one realm to another. It included, for example, her final collaboration with her idol and fantasy father-figure Clark Gable.

Self-development and makeover are very telling metaphors for Hollywood. Monroe's stardom was standard in so far as it was shaped by the studios' publicity departments, which

²² Basinger, *Star Machine*, 139-40.

spread accurately-fashioned pictures through the printed media, built up a “discovery” pattern, and spread rumors about her romances with other celebrities. Marilyn was also, very significantly, an emblematic child of Hollywood, born and raised in the movie capital. Her mother, a worker in the film industry, chose for her daughter a name that combined those of two favorite actresses: Norma Talmadge and Jean Harlow. Norma Jean was entirely a Hollywood creature and, therefore, shared its mythical foundations. Hollywood mythmaking is based on the paradigmatic story of provinciality struggling successfully to reach the mainstream, a narrative repeated in many small towns throughout the West.²³ The potentials of the marginal community of self-motivated, unscrupulous individuals substantiated Marilyn’s stardom, encapsulating Hollywood’s mythical story of fragility and power.

At the same time, Marilyn was a protagonist in the changing fortunes of the film industry. The 1950s were years in which the old-fashioned promotion methods began to seem ineffective, while television brought forward new stars. According to Basinger, “[t]his brought on a type of internal malfunction that was new – a malaise or disillusionment with the idea of stardom in advance of its having happened, which effected those undergoing the process.”²⁴ These malfunctions come to the foreground in a climate of pungent disillusionment on the one hand, and a stubborn sticking to a dream of stellar escalation on the other, which was particularly noticeable as the epitome of Hollywood’s classicism. The enormous consequences of such malfunction may explain why Marilyn’s birth name has persisted in the public imagination as much as her pseudonym, and why the latest criticism and forms of remediation of Marilyn’s myth (Elton John’s song, for example) are based on the problematization of her name.

Within or without the reach of the studio system, Monroe overextended herself into a myriad of sub-products and by-products of the disciplined, classical Hollywood star: nymphet, pinup, model, Venus in trouble, vamp, spinster. Thanks to her particular deal with photographers,²⁵ she introduced a few innovations in her flagrant theatrical presentation that produced a transformation of the very notion of stardom. Stardom revealed itself to the public as nothing else than the power exerted by an image. More than that, that image did not belong to the subject that generated it. In a period when Hollywood was losing its certainties, its branded merchandise appeared blatantly for what it was: a set of living fantasies that had lost their material roots.²⁶

Extending herself massively in an extraordinary range of venues of public visibility, Monroe essentially devalued the brand name. That is where Norma Jean came into play. In a period when film viewers were becoming increasingly different in terms of generational

²³ Mark Drop, *The Hollywood Storyteller* (London: Robert Hale, 1992), 10.

²⁴ Basinger, *Star Machine*, 118.

²⁵ Sara Pesce, “Nel piccolo spazio tra l’obiettivo e la pellicola”. *La professionalità incerta di Marilyn e Il Principe e la Ballerina*, in Giulia Carluccio and Paola Pierini eds., *La valle dell’Eden. Miti D’oggi. L’immagine di Marilyn* (Torino: Kaplan, 2015), 90-96.

²⁶ Supposedly, Marilyn herself declared that she was only a fantasy, especially after her conjugal crisis with Arthur Miller. See Spoto, *Marilyn Monroe*, 409.

tastes and viewing habits, Monroe was able to conciliate contradictions and touch a variety of the audience's lifestyles, conducts and beliefs. She did that by coupling the brand name, Marilyn, with the sub-product, Norma Jean. If Marilyn brought forward the shiny stellar essence, Norma Jean had the flavor of contingency. Monroe's overextension of her symbolic capital happened at a time when knowledge about the stars, how they were fashioned and what they signified, became a crucial component of the viewer's *habitus*. This is due to a dissemination of information, images and commercials involving the stars, which overwhelmingly reached the spectators' homes.²⁷ The 1950s marked an explosion of women magazines – not only periodicals dedicated mainly to household matters like *Lady's Home Journal*, *Collier*, *American Weekly*, *The Family Circle*, but also style and fashion magazines like *Harper's Bazar* and *Vogue* (which become more popular in the 1950s), *Mademoiselle*, *Glamour*, and *Seventeen*, periodicals bought by women that contained attractions for children and husbands. In addition to that, men's magazines like *Playboy* and gossip magazines like *Modern Screen*, *People Today*, *Screen Stars*, *Movie World* increased their readership in this period.²⁸ These periodicals imposed their presence in viewers' houses as much as radio sets before television sets became common household appliances. The commodity status of the stars changed accordingly: they "inhabited" the household, sharing a space in the pages of magazines with domestic and cosmetic advice. Not only information about their lives was made more reachable, their symbolic status reached the private, the ordinary realm of viewers, who were increasingly using mass media to gain competences about the self: through knowledge about beauty, household technology, behavior patterns, status symbols and style.²⁹ Magazine readers, who were radio listeners and film-goers as well, came to understand the self-fashioning component of modern life.

A Persistent Pattern

The tremendous potential of the biographical and intimate meaning contained in Norma Jean proved to be the drive of Marilyn's long-lasting stardom and always involved an alliance with the viewers' knowledge. This potential turned profitable during Marilyn's rise to fame and had an enduring effect after her death.

Coupled with Marilyn's exorbitant presence, Norma Jean became an emblem of impellent truth combusting inside an extraordinary artifice. It symbolized the sacrifice imposed by the show business and contributed to stigmatize Hollywood as a young-talent-devouring machine. It also justified the enormity of the Marilyn Monroe hunger for the public, her extraordinary sweetness or innocent sorrow in front of dozens of photographers and masses of fans. The myth goes that Marilyn compensated Norma Jean's misery and lack of comprehension on the part of men and Hollywood leaders with her unlimited hunger for "uncomplicated splendor," a confluence of self-presentation and self-conception where her

²⁷ Martin Levin, *Hollywood and the Great Fan Magazines* (Random House, 1991).

²⁸ Marilyn Monroe was featured in most of these magazines during the 1950s, besides appearing on *Life* and *Look* (See Sara "Nel piccolo spazio," 94).

²⁹ Nancy A. Walker, *Women's Magazines, 1940, 1960. Gender Roles and the Popular Press* (Bedford: St. Martin, 1998).

exuberant beauty was relieved in its full naturalness when solicited by the public's enthusiasm and by photographers' cameras. Part of this myth lingers even on reporting her misleading and manipulative uses of the Norma Jean paradigm. This interpretation has underpinned malicious versions of her ability to play the needy Norma Jean, the orphan, the grieving abandoned wife. It was said that her best performances were actually off-screen, when Marilyn was looking for support among powerful men. Marilyn's weeping melodramas have been narrated recurrently:

She may also have been weeping to attract the attention and arouse the sympathy of Kazan and Miller, and to make herself even more appealing to them. If so, she was more convincing in this role than the one in the movie. Miller poignantly recalled that "she was so striking and so terribly sad that the combination struck me" – as it was meant to.³⁰

In the 1960s, the cult of Marilyn's innocence and naiveté was epitomized by Maurice Zolotov's biography *Marilyn Monroe*, which the actress herself expressed reservations about. Since then, Marilyn's biographies have abounded, with the name Norma Jean popping up regularly. In 1969, Fred Lawrence Guiles' serial reportage for the magazine *Ladies' Home Journal*, published in 1967, was turned into a book entitled *Norma Jean: the Life of Marilyn Monroe* and became a bestseller. For many years, Guiles's was the undisputed definitive biography. In it, the author portrays an amalgam of power and innocence, and introduces the influential notion that Monroe was split into two selves. The book emphasizes the exceptionality of her name change, its power to give Marilyn a completely new identity, which meant abandoning a neglected existence. According to this view, Marilyn had promptly turned her back on Norma Jean.

During the 1970s the public lost interest in searching for the truth about Marilyn. Fantasizing about her according to men's or women's desire appeared to be the new cultural meaning attached to the star; this is what Norman Mailer did in his popular and manipulative book *Marilyn* (1973), a hybrid between biographical account and literary imagination. Accordingly, Elton John's 1973 song "Candle in the Wind" contains a first person salute to Norma Jean. Norma Jean emerges as the accessible side of the star, which the admirer can grasp in his fantasies, in his desire to know her better – a pattern repeated in Def Leppard's hard rock song "Photograph" (1983), which makes reference to a picture of Marilyn and the frustration at having but this photographic contact with her. Elton John's song emphasizes the name change, creating an opposition between being a superstar and paying the price of loneliness and pain. Norma Jean evokes Marilyn's victimization and offers to the spectators a power of meaning-making based on their sensitiveness, on their ability to feel her unhappiness and regret her crushed youth. In 1977, a New Jersey punk rock band called themselves *The Misfits* after Marilyn, picking the outcast meaning associated with Monroe; the lead singer, Glenn Danzig, also composed the song "Who Killed Marilyn" (1981), whose very title is a declaration of Monroe's victimization.

³⁰ Jeffrey Meyers, *The Genius and the Goddess* (London: Hutchinson, 2009), 3-4.

Pop music thus sanctions Marilyn as an emblem of the Hollywood dystopia and makes Norma Jean a brand for future generations of romantic or acid rebels. This pattern is followed in these latest years by rock sub cultures addressing a young audience, who proudly refuse the mainstream and fear artistic corruption. The metal core band Norma Jean, for example, plays an abrasive and non-commercial style of music that puts an emphasis on breakdowns (solo moments or “brakes”, often followed by all instruments together or individually repeating the verse) and typically lingers on slow and intense passages.

The Norma Jean pattern of victimization, an amalgam of naiveté and muscle, of fragility and power, has generated narratives about her split identity, which have run across the decades. Norma Jean appears, for example, in the title of a TV movie in the mid-1990s: *Norma Jean and Marilyn* (HBO, 1996). Here, the plot dramatizes the contrast between two personalities: a surprisingly attractive and sophisticated Norma Jean (Ashley Judd) struggles ferociously and cruelly with the transformed Marilyn (Mira Sorvino) who is insecure, guilty, and appears in an unconvincingly low profile. The film equates the name change to an assassination and has Norma Jean haunting Marilyn for having killed her and for continuously making the wrong decisions.

In the last decades, especially in the new millennium, Monroe has increasingly been associated with style and fashion, as demonstrated, for example, in the 2013 campaign for Chanel n°5, which retrieved the actress’s declarations about the perfume, photographs and video clips.³¹ Recent historical research has underlined how Marilyn developed extraordinary skills regarding makeup and clothing, and inspired fashion trends.³² A cocktail dress she wore for a press reception in London in 1956 was copied and rushed into stores, and the style of the white dress she wore in *The Seven Year Itch* has been copied over and over again. Marilyn’s standing in the world of fashion has taken decades to be recognized. Her provocative look and voluptuous figure surpassed the interests of her stylistic choices due to the commanding attention of photographers and on-scene reporters who were nearly all male. Moreover, Marilyn only seldom revealed the identity of her fashion collaborators, in order to avoid shifting public attention from how gorgeous she looked to whose dress she was wearing.

Over the years, Marilyn has become a fashion icon, mentioned by fashion bloggers as an expert in presenting herself and as a model of competence in beauty, makeup and body care.³³ In this process, Norma Jean was slowly separated from Marilyn. The first has retained

³¹ See Chanel’s use in 2014 of an audio recording made in 1952 in which Marilyn declared that she wore the n.5 perfume to bed. This recording and a complex of images drawing on the early 1950s were used for the Chanel n.5 campaign.

³² Christopher Nickens and George Zeno, *Marilyn in Fashion. The Enduring influence of Marilyn Monroe* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2012).

³³ On the popular scene, Marilyn’s commemorations and revivals associate her with style and underscore her influence on fashion: see for example online professional and amateur commentaries like <http://www.rte.ie/lifestyle/fashion/features/2012/0808/332644-remembering-a-style-icon-marilyn-monroe/>, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/fashion-and-beauty/fashion/the-monroe-doctrine-50-years-later->

the implications of the outcast, of a struggle with a system, of a wasted and angry youth. The latter has been associated with a popularization of her extraordinary expertise in glamour and style.

Conclusion

Far from being an undifferentiated phenomenon, Hollywood star-naming has always been strictly entangled with viewers' responses, thereby undergoing taste changes and cultural revolutions. Even when commanded by a vertical and strict production system, it reflected hidden mechanisms of cultural consumption, which become apparent when we focus on each particular case, each time revealing a diverse meaning. This is what the Marilyn-Norma Jean story clearly reveals.

As an emblem of the immensely dramatic, influential though repressed motor of Marilyn's personality, Norma Jean constitutes the juicy savory ingredient in Monroe's shiny appearance in a period when models of splendor rooted in past idealizations and normalizations were deteriorating. Marilyn's overwhelming presence in myriad spheres of public exposure was an aberration of the publicity machinery sustaining the Hollywood dream. It was enabled by the loosening of the studios' control on the players at the end of the golden age, and increased emblematically in the second half of the 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s. It was also made possible by a new style in the alliance between models, actresses and photographers, and a concomitant revolution in the viewer's approach to the artificial presentation of femininity in both the domestic and public spheres of American social life. All these factors participate in a change of trend in the public consumption of her stardom. In this context, Marilyn's disseminated presence incarnated a stellar dream in a way that implied that "her life was elsewhere," as Marlon Brando declared after her death.³⁴ In an epoch in which the star was no longer a sign of immortality, and the screens had become small, Norma Jean was the part of Monroe's stardom that responded to the need to root the stellar fantasies surrounding her in contingency, especially a gargantuan contingency.

marilyns-fashion-influence-endures/article4471081/, or <http://urbanitychic.com/2011/09/icons/fashion-icon-marilyn-monroe/>.

³⁴ Adam Victor, *The Marilyn Encyclopedia* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1999), 41-42.