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# Tragic blondes, Hollywood, and the “radical sixties” myth: *Seberg* and *once upon a time in Hollywood* as revisionist and reparative biopic

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay I explore two recent ‘reparative biopics,’ *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (Quentin Tarantino, 2019) and *Seberg* (Benedict Andrews, 2019), which share features found in the resurgent cycle of 1960s-set ‘back studio’ films that have appeared in the wake of feminist criticism of mainstream Hollywood. Although positioned very differently in terms of genre (as biopic and counterfactual history respectively) and in their creative engagement with the cultural and political history of the late 1960s, both are notable for the way they deal with the real female stars at the centre of their stories, Sharon Tate and Jean Seberg. While each film seems to be seeking reparation for the past, their approach ultimately recuperates the women into a mythic discourse of the ‘radical sixties’ in which masculine agency and homosocial bonds are privileged. I argue that these films rehearse familiar biopic conventions to depict the blonde female star as tragic victim, not only of history but also of her own inherent frailty.

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In this essay I explore two recent ‘reparative biopics,’ *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (Quentin Tarantino, 2019) and *Seberg* (Benedict Andrews, 2019), which share some distinctive features found in the resurgent cycle of 1960s-set ‘back studio’ films (in the term coined by Steven Cohan 2017) that have appeared in the wake of feminist criticism of mainstream Hollywood’s neglect of women and recent attempts to address the issues raised by the MeToo movement. Although positioned very differently in terms of genre (as biopic and counterfactual history respectively) and in their creative engagement with the cultural and political history of the late 1960s, both films are notable for the way they deal with the real female stars at the centre of their stories, Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) and Jean Seberg (Kristen Stewart). Indeed, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* has become famous for its alternative history of Hollywood in which Tate is spared her murder by the Manson Family. However, there are important differences: while *Once Upon a Time* . . . is structured through the conventions of contemporary bromance/comedy, *Seberg* is both a biopic and a ‘woman’s picture’ in its concern with the emotional life of its main character. These genre combinations further inflect the way each film reimagines history.

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What they share is a preoccupation with the back studio narrative as the source of ‘truth’ about Hollywood, the fetishisation of the blonde female star through the instrument of a renewed male gaze (and the implicit racial power relations involved), and the reiteration of familiar myths about the 1960s.

While each seems to be seeking a form of reparation for the way these actresses have been neglected or pathologized in the past, their approach does little to transform our understanding of either Seberg or Tate, and even positions them within already familiar and profoundly anti-feminist mythic discourses: first of a ‘radical sixties’ in which masculine agency is privileged; and second of the blonde female star as tragic victim. Furthermore, white femininity is rendered passive alongside the neutralising of the agencies of those persons of colour who also threaten patriarchal stability and power. I explore the tendency to position exploitation as a ‘truth’ about female stardom and argue that these films rehearse familiar biopic and Hollywood back studio conventions which serve, ultimately, to recuperate female stars as victims, not only of the Hollywood system and recent history but also of their own inherent frailties.

### The back studio narrative: victims, monsters and moguls

In the slipstream of the Weinstein scandal and the emergence of the MeToo movement, two convergent tendencies have appeared in mainstream narrative film and television. The first is the reappearance of dramas focusing directly or indirectly on the Hollywood system’s exploitative tendencies and the emotional and psychological impact this has had on women especially, but also on queer and Black people. These include *Bombshell* (Jay Roach, 2019), *The Morning Show* (Apple TV+, 2019), *The Assistant* (Kitty Green, 2019), and *Hollywood* (Netflix, 2020). The second is the resurgence of interest in the radical and countercultural movements of the 1960s that spawned contemporary feminism and inspired campaigns such as Black Lives Matter. We can see in films such as *Hidden Figures* (Theodore Melfi, 2016), *The Best of Enemies* (Robin Bissell, 2019), and *Misbehaviour* (Phipps 2019) or television series such as *Mrs America* (FX, 2020) a renewed concern with the political battles of the late 1960s. Here, however, female experience and Black consciousness in the face of the obliviousness or hostility of powerful white men are foregrounded, in contrast to many earlier depictions of the period.

However, where an ‘exploitation narrative’ is repeatedly privileged in biographical or fictional accounts of the lives of female stars, it can be especially problematic. Keightley (2003: passim) points to the prevalence of this fabula in Hollywood’s depictions of the popular music business in, for example, the life story of torch singer Ruth Etting, *Love Me or Leave Me* (Charles Vidor, 1955) or the biopic of Tina Turner, *What’s Love Got to Do with It* (Brian Gibson, 1993), pinpointing the films’ neat deflection of exploitative tendencies onto a rival industry. It is equally persistent in ‘exposés’ of the movie business dating back at least to the 1920s and 1930s, in accounts of the troubled life stories and exploitation by ‘the system’ of stars such as Clara Bow and (tragic blonde) Jean Harlow. Later Hollywood fictionalisations such as *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) or *LA Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997) have simply cemented this narrative.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Bingham (2010: passim) observes that the paradigm of victimhood and suffering at the hands of patriarchal figures was a longstanding component of Hollywood biopics of female stars throughout the classical and post-classical period. It has continued even into contemporary documentary,

in films such as *Amy* (Asif Kapadia, 2015), which casts Amy Winehouse as the victim of her manager father's ambitions.<sup>2</sup> Suffering, it is suggested, hones native female talent and guarantees authenticity. Exploitation is an inevitable consequence of exposure to a venal business.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, as Steven Cohan has explored (Cohan 2019), Hollywood has an equally long history of depicting the rise and fall of narcissistic, and self-destructive stars for whom ageing brings an increasing monstrosity: such films seek to ' "explain" the female star's unruliness, which extends from her private demons to her defiance of the studio's patriarchal hierarchies ... This figuration of stardom as feminine excess easily becomes glossed as "monstrous" because of her abject state of mind ... ' (Cohan 2019, pp. 135–136). While these tropes can also be found in biographical accounts of male performers, it is in the life stories of female stars that they have become axiomatic. Exploitation, degradation, excess, self-destruction and abuse have thus become part of the dominant narrative about female stardom regardless of their wider evidential basis.<sup>4</sup> Cohan also points to the way Hollywood's cycles of 'back studio' films – his term for this genre, which purports to tell the truth about the studio system through the equivalent of backstage stories – have taken the exploitation narrative to its culturally logical conclusion by presenting it as the price paid by the female star for her willing participation in a corrupt industry: 'Hollywood's excesses, insularity, and obsolescence [are located] in her figure.' (Cohan 2017, p. 530). That is, the failings of the system are mapped onto the body of the female star and are thus transformed into an individualised pathology.

Marilyn Monroe's career trajectory has been repeatedly framed through this discourse. Monroe is perhaps the ultimate 'tragic blonde,' and the repetition of her life story in innumerable documentaries, biographies, novels, kiss-and-tell memoirs and speculative histories, is distinctive for the way the story remains unchanged regardless of the amount of research or new material that has contributed to its retelling. As Cohan argues, quoting Sarah Churchwell, such accounts, 'promise[s] the truth but only end[s] up "telling us what we already think we know".' (Cohan 2017, p. 532, Churchwell 2004, p. 5). Furthermore, he notes that, 'in one way or another, the biopics all share an underlying anxiety about female agency that motivates the constant retelling of Monroe's story – and our culture's obsession with it – and that still informs the complexity and currency of her bio-persona.' (Cohan 2017, p. 532). For Cohan, such texts 'stress Monroe's erotic value' yet also dwell on her growing insecurity and (supposed) self-destruction (Cohan 2017, p. 539). Her early death is thus figured as in some ways the inevitable culmination of her availability to be exploited, which is then itself eroticised. Crucially, then, Monroe's story has shaped the myth of the blonde star – as well as contributing to Hollywood's own self-mythologisation.

However, the resurgence of explicitly anti-patriarchal sentiments linked to MeToo and fourth-wave feminism have critically reframed this discourse. Biopics produced partly in response to MeToo now position themselves as 'feminist' or as revelatory because they offer, supposedly for the first time, a critique of these exploitative and misogynist dimensions to the Hollywood machine. For example, Kristen Stewart, when publicising her role as Jean Seberg, linked the latter's politics to her own MeToo activism in *The Hollywood Reporter* (9/13/2019), describing the actress as a 'martyr;' while Tarantino claimed he wanted his depiction of Tate to help her escape the shadow of the Manson murders (*Entertainment*, 24/07/19). Such aims are clearly well-intentioned. And it is certainly the

case that *Seberg* exposes the actress's treatment as a political threat by the FBI, while *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* rescues Tate's reputation as a comedienne. These reparative desires are not to be criticised. However, the films, in effect, do not change the victim narrative. They replicate a familiar set of mythic tropes that do little to challenge the idea of the female star as a passive body on which male fantasies, fears and anxieties are projected. The combination of a lovingly recreated period *mise-en-scene* together with a story of exploitation or tragedy may thus produce a text that lays claim to authenticity or truth yet remains profoundly recuperative.<sup>5</sup>

The repetition of these tropes in new stories may, however, be mistaken for a newly-minted liberation – a form of speaking ‘truth to power,’ as Stewart's comments imply. Such articulations not only misrepresent or obliterate the many instances of female stars who challenged the exploitative tendencies of Hollywood in the past (Bette Davis, Olivia de Havilland and even Monroe herself all successfully resisted the studios' attempts to control them), they also present female stardom in relatively decontextualised ways. As Alison Phipps has argued, repetition is not resolution, and here the reiteration of the exploitation narrative simply works to naturalise it or even intensify the assumption that it is an inevitable consequence of women's attempts to claim agency: ‘in contrast to the original feminist positioning of “speaking out” as a way to divest oneself of trauma ... [such repeated reiterations] may be a way to ontologize it.’ (Phipps 2019, p. 24). To interpret such texts as feminist is, then, deeply problematic if the consequences (however unintended) are to reaffirm or even fetishise the inevitability of the female star as a tragic victim or, indeed, a tragic monster.

The two films I discuss here have appeared as part of this resurgent ‘back studio’ cycle and synthesise aspects of these tendencies. The first, Quentin Tarantino's long heralded and counterfactual *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, was treated as a major cultural event on its release. The second, *Seberg* (Benedict Andrews, 2019), a vehicle for Stewart, was less commercially and critically successful. Both are set in 1969, a key year for radical politics of various hues. Both feature figures who have been the subject of ongoing fascination because of their untimely deaths. Since her murder, Tate's story has become thoroughly entangled with the Manson Family narrative and the scandals surrounding her husband Roman Polanski. This has indeed made Tate a victim several times over, as her acting career has long been overshadowed. Meanwhile, Seberg's iconic place in the history of the French New Wave has been similarly eclipsed by her apparent suicide. Crucially, it is also the relative youth of both at the time of death which has helped to fix them as tragic victim figures and makes them available to be ‘rescued’ for posterity. Unlike other female stars in the back studio cycles, they are spared the ‘monstering’ afforded the ageing Gloria Swanson or Joan Crawford that Cohan discusses (Cohan 2019, pp. 116–147).

However, while the textual focus on the two actresses at a key moment in their short lives is an important commonality and an indicator of the films' place in the back studio cycle, which is largely preoccupied with female stars as I have said, it should be noted that they are very different in terms of genre and style. *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is a sprawling, darkly comic bromance in which a variety of story strands and themes are intertwined, with pastiches of popular television shows and films of the late 1960s blended into a purported account of the events leading up to Tate's (non)murder in a melange of textual layering. It is not only a nostalgic homage to the late 1960s it is also

an overtly revisionist history in which real events are blended with semi-fictional characters.

The film does this by deftly tying Tate's story into that of its two main (semi-fictional) protagonists: Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) an increasingly washed-up star of television westerns, and Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt), Dalton's genial, cowboy-styled stunt double and best buddy-cum-general handyman. The film has Dalton owning the bungalow next door to Tate and Polanski (Rafal Zawierucha) on Cielo Drive, and this device produces the sleight-of-hand finale in which Tate is spared and (presumably) lives happily ever after. But *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood's* desire to present an alternative history of the events of August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1969, is both symptomatic of its mythologising project and problematic for any kind of feminist reading (and, admittedly, Tarantino is not a director who would encourage the latter). Its attempt to rescue Tate is made possible only by returning her to a passive role.

In contrast, *Seberg* was largely marketed as a political thriller, but its foregrounding of the actress's personal life makes it closer to a biopic or indeed a 'woman's picture.' At face value, the film seems to want to redress the injustice of Seberg's faded reputation and re-establish her as a significant cultural figure. This certainly seems to have been Stewart's objective. Based on real events, the plot centres on Seberg's surveillance by the FBI as she becomes increasingly involved in the Black Power movement, and her subsequent persecution by the US intelligence services, including a smear campaign concerning the paternity of her second child. However, while the politics may be its conscious project, the film seems much more interested in Seberg's mental disintegration. Its avowed focus on the role of the American state in demonising civil rights movements is obscured by its depiction of the star as an already fragile, unpredictable, and fractured figure. *Seberg* foregrounds the actress at repeated moments of mental crisis, and these are in turn ultimately, eroticised, as I discuss below. As Hannah Andrews argues, such accounts offer 'a hackneyed cultural narrative of the disorder and instability of the troubled female celebrity.' (Andrews 2017, p. 354). When they are constantly repeated, they are in danger of becoming a new truth.

### ***Once upon a time in Hollywood: little (blonde) girl lost***

The blonde female star has long been a fixture of Hollywood cinema's erotic hierarchy. Golden hair was initially fetishised by the lighting techniques of silent film which produced it as a halo-like cloud, and the white, blonde star was invariably presented as the epitome of female desirability. As Ginette Vincendeau points out, 'blondness connotes virtue and the angelic . . . yet conversely it also signifies the sexual allure of the temptress – both sides of the coin being well represented among film stars.' (Vincendeau 2016, p. 98). She goes on to note that blonde stars were also 'especially associated with the American model of the consumer society, prosperity and modernity,' (Vincendeau 2016, p. 100) or a 'classless glamour' as Fiona Handyside describes it: to be blonde was thus also to be the epitome of modern and thoroughly American femininity (Handyside 2010, p. 292). Richard Dyer further emphasises the racialised dimension to the fetishisation of bloneness: 'the white woman is offered as the most highly prized possession of the white man, and the envy of all other races' (Churchwell 2004, p. 40).

In Hollywood, bloneness has also been expressly linked to a naïve and childlike temperament combined with a native wit in the figure of the ‘dumb blonde,’ again exemplified by Monroe’s star image. Indeed, in screwball comedy the blonde is habitually depicted as both a sexual spectacle and a disruptive force: the narrative stops to enable the camera to linger on her body whilst her very existence may be presented as disordering everyday life (Dyer 1987, p. 36).<sup>6</sup> Sharon Tate’s star meanings were indeed a partial reinvention of the dumb blonde for a new era in films such as Polanski’s own *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967); and she was kin to the ‘free spirit’ figures played by other blonde female stars of the 1960s, such as Julie Christie and Goldie Hawn in *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963), *Darling* (John Schlesinger, 1965), *Petulia* (Richard Lester, 1968) and *There’s a Girl in My Soup* (Roy Boulting, 1970).<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on Tate and Seberg’s bloneness is, then, part and parcel of the way the two films infantilize them as little girls lost: both, in their different ways, victims of late sixties excess.

Tate has remained a figure of problematic fascination since her death. A series of what Erik Morse has termed ‘Mansonsploitation’ films (Morse 2019, p. 28) followed the murders from the 1970s through the 1990s, and *Once Upon a Time . . .* was itself preceded by Mary Harron’s (otherwise very different) *Charlie Says* (2018), another film about the Manson gang.<sup>8</sup> The proliferation of these texts suggests that something more complex is at stake than a fixation with a particularly horrific murder, however. For, despite that even by the late 1960s the counterculture was already being depicted as inherently destructive in films such as *The Trip* (Roger Corman, 1967), *Wild in the Streets* (Barry Shear, 1968) and even *Easy Rider* (Peter Fonda, 1969), the myth of the radical sixties has retained its power. It has been repeatedly returned to as a moment of unfulfilled promise in films as diverse as *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) and *Inherent Vice* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2014) as well as the texts noted towards the beginning of this essay. Why then does this moment hold such fascination?

One way to understand it is to see Tate’s murder as the ‘primal scene’ wherein the countercultural dream of free love, peace and harmony turned to horror. Western culture’s investment in that ideal, and especially Hollywood’s own preoccupation with the end of the sixties dream and California as its mythic centre makes the Manson crimes a source of profound cultural trauma and ongoing fascination. Tarantino’s desire to return to that moment, retell it with a new and better ending and thus change the outcome, therefore carries a degree of cultural logic. If Hollywood itself is both the location of and the reason for the destruction of the dream it can hardly be surprising that *Once Upon a Time . . .* also seeks to play out a different resolution. However, films which seek to expose the underbelly of Hollywood or ‘the sixties’ nearly always end up re-mythologising both, not least because they tend to re-circulate the preferred narratives. As with the cyclical re-telling of Monroe’s life story, they reiterate what we already ‘know.’ *Once Upon a Time . . .* positively revels in its back studio strands, with numerous sequences set on studio lots, genuine footage from the late 1960s, real and composite characters, and the suggestion of unprecedented access to the events behind the Tate tragedy. Crucially, the film is also set at the point when the ‘Old’ Hollywood was already disappearing as the studio system was replaced by independent producers and directors (and, indeed, television, as *Once Upon a Time . . .* makes clear), and the kind of countercultural values that marked films such as *Easy Rider* were becoming more mainstream in the films of the so-called New Hollywood directors such as Bob Rafelson and Robert Altman. The film is thus



replete with knowing references that purportedly demythologise Hollywood (Old and New) yet ultimately reify it.

Yet, in both *Seberg* and in *Once Upon a Time ...* 'Hollywood' is also an unstable and liminal space. Swooping shots take us over rooftops and canyons from the Hollywood Hills to downtown LA's highways and beyond. But this is also an imagined geography in which 'out of place' female bodies threaten the power and security of straight white men, most notably when Jean Seberg is depicted transgressing the unwritten rules of racial, gendered, and topographical power by visiting her Black Power boyfriend's home in a 'non-white' suburb. It is therefore no coincidence that it is only as the final scene of *Once Upon a Time ...* closes upon a moment of homosocial bonding, and the camera pans up and away from Cielo Drive, that the film's title eventually appears, reinforcing the wish-fulfilment fantasy of its ending: 'Once Upon a Time ...'. While this moment serves to reify again the mythological Hollywood of the back studio narrative, it also reinforces the spatial dimension to the film's vision of a utopian 1960s Californian culture destroyed by its distorted mirror image in the Manson Family's murder sprees. Crucially, *Once Upon a Time ...* stages this through a series of sequences in which female agency is both foregrounded and problematised.

The first is a spectacular set-piece party sequence featuring numerous extras of partygoers and go-go dancers at Hugh Hefner's Playboy Mansion (and it is the real one). The sequence begins with a crane shot that at first glides in and over the mansion as Tate and Polanski arrive at the party, and then exits in a continuous *Rope*-like movement taking us through the house and out to the poolside fun. Here, contemporary stars play 1960s celebrities, with Damian Lewis in an awkward curly wig essaying Steve McQueen, and a mini-skirted Rachel Redleaf as Mama Cass grabbing Robbie's hand to skip girlishly outside. The scene clearly seeks to capture a moment before the fall in which an innocent late-sixties cultural melting-pot is on the cusp of being overturned by violence.

However, by locating this innocence at the Playboy Mansion, and by figuring the house as a recreational space for women as well as men, the film offers a dubious gloss on the Playboy ethos, grounded as it is in the objectification of women. The mansion here is denuded of such problematic associations, becoming the locus merely for sexual playfulness. This is confirmed by Lewis's McQueen ruefully acknowledging his ineligibility for Sharon's favours. The transformation of women's sexual subordination into an exchange in which *men* are the losers also constitutes an underlying thematic structure within the film more generally, exemplified by Rick Dalton's loss of leading man status and Cliff Booth's itinerant career. Here, such agency claims are foregrounded by a range of striking aspects to the sequence: Sharon dancing, apparently unselfconsciously absorbed in her body's response to the music; the poolside Playboy 'bunnies' on a podium whose evident enjoyment of their own objectified glamour is visible; the invisibility of Hefner himself, whose presence might remind the viewer uncomfortably of the discrepancy between the Playboy fantasy and its lived reality.

The second set-piece takes place against the backdrop of the LA suburb, Westwood, and features Tate's visit to the Fox Bruin Theatre to see herself on screen in *The Wrecking Crew*, a genuine 1969 spy caper loosely spoofing the Bond films. Crooner Dean Martin played the lead role of spy Matt Helm while Tate had a screwball role as the ditzy Freya Carlson, a British agent. The quotidian details that locate time and place are meticulously



recreated in this sequence, whose *mise-en-scene* is peppered with billboard posters and cinema frontages (including one showing a Seberg film, *Pendulum*), while cars and buses gleam with pre-oil crisis chrome. Meanwhile, Tate is presented as naïve and childlike, delightedly sharing in the laughter of her fellow spectators at her own comic escapades.

Importantly, the specific scenes from *The Wrecking Crew* screened within *Once Upon a Time* . . . focus on Tate as a physical comedienne: first in a scene of skilfully executed comedy pratfalls, and then in a set-piece Kung Fu fight with co-star Nancy Kwan. While this seems initially to undercut the dominant image of Tate as passive victim it does not ultimately change her meanings since her active *body* is not a form of active *agency*. Indeed, her character in *The Wrecking Crew* is eventually rescued by Helm, thus re-establishing ideological norms around gendered power. Furthermore, as with other examples of female kick-ass characters of the 1960s such as Emma Peel (Diana Rigg) in the British television show, *The Avengers* (ITV, 1961–69), such action sequences are also a form of sexual spectacle in which the woman's body is offered to the camera's gaze, as Moya Luckett has explored (Luckett 1999, pp. 285–286). As with its treatment of the martial arts star, Bruce Lee (played by Mike Moh), who is depicted as a pompous braggart who, wholly improbably, is humiliated in a play fight by Cliff Booth, *Once Upon a Time* . . . foregrounds the skills of its 'others' largely to negate their Black, Chinese or female agency and to recuperate failing white male power.

What soon becomes clear in this and subsequent episodes throughout *Once Upon a Time* . . ., therefore, is the extent to which the film is organised around different kinds of bodies and their functions within a patriarchal geography of gender wherein women's movements especially are consistently problematised. Tate's are largely contingent on male protection and permission. Her carefree stroll towards the Bruin is the only time we see her without a male companion or, indeed, alone beyond the confines of the bungalow she shares with Polanski. It is preceded by a journey in an open-top sports car through the winding Hollywood Hills. *En route*, she is shown offering a lift to a 'hippy chick' (Breanna Wing) who is thumbing rides, and we later see her saying an affectionate farewell to the young woman as they arrive at a valet parking lot.

This is in marked contrast to the way Rick, and especially Cliff, enjoy the freedom to travel wherever they wish, epitomised in sequences depicting the latter's sun-flecked journeys around LA's sprawl. Where Tate's bloneness, pregnancy and lightweight film roles are signifiers of her non-threatening status, permitting her some limited free movement, other women in the public realm are suspect. Admittedly, the hippy chick who secures a lift from Tate remains unnamed and is (we assume) a wholly blameless figure. But her visible presence in the anonymous, freeway-littered landscape of downtown LA is an early symptom of the city's corruption. Here, Hollywood is spatially compromised by the 'wrong' kind of active female body. Soon, Cliff's journeys feature him noticing not one but whole gangs of hippy chicks: they are thumbing rides, raiding dumpers, goofing around, smiling seductively at passing male motorists. These apparently innocuous figures with their fringed suede jackets and bags, their bare legs, and wild, undressed hair are a new phenomenon. They are not blondes, not aspiring starlets, nor are they street corner hookers. Their presence is an indicator of something that seems initially to be refreshingly lacking in pretence or Hollywood hype, but which is, according to the film's spatial logic, a sign of imminent danger. This is underlined by the soundtrack's use of a car radio to provide a continuous allusive commentary on the action, either in the

form of music tracks, or in news bulletins. As the group of women whom we later learn are members of the Manson Family appear for the second time, the car radio's news bulletin is aurally foregrounded, reporting the arrest of Bobby Kennedy's deranged assassin, Sirhan Sirhan.

In other words, the film makes it clear that the free movement of these women is a threat to more conventional white male autonomy and even to the stability of the political order. A key figure in this is 'Pussycat' (Margaret Qualley), the youthful, brunette would-be-seducer of Cliff Booth whose offer of underage sex in the car once he has picked her up, he wisely refuses.<sup>9</sup> Pussycat is also a male fantasy turned nightmare. Her sexual availability to Cliff is signalled from his first encounter with her at the street corner. She is not only the most conventionally desirable of the women (her long legs, slim body, large eyes, and mass of brown hair indicate this), but she is also dressed in skimpy denim shorts and a revealing bikini-style top. If we hadn't already understood that Pussycat is both desirable and dangerous, the film emphasises this through the gratuitous shot of her behind wiggling seductively as she leans into Cliff's car to ask for a lift. Equally importantly, she is not blonde but brunette. This confirms her position as antagonist rather than victim.

It is by falling for Pussycat's roadside charms that Cliff finds himself at the nearby Spahn's Ranch where she and her fellow self-styled revolutionaries, the Manson Family, now live. The ranch then becomes the locus for another of the film's major set-pieces, a fight in an echoing, disused 'western' main street built to act as the backdrop for the kinds of shoot-outs and showdowns that the film pastiches in its fictionalised sequences from the TV western, *Lancer* (CBS, 1968–70). Cliff is forced into a confrontation with the Family when the front tyre of his car is deliberately slashed by one of its members, 'Clem' (James Landry Hebert).<sup>10</sup> This leads to a fight in which Clem is beaten and humiliated by the muscular Cliff who then forces him to change the damaged tyre. The contrast between Cliff's tanned, 'cowboy' frame (suitably embodied by Pitt) and Clem's scrawny 'hippy' puniness and drug-wizened face is blackly comic. Even so, the Family's dominance by women who are by turns docile and menacing, frumpy yet entirely undomesticated (judging by the squalor of their cabins), polarises the contrast further. Clem is an emasculated figure even before the fight begins. The presence of the Manson women, who form a sinister audience to the fight, makes the difference even more palpable. They are now recast not as seductive free spirits but as malevolent harpies, monstrous in their castrating power.

Spahn's Ranch lies on the edge of the LA conurbation, just as the Manson Family occupied the edges of hippy culture. Its real history as the setting for numerous film and TV westerns adds to the film's staging of the confrontation between competing versions of the Californian dream in the showdown between Cliff and Clem. The relationship between gendered spatiality and meaning here is therefore vital. Just as the presence of the Family on the LA highway intersections signifies their entry into and poisoning of the everyday life of California's citizens, so other key locations work as emblems of the curdling of the counterculture into violence. And just as the inappropriately active Manson women are cast as the true agents of destruction, with Manson himself a marginalised character in the film, the 'right' kind of active female body is self-objectifying, blonde-haired, and contained within the fantasy topography of Hollywood. Cliff's confrontation with Clem thus foreshadows and legitimates his later heroism when

he takes on and destroys female members of the Family, thus reasserting white male power against the corrupting influence of a dangerously feminised counterculture.

In this final sequence, the counterfactual 'happy ending' to the film, Tate's murder, alongside that of her friends, Jay Sebring (Emile Hirsch) Abigail Folger (Samantha Robinson) and Wojcieh Frykowski (Costa Ronin), is averted. In place of the rampage in which members of the Family brutally butchered the bodies of their victims, the putative killers are diverted to the house next door owned by Rick Dalton, where they are seen off by himself and Cliff in a triumphant reassertion of white male heroism. And here the film's desire to return its female characters to passivity becomes *reductio ad absurdum*. For, while a human female is resident at the bungalow in the form of Dalton's sleeping Italian starlet wife, Francesa Capucci (Lorenza Izzo), she has considerably less agency than Cliff Booth's Pitbull bitch, Brandy, who acts as a comic sidekick, enthusiastically engaging in the ensuing melee by attacking the Manson gang. Meanwhile, Francesca sleeps on, oblivious, unconscious, unthreatening. In contrast, as we have seen, active women are, by definition, antagonists and can therefore be legitimately destroyed. Dalton even kills one of the gang, 'Sadie' (Mikey Madison), by incinerating her with a flamethrower in a scene of overwhelmingly visceral violence that is played for laughs rather than horror.

Indeed, violence against women is a tacit theme throughout *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Apart from the murder of Tate, which floats cloud-like over the film but is of course never enacted, reference is made to the violent ending supposedly met by Cliff's wife in events that precede the narrative, which is darkly hinted at but never fully verified. And the most fully realised female character apart from Brandy is a precocious child actor, Trudi Fraser (Julia Butters), whom Rick meets on the set of *Lancer*. Trudi's prepubescent state presumably makes her a non-threatening figure, but even she is given a kicking. Trudi is serious, professional and focused, and her work ethic makes Rick take a cold, hard look at his own. Even here, however, the film does not miss an opportunity to physically punish her for being a potential threat. In a move supposedly inspired by Trudi's own commitment to naturalism, Rick improvises by throwing the child onto the ground during a scene featuring a violent shoot-out, apologising to her afterwards for his impulse. He is rewarded with Trudi's enthusiastic approval: 'That was the best acting I've ever seen.' Even little girls are complicit in their own abuse if it helps a man, it seems.

Such a move prepares the ground for the reinsertion of masculine agency and the reassertion of bromance as the defining aura of the film. Throughout *Once Upon a Time . . .*, homosocial rather than heterosexual bonds are privileged. This is most explicit in Rick and Cliff's relationship in which Cliff's amiable devotion seems never to spill over into jealousy of the other's good fortune. Their mutually sustaining friendship is instead depicted as uncomplicated by other attachments and is marked by the film's conviction of the 'lovable[ness] . . . of the modern boy-man . . . all the while leaving the sense of privilege (read: whiteness) that preconditions such manifestations of retreatism and sustained immaturity' (Weinman 2014, p. 43). The film's back studio elements reaffirm Hollywood as a homosocial universe in which men bond with other men, while women are objects of desire or agents of destruction. Its male characters are three-dimensional; emotionally complex even if they are not wholly likeable. Sharon Tate, in contrast, is reduced to a one-dimensional fantasy girl. And even though the film saves her from her real fate and thus implicitly offers her a new life, it does not hint at what this might be. Instead, it ends by focusing on the two men between whom she has been symbolically exchanged because

of its narrative reversal: Rick, exhausted but elated at having helped defeat the Family, and revelling in the recovery of his 'cowboy' heroism, encounters Jay Sebring who has come to the gates of Tate's next-door driveway to investigate the disruption. The men bond through banter. And at this point Sharon is returned to a ghostlike state: a disembodied voice emerging through a driveway intercom, expressing her relief and gratitude to the men who have rescued her.

### **Seberg: suicide blondes**

As I have noted, in both films the central female characters' blonde hair is a signifier of potential victimhood. While, for Robbie as Tate, this manifests as an angelic naivety that is 'too good' for Hollywood, for Stewart as Seberg it indicates emotional fragility and a childlike insecurity. The real Seberg's ash-white elfin crop became her hallmark, especially after her appearance as Patricia, the Beatnik American selling copies of the *International Herald Tribune* on the streets of Paris in *A Bout de Souffle* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1959, a film whose status and style as 'art' had a profound influence on the emergent New Hollywood).<sup>11</sup> The potentially infantilizing associations of Seberg's hairstyle are here accentuated by costume. The late 1960s was a period of extreme sartorial contradiction in which, alongside the 'psychedelic' patterns, flared trousers and loose tie-dyed shirts worn by both sexes, Peter-Pan collars, oversized buttons, and Mary-Jane strapped shoes became fashionable for women. These styles suggested a childlike physique, working symbolically to disavow the threat the adult woman posed to patriarchal structures by eroticising physical fragility at a moment when feminism was securing some economic and social gains.

As Jane Gaines has famously argued, costume 'tells the woman's story' in ways that exceed narrative exposition yet economically convey character meaning (1990: passim). Stewart as Seberg is costumed to express her childlike status. When we first encounter her, for example, she is wearing a buttercup yellow mini-skirted wool two-piece with a white collar and large white buttons, worn with pale tights and white Cuban-heeled court shoes. Such an outfit externalises the character's political unworldliness through its infantilizing details: big buttons, wide white collars. This impression is underlined in a mocked-up photograph of Seberg in the same outfit raising a clenched fist alongside a group of Black Power activists, the only white woman amidst a crowd of tall, dark-clad Black men, her bright yellow outfit and blonde hair a sign not only of her disruptive presence within the immediate public realm but also a harbinger of her problematic place in political discourse.

In a later and pivotal scene, Seberg is depicted in a state of imminent mental collapse brought on by her terror of the FBI's power to defame her. Here she is shown at night in her study, which is illuminated only by the dim light of a lamp and is framed in long shot from a corridor, desperately pulling apart books and furnishings in a search for bugging devices. She is clad in a filmy, lime-green chiffon 'baby doll' nightdress that reveals much of her breasts and legs. This garment not only externalises her disordered state of mind through colour and texture, with its vivid green a signifier of paranoia, its 'baby doll' style also reiterates Seberg's child-woman status and the eroticisation of her frailty.

Like *Once Upon a Time . . .*, *Seberg* mixes real-life with fictional or composite characters, who largely function as expositional interlocutors. For example, Hakim Jamal (Anthony

Mackie), the Black Power revolutionary with whom Seberg had an affair, is required to explain contemporary political struggles to the actress in a series of clunky exchanges. While it is refreshing to see a Black man accorded intellectual authority, it is perhaps a symptom of the film's own political confusion and pseudo-feminism that it sees no problem in depicting Seberg as a simple, childlike quester after good with only a tangential grasp on political reality. Indeed, Jamal's political agency is itself undercut as the narrative proceeds and Seberg is depicted as increasingly paranoid.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, and in line with such victim narratives, the actress's isolation from other women is accentuated: at no point does the film suggest that Seberg has female friends or political allies. She is, it seems, entirely dependent, both emotionally and intellectually, on men.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside its depiction of the real Seberg, Jamal, and the actress's French husband, the writer and intellectual Romain Gary (Yvan Attal), the film foregrounds two wholly fictional, white FBI agents Jack Solomon (Jack O'Connell) and Carl Kowalski (Vince Vaughan), who are charged with undertaking the undercover surveillance. Indeed, Seberg's story is framed through these characters, thus privileging their perspective. This device also lends the film a noirish quality; the FBI investigation of the actress's political activities is conflated with her sexual trustworthiness and, indeed, her availability to them as an object of desire. Here, then, the blend of fact and fiction becomes deeply problematic. First, Solomon and Kowalski are set up as a hackneyed 'good cop' and 'bad cop' duo in which Solomon is cast as increasingly uncomfortable with the state's invasion of Seberg's privacy, while Kowalski is a cynical, hardened, cryptofascist who treats the actress with contempt. Solomon is even given a student doctor wife, Linette (Margaret Qualley) whose limited narrative function inadvertently discloses the film's reluctance to endow its female characters with meaningful agency. She is there purely to act as his moral conscience.

Yet more problematic still is that the surveillance narrative permits numerous sequences in which the viewer is complicit with the film's privileging of a noir-like male gaze as Solomon and Kowalski covertly watch a semi-naked Seberg in her conveniently plate-glass windowed Hollywood bungalow, unaware of yet repeatedly making herself available to their eyes. In an extended sequence cut to Bobby Wright's haunting 'Blood of an American' (released in 1974 as an anti-Vietnam song but here used to convey the conflicted emotions Seberg experiences concerning her family and politics), Seberg is framed at night, moving from brightly lit room to brightly lit room clad only in a short, silky robe. The point of view offered is that of the classic male voyeur. Seberg's naivety and vulnerability are almost literally magnified by our acute awareness that she is being watched, not only by Solomon but by us. The scopophilia afforded the viewer at this point is deeply disturbing in a film avowedly committed to problematising issues of power, even if the intention is to remind us of the relationship between the male gaze and state authority. By sharing the look, the audience is potentially implicated in the power of the gaze, but the consequences of this are not unpacked. Instead, these scenes help to consolidate Seberg not as a political activist but as a helpless and vulnerable figure, a blonde child-woman in need of protection. The FBI plot thus legitimates the objectification of Stewart as Seberg, while ostensibly condemning it.

Furthermore, the extra-textual knowledge of Seberg's suicide shapes not just the narrative arc of *this* text but also the meanings which surround and inform it. In a move that seems to reiterate Seberg's willed victimisation, and one utilising tropes familiar from those Hollywood biopics and studio back stories about female stars, private

tensions are exacerbated by public life: here, the actress's growing stardom and accompanying involvement in politics via Jamal. Seberg is shown effectively abandoning her child, Diego (Gabriel Sky), when she leaves for the USA at the beginning of the film and, in an important convergence, this is also the point at which she meets Jamal and embarks on her ill-fated affair with both him and radical politics. Her refusal of a traditional mothering role thus coincides with an attempt to control other aspects of her life and to escape the restrictions imposed by the Hollywood system on its stars. Yet, characteristically, this is depicted as self-defeating and self-destructive. Seberg cannot move beyond her appointed role as sexy naïf without courting danger. Jamal's established authority even enables him to name Seberg's desire for self-martyrdom: 'What is it with you? ... You're running around with a hand full of nails looking for a cross to die on.'

Yet these words are a rationalisation of the film's own internal logic. Its underlying fixation with the proposition that the blonde victim ultimately invites her own crucifixion has, in fact, already been staged at the very beginning of *Seberg*. Even before the credits have rolled for the main part of the story set in 1968–9, a flashback sequence recreates the event which took place ten years earlier in 1957 during the filming of Otto Preminger's *Saint Joan*, which gave Seberg her first starring role. The sequence depicts the horrific moment when the actress was accidentally set on fire during a scene in which Joan was burned as a heretic. Clearly, this must have been genuinely traumatic, especially given the prestige of the film, the power of its director, and Seberg's own newcomer status. In its re-enactment in *Seberg*, however, the MeToo myth of the director as malign patriarch is retrofitted into the narrative. The accident is transformed into a symbolic self-immolation at the behest of Preminger's tyranny, prefiguring a later sequence supposedly showing Seberg in her *Saint Joan* audition tape, in which the director appears only as a disembodied and terrifyingly guttural voice. Preminger thus stands in for what we 'know' about male directors and producers post-Weinstein: that they are tyrants who exploit female stars. In these moments *Seberg* discloses its own unconscious project, which is to memorialise the actress as a beautiful, tragic, and ultimately passive victim. As with the Monroe biopics discussed by Cohan, the film becomes an account not of Seberg's admirable desire for political agency, but rather a 'cautionary tale for today about an ambitious woman who tries to overstep her restricted position in the industry as a sex object' (Cohan 2017, p. 540).

If the message that a young blonde woman's proper place in Hollywood is that of tragic victim is not yet sufficiently clear, the film further underlines it through its regressive depiction of a confrontation between Seberg and the only woman to be accorded a degree of narrative agency: Afro-haired Dorothy (Zazie Beetz), Jamal's wife and fellow revolutionary. Dorothy's clichéd role culminates in a climactic scene in which she invades Seberg's home brandishing a pistol, having discovered their affair. The attack offers a crudely reductive staging of Black female savagery and white female terror, and it is in marked contrast to the portrayal of Jamal. Dorothy is an aggressor not an ally, a stereotypical 'angry Black woman' whose primary concern is with defending her sexual territory. Dorothy is recuperated into a purely antagonistic figure in ways that obliterate her political agency while reiterating women as rivalrous objects of exchange between men. The scene also stages what Phipps has called 'the symbolic woundability of white femininity' (Phipps 2019, p. 13), a quality imbued with the ideas of racial purity and sexual innocence that the blonde female star historically represented. By depicting



her as the passive object of Dorothy's fury, alongside her transgressive desire for Jamal and misguided attempts at political agency, the film naturalises Seberg's vulnerability and resecures her victim status.

## Conclusion

*Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* presents a reparative alternative history in which Tate is spared her terrible death. It is an appealing fantasy. *Seberg* attempts restitution by detailing its subject's persecution by the US state for her beliefs. Yet the underlying discursive structures in both films do the opposite to their ostensible intentions. By fixing both Tate and Seberg as tragic blondes whose fate is predetermined, and by seeking to retell the 'radical sixties' through their stories, the complexity of those women as well as the politics involved, whether Hollywood's or those of the counterculture or the Black Power movement, disappears. And the desire to expose and redress the institutional power exerted by the American state or by Hollywood is undermined. Instead, in both films, the agency of the two female stars is obliterated and the perspectives of fictional white men are privileged as the lens through which these stories are told.

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. As I have established, the idea that exploitation and victimhood are an inevitable component of female stardom and that this can only now be revealed is in danger of becoming a 'truth' of the post-MeToo film, yet this paradigm has long been standard in studio biopics, back story narratives and documentaries. By reiterating narratives of exploitation, we may end up naturalising them.

This tendency seems especially prevalent if the real female star on whom such broadly historical narratives are mapped is perceived to conform to an established template of feminine fragility which does not ultimately threaten patriarchal power structures. Indeed, we may also learn that the tragic blonde's fragility renders her especially vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation, not because women are systematically excluded from patriarchal power networks, but because the star is unconsciously complicit in her own subjugation. *Once Upon a Time* seeks to redeem Tate as a comedienne and to free her from being exclusively associated with Manson, but ultimately co-opts this project through its focus on homosocial bromance. *Seberg* has a more overt desire to redeem the actress's activism, but its own confused politics work against this. While Sharon Tate has indeed been unjustly reduced to a titillating and squalid crime and Jean Seberg has perhaps been equally unjustly forgotten, the evidently reparative aims of these films are themselves problematic. For Tate and Seberg are ultimately robbed of their agency, not by the state or even the Family, but by the narrative logic of the films themselves.

## Notes

1. Perhaps ironically, Tate appeared in the exploitation film, *Valley of the Dolls* (Mark Robson, 1967), which was itself marketed as an exposé of Hollywood's abuse of actresses.
2. For a comprehensive discussion of biopics of female stars see Dennis Bingham's *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010). For work on Amy Winehouse's depiction in *Amy* see Hannah



Andrews, 'From unwilling celebrity to authored icon: reading *Amy* (Kapadia, 2015),' *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Summer 2017, pp. 351–354; Bronwyn Polaschek, 'The dissonant personas of a female celebrity: *Amy* and the public self of Amy Winehouse,' *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 2018, pp. 17–33.

3. This narrative has become increasingly familiar through its circulation and reiteration within popular media and especially Hollywood's own trade press, such as *Variety*. See, for example Casting-Couch Tactics Plagued Hollywood Before Harvey Weinstein – *Variety*
4. It should also be noted that the use of a female star's first name as the title of such biopics and documentaries (as in *Amy*, *Judy*, *Marilyn*) also works to reinforce her positioning as passive or infantilised.
5. One further example of this is the 2019 biopic of Judy Garland, *Judy* (Rupert Goold), which combines both the tendencies I identify, although its subject is clearly not blonde in any literal sense. It is set mainly in 1969, the last year of Garland's life and the period of her lengthy sojourn in London at The Talk of the Town cabaret, thus affording a late sixties backdrop that chimes with the revived interest noted above. The film also frames its 'present day' narrative within flashbacks of Garland's bullying at the hands of Louis B Mayer as a child star in the 1930s. These devices are presumably intended to speak to contemporary consciousness about child abuse and to position Garland within that paradigm. Yet the idea of Judy Garland as the fragile victim of a brutalising studio system is itself always already a key element in the Garland myth and is even close to defining her. Richard Dyer's essay on Garland in *Heavenly Bodies* (London: BFI/Macmillan, 1987) is very good on this, noting that by the 1950s Garland was a star with 'a special relationship to suffering' (143). See also Karen McNally's *The Stardom Film: Creating the Hollywood Fairy Tale*. Wallflower Press, 2021.
6. Jayne Mansfield's pneumatic progress down a city street filled with goggle-eyed men in *The Girl Can't Help It* (Frank Tashlin, 1956) is the comedic epitome of this trope, while Monroe's performance of 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953) is perhaps its most essential expression.
7. For more on Hawn's remarkable longevity as a 'dumb blonde' see Tincknell, 'Goldie Hawn: An Ageless Blonde for the Baby Boomer Generation,' in *Ageing, Performance and Stardom: Doing Age on the Stage of Consumer Culture*, eds. Aagje Swinnen and John A Stotesbury (Berlin and Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2012), 93–108.
8. Harron's film is based on *The Long Prison Journey of Leslie Van Houten*, by Karlene Faith, and this source and its director's queer and feminist credentials ensure a very different approach to the Manson story to that of Tarantino.
9. 'Pussycat' is based on Ruth Ann Moorehouse, a member of the Manson gang.
10. The character is based on Steve 'Clem' Grogan, a member of the Manson gang.
11. This is not to suggest that other stars did not share this hairstyle. Mia Farrow, another blonde 'waif' also associated with Polanski, was famous for her elfin crop.
12. Indeed, in Mackie's performance Jamal is a thoughtful, sympathetic character, the film's main mediator of political insight, and appears in stark contrast to the way he has been remembered in historical accounts. Jamal was committed to a mental asylum after two attempted murders before his conversion to Islam and name change from Allen Donaldson. He was later involved with a British model, Gale Benson, who was murdered by two of his and Michael X's associates in Trinidad.
13. In fact, according to an article in the *Los Angeles Times* (Susan King, 26 February 2020) Seberg's close female friend Diane Baker, an actress and producer, had introduced her to Jamal and remained in touch with her throughout the ordeal of FBI surveillance and smears.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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