

Blond on *Blonde*

One judges “entertainment” by standards like “Did you laugh? Did you cry? Did you forget about life while watching?”

“Art,” however, is held to stricter standards. Does it stick with you? Does it haunt you afterwards? Did it disturb you? Does it go someplace new and daring? Can two people look at it but see two different things?

Blonde, Netflix’s recent contribution to the ever-growing collection of films about Marilyn Monroe, is a gigantic flop when judged as an “entertainment.” There are just too many things to hate about it.

But – God help me – even with all its warts, indulgences, and over-the-top ugliness, the film *does* qualify as art.

If you’re one of the thousands who reportedly turned it off at the 20-minute mark, you must admit that you didn’t quickly forget your experience. *Did you?*

I fully expected to be one of those viewers who switched it off in disgust. After all, I only tuned in to see what the fuss was all about. And while I did take a break (to catch my breath and take an Ativan), I did turn it back on. Because visually, it is the most remarkable, breathtaking, and audacious film I have seen in a long, long time.

The massive negative reaction is partially Netflix’s own fault. They were wrong to promote this picture as a biopic. Because, even with her childhood, marriages, and many film roles depicted, this is *not* Marilyn Monroe’s life story. It is based on a *novel* by Joyce Carol Oates – a work of fiction – and not on any Monroe biography.

This is not the Marilyn we know – certainly not the Marilyn we *think* we know. Director Andrew Dominik wants us to feel how Marilyn saw and felt about herself.

This is Marilyn from the inside looking out, not Marilyn from the outside looking in.

This is the fever dream of a mentally ill, increasingly drug-addled woman who felt exploited and betrayed at every turn. On that level, it succeeds marvelously – maybe too well.

Ultimately, *Blonde* is an unrelenting horror film. A monster movie. And the monster is the multi-headed hydra of Hollywood. The “haunted house” is sexist 1950s America. “Toxic masculinity” is the character you hope will save the heroine but who ultimately betrays her. And Marilyn is the horror film’s “Final Girl,” who survives all the attacks and horrors and indignities. Well, except that [spoiler alert!] she dies at the end.

Ana de Armas’ performance is amazing and truly deserves to be seen – *if* you’re up to the challenge. The production itself is absolutely breathtaking to look at. The combination of different film stocks & ratios, the mixing of color with black & white, the occasional distortion of the images, and moments of reality twisting with dreams and hallucinations – it’s as if the film *Frances* had been written by David Lynch, directed by Baz Luhrmann, and produced by Russ Meyer.

All that said, there *is* a lot in this movie that turns the stomach.

A talking fetus shames Marilyn for having an abortion? I get that it’s just happening in her head. But given today’s heated culture, it’s easily misinterpreted as an anti-abortion message, instead of just Monroe’s damaged “inner monologue.” I found the sequence wildly irresponsible and designed merely to provoke – especially by using images of a fetus to do so.

Audiences particularly hate a scene late in the third act, wherein President Kennedy forces Marilyn to perform oral sex. It *is* extremely graphic, outside the bounds of good taste, and perhaps the hardest scene of all to watch. But I have no trouble imagining their relationship playing out in that fashion, with Secret Service men sitting just outside the open bedroom door.

What about the “Big Question”? Did Kennedy have her killed? Dominik tries to have it both ways. There’s a nightmare-ish moment, shortly after her presidential rape, where she awakens in the middle of the night to find trench-coated G-men tearing her place apart. She hides under the sheets. They come for her. And as this scene plays out, you assume “Oh, here we are, this is ‘The End.’”

But that turns out to be a nightmare – *or was it?* Soon enough, we then watch her washing down too many pills with straight booze, and taking to her bed, after receiving (completely made up) bad news. Given how fucking ballsy the film is up until then, and all the legitimate real-life questions surrounding her death, this dénouement feels more than a bit cowardly.

There’s good reason why some critics are calling it “torture porn.” Jesus Christ, are we to believe there wasn’t a single moment of joy in the poor woman’s life? Never a moment of clarity? Not a second of self-realization?

The film is also loaded with falsehoods which will enrage fans familiar with her true story, but again, it was based on a novel, *not* her actual life.

I certainly recommend this film to hard-core film buffs without hesitation because it’s an amazing visual spectacle and is incredibly edited and mixed. But hard-core Monroe fans? Think long and hard before strapping in for this trip.

Does the film deserve the backlash? Frankly, I’ve seen much worse. Darren Aronofsky’s 2017 shit show *Mother!* is far more offensive, and not at all successful artistically. *In the Realm of the Senses* or, hell, even *Showgirls* were much more painful for me to watch.

Sadly, it didn’t have to be this way. The film could have, and *should* have, opened with a disclaimer that it was based on a work of *fiction* that was merely *inspired* by Monroe’s life. But no.

In the credits, DiMaggio is called “The Former Athlete.” Arthur Miller is called “The Playwright” and Kennedy is “The President.” Perhaps Dominik should’ve used that approach with Marilyn herself, and just called her “The Blonde.” If he’d made

the movie more of a *roman à clef* or given it the *Citizen Kane* treatment (which was *still* about William Randolph Hearst even though the character was named Charles Foster Kane), perhaps her legion of fans could better tolerate the wild liberties and outrageous exaggerations.

Just another way Netflix *could've* made it less offensive to Marilyn's fans.
It's a shame. Because there is a lot of gold in this gutter.

But I write this not to change minds. You'll either love it or hate it (or, like me, you'll love *and* hate it). And whatever your reaction, you are 100% correct.

And isn't that what "art" is all about?