



Marilyn in the Media: The Male Gaze of Conspiracy

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Abstract

2022 marked the 60th anniversary of Marilyn Monroe's death. Her name is once again making headlines. The notable uptick in recent media coverage surrounding Monroe underscores that her cultural significance extends far beyond being an iconic actress. Monroe's life and legacy have become inseparable from her death, which is famously wrought with conspiracy. Conspiracy theories, typically associated with the socio-political sector, have pushed beyond the political sphere and permeated pop culture. Conspiracy theories stem from a fixation with and desire to rationalize the unknown. For celebrities that reach superstardom, coupling their fame with any mysteriousness creates the perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theories to brew. By examining several theories about how and why Monroe died (in lieu of suicide), this paper dissects how her life and death have been permanently punctuated by conspiracies pushed by men. Monroe was not only at the mercy of conspiracy, but she was infamously, inescapably defined by men. Her story has been told through men's eyes, both in life and after death. In addition to conspiracy theories, I use news reports (entirely written by men) from the day she was found dead to investigate the extent to which Monroe's life and legacy was impacted by being hypersexualized. I propose that conspiracy theories, like pop culture and the media, are subject to the male perspective creating, dominating, and directing the narrative. I use Monroe and the conspiracy theories which surround her as a case study to exemplify how destructive and reductive the male gaze becomes when it is left unchecked.

1. Introduction

A timeless blonde bombshell, the standard of sexual aesthetic. Her name, her voice, and her body created the epitome of a Hollywood sex symbol. Marilyn Monroe's iconic image established the blueprint for women's sexuality. The movie star persona, however, reduced Monroe to a doll manipulated by a male-dominated Hollywood and by the desires and demands of the patriarchal American public. The symbol she came to embody was seldom looked beyond. As a result, Marilyn Monroe was reduced to a one-dimensional figure designed to perfectly serve the fantasies and fetishes of men. The male gaze Monroe was subjected to, ever present in the

film industry and in American pop culture, has played an equally heavy hand in conspiratorial thinking. There have been countless publications put forth by men contending the true series of events that led to Monroe's death. The conspiracy theories that surround Monroe's death have cast her in the same hyper-sexualized role she held in life, underscoring the consequences of conspiracy theories permeated by the male gaze.

2. Background

Behind the blonde tresses and impeccable glamor was a woman who came from a humble yet tumultuous background. Monroe was born in

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1926 as Norma Jeane Mortenson.² Her biological mother suffered from schizophrenia and spent time in and out of mental asylums.³ As a result, her children passed through numerous temporary foster homes and orphanages.⁴ Stability was ephemeral at best and non-existent at worst for young Monroe. The psychological impact of an unstable childhood undeniably affected Monroe for the rest of her life. When she struck stardom in the early 1950s, her image, the symbol “M.M.,” became synonymous with her personhood. Norma Jeane was reinvented as Marilyn Monroe: sultry seductress and comedienne. Despite fame and fortune, Monroe still lacked the stability she craved. As the woman atop the American pop culture pedestal, Marilyn stood alone. She was condemned to personify an unobtainable prototype. Monroe was no longer human in the eyes of America, but a symbol and object. The standard she was expected to unfailingly achieve—that of the ultimate sexual aesthetic—was, and still is, an impossible standard to uphold. I suspect that these continued and unrelenting pressures weighed heavily on Monroe, further isolating her from a sense of normalcy. She must have been impossibly, constantly drained knowing her worth was wrapped up in her sex appeal. The weight of iconic stardom could have only worsened Monroe’s inability to find contentment and balance in life.

During her thirty-six years, Monroe weathered three divorces. The first was from an aircraft factory worker who she married and separated from pre-fame. The second was from Joe DiMaggio, with whom she was married for

under a year, from January 1954 to October 1954.⁵ Her final divorce came after four years with Arthur Miller, ending in 1961.⁶ She tried desperately to conceive with Miller but was unable to fulfill her dream of having children.⁷ Monroe failed to achieve the 1950s “staples” of womanhood: she couldn’t keep a man (although it is important to note that she filed for divorce all three times), and she didn’t succeed at having a child. “She suffered at least two miscarriages and was never able to have a child,” *The New York Times* wrote. “Her emotional insecurity deepened,”⁸ as would anyone’s when handling such intense losses, especially without a strong support system.

In addition to these stressors in her personal life, about a year prior to Monroe’s death her acting career took a downward turn because of disillusionment with the industry. Her poor attendance had her fired from a role, and recent films were box-office flops. This culminated in Monroe’s increased drug abuse.⁹ She was known to drink heavily, champagne being a favorite, often mixing alcohol with prescription pills. Ultimately, drugs would be the death of Marilyn Monroe on August 4th, 1962. She was found face down in her bed in her Brentwood, Los Angeles home. She was found by her housekeeper, Eunice Murray. Murray initially called Monroe’s psychoanalyst Dr. Ralph Greenson; later, the police were called. It was assumed, following the nature of the life events leading up to her death and the condition she was found in, that she committed suicide.¹⁰ The official police report

² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Marilyn Monroe American Actress,” accessed December 9, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marilyn-Monroe>.

³ Special to The New York Times, “First Scene Put Her in Limelight,” August 6, 1962, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/22/specials/monroe-obit3.html>.

⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Marilyn Monroe American Actress.”

⁵ “Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio: The End of a Marriage, 1954,” *LIFE* (blog), January 14, 2014, <https://www.life.com/people/tearful-photos-from-the-day-marilyn-divorced-dimaggio-in-1954/>.

⁶ “Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio.”

⁷ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Marilyn Monroe American Actress.”

⁸ Special to The New York Times, “First Scene Put Her in Limelight.”

⁹ Robert W. Welkos, “Marilyn’s Secret Tapes,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 15, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/news/la-et-marilyn5aug05-story.html.s>

¹⁰ History.com Editors, “Marilyn Monroe Is Found Dead,” *HISTORY*, accessed December 9, 2022,

rules a “probable suicide.”¹¹ It is highly possible that the overdose was accidental. It is also possible and has been postulated by numerous male conspiracists over the years, that she was intentionally drugged with the intent to kill.

3. Definitions

To ensure clarity of analysis, the term “male gaze” will be defined specifically within the context of this essay. The “male gaze” is a term coined by Laura Mulvey in her paper “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” published in 1975. According to Mulvey, “[t]he male gaze refers to the way women are objectified by the camera lens in Hollywood movies because men are in control of the production process and make decisions that appeal to their own values and interests.”¹² The male gaze is pervasive beyond the cinematic realm; the concept can easily be lifted from film and transplanted into a conspiratorial context. The term is also particularly apt in the scope of this research, considering Monroe was famously subjected to the male gaze throughout her career. In this paper, I draw on the concept of the male gaze to examine how men control the conspiratorial narratives around Monroe’s death to drive interpretations that appeal to “their own values and interests.”

As an actress, Monroe was hyper-sexualized. My definition of hyper-sexuality for this discussion’s purpose will be two-fold. First, the term refers to the minimization and objectification of people, especially women, for their aesthetically sexual and seductive qualities, including their face, body, voice, mannerisms, and personality. The use of “hyper” implies that the objectification goes beyond what is considered normal and reduces the person to

nothing more than their perceived allure based shallowly on physical appearance and mannerisms. Again, it is predominantly levied against women to reduce them to an item to be marveled at or procured, rather than a human being. The second implication of hyper-sexuality is far more nuanced. It deals with the tendency to use the reduced version of the hyper-sexualized person as an item, pawn, or object. It serves to lessen the depth and space someone is allowed to take up because of stripped agency from their personhood. This form of reductionist hyper-sexualization is common throughout the discussion of Monroe’s death conspiracy. She has been repeatedly understood and contextualized through her value to men, such as the Kennedys, or as a pawn in a political game.

4. Hyper-Sexuality and the Male Gaze

Monroe’s narrative has been controlled by men since well before she died. As a young actress, Monroe was molded into the woman she became on screen. Like countless other golden-age Hollywood actresses, Monroe was rebranded—stripped of her given name and appearance in favor of a title and look suitable for the silver screen. Norma Jeane Mortenson, a modest woman, was reborn as Marilyn Monroe: a symbol fit to be flashed around the world. Bosley Crowther, journalist for *The New York Times* wrote: “at one time, even the magical initials, M. M., and the image of the shapely, soft, blonde charmer would seductively swim into mind.”¹³ This was published on August 6th, 1962, the day after Monroe was discovered dead. It is clear from Crowther’s choice of descriptive language—“shapely,” “soft,” “seductive,” “magical,” “charmer”—that Monroe’s public image was jejune, even infantile. Crowther’s diction

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/marilyn-monroe-is-found-dead>.

¹¹ Jay Margolis and Buskin, Richard, *The Murder of Marilyn Monroe: Case Closed* (Skyhorse, 2016).

¹² “Laura Mulvey’s ‘Male Gaze,’” *Media Studies*, August 2, 2021, <https://media-studies.com/male-gaze/>.

¹³ Bosley Crowther, “Actress as a Symbol,” August 6, 1962, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/11/22/specials/monroe-obit4.html>.

demonstrates a trend in the articles that directly followed news of Monroe's death. Though she ought to have been mourned and remembered, a modern lens reveals that these publications give jarring, often vile and wildly inappropriate descriptions that exemplify how the star was appraised in life. Crowther continues: "It was the image of feminine allurements, compounded of the silver-blond tresses, the wide-eyed stare, the pouting lips, the baby-talk burble in a husky sing-song voice and the remarkable body that were the physical attributes of Miss Monroe."¹⁴ Despite being an article about her life in honor of her passing, there is a distinct focus on the "remarkable body" and "physical attributes" that characterized Monroe, in lieu of attention to her career, cultural importance, and achievements. The pointed commentary on her "wide-eyed stare," "pouting lips," and most concerning, "baby-talk burble," are deeply disturbing observations, underlining the extent to which Monroe was systematically fetishized and infantilized in the media. The broader implications of how fixated the article is on her child-like features suggests a troubling, dangerous understanding of what the epitome of female sexuality looks like. Monroe's persona connected problematic physical and aesthetic standards of beauty with limiting social requirements for women. Touting one of the most admired women in the world as nothing more than an adult baby essentially sets the sexual standard at child. Even with a generous interpretation of these descriptions, the expectation set for women was coy, "wide-eyed" helplessness. Women portrayed as childlike crafted a cultural understanding of an ideal woman: someone who remained dependent upon men for support and direction.

A large part of the hyper-sexualization that Monroe endured was the constant pressure to be prototype perfect. When she was found dead, men at *The Los Angeles Times* reported that "She

¹⁴ Crowther.

was unkempt and in need of a manicure and pedicure, indicating listlessness and a lack of interest in maintaining her usually glamorous appearance."¹⁵ The implication that the simple lack of polished nails indicated "listlessness," with a more severe undertone of depression, considering Monroe failed to maintain a "glamorous appearance," sets an egregious aesthetic standard for women. The presence or lack of nail polish is not an indication of mental health. It is humiliating and demeaning to comment on such trivial aspects of Monroe's appearance when she was found deceased. It perpetuates the extreme standard of beauty and sexuality Monroe had to maintain to appease the druthers of men, even in death.

In her short career, Monroe quickly became a national and even global figure. The media was acutely aware of her status as a symbol, and how limiting it was. In fact, the point is belabored in the articles written posthumously. The Marilyn Monroe we know and love "was fashioned into the female image that was ... flashed as a symbol around the world," explained Crowther.¹⁶ By definition, a symbol is an "object having cultural significance and the capacity to excite or objectify a response."¹⁷ Monroe certainly had the "capacity to excite," and she was more than just objectified. Crowther continues: "The persistence of this image of the exceptionally lovely movie star could be explained by the fact that in the common view, she was more a symbol than an artist."¹⁸ Crowther did not hesitate to take this opportunity to insult Monroe by questioning her validity as "an artist." He simultaneously and inadvertently acknowledged that Monroe's status as a symbol detracted from the respect she garnered as an artist. She was so "exceptionally

¹⁵ Howard Hertel and Don Neff, "From the Archives: Marilyn Monroe Dies; Pills Blamed," *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 1962, <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/archives/la-me-marilyn-monroe-19620806-story.html>.

¹⁶ Crowther, "Actress as a Symbol."

¹⁷ "Definition of SYMBOL," accessed December 9, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/symbol>.

¹⁸ Crowther, "Actress as a Symbol."

lovely” that “the common view” never bothered to consider her more deeply, beyond the allure and glamor. For a woman so popularly regarded, it is devastating, but not astonishing, that the esteem she earned as an actress was denied as a symptom of hyper-sexualization in the public eye. As a repercussion of the constant, unyielding sexualization, it became nearly impossible for Monroe to be valued for anything other than her physical features.

5. The Conspiracies

Myriad conspiracy theories have been advanced since Monroe’s death sixty years ago. While most often centered around the Kennedy family, a prominent political family of socialites, many theories involve the CIA, FBI, the Chicago mob, and Monroe’s own therapist as well. Male conspiracists and reporters make up an overwhelming majority of contributors to the conspiratorial canon that encircles Monroe’s death. Unsurprisingly, each of these theories position Monroe as a gambit in schemes far larger than herself.

Monroe’s legacy, especially her death, is inherently contextualized by her relationship with the Kennedys. This is a result of the significance of the family in American culture overall. The Kennedys are famous in part for being entrenched in conspiracies of their own. Relating the Kennedys closely to Monroe’s death enhances the mystery of how she died by weaving her into the extensive Kennedy conspiracy net. It is also a result of direct and suspected links to the Kennedys when she died. Monroe’s infamous performance of “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” in honor of John F. Kennedy has been touted as sultry at best, and downright seductive at worst. It spurred rumors that Monroe was having an affair with the President.¹⁹ That is followed by a rumor that when John F. Kennedy was over her, he handed her off to his brother, Attorney General

Robert Kennedy.²⁰ Today it is widely accepted that Monroe did have an affair with JFK and likely Robert Kennedy as well. Most importantly, however, Monroe’s involvement with the Kennedy family reflects the tendency to conceptualize women in terms of their relationships to men, especially powerful men. The association between women and powerful men reflects historical patriarchal ideals in which women were the property of men. Viewing women primarily in relation to men is one of the more sinister reductionist tools employed by the patriarchy to ensure women remain subjugated, because it dissolves women’s autonomy and diminishes the respect they are perceived to deserve. It is a recurring theme, especially in the conspiracies surrounding her death, to see Monroe presented via her usefulness or lack thereof to a man.

It is no surprise, then, that “Monroe’s purported relationship with the Kennedy family factors into almost all conspiracy theories about her death.”²¹ The first conspiracy theory published, aside from friends who “were nearly unanimous in believing her death was accidental” as opposed to by her own hands, was in 1964, two years after her death.²² Frank A. Capell wrote the book *The Strange Death of Marilyn Monroe*. A piece of propaganda, Capell used his book to advance the theory that Monroe and everyone close to her was a communist spy. Reviewer David Marshall wrote that the book was full of “staunch anti-Kennedy, anti-Communist, high moral preachings of the far right.”²³ Immediately, the political motives are abundantly clear. Marshall

²⁰ Tierney McAfee, “All About Marilyn Monroe’s Alleged Affair with John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy,” *Peoplemag*, October 16, 2022, <https://people.com/politics/marilyn-monroe-affair-john-f-kennedy-robert-f-kennedy/>.

²¹ Carli Velocci, “7 Conspiracy Theories About Marilyn Monroe’s Death From Murderous Kennedys to UFOs,” June 1, 2017, <https://www.thewrap.com/7-theories-marilyn-monroe-death/>.

²² Hertel and Neff, “From the Archives.”

²³ David Marshall, “The Strange Death of Marilyn Monroe by Frank Capell,” Collection Master, [marilynmonroe.ca](http://www.marilynmonroe.ca), 2006, <http://www.marilynmonroe.ca/camera/books/89.html>.

¹⁹ Welkos, “Marilyn’s Secret Tapes.”

continues that it was “[Capell’s] vicious attacks on Monroe that truly surprise[d]. The feeling one gets from Capell is that sure Marilyn was a tramp who played with fire and got what she deserved, but tramp or not, the Commies were behind the whole thing and that’s what we need to focus on ... And EVERYONE is a Communist in Marilyn’s world.”²⁴ It is no surprise that Capell’s discussion of Monroe paints her as a “tramp who played with fire,” both degrading her for her sexual nature and blaming her for her own demise, claiming that, essentially, “she asked for it.” Capell’s angle was to smear Robert Kennedy’s name by relating him closely to the evil communists, who are also, in Capell’s world, known to include deviant sexual women deserving of their fates, like Monroe. The more scandalous, raunchy, and perverted, the more incendiary and effective the piece of propaganda. It is important to remember that at the heart of Capell’s attacks was the election of 1964, in which Robert Kennedy “was running for the Senate.”²⁵ Capell was vehemently right-wing, while Robert Kennedy represented more liberal ideologies. Capell’s demeaning theory about Monroe’s death was the first to severely reduce Monroe to a mere political pawn, a hapless victim. It served primarily to advance Capell’s anti-Kennedy, anti-communist propaganda, and further his right-wing political agenda. Although one of the first, Capell was certainly not the last man to objectify and shame Monroe following her death.

In 1975, journalist Anthony Scaduto followed Capell’s Monroe-was-a-Communist Conspiracy with his article *Who Killed Marilyn Monroe* in *Oui Magazine*.²⁶ Scaduto claimed Monroe “was murdered and that police and the coroner’s office participated in a cover up.”²⁷ He connected her

death to Robert Kennedy, who, according to Scaduto, killed Monroe to keep her silent about a “diary filled with incriminating information she overheard from the Kennedys.”²⁸ This theory advanced the notion of Monroe’s expendability to the Kennedys. As soon as she became a liability, Monroe was no longer of use. The theory suggests that because she was already essentially an object to Robert Kennedy, he chose to have her dealt with permanently to protect himself. Monroe as a disposable asset is a recurring theme in the proposed narratives detailing the events that led up to her death. Scaduto provided another male-created conspiracy about Monroe, advancing the canon that she was basically a throw-away factor in grander cover-ups. As a hyper-sexualized woman in American pop culture, it is no shock that she was, and continues to be, viewed as disposable.

Another conspiracy was proposed by Anthony Summers in his 1985 book *Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe*.²⁹ Once again, the Kennedys are heavily implicated in the theory. Summers, while an acclaimed author, only further convolutes the pool of Monroe’s conspiracy theories. He claimed that when “Robert Kennedy broke off their affair, Monroe threatened to go public,” so Kennedy and his brother-in-law Peter Lawford (also a friend of Monroe’s) pushed her drug addiction to the point of accidental overdose.³⁰ The death was then covered up by Kennedy and Lawford, and somehow incriminated FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in the whole affair.³¹³² Summers’ theory once again contextualized Monroe in relation to the men she associated with.

Donald Spoto, an American biographer,

²⁴ Marshall.

²⁵ Marshall.

²⁶ Velocci, “7 Conspiracy Theories About Marilyn Monroe’s Death From Murderous Kennedys to UFOs.”

²⁷ Jeff Wilson, “Marilyn Monroe Death Documents Reveal Peter Lawford’s Anguish,” AP NEWS, September 24, 1985, <https://apnews.com/article/709c9cb3a0afa87c7277c64ebffaada1>.

²⁸ Velocci, “7 Conspiracy Theories About Marilyn Monroe’s Death From Murderous Kennedys to UFOs.”

²⁹ Velocci.

³⁰ Velocci.

³¹ Velocci.

³² Kaytie Norman, “Anthony Summers Discusses ‘Goddess: The Secret Lives of Marilyn Monroe,’” *earlybirdbooks.com*, April 1, 2022, <https://earlybirdbooks.com/anthony-summers-interview-goddess-marilyn-monroe>.

claims that Monroe's death was unrelated to the Kennedy family entirely.³³ Remarkably, it is the only serious conspiracy theory put forth that is not somehow related to the Kennedys. In fact, Spoto says that "[t]he Kennedys had almost nothing to do with her."³⁴ She was killed instead by her psychiatrist Dr. Greenson, who had the housekeeper—the same one that found Monroe the following morning—administer a lethal dosage of drugs via enema. It was proposed that "[t]o stay on the payroll, Spoto suggests they 'conspired to keep her drugged and dependent.' The shrink was retreating into a 'psychoneurotic fear of abandonment and rejection'" because Monroe was not interested in working with him anymore.³⁵ In this case, Dr. Greenson's personal obsession and fixation with Monroe was the force that killed her. An obsession of that magnitude speaks to how severely she was reduced from an autonomous human being to a person who was controlled by others. It has also been alleged that Monroe was having an affair with Greenson, which would further an unhealthy, potentially lethal obsession.³⁶ Spoto's claim positions Monroe as a victim of male temper and possessiveness; the fear of losing her was so overwhelming that Dr. Greenson chose murder over treating her as a woman with personal autonomy.

The 2004 conspiracy put forth by Matthew Smith in the book *Victim: The Secret Tapes of Marilyn Monroe* implicates the CIA in Monroe's murder, claiming she was killed as revenge for the Kennedys' Bay of Pigs invasion.³⁷ Smith argues that Monroe was "a woman in full charge

of her life," which staunchly opposes the anecdote that she was depressed and suicidal leading up to her death.³⁸ He does, however, further the notion that Monroe was reduced to a token in the CIA's game. Similarly, in 2010 members of the Chicago Mob published *Double Cross*, which takes responsibility for Monroe's death as payback to Robert Kennedy for his sustained attack on the mob. The Mob's goal was to frame Robert Kennedy for Monroe's death, with "evidence of Bobby's presence there only hours old."³⁹ To the "Chicago Godfather's disappointment, FBI agents quickly removed all traces of Bobby's presence at the apartment," implying a substantial cover up.⁴⁰ Monroe was dead, and the alleged desired outcome—pinning the murder on Robert—was not achieved. In the conspiracy proposed in *Double Cross*, it seemed as if it were almost automatic protocol to wipe all traces of Kennedy's supposed presence. In both conspiracies, Monroe is treated as nothing more than collateral. She was a pawn in men's sick games of revenge and the pursuit of political power.

6. Discussion

As discussed throughout the conspiracies put forth about Monroe's death, she is continually perceived to be dependent upon or at the mercy of the men around her. Predictably, it is solely male reporters and conspiracy theorists who have advanced these narratives. In fact, these men are expanding upon a persistent fixation. That is abundantly clear from the decades of iterations of conspiracies about Monroe's death that have

³³ Neil Genzlinger, "Donald Spoto, Biographer of Hitchcock and Many More, Dies at 81," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/17/books/donald-spoto-dead.html>.

³⁴ Paul Rosenfield, "Leave the Kennedys Out of It: MARILYN MONROE: The Biography, By Donald Spoto," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1993, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-05-02-bk-29911-story.html>.

³⁵ Rosenfield.

³⁶ Margolis and Buskin, Richard, *The Murder of Marilyn Monroe: Case Closed*.

³⁷ Velocci, "7 Conspiracy Theories About Marilyn Monroe's Death From Murderous Kennedys to UFOs."

³⁸ Matthew Smith, *Victim: The Secret Tapes of Marilyn Monroe* (London: Arrow, 2004), https://archive.org/details/victimsecrettape0000smit_f0i8.

³⁹ "U.S.-Star - Marilyn Monroe Was Killed on Orders of Mafia Godfather in 'Perfect' Hit | Double Cross," *Double Cross*, accessed December 7, 2022, <http://doublecrossthebook.com/in-the-news/u-s-star-marilyn-monroe-was-killed-on-orders-of-mafia-godfather-in-perfect-hit/>.

⁴⁰ "U.S.-Star - Marilyn Monroe Was Killed on Orders of Mafia Godfather in 'Perfect' Hit | Double Cross."

been devised and published by men. Monroe was self-made, self-educated, and a career woman, despite mental health struggles, an unstable early life, and the constant pressure of perfection—that is, she was anything but infantile and helpless.

As a result of the hyper-sexualized stardom, Monroe was and continues to be placed into a limiting societal box where she is exclusively seen as tragic, fragile, vulnerable, and frivolous. Fueled by the fascination and fixation of men, this is maintained in the discussion around her death. The potency and longevity of the conspiracies that swirl around Monroe's death are the culmination of the hyper-sexualization she was subjected to in life.

Men have been bickering over who gets the final word on Monroe's death for decades. In the neurotic efforts to pin her passing on something larger than herself, men have entirely co-opted the narrative. The male gaze has permeated every aspect of the conspiracy theories surrounding Monroe's death, resulting in the perpetuation of a warped, limited understanding of who Monroe was in life.

Setting the hyper-sexualization and fetishization aside, it could be argued that stardom at the level Monroe achieved it, in tandem with her untimely death, is enough to launch conspiracy theories. There are notable similarities in the case of Elvis, a superstar and prescription pill addict who met a premature end. The distinction, however, is that Elvis is rumored to still be alive. The big "theory is that Elvis didn't die, that he faked his death to protect himself and his family from death threats stemming from his work as a government agent, that rumors about his drug use were spread to support the cover-up, and that he has been living under an assumed identity in a government protection program ever since."⁴¹ Even though Elvis easily rivals Monroe as a hyper-sexualized pop-culture symbol, his death will never hold the same intense

fetishization because as a man, he was not subjected to the male gaze as Monroe was. Instead of being killed as collateral by government agents, it is theorized that Elvis was a government agent.⁴² Instead of dying a drug abuser's death, it is hypothesized that drugs were a cover for Elvis to slip away into obscurity. As much as people obsess over Elvis, instead of becoming a political pawn having all personal agency stripped as Monroe has been in her conspiracies, he is rumored to be living a peaceful life with a new identity—a far cry from the stories that were born out of Monroe's death. The contrast is clear: conspiracy theories about Elvis preserve autonomy over his body and life, whereas Monroe's conspiracies deprive her of such privileges.

7. Conclusion

Monroe's legacy, death, and most significantly the conspiracy theories that surround her death reveal the potent effect the male gaze has on media and pop culture. Monroe is the ideal case study of a woman inescapably contextualized by men. She epitomizes hyper-sexualization, so much so that the objectification she fell victim to in life is deeply ingrained in the narrative around her death. Regardless of how she died, or what led up to her untimely death, Monroe's capacity to maintain the American public's obsession and the American man's infatuation speaks to how powerful, dangerous, and damning superstar, sex-symbol status can be. The precarious pedestal women like Monroe are put on provides a platform for toxic and destructive treatment. That treatment has since been over-analyzed and extrapolated by male conspiracy theorists, further stripping Monroe of her agency and autonomy in death. Monroe's is a cautionary tale for women. She was, and still is, a victim of the perils of demeaning hyper-sexualization and the derogatory male gaze. Marilyn Monroe deserves

⁴¹ Mark Morrison, "THE ELVIS CONSPIRACY," September 15, 1994, <https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/VA-news/ROA-Times/issues/1994/rt0994/940915/09160009.htm>.

⁴² Morrison.

to be remembered as more than a sex symbol, more than an item to be hoarded, and more than a disposable pawn in grand political schemes; she deserves to be remembered as a human.

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