

Comparatismi 8 2023

ISSN 2531-7547

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14672/20232289>

“Meat to be Delivered” Disgust and Empathy in *Blonde* across Media

Gabriele D'Amato

Abstract • The article examines the role played by readers' engagement with characters in their interpretive strategies of physical and moral disgust, by taking as its point of departure the concept of “character-centered illusion” developed by Marco Caracciolo. Through my case studies – the novel *Blonde* (2000) and its film adaptation (2022) – I attempt to show how formally and thematically similar works may produce a different reception of disgust, depending on a different structural juxtaposition between empathetic perspective-taking and cognitive dissonance toward their protagonist, Norma Jeane. In my comparative analysis I focus on a range of formal and thematic strategies adopted by the two works to elicit disgust in their recipients, distinguishing between differential and medium-specific techniques. I then examine how the two works foreground Norma Jeane's fractured identity and altered state of consciousness as a means of problematizing readers' engagement with her. While highlighting the continuities between the novel and the movie, I suggest that the latter disrupts the effective balance between empathy and cognitive dissonance of the former by relying heavily on the conventions of the psychological horror and Norma Jeane's hallucinatory and delusional states, thus forcing a switch in viewers' interpretive strategies.

Keywords • Disgust; Empathy; *Blonde*; Character-centered illusion; Unreadable minds

Ledizioni 

“Meat to be Delivered” Disgust and Empathy in *Blonde* across Media

Gabriele D’Amato

I. Introduction

Before its release in September 2022, Andrew Dominik’s *Blonde*,¹ based on the novel of the same title by Joyce Carol Oates (2000), was anticipated as one of Netflix’s most ambitious original productions to date. Nevertheless, after mixed reviews during the 79th Venice International Film Festival, the movie sparked controversy for several reasons, including its graphic depiction of rape, sexual harassments, psychological abuses, and forced abortions, with many critics and viewers accusing Dominik himself of exploiting Marilyn Monroe’s life and image.² In the harshest reviews, words related to “disgust” were used widely, with “disgusted” viewers turning off the “unwatchable Marilyn Monroe drama after just 20 minutes” (Chilton, 2022; Diente, 2022). However, most of the movie was straightforwardly adapted from Oates’s novel, which – despite some controversies after its publishing³ – has always been one of Oates’s most appreciated and best-selling works, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Among others, feminist critic Elaine Showalter even praised it as “the definitive study of American celebrity” (Showalter, 2020), while Oates herself always considered the novel as her own *Moby-Dick*.⁴ By taking as its point of departure Marco Caracciolo’s concept of “character-centered illusion” (Caracciolo, 2016), this article aims to analyze a group of themes, formal strategies and narrative techniques through which the novel *Blonde* and its movie adaptation elicit physical and moral disgust in their recipients, in order to explore the different interpretive outcomes and the divergent responses faced by the two works. Drawing on insights from cognitive-oriented narratological studies of fictional minds, I suggest that recipients’ engagement with characters plays a pivotal role in their interpretive strategies of disgust.

¹ Dominik’s *Blonde* is not a Marilyn Monroe biopic, but a faithful adaptation of Joyce Carol Oates’ fictionalization of Monroe’s life as Norma Jeane. While Oates makes that very clear in an “Author’s Note” at the beginning of the book – where the novel is defined as “a radically distilled ‘life’ in the form of fiction” –, the movie’s fictional take relies entirely on Oates’s work (see Oates, 2000, p. VII). Throughout both the novel and the movie, symbolic events and encounters are selected in place of numerous real happenings, and characters’ names are usually replaced by symbolic nicknames (or by their last initials), such as the Ex-Athlete, the Playwright, the President, who conceal fictional counterparts of Joe DiMaggio, Arthur Miller, and JFK, respectively.

² Among the most popular online review aggregators, *Blonde* is currently “rotten” on Rotten Tomatoes with a 42% critics’ score and an even worse 34% audience score, while on IMDb and Letterboxd it currently has a 5.5/10 score and a terrible 2.0/5 score, respectively. Moreover, the movie has been “honored” with two Razzie Awards, for Worst Picture and Worst Screenplay of the year.

³ Even unimpressed reviewers felt the need to address its status as a notable candidate for the contemporary Great American Novel (see Connolly, 2000).

⁴ Regarding Oates’s novel, I will examine online customer reviews from GoodReads.com and Amazon.com, where the novel has a 3.95/5 score and a 4.2/5 score, respectively.

Since Ralf Schneider's (2001) and Alan Palmer's (2004) seminal works on literary characters and fictional minds, contemporary narratology has devoted increasing attention to the representation of characters' mental processes and readers' responses to them. In relating to characters, readers may engage in the complex phenomenon of empathetic perspective-taking. In his analysis of the concept, Berys Gaut focused on the "aspectual" nature of empathetic perspective-taking (Gaut, 1999), by underlining how readers can take on different aspects of characters' perspectives,⁵ while Jens Eder described the gradations of the phenomenon through the metaphor of "being close" to characters (Eder, 2006). In Caracciolo's analysis, the character-centered illusion is "a specific kind of experience in which readers come to value a fictional representation of mind because of its interest, effectiveness, or plausibility" (Caracciolo, 2016, p. 8); it can be considered a subtype of Werner Wolf's "aesthetic illusion", regarded as the "feeling of being recentered in a possible world as if it were (a slice of) life" (Wolf, 2004, p. 325). In a recent essay, Wolf follows a comparative perspective and explores the concept of aesthetic illusion across media, defining it as a transmedial phenomenon, through a comparison between literary fiction, cinema, and painting (Wolf, 2017). Similarly, Caracciolo acknowledges that "more than other narratological categories, 'character' seems easily transposable across the media" (Caracciolo, 2014, p. 189) and explores the concept of character-centered illusion from a transmedial perspective. Moreover, the concept of character is strictly bound up with the notion of subjectivity, one of the three narratological categories explored by Jan-Noël Thon – alongside with storyworlds and narrators – as transmedial ones in *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (2016). Thus, I will analyze audiences' engagement with *Blonde*'s protagonist, Norma Jeane Baker,⁶ in both the novel and the movie, relying on the transmedial nature of the character-centered illusion, in order to investigate the relationship between disgust and empathetic perspective-taking along the two works.

My main assumption is that the physical and especially moral disgust elicited by the movie should not be considered inherent to the content of the movie itself, but that it depends on the movie's failure to transpose the novel's structural juxtaposition of empathetic perspective-taking and cognitive dissonance in recipients' engagement with Norma Jeane. My approach is admittedly speculative and relies on critics' and audiences' reviews, a "soft" methodological option" in Caracciolo's words (2016, p. 26). Among other possible interpretations, I acknowledge that a medium with a visual dominant such as cinema could arouse visceral emotions like disgust, especially physical disgust, more easily than a verbal medium such as the novel. Moreover, the audiences' cultural landscape could have changed significantly during the twenty-two years gap between the novel and the movie, particularly regarding female characters' representations in fiction after the explosion of the #MeToo movement in the United States.⁷ Finally, another contextual as-

⁵ In Caracciolo's work, the "aspectual" nature of empathy plays a central role, as he distinguishes between "five different aspects of another person's (or character's) perspective that we may imaginatively simulate" (2016, p. 39), by explaining that "we can, for instance, take on a character's emotional or perceptual perspective without buying into his or her ethical evaluations" (p. 47).

⁶ Following Oates's novel, I will call *Blonde*'s main character Norma Jeane Baker, since the studio name "Marilyn Monroe" is considered by the author one of the many roles played by and imposed to Norma Jeane during her life. Moreover, Oates always called her Norma Jeane in interviews (see Johnson, 2003).

⁷ Even though the majority of readers' reviews examined for Oates's *Blonde* are taken from the years 2018-2022.

pect to consider – albeit common to both the novel and the movie – is the “question of hybrids”: in his exploration of narrative and truth, H. Porter Abbott takes Oates’s *Blonde* as an example of biographical fictions that produce an “asymmetry between what is expected of fiction and what is expected of nonfiction” (Abbott, 2008, pp. 152-153). While Abbott seems to believe that an author’s statement (as in a title such as *Blonde: A Novel*) will lead recipients to accept the experiment, I believe that reception may be problematic even in the presence of such a statement, as Dominik’s provocative approach to the biopic genre demonstrates. However, I follow a cognitive and transmedial narratological approach to suggest that, while Oates’s novel manages to resolve the elements of disgust through a “generalizing interpretation”, Dominik’s movie forces recipients to take on a “perspectival” interpretation (Caracciolo, 2016, pp. 8-15), mainly focusing on the director’s immorality.

2. Formal strategies and narrative techniques to elicit disgust

According to Paul Ekman’s classification (Ekman, 1973), disgust is one of the basic emotions and has biological roots as a defense mechanism against contaminated objects (rotten food and tastes, pungent odors, corpses and carcasses) that could also help to enforce hygiene-related behaviors. However, following Jesse Prinz’s account, physical disgust can be “recruited” by human cultures to produce a secondary, sociocultural emotion known as *moral* disgust (Prinz, 2007).

In recent years, much ink has been spilled on the relationship between physical and moral disgust, with many cognitive psychologists and philosophers claiming their incompatibility, and others remarking their common roots. Among others, Iskra Fileva offers a good take on the state-of-the-art, by acknowledging the existence of skeptical positions on moral disgust as a mere metaphor or as simply physical disgust with a moral trigger, while arguing the existence of a genuine moral disgust (Fileva, 2020). However, in the studies on the relationship between disgust and art – recently explored more thoroughly by film studies and aesthetic philosophy – the connection between physical and moral disgust is more generally accepted, following the popular distinction between physical (or core) disgust and moral (or sociomoral) disgust.⁸ As suggested by film scholar Carl Plantinga (2006, p. 82), this distinction stems in part from the most influential taxonomy of disgust, developed by Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley, whose original version posited seven types of disgust (Haidt, McCauley, Rozin, 1994) later reduced to four: core disgust (rejection of contaminants, such as food, animals, body products), animal reminder disgust (sex, death, hygiene, violations of bodily envelopes), interpersonal disgust (avoidance of contact with other humans), and moral disgust (Rozin, Haidt, McCauley, 2008). Thus, in film studies, Plantinga reflects on the relationship between “*physical disgust* and *sociomoral disgust*” and argues that “the social components of disgust can perhaps be best seen in the way that physical disgust quickly shades into sociomoral disgust” (Plantinga, 2006, p. 82). Similarly, Julian Hanich admits that “bodily and moral disgust are often strongly intertwined” (Hanich, 2011, p. 11), while Dan Flory suggests the existence of a subtype of moral disgust called “racialized disgust” and states that the “crucial distinction for [his] purposes is between ‘core’ and sociomoral disgust” (Flory, 2016, p. 19). In this

⁸ As reminded by Nina Strohminger, there are many classifications without an “empirically grounded structure of disgust” (2014, p. 481).

article I will follow this distinction by exploring the links between physical and moral disgust in *Blonde*, and by observing how the former can work as a trigger for the latter.

In an insightful article, Hanich argued that the production of disgust in cinema "is based on recurring aesthetic strategies" (Hanich, 2009, p. 299), offering an admittedly partial but helpful list of the most prevalent ones. Among else, he underlines a purely technical strategy, such as close-up, as well as an experiential one, such as character engagement. In my analysis of *Blonde*, I would like to distinguish between "differential" and "medium-specific" strategies to elicit disgust in both the novel and the movie. As previously mentioned, my assumption is that elements that could easily arouse disgust are present in both works, although they are interpreted in different ways. Following Gaut's definition, differential features are "features that differ between one group of media and another specified group" (Gaut, 2010, p. 224): for example, being or not being a narrative medium is a differential feature between cinema and instrumental music. In *Blonde*, it is possible to highlight at least three differential strategies peculiar to both the novel and the movie: the use of *unsettling metaphors*, the *disruption of bodily boundaries*, and the *fragmentation of perspectives*.

Oates's *Blonde* is full of graphic and almost unbearable descriptions of sexual harassments, psychological abuses, and female objectification. However, one of the most audacious choices is the frequent use of unsettling metaphors that associate Norma Jeane's body with animals or food. This seems to be a common practice in the studio system, with many producers, directors, agents, photographers, and reporters referring to Norma Jeane in these terms. One of the most recurrent metaphors is the association of Norma Jeane's body with meat, which usually brings together the animal and the food metaphors. For example, in a section where the photographer Otto Öse is the focalizing character, Norma Jeane is described as "a piece of luscious meat to be marketed" (Oates, 2000, p. 235). Similarly, many years later, once Norma Jeane has become "Marilyn Monroe", the narrator describes journalists and reporters as vultures or jackals, greedy to scavenge on her carrion:

They were there at the birth of the star and they were there at the death. They rhapsodized the flesh and they picked at the bones. Greedily they licked the beautiful skin and greedily they sucked the delicious marrow. In boldface in the fifties proclaiming MARILYN MONROE MARILYN MONROE MARILYN MONROE (p. 373).

The association with meat seems to be intensified by Norma Jeane's popularity and the occurrences increase as we progress through the novel. It is especially her marriage with the Ex-Athlete to be shaped by this obsession; his manipulative jealousy frequently explodes in angry outbursts: "Is that what you are? Meat?" (p. 441). Moreover, he finds her movies and her ways of exposing the body disgusting. Indeed, a form of disgusted repulsion directed *at* Norma Jeane is thematized throughout the novel as a way that men find to counterbalance the irresistible attraction to her. This kind of repulsion can easily provoke moral disgust in the reader, since it clearly depends on the Ex-Athlete's (and other male figures') anxiety of possessing her body just for himself:

Yet the Ex-Athlete was roused to anger if other men stared at the Blond Actress too pointedly. Or if vulgar remarks were made in his hearing. He didn't generally approve of the Blond Actress's public performances, her Marilyn self. He wanted her to dress provocatively for him, yet not for others. He'd been shocked and disgusted by *Niagara*, both the film and the lascivious and ubiquitous billboards. [...] Didn't she care that she was being advertised like meat? When "Miss Golden Dreams" was resurrected to run as the centerfold in the first issue of *Playboy*, the Ex-Athlete had been infuriated (pp. 417-418).

In this case, readers' moral disgust is enhanced by the perspective shift, since recipients are exposed to the Ex-Athlete's focalization and have access to his thoughts. Thus, as we will see, his misogynistic disgust toward Norma Jeane produces a moral friction in readers, who are brought to share his perceptual or epistemic perspective without adopting his emotional or axiological stance (Caracciolo, 2016, pp. 39-40).

Other men try to possess Norma Jeane's body by giving her different *names* – a significant dehumanizing strategy, as we will see – and associating her with animals or foods: Cass Chaplin and Eddy G Robinson, for example, foreshadowing the first abortion, call her “fish” and explain the meaning of the name through graphic and explicit images: “‘Fish’ only just means female. The sticky scales, the classic stink. A fish is slimy, y’ see? A fish is a kind of female no matter if it’s actually a male, specially when you see a fish gutted and laid out, get my meaning? It’s nothing personal” (Oates, 2000, p. 336).

The movie tries to transpose this use of unsettling metaphors, both adapting them textually and finding new medium-specific strategies. One of the most daring solutions can be found in a threesome sex scene with Cass and Eddy G: while Norma Jeane (Ana De Armas) is reaching orgasm, the white bed sheets turn into Niagara Falls, the natural landscape of the “lascivious” movie starring “Marilyn Monroe” deplored by the Ex-Athlete. The bold transition may destabilize the audiences and arouse physical disgust because of the association of the bodily fluids of the sexual act with waterfalls. However, the strategy more frequently adopted by the movie to provoke disgust is the disruption of bodily boundaries. Following István Czachesz (2009), Caracciolo argues that “the destabilization of bodily boundaries elicits a mixture of fear and disgust in the audience” (Caracciolo, 2016, p. 89). In Dominik's *Blonde*, Norma Jeane's bodily boundaries are constantly violated, sometimes *literally*. It happens most prominently in two of the most controversial scenes, depicting the two abortions: after being forced into the operating room, Norma Jeane undergoes the operation while the camera *in utero* presents the room with a point-of-view shot from the inside,⁹ almost crawling outside, showing the doctors' scalpels and scoops. However, this morbid obsession with Norma Jeane's body seems to be experienced by recipients also in Oates's *Blonde*. For example, in a review posted on GoodReads.com, Julie writes that “disturbingly, Oates seems even more obsessed with Marilyn's body than the raving fans: dwelling, obsessively, on skin and excretions and secretions, *ad nauseam*. She is preoccupied with Marilyn's sexual intimacies and her miscarriages and her womb” (Julie, 2022). Thus, in the novel, the first abortion is represented in a similarly graphic way, even though, as a textual medium, Oates's writing cannot be as uncomfortably close¹⁰ as the movie:

Just as the cold steel speculum entered her body between her legs. Just as they scooped her out as you'd scoop out a fish's guts. Her insides were running down the sides of the scoop. She tossed her head from side to side screaming until the tendons in her throat seized (Oates, 2000, pp. 411-412).

⁹ In an article appeared on “The New York Times”, Manohla Dargis wonders whose subjectivity the scene actually portrays: “I’m still not sure if this is meant to represent the point of view of her cervix or fetuses [...] It certainly isn’t Marilyn’s” (Dargis, 2022).

¹⁰ Following the phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai, Hanich states that “in order to be experienced as disgusting an object must come overly near and penetrate the intimate area of the senses” and analyzes this concept in cinema as “obtrusive nearness” (see Hanich, 2009, pp. 295-296).

In this passage, the disruption of bodily boundaries is combined with the unsettling metaphor that blends Norma Jeane's body (and identity) with the fish's guts, linking the abortion to Cass's and Eddie G's name for her. Another, more ambiguous, destabilization of bodily boundaries is offered in the movie by the infamous "talking fetus" scenes. As we will see, rather than disgusting *per se*, the talking fetus marks another camera obstruction into Norma Jeane's body, an unnatural perspective that could easily repulse the viewers and alienate them from the empathetic perspective-taking: on "Independent", for example, Amanda Whiting confesses that "as a mode of storytelling, [these sequences] are entirely alienating. Marilyn Monroe never seems less real to me than when she's cheerfully dialoguing with the unborn child in her fantastically radiant womb" (Whiting, 2022).

As an unnatural point-of-view shot, the talking fetus brings us to the third differential feature previously mentioned – namely, the fragmentation of perspectives on Norma Jeane. We have already seen how the novel employs this technique to report the Ex-Athlete's misogynistic thoughts, while the movie uses it to penetrate forbidden spaces. Although both the novel and the movie are presented mostly through Norma Jeane's focalization, they employ perspective shifts, sometimes abruptly, in order to make the recipients uncomfortably *align* with the sexual predators' points of view. Thus, there are many chapters or paragraphs in the novel with different characters as narrators or focalizers, either major ones such as the husbands Bucky Glazer, the Ex-Athlete, and the Playwright, and the lovers Cass and Eddie G, or minor characters such as Otto Öse, Frank Widdoes, the unnamed director of *Don't Bother to Knock*, among others. Moreover, some chapters or paragraphs are even narrated by mysterious figures, such as the first-person narrator of the chapter "The Sharpshooter", the you-narration, and the we-narration (first-person *plural* sections) diffused across the novel (for example, there are occurrences of we-narration in the chapters "Freak", "The Broken Altar", and "After the Wedding: A Montage").¹¹ Following Murray Smith (1999), Rita Felski assimilates the narratological category of focalization to the concept of alignment: "alignment refers to the formal means by which texts shape a reader's or viewer's access to character [...] It points to the directive force of narrative, description, and point of view" (Felski, 2019, pp. 93-94). Conversely, "allegiance speaks to the question of how ethical or political values – that is, acts of evaluating – draw audiences closer to some figures rather than others" (p. 95). In Oates's *Blonde*, we have a proliferation of alignments that never produce any sort of compelling allegiance, since readers spend a short period of time engaging with these characters and cannot ethically share their blatant sexism. Moreover, they usually have no name – although referring to their real counterparts – and are sometimes represented by their dramatic function: they basically exist only in relation to Norma Jeane, who is the constant object of their thoughts and judgments. In Caracciolo's terms, recipients are brought to imaginatively simulate the perceptual aspect of their perspective without sharing their emotional or axiological stance (Caracciolo 2016, pp. 39-40). Therefore, the fragmentation of perspectives enhances recipients' moral disgust, since they are forced to formally align with unlikable narrators or focalizers whose idea of Norma Jeane is judgmental and misogynistic. In the movie, this is perfectly summarized by the audition sce-

¹¹ As observed by Natalya Bekhta, Oates frequently employs this peculiar mode of narration, as in the short story "Parricide" (see Bekhta, 2017). In Bekhta's account, the distinction between "we-narration" and "we-narrative" is "between a type of narrative discourse and a type of narrative form": thus, as in Oates's *Blonde*, "[p]assages of we-narration can be found in texts composed in other narrative situations" (p. 165).

ne, adapted by the novel, which ends with a point-of-view shot from the perspective of an unnamed director – who we will never see again – on Norma Jeane’s back while she leaves the studio; then, his assistants blatantly mock her performance, as the director says: “Sweet Jesus. Look at the ass on that little girl”.

While the detailed and explicit descriptions seem to be the most relevant medium-specific strategy adopted by the novel,¹² the movie employs several techniques to elicit disgust in the viewers. I have already described the use of *unnatural POV shots*, which are particularly suitable for the destabilization of bodily boundaries. Now, I will focus on three medium-specific techniques: the *extreme close-up*, the *reaction shot*, and the *sound effects*.

Among the recurring aesthetic strategies analyzed by Hanich, close-ups play a pivotal role, since they actualize the need for obtrusive nearness suggested by Aurel Kolnai as a key experiential feature of disgust (Hanich, 2009, p. 300). The close-up tightly frames the object of disgust and is “a means of directing the viewer’s attention” to it; moreover, it can be combined with another medium-specific feature, such as the reaction shot. In *Blonde*, this association is clearly exemplified by the “room service” scene, where – as in a sentence from her voice-over that gives this article its title – Norma Jeane is delivered like meat to the President’s hotel room. While he is lying on the bed, watching a rocket launch on television and talking to a man on the telephone, Norma Jeane is forced to perform oral sex: the camera settles on a close-up – almost an *extreme close-up* – of her face, focusing on her shocked and bewildered eyes, producing a sense of uneasiness further emphasized through the breaking of the fourth wall (showing the scene playing out in a crowded theater), and her voice-over, reporting her thoughts similar to how they appear in the novel: “Just don’t puke. Not here. Not in this bed. Don’t cough. Don’t gag. You have to swallow. You have to swallow”.¹³ Here, the extreme close-up of her eyes is combined with the reaction shot, whose repulsive effect is enhanced by her voice-over, as well as by another medium-specific feature such as the long screen time,¹⁴ since the close-up goes on for almost two minutes. According to Berys Gaut, for example, “the reaction shot can be a more effective vehicle for affective and empathic identification with a character than is the point-of-view shot” (Gaut, 2010, p. 265), while Hanich refers to “somatic empathy” as “a strong somatic relation to the characters” through which “we relate to the character’s intentional *act* of being disgusted – rather than the intentional *object* of disgust – and hence feel disgusted in a similar (albeit not identical) way” (Hanich, 2009, p. 302). Then, following Kolnai once again, Hanich states that “an object of disgust neither provokes an active urge to destroy it (as in hatred) nor to flee its danger (as in fear); it simply evokes a tendency to put the disgusting object out of the way”; thus, “once we experience the proximity of the movie too intensely and constricting, we *re-act*

¹² For example, an online reviewer writes that “Joyce Carol Oates composes sentences that are as harsh and unforgiving as razor blades. She goes into graphic detail about all of Marilyn’s various ‘Bodily issues’. Whether it’s her menstrual cycle, miscarriages, vomiting, etc, we the reader get the full story. Turning the pages, your fingers start to feel sticky with blood” (Erik, 2020). Another reviewer admits that “the level of detail in some of the crude aspects of the novel did feel a little excessive but I guess that’s the point” (Ken, 2022).

¹³ In the novel, the act is explicitly referred to as “disgusting”: “She apologized for coughing but couldn’t seem to stop. Swallowing the male’s semen is in homage to the male, but was ever anything more disgusting; yes but if you love the male, the man, shouldn’t you? love his cock, his semen?” (Oates, 2000, p. 707).

¹⁴ On the peculiar temporality of disgust, see Barker (2011).

with strong *re-pulsion* or *re-vulsion*" (p. 297). The disturbing paradox generated by this scene is that the metaleptic breaking of the fourth wall – the fact that the oral sex scene is projected on a movie screen in a darkened theater filled with people – shows an audience that silently seems to enjoy the physically and morally repulsive sexual act, without even trying "to put the disgusting object out of the way". Thus, the disgust experienced by the "real" audience is enhanced by the absence of disgust shown by the fictional one. Indeed, this seems to be the ultimate example of the moral friction elicited by a perspective shift – previously experienced through the engagement with the Ex-Athlete – that forces us to take part in a crowded audience watching the movie with indifference. While in the previous case recipients' moral repulsion was reinforced by the misogynistic disgust directed at Norma Jeane, in this scene, by contrast, it is the absence of disgust that creates a dissonant reaction in viewers. In both cases, the fragmentation of perspectives produces an almost unbearable moral friction for the audience.

Finally, the repulsive sense of obtrusive nearness described by Kolnai can be also produced in movies through nauseating sound effects (Hanich, 2009, p. 300). During the final third of Dominik's *Blonde*, as we will see, the movie is filled with hallucinatory sequences than depend on Norma Jeane's destabilized subjectivity. One of the most harrowing scenes shows her spectral figure wandering around an empty house, before being abducted to undergo the second forced abortion: here, the already repulsive sequence is further emphasized by audible suction and sucking sounds, as an example of physical disgust that works as an amplifier of moral disgust.

3. Norma Jeane as an empty shell

As announced in the introduction, my proposal is to interpret physical and moral disgust in *Blonde* in accordance with the recipients' engagement with the protagonist. Yet, this engagement is constantly problematized throughout the two works; as I will attempt to show, however, the movie's partial take on the novel results in a destabilization of the structural juxtaposition that effectively builds Oates's engagement with Norma Jeane. A group of formal and thematic strategies work together to complicate the empathetic perspective-taking towards *Blonde*'s protagonist: I will detail both the novel's and the movie's in turn.

Oates's novel is a rather experimental work in terms of structural and formal creativity, whose most significant features to destabilize Norma Jeane's subjectivity are the *multiperson narration*, the use of *italics*, the thematization of *names* and *roles*, and the *object-oriented* sections.

As I have previously mentioned, the novel features several shifts in narrators and focalizers. Therefore, following Brian Richardson's classification, it can be considered as an example of "multiperson narration", in which "the same character's thoughts and actions are narrated in different persons, or when entirely disparate narrators converge" (Richardson, 2006, p. 61). Thus, even though it mostly employs an apparently conventional third-person narrator, Oates's *Blonde* presents many chapters narrated with a first-person voice, either by Norma Jeane¹⁵ or other minor characters, with examples of you- and we-narration. However, this constant shift may destabilize the empathetic perspective-taking, by confusing the readers about the perspective through which they have access to a specific scene and keeping them away from Norma Jeane's subjectivity. For an

¹⁵ Oates refers to the novel as "a posthumous narration by the subject" (Oates, 2003, p. 145).

online reviewer, “[the] book is a sprawling, consuming and at times challenging experience. The first half was the strongest for me, inhabiting a young Norma Jean’s [*sic*] subconscious and the people in it with effortless shifts from one perspective to another” (laudandum at 33, 2018). Another reviewer confesses that the frequent shift in narrators was underwhelming: “the varied tonality and voice makes it a somewhat challenging read – some parts are compelling and pull you in, and then the voice will abruptly change from 1st person to 3rd person, many times over which is jarring” (Lwillis, 2019).

Norma Jeane’s first-person narration and internal focalization are constantly signaled through specific markers, such as typographic indicators or stylistic choices: one of the most interesting is the use of the symbol “&” instead of “and”, which comes from her diary and poems – a significant source of engagement, as we will see – but that leaks out of her writings to permeate her thoughts in sections with an internal focalization. For example, the chapter “Sugar Kane 1959”, although employing a third-person narrator, presents a rapid, anxiety-inducing rhythm to reproduce Norma Jeane’s altered state of consciousness, featuring the symbol “&” as if it was her prose:

After their unwanted & distracting applause, next take was a disaster & she forgot her lines & even her fingers betrayed her plucking wrong notes on the ukulele & she burst into sobs strangely without tears & pounded at her thighs in her silky-tight Sugar Kane costume (so tight she couldn’t sit down on the set & could only “rest” in a hollowed-out apparatus devised for such circumstances) & began to scream like a creature being killed & in a fury tore at her newly bleached fine-blown hair brittle as spun glass & would have raked her nails across her sweet-baby cosmetic mask of a face except W himself rushed to prevent her (Oates, 2000, pp. 615-616).

Following Caracciolo, first-person narrators (or internal focalizers) should favor readers’ engagement by replicating real-life interactions: “first-person narration, in particular, calls for interpretive strategies that are not different – at least not completely different – from those we use to make sense of real people’s life stories” (Caracciolo, 2016, p. XIV). However, in Oates’s writing, even those sections are problematized through a particular use of Norma Jeane’s subjectivity markers. This is the case of the chapter “The Sharpshooter”, narrated by an unnamed, shadowy figure – who is eventually alluded to as the possible murderer of Norma Jeane hired by the President – where the symbol “&” still replaces the word “and”, breaking the pattern that seemed to indicate Norma Jeane’s thoughts. This inconsistent use of markers may once again cause confusion among readers: for an online reviewer, “there were passages written in Monroe’s perspective, parts that were possibly dream sequences, whole chapters where the word ‘and’ was replaced with ‘&’ [...]. The fact I’ve written ‘possibly’ and ‘maybe’ shows I still don’t really know what the book was aiming for” (Felicity March, 2022). I propose that this incoherence should be analyzed as a deliberate form of destabilization of Norma Jeane’s subjectivity, achieved mostly in the course of the novel through the “cannibalization” of her fictional mind.

Since the opening chapters, Oates establishes a series of strategies that seem to give access to the protagonist’s subjectivity, such as Dorrit Cohn’s “quoted monologue” sections (Cohn, 1978) and typographic markers, only to subvert them as soon as the readers start to recognize their workings. As it is common in novels,¹⁶ Cohn’s quoted and narrat-

¹⁶ Analyzing a passage from a novel, for example, Alan Palmer notes that “the expressive emphasis on the italicized “*was*” allows example 6 to be plausibly interpreted as free indirect thought

ed monologue sections are italicized in *Blonde*, and they aim to implement internal focalization. However, in many chapters presented through Norma Jeane's focalization, "her" italicized sentences report other people's thoughts or voices, by creating an unresolvable ambiguity between others' thoughts or her own thinking of their thoughts. This passage taken from the chapter "The Curse" – where the device is extensively employed – shows both her thoughts and others' reported voices through italicized sentences:

Truly I had no pride! And no shame! Grateful for any kind word or any guy's stare. My young body so strange to me like a bulb in the earth swelling to burst. For certainly she was well aware of her chubby growing breasts and the widening of her thighs, hips, "ass" – as that part of the anatomy, when female, was called with approval and a kind of jocular affection. *What a sweet ass. Look at that sweet ass. Oh, baby baby! Who's she? Jailbait* (Oates, 2000, pp. 89-90).

I suggest that this is a clever example of a formal device that reflects a thematized concept underlying the entire novel – namely, the "cannibalization" of Norma Jeane.¹⁷ Indeed, the appropriation of italics by other voices is a symptom of this cannibalization, since the privilege granted by italicized sentences is the access to a character's subjectivity. Thus, on a formal level, this device actualizes Norma Jeane's belief that "*all through my life I would know of myself through the witnessing and naming of others. As Jesus in the Gospels is only seen and spoken of and recorded by others*" (p. 16). In a certain sense, this formal strategy is the ultimate representation of Norma Jeane as an empty shell filled from within; once again, the possession of her body is thematized throughout the novel, even with demonic allusions: "Norma Jeane had appropriated Gladys's hands, not guessing that Gladys had taken her over as a demon may inhabit a body" (p. 312). Because of others' possession of her italicized sentences, Norma Jeane is controlled *from the inside*, and her focalization is sabotaged and manipulated without even being technically abandoned.¹⁸

Similarly, her identity is destabilized through the proliferation of *names* and *roles* across the narrative. This is clearly visible right from the title of the novel, "Blonde", and the ambivalence of her studio name, "Marilyn Monroe". More than once, Norma Jeane confesses that the "Marilyn" name is nothing more than another role to play, another form of cannibalization, as thematized by the first-person narrator recalling the choice of the name, picked between "Moirá Mona Mignon Marilyn Mavis Miriam Mina": "Mari-

[another name for Cohn's "narrated monologue"] rather than thought report" (see Palmer, 2004, p. 209).

¹⁷ As mentioned in the second paragraph, there are many passages that employ unsettling metaphors to thematize different forms of cannibalization: "your body is fragile and breakable, like a doll; your body *is* a doll; your body is for others to admire and to pet; your body is to be used by others, not used by you; your body is a luscious fruit for others to bite into and to savor; your body is for others, not for *you*" (pp. 43-44); "And she was looking so pretty and so soft: a bonbon. A cream puff. Something to lick vigorously with the tongue, not chew and gnaw" (p. 286).

¹⁸ Perhaps the definitive and most disturbing manipulation from within comes from her fetus, who can talk (as in the movie): "Like Baby was sucking her down into him, into his quiet lightless space that predated all time. *Before the universe began. I was. And you with me*" (p. 357); "And Baby in her womb gripping her tight. *You won't hurt me this time will you. Not do what you did last time?*" (p. 584).

lyn Mon-roe savoring the sexy murmurous sound of it!” (pp. 216-217).¹⁹ In his analysis of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Lubomír Doležel observes that the “supreme Adamic power” of “renaming” is an attempt to alter Antoinette’s identity (Doležel, 1998, p. 215): similarly, in *Blonde*, everyone has a “special” name for Norma Jeane, each lover, photographer, director, husband, calls her by a different name, trying to start their own “ownership” of her from that. In doing so, they seem to take their cues from the reflections of a young Norma Jeane, struggling with choosing a name for her doll: “names are so important! – you must have a name for someone or you couldn’t think of that person, and they must have a name for you, or – where would you *be*?” (Oates, 2000, p. 28). Thus, she is “Fish” for Cass and Eddy G, “Angel” for the Dark Prince, “Magda” for the Playwright, “Gladys Pirig” for the members of an UCLA Renaissance Poetry class, “Marilyn” for her directors and raving fans, and “Blond Actress”, and “Blondie”, and almost all the names of the movie characters played by her. In order to further underline the importance of role shifting, many chapters are even titled after these names, such as “‘Angela’ 1950”, “‘Nell 1952’”, “‘Rose 1953’”, “‘Cherie 1956’”, “‘Sugar Kane 1959’”. This proliferation of names and roles undermines Norma Jeane’s identity, as it is diffusedly thematized throughout the novel, as in this passage where she is the focalizer: “She was ‘Marilyn’ – no, she was ‘Angela’ – she was Norma Jeane playing ‘Marilyn’ playing ‘Angela’ – like a Russian doll in which smaller dolls are contained by the largest doll which is the mother” (p. 257).

Finally, the novel employs another narrative device to foreground Norma Jeane’s objectification and fractured self – namely, the object-oriented narration. Even though in Caracciolo’s econarratological definition the “object-oriented plotting” concerns the partial overcoming of the anthropocentric comfort zone of narrative, I adopt the expression more generally to indicate a situation in which an object “takes center stage in a narrative” (Caracciolo, 2020, p. 46) and interconnects unrelated storylines. In Oates’s *Blonde*, this object is Norma Jeane herself, who intertwines all the fragmented pieces of this complex narration.²⁰ In particular, it is her image or her body to literally connect different characters, as is perfectly summarized by the chapter “Pinup 1945”, where magazines and issues featuring photographs of Norma Jeane become the common denominator in the lives of those who knew her, from Bucky Glazer to Elsie Pirig, through Frank Widdoes and Warren Pirig, in a sort of backward journey among the people who have tried to possess her.

Like the novel, Dominik’s *Blonde* shows a constant commitment to stylistic and formal devices (Raup, 2022), by employing several medium-specific techniques in order to replicate the problematization of viewers’ engagement with Norma Jeane. The most notable ones are the *shift in aspect ratios*, the switches from *color to black-and-white*, and the temporal and spatial *distortions*.

Throughout its 167 minutes, the movie constantly shifts its aspect ratio, alternating four different sizes: 1:1, 1.37:1, 1.85:1 – which is the one that is most used throughout the movie – and 2.39:1. In doing so, Dominik’s *Blonde* tries to recreate Oates’s various shifts in narrators and focalizers, framing Norma Jeane through different formats. Similarly, the frequent and almost confusing switches from color to black-and-white, although suppos-

¹⁹ With a clear allusion to the well-known opening lines of Humbert Humbert’s narration in *Lolita* (1955).

²⁰ On the complex phenomenon of sexual objectification, see Nussbaum (1995). Moreover, Nussbaum influentially wrote about disgust, following skeptical positions and arguing that disgust precludes empathy (Nussbaum, 2004).

edly depicting historical usage – such as recreating specific real-life photographs either shot in color or in b/w –, ²¹ show an aggressive take on Norma Jeane's figure, with a constant sense of obtrusion from different devices, such as framing, color, light. Through this formal fragmentation, the movie aims to recreate a disjointed mosaic of Norma Jeane's fractured self, further emphasized by distorted images and sounds that depend on her unstable subjectivity, as declared by cinematographer Chayse Irvin: "it was like a hallucination happening in a sequence. [...] It was less about recreating factual events and more about 'How do we distort it in a way that really harnesses how she must have felt in that moment?'" (Hemphill, 2022). During the opening night of *Some Like it Hot*, for example, as Norma Jeane becomes addicted to painkillers and sedatives, a subjective point-of-view sequence shows the monstrous, distorted faces of fans and photographers around the red carpet, while, during the screening, the movie speeds up to the end according to her altered perception of time.

In this foregrounding of Norma Jeane's altered state of consciousness, the movie marks a departure from its source, by relying heavily on hallucinatory and delusional sequences. However, although the novel – as we will see – manages to convey, at least in part, Norma Jeane's mental states through elements such as her journal and poems, a similar epistemological uncertainty is also present in Oates's work, as noted by an online reviewer, who underlines the protagonist's unreliability: "as the novel progresses, the narrative voice becomes more rambling, less reliable, as Norma Jeane becomes addicted to painkillers, sedatives, and stimulants and slowly but surely loses her mind and her self" (Mike Smith, 2022). Therefore, both the novel and the movie depict their protagonist as an unstable figure, forcing the recipients to engage with what Abbott calls an "unreadable mind", that is, a fictional mind that "[defies] our best efforts to read [it]" (Abbott, 2013, p. 125). As noted by Caracciolo, unknowable protagonists orienting the narrative perspective through first-person or internal focalization – such as Norma Jeane – produce in the recipients "a paradoxical sense of being internal to – and yet barred from – the protagonist's subjectivity" (Caracciolo, 2014, p. 190), further emphasized in our case by the long dimensions of the two works, a novel of 738 pages and a movie of 167 minutes. It is a sense that may sometimes frustrate the readers, as an online reviewer puts it: "we as readers never truly get inside Norma Jeane's head. Oates does not make attempts for us to understand her" (Viola, 2015). Thus, Abbott suggests approaching unknowable characters "in a full acceptance of their insistent unreadability", admitting that "this does, however, preclude empathy" (Abbott, 2013, p. 146).

However, the difference between the novel and the movie is how much more the latter relies on Norma Jeane's unreadability, by adopting an array of formal and thematic strategies to foreground an epistemological instability. A simple quantitative observation can enlighten this aspect: approximately, the second half of the movie – governed by Norma Jeane's hallucinatory states – covers the last quarter of the novel, thus creating a strong inclination towards unreliable and delusional elements. In this sense, while the novel still succeeds in developing an empathetic connection through a deep exploration of Norma Jeane's childhood or fragments from her poems, Dominik's *Blonde* relies mostly on what

²¹ For example, in an interview for "Observer", Dominik stated: "It's all based on pre-existing imagery, and some of the imagery is colored and some of it is black and white. So if we're basing a scene on a black and white photograph that's in a particular format, we do it in that format; if it's in color, we do it in color. If the scene has no kind of reference to it, then we end up just doing it widescreen or something like that. There's no story reason. [...] It's not storytelling. It's an emotional [experience]" (Gao, 2022).

Lars Bernaerts has defined as “narrative delirium” (Bernaerts, 2009), a situation in which the narrative progression is triggered by and depends on a character’s hallucinations and delusions. As underlined by Caracciolo, following Marie-Laure Ryan’s terminology (Ryan, 1991): “when the textual progression is governed by a character’s hallucinatory mental perspective [as in Bernaerts’s narrative delirium], a gap opens up between the ‘textual actual world’ and the character’s ‘private’ world” (Caracciolo, 2016, p. 80). Thus, in the second half of the movie, partly through the use of stylistic devices and conventions typical of the psychological horror genre, Dominik emphasizes Norma Jeane’s unstable state of consciousness, making it impossible to decipher reality from imagination, and progressively undermining the viewers’ empathetic perspective-taking.

Among the various devices that the movie adopts to depict Norma Jeane’s altered subjectivity, the most relevant is what Jan-Noël Thon calls “quasi-perceptual overlay”. In Thon’s words, “quasi-perceptions” are non-ordinary states of consciousness, “such as hallucinations, memories, dreams, and fantasies” (Thon, 2016, p. 249): they can be prevalently expressed through “quasi-perceptual point-of-view sequences” or “quasi-perceptual overlay”. The former is what Edward Branigan calls “perception shot” (Branigan, 1984, p. 79), “where the pictorial representation not only approximates the spatial position of a character but also represents more clearly subjective (quasi-)perceptual aspects of his or her consciousness, resulting in a representation of storyworld elements that can often not be considered to be intersubjectively valid anymore” (Thon, 2016, p. 259). Such is the case with the sequence that represents the opening night of *Some Like it Hot*, where Norma Jeane’s point-of-view shot portrays monstrously deformed mouths on the disfigured faces of delirious fans. Conversely, in the “quasi-perceptual overlay” – corresponding to Branigan’s “projection” – the pictorial representation “does not approximate the spatial position of a character but still represents other (quasi-)perceptual aspects of a character’s consciousness to such an extent that the resulting representation of storyworld elements cannot be considered intersubjectively valid anymore” (Thon, 2016, p. 261). In both cases, what is represented is closer to the character’s “private” world than to the “textual actual world”. Although these techniques are quite common in movies that aim to depict altered states of consciousness, they further stand out by their association with the framing and color shifts that dominate *Blonde*. Moreover, as added by Thon, the quasi-perceptual overlay is “commonly combined with the subjective representation of storyworld sound” (Thon, 2016, p. 261), as it happens in *Blonde*’s most relevant example of this technique, where the use of the SnorriCam, through its typical dizzying effect, replicates Norma Jeane’s altered state of consciousness, further emphasizing it through subjective storyworld sound effects, such as distorted echoes and muffled voices.

Furthermore, as noted by many critics, Dominik’s *Blonde* displays an array of intertextual references to prominent psychological horror movies, attempting to fit into a tradition that features blond female protagonists, from Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) to David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992) – constantly referenced through the evocative soundtrack –, through Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* (1965) and Robert Altman’s *Images* (1972). In doing so, in addition to presenting other elements of disgust typical of the psychological horror genre,²² the movie foregrounds its narrative delirium, transforming Norma Jeane’s life in a haunting, “hellish vision”, and ostentatiously taking the distance from the biopic genre, as suggested by film critic Mark Kermode: “*Blonde* is

²² For example, see Tarja Laine’s insightful analysis of *Repulsion*, which foregrounds some key elements peculiar to the genre (Laine, 2011).

a horror movie masquerading as a film about fame" (Kermode, 2022). This partial take on the complex generic architecture carved by Oates – who still presents horror aspects, but juxtaposes them with elements from the *Bildungsroman* and fairy tales – heavily undermines viewers' empathetic perspective-taking with Norma Jeane's fractured mind, similarly to what happens to Carol (Catherine Deneuve) in Polanski's *Repulsion*. According to Tarja Laine, the movie seems "to emulate Carol's perceptual viewpoint, but ultimately it withholds any kind of clear psychological or empathetic motivations" (Laine, 2011, p. 44), and, in much the same way as *Blonde*, "in *Repulsion* disgust and madness obtrude upon Carol from within" (p. 43), by inviting viewers "to participate in Carol's insanity from the inside" (p. 41). It is exactly this participation from the inside to destabilize viewers' engagement, emphasizing the perception of Norma Jeane as a "Russian doll", or as an empty shell to be filled.

4. Conclusion

In this article I have examined some of the strategies through which the two versions of *Blonde* can elicit disgust in recipients and frustrate their engagement with Norma Jeane's fictional mind. Although both the novel and the movie present repulsive elements, audiences have adopted different interpretive strategies towards them. While acknowledging that one possible interpretation can be found in the more visceral nature of cinematic emotions, my suggestion is that we should look at the *omissions* to understand the reception of disgust in Dominik's *Blonde*: although the movie faithfully adapts the transposed sections of the novel, it destabilizes their structural balance, relying on the conventions of the psychological horror and unbalancing the narrative toward Norma Jeane's hallucinations and delusions. In the novel, there is a strategic juxtaposition of "cognitive dissonance" – which produces "the psychological phenomenon that accounts for readers' feelings of strangeness" (Caracciolo, 2016, p. 34) towards Norma Jeane's opaque fictional mind – and empathetic perspective-taking, achieved through a series of elements completely discarded by the movie: a deep exploration into Norma Jeane's *childhood* and *adolescence* – drastically reduced to the first 16 minutes of the movie by Dominik, while in the novel it covers more than a quarter of the book –, first-person passages from her secret *journal*, fragments from her *poems*. These elements not only give access – at least a partial access – to Norma Jeane's subjectivity, but also help to portray a well-rounded character, one the readers can engage with. By disrupting this structural juxtaposition, the movie elicits imaginative resistance towards Norma Jeane, portraying her as a helpless victim and an unknowable character, as in the words of an online reviewer: "we're supposed to feel for her, but the film's psychology is clunky and weightless, all in service of an admittedly impressive aesthetic exercise" (SilentDawn, 2022).

In sum, I propose that the elements of disgust that permeate the novel can be read as a means to an end, such as the exploration of a complex fictional mind, or the "definitive study of American celebrity" (Showalter, 2020), in a harsh social critique of the American studio system, the entertainment industry, and consumerist society, by effectively directing readers' moral disgust at its perpetrators and Norma Jeane's sexual and emotional predators. Thus, Oates's *Blonde* foregrounds what Caracciolo calls a "generalizing interpretation" (Caracciolo, 2016, p. 11), through which readers construct meanings for the novel as a whole, focusing on the "narrative's ideological agenda" (p. 82). On the contrary, by failing to convey any sort of empathetic perspective-taking to account for the disgusting elements, the movie forces audiences to take on Tamar Yacobi's "perspectival" interpretations (Yacobi, 1981, p. 114), bringing them to direct their moral disgust at the

“author”, Andrew Dominik himself, putting him on the same level as the male sexual predators of the movie, as in “The New York Times” review: “if Dominik isn’t interested in or capable of understanding that Monroe was indeed more than a victim of the predations of men, it’s because, in this movie, he himself slipped into that wretched role” (Dargis, 2022); or, similarly, in “The New Yorker”: “the very subject of the film is the deformation of Monroe’s personality and artistry by Hollywood studio executives and artists; in order to tell that story, Dominik replicates it in practice” (Brody, 2022). Moreover, it is hard to imagine that contextual factors, such as Dominik’s unfortunate statements (Shenfeld, 2022) in response to the criticisms received for *Blonde*, did not further exacerbate the moral judgment against him, becoming relevant to the interpretation of the movie itself.²³ However, what seems to consistently emerge from critics’ and audiences’ reviews is that Dominik’s *Blonde* “blurs not only reality with fantasy but also empathy with exploitation” (Rooney, 2022). Its provocative, repulsive elements fail to combine with an in-depth exploration of a fictional mind, or with a clearly defined ideological agenda, thus provoking a switch in reading strategies that can offer a possible explanation for the different reception of disgust in the two versions of *Blonde*.

Works Cited

- Abbott H.P. (2008), *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- (2013), *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press.
- Altes L.K. (2014), *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Narrative Fiction*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.
- Barker J.M. (2011), *Chew on This: Disgust, Delay, and the Documentary Image in Food, Inc.*, “Film-Philosophy”, 15, 2, pp. 70-89.
- Bekhata N. (2017), *We-Narratives: The Distinctiveness of Collective Narration*, “Narrative”, 25, 2, pp. 164-181.
- Bernaerts L. (2009), *Fight Club and the Embedding of Delirium in Narrative*, “Style”, 43, 3, pp. 373-387.
- Branigan E. (1984), *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film*, Berlin, De Gruyter.
- Brody R. (2022), “*Blonde*” Is “*The Passion of the Christ*” for Marilyn Monroe, “The New Yorker”, September 20, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/blonde-is-the-passion-of-the-christ-for-marilyn-monroe>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Caracciolo M. (2014), *Unknowable Protagonists and Narrative Delirium in American Psycho and Hotline Miami: A Case Study in Character Engagement Across the Media*, “Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies”, 9, pp. 189-207.
- (2016), *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction: Explorations in Readers’ Engagement with Characters*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press.

²³ For an in-depth analysis of authors’ ethos and narrative interpretation see Altes (2014).

- (2020), *Object-Oriented Plotting and Nonhuman Realities in DeLillo's Underworld and Iñárritu's Babel*, in James E., Morel E. (eds.), *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, pp. 45-64.
- Chilton L. (2022), *Blonde: 'Disgusted' Netflix viewers turn off 'unwatchable' Marilyn Monroe drama after just 20 minutes*, “Independent”, September 30, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/blonde-netflix-marilyn-monroe-reactions-b2177834.html>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Cohn D. (1978), *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Connolly C. (2000), *Blind Leading the Blonde*, “The Guardian”, April 9, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/apr/09/fiction.reviews1>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Czachesz I. (2009), *Metamorphosis and Mind: Cognitive Explorations of the Grotesque in Early Christian Literature*, in Seim T.K., Økland J. (eds.), *Metamorphoses: Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity*, Berlin, De Gruyter, pp. 207-230.
- Dargis M. (2022), *'Blonde' Review: Exploiting Marilyn Monroe for Old Times' Sake*, “The New York Times”, September 28, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/28/movies/blonde-review-marilyn-monroe.html>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Diente T. (2022), *Netflix's 'Blonde' called 'disgusting and cruel' Marilyn Monroe film*, “International Business Times”, September 30, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/netflixs-blonde-called-disgusting-cruel-marilyn-monroe-film-1706761>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Doležel L. (1998), *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eder J. (2006), *Ways of Being Close to Characters*, “Film Studies”, 8, pp. 68-80.
- Ekman P. (1973), *Cross-Cultural Studies in Facial Expression*, in Id. (ed.), *Darwin and Facial Expression: A Century of Research in Review*, New York, New York Academic Press, pp. 169-222.
- Erik (2020), “It's a bold thing to do. Write a novel about an already over-exposed Hollywood legend...”, GoodReads.com Customer Reviews: *Blonde*, August 3.
- Felicity March (2022), “‘Blonde’ is the ambitious tome containing the life of Norma Jean/Marilyn Monroe”, GoodReads.com Customer Review: *Blonde*, October 22.
- Felski R. (2019), *Identifying with Characters*, in Anderson A., Felski R., Moi T. (eds.), *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, Chicago-London, University of Chicago Press, pp. 77-126.
- Fileva I. (2020), *You Disgust Me. Or Do You? On the Very Idea of Moral Disgust*, “Australasian Journal of Philosophy”, 99, 1, pp. 19-33.
- Flory D. (2016), *Racialized Disgust and Embodied Cognition in Film*, “Projections”, 10, 2, pp. 1-24.
- Gao M. (2022), *'Blonde' Director Andrew Dominik on Turning the Iconography of Marilyn Monroe Inside Out*, “Observer”, September 27, <https://observer.com/2022/09/blonde->

- [director-andrew-dominik-on-turning-the-iconography-of-marilyn-monroe-inside-out/](#), last access: November 9, 2023.
- Gaut B. (1999), *Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film*, in Plantinga C., Smith G.M. (eds.), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 200-216.
- (2010), *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Haidt J., McCauley C.R., Rozin P. (1994), *Individual Differences in Sensitivity to Disgust: A Scale Sampling Seven Domains of Disgust Elicitors*, "Personality and Individual Differences", 16, 5, pp. 701-713.
- Hanich J. (2009), *Dis/liking Disgust: The Revulsion Experience at the Movies*, "New Review of Film and Television Studies", 7, 3, pp. 293-309.
- (2011) *Towards a Poetics of Cinematic Disgust*, "Film-Philosophy", 15, 2, pp. 11-35.
- Hemphill J. (2022), *Created in Chaos: The Cinematography of 'Blonde'*, "Indiewire", September 28, <https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/blonde-cinematography-netflix-marilyn-monroe-1234766933/>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Johnson G. (2003), *Blonde Ambition: An Interview with Joyce Carol Oates*, in Oates J.C., *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art*, PerfectBound, ebook, pp. 143-152.
- Julie (2022), "I have conflicting emotions about this book...", GoodReads.com Customer Reviews: *Blonde*, October 3.
- Ken (2022), "Obviously it was the Netflix movie that made me want to read this novel...", GoodReads.com Customer Reviews: *Blonde*, October 3.
- Kermode M. (2022), *Blonde review – A hellish vision of Marilyn and her monsters*, "The Guardian", September 25, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/sep/25/blonde-review-marilyn-monroe-netflix-film-ana-de-armas-andrew-dominik-joyce-carol-oates>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Laine T. (2011), *Imprisoned in Disgust: Roman Polanski's Repulsion*, "Film-Philosophy", 15, 2, pp. 36-50.
- laudanum at 33 (2018), "This book is a sprawling, consuming and at times challenging experience...", GoodReads.com Customer Review: *Blonde*, February 22.
- Lwillis (2019), "Compelling but too long", Amazon.com Customer Review: *Blonde*, August 2.
- Mike Smith (2022), "I read *Blonde* because of the Netflix film adaptation due out later this year...", GoodReads.com Customer Review: *Blonde*, July 17.
- Nussbaum M. (1995), *Objectification*, in "Philosophy and Public Affairs", 24, 4, pp. 249-291.
- (2004), *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Oates J.C. (2000), *Blonde: A Novel*, New York, The Ecco Press.
- (2003), *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art*, PerfectBound, ebook.
- Palmer A. (2004), *Fictional Minds*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.

- Plantinga C. (2006), *Disgusted at the movies*, "Film Studies", 8, pp. 82-92.
- Prinz J.J. (2007), *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Raup J. (2022), *Breaking Down the Visual Effects of Blonde and Andrew Dominik's Meticulous Vision*, "The Film Stage", October 27, <https://thefilmstage.com/breaking-down-the-visual-effects-of-blonde-and-andrew-dominik-meticulous-vision/>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Richardson B. (2006), *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press.
- Rooney D. (2022), *'Blonde' Review: Ana de Armas' Haunted Marilyn Monroe Drowns in the Excesses of Andrew Dominik's Woozy Reflection on Celebrity*, "The Hollywood Reporter", September 8, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/blonde-ana-de-armas-andrew-dominik-marilyn-monroe-netflix-venice-1235214391/>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Rozin P., Haidt J., McCauley C.R. (2008), *Disgust*, in Lewis M., Haviland-Jones J.M., Barrett L.F. (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, 3rd ed., New York, Guilford Press, pp. 757-776.
- Ryan M.-L. (1991), *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Schneider R. (2001), *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction*, "Style", 35, 4, pp. 607-639.
- Shenfeld E. (2022), *'Blonde' Director Andrew Dominik Calls Marilyn Monroe's 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes' a Film About 'Well-Dressed Whores'*, "Variety", September 27, <https://variety.com/2022/film/news/blonde-andrew-dominik-marilyn-monroe-gentlemen-prefer-blondes-whores-1235385496/>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Showalter E. (2020), *Joyce Carol Oates's "Blonde" is the Definitive Study of American Celebrity*, "The New Yorker", April 13, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/joyce-carol-oates-blonde-is-the-definitive-study-of-american-celebrity>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- SilentDawn (2022), "It's early in Andrew Dominik's *Blonde*, and a young Norma Jeane is stirred awake by her mother...", Letterboxd.com Customer Review: *Blonde*, September 28.
- Smith M. (1999), *Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes, or Apparently Perverse Allegiances*, in Plantinga C., Smith G.M. (eds.), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 217-238.
- Strohming N. (2014), *Disgust Talked About*, "Philosophy Compass", 9, 7, pp. 478-493.
- Thon J.-N. (2016), *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press.
- Viola (2015), "I started reading *Blonde* because I had thoroughly enjoyed another one...", GoodReads.com Customer Review: *Blonde*, November 4.

- Whiting A. (2022), *All Marilyn Monroe movies are exploitative. But the nightmarish Blonde actually shows you inside her vagina*, “Independent”, September 22, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/blonde-netflix-ana-de-armas-marilyn-monroe-vagina-b2176431.html>, last access: November 9, 2023.
- Wolf W. (2004), *Aesthetic Illusion as an Effect of Fiction*, “Style”, 38, 3, pp. 325-351.
- (2017), *Aesthetic Illusion(s)? Toward a Media-Conscious Theory of Media-Elicited Immersion as a Transmedial Phenomenon*, in Koblížek T. (ed.), *The Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and the Arts*, London, Bloomsbury, pp. 29-70.
- Yacobi T. (1981), *Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem*, “Poetics Today”, 2, 2, pp. 113-126.