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The Misfits in *The Misfits* (1961)

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the idea of the misfits in both Arthur Miller's screenplay, *The Misfits* (1961), and the film directed by John Huston. It attempts to critically analyze the different kinds of misfits found in the screenplay and movie. The paper begins by defining who/what is a misfit, and then moves on to discuss the multitudinous ways in which one can identify misfit entities and 'mis-fit' elements, such as the director who is himself considered a misfit, the not-so-Hollywood run-of-the-mill type commercial production that this film is, and the actors who all are considered misfits in real life as well as on screen. This critical essay follows the methodology of qualitative and subjective literary analysis for the screenplay and Apparatus theory, Genre Studies and Feminist theory (the politics of film representation specifically in the case of Marilyn Monroe) for Film criticism, while looking at the artistic methods, stylistic features, camera work, poster, among other things. The paper follows the transformation, or rather the fall of the "hero" to an unusual, abnormal being in the society who is not ready to be accommodated, and chooses to live "free". This choice is not available to these characters, which the screenplay and the film go on to reveal eventually. It offers an exposé of the estrangement of the American cowboy in a world that has been urbanized and industrialized. The movie signals towards the impossibility of living "free", unscathed and unblemished, in a society, which is itself a corrupt, industrial prison.

Keywords: Misfit, Hero, Free/Freedom, Urbanity, Film Theory, Film Criticism, Hollywood Western, Artistic Cinema, Camera/Gaze, Feminism, Industrialisation

The puzzle icon used in the Arthur Miller's screenplay and John Huston's cinema is emblematic of what is to follow, as it conveys the idea of an unsolvable puzzle, whose pieces do not fit together (mis-fit), leaving the game perennially unfinished. The paper focuses on the idea of the misfits in both Arthur Miller's screenplay, *The Misfits* (1961), and the film directed by John Huston. It attempts to critically analyze the different kinds of misfits found

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in the screenplay and movie. The paper begins by defining who/what is a misfit, and then moves on to discuss the multitudinous ways in which one can identify misfit entities and 'misfit' elements, such as the director who is himself considered a misfit, the not-so-Hollywood run-of-the-mill type commercial production that this film is, and the actors who all are considered misfits in real life as well as on screen. This critical essay follows the methodology of qualitative and subjective literary analysis for the screenplay and Apparatus theory, Genre Studies and Feminist theory (the politics of film representation specifically in the case of Marilyn Monroe) for Film criticism, while looking at the artistic methods, stylistic features, camera work, poster, among other things. The paper follows the transformation, or rather the fall of the "hero" to an unusual, abnormal being in the society who is not ready to be accommodated, and chooses to live "free". This choice is not available to these characters, which the screenplay and the film go on to reveal eventually. It offers an exposé of the estrangement of the American cowboy in a world that has been urbanized and industrialized. The movie signals towards the impossibility of living "free", unscathed and unblemished, in a society, which is itself a corrupt, industrial prison.

A misfit can be defined as 'someone who is not suited to a situation or who is not accepted by other people because their behaviour is strange or unusual' ("Misfit"), or something that is out of place (mis-fit). *The Misfits* is mainly the story of three men, namely Gay, Guido and Perce, who do not belong to the world of work, home and familial relationships. Every single character, even the geographical setting, in the story seems to be a misfit in one sense or another.

In the documentary *Making the Misfits*, Miller talks about how John Huston was the perfect director for the movie, as he was himself a misfit. Huston's son, Tony also points out that his father was concerned with the "bourgeoisification" of America like Miller. The movie was not those Hollywood run-of-the-mill type commercial productions, but was placed in the ambit of a misfit, which was made to prove a point about the reality of an unheroic age, where "everyone was alike" and nothing/no one really stands out. 'The Misfits: What Happened Around the Camera' informs us that Miller describes the 'inspiration for the original short story as Nevada's population of divorcees and outcasts: "The whole state was full of misfits, people who did not fit anywhere. They knew it, they made fun of it, of their inability to function in the United States"' (Kouvaros 28-33).

Miller in the author's note of *The Misfits* emphasizes that this writing is not going to be something which is familiar, but will be presented 'in an unfamiliar form, neither novel, play, nor screenplay.' This cinema-novelistic writing then takes on the character of a misfit itself, which cannot be related to other forms, or contained within a specific category. This can be seen in relation to Genre Studies in Film Theory, wherein Miller's screenplay and Huston film rejects the 'Tyranny of Genre' (Coe 188). This resistance to the Western film genre thereby gives them liberty as artists to work upon a script which itself is a misfit of sorts, and which also offers its readers/viewers to function beyond the 'horizon of expectation' (Jauss 13). It is, at best, a misfit Western, set in the not-so-Wild West (now domesticated), and thus does not

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feed into stereotypes of the “Western hero”, all alone, engaging in gun fights, keeping law and order in the face of danger (Native Americans as the Other) with his roping skills.

Miller, according to Gerald Weales, is preoccupied with an ‘assumption that in our society the hero is reduced to the misfit’ (177), as in his introduction, “On Social Plays” to *A View from the Bridge*, Miller commented upon the condition of the hero saying, ‘Our common sense reduces him to the size of a complainer, a misfit.’ The cowboy-heroism palpably present in the Westerns is washed away and all that is left is a non-hero. The story of *The Misfits* mirrors the transformation, or rather the fall of the ‘hero’ to an unusual, abnormal being in the society who is not ready to be accommodated, and opts to live “free”. Gay’s ideology that “anything is better than wages”, and ‘Sometimes when a person doesn’t know what to do, the best thing is to just stand still.’ Being a genuine cowboy, he is an “independent man”, who defies the conventional societal pressures by refusing to work at any place that keeps him tied down. What he does not realize is that he has been standing still for too long, turning a blind eye to everything that is altering around him, getting transformed into a spectre of the past, irretrievable world. Guido is a garage mechanic and ex-war pilot, whose house in the desert is an incomplete structure, which stands for the common condition of rootlessness. Perce, a young rodeo rider, wanting only to be around mustangs, is lost after his father’s demise.

In *The Misfits*, the character of Roslyn is a mixture of sadness, pain and innocence, as Guido notices, ‘You have the gift for life, Roslyn,’ and ‘The rest of us, we just lookin’ for a place to hide and watch it all go by.’ In the car with Gay, Roslyn asks an important question, ‘Don’t you have a home?’ summing up his insistence on wandering and being free in an illusory way. For her, ‘...nobody was ever there’, but she still tries to revive the love and the zest for life. She becomes the agent of change, who brings Gay back to what he was, helping Perce decide for himself, and exposing Guido’s self-pitying nature. Shouting at them and calling all three of them ‘murderers and liars’, she takes on the task of uncovering the illusion of the countryside being an idyll, offering an alternative perspective on the same, where the word, “freedom” is just a word and means no real liberation. There is an exhibition of these misfits, who are all outside the domain of the normative, and they all want a rosy life, but their non-normative circumstances and deep distrust towards human connection of any kind do not allow for that.

The character of Roslyn is played by Marilyn Monroe, who was considered to be the sex symbol of the times and a misfit as well, and who was also offered movies that added on to her image as a sexual object. But, in *The Misfits*, she was given a serious role; still, there were scenes in the movie which somehow worked towards “eroticising” Monroe, and reiterating the sexist stereotypes. In this context, Elizabeth Cowie’s, “Feminist Film Criticism: A Reply” states:

Lighting, camera angles, the cutting between actors and use of close shot v. long shot—all the techniques of filming are used to differentiate radically the presentation of men and women on screen... techniques normally used... for women in films... essentially produce

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a specularity in relation to the character in a way which places her role in the film as iconic rather than diegetic; i.e. the classical sexual objectification of women in films. (138)

On one hand, the 'Tyranny of Genre' is shunned, and on the other hand, there is certain compliance vis-à-vis Apparatus theory, which reveals how the execution of the screenplay maintains the dominant tropes of the viewing culture, leading us to the question of the representation of Monroe on screen through Feminist Film Theory. Monroe is packaged as per expectations of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 359-70), which is evident even in the poster of the film, with Monroe occupying center-stage. In Visual Studies, John Berger too notes: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at... Thus she turns herself into an object... : a sight' (*Ways of Seeing* 41). In some of the first scenes, Monroe is seen looking at herself in the mirror while she applies makeup to step out. It is evident that she is hoping to meet someone, and trying to look her best (for that someone). Her gaze upon herself is also dictated by the gaze of men. The camera focuses differently on Monroe's face and body, using softer focus and tones to depict her idealistic, dreamy nature. The men in contrast are rugged, sun-burnt, being closer to their reality which is projected by the camera with a sharp focus, again highlighting the distinction between dreamy, naïve femininity and somewhat realistic hyper-masculinity.

Another scene warranting attention is the one where Monroe is playing paddle ball, with her entire body rocking and gyrating in a suggestive manner in a dress accentuating her bodily figure. The camera's gaze is deliberately and unapologetically pointed at her shaking body, as if she was hired exactly to execute this and be Monroe, not Roslyn. In contrast, one finds Isabelle, the older, scarfed, fully clad lady portrayed quite differently, as she is not the 'hook'/'bait' for the prospective audience. The camera is made to distinguish and regulate its focus palpably so vis-à-vis male and female characters.

The screenplay/movie signals towards the impossibility of living "free", unscathed and unblemished, in a society, which is itself a corrupt, industrial prison. All three of them keep on mustanging in a zombie-like fashion, unaware that the work they do is indirectly linked to the industrialised world of scooters, factories and gas-stations. Their belief that they are away from the clutches of the urbanity and can avoid it gets shattered, when Gay screams, 'They changed it... all around. They smeared it all over with blood, turned it into shit and money like everything else... It's just ropin' a dream now.' Huston explains in *The Story of The Misfits*: 'This movie is about a world in change. Now the cowboys ride pickup trucks.... Once they sold the wild horses for children's ponies. And now for dog food. This is a dog-eat-horse society' (45).

The climactic development in the last roundup is crucial, where Gay overpowers the mustang, and then releases it again. It serves a symbolic purpose, which exhibits an act of reclamation, in which Gay reclaims his personal integrity of being a "real" man. The struggle of the mustangs also resonates with the cowboys grappling with the forces of industrialization. At the end, we have Perce, who is forced to face the reality, Guido, who is left with plain frustration, and a hopeful Gay, still picking up the pieces. However, Roslyn

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seems to be more of a misfit (hierarchically) among the misfits, as she is unable to comprehend the inevitable vicissitudes of life, the way other male characters do from the perspective of survival. The conclusion, even when it offers a new dream, this 'dream of new beginnings could be dangerous and delusional' (Borden and Essman 38), and the dream may too not fit or be a mis-fit in this unusual, deserted universe.

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