

Gia Mazzotti

22033299

Fashion Aesthetics and the Audience

Essay Topic

The impact Marilyn Monroe's "Happy Birthday, Mr President" dress had on the audience in 1962 compared to when Kim Kardashian wore it in 2022 and how it explores the link between fashion, celebrity culture, and societal values focusing on the significance of the dress in relation to the Male Gaze, parasocial relationships and transcoding.

Primary Research

The primary researched used in this essay is the analysis of archival clippings from newspaper articles written a day or two after JFK's birthday celebration in 1962 (20 May 1962 - 21 May 1962) and the comparison on the first hand accounts to determine an understanding of the audience's reaction to this event. An analysis of video and audio recordings to formulate my research is evident in this essay, specifically with how the audience at the event reacted. This supports my essay in the sense that it gives me a first hand account of what what witnessed and I am able to step into this time to formulate my own opinion and data of this event.

London College of Fashion
Cultural and Historical Studies

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In Celebrity culture, fashion items transcend their material form to become iconic symbols of culture, shaping societal values. How people dress forms part of a "social system that constructs and disciplines the body" (Liang and Wilson, 2020, p. 58). The wearer can never be certain of how the audience will perceive how they dress. Marilyn Monroe's dress from her iconic performance, "Happy Birthday, Mr President," in May 1962 and Kim Kardashian's reuse of the dress at the 2022 Met Gala are two examples. These prominent women and the dress intrigued the audience and started a conversation about the Male Gaze, parasocial relationships and transcoding. Laura Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze positions women as objects of visual pleasure that cater to heterosexual men and their desires. Monroe's and Kardashian's interpretations of femininity through the dress depict how the gaze continues to influence beauty standards and desirability. These instances of the dress being worn can be linked to parasocial relationships, a concept developed by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl to convey how pop culture figures can provoke a one-sided relationship with their audiences based on a delusion of intimacy, allowing Monroe and Kardashian to personify standards of glamour that connects deeply with the audience. Through these relationships, the dress has been elevated from a personal statement to a cultural phenomenon, becoming a topic of public fascination and debate. Kardashians wearing Monroe's dress can be analysed through the idea of transcoding, taking pre-existing meanings and representations and reinterpreting them into new definitions, often in ways that contradict or complement their original intent. By wearing this iconic piece of fashion history, Kardashian linked herself to Monroe's lasting legacy and adapted it to modern ideals around fame and originality. This essay discusses the impact Marilyn Monroe's "Happy Birthday, Mr President" dress had on the audience in 1962 and again in 2022 when Kim Kardashian wore it and how it explores the link between fashion, celebrity culture, and societal values. This essay focuses on the significance of the dress in relation to the Male Gaze, parasocial relationships and transcoding while exploring the relationship between fashion, fame and the audience.

Norma Jeane Mortenson or Marilyn Monroe's public perception was shaped by the Male Gaze and became one of the most iconic sex symbols in modern times. Monroe was both adored and over-analysed by her audiences, with her image being moulded to the heterosexual male fantasy. Monroe's seductive voice, hourglass figure and constructed persona as the 'dumb blonde' contributed to her desirability. "Besides bloneness, Monroe also had, or seemed to have several personality traits that together sum up female desirability in the fifties" (Dyer, 2013, p. 42). Monroe became a pin-up in the 1940s, which were images of women mainly for male consumption. Pin-ups promote visual appearance and the objectification of women (Dyer, 1979, p. 50). In Richard Dyer's *Stars* (1979, p. 31), he argues that Monroe's combined sexuality and innocence characterised the changing of ideas about sexuality in the 1950s in America. Before her, women were told not to celebrate their sexuality and had to conform to society's idea of how they should act. Dyer (2013, p. 21) explains in *Heavenly Bodies* that "Monroe became virtually a household word for sex." With her association with pin-up style, she manipulated the Male Gaze to attract

success and popularity. The public and her audience's parasocial relationship with her grew with her persistent rumours about her personal life, particularly her alleged affair with President John F. Kennedy. JFK regularly used his brother-in-law, Peter Lawford, who was in the movie scene, to bring Monroe to the White House (Rojek, 2001, p. 123). Monroe's performance at JFK's birthday celebration in 1962 fuelled rumours of their affair. Figure 1 shows the only known photograph taken of Monroe and JFK, the photograph was taken at the afterparty of the birthday celebration in 1962. The public became obsessed with her image and personal life as the alleged affair added to her allure. Marilyn Monroe was a character, a facade, to Norma Jeane Mortenson, a way to satisfy Hollywood's expectations and the Male Gaze. The expectations placed on her by her audience contributed to her mental struggles. Monroe demonstrates how celebrity women are often trapped within the Male Gaze, where their worth is measured by desirability, and the audience's parasocial relationship with them overshadows their autonomy.

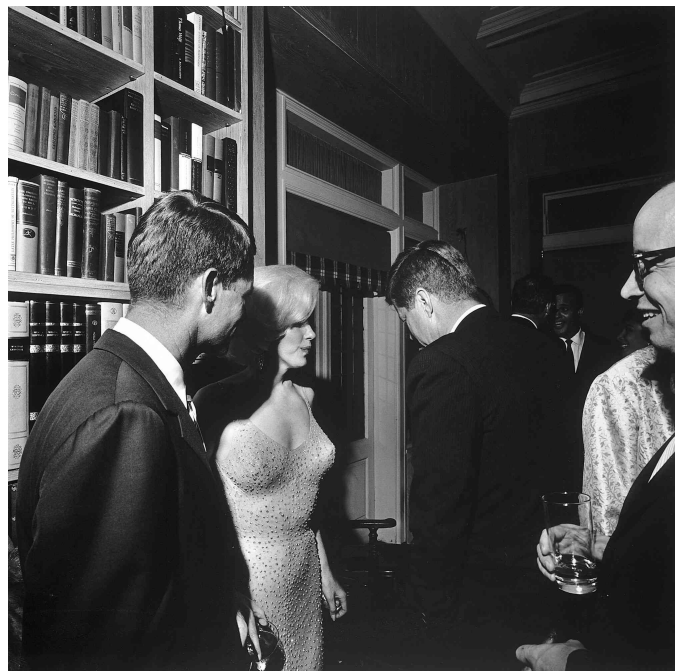


Figure 1: (Stoughton, 1962)



Figure 2: (Ray, 1962)

In May 1962, Marilyn Monroe made history with her version of the 'Happy Birthday' song when she sang it to John F. Kennedy. Her breathy and seductive version of the song became one of the most famous performances of all time. However, the alluring cover was not the most iconic part of that night; her dress was. Figure 2 shows Monroe's dress from behind. At a fundraiser ten days before JFK's birthday, Monroe took the stage in a white fur coat and removed it to reveal a breathtaking embellished gown, earning a gasp from the audience. The dress was designed by Jean Louis and inspired by Bob Mackie's sketch. The custom-made, sheer, flesh-coloured gown adorned with 2,500 hand-sewn rhinestones was so form-fitting that Monroe reportedly had to be sewn into it and chose to wear nothing underneath it to appear as though she was wearing nothing but diamonds, emphasising sensuality and glamour. Monroe's

dress and performance were provocative and bold, pushing boundaries in a way that shocked many. It reflected the tensions between conservatism and sexual liberation in early 1960s America. The revealing qualities of the dress and the sultry performance were met with desire and disapproval from the audience. American society at the time was mostly conservative, and Monroe's form-fitting dress was regarded as highly inappropriate for a political event. Many viewed it as too revealing and sexual, especially in the presence of JFK. Her performance caused an immediate reaction from the broader audience, partly due to the scandalous rumours that she and JFK were having an affair; one columnist wrote that the actress seemed to be "making love to the president in direct view of 40 million Americans." JFK reacted to the performance during his speech at the end of the evening, saying, "I can now retire from politics after having had Happy Birthday sung to me in such a sweet, wholesome way." (The Sacramento Bee, 1962). Fueled by scandalous rumours, this controversy added a layer of intrigue to the dress and its cultural significance.

The Male Gaze, according to Laura Mulvey, is to objectify and sexualise women from heterosexual male perspectives. The Male Gaze has become a prominent social media aspect, specifically with Kim Kardashian. Given that she rose to fame with a highly publicised sex tape that circulated in 2007, Kardashian's position as a subject of the Male Gaze is indisputable. She used this sexualised media portrayal as a focal point for her public identity. Kardashian took advantage of the position she was in and displayed her body on her own accord. It is argued that she stages her body as an object and fetish to control her public image, much like Marilyn Monroe did, through her social media platforms to exploit the Male Gaze and use it for her own personal and financial gain. In Valerie Steele's book *The Phallic Woman*, she talks about the relationship between fashion and fetishism. She investigates how people, particularly women, embrace fetishism and use it as a source of power and how fashion plays a fundamental role in this. (Rocamora, 2015, p. 53). Kardashian uses her clothes and body as a source of power to create her own narrative. Before the 2022 Met Gala, Kardashian had always been in the public eye one way or another for numerous reasons, mainly because of the shock factor she delivered to social media and pop culture. Kardashian's hourglass figure has been a significant focus in media coverage, celebrated by some and looked down on by others for creating unhealthy beauty standards, but mainly as a universal symbol of desire for men.

Marilyn Monroe's dress, which famously symbolised sensuality and glamour, was worn for the second time by Kardashian at the 2022 Met Gala. According to Andrew Tudor's model of audience/star relation types, Kim Kardashian would fit into the low-range bracket of star/individual identification as she played the role of Marilyn Monroe by wearing the dress. Monroe acted as "some sort of model" for Kardashian (Dyer, 1979, p. 18). The idea of transcoding in this context refers to what the dress symbolised in 1962 and how its meaning changed after the 2022 Met Gala. Kardashian transcoded the cultural and historical significance of the dress when she wore it to the Met Gala. Kardashian pivoted the audience's perception of the dress from the epitome of Hollywood Glamour and

sensuality to a symbol of imitation, unhealthy body standards and misusing a historical artefact. Figure 3 shows Kardashian posing in the dress before the Gala. The act of wearing the dress caused immediate backlash from most of her audience, as people thought it was distasteful to wear a piece of history that was once worn by a Hollywood icon. The audience believed that Kardashian was trying to create a new image for herself that reflected glamour, but instead, it was regarded as an offensive imitation. Before the gala, Kardashian could only wear the dress if it fit her; no alterations were allowed, so when the dress did not fit her, she decided the only logical answer would be to alter her body shape. Kardashian revealed she lost 7kg in three weeks by following a diet reminiscent of the crash diets that are widely criticised for their harmful health effects. Her rapid weight loss reinforced unhealthy beauty standards that contribute to body dysmorphia among women.

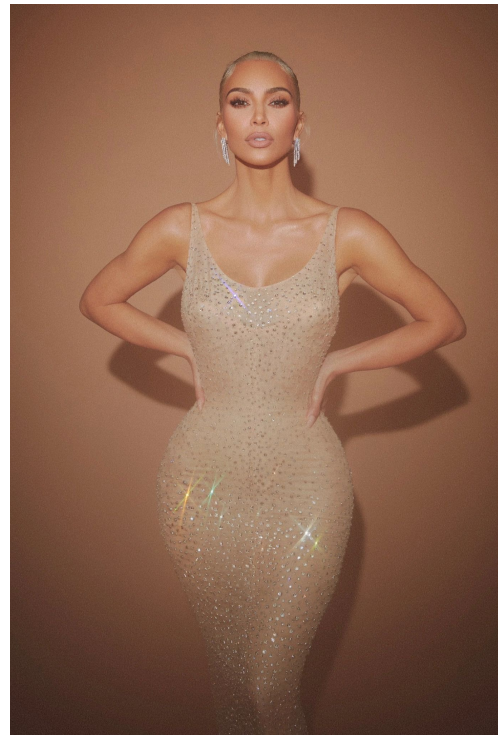


Figure 3: (Swales, 2022)

Kardashian's plan to fit into the dress drew parallels to weight loss expectations of pop culture and Hollywood. Although Kardashian only wore the dress to climb the steps and then changed into a replica for the gala itself, it sparked the discussion of the fact that celebrities live in a different world to us and how it seems to permit them to do things that only ordinary people can dream of (Rojek, 2001, p. 31). Kardashian's reuse of the dress sparked conversations about body image, imitation and wearing a historical artefact.

Marilyn Monroe's "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" dress was worn and designed around the Male Gaze, reinforcing Laura Mulvey's theory. In 1962, Monroe's sheer dress was designed to create the illusion of nudity to captivate not only the audience but also President John F. Kennedy. The combination of the dress that 'left nothing to the imagination' and her breathy and seductive rendition of 'Happy Birthday' created a moment of intense sexualisation, casting herself as a woman who existed for the pleasure of others, particularly the male audience. "Monroe conforms to, and is in part of the construction of, what constitutes desirability in women" (Dyer, 2013, p. 40). The dress itself became a symbol of seduction, reinforcing Monroe's position as an object of desire. When Kim Kardashian wore the dress in 2022, the Male Gaze surrounding the dress returned but within the modern cultural landscape of social media. By wearing the dress, Kardashian aligned herself with Monroe's legacy of a sexualised icon, thus putting herself into the view of the Male Gaze. Kardashian's hourglass figure, particularly in this dress, was scrutinised and admired on social media, where the Male Gaze dictates desirability. Monroe and Kardashian in the dress were both subjects of debate on the topic of desirability and spectacle, showcasing that the Male Gaze remains a prominent aspect of how women in the public eye are perceived.



Figure 4: (Gotham, 2022)

Before Kim Kardashian wore Marilyn Monroe's "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" dress to the 2022 Met Gala, the dress was seen as an iconic historical relic symbolising Monroe's sensuality, desirability, and public image. The dress was a defining moment in celebrity history, emphasising Monroe's ability to draw in audiences through fashion, performance, and allure. For 60 years, it remained untouched and a preserved piece of history. Monroe's sheer, form-fitting, embellished dress was specifically made for her to enhance her sensuality and seduction as a woman, tying into her own identity and narrative, particularly, the rumours of her alleged affair with President John F. Kennedy. However, when Kim Kardashian wore the dress, she transcoded the meaning from a symbol of Monroe's allure and personal experience to a symbol of modern celebrity commentary and access. While Monroe intended to immortalise herself and make a statement about her

career in a moment of sensuality, Kardashian's decision was rooted in nostalgia, spectacle and creating a moment that would shock the audience and reinforce her self-branding as pop culture's most iconic woman. Figure 4 shows Kardashian wearing the dress on the red carpet. This decision made for considerable controversy; some of her audience praised her for paying homage to an iconic woman and an iconic dress, while others disapproved her choice to risk a historical artefact for a red carpet. Kardashian was also met with backlash for her drastic weight loss in order to fit the measurements of the dress, which led to the ever-present discussion of unrealistic beauty standards that celebrities create for their audiences. This rapid weight loss over a three-week period was viewed as regressive by many and contrasted with newer discussions on body positivity and acceptance, tying into the argument that fashion oppresses women (Rocamora, 2015, p. 57). Many historians and archivists argue that Monroe's dress should never have been removed from the designated room and should have remained untouched rather than used for modern celebrity culture. Kardashian shifted the public's perception of the dress from a historical relic of Hollywood glamour to a reused item that is available to anyone with enough influence. Monroe's dress, once symbolised sensuality, allure and glamour, has been transcoded to symbolise celebrity spectacle.

The comparison between Marilyn Monroe wearing the dress in 1962 and Kim Kardashian wearing the dress in 2022 shows the lasting effect and prominence of the Male Gaze, parasocial relationships and transcoding. The Male Gaze has been and is still a predominant force in society and in shaping the audience's view of female celebrities, with similarities and shifts between eras of pop culture, particularly with controlled imagery in Monroe's era and self-curated social media in Kardashian's era. Monroe placed herself

within the Male Gaze as a character to make it in the Hollywood system, and Kardashian used her experience with the Male Gaze as a means of power; this establishes the parallels between Monroe's era and Kardashian's era of pop culture and shows that the Male Gaze has not declined over time. However, parasocial relationships have evolved over time, primarily due to the advancement of influencer culture and social media. Monroe's fanbase was fascinated with her but had limited access to her personal life; what was known about her personal life was either speculation, like her alleged affair with President Kennedy, or given to the audience by herself. Kardashian, however, exists in a time where the line between public and private is blurred due to social media. Fans are able to engage directly with her through various social media platforms. Kardashian's fans perceive her as relatable while Monroe's fans admired her from a distance, indicating the shift in parasocial relationships. The idea of transcoding played an important role in transforming Monroe's dress from an iconic historical artefact to a reused fashion statement. Monroe wore the dress as a symbol of seduction and allure, strengthening her cultural influence; however, when Kardashian wore it, it became a symbol of consumption and spectacle. Ultimately, while the Male Gaze, parasocial relationships and transcoding have evolved in one way or another, their roots in society have remained intact.

The heritage of Marilyn Monroe's "Happy Birthday, Mr President" dress and its re-emergence into society through Kim Kardashian at the 2022 Met Gala demonstrate that fashion items can transcend time and their material form to become iconic symbols of culture, shaping societal values. Through the lens of the Male Gaze, Monroe's performance was centred around desirability and femininity that rooted her in the fantasy of the heterosexual male. Although Monroe and Kardashian lived through different cultural eras, both of these women felt the pressure of desirability and audience perception, proving that the Male Gaze has remained a prevailing force in pop culture. Kardashian's reuse of the dress, 60 years later, redefined what the dress symbolised. She shifted it from an iconic piece of fashion history and Hollywood glamour to a means for celebrity branding. Kardashian's controversial use of the dress shows how fashion can be reinterpreted through different cultural contexts. In conclusion, it is evident that although the dress served two different purposes for Monroe and Kardashian, the audience's dictation on desirability and influence has remained in celebrity culture. Whether the dress is regarded as a symbol of sensuality or imitation, it remains proof that fashion has the ability to transcend time.

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Figure 1:

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Figure 3:

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