

He was a giant of literature; she was the ultimate movie star. On the publication of a stunning new TASCHEN book, we reprint Norman Mailer's essay on what made Monroe the one woman NO man could forget...

MAILER *on* MARILYN



Pink Scarf is one of the many photographs Bert Stern took of Marilyn over a three-day period, known as *The Last Sitting*, for *Vogue* in the early 1960s
Above: A contact sheet, choosing images to be published in *Vogue*
Inset: Norman Mailer, taken in the 1970s



SO WE THINK OF MARILYN who was every Man's love affair with America, Marilyn Monroe who was blonde and beautiful and had a sweet little rinky-dink of a voice and all the cleanliness of all the clean American backyards. She was our angel, the sweet angel of sex, and the sugar of sex came up from her like a resonance of sound in the clearest grain of a violin.

Across five continents the men who knew the most about love would covet her, and the classical pimples of the adolescent working his first gas pump would also pump for her, since Marilyn was deliverance, a very Stradivarius of sex, so gorgeous, forgiving, humorous, compliant and tender that even the most mediocre musician would relax his lack of art in the dissolving magic of her violin. 'Divine love always has met and always will meet every human need,' was the sentiment she offered from the works of Mary Baker Eddy as 'my prayer for you always' (to the man who may have been her first illicit lover), and if we change love to sex, we have the subtext in the promise. 'Marilyn Monroe's sex,' said the smile of the young star, 'will meet every human need.'

She gave the feeling that if you made love to her, why then how could you not move more easily into sweets and the purchase of the full promise of future sweets, move into tender heavens where your flesh would be restored. She could ask no price. She was not the dark contract of those passionate brunette depths that speak of blood, vows taken for life, and the furies of vengeance if you are untrue to the depth of passion, no, Marilyn suggested sex might be difficult and dangerous with others, but ice cream with her. If your taste combined with her taste, how nice, how sweet would be that tender dream of flesh there to share.

In her early career, in the time of *The Asphalt Jungle* when the sexual immanence of her face came up on the screen like a sweet peach bursting before one's eyes, she looked then like a new love ready and waiting between the sheets in the unexpected clean breath of a rare sexy

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FEATURE

morning, looked like she'd stepped fully clothed out of a chocolate box for Valentine's Day, so desirable as to fulfil each of the letters in that favourite word of the publicity flack, curvaceous, so curvaceous and yet without menace as to turn one's fingertips into 10 happy prowlers. Sex was, yes, ice cream to her. 'Take me,' said her smile. 'I'm easy. I'm happy. I'm an angel of sex, you bet.'

What a jolt to the dream life of the nation that the angel died of an overdose. Whether calculated suicide by barbiturates or accidental suicide by losing count of how many barbiturates she had already taken, or an end even more sinister, no one was able to say. Her death was covered over with ambiguity even as Hemingway's was exploded into horror, and as the deaths and spiritual disasters of the decade of the 1960s came one by one to American Kings and Queens, as Jack Kennedy was killed, and Bobby, and Martin Luther King, as Jackie Kennedy married Aristotle Onassis and Teddy Kennedy went off the bridge at Chappaquiddick, so the decade that began with Hemingway as the monarch of American arts ended with Andy Warhol as its regent, and the ghost of Marilyn's death gave a lavender edge to that dramatic American design of the 1960s, which seemed in retrospect to have done nothing so much as to bring Richard Nixon to the threshold of imperial power. 'Romance is a nonsense bet,' said the jolt in the electric shock, and so began that long decade of the 1960s, which ended with television living like an inchworm on the aesthetic gut of the drug-deadened American belly.

In what a light does that leave the last angel of the cinema! She was never for TV. She preferred a theatre and those hundreds of bodies in the dark, those wandering lights on the screen when the luminous life of her face grew 10ft tall. It was possible she knew better than anyone that she was the last of the myths to thrive in the long evening of the American dream – she had been born, after all, in the year Valentino died, and his footprints in the forecourt at Grauman's Chinese Theatre were the only ones that fit her feet.

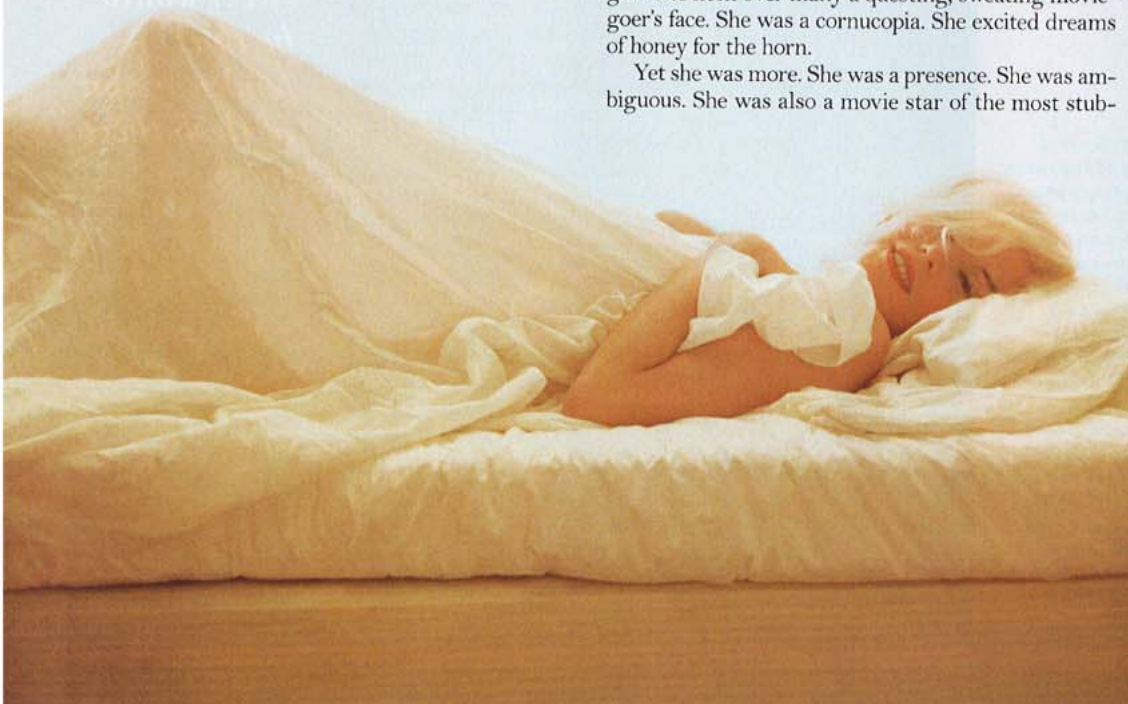
She was one of the last of cinema's aristocrats and



may not have wanted to be examined, then ingested, in the neighbourly reductive dimensions of America's living room. No, she belonged to the occult church of the film, and the last covers of Hollywood. She might be as modest in her voice and as soft in her flesh as the girl next door, but she was nonetheless larger than life up on the screen. Even down in the Eisenhower shank of the early 1950s she was already promising that a time was coming when sex would be easy and sweet, democratic provender for all. Her stomach, untrammelled by girdles or sheaths, popped forward in a full woman's belly, inelegant as hell, an avowal of a womb fairly salivating in seed – that belly which was never to have a child – and her breasts popped buds and burgeons of flesh over many a questing, sweating moviegoer's face. She was a cornucopia. She excited dreams of honey for the horn.

Yet she was more. She was a presence. She was ambiguous. She was also a movie star of the most stub-

All photographs by Bert Stern from 1962.
Above: Marilyn Vogue
Below: Marilyn In Bed
Opposite: Marilyn Beads



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'It was possible she knew better than anyone that she was the last of the myths to thrive in the long evening of the American dream. She was one of the last of cinema's aristocrats'



born secretiveness and flamboyant candour, most conflicting arrogance and on-rushing inferiority; great populist of philosophers – she loved the working man – and most tyrannical of mates, a queen of a castrator who was ready to weep for a dying minnow; a lover of books who did not read, and a proud, inviolate artist who could haunch over to publicity when the heat was upon her faster than a whore could lust over a hot buck; a female spurt of wit and sensitive energy who could hang like a sloth for days in a muddy-mooded coma; a child-girl, yet an actress to loose a riot by dropping her glove at a premiere; a fountain of charm and a dreary bore; an ambulating cyclone of beauty when dressed to show; a dank, hunched-up drab at her worst – with a bad smell! – a giant and an emotional pygmy; a lover of life and a cowardly hyena of death who drenched herself in chemical stupors; a sexual oven whose fire may rarely have been lit – she would go to bed with her brassiere on – she was certainly more and less than the silver witch of us all.

In her ambition, so Faustian, and in her ignorance

of culture's dimensions, in her liberation and her tyrannical desires, her noble democratic longings intimately contradicted by the widening pool of her narcissism (where every friend and slave must bathe), we can see the magnified mirror of ourselves, our exaggerated and now all but defeated generation; yes, she ran a reconnaissance through the 1950s, and left a message for us in her death, 'Baby go boom'. Now she is the ghost of the 1960s.

It may be fair to quote another woman whose life ended in suicide: 'A biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many as one thousand.' The words are by Virginia Woolf. In its wake, the materials of any biographer come begging with his credentials. ♦

♦ *A review of the new TASCHEN book is on page 57.*

♦ *For more images of Marilyn from the Bert Stern sessions, visit www.lady.co.uk.*

Norman Mailer, Bert Stern: Marilyn Monroe, is published by TASCHEN, priced £650 for the Collectors Edition or £1,500 for either the Art Edition, containing the limited-edition prints of Marilyn: TASCHEN, 12 Duke of York Square, London SW3, www.taschen.com

The Lady

