The multivalent feminism of *The Notorious Bettie Page*

by Steven S. Kapica

Pin-up queen Bettie Page was one of the most photographed women of the 1950s. In addition to posing for thousands of pin-up and cheesecake images, Page performed in burlesque features and cheeky bondage and discipline scenarios. Her modeling career only spanned a few years, from 1951 to 1957. Then, while her images and films continued to circulate, she fell into relative obscurity for more than twenty years. In the 1980s, Page resurfaced as a cult icon, spawning what comedian Buck Henry termed in 1992 the “Betty Boom.”[1] Page became an inspiration to and cipher for artists, fashion designers, models, and feminists who appropriated Page’s aesthetic and claimed her as a proto-feminist icon of liberated sexuality. Writer and director Mary Harron’s interest in Bettie Page dates to this “boom” and, in 1993, Harron and Guinevere Turner began working on their script for *The Notorious Bettie Page*.

*The Notorious Bettie Page* (2005) is a multivalent construction. The film recasts and appropriates Bettie Page as a multifaceted representation of beauty and desirability that ultimately disrupts traditional understandings of female sexuality and identity. This is especially interesting when we consider the film and its relation to current feminist discourse. As an examination of Page and the social and political turbulence of the postwar era—an era which consumed a tremendous amount of sexual commodities—*The Notorious Bettie Page* affords us a way to understand the problems inherent in cinematically representing a female sexuality commensurate with current feminist schemas. By refiguring a postwar pin-up model in a third wave feminist light, Harron’s film destabilizes a traditional male gaze and invites the audience to engage a dialectic of representational female sexuality. *The Notorious Bettie Page* embraces contradiction and draws attention to the complicated business of feminist sexual signification. Not only does Harron’s film appropriate and recover Bettie Page for a third wave feminist audience, it provides viewers with a challenging rumination and remediation of postwar ideology and femininity.

The “infamous” Mary Harron

Canadian filmmaker and writer Mary Harron is touted as one of the film industry’s few “high-profile female directors,” even though she has only directed and released four feature length films in the last fifteen years.[2] The director’s measured output is the result of careful research, attention to detail, and a need to connect with her material. As Harron reveals in an interview with *The Guardian*’s Kate Bussman,

“If I’m going to write a script it has to be something that I’m going to stay interested in over a long period. Writing a film is time-consuming, and I have to be invested in it.”[3]


With *I Shot Andy Warhol* Harron diligently balances recreation of period with her deep affinity with Solanas. Dana Heller cites Harron who writes,

“The Manifesto… reached a core of anger I didn’t know I possessed… It made me wonder about blighted talents, vanished possibilities, and what might be lurking in the great host of humanity we call failures.”[4]

Many reviewers of the film took issue with Harron’s treatment of Andy Warhol, the Factory scene, and Solanas’ motivations and her unique brand of radical feminism. As Heller suggests, however,

“What reviewers have overlooked in the race to distance themselves from Solanas’ writings and Harron’s canonization of *SCUM* is the film’s seeming fascination with the possibility that Solanas’ derangement was owed to the failure of writing itself, or to shifting technologies of cultural memory.”[5]

Harron’s fascination with “blighted talents” and “vanished possibilities” is filtered through her interest in the shifting technologies of cultural memory and the complex nature of writing (and rewriting). This allows her film to supersede historical accuracy and eschew any straightforward feminist agenda. Harron’s depiction of Solanas’ radicalism has less to do with redressing societal wrongs to women than understanding Solanas’ inability to manage herself in an environment ill-equipped to accept her. Solanas begs for change, prostitutes herself, espouses radical anti-male feminism. When met with indifference she becomes increasingly agitated to the point where her
shooting Andy Warhol is less the result of spiraling out of control than it is her extreme, final attempt to be heard, to be noticed. Warhol reads less as “an insult to level-headed feminism” than as a provocative rumination on the difficulty of managing personal identity and agency within the discursive forces of a patriarchal consumer culture.[6]

Following Warhol with a screen adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis’ American Psycho, Harron again demonstrated her unique approach to period recreation and art direction, as well as her dedication to filming frustrated, misunderstood characters whose lives go terribly wrong.[7] Like Warhol, American Psycho received mixed reviews, due in part to Harron’s unflinching treatment of Bret Easton Ellis’ novel and her commitment to presenting the story as razor sharp, period satire—as an indictment of 1980s empty opulence. And like her treatment of Solanas, Harron depicts Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) as a complicated, even loathsome character who begs not for sympathy, or identification, but for acceptance—to be seen and heard.

Warhol and American Psycho together highlight a battle between ideology and autonomy. Bateman and Solanas are both products and aberrations of their discursive environments. Solanas’ abject “butch” lesbianism and anti-male radical feminism, Harron demonstrates, are the results of both internal and external discursive forces. Patrick Bateman is not simply pushed to extremes by a 1980s culture obsessed with surface and consumption; he is also driven (and driven mad) by his own unchecked desire to be a successful part of that very culture. That he is finally met with utter indifference echoes the indifference with which Solanas is met in Warhol.

In his review of American Psycho, Roger Ebert cites Harron’s confession that American Psycho is a “feminist” film. While Ebert’s reading of Harron’s feminism is not particularly illuminating, Harron’s admittance suggests strong feminist ties between her first two films; it also reveals the director’s penchant for creating feminist works that play with surface and resist “level-headed feminism.” Reading Warhol as a feminist film requires looking through Solanas’ radicalism to see how Warhol’s fame and success represent a co-opting of his queer aesthetic by heteronormative consumer culture and its reinforcement of traditional, patriarchal gender roles. Solanas’ abjection is incommensurable, and so must be purged. Patrick Bateman’s devotion to surface and status reifies both heteronormativity and patriarchy. Harron’s biting satirization of Bateman’s desire exposes the hollowness of the patriarchal drive for dominance and wealth. Bateman’s proclamation that there is nothing beneath his surface aligns his mania with a psychotic fetishism born of rampant objectification.

Given Warhol’s interest in exploring the complexity of gender signification, feminism, and cultural memory, and American Psycho’s interest in surface, objectification, and patriarchal fetishism, it is not surprising that Harron chose to tackle pin-up queen Bettie Page. Page, a product of postwar ideology and the feminine mystique, eschews clear labels; her image vacillates between and collapses the good girl/bad girl binary. Harron’s treatment carefully navigates Page’s multifaceted iconography, and the film remediates the model’s life and image in a way that challenges traditional representations of female sexuality and dismantles rote objectification and easy consumption of sex symbols. In a way, The Notorious Bettie Page collects and extends Harron’s previous films’ interests and ranks as not only her most “feminist” film but as her clearest rendering of a multivalent third wave agenda.

The Notorious Bettie Page traces the life of Bettie Page through a series of flashbacks while she waits to testify before the 1955 Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Harron uses Bettie’s waiting alone on a courthouse bench to anchor the film’s narrative. And that narrative frames Page’s life and culpability with questions regarding sexual signification and the larger social and political questions raised by postwar sexual iconography. As with Warhol and Psycho, however, Notorious carefully balances the power of ideological forces and personal agency. The Bettie Page of Harron’s film is both a product of the postwar era and an active, if at times conflicted, agent in the trajectory of her life.

Notorious stars Gretchen Mol as Bettie Page. A graduate of the William Esper Studio in Manhattan, Mol was “discovered” by photographer Davis Powell in 1994. Her first film role was in Spike Lee’s 1996 film Girl 6. As Ryan Stewart notes,

“When [Mol] first arrived on the scene in the late 1990s, observers and critics, wowed by her cottony golden locks, gigawatt smile… proclaimed her to be the heir apparent to the immaculately-coifed bombshells of Hollywood’s Golden Age.”[8]

That years later she would play pin-up queen Page seems fitting, though she would trade her golden locks for Bettie’s trademark jet black hair with sharp bangs.

Mol’s commitment to portraying Page survived the two years between signing on to the project and Harron’s securing of funds to start filming. The actress also spent considerable time delving into the pin-up model’s life and circumstances. Mol explains of Page:

“She was so full of mystery, I found, when I was trying to uncover who she was, that she was just so full of all these juxtapositions. She was very much a 50s woman and she was religious, but she was also so comfortable naked.”[9]

Of her turn as the pin-up queen, Mol says,

“I think what I learned from doing Bettie was investigating how any given period affects how a woman reacts… The culture of that time, how much of an effect that had on Bettie, being part of a time period when there was so much repression.”[10]

Mol’s observations echo Harron’s, both in terms of cultural memory and aesthetic, and her portrayal of Page clearly reflects the actress’s connection to the material and the subject of Notorious.

Much like the reception of her first two films, many reviewers were disappointed with Notorious, complaining the film failed to evoke a real, emotional response. Chris Cabin notes,

“The Notorious Bettie Page is not a good movie... Perhaps its biggest crime is that it has succeeded at being what Bettie
That the film runs counter to expectations is echoed in comments Harron made in response to American Psycho (2000). Kaufman, in reference to Harron’s thanking Lion’s Gate for producing “a film that nobody would,” asked the director what changes other producers required of her in order to produce the film:

“Other people were very concerned about the hero being so unsympathetic. They were like, can’t you have more about his psychology, and more about his background? And I felt like no, it’s not about realistic psychology, it doesn’t matter what his parents were like.”

Harron reveals a clear intention to eschew narrative tropes and psychological character development in search of something with “edges.”

In an interview with Ann Hornaday, Harron admits,

“Some people have reacted badly to Bettie Page and say that it’s not deep enough or dark enough, because [they] think when you see a girl doing any kind of sex job and sexual photographs and fetish photographs, then she should end up cut up in a trunk, basically.”

Hornaday follows up on these comments by questioning, “What’s your relationship to feminism?” Harron’s response is telling:

“I feel that without feminism, I wouldn’t be doing this. So I feel very grateful. Without it, God knows what my life would be. I don’t make feminist films in the sense that I don’t make anything ideological. But I do find that women get my films better.”

Harron’s insistence that she “[doesn’t] make feminist films,” that she “[doesn’t] make anything ideological,” is indicative of the double-bind represented by the multiple and often contradictory categories of contemporary feminisms. Speaking to these contradictions, Stephanie Genz opens Postfemininities in Popular Culture by noting that “the last decades of the twentieth century were characterized by analytical turmoil and popular disagreements regarding the conditions of feminism and femininity.”

This confusion is most noticeable in the friction between postfeminism(s) and third wave feminism. Lise Shapiro Sanders cautions, “Postfeminism should not be confused with third wave feminism.” Sanders cites Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake to articulate the differences between the two:

“’postfeminist’ characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave.”

This characterization of postfeminism as conservative and oppositional to the second wave is the one typically forwarded by popular media, the claim being feminism has run its course, is “dead.” Postfeminism, as an anti-feminist stance, rallies behind an essentialized definition of “woman” and reinstalls it within a conservative, patriarchal tradition. Sanders adds that there are alternative uses of “postfeminism” not characterized by anti-feminist sentiment; however, she does warn that

“postfeminism must be read not (or not merely) through the logic of generational difference but through the political and social implications of the claims made in [postfeminist] texts, as well as the ways in which they have circulated in the media and the popular imagination.”

Harron’s comments demonstrate this conflict between celebration and condemnation of women and feminism; her denial of ideological intent, combined with her reverence for second wave feminism, is both feminist and not feminist. Such a contradictory stance is better characterized by the move from second to third wave feminism. R. Clair Snyder notes, “the third wave foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism.” Furthermore, “third-wave feminism emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political.”

In Chilla Bulbeck’s encapsulation of the key differences between the second and third wave there is a clear distinction regarding sexuality:

“Third wavers have been particularly critical of what they see as the second wave’s victim, puritan, punitive or Victorian feminism. In fact, some claim that third-wave feminists have made sexuality the central means of asserting generational differences. Feminism’s ‘obsession’ with rape, man-bashing and goddess religions is rejected as creating a ‘morally pure yet
In photographic model, Harron presents us with Page's induction into the fifties amateur camera club scene. Harron notes in the DVD commentary track that a female photographer appears amidst the men gathered to photograph Page. Eating, Harron's direction also subverts erotic objectification. Bettie is the "object" who is gawked at, slobbered over, and almost continuously photographed within the narrative. This continuum of objectification doesn't seem to faze Page. Her performance is never about catering to her audience's need for sexual gratification; rather, it's about her own fun and liberation.

For Page (the "real" and the "notorious"), her modeling meant a liberation from the pressures and abuses of her life; for the audience watching the modeling, it means liberation from social constraints and the ideological trap of viewing female sexuality as a symbolic act of sexual oppression. As such, Page's role as erotic object gets stripped away. The result of the film's narrative—as well as its tone and construction—is to obfuscate audience desire. The tepid reviews from male critics, combined with Harron's insistence that women (and gay men) "get her films," illustrates her ability to destabilize heteronormative viewing pleasure. Furthermore, as Jane Gaines notes, "The sex symbol is a consolidation of needs and wants around a something that the society can deliver through commodity production, the only organized means."[27]

In a sense, The Notorious Bettie Page takes the already written sex symbol that is Bettie Page and rewrites her sexual signification as a feminist act.

As Maria Elena Buszek notes, the challenge of third wave feminists to create a new sexual paradigm involves "the drive toward creating representations that disrupt the patriarchal subjugation of women yet retain the right to use familiar conventions of representing women's beauty and desirability to make this disruption more accessible."[28]

Harron's film attempts this very thing by presenting the physically attractive and accessible Gretchen Mol as a good-natured and free-spirited Bettie Page liberated by the exposure of her sexuality. Page's desirability is unquestioned—both by the filmmakers and the audience. However, Harron's and Mol's presentation of Page is ultimately presented as disruptive. Such disruption is most noticeable in the film's ability to underscore Page's sexuality with humor, to invite audience reflection instead of desire, and to present Page's confidence in front of the camera as unwavering.

"Show us your keister"

The Notorious Bettie Page's carefully crafted version of Bettie Page begs its audience simultaneously to view Page as a sexual woman and interrogate this representation. By eschewing a reading of Bettie's psychological underpinnings and by presenting Page as unflinchingly good-natured in her sexual performance, Harron in a sense de-sexes a sexual icon. As Gaines points out, "Sexuality, contrary to prevalent belief, is not 'natural' at all. Rather, sexuality indicates one of the most rigidly organized areas of social life, and is as much a social construction as language."[29]

By underscoring Page's sexual performance with her harmless, even innocent, good-natured enjoyment, the audience comes to view her sexuality not as a performance for its gratification—a performance wherein Page reinforces a culturally naturalized sex—but one wherein she achieves her own satisfaction—a satisfaction that transcends rigidly organized (and contained) areas of sexual life.

After the real Bettie Page moved to New York from Nashville in 1950, she worked a number of secretarial jobs before being introduced to photographic modeling by policeman and amateur photographer Jerry Tibbs. Notorious includes this introduction and uses it to establish Page's transition from secretary to model, a transition emphasized visually by Tibbs' suggestion that Page cut her bangs to enhance her appearance in front of the camera. This establishment of Page as a model provides a backdrop to one of the film's most interesting sequences—one which not only destabilizes sexual signification through humor but presents a provocative instance of gender transgression.

While the real Bettie Page modeled extensively for professional photographers, she also posed for amateur photographers and camera clubs. These camera clubs were largely composed of men who gathered in houses and outdoor locations to photograph women hired to model in various stages of undress. While touted as clubs for men interested in photography, they primarily served as opportunities for men to ogle scantily clad and nude women. Shortly after the audience witnesses Bettie's transformation from telephone operator to photographic model, Harron presents us with Page's induction into the fifties amateur camera club scene.

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for Bettie than it does for Charlie. Page and Charlie, the film suggests, are operating on two different planes. This event satisfies very different needs.

Page's nudity is arresting—not only for the characters but for the audience as well. When the camera cuts away from the meditative continued boyish excitement but the subtle shift in Page's attitude, from playful confidence to complete ease and tranquility. The effect of moment on the topless Page, arms raised, before cutting back to register Charlie's reaction. The young photographer is visibly stunned.

Harron also injects a considerable amount of humor into this scene, balancing enthusiastic male ogling with silliness. What might otherwise be creepy—a handful of middle-aged men photographing scantily clad women in a non-descript suburban living room—is presented with an air of safe and jovial naïveté. The humor—in particular, one excited photographer's insistence that he saw "beaver"—exposes the collection of amateur photographers not as controlling, patriarchal objectifiers, but as silly, horny boys. The comedy exposes the difficulty of reading The Notorious Bettie Page as a film which traffics in female sexuality for the purpose of eliciting masculine desire.

As an audience of the audience of photographers, the film's viewers are focused less on Page's beauty (as erotic object) than they are on the photographers (on the humor and absurdity represented by the tableaux). While Page is placed at the center of the frame, the scene's focus is actually at the edges of the frame, on how Page is viewed by the photographers. Instead of watching Page, we watch how the photographers watch Page. Harron emphasizes this by focusing on the photographers (with Page out of focus in the background) and continually returning to shots of them snapping away at Page. The comedy suggests reflexivity. It addresses the film's audience and invites interrogation of audience pleasure in the eroticized object.

The "beaver" joke in this sequence hinges on what is not seen—or what is almost seen—trading historical accuracy for reflection. While Bettie remains clothed in Harron's camera club shoot, historically, this was not always the case. Page's authorized biography notes that women occasionally participated in these camera clubs. Harron's female photographer is clearly presented as a challenge to gender expectations: She dresses like a man and refers to herself as a boy. This insertion of transgender coding countermands a predominantly male (masculine) context, one that places objectified femininity as its focal point. That this female photographer crosses gender lines without question (she is fully assimilated into the club; she is one of "us boys") rearticulates an otherwise historically determined situation. Her inclusion suggests to the audience that viewing (and photographing) women is not the problem; the problem is patriarchal (masculine/ misogynist) control and the desire to consume women as objects.

This challenge to gender boundaries is underscored by the scene's insistence on carefully policed separation of model (female) from photographers (male). In the same sequence, one of the male photographers—positioned directly in front of a model—reaches out to touch and pose her leg. This transgression of a physical border between photographer and model violates a contract and is met with immediate reprimand because it reduces the model to an object to be posed. That these two boundary crossings (one accepted; one admonished) are placed back-to-back in the sequence illustrates Harron's attempt to separate acceptable viewing from objectification.

Harron shifts gears, however, by quickly transitioning away from this conversation to a wide shot of a pastoral scene where Page walks down a forest trail with a young photographer named Charlie (Teddy Eck). Over this tranquil scene the audience is treated to an intimate conversation—one where Page talks about herself openly. The tableau might easily indicate budding romance; this is reinforced by Charlie's well-mannered boyishness enthusiasm. His innocence sharply contrasts the conversation at the picnic table. The unnamed photographer's (John Ventimiglia) and Art's conversation is marked by a knowing pessimism. These photo shoots are not about boys clamoring for peeks at pretty girls; rather, they are constituted by men deriving erotic charge from looking at and photographing naked women paid to pose for their use.

In the later scene, she disrobes completely. Where the first sequence takes place in a suburban home, connoting a sense of shelter and safety, this later sequence takes place in a forest park, connoting a sense of wildness and provocation. This sense of provocation is heightened by the conversation between the models and the camera club photographers. In the earlier sequence, Art (Joe Mosso) acts as a father figure policing the scene, the models' safety his number one concern. In the outdoor sequence, however, Art's speech betrays a bit of cheek and sarcasm. While emphasizing that nudity is "optional," Art qualifies, "If you're feeling shy about that, bathing suits are just dandy with us." His insistence is at once reassuring and suggestive; it is meant to convince both models that posing nude in such a safe environment would be silly. The seemingly rote quality of Art's speech about safety and choice contrasts with the jovial naïveté of the earlier camera club sequence. The unnamed photographer's (John Ventimiglia) and Art's conversation is marked by a knowing pessimism. These photo shoots are not about boys clamoring for peeks at pretty girls; rather, they are constituted by men deriving erotic charge from looking at and photographing naked women paid to pose for their use.

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The attention drawn to nudity in this sequence foreshadows what comes next. After some playful banter regarding tan lines and the harmless of removing "one little piece of cloth," Bettie removes her top for Charlie's waiting camera. The camera holds for a moment on the topless Page, arms raised, before cutting back to register Charlie's reaction. The young photographer is visibly stunned and speechless—mouth opened wide and hands motionless. After a small beat, Charlie sighs heavily and stammers out, "Oh... thank you."

From here, the scene develops to a point where Charlie suggests Page completely disrobe. What is most notable is here is not Charlie's continued boyish excitement but the subtle shift in Page's attitude, from playful confidence to complete ease and tranquility. The effect of Page's nudity is arresting—not only for the characters but for the audience as well. When the camera cuts away from the meditative Page back to Charlie, viewers find themselves contemplating (with equal wonder) the speechless young photographer looking at Page basking in the sun. Page and Charlie, the film suggests, are operating on two different planes. This event satisfies very different needs for Bettie than it does for Charlie.
The same can be said for the audience encouraged to vacillate between the two perspectives. In much the same way as Harron inserts a female photographer into the earlier camera club scene to destabilize our sense of gender roles in creating and consuming sexual representation, here Charlie’s innocence counterbalances patriarchal objectification with innocent heterosexual desire. The splitting of audience attention between Charlie’s boyish desire and Page’s meditative disrupts our simple consumption of Mol’s naked form as an erotic object. The audience’s voyeuristic desire is displaced in favor of their contemplating desire itself and the nature of sexual (self) expression.

Charlie breaks the spell when he finally regains his composure and calls out, “Bettie… If we show too much, I could get arrested… The top is okay, but you have to hide… that.” Charlie gestures with his right hand in the direction of Page’s pubic hair. When Page moves to put her bikini bottom back on, Charlie stops her, adding, “The backside’s okay.” Where the earlier scene plays “beaver” and “keister” for humor, Harron here draws attention to the arbitrariness of decency and social mores regarding female biology and sexuality. Charlie’s insistence that he could be arrested for photographing Page’s exposed pubic hair—even though photographing her naked backside is perfectly acceptable—illuminates postwar puritanical views toward female sexuality.

The joy with which the photographers photograph Page’s “keister,” however, clearly dispels any notion that denying the viewing of certain parts of female anatomy denies (or successfully contains) pleasure. This last point is emphasized by Harron’s choice of ending each sequence with Page turning her keister/backside to the camera and smiling broadly. This is punctuated even further by the second sequence’s overlaying of magazine titles on Page’s image. Adhering to the arbitrary social restrictions cited by Charlie is rewarded with the production of a commodifiable image.

Each of these scenes illustrates that Notorious functions in a way that fulfills Laura Mulvey’s call for a truly feminist film, for a “counter-cinema” which actively disrupts the traditional, exhibitionist role prescribed to women. [35] While Nina K. Martin is right to point to Judith Mayne’s observation that “feminist film critics simply do not have the body of evidence to suggest how and in what ways female-authored cinema would be substantially different from cinema directed and created by men,” the call for a “counter-cinema,” for a “filmmaking practice that attempts to destroy the system of narrative pleasure that creates unequal gender representations within the cinema” is answered by the representation of Bettie Page in The Notorious Bettie Page.[36] Harron answers the call for a counter-cinema by presenting a feminism which allows for the suturing of seemingly incompatible viewpoints.

Mulvey insists,

“The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions… is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment.”[37]

Harron does this by decentering Page’s sexual signification as she turns the audience’s gaze to the photographers in the first camera club sequence. In the later sequence she juxtaposes Charlie’s heterosexual desire and Page’s meditative liberation through nakedness. Again, these sequences privileges audience reflection over fulfillment of voyeuristic desire. Reading Harron’s film as a product of “the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions” results in dissatisfaction because the film “isn’t really sexy.”

The “notorious” Bettie Page

The commentary track for The Notorious Bettie Page, where Harron, co-writer Guinevere Turner, and Gretchen Mol (the actress who portrays Bettie Page) discuss the film, reveals a shorthand with which they discuss the “real” Bettie.[38] Much of their commentary centers on a thorough understanding culled from available materials on Page’s life. Harron and Turner admit to not being able to secure an actual meeting with the real Bettie Page (who was in her 80s when the film went into production), but the “Betty Boom” of the 1980s and 1990s had generated a wide range of information about Page, from her authorized biography, The Life of a Pin-Up Legend(1996), to an unauthorized expose, The Real Bettie Page: The Truth about the Queen of Pinups(1997), and an E! True Hollywood Story episode (1997). The tone of their conversation is congenial and knowledgeable, but it still tends to cast much of Page’s life into a familiar shorthand commensurate with a Bettie Page mythology. This is not surprising given the nature of biography and myth-making. Even a cursory survey of the literature available about Page reveals common, oft-repeated stories—her sexually abusive father giving her dimes for hush money, her almost child-like good-naturedness, the ease with which she disrobed and posed for a multitude of male photographers, her reasons for disappearing from the modeling scene in 1957.

Near the end of their commentary track, Guinevere Turner comments that Bettie “is whatever people want her to be… There is something blank in Bettie.” Writing from an understanding of Page as a cipher, as having the ability to become whatever is required of her, reveals Harron’s and Turner’s Bettie as a blank page for appropriation. That this is a “true” quality of the real Bettie Page is irrelevant; however, the ease with which Harron and Turner appropriate Bettie does lend a certain credibility to this blankness. Ultimately, this interpretation serves to further couch “Bettie Page” within a multivalent feminist discourse of sexual revolution, liberation, and female independence that changes her into the “notorious” Bettie Page.

Two scenes in particular serve to illustrate Harron’s feminist appropriation of “Bettie Page”; both scenes involve sexual abuse. The first sequence occurs early in the film and reveals in a scant fifteen seconds the sexual abuse perpetrated by Roy Page (Jack Gilpin). The film quickly moves on to the next scene, leaving very little time for the audience to ruminate on what happens off camera. This “event” corresponds with accounts of the historical Bettie Page. Betty Mae Page was born on April 22, 1923 in Nashville, Tennessee, the second child of Walter Roy Page and Edna Mae Pirtle. She grew up poor and was never particularly happy at home. Roy Page was a mechanic and a womanizer; when Page was thirteen he began sexually abusing her. According to Richard Foster’s unauthorized biography, The Real Bettie Page, Roy “[traded] her dimes for the cowboy movies in exchange for her silence.”[39] A naïve Bettie allowed herself to be taken advantage of and, in her authorized biography, she claims “I probably would have done anything just
Despite Herron’s short treatment of this trauma, it is affective and is carefully positioned within the film’s larger narrative structure. As Herron notes in the commentary, the goal of the scene was to refer to the trauma

"without hammering it... because otherwise the danger is that [Bettie] was abused and therefore she became a pin-up model and bondage queen, as if it’s a direct tale of moral downfall."

Herron is clearly cognizant of evoking tropes of victimization—and she works (by her account) to downplay such associations.

A second, longer sequence further illustrates the difficulty of representing sexual trauma without turning to a teleology of victimization. Shortly after Page meets, marries, then leaves her first husband, Billy Neal, the audience witnesses Page being lured into a gang rape scenario. Enticed under the pretense of dancing, Bettie is driven to a dark, seemingly abandoned locale, where Scotty (Dallas Roberts), her abductor has arranged for a group of paying men to take turns victimizing Page. To “save” herself, Page tells the men that she has her period. This ploy only refocuses her attackers: “Well,” her abductor concludes, “she’ll have to give us some kind of a satisfaction.”

Like the sequence with her father, the audience is removed from the actual transgression and, after a short sequence of Page “buttoning up,” Herron quickly shifts focus away from them—preventing extended reflection. In commentary over this scene, Herron and Mol (Bettie Page) discuss how painful it was to work through these scenes. Herron again notes, that she "wanted to suggest terrible things happening but not show everything that was going to happen." This, she claims, was an attempt to film “in the style of the 50’s movie [where] the worst things always happen off camera.” This invocation of fifties cinematic tropes is telling since, as Herron comments earlier, "we wanted to make [the film] more about New York in the fifties" than a psychological character study of Bettie Page.

Herron takes liberty with the historical accuracy of this event. While Bettie Page does relate in interview that she was gang raped—and that she did tell the assailants that she was on her period—the event didn’t occur in Nashville. It actually occurred on Bettie’s first trip to New York in 1947. This subtle shift may seem innocuous, but it does illustrate the careful plotting of the script to make “real” events fit the overall narrative arc of the film. Placing this sequence in Nashville creates a division that allows for the audience to disassociate New York from the crimes inflicted on Page. Herron’s Page moves from the dysfunctional, abusive Nashville and lands in an accepting New York where she is free to be herself and exhibit her sexuality free of trauma and abuse.

Regarding the gang rape sequence, we are left with an understanding of Page not so much as victim but as survivor. This perspective is enhanced by the follow-up sequence of Bettie emerging from the woods after the event. Herron notes in the commentary, "we needed a scene of her aftermath." What’s telling about this “need” is that by inserting this aftermath sequence—which was not originally part of the film—Herron frames the traumatic event in precise, cinematic terms. Without the aftermath scene, the audience would be denied a sense of closure to the scene; with the sequence, the audience is allowed to settle into a more traditional reading of the narrative within a teleology of rape survival rather than one of mere victimization.

This is essential to navigating appropriations of Bettie Page because in almost all (positive) accounts of Page, we are led to believe that she was (is) never to be read as “victim.” In commentary, as the credits role, Herron, Turner, and Mol all chime in to assert that “Bettie was no victim.” This echoes the sanitized view of Bettie presented throughout her authorized biography, Bettie Page: The Life of a Pin-Up Legend. Others, like comics artist Dave Stevens, who became a friend to Bettie later in life, photographer Bunny Yeager, and artist Jim Silke, are quick to defend Page. Silke goes out of his way to cast Bettie in a decidedly “survivor” role:

“Bettie’s story is not the tale of an exploited woman. She was no victim. What you’re looking at is a proud, independent woman who went against the grain of her time, ignored the mockery and degrading rejection of polite society and remained true to herself.”

Harron and company are quick to note that they do not want their audience to perceive the inclusion of these events (including the abuse by Roy Page) as directly related to tales of moral downfall. By not “hammering it,” to use Harron’s phrase, Notorious eschews easy labeling. Furthermore, Harron and Mol (as she describes her acting in the aftermath scene) make it very clear that what is being presented on Mol’s (Page’s) face is not positive strength so much as Bettie “buttoning up” and moving on—as a very “fifties way of dealing with things.”

However, in light of conflicting contemporary feminisms—especially popular threads of anti-feminist postfeminism, what Martin terms “pop feminism”—it is hard to not read this sequence as indicative of the independence achieved by victimized women in post-1980s rape narratives. Sarah Projansky notes, the

“figure of the woman who achieves independence as a result of rape is versatile... these examples represent rape as a painful but ultimately positive event, one that enables the emergence of a woman’s latent independent identity.”


Similarly, Martin reveals that erotic thrillers—straight to video and soft-core films marketed to women—"limit sexual exploration through a system of dangers and punishments.” “The feminist values of economic and emotional independence,” Martin points out, “are always accompanied by danger and murder” within the erotic thriller genre. While Projansky’s and Martin’s observations are directed at genre films far removed from The Notorious Bettie Page, their points do suggest transferable tropes. Martin aptly notes, “sexual pleasure cannot be easily defined by feminist politics or normative gender identity.” That a significant amount of film has linked female sexual identity and independence to the narrative tropes of rape, danger, and even murder, suggests that a de-linking is nearly impossible.
Buszek notes that

"include at least brief representations of a woman's point of view and of her experience of the trauma of rape and its aftermath. These scenes lend these characters credibility and emphasize that something traumatic really did happen to them, whether or not anyone else believes them."[48]

Projansky specifically cites Rob Roy and Mary's (Jessica Lange) pulling away from Rob Roy (Liam Neeson) after she is raped by Cunningham (Tim Roth) as signs of her victimization and its affect on her sexuality.

The same can be posited for Harron's handling of Page's abuse. By not saying anything, by internalizing her trauma, Bettie becomes credible as an independent, though sexually damaged, woman. This notion—that rape is necessary for independence—is very troubling. As Projansky concludes,

"rape can be the event that helps a woman fully access equality in a masculine arena... Ironically, in these examples one of the things feminism fights against—rape—is required to facilitate feminist goals."[49]

Here again, though Harron attempts to downplay the implications of Page's abuse as morality play, they do slide into the murky water of postfeminist discourse that posits rape as facilitating.

In the DVD commentary, Harron reveals that the scene of Page emerging from the forest was not originally part of the script; its addition was suggested by her film director husband, John Walsh. This simple suggestion illustrates the difficulty of maintaining the film's feminist agenda. Harron confesses that, prior to the addition, the scene was not working; she was unable to determine why it didn't work. By injecting the short aftermath sequence into the narrative, Harron subtly alters the trajectory of Page's signification, pulling it back onto a familiar narrative track despite the film's attempts to destabilize such narrative coding. Instead of this sequence reading in a more confounding way—as disruptive—it slides into victimization and survivalism narratives.[50]

Except this is not entirely true. Despite the difficulties of representing sexual trauma in narrative, Harron's film decidedly breaks away from this teleology of victimization. This becomes clear when looking closely at one of the most affecting scenes in the film. Shortly after Bettie Page participates in an acting exercise at the "GP Acting Studio." Bettie's acting teacher directs her to the stage and asks her to "recreate two minutes of ordinary life... when we're alone." Bettie's response to this direction is compelling. After a few furtive moments, Bettie begins removing her clothes. We learn from commentary that this sequence was not part of the original script. It was only added after Turner and Harron interviewed one of Bettie's acting classmates (who was also a former boyfriend). He explained to Turner and Harron that the disrobing portrayed in the film actually happened on more than one occasion.

We might be tempted to cast this sequence into a contiguous survival tale. Building on the earlier sexual trauma sequences, Bettie's performance here might serves as sign of trauma (similar to Mary's pulling away from Rob Roy). This reading would view the freedom with which Bettie disrobes as symptomatic. Such a reading, however, keeps us from seeing the subversive power of the scene. Instead of reading the sequence within a teleology of victimization, Harron encourages us to read Bettie's performance as a moment of transcendence.

When Bettie's acting teacher prefaces the exercise, he tells his class, "To want or need a mask to hide behind comes from a distrust of ourselves." Bettie's initial hesitation on the stage illustrates her sense of distrust. However, when she commits to the scene, to recreating two minutes of ordinary life alone, she removes the mask. Open to the moment, Bettie transcends to a place where her sexuality "frees" her. Close inspection of Bettie's face reveals the exact moment of her transition from anxiety to confidence, the point where she closes her eyes and fully commits to the scene. As observed later in the film, when Bettie completely disrobes for the camera club photographer, there is no evidence of anxiety, no hesitation, no fear. When Bettie is naked, she is most free and self-possessed.

Harron's representation of Page, then, not only falls in line with narratives that recall Bettie being completely at ease and confident when posing—both with clothes and without—but it also falls in line with Buszek's assertion that

"popular culture has not been viewed by feminists solely as a reserve of conservative messages to rage against, but also as a powerful tool for offering progressive alternatives to these very messages."[51]

This reclaiming of sexual imagery as a progressive alternative to antifeminist postfeminists who cannot reconcile feminism with sexuality is a quintessentially third wave feminist move.

Harron's explicit identification as a feminist, as well as her interest in Valerie Solanas, links her to second wave feminism; and Notorious, by pedigree, is also deeply connected to the second wave. However, Notorious more closely aligns with Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon's observation about later articulations of feminist concerns:

"third wave feminists embrace contradiction and diversity as inherent components of late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century women's (and men's)."[52]

By taking as its primary subject the queen of fifties pin-ups, a woman who was a product of Betty Friedan's feminine mystique, Harron's film appropriates postwar sexuality and rewrites it within this matrix of contradiction and diversity.[53]

Buszek notes that
Postwar representations of femininity, then, reveal the pervasiveness of the mystique. While suburban women were fed a steady diet of patriarchal rhetoric through women's magazines, men were treated to images (in men's magazines, pin-ups, and cheesecake) reflective of this same rhetoric. The historical Bettie Page was not only a living woman caught within this trap of postwar femininity but her images were likewise representative of these postwar ideologies. Working at a time when sexualized images of women were extremely profitable, and often publicly contested, Page was willing agent and cipher, an object for consumption and a willing subject. Though Page did, as Buszek claims, offer a variety of “complex, pluralistic pin-ups” that challenged and/or subverted postwar definitions of femininity, the culture that consumed them, steeped in the tenets of the feminine mystique, was perfectly free to view them simply as cheesecake. [55]

This oscillation between conventional representation and subversive alternative is the ground on which Harron creates a “notorious” Bettie Page. Harron and Turner offer a Page who embraces the contradictions of postwar femininity and bridges the gap between exploitative sexual imagery and imagery disruptive of patriarchy. While the “real” Bettie Page was a woman who wrestled with the tenets of the feminine mystique, was and is viewed as sexual pioneer and nostalgic artifact, the “notorious” Bettie Page embraces these contradictions in a productive way that draws our attention to the dangers and affordances of female sexual signification and prompts deep reflection of the space between consumption and critique.

“What do you think Jesus would say?”

In one of the most bizarre sequences of Notorious, Bettie Page is seen trussed up against a wall with a ball gag in her mouth being photographed by John Willie (Jared Harris). The scene is not bizarre because of Page’s predicament—the audience has already witnessed Bettie being photographed in a variety of bondage and discipline scenarios. What is notable is that Bettie takes offense to Willie singing an off-color song. In the conversation that ensues (after Willie loosens the gag in her mouth so she can speak), the photographer is surprised to discover Bettie is a devout Christian with deep religious conviction.

The “real” Bettie Page was a raised to be a god-fearing Christian, and by most accounts she lived a good Christian life. Page’s response to Willie in Notorious is a close approximation of how Page is said to have viewed the schism between her conservative, Christian sensibility and her more outrageous modeling. When Willie asks her, “What do you think Jesus would say about what you’re doing now?” Bettie responds, “I think God has given each of us some kind of talent and he wants us to use it.” The “real” Bettie Page spent much of her life struggling to find an outlet for her talents: After finishing college, she tried being a teacher, a homemaker, a secretary—the three primary avenues open to women in postwar United States. None of these spoke to her God-given talent(s); her modeling provided her success and fulfillment these other career paths were unable to supply.

Harron’s film supports this reading. The “notorious” Bettie Page is devout and sexually liberated. She finds nothing wrong with her modeling and is only occasionally troubled by what Jesus, or God, might think about her chosen profession. That is, until she is summoned to testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Herron’s placing Page in the background of the courthouse as Irving and Paula Klaw discuss the future of Movie Star News, suggests that Bettie’s decision to quit modeling is a direct result of what she witnesses; it is a “sign” that God might not be happy with what she’s been doing. The Notorious Bettie Page's coda supports this reading by glossing over of the events after the Senate hearings. Page moves to Miami, marries a young man named Armand (Alejandro Chabán), settles uneasily into a life outside the camera frame, and finally becomes a born again Christian. Notorious ends with a conservatively dressed Page wearing a crucifix and preaching from an open Bible to passers-by in a nameless wood. [56]

This presentation of Page reinforces her “goodness” and independence, allowing the audience to conclude that modeling was always Bettie’s choice, her decision to “use her talent” in a productive and fulfilling way. Harron’s use of the Senate Subcommittee hearings suggests (like the outdoor camera club scene) that the problem was the social climate of the fifties, one ill-equipped to tolerate the female sexuality represented in Bettie’s bondage photos. This reading is reinforced by Paula Klaw’s frustration with Irving who insists they destroy all their negatives. Even as she sets fire to her life’s work, Paula gazes longingly at the images, shoving a few into her pockets despite her brother’s insistence.

By presenting the Senate Subcommittee hearings in this way—juxtaposed with Bettie’s concerns about God and Paula’s conviction that there is nothing wrong with the work she has produced—Harron illuminates and interrogates the odd schism in postwar sexual iconography. Page’s popularity as a model was commensurate with the fifties’ obsession with pin-up photography. Men’s magazines proliferated in the postwar era, and the “sex” sold by Hollywood and Hugh Hefner was not at all taboo. In fact, as Jane Gaines has pointed out, its consumption was actively encouraged.[57] What was not tolerated was the seemingly dangerous and “obscene” bondage materials produced by the Klaws. As Harron shows us in Notorious, the Senate Subcommittee hearings sought to blame juvenile delinquency—even a rash of teenage suicides—on the bondage and discipline scenarios sold by Movie Star News. What this friction between the acceptable objectification of cheesecake and the unacceptable fetishism of bondage photos indicated was a disruption and disintegration of conservative sexual mores. As Gaines points out, sexuality is very much a matter of social convention; it serves, recalling Foucault, disciplinary and regulatory functions. [58]

What Notorious demonstrates, however, is how this regulatory function was, in fact, constantly subverted by the very culture that sought to suppress dysfunctional forms of sexuality. Cross-dressing female camera club photographers and born-again bondage models offer subversive ruptures in the larger narrative that would cite fetishism and a confident, open female sexuality as aberrant and in need of suppression. What’s more, two of the film’s most independent and confident characters are women: photographers Bunny Yeager (Sarah Paulson) and Paula Klaw.
Lili Taylor’s performance of Klaw is honest, open, and down-to-earth. As the photographer of many of Bettie’s film loops and bondage scenarios, Klaw is a consummate professional. As she tells Bettie during her first photo shoot,

“You see, customers who want this stuff, they’re very respectable, very high quality people… There not people like us. The pressures they’ve got. They’re not your average Joe. So what if they want something that seems a little strange, right? If it makes them happy?”

The real Paula Klaw is cited in Bettie Page’s authorized biography as being very protective of her models, often taking control of tying and securing the ropes, trusses, and other bondage implements so her models would not be hurt.

Bunny Yeager is also a positive force of patriarchal disruption in the film. Yeager, a former model, achieved success as a glamour photographer and was responsible for the iconic Playboy centerfold of Bettie trimming a Christmas tree wearing only a Santa hat. Her approach to Page in the film is noticeably different than that of Bettie’s male photographers. When Bettie visits Yeager’s home for the first time, she brings along a suitcase of outfits for posing, including high heels and a black corset. Yeager responds to the corset with a dismissive, “I believe the female form can stand on its own.” Later, in a photo shoot on the beach, Yeager notes in a voice-over, “Yes, she’s been shot by just about every photographer in the country, but I think I caught something special in her personality when I photographed Bettie Page.” This something special, the film suggests, is the result of Yeager’s subject position. As a woman, as a former model, she has taken control of the objectifying gaze by stepping behind the camera; by wielding the apparatus of the gaze, Yeager is able to refocus that gaze and capture something “special.”

The real Bunny Yeager produced some of the most memorable (and appropriated) images of Bettie Page; she was not alone, however, in thinking that she captured something “special” in her photographs of Page. Most photographers found something special in the real Bettie Page, something inherently photographable. Buszek, notes,

“[Bettie’s] brazen, over-the-top poses and pointedly lighthearted approach to performing as a pin-up served to expose the very construction of the genre, revealing both its artificiality and performative nature, as well as its potential as an expressive medium for the woman so represented. A great performer as well as a great beauty, Page’s pin-up celebrity came from her ability to shift gears within a spectrum of extreme sexual roles.”[59]

It is this constructedness, this performativity that is key to understanding the signifying power of multiple representations of Bettie Page. That Bettie Page could be, as Turner notes, “whatever people want her to be,” that she could so easily “shift gears within a spectrum of extreme sexual roles,” makes her image and persona now—as icon, cult figure, film subject—ininitely appropriable. For Harron, Page is a perfect subject not just to admire and recreate faithfully out of respect; she is a figure capable of presenting a multivalent, third wave female sexuality. By filming a “notorious Bettie Page,” Harron “exposes the very construction” of representational female sexuality, “revealing both its artificiality and performative nature.” But, more importantly, Harron’s film presents a complex female sexuality, one which supports Buszek’s reading of the pin-up’s “potential as an expressive medium for women.”

The juxtaposition of clothed Bettie Page sitting silently, nervously on an empty stage with a fully nude Gretchen Mol (as Bettie Page) at ease, standing in the wilderness perfectly encapsulates a third wave feminist

“drive toward creating representations that disrupt the patriarchal subjugation of women yet retain the right to use familiar conventions of representing women’s beauty and desirability to make this disruption more accessible.”[60]

Much like the way Page was able to reveal the artificial and performative nature of the pin-up, Harron is able to disrupt “the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions” by reflexively appropriating and rewriting those conventions through a “notorious” Bettie Page. These two scenes represent the tension between relying on convention and disrupting it.

Rhetorician Sharon Crowley notes,

“Ideological means of connection include webs of analogous and/or metonymic historical associations (that is, articulations) built up over time.”[61]

It is these metonymic historical associations that make any and all representations of female sexuality difficult to reclaim or disrupt. As Crowley suggests,

“once made… ideological connections can be endlessly repeated, and their endurance is remarkable.”[62]

This ideological conundrum—how to move beyond, deny, or reclaim ideological connections—is at the heart of The Notorious Bettie Page. This is not a question of how to disavow or remake the past so much as it is managing the multiple, often conflicting, ideological associations built into representations of female sexuality. It is the ideological nature of sexual representation that makes it such a difficult subject to navigate as a feminist artist. It is also what makes The Notorious Bettie Page such an achievement. Filming a subject of rare cult and sexual icon status, with origins in postwar femininity and intrinsically tied to second wave feminism—a subject co-opted by postfeminist ideologies and third wave feminists alike—is no easy feat. Returning one last time to Gretchen Mol in the forest, it becomes even clearer just how disruptive Harron’s film is. In that moment of contentment, we must remember that Page felt completely free in front of a man with a camera.

Notes
Acknowledgement: The author would like to acknowledge the guidance of Suzanne Leonard, Simmons College, the excellent feedback provided by Jump Cut’s peer reviewers and editors. This article would not exist without the friendship and support of Dana Hatcher.

1. Henry, Buck, “The Betty Boom,” Playboy (December 1992):122+. Bettie Mae Page was born “Bettie,” but due to the volume of publications in which she appeared, her name was often misspelled. In my writing, I use “Bettie” but preserve alternate spellings when used by other authors (as Henry did in his 1992 Playboy article). [return to text]


3. Bussmann, “Cutting Edge.”


6. Heller, “Shooting Solanas,” 170. The film intimates that Solanas’ assassination attempt is fueled by her reading of Warhol’s financial success and his acceptance by mainstream culture: That Warhol is such a star suggests that his brand of transgression is acceptable, even admirable. As a homosexual male provocateur Warhol is less of a threat to patriarchy than the “butch” Solanas, especially since his art is both an ironic indictment of consumer culture and extremely profitable within that same culture.


10. Stewart, “Gretchen Mol.”


15. Kaufman, “Interview.” Harron goes on to note: “There was another company who were saying, we almost have a conventional detective story, can’t you build up the role of the detective? It’s like, no, if I wanted to do a conventional detective story, I would have. So there’s a chance with the bigger studio and the more money that you’re getting, to take the edges off it, I think.”


18. Genz, Postfemininities, 1.


30. Harron, Mary, Guinevere Turner, and Gretchen Mol, filmmaker commentary, The Notorious Bettie Page, DVD (HBO Films), 2006. My reliance on filmmaker commentary serves two purposes: 1) First-hand accounts of the filmmaking process provide context clues to the finished film and, to an extent, its rhetorical intentions. The subjectivity of filmmaker assertions is always suspect; however, subjectivity aside, useful insight can be drawn from the filmmakers' conversation. 2) Cult figures like Bettie Page generate an extensive variety of 'source' material regarding their lives and exploits, so much so that mythologies and a kind of short-hand reference emerge. By surveying the filmmaker commentary, we can, in a sense, triangulate the 'facts' in a way that better reveals the rhetoric of the film.

31. It is also possible to read this sequence in terms of the cheesecake spreads in popular men's magazines: Prior to the postwar photographic pin-up, pin-up artists like Gil Elvgren created cheeky pin-up scenarios that traded equally in humor and female physicality/sexuality. In the 1950s, pin-up art was, to an extent, replaced by humorous photographic narratives with scantily clad models cavorting with men in gorilla suits and the like. Harron may be citing cheesecake with her injection of humor into the camera club sequence.


33. Bettie and Charlie’s conversation brings up a theme not discussed in this article: Bettie’s comfort with being alone. Charlie equates Bettie’s desire to be alone with that of great artists and thinkers. This conversation echoes similar observations throughout the film, suggesting that Harron intends her audience to read Bettie’s choices as those of an innately independent spirit which, in turn, reinforces the reading that Bettie’s modeling and sexuality are not to be viewed as patriarchal objectification but conscious choices of a free spirit.

34. Charlie’s “thank you” is delivered with such a grateful tone that I wonder what the audience is expected to think: Are we meant to understand that Charlie’s erotic desire is met? His gratefulness makes it difficult to find such fulfillment negative, or couched in patriarchal, fetishistic objectification. I’m inclined to think Harron uses Charlie’s desire to suggest that looking at and finding pleasure in female sexual spectacle is, in appropriate situations, acceptable. The question becomes what constitutes an appropriate situation? Keeping with my insistence that the film denies such pleasure to its audience, it’s worth noting that our attention is focused on Charlie’s pleasure and not on our own.


38. See comments on note 27.


40. Essex and Swanson, Bettie Page, 25.

41. Essex and Swanson, Bettie Page, 50- 57.


43. Martin, Sexy Thrills, 3.


46. Martin, Sexy Thrills, 4.

47. Martin, Sexy Thrills, 10.


49. Projansky, “Film and Television Narratives,” 118.

50. There is no unified, common postfeminist movement and postfeminism contends with a fickle popular imagination. What is clear across a myriad of postfeminist discourses is that postfeminism opposes the second wave’s stance on sexuality. This opposition is, in some ways, shared with third wave feminists. Where these brands of feminism differ is in how they oppose the second wave.


52. Genz, Stephanie, and Benjamin A. Brabon, Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009), 156.

52. Friedan, Betty, The Feminine Mystique (New York: Laurel, 1983). The historical Bettie Page can be considered a product of Betty Friedan’s feminine mystique. What Friedan uncovered in her seminal second wave text, The Feminine Mystique, was that proliferation of a definition of femininity that contained and exploited women, that reduced them to good housekeepers and dutiful handmaids.
Through the rhetoric of women’s magazines, fifties women were told happiness lies in “accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love” (43). This narrow definition of femininity resulted in a variety of cultural (dysfunctional) manifestations, not the least of which was a burgeoning market of men’s magazines.


56. Harron accurately draws from the real Bettie Page’s life—with a few careful changes: The years after Bettie stopped modeling were indeed filled with drifting, displacement, and a call to do God’s work. What Harron opts not to include, however, was the real Bettie Page’s final descent into obscurity and madness. Bettie spent years in Bible schools, even making a brief contribution to Billy Graham’s crusades. At one point she went back to school to acquire a Master’s Degree in English and journalism, though she fell short of completing the degree by a few credits. Bettie tried to reconcile with her first husband Billy Neal; she also entered into two other marriages that failed. Richard Foster’s unauthorized biography follows Bettie’s twisted, post-modeling journeys and claims that Bettie eventually wound up in mental institutions and racked up charges of assault and attempted murder.

57. Gaines, Jane, “In the Service of Ideology.”
58. Gaines, Jane, “In the Service of Ideology.”
60. Buszek, Pin-Up Grrrls, 7.
62. Crowley, Toward a Civil Discourse, 62.

Review of Contemporary Media. Download 158,74 Kb. Page. copyright 2008, Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media Jump Cut, No. 50, spring 2008. Babel: Pushing and reaffirming mainstream cinema's boundaries. by Marina Hassapopoulou. Any attempt to summarize Alejandro González Iñárritu’s Babel (2006) is bound to be reductive, mainly because a film synopsis aims to impose a sense of linearity and causality that does not do justice to Babel’s complexity. However, to conceptualize a plot constitutes the inevitable act of trying to impose coherence on a work that consciously refuses to be pinned down. It turns out that Babel can actually be summariz