

Blonde Crazy



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Hollywood made blonde into a noun; it mimicked the effects of the Los Angeles sun on its hopeful starlets and used a lighting system that made their hair luminescent. As the studios developed, so too did a variety of blonde-types, often mirrored and informed by society's troubled attitude towards women and sex. Early blondes, such as sassy-dame **Phyllis Haver** and the first of the prat-fall blondes, **Marion Davies**, were trailblazers for the uncompromising, witty dames of the 30s, such as original platinum blonde **Jean Harlow** in *Red Dust* (1932) and queen of the innuendo, **Mae West** in *I'm No Angel* (1933). The classy blondes of the 40s, **Carole Lombard** in *To Be Or Not To Be* (1942) and **Veronica Lake** in *I Married a Witch* (1942) for instance, inspired **Hitchcock's** icy blondes, represented in this season by **Tippi Hedren** in *Marnie* (1964). The radically changing attitudes towards gender and sexuality in the 50s are supposedly epitomised by the non-threatening blonde bombshells like **Diana Dors** in *Yield to the Night* (1956) and **Marilyn Monroe** in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953); yet these buxom blondes were also keen to be cast against type, thus complicating such an assumption.

However hard it is to resist the temptation to label these blondes with alliterative adjectives (brassy, bimbo, bombshell), these characters, and the stars that played them, represent neither stable personae nor simplistic blonde stereotypes. Behind **Lana Turner's** MGM-created 'sweater girl' image in *The Imitation of Life* (1959) is a consummate actress. **Brigitte Bardot** took a more challenging role in **Godard's** *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963), and actresses like **Bibi Andersson** in *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*, 1957) and **Gena Rowlands** in *Gloria* (1980) are renowned for their adaptability. These blondes may owe a debt to the French chemist Eugène Schuller, who invented the hair-bleaching process in 1909, but, as actresses, their talent is all their own. The contribution of female creative talent celebrated here is not confined to the memorable stars of these films. Six of the films were edited and another seven penned by women. With works from prolific screenwriters like the American **Agnes Christine Johnston**, *The Patsy* (1928), and the Belgian **Annette Wadement**, *Casque d'or* (1952), this programme again demonstrates the vital and multifarious contribution women have made to film iconography.

Key Scholars in Film Studies

For the fourth in our lecture series, we welcome Laura Mulvey, Professor of Film and Media at Birkbeck College. A pioneering figure in the development of Anglo-American film theory, and in particular psychoanalytically-oriented feminist film studies, as well as a filmmaker, Mulvey has since the 1970s been at the vanguard of work on the cinematic gaze, film spectatorship, melodrama and the aesthetics of the moving image.

Laura Mulvey on The Blonde

The Hitchcock blonde brings an extra perfection, polish and poise to her performance, hinting at a surface that conceals a darker 'inside'. In this talk, Laura Mulvey will move between the blondes that inspired her seminal article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' and her more recent interest in Hitchcock's use of rear-projection, to consider his preoccupation with the vulnerability of both illusions: that of the blonde and that of cinema itself.

Mon 8 Mar 18:30 NFT1

Joint ticket available with Marnie (Mon 8 Mar only) £12.90, concs £9.65 (Members pay £1.40 less)

Extended Run: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953)

Fri 26 Feb – Wed 17 March

Marilyn Monroe gives arguably her finest, certainly her most delectably relaxed performance as gold-digger Lorelei Lee, fending off suitors rich, ancient and absurdly infantile as she crosses the Atlantic in the gloriously Amazonian company of **Jane Russell's** Dorothy Shaw. Typically for **Howard Hawks**, any stereotyping is gleefully undermined when Lorelei gets to explain her irresistibly seductive modus operandi, while the songs (by **Jule Styne** and **Leo Robin**, and **Hoagy Carmichael**) include such sardonic classics as 'A Little Girl from Little Rock', 'Bye Bye Baby' 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend'. An exhilarating celebration of female sexuality and intelligence and of cinema's potential as entertainment both witty and wise.

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Red Dust

Dennis Carson (Gable) battles with the elements on his rubber plantation in Indochina. Enter Vantine (Harlow), a floozy from Saigon on the lam. It doesn't take long for Carson to fall for her charms, but passions run high when classy brunette Mrs Willis (Astor) arrives. With her iconic platinum 'finger waves' and cupid's-bow lips, Jean Harlow was Hollywood's original Blonde Bombshell with comedic chops to boot.

USA 1932 Dir Victor Fleming With Jean Harlow, Clark Gable, Mary Astor, Gene Raymond 83min PG

Thu 4 Mar 18:20 NFT2, Sat 6 Mar 20:50 NFT2

I'm No Angel

West's raunchy stance on sex, sassy strut, bottle-blonde curls and bawdy double entendres created box-office gold. She was proud of penning this screenplay in which she plays Tira, a dancer-cum-lion-tamer, who bags the man of her dreams by using her ample talents. The one-liners are amongst her best: 'When I'm good, I'm very good. When I'm bad, I'm better.'

USA 1933 Dir Wesley Ruggles With Mae West, Cary Grant, Gregory Ratoff 87min U

Mon 1 Mar 20:50 NFT1, Fri 5 Mar 18:20 NFT2

Becky Sharp

In this classic adaptation of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Hopkins stars as the sinfully seductive lower-class girl who insinuates herself into an upper-class family; with a gravelly voice and hypnotic mouth – watch it manoeuvre into delectable pouts. As an admirer observes: 'There isn't an ounce of sweetness or goodness about you – that's your secret!' Hopkins, with her swagger, appears somewhat anachronistic, but is delightful as the first feature-length Technicolor blonde.

USA 1935 Dir Rouben Mamoulian With Miriam Hopkins, Billie Burke 84min PG

Sun 7 Mar 18:20 NFT2, Tue 9 Mar 18:20 NFT2

To Be Or Not To Be

1939, Poland. A troupe of actors (driven as much by their egos and their desire to reopen their theatre as by their hatred for the Nazi invaders) team together to help the Polish resistance. As each tries to outdo the

other, Lombard steals the show: as purring seductress playing 'blonde', she's a seemingly incongruous mix of glacial star and screwball heroine. Sheer perfection.

USA 1942 Dir Ernst Lubitsch With Carole Lombard, Jack Benny, Robert Stack 99min U

Sun 7 Mar 16:10 NFT1, Sun 14 Mar 20:20 NFT1

I Married a Witch

Lake was a super-nova by the time she starred as a witch who falls for the descendant of the man who burned her at the stake centuries before. Her long, straight and very blonde hair, with the signature 'bang' falling seductively over her right eye, was rumoured to be the result of a bad-hair moment. It was her star image and made her forever 'The Peek-a-boo Girl'.

USA 1942 Dir René Clair With Veronica Lake, Fredric March, Susan Hayward 76min U

Thu 11 Mar 20:40 NFT2, Sun 14 Mar 18:30 NFT1

Casque d'or Golden Marie

The *belle époque* coiffure favoured by Marie (Signoret) provides the title of this film. It means 'golden helmet', and something is lost in translation since Signoret (and her hair) embody both elegance and sensuality. Gangster's moll and sometime prostitute, Marie falls in love with Manda (Reggiani) in a perfect *coup de foudre*, but it's doomed from the start. When she lets her hair down, it's breathtaking.

France 1952 Dir Jacques Becker With Simone Signoret, Serge Reggiani, Claude Dauphin 96min EST PG

Sat 13 Mar 15:50 NFT3, Tue 16 Mar 18:10 NFT3

It Should Happen to You

Ace comedienne and songstress Holliday plays Gladys Glover, a kookie blonde who hatches a scheme to get her name in lights and is forced to choose between a playboy (Lawford) and an adorable boy-next-door (Lemmon). Holliday was known as the smartest dumb blonde in Hollywood; however, as she put it, 'it takes smarts to convince people the characters I play are stupid!'

USA 1954 Dir George Cukor With Judy Holliday, Jack Lemmon, Peter Lawford 87min U

Tue 2 Mar 18:30 NFT3, Wed 3 Mar 14:30 NFT2, Sun 7 Mar 20:30 NFT3

Yield to the Night

Inspired by the tragic life and death of Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be executed in the UK, this was the Siren from Swindon's bid for a serious acting career. Desperate to shake off her buxom dumb-blonde image, Dors brought compassion and sensitivity to the role, but this didn't stop the studios sensationalising the US release and re-titling it *Blonde Sinner*.

UK 1956 Dir J Lee Thompson With Diana Dors, Michael Craig, Yvonne Mitchell 99min 15

Wed 3 Mar 18:10 NFT2, Sun 7 Mar 18:15 NFT3, Thu 11 Mar 14:30 NFT2

Wild Strawberries Smultronstället

Like Hitchcock, Bergman cherished his blondes. Andersson is mesmerising both as a young hitch-hiker and as the idealised blonde of Dr Borg's youth. Thulin gives a very different performance as Marianne, the wife of Borg's damaged son. Poised and tranquil, she's the epitome of the expression 'still waters run deep'. A sublime masterpiece.

Sweden 1957 Dir Ingmar Bergman With Bibi Andersson, Ingrid Thulin, Victor Sjöström 94min EST 15

Wed 10 Mar 20:45 NFT1, Wed 17 Mar 21:00 NFT1

Marnie

'You don't love me. I'm just something you've caught!' One of Hitchcock's most damaged and elusive heroines, Marnie also has the disadvantage of being both frigid and a compulsive thief. Up steps Mark Rutland, a complex hero, to say the least, who helps her unearth a traumatic past. In real life, Hitchcock himself perhaps got too close for comfort to icy blonde Tippi Hedren.

USA 1964 Dir Alfred Hitchcock With Tippi Hedren, Sean Connery 130min 15

Mon 8 Mar 20:20 NFT1 (Joint ticket available with Laura Mulvey on *The Blonde*), **Wed 17 Mar 18:00 NFT2**

Imitation of Life

'I want to have everything. Maybe too much.' Lora Meredith (Turner) is a struggling widow when she fortuitously meets a homeless black woman Annie (Moore), also a single parent. Annie moves in, enabling Lora to fulfil her ambition to become an actress. But there are sacrifices to be made. Definitions of beauty (including the colour of skin and hair) encourage passions to run high.

USA 1959 Dir Douglas Sirk With Lana Turner, Sandra Dee, Susan Kohner, Juanita Moore 124min U

Sun 14 Mar 15:50 NFT1, Mon 15 Mar 20:30 NFT3

Le Mépris Contempt

Like Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (referenced here), *Le Mépris* is 'about' the breakdown of a relationship, but also hints at a more devastating existential malaise. The locations are stunning but Bardot is the real spectacle – a

blonde goddess – all silky skin and blonde tresses. Indeed, she's a revelation, displaying an inner life even while Godard's penetrating camera focuses on her body.

France-Italy 1963 Dir Jean-Luc Godard With Brigitte Bardot, Michel Piccoli, Fritz Lang 103min EST 15

Fri 5 Mar 20:45 NFT1, Sat 6 Mar 15:30 NFT1

Belle de Jour

Sèverine is a bourgeois surgeon's wife who works in a brothel by day to indulge her masochistic desires. Fantasising about bondage and floggings, she returns to her husband each evening to try and summon up some marital bliss. Deneuve's radiant beauty, cascading blonde mane and on-screen restraint led critics to crown her the 'Ice Queen'. But she has rightly refuted this: 'I was cool, not cold.'

France-Italy 1967 Dir Luis Buñuel With Catherine Deneuve, Jean Sorel, Michel Piccoli 100min EST

Thu 11 Mar 18:20 NFT1, Sat 13 Mar 20:45 NFT1

Gloria

'You let a woman beat ya, huh?', taunts Gloria at the mobsters she's fleeing with six-year-old charge Phil. Having seen the Mafia kill his parents, Phil turns to the straightshooting, fast-talking ex-moll for help, and while maternal instincts aren't her forte, she does a cracking job. Rowlands' glamour and edge are a perfect noir homage.

USA 1980 Dir John Cassavetes With Gena Rowlands, John Adames, Buck Henry 121min 15

Sat 13 Mar 18:15 NFT1, Mon 15 Mar 18:30 NFT1

Basic Instinct

When a former rock-star is butchered with an ice-pick, all the clues lead Detective Nick Curran (Douglas) towards icy Catherine Tramell (Stone). Accused upon release of misogyny and homophobia, the film projected Stone into the Hollywood stratosphere and cemented the association between hot intelligent blondes and deceptive sexual danger.

USA 1992 Dir Paul Verhoeven With Sharon Stone, Michael Douglas 128min

Sun 14 Mar 20:30 NFT3, Tue 16 Mar 20:30 NFT2

Booking information

The BFI Southbank is open to all. BFI members are entitled to a discount on all tickets. BFI Southbank Box Office tel: 020 7928 3232. Unless otherwise stated tickets are £9.00, concs £6.65 Members pay £1.40 less on any ticket. Website www.bfi.org.uk/southbank

Tickets for ALL FREE screenings and events but must be booked in advance by calling the Box Office to avoid disappointment

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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The benugo bar & kitchen

Eat, drink and be merry in panoramic daylight. benugo's décor is contemporary, brightly lit and playful with a lounge space, bar and dining area. The place to network, hang out, unpack a film, savour the best of Modern British or sip on a cocktail.

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***** PICTURE DESK *****

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