

The Sexiest Symbol: Marilyn Monroe

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Abstract

This essay is a rhetorical analysis that reviews the concept of “ideographs” as it relates to verbal and visual rhetoric. I suggest that there is another form of ideograph—the “embodied ideograph.” I define the embodied ideograph as people who embody a particular ideology and are recognized by a mass group of people, whether consciously or subconsciously, throughout history. The famous American icon, Marilyn Monroe, exemplifies this concept and is used to demonstrate how an embodied ideograph is created. This essay investigates how Marilyn Monroe is considered a sex symbol, both during her time and in today’s society. This leads me to believe she is an embodied ideograph that represents sexuality, both from a male gaze and a female empowerment perspective. Additionally I make reference to public memory found especially within U.S. discourse. Lastly the essay explores the ways that embodied ideographs, like <Marilyn Monroe>, can be frozen in time with no control over their public personas.

Keywords: Celebrity Culture; Collective Consciousness; Female Empowerment; Frozen In Time; Marilyn Monroe; Embodied Ideographs; Male Gaze; Public Memory; Rhetoric; Sex Symbol; Sexuality; U.S. Discourse; Verbal Ideographs; Visual Ideographs

Introduction

Rhetoric has a way of contributing to our personal perceptions, while also creating a society-wide consciousness or public memory. This means that rhetoric has the power to shape not only an individual's perception, but also the perception of a nation as a whole. This is especially true of iconic American figures. Although American icons do have some control in their careers and how they present themselves, it is typically the public that creates their meaning. For instance, Marilyn Monroe¹ is famous for being a sex symbol. Although she played a major role in shaping her persona it was truly a public effort to have her maintain that image, even long after she died.

The primary purpose of this essay is to offer insight into the idea that verbal and visual ideographs have the ability to create embodied ideographs. This means that actual human beings can function as an ideograph in public culture. For example, <Marilyn Monroe> is an ideograph because she represents sexuality. Several of her iconic photographs helped shape her into this ideographic form. This demonstrates American society's ability to shape, create, change, and influence our perceptions. This concept is also important because it shows how celebrities, both past and present, are frozen in time without control over their public personas. This essay hopes to investigate U.S. discourse's role in shaping Monroe into a sex symbol. An exploration of how Monroe contributed to this image is also included. <Marilyn Monroe> exemplifies these ideas because many of her photos are still in production today, 56 years after her death. She is still as relevant today as she was during the height of her career.

¹ Following this reference, when Marilyn Monroe is being referred to as a human she will be referenced as Monroe. When Marilyn Monroe is being referred to as an embodied ideograph she will be referenced as <Marilyn Monroe>. Dyer (2004) describes the difference between the celebrity as a human and their public persona, which is why I chose to differentiate between Monroe as a human and <Marilyn Monroe> as an embodied ideograph.

The following essay is a rhetorical analysis. It therefore relies on scholarly articles and artifacts of Monroe to justify its claims. The primary focus is on verbal, visual, and embodied ideographs. There is additional research on collective consciousness, public memory, sex symbols, U.S. discourse, and the theory that celebrities can be “frozen in time” in public memory. Monroe, a worldwide recognizable American icon, is used to illustrate these concepts. I suggest that <Marilyn Monroe> is an embodied ideograph in her own right. I argue that through verbal and visual rhetoric and ideographs that an embodied ideograph can be constructed. This means that people, not merely words or pictures, are able to become ideographs that represent various ideologies and live on in public memory. In the case of <Marilyn Monroe> it is suggested that she embodies sexuality, both from a male and female perspective.

My method is to interpret various scholarly articles on verbal and visual ideographs in order to determine the possibility that an embodied ideograph can be constructed. I use Monroe to demonstrate how verbal and visual ideographs lend themselves to such a construction. I chose Monroe due to her continuous relevance throughout public memory. I use two television shows to prove her relevance. The television show, *Parenthood*, is used to describe modern views of Monroe. The television show, *Mad Men*, is used to demonstrate modern perceptions of past views of Monroe. I chose these television shows because they are both fairly new shows, first airing within the last 10 years, and provide insight to my topic. This is because they both explicitly discuss Monroe and her role in society, both past and present. I also include screenshots from two different ongoing television segments to demonstrate how Monroe’s image is still used as a commodity. These television segments are from *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* and *The Grand Tour*. This shows how celebrities have the potential to become commodities. I also interpret scholarly articles related to Monroe herself to support my claims.

This analysis is informed by a literature review of scholarship on ideographs, public memory and public persona.

Verbal, Visual, and Embodied Ideographs

Verbal Ideographs

Ideographs are where rhetoric and ideology meet. Initial applications of the ideograph relied heavily on verbal communication. This means that ideographs were initially thought as being specific words, terms, or phrases (Condit & Lucaites, 1993; Edwards & Winkler, 1997; McGee, 1980). McGee (1980), who was the first to define ideographs, states,

“A formal definition of ‘ideograph,’ ... would list the following characteristics: An ideograph is an ordinary language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable” (p. 15).

McGee’s (1980) work focused on verbal ideographs found within political discourse. According to Hariman and Lucaities (2003), these verbal ideographs inspire a public consciousness toward a particular cause or ideology through repetition of the words and terms within the society. They explain that this is because verbal ideographs typically represent the common beliefs of the public. For example, the word <patriotism> is used in political discourse to create a like-minded public ideal to strive for. To have <anti-patriotism> beliefs is to be antisocial, and therefore would create tension within the public. The more the verbal ideograph <patriotism> is used to represent an American ideal, the more likely people’s perceptions will be altered to conform to

the status quo.

In addition to McGee's (1980) work, Condit & Lucaites (1993) provide a more concise explanation of a verbal ideograph. They state, "An ideograph is a culturally biased, abstract word or phrase, drawn from ordinary language, which serves as a constitutional value for a historically situated collectivity" (p. xii). Drawing on these ideas, it can be assumed that ideographs are related to a collective consciousness found within society. This being said, ideographs can take a malleable function. This means they are able to represent different things to different people, while maintaining a central ideology. Condit & Lucaites (1993) further this idea when they state, "Because ideographs are abstractions, and thus lack any rigidly defined meaning, creative rhetors craft their meaning-in-use as they employ them in public discourse to persuade audience of the public nature of historically specific beliefs and actions" (p. xiii). They continue their assessment by stating that there are limits to how the public can use ideographs. For instance <equality> can take the form of different functions for different groups of people, but inherently there is only one ideology attached to it. To put it another way: Different groups of people can use <equality> to support their own agendas, but inherently <equality> represents a singular ideology. The same principle can be applied to <Marilyn Monroe>. Dyer (2004) states, "...Monroe became virtually a household word for sex" (p. 21). <Marilyn Monroe> can thus be considered a verbal ideograph if we are strictly looking at her name. Her visual photographs and films, however, contribute just as much as her name.

Visual Ideographs

McGee's (1980) definition of an ideograph limits the concept to verbal communication. He also blatantly "disregards the rhetorical potential of visual images" (Edwards & Winkler, 1997, p. 297), even though his theories can easily be applied to visual rhetoric. This essay hopes

to further the belief that ideographs can go beyond verbal rhetoric and enter the realm of visual rhetoric. Verbal and visual ideographs hold similar properties. They both rely on a collective commitment among the public to give life to an abstract concept, and they are powerful enough to guide human behavior (Cloud, 2004; McGee, 1980). McGee (1980) provides a solid foundation for the world of ideographs, but limits the theory to verbal rhetoric and ideology. There are others, however, that have expanded this research to include visual rhetoric.

Most people think of actual symbols when they think of visual ideographs. For example, the symbol $\langle\infty\rangle$ means infinity or forever. When we see that symbol we probably say “infinity” in our heads or out loud. Humans are trained to do this. We are able to look at a symbol and instantly understand its hidden meaning. This can be said for many other actual symbols. Cloud (2004) states, “...the visual ideograph is, perhaps, even a stronger inducement to national identification than its propositional counterpart” (p. 289). Symbols are essentially shorthand for humans. They help us move quickly throughout life. We look at a symbol, process its true meaning in seconds, and move on about our day. These actual symbols, like $\langle\infty\rangle$ help create a united sense of understanding within a society. These actual symbols, however, are not always ideographs. Typically visual ideographs are something tangible, like photographs or images. They are usually more complex than actual symbols because the ideology they represent is not so easily defined or always recognizable.

This leads me to believe that iconic photographs or images can become ideographs themselves, because they can transcend time and space. Iconic images exist in a public memory more often, and more strongly, than most actual symbols. This is because iconic photographs are almost always representatives of visual ideographs. They are more likely to represent an ideology because they are viewed repeatedly by society as being something worthy of

preservation. These forms of ideographs tend to deal with more complex and figurative ideas. It has been found that photographs and other images are able to represent the verbal words, terms, phrases, and/or slogans of a nation visually (Cloud, 2004; Edwards & Winkler, 1997; Hairman & Lucaites, 2003). Additionally, visual images increase the likelihood that a public memory is formed. Zelizer (1998) adds to this argument by stating, “Our ability to remember the past is facilitated by photographs, paintings, and snippets of films that are readily available in the public sphere” (p. 6). These visual images lend themselves to a collective consciousness, which creates a shared sense of ideology.

An iconic photograph is never truly hard to name, but proves difficult to define. This is because there is a public memory, or a collective consciousness, within society that is instantly able to recognize these iconic images based on a mutual belief system (Dickinson, Blair, & Ott, 2010; Hariman & Lucaites, 2003). To put into different words: There are several images throughout history that we as a society view as iconic, but these iconic images tend to differ in many ways. It is therefore difficult to soundly define what characteristics make an iconic photograph iconic. To demonstrate this, Boudana, Cohen, & Frosh, n.d. state,

Despite the overall lack of agreement, three major traits consistently recur: (a) the recognition of these photos by a large public, (b) their repetition and recycling across media platforms, and (c) their broad social and moral significance, beyond the referential meaning of the originally reported event (p. 1212).

Essentially in order for an image to be considered “iconic” it must be popular among the public, be used repeatedly across various media platforms, and represent a figurative social concept that goes beyond the image itself. To say “the image itself” means that of line, color, and form. The image must go beyond the physical and become something of “poetic information” (Benzel,

1991, p. 24). It is important to note, however, that aesthetic appeal of the image itself does help drive the ideological force behind the image (Cloud, 2004; Hariman & Lucaites, 2003). That is to say the more noticeable to the eyes an image is based off of line, color, and form the more likely an image will be able to influence our perceptions.

Monroe provided the world with some of the most iconic images of all time. She fits all the criteria listed above. Take, for example, the iconic image of Monroe in her flowing white dress from the set of her movie *The Seven Year Itch*. While filming the movie, Monroe stands above a subway grate and lets the rushing subways beneath her lift her skirt up. She is seen embracing the moment and is not at all flustered by her dress exposing her body. This image of Monroe in a white dress that the wind has carelessly lifted up above her knees echoes constantly throughout history. When TV shows, movies, commercials, magazines, etc. parody Monroe they typically use this iconic image as their platform. This particular image of her is used over and over again across all media platforms; however, other iconic photographs of her are seen regularly as well. An incredibly large audience, which extends far beyond just the U.S., knows her image and can recognize her immediately. She is found on posters, t-shirts, calendars, shot glasses, spoons, and practically any other item you can think of. Her image can be seen online as memes and gifs. She can be found in restaurants and clubs. People are even able to buy similar dresses or exact costumes (including a blonde wig) that look like her iconic white dress image.

Monroe is even placed in the background of television segments. Figure 1 (Miles & Fallon, 2014-present) and Figure 2 (Clarkson et al., 2016-present) below provide credibility to these claims. Figure 1 is a screenshot from one of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon's* segment "Ew!" Monroe's iconic photograph, described earlier, from *The Seven Year Itch* is displayed in the room. She can be seen in multiple shots of segment. Even though she is not the

primary focus of the show's segment, she is still there. In the same respect, Figure 2 is a screenshot from one of *The Grand Tour's* segment "Celebrity Face Off." This British car show begins this segment with a video introduction that has several celebrities' pictures set driving a car. Celebrities' like Tom Cruise, Bono, Elvis Presley, and others can be seen as well throughout the introduction. This proves Monroe's relevance in today's society. She is still an item we can buy, as seen in Figure 1, and she is still considered a popular celebrity after her death, as seen in Figure 2.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Finally, Monroe's images hold the social and moral significance described above. Her iconic white dress image perfectly embodies the ideology of sexuality. When people look at it, they see what <Marilyn Monroe> represented—sex. She is constantly referred to as a sex

symbol, and her images only help reinforce the ideology of sexuality even today. This iconic image of her shows a carefree and beautiful young woman having a good time. Benzel (1991) states, “In the medium of still photographs, Monroe becomes the artistic subject in a text without words, a text that invites the viewers’ participation” (p. 1). This idea leads to an understanding that iconic photographs are typically visual ideographs. These images have the ability to represent ideology in ways that mere words cannot.

Cloud (2004) states, “Ideographs are the link between rhetoric and ideology, vehicles through which ideologies or unconsciously shared idea systems that organize consent to a particular social system become rhetorically effective” (p. 288). It is therefore assumed that iconic photographs can take the form of ideographs because they demonstrate a common societal consciousness. Specifically speaking, iconic photographs of Monroe go beyond her mere image and enter a world of ideology focused on sexuality. This is because it is a shared belief within society that <Marilyn Monroe> represents the ultimate feminine sex symbol. As Dickinson, Blair, & Ott (2010) state, “...public memory is theorized in most scholarship as narrating a common identity, a construction that forwards an at least momentarily definitive articulation of the group” (p. 7). <Marilyn Monroe> has lasted in public memory because her iconic images are repeatedly used to showcase feminine sexuality. This is because her photographs and movies are all we have left that capture her physical self. I argue, however, that it is her physical self, along with her with public persona, which truly represents sexuality. It was never merely her images. <Marilyn Monroe> is sex. It is in her name, in her images, and in herself.

Embodied Ideographs

I choose to define embodied ideographs as people who embody a particular ideology and are recognized by a mass group of people, whether consciously or subconsciously, throughout

history. Embodied ideographs are tied heavily to public memory, but go beyond verbal and visual ideographs. Verbal and visual ideographs certainly lend themselves to embodied ideographs, but in essence it is the person being depicted in words, terms, phrases, photographs, artwork, etc. that is the true representation of an ideology. Even after a person dies, their identity is carried on in a collective consciousness. This public memory undoubtedly uses the verbal and visual world, where society can hear the name of a person or see an image of them and understand the hidden ideology, but it is actually the physical person that is being remembered. When I say <Marilyn Monroe> or I show someone a picture of her, they understand that I am discussing a person. In addition to this, however, they either consciously or subconsciously think of sexuality. This is because Monroe is more than a person, and more than a sex symbol. She is the physical embodiment of a particular type of sexuality. This type of sexuality is that of the curvy, blonde, white woman. She lives on in our collective consciousness because we are constantly hearing about her or seeing her images. When we hear about her or see her, however, we think of her—the person, the physical embodiment of an idea.

<Marilyn Monroe> represents the ideology of sexuality. Many people share this idea across nations. When we see past images of Monroe, we see the embodiment of sex. For Monroe, this idea of sex is meant to be natural. Dyer (2004) elaborates, “Monroe knows about sexuality, but she doesn’t know about guilt and innocence – she welcomes sex as natural” (p. 34). Monroe was not ashamed of her sexuality and went against societal norms of her time. It can be argued, however, that by embracing sexuality she embraced being “...vehicle *for* male sexuality” (Dyer, 2004, p. 38). Regardless of what kind of sex <Marilyn Monroe> represented, she embodied sex. This leads me to believe that embodied ideographs can also mean different things for different people, much like the verbal ideographs described by Condit & Lucaites

(1993) could. Some viewed <Marilyn Monroe> in a male gaze context that focused on objectification. Mulvey (1975) explains, “The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (p. 11). <Marilyn Monroe> is typically seen as being for the male pleasure. Others, however, viewed her in a female empowerment context focused on sexual liberation. <Marilyn Monroe>, through this context, is seen as a representation of sexuality focused on feminism. Despite these two very different contexts, people still view <Marilyn Monroe> as someone worthy of the embodiment of sexuality.

When we say <Marilyn Monroe> or we see an iconic image of her, our minds still dance around the ideology of sexuality today long after her death. Therefore, by applying this theory, I believe American icons have the ability to become ideographs themselves, due to their constant presence within society and public memory. Not all celebrities will represent sex ideology, but they can represent other ideologies themselves. For instance, when we think of Elvis Presley we think of “The King of Rock and Roll”. He embodies the ideology surrounding that genre of music, commonly thought of as either “rock ‘n’ roll” ideology or “rockabilly” ideology, which is reflected in public memory still today. <Elvis Presley> can therefore be considered an embodied ideograph. Like Monroe, Presley’s death did not end his embodiment of a particular ideology. This is because the public determined that he deserved to be preserved, just like many other celebrities throughout history. Their iconic status, along with their constant presence within society, forces these celebrities into a realm beyond verbal and visual concepts. Verbal and visual ideographs are certainly a catalyst for such expansion, but it is a person’s own persona that is viewed as carrying the ideology. With regard to <Marilyn Monroe>—her name, identity, image, and self belong to the public. She is an embodied ideograph that lives on in public memory because the public decided she was worth remembering.

Humans are something more than verbal or visual representations of ideas. They have things like autonomy, agency, thoughts, feelings, actions, and so on. They should be seen as humans, and not simply classified as mere objects for the public's agenda. More often than not, however, people are used to push agendas. People are used as objects. People are used to represent things like "patriotism" or "sexuality," and so on. This is especially true of celebrities. Dyer (2004) states, "Stars matter because they act out aspects of life that matter to us; and performers get to be stars when what they act out matters to enough people" (p. 17). These celebrities, stars, or icons matter because the public gives them meaning and significance. Celebrities are typically seen as something more than mere people. They are the ones who become embodiments of ideologies. This can be seen in several definitions and theories of icons where people are tangible embodiments of abstract ideas (Hairman & Lucaites, 2003; Alexander, 2010). Alexander (2010) states,

With icons, the signifier (an idea) is made material (a thing). The signified is no longer only in the mind, something thought of, but something experienced, something felt, in the heart and the body. The idea becomes an object in time and space, a thing (p. 11).

Looking at this definition, it can be considered that Monroe is simply an icon. Sexuality (the signifier/an idea) is made material in her (a thing). Sexuality is no longer just an idea because it has taken on a life of its own in <Marilyn Monroe>. She, an icon, is a physical embodiment of a shared belief. It can be argued, however, that she is more than that. She is more than her pictures, and more than her iconic status. Monroe is still treated as a sex symbol long after her death. She is still seen as something pretty that men could look at, or something women can admire for being person who breaks societal taboos. Dyer (2004) notes, "Monroe = sexuality is a message

that ran all the way from what the media made of her in the pin-ups and movies to how her image became a reference point for sexuality in the coinage of everyday speech” (p. 18).

<Marilyn Monroe> established and affirmed two different contexts when it came to sex ideology. The first ideology links sex to the male gaze, and the second links sex to female empowerment. This can be reflected when Dyer (2004) states, “The contemporary women’s movement has seen Monroe as, at worst, the ultimate example of woman as victim as sex object, and, at best, as in rebellion against her objectification” (p. 56). Her images constantly reflect both contexts, and are able to exist as vehicles for ideology because of the public memory that surrounds them.

To support this idea, Zelizer (1998) states, “Unlike personal memory, whose authority fades with time, the authority of collective memories increase as time passes, taking on new complications, nuances, and interests” (p. 3). This is similar to Hariman & Luciaties’ (2003) description of the importance of repetition. Through constant repetition and engagement with an ideology, the stronger and more likely an ideograph will live on. This is why repetition is so important in creating embodied ideographs. As time passes, people are able to reflect on what kind of sex symbol Monroe was and is. The fact of the matter is, however, that she is still viewed as a sex symbol despite the context and whether it is a positive or negative quality to possess. This makes her, as a person, an embodied ideograph. She lives on through public memory, despite the context, as a representation of sexuality. Dickinson, Blair, & Ott, (2010) state, “...rather than representing a fully developed chronicle of the social group’s past, public memory embraces events, people, objects, and places that it deems worthy of preservation, based on some kind of emotional attachment” (p. 7). People choose to remember Monroe as a sex symbol because people see her as something that needs to be preserved. It does not matter if that

preservation is due to a male or female perspective, what matters here is that it happens at all. <Marilyn Monroe> is the embodiment of sexuality.

The Making of A Sex Symbol

Symbols as an Embodied Ideograph

As detailed in the above section there can be verbal, visual, and embodied ideographs. This means that there are verbal, visual, and physical representations of particular ideologies. Some ideologies are found in the form of symbols. Cronkhite (1986) states, “A ‘symbol’ does not stand for its significate by any natural relationship; rather its relationship is arbitrary, created by its use” (p. 232). Symbols are created by its uses and we create its uses. The same can be said for ideographs. Ideographs are rhetorical representations that we create in order to make sense of complex ideologies. Not all symbols are ideographs, but some are. Sex symbols represent sexuality, which can be considered a type of embodied ideograph when it is a person who represents this. Monroe is a sex symbol, but she is also more than that. She represents both male and female ideals of sexuality. <Marilyn Monroe> is an embodied ideograph because she lives on as this embodiment of sexuality today.

When we think of an embodied ideograph, we rarely just think of the person being presented to us. We typically think about the symbolic meaning that the person represents. For example, when people think of Monroe it is highly unlikely that they instantly think of Norma Jeane Mortenson. They probably picture the beautiful blonde in the white dress above a subway grate, or one of her other iconic photographs. They view her as the commodity that she was and is. It might come to a shock for some people that Monroe’s birth-name is Norma Jeane Mortenson or even that her natural hair color is brown. We typically picture Monroe as we have come to know her—the gorgeous model/actress of the 1940s-60s. More importantly, we think of

her as a sex symbol during a time when being openly sexy was more than frowned upon. We created <Marilyn Monroe> because we wanted to use her in a variety of ways. Whether we embraced or spurned the ideology around sex symbols, the idea of sexuality, <Marilyn Monroe> was used as the example.

The Sexiest Symbol: Marilyn Monroe

If we type into Google “Define Sex Symbol” right now, a definition will be provided to us. Underneath that definition there will be synonyms for the term, but underneath that is what we should pay attention to. The term is used in a sentence that states, “Sex symbols come and go, but Marilyn is forever.” This is a perfect example of how <Marilyn Monroe> still influences today’s society. She is the sexiest symbol. She is still the person referenced most often when describing sex symbols. This persona has lingered 56 years after her death. <Marilyn Monroe> was and is “sex.” Like most female celebrity sex symbols, she was essentially manufactured, and managed closely, in order to become what she was (Evans & Riley, 2013, p. 269). Monroe was more than just a pretty face. She embodied every man’s fantasy, and people exploited that. She was able to capture every desire that men want (Sterk, 1986, p. 220). Dyer (2004) accurately describes this fantasy when he states, “By embodying the desired sexual playmate she, a woman, becomes the vehicle for securing a male sexuality free of guilt” (p. 39). Although there are two contexts for her sexual representation, it is more often than not the male gaze context that outshines the female empowerment context. Not only is this true of her own time, but it is still true today. For instance, there are calendars still being produced that have several of her iconic pin-ups and photographs. Men still want to see her.

Monroe stopped being a person while she was alive; she became a commodity that men, and women, could buy. Even Andy Warhol reflected on this concept in his Marilyn prints. He

took an iconic picture of Monroe and produced prints shortly after her death to show how media was making her into an object and not a person. Andy Warhol recognized that the real woman was lost. She vanished before the public and his prints reflect this. We only have to look at the surface to see Monroe (Adams, 2004, p. 95). After her tragic suicide, what did people do? They bought images of her, they watched movies where she was the star, and they thought about her career. The world, and especially Americans, mourned the image of <Marilyn Monroe>. Rarely did they think about Norma Jeane Mortenson, the 36 year old who took her own life. This is because <Marilyn Monroe> is an embodied ideograph. She is a representation of sex symbols, a physical embodiment of a public ideology surrounding sexuality. Monroe ceased being Norma Jeane Mortenson long before her death.

There are countless references throughout popular culture that demonstrate how Monroe is a sex symbol. I explore how this manifests in television, art, songs, movies, and other media. Two television shows in particular will be used to demonstrate today's views of <Marilyn Monroe>. Each show provides insight to how the current public views and remembers the late celebrity. The television show, *Parenthood*, (Katims, Beletsky, & Whittingham, 2011) comes to mind to illustrate this point as it is based in the present. In this specific episode a children's musical is taking place. The play goes through several of California's historical moments, as the show takes place in California. In one scene, the children discuss the studios that popped up throughout California. One of the main characters, Julia's, daughter has been cast as none other than Monroe. The young girl is dressed in the style of the above-mentioned iconic photo. She has on a blonde wig, is wearing a white dress that has been altered to mimic the flow of the wind, and has bright red lipstick on. This can be seen in Figure 3, which is a screenshot from the show. As the young girl is delivering her lines, Julia turns to her sister in the audience and says, "I

cannot believe I'm letting her play a sex symbol." Her sister replies that it is just a play and that the girl is cute. It appears that Julia believed Monroe represented the male gaze context described earlier. This is seen through her discomfort with her young daughter portraying an individual who is essentially always objectified by men. I highly doubt that any parent would want to see their child being sexually objectified, so it makes sense that Julia was upset. However if Julia viewed Monroe in the other context, the one where <Marilyn Monroe> represents empowerment and a rebel against gender norms, she might have viewed her daughter's performance in a different manner. The lens through which you view <Marilyn Monroe> contributes to your perception of her, but the fundamental fact remains the same. It is a shared belief that <Marilyn Monroe> represents sexuality. This belief that Monroe is a sex symbol is demonstrated not only in this episode, but also around every corner.



Figure 3

In addition to the episode of *Parenthood*, the popular television show *Mad Men* can be used to understand our modern day perception of the public's past views of <Marilyn Monroe>. *Mad Men* first aired in 2007 and ended in 2015. Although a relatively new program, the show is set in the 1960s-1970s and explores the advertising world of New York City. In one particular episode (Weiner & Abraham, 2008) the advertising company is creating an ad for Playtex's bras.

They come up with the idea that every woman is either a “Marilyn” or a “Jackie.” To prove their pitch the men begin pointing at the women in the office and naming them as either a Marilyn Monroe or a Jackie Kennedy. Both are famous and beautiful women; both are known for very different things. Monroe represents sex and excitement, while Jackie Kennedy represents class and sophistication. The ad was in black and white and used the same model for two very different representations of Playtex’s bras. A screenshot of the show displays this ad in Figure 4. On one side the model wore black underwear and was posed in a prim and proper manner holding a coffee cup and saucer with a causal expression to represent Jackie. On the other side she wore white underwear and was posed in a fun and inviting manner holding champagne and a boa with a fun smile to represent Marilyn. The logic behind the ad was to show how every woman wanted to be both a Jackie and a Marilyn, because “women want to see themselves as men see them.” The caption below the two different representations is “Nothing fits both sides of a woman better than Playtex.” Monroe does not get to be her own person. She gets to be what other women should strive for because she is what men typically wanted to see. She is set above ordinary people. Even though she is just a person, she is treated as something more. She is treated as an unattainable object, an ideology surrounding sexuality.



Figure 4

Although this is a television program from the 21st Century it shows how the world and people of that time viewed <Marilyn Monroe>. They used her image, and what she represented in society, to pass their own agenda. Adams (2004) states, “Monroe was an object struggling to be taken seriously as a subject” (p. 95). Her photographs can certainly be considered visual ideographs, especially since she is no longer here to represent herself, but <Marilyn Monroe>’s physical self and public persona was an embodied ideograph. In her last interview with *Life* magazine before she died Monroe said, “That’s the trouble, a sex symbol becomes a thing – I just hate to be a thing” (Adams, 2004; Dyer, 2004; Rollyson, 1987). The thing that she became was more than a sex symbol and more than an American icon. She became an embodied ideograph because her own identity was a representation of an idea that lived in public memory. Hall (1989) furthers this concept when he states, “So the notion that identity is outside representation—that there are our selves and then the language in which we describe ourselves—is untenable. Identity is within discourse, within representation” (p. 16). Identity and representation go hand in hand. Monroe’s own identity became how she was represented, and she knew that. She, her physical self, became a vehicle for which a shared ideal was personified. The public, both then and today, views <Marilyn Monroe> as sex and not as an ordinary human being.

As just described, the show *Mad Men* provides insight into the modern day perceptions of the public’s past opinions of <Marilyn Monroe> when she was alive. That particular episode focused on her sex appeal and how the advertising company extorted her image. There is another episode (Weiner, A. Jacquemetton, M. Jacquemetton, & Uppendahl, 2008) that provides insight into the public’s view of her after her death. The episode opens with several of the office’s secretaries crying and talking. A few of the men also join in on the conversation throughout the

day. Later in the episode, one of the few lead female actresses of the show, Joan, is caught laying in the dark on the office couch of one of her bosses, Roger, with whom she is having an affair.

The following is dialogue from the scene:

Roger: What's wrong, Red? Do you miss me?
Joan: She was so young.
Roger: Not you, too.
Joan: Yes, I'm just another frivolous secretary.
Roger: It's a terrible tragedy, but that woman's a stranger. Roosevelt I hated him, but I felt like I knew him.
Joan: A lot of people felt like they knew her. You should be sensitive to that.
Roger: Hey. You're not like her. Physically, a little, but don't tell me that makes you sad.
Joan: It's not a joke. This world destroyed her.
Roger: Really? She was a movie star who had everything and everybody, and she threw it away. But, hey, if you want to be sad.
Joan: One day you'll lose someone who's important to you. You'll see. It's very painful.

The scene shows two sides of the public's view. First there is Joan's perspective, which shows feelings of loss and sympathy toward the late American icon. Joan viewed Monroe in the female empowerment context. She was someone to sympathize with. Then there is Roger's perspective, which shows a lack of understanding of who Monroe truly was. This shows the male gaze context. Roger even objectifies Joan when he says that she should not be sad that she physically resembles Monroe. This is significant because it offers insight into both contexts. Viewers today are able to reflect on <Marilyn Monroe> and exactly what sexual representation she actually embodies. *Mad Men* is oriented to today's audiences, which proves Monroe's relevance again. Yes, it is a show based in the 60s, so they are more than likely going to mention Monroe's death. They did so in a way, however, that provides viewers with the opportunity to witness her actual importance. <Marilyn Monroe> mattered to people back then, and she continues to matter today. People still see her on a regular basis, even if they do not pick up on it. This episode is

significant because it allows for a dialogue to emerge in public discourse. People who were not alive during Monroe's time are still able to learn about her. As an embodied ideograph, she is someone who public memory has preserved and continues to preserve each day.

During her time, Monroe was seen as somewhat of a radical. There were always two sides of the argument that surrounded her, each described in the two contexts already discussed. These two sides can be seen in the two very different reactions found above with Joan and Roger. Monroe was sexy and she knew and exploited that. This is something that women of the 50s were not supposed to be/do. However, Kray, Howland, Russell, & Jackman, n.d. suggest, "Individuals have a fundamental need to view a social system positively and will engage in a number of motivated processes to rationalize the status quo" (p. 99). Monroe normalized sexuality in a way. She made it okay for women to be sexy, which some people found completely liberating. They viewed <Marilyn Monroe> as empowering and someone to relate to. They mourned her, like Joan did, because they felt they lost someone they knew. It was as if Monroe was a close friend to many individuals because she was such a friend to the public that helped create her. This is, however, only if they chose to view her in the female empowerment context. Other people, like Roger, felt that she was just some celebrity that "threw it all away." To these people, she represented only a sex symbol designed for the male gaze. She was viewed merely as the commodity that was discussed earlier. In this way, she was not someone to relate to. She was just a thing. She was merely something to miss solely because we would not be able to look at her physical self any longer. Both interpretations, the female empowerment or for the male gaze context, are different lenses to use when viewing the embodied ideograph. Both can be used to interpret <Marilyn Monroe>, but ultimately it remains that Monroe represents sexuality.

Marilyn's Contribution

The public certainly helped shape Monroe into the sex symbol that she was and still is today. Saying that she had no agency in crafting this role, however, would be incredibly inaccurate. Monroe contributed just as much to her persona as the public did. In fact, Benzel (1991) states,

Monroe's photographers never pose her for shots, rather they let her create the portrait. Often they would take her directions to change the lighting, to change the backdrop, to use different camera angles....In this way, she controls the photographic image (p. 5).

Monroe had complete agency in her role. She knew what she was doing, and she was fully aware of what she was becoming. Many people have viewed her as a sex goddess or even a siren (Pollock, n.d.; Rollyson, 1987; Sterk, 1986). She is a person that surpasses the average celebrity and becomes something mythical. Monroe contributed to this eternal public persona that is echoed still today. This is because sexuality appeared natural to her (Adams, 2005; Dyer, 2004). She was able to embody this idea because it was essentially inherent to her.

As mentioned previously, Monroe realized that she was becoming "a thing." To add to this argument, Rollyson (1987) states,

There was nothing accidental about her appeal; Marilyn Monroe worked very hard to become Marilyn Monroe, and she was acutely aware not only of her popularity, but also of her place in the public subconsciousness. She knew she had made herself into a myth that was larger than the circumscribed dimensions of a sex symbol (p. 24).

Although Monroe was aware of her role in society, she was rarely given the opportunity to voice this fact. Interviewers constantly ridiculed her and divvied up her statements to make her sound lesser than she actually was (Rollyson, 1987). People constantly thought that it was by accident when Monroe had a good idea (Adams, 2004). The public rarely gave her the opportunity to step outside her limited roles. This is because, although she contributed to her role, the value of her image and persona rested in the hands of the public (Decker, 2009, p. 259).

Frozen In Time

The final portion of this essay seeks to explore what happens when a celebrity dies and can no longer control their images or public personas. The loss of autonomy creates controversy among the public as sides are taken to discuss the post-mortem rights of iconic American figures. For example Decker (2009) elaborates

Assuming a persona could be invaded after death, would Monroe, who died of an overdose and suffered from alcoholism, consider the use of her image by Absolut Vodka, as arranged by Anna Strasberg, to be an invasion of her persona? (p. 267-268).

Anna Strasberg is the person in charge of Monroe's estate. This is a person who Monroe never met, and who is making several decisions regarding her public persona. There have been several controversies regarding celebrities' post-mortem rights, and it appears that little can actually be done to preserve a celebrity's persona. This is because "Courts do not enforce protections against indignity and mental trauma for celebrities, however, as their careers are built on the widespread use of their images" (Decker, 2009, p. 250).

This idea can also be seen in Hall (1989), which states, "there are always conditions to identity which the subject cannot construct. Men and women make history but not under

conditions of their own making” (p. 11). Monroe played a role in her career, but it was the public that allowed her to have a career in the first place. The public provided Monroe with the platform for success. They also gave her the fans she needed to become famous. The public built <Marilyn Monroe> into what she was during her time, but the public still contributes to her fame today. She is still as relevant today as she was when she was alive. She “...is one of a handful of iconic stars who, long after their deaths, continue to gain new fans and remain powerful cultural commodities” (Levitt, 2010, p. 62). Her lasting impact in society is in large part to the people that choose to make her relevant. This is because she lacks the autonomy to do it herself.

Monroe has certainly made history, during her time and long after her death. Her death is what truly froze her in time, making her this iconic sex symbol forever. Monroe never grew old. She will forever remain the beautiful blonde we have all come to know. Although Monroe constructed some of her fame, her identity as a sex symbol was the result of the public making her. As with most celebrities, the public is what sets people above the rest (Sonnet, 2010). Yes, celebrities do have some power and sway in their careers, but they would be nothing without the public and their fans. The reason we still see images of Monroe, view her as an embodiment of sexuality, and discuss her importance within U.S. discourse is because she is eternal. She is something we created and continue to create everyday. She exists in a collective memory, a public consciousness (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003) that has been passed between generations. Sonnet (2010) states, “Her image ‘has no one original location. It has no single history, no point of origin, no final end: it lives as copy, resurrected as image through the forces of mass-mediated reproduction’” (p. 70). <Marilyn Monroe> has no end because she, like many other celebrities, has been frozen by the public. She continues to represent a collective public conscious.

Conclusion

The first use of the concept “ideograph” focused only on verbal rhetoric. Words and terms were used to represent a collective ideology found within society. Since this first use, there have been steps toward expanding the concept to include visual rhetoric. Images are now considered to be vehicles of shared ideology within the public. It is suggested in this essay that there is a step further into the physical realm, beyond photographs, where people can actually be considered ideographs themselves. <Marilyn Monroe> is used to explore the idea of an embodied ideograph. She represents the ideology of sexuality. Although it can be considered that she is merely an icon, she fits the concept of ideographs perfectly. The public deemed her a sex symbol while she was alive, but continues to do so today long after her death. There is a shared understanding in society, but of the U.S. and other nations, that <Marilyn Monroe> represents sex ideology. This is why her image is still widely produced and circulated. Monroe lacks the autonomy to change this public persona, and will forever remain the embodied ideograph that she was when she was alive.

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