

Conflicting and Commodifying Womanhood in *Angels Wear White*

As the title of Vivian Qu's 2017 film *Angels Wear White* informs us, there lies deep symbolic significance within this color and those who wear it. Here, the angelic, pure, and unsullied virginal qualities of white coexist alongside and within the dark and disturbing secrets of a seaside town; a town home to a giant, looming Marilyn Monroe statue in her infamous white dress. This film is rich with symbolic icons and colors, and utilizes a narrative style in which the assault upon two young girls ripples out to affect many others--in particular, other women. The film both begins and ends with one character's deep focus on and connection with the prominent Marilyn statue; these brief and quiet moments between a young homeless girl and a statue of an iconic American sex symbol comment upon and inform the entirety of this story. Throughout this film we witness womanhood and girlhood clashing, a rigid and sexist Chinese society and its obsession with virginity as a product to be bought and sold, and the ceaseless and overwhelming commentary upon women, their bodies, and their worth. Qu compares and contrasts these differing experiences of women and girls, and invites us to ask the questions: how is girlhood commodified? What does it mean to be a woman in China today? How does one gain agency and control in such a society? Qu crafts her narrative into a compelling, overarching statement which argues that womanhood does not mean one specific thing: each character, each person, must reach their own peace with it. In a story and a town which seems so drowned in corruption and evil, no character is truly totally exempt from wrongdoing--this is a story of survival, as a woman, and all of the pain, manipulation, and loss which burdens that.

The film is bookended by two vastly different interactions with the Marilyn statue. Qu invites us to consider the changes that have occurred between these two scenes, in particular

what has changed in the way that one of the central characters, Mia, thinks of and looks at this iconic American sex symbol. In the first of these scenes--the opening of the film--Mia approaches the statue and considers it very carefully. Marilyn looms so tall and high above that her face cannot be seen. Mia, almost lovingly, touches the huge toes, their nails painted red. She runs her hands up and down along the cold plaster. This scene is given time and space to breathe by Qu, who effectively pushes us to consider the relationship between these two figures-- before Mia is rudely pushed away by two other girls we will soon come to know. Mia's connection with the statue is clearly personal, but she is not alone in being so entranced-- not only with the symbol and figure of Marilyn Monroe, but with this particular image being represented. Lois Banner characterizes this image as "one of the twentieth century's most famous photographs", and describes Marilyn as "a vision in white: her hair is platinum blonde; she wears a white dress, white underpants...Absorbed in blissful auto-eroticism while holding down her skirt, she both exudes eroticism and transcends it, both poses for the male gaze and escapes it" (Banner 4)¹. The image of Marilyn depicted in this statue is one which is infamous for its "iconic" nature--yet as Banner describes it, Marilyn's position in simultaneously coexisting within innocent girlish glee and provocative, erotic sex symbol caught in an exposing moment defies a simplistic or singular experience of *viewing* this image. The fascination with this captured picture, as well as with Marilyn's power as a symbol, so often focuses squarely on her power and influence over an imagined heterosexual male figure. Here Qu bucks this and considers how such a powerful and

¹ Banner, Lois W. "The Creature from the Black Lagoon: Marilyn Monroe and Whiteness." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2008, pp. 4-29. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20484410.

influential image, in its many proliferations and reincarnations, could take on a personal and unseen significance to a young girl.

If Marilyn presents us with such a culmination of the idealized qualities of sexuality in a woman, how does a girl in the throes of puberty, homelessness and abuse see her own womanhood reflected? In these moments in which Mia lovingly strokes the statue and examines every inch, is she considering herself in a reflexive manner? These questions of how Mia views herself are further confused by the opening scene's conclusion--in which she takes out her phone and snaps a photo of Marilyn's exposed white underwear. Not only are we prompted to consider how girls are pushed towards their own self-exploitation and presentation toward an expected male audience by seeing themselves represented in this way, Qu demonstrates Mia's reluctance to truly self-examine at this point in the narrative. She takes a step back, more removed, and casually snaps this photo as she is unable to do much else about the presence of the statue or her feelings about this. This moment is mirrored when the sexual assault takes place, and later during medical examinations conducted upon the victims.

In the tense moments in which we watch, via the security cameras with Mia, the schoolgirls unable to keep the older man from forcing his way into their room, Qu crafts a palpable anxiety and uncertainty. The limitations upon the frame itself, and the camera's inability to enter the room or move beyond the view of the cell phone screen as it records greatly heighten these intense feelings of restraint and stress. An awareness of what is most likely happening behind those doors heightens the stress of our growing realization that Mia is not going to save them herself. As during her interaction with the statue, Mia takes out her cell phone and records the forced intrusion. Here, Qu additionally begins prompting us to question,

as we do many times throughout the film, the ethics of Mia's actions. We soon after see the first interaction between Mia and Lili, the hotel receptionist. Lili is immediately presented as another prominent representation of femininity and womanhood in Mia's life, almost positioned as a big sister to her. Lili wears all pink, nails painted to match, and as she speaks she carefully takes care of them. Revealed behind her long dark hair are a new pair of earrings, which Mia eagerly examines as she similarly does to the statue. Just as this interaction is unfolding, Qu once again places a jarring and unexpected moment in a time of supposed calm and peace. Lili says that the man she was with last night is interested in whether or not Mia is a virgin--and if she is, her virginity could be sold at a high price. Mia appears startled and unsure--just before we cut away. Mia later only reveals details of the events to a lawyer for money. Across these events and interactions between women, Qu consistently applies pressure upon us to consider their ethics within a deeply corrupt and twisted town and larger system. Mia appears cold and callous, and her motivations for keeping the video to herself are not revealed to us. Lili appears in the same light, with a flippant disregard for Mia's feelings and seemingly without thoughts or feelings on the actual prospect of commodifying one's own virginity. The ways in which these characters experience their own femininity and the way Qu utilizes this to make a statement are ultimately demonstrated in two scenes: Lili post hymen-reconstruction surgery, and the lawyer's intense questioning of Mia soon after. Lili, crying in pain after her surgery, says: "I don't want to be reborn as a woman". When the lawyer prompts Mia to consider how she would feel had she been the one assaulted, Mia responds with only: "That kind of thing would never happen to me". The narrative which follows the relationship and parallels between Mia and Lili demonstrates two young women at war with how their femininity is perceived by others and how it is experienced

personally. Lili embraces a stereotypical femininity, but breaks down from the pressures of maintaining an imposed womanhood from a society which places such great importance on rigid, solid, anatomical *proof* of womanhood. Mia runs away from stereotypical femininity, and attempts to craft a hard and impenetrable exterior, but also breaks from the overwhelming pressure of a society which imposes a womanhood upon her which means vulnerability, weakness, and a lack of agency.

Wen, a victim of the assault, parallels these experiences with one of her own. Just as Mia and Lili experience, Wen's own self-perception clashes harshly with outside perceptions of her. Where once her mother saw an innocent girl, after the assault she sees someone with a manipulative, provocative and sexual power. Wen's mother violently rips dainty dresses out of the closet, screaming repeatedly that she shouldn't be dressed this way. Later, alone, Wen dumps out her makeup into the sink, including a container of red nail polish-- a parallel of Marilyn's outfit and her influence upon our perception of the iconically sexual. Qu frames Wen during a walk on the beach alongside brides in white gowns carried atop horses, brides posing for wedding photos, extravagant, celebratory displays of stereotypical femininity. Wen is often isolated in the frame, such as during her first medical exam, in which her parents scream hate and blame at each other. All the while, Wen sits alone, the weight of this experience upon her quite tangible to us. She travels alone at night through the city, searching out her father's home. Wen is engaged in a constant balance between isolating, confusion childhood and the overwhelming pressures of societally-crafted womanhood. Wen's own personhood is consistently invaded--by doctors, her mother, and strangers who find comfort in placing the blame upon her and what they perceive to be a premature performance of womanhood.

This invasion of Wen's private and personal sphere is most viscerally in the sequences in which she is medically examined by doctors. Qu returns frequently to considerations of hymens, and of an acute obsession with seeing physical evidence of virginity, purity, and true womanhood. Lili's agony after her hymen-reconstruction surgery demonstrates to us how much pain can be endured just to regain this physical structure and the symbolic weight that comes with it. In tandem with this, a final scene in which a team of doctors examine Wen and announce to the public that she has *not* been assaulted demonstrates again an obsession with physical evidence as the one, and only, marker of evidence. The emotional states, as well as the verbal statements and accounts of women and girls in this film are of absolutely no importance to the power structures at large. Here again, the Marilyn statue returns to give shape to Qu's statement here: the focal point of this statue is the place which we never see in the original Marilyn photograph, the place which she is attempting to hide in her iconic pose. These tourists, beach goers, the two young girls, and Mia as well stare skyward directly between Marilyn's legs. Mia's photographing of this piece of the statue implies some fascination with what is still hidden, a fascination compelled by this society which places so much importance on the physical markers on women's bodies. Just as these people stare and photograph this piece of Marilyn's statue, the blank stares of the doctors as they supposedly examine Wen reflect, again, a disregard for the personal space and emotional and mental health of these girls. While the primary assault upon the two young girls is shown, Qu mirrors this in the deeply discomforting examination scene. There is no right to consent given to the girls, no agency, no privacy--in this setting of Qu's, anyone and everyone has the right to stare into women's most private places: ultimately, it seems, these pieces of women's bodies don't really belong to the women.

In *Angels Wear White*, Qu crafts and contrasts these three women's narratives alongside each other, and effectively demonstrates the ways in which China's culturally and societally-imposed "womanhood" cannot ever truly exist as it is so perfectly crafted. "Inside this web of corruption, women and girls form a community of suffering. The film treats the rape not as an isolated case, but rather as an example of the injustice and exploitation suffered by women of all ages and social classes behind the glossy veneer of seaside attractions, happy tourists, new couples taking romantic pictures on the beach, and a sparkling amusement park" (Chen)². These women are simultaneously expected to maintain perfection, sexuality, innocence, beauty, vulnerability, but the power to reject men who threaten to ruin this within them. As the film ends with Mia's successful escape from selling her virginity and the town which has caused her such pain, the dirtied and abandoned Marilyn statue is taken away alongside her on the highway. We linger here for a long while, taking in all the symbolic significance of Mia in her white dress, in the process of witnessing the ultimate end of a figure of womanhood which she potentially idolized. Qu does not provide us with closure in the stories of the victims, Wen and her classmate, nor are we shown a possible escape or outcome for Lili. Qu does not provide a plan or strategy for combating this sexism, or navigating one's own womanhood and all that this implies. She does provide us with a vulnerable, simple hope of freedom, whatever form that may take, and a presentation of one young woman's experience with idealizing, rejecting, and seeking out womanhood.

Qu's statements in this film are strong, firm and resolute: yet at the same time, she avoids falling into the potential trap of making distinct what womanhood "truly" is. Wen, Mia, Lili, and

² Chen, Lux. "Angels Wear White". *Cineaste*. Vol. XLIII, No. 4

many other female characters of this film experience an intense challenging of their views of what womanhood is, should be, and how it applies to themselves and the women around them. Mia considers selling her virginity, Lili attempts to wield her beauty for her benefit, Wen's mother and others place the blame for the assault squarely on her supposed premature weaponizing of womanhood. Qu demonstrates how these women push back against this, can become crushed by it, and how they attempt to escape from it. In a world where we draw distinctions between the good women--the "angels"--and abandon and condemn the rest, Qu reminds us of the absurd, impossible, and repressive nature of forcing many to adhere to one strict and limiting view of what womanhood is and should be.

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