

George Kouvaros. *Famous Faces Yet Not Themselves: "The Misfits" and Icons of Postwar America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 256pp.

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*The Misfits* (1961), written by Arthur Miller, directed by John Huston and starring Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe and Montgomery Clift, was initially described by its producer Frank Taylor as “the ultimate motion picture”. It is instead often remembered for its commercial and critical failure, the on-set dissolution of Miller and Monroe’s marriage and Gable’s death shortly after filming ended. *Famous Faces Yet Not Themselves* takes as its basis a series of photographs by the prestigious Magnum agency, which was contracted to document the increasingly difficult shoot. George Kouvaros asserts early on his view that photography is an overlooked resource in film studies, insisting that these on-set images have an important “textual value in their own right” (4). Kouvaros uses the Magnum images as a prism through which to explore not only the reception and understanding of this challenging film, but also the iconography of postwar acting, defined by discourses surrounding Stanislavsky and the Method; the dramatic institutional and stylistic changes in American filmmaking and photography throughout the 1950s and 1960s; and the often fraught and contradictory figuring of the relationship between public and private identity in postwar America.

After contextualising *The Misfits* and the Magnum photographs, the book begins to explore the relationship between images of absorption and the Method acting techniques popularised by Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio (who worked with Monroe, Marlon Brando and James Dean amongst others). Kouvaros argues that Method discourses around absorption should be understood as part of a wider cultural preoccupation with “authentically” figuring the subject and the beholder, which he traces from philosopher Denis Diderot and nineteenth-century painting/aesthetics through to contemporary photography. These issues are further explored through the

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changing iconography of movie star images. The photographs taken on the set of *The Misfits* are cited as a prime example of the shift from glamour portraits towards images that show acting as a work of labour, and emphasise “the star” as a potentially unstable identity to be assumed and performed. Eve Arnold’s seemingly candid images of Monroe are analysed in particular depth, with Kouvaros asserting that they represent a means to conceptualise the changing relationship between private and public identity in postwar America, a development he later describes as “not a collapse in public expression but its reformation into the contradictory condition of being private in public” (200).

Following a chapter that refines the author’s view that Method acting’s representation as absorption and labour should be considered alongside the work of innovative American photographers like Robert Franks and Bruce Davidson, the book moves on to an analysis of *The Misfits* in relation to “lateness”. This proves a particularly productive focus for Kouvaros, who frames the film’s strange temporality and disjunctive blurring of genres (for which it was criticised heavily when released) within Edward Said and Theodor Adorno’s theories of “late style”. He argues that *The Misfits* displays attributes of “belatedness” related to its emergence at a time of transition between “Classic Hollywood” and the “New Hollywood” of the mid-1960s and 1970s, as well as the end/afterlife of the Western myth and genre, a major thematic concern of the film.

Late style is an increasingly ubiquitous theoretical preoccupation, but Kouvaros’s analysis of the term’s complexities and contradictions and application of them to *The Misfits* is extremely effective, deftly incorporating many of the book’s earlier themes. Lateness is analysed less in terms of authorship (its usual frame of reference) and more as a concept through which the anxious figuring of social, cultural and generic changes can be understood. For Kouvaros, *The Misfits*’ fractured narrative and stylistic qualities represent the telling irreconcilability of this late Western’s “insistence on bringing the tropes and iconography of classical genres into engagement with the material realities of postwar life” (151). The final chapter applies this belatedness to theories of photography and iconography, focusing particularly on the various temporalities of the still and cinematic image and evidenced by further readings of the Magnum photographs.

As this brief summary suggests, the book's theoretical concerns and frame of reference are broad, encompassing a range of critical and cultural sources. That *Famous Faces Yet Not Themselves* remains such a coherent study is a testament to the author's comprehensive scholarship and clear prose style as well as the suggestiveness of the Magnum photographs themselves. Kouvaros persuasively argues that exploring these images is essential to understanding the enduring significance and allure of *The Misfits* as a piece of cinema and a transitional moment in American cultural history. In doing so he has produced a complex but compelling work that represents an original contribution to debates around film studies, photography and iconography in the postwar period.