

British Blonde (London, 18 Oct – 15 Nov 23)

V&A Gorvy Lecture Theatre, South Kensington, London, Oct 18–Nov 15, 2023

Alice Read, London

Join us for the Paul Mellon Lectures Autumn 2023, British Blonde: Women, Desire and the Image in Post-War Britain delivered by Professor Lynda Nead.

Wednesdays at 6:30pm for 5 weeks at the Gorvy Lecture Theatre, V&A Museum

These lectures look at post-war Britain through changing styles of femininity that expressed many of the key concerns of the nation in the twenty-five years that followed the end of the Second World War. In the 1950s, American glamour was exported to a war-torn Britain, part of a larger passage of commodities that crossed the Atlantic in this period. In the process, however, something important happened, blonde became British, Marilyn Monroe became Diana Dors. The lectures capture this process as it evolved through the 1950s and 1960s and was subjected to the changing definitions of class, social aspiration and desire that shaped the post-war nation.

Drawing on a wide range of visual media and forms including painting, film, photography, advertising and fashion the lectures offer a new history of the art and culture of post-war Britain.

Lecture One: The British Marilyn – Diana Dors (18th October 2023 - followed by a drinks reception)

The transformation of American glamour is most clearly demonstrated in the life and image of Diana Dors, who became known as the “British Marilyn”. The vulgar excess of the 1950s bombshell body troubled the deep-seated myth of British restraint and subtlety. It was, quite simply, too much, beyond containment and, in the end, it came down to a question of scale. The expansive female bodies of the 1950s demanded something more than existing flatscreen cinema technologies and these years saw an explosion of technological innovations such as CinemaScope, Cinemascope, 3-D and Technicolor. This lecture considers blonde glamour of the 1950s and its relationship to developments in film technology.

Lecture Two: Blonde Noir – Ruth Ellis (25th October 2023)

Ruth Ellis was the last woman to be hanged in Britain, after being found guilty in 1955 of the murder of her lover, David Blakely. The image of the femme fatale has a long history in Western visual culture but came into its own in Hollywood cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, becoming a stock character within the shadowy and violent narratives of film noir. Ellis’ life brings to light some of the central themes in “British Blonde” that weave through the people and places that populate its world: sleaze, exploitation and aspiration. This lecture draws on the archives of press photography, examining images of Ellis for what they reveal about this aspect of post-war Britain and the

image of "Blonde Noir".

Lecture Three: Carry On Blonde – Barbara Windsor (1st November 2023)

This lecture considers the role of humour in "British Blonde", focusing on the Carry On films, a series of thirty-one British comedy films that ran from 1958 until 1992 and starred, amongst its regular cast, the British actor, Barbara Windsor. Carry On films drew on the traditions of music hall and seaside postcards and lent heavily on innuendo and double entendre, which Angela Carter has described as "everyday discourse which has been dipped in the infinite riches of a dirty mind". Drawing on detailed sequences from Carry On films, this lecture reassesses post-war British humour and its role in defining woman as body and the female body as comic.

Lecture Four: Sixties Blonde – Pauline Boty (8th November 2023)

In the 1960s a new kind of blonde femininity emerged. Part of a new regional and class configuration and a changing moral and sexual environment, Sixties Blonde was described as natural, energetic, impulsive and self-sufficient; an urban figure who embodied modernity and was a staple of fashion photography and sixties cinema. The work of British pop artist, Pauline Boty, expresses many of the tensions for young women in the 1960s, the possibilities and constraints, liberation and collusion. This lecture considers Boty's work and her image in the context of shifts in morality and sexuality in the period and the broader culture of film and photography in these years.

Lecture Five: Screenings and Panel Discussion (15th November 2023)

The Paul Mellon Centre has commissioned four new, short video essays from filmmakers Catherine Grant and John Wyver that respond to the arguments and materials in the lecture series. Exploring the medium of the essay film, they work with still and moving images to develop ideas concerning women and desire and the visual imagery of Diana Dors, Barbara Windsor, Ruth Ellis and Pauline Boty. The fifth session in this lecture series will be the first public screenings of these films, along with a panel discussion of invited speakers.

Catherine Grant is honorary professor at Aarhus Universitet, Denmark, honorary research fellow at Birkbeck, University of London, where she was professor of digital media and screen studies until 2020, and senior research fellow at the University of Reading, UK. She carries out her film and moving image studies research mostly in the form of remix-based video essays and is a founding co-editor of the award-winning journal, [in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies.

John Wyver is a writer, producer and director with Illuminations, and professor of the arts on screen, University of Westminster. He collaborated with Lynda Nead on the multimedia article "Bert Hardy: Exercises with Photography and Film", British Art Studies Issue 15.

Tickets: £5 per lecture

Location: V&A Gorvy Lecture Theatre

6:30 – 7:30 pm

Reference:

ANN: British Blonde (London, 18 Oct - 15 Nov 23). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 11, 2023 (accessed May 12, 2025),

<<https://arthist.net/archive/40042>>.