

## Review Essay

### The “Liberated” Captive: A Review of *Monica in Black and White*

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Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato. *Monica in Black and White*. HBO, 2002.

Although the Monica Lewinsky joke maintains its status as an acceptable and usually amusing form of discourse, Monica Lewinsky in the flesh increasingly inspires groaning, eye-rolling disgust. In 1999, Matt Lauer heckled her offstage after inviting her to promote Andrew Morton’s *Monica’s Story* on *The Today Show*. When she became a spokesmodel for the diet company Jenny Craig, several independent franchises refused to run the ads, and soon the campaign was dropped altogether. More recently, TV critics “toasted” Lewinsky at a press conference for the HBO documentary *Monica in Black and White* with “Can’t she just move on, dry clean the dress already, and shut up?” (Brioux) and then snidely summarized that “Monica Lewinsky, the dim echo of political scandals past, wants your sympathy” (McCollum). Filmmaker Randy Barbato described this ungracious meeting of the Television Critics Association thusly: “They showed the clip and then we walked out with Monica to answer questions. Well, the audience was so hostile. There was so much rage in the room, like people are angry that Monica Lewinsky, to a certain extent, still exists” (Rothkerch 3).

Most people who have a knee-jerk negative response to Lewinsky’s attempts at self-explanation accuse her (as Matt Lauer did) of “making a career out of being Monica.” It is presumed that, first, she is making a fortune from her fame; second,

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she would never have had the opportunity to amass this fortune if it were not for her key role in the Clinton impeachment scandal; and, third, she enjoys her notoriety and perhaps even planned it. The new documentary can be superficially read as a continuation of this grand scheme, and *Monica in Black and White* immediately irks critics because it was Lewinsky's idea, and because she was paid an undisclosed sum by HBO for her participation.

To assume that Barbato and his partner Fenton Bailey would spend their time proselytizing for Lewinsky's cause, however, is to seriously underestimate these filmmakers and to risk missing the point of the production. Although they do seem to specialize in the triumph of the underdog—these are the folks who brought us RuPaul and who humanized Tammy Faye Baker—in this case Bailey and Barbato are not particularly interested in generating sympathy for Lewinsky. Nor are they, despite the “black and white” conceit, committed to showing us the “real” woman behind the headlines. Rather, Bailey and Barbato construct *Monica in Black and White* in such a way that what becomes significant is not Lewinsky or her story, but our reaction to Lewinsky and her story. The documentary illuminates the cultural forces that work to block our sympathy for Lewinsky—more specifically, our inability to process the humanity of a woman whose most intimate private life has become public.

That Lewinsky's image is not Bailey and Barbato's first priority is immediately evident in the opening of the documentary, which features Lewinsky entering an auditorium at New York's Cooper Union College and then plopping unceremoniously at the edge of the stage. The folksy-ness of her pose is at odds with Lewinsky's sophisticated suit, and the entire set-up feels forced and uncomfortable. The audience itself is a vague and motley collection of students, HBO employees, and other “interested parties.” That is to say, although it is staged as an intimate and organic meeting of Lewinsky and her audience, there is no way of knowing which comments might have been planned and planted by the director/producers. The narrative of Lewinsky's experiences is further mediated by the fact that several sessions were filmed—some of them “rehearsals” with no audience at all—and then spliced together along with film clips and snatches of information from the scandal.

With this highly constructed format, Bailey and Barbato emphasize that Lewinsky “is,” and forever will “be,” only what we, in conjunction with the media, “make” her. Audience members who come looking for “the real Monica” must realize that she has already been rendered in stark “black and white” terms, and that she has already been “read” obsessively. And just as James Kincaid has argued that in the Clinton/Lewinsky saga “we have a story forlornly looking for a genre” (82), so Bailey and Barbato show Lewinsky searching for a genre—or, more accurately, for a narrative that is comprehensible to the American public but does not assassinate her character. Beyond the normal debate—“[Is] she vamp or victim? Stalker or sweetheart? Innocent or instigator?” (Rothkerch 1)—Lewinsky's story swings pendulously between the few narratives our culture makes available for women in distressful situations: all-American heroine, pathetic victim, and diabolical slut. Not one of these narratives can contain the level of bodily realism that has been endlessly reported about Lewinsky, and what we learn from the enactment of

these faltering narratives in *Monica in Black and White* is that what is repulsive about Monica Lewinsky is what we find un-narratable about her: her over-exposed flesh.

The most dominant media representation of Lewinsky, of course, fits within the “diabolical slut” narrative. Ignoring the more crass and over-the-top characterizations of her as a “stalker,” this version of Lewinsky most often borrows from the “Jewish-American Princess” stereotype and is well summarized by a recent Philip Roth character who calls her “the most exhibitionist Jewish girl in the history of Beverly Hills” (147). There is some evidence against her in this regard: she unwisely took her first lawyer’s advice to smile for the paparazzi, making her appear in the midst of humiliating scandal like some kind of thrilled debutante; she participated in an ill-timed *Vanity Fair* photo shoot involving fashion statements and an American flag; most of her employment, from Jenny Craig spokesperson to hand-bag designer, has been quite public; and now, of course, we have *Monica in Black and White*. Bailey and Barbato put this issue at the forefront of the documentary, with the first several questions asking Lewinsky to defend her decision to even do the documentary, since she “would do anything to have [her] anonymity back.” What she expresses, pretty convincingly, is that she is not so much trying to prolong the media’s attention on her as she is trying to accept it by changing its focus, by “struggling and trying to balance what this new life is.” Indeed, even the most cursory familiarity with Lewinsky’s story makes it obvious that nobody—not even the mythologized figures that our culture fantasizes coming out of Beverly Hills—would seek the kind of notoriety that she has suffered. This gives us a way to understand why Lewinsky “keeps making herself into a human Whack-a-Mole, popping back into the public eye only to be slapped down again” (Barnhart). She does so for the same reasons that a wild-eyed Susan McDougal kept screaming at unperturbed CNN interviewers from within her Arkansas jail cell about the rabidity and dangerousness of Kenneth Starr: it is maddening to have so little control over your story, especially when you feel that grave acts of injustice have been committed.

The very real instances of injustice in her story leads to the second narrative within which we can read Lewinsky: heroine. Set up by Linda Tripp and ambushed by the FBI, Lewinsky spent about ten hours guarded and somewhat terrorized by nine armed men before she finally managed, via contacting her parents, to secure guidance from a lawyer. Despite the strong-arming of Starr’s agents, however, Lewinsky valiantly refused to make a deal in which she wore a wire and became a version of Linda Tripp (a villain no matter how you slice it). After the story broke, she was basically trapped in the Watergate apartment building while her lawyers bargained with Starr for immunity (which took six months to secure). Every time she left the building, she had to “run a gauntlet” through the merciless press.

In all of this, as biographer Andrew Morton shrewdly recognized, Lewinsky fits the role of the true American heroine, that earnest and virtuous type found in classic captivity narratives. Drawing on this archetype is particularly appropriate, considering the “puritanical” feel of the entire Starr enterprise. Like Mary Rowlandson, the heroine author of *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, the

prototypical captivity narrative that is credited with being “America’s” first “bestseller,” Lewinsky’s life was disrupted and threatened by an ambush. Rowlandson is taken captive by Native Americans and dragged through the wilderness in intolerable conditions until her husband successfully bargains for her release. While she waits for the powerful men who are bargaining over her fate to settle it, though, Rowlandson, like Lewinsky, accomplishes quite a bit of bargaining on her own, sewing in exchange for food, vaguely enjoying some favor with her Chief, and trying to intervene on behalf of her surviving children. Despite its highly religious and typological format, Rowlandson’s narrative also conveys quite a bit of ambivalence towards the puritan “party line,” and therefore some agency.

As Christopher Castiglia and Michelle Burnham have recently argued, the captivity narrative and its heroine have been a quintessential American genre, linked to both nationalism and a subtle sort of empowerment for women. Basically, the way in which a captive typically transgresses norms in order to survive, as well as her shockingly close contact with “the Other,” titillates readers and, in a complex sentimental reaction, ultimately reinforces national boundaries and the heroine’s belonging within them. The specifics of what a heroine has to do in order to survive are overlooked in favor of this sentimental re-interpretation of her particularly “American” strength and virtue. Castiglia demonstrates the power of the captivity narrative genre throughout American history, from, as his title emphasizes, Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst.

Morton’s strategy in creating a sympathetic reaction to Lewinsky, then, is to completely structure *Monica’s Story* around the “sting” in the Pentagon city mall (when she was supposed to meet Linda Tripp for lunch and instead met the FBI) and to make repetitive references to captivity. He quotes a sad little poem that Lewinsky wrote as an adolescent: “I am trying to survive but they tug and yank me. / The more they pull, the weaker I become. / I hope and pray for my survival” (35). As this poem becomes prophetic, Morton emphasizes Lewinsky’s heroic character—“no matter what it meant to her own safety, she was never going to betray anyone like she had been betrayed” (190)—and the fact that she is caught, in Kenneth Starr’s web of influence, in an oppressive regime—“those who entered ‘Starr Country’ soon saw the dark side of the American dream” (221). Starr is compared to Stalin, McCarthy, and Hitler, while Lewinsky is “reduced to hiding in shadows, a fugitive in her own land . . . She is a prisoner in the land of the free, every move she makes is served up for the masses” (271).

Barbato and Bailey also explore this version of Lewinsky in *Monica in Black and White*. The film’s *raison d’être* is, after all, that Lewinsky is finally “free” from the restrictions of her immunity deal, which required that she not discuss or in any way characterize the way she was treated by the FBI on January 16. Barbato and Bailey describe her in “heroine” terms as well: Barbato says that “[d]uring the course of the filming, we learned that this is a bright, strong-willed, funny, compassionate woman. And above all, strong”; while Bailey asks, “How did she survive?” (Rothkerch 2). The trauma and drama of her experience—an ordinary American young woman suddenly ambushed by powerful forces of the state—is shown breaking through to her jocular audience when Lewinsky is unable to continue her

recollection of the event for her tears:

I didn't know very much about the law, but from what I had seen from television and the movies, I said, "I'm not talking with you without my attorney." Agent Irons said, "That's fine, but you should know that if your attorney is present we won't be able to give you as much info and we won't be able to help you as much." [laughter] Why is that funny? [Faint voice in audience: "It's bullshit."] Oh, OK. OK. It's not funny. Good. So, I really didn't know what to do because in TV and the movies, after the person says that, they always say, "Oh, OK." [laughter] So going through my mind I—I just couldn't— [puts her head in her arms and cries]

While her audience is first amused by her self-deprecating account, they and we are suddenly shocked into a realization of how painful it is to Lewinsky that she didn't know what to do when faced with the FBI. Would we? She feels unutterably stupid, which takes the steam out of any dedicated response of amused contempt, if that was your inclination. Later, after recounting that the FBI threatened to prosecute her mother if she didn't cooperate, she has to leave the stage to recover herself. Bailey and Barbato pan to several stricken faces in the audience, and at this point we are totally with her.

Well, almost totally. Although Bailey and Barbato do show the "heroine" aspect of Lewinsky's story, such as her attempt to humanize herself to her captors by having dinner with them in the Pentagon city mall (something Mary Rowlandson may well have done) and her gutsy, though failed, attempt to call Betty Currie from a payphone in the bathroom and warn the president not to perjure himself, they also highlight the specific way that this narrative begins to break down. Even though she stays "strong," Lewinsky's heroine status is compromised by a smirking young man who asks her: "How does it feel to be America's premiere blow job queen?"

Ugh. The majority of the audience boos, and although several people call out "Don't answer that!" they are thrilled when she takes him on. She says, with pluck:

It's hurtful and it's insulting. [cheers] And as insulting as it is to me, it's even more insulting to my family. I don't actually know why this whole story became about oral sex. [clapping] I don't! It was a mutual relationship. I don't . . . . The fact that it did is maybe the result of a male dominated society, er . . . . [laughter] You might be better poised to answer that. [cheers]

The offending audience member, oddly enough, looks hurt at being characterized as a misogynist, and Lewinsky wins the round. Despite this seeming victory, though, the heckler (who may very well have been planted by Bailey and Barbato) succeeds in evoking the most major blockage to sympathy for and understanding of Lewinsky as a heroine—her sexuality. The fact of the matter is that even though she does express to her audience that the Starr report and all of the attending media coverage of her detailed sexual actions was "pretty violating," she doesn't exhibit shame about sex. Unlike Clinton, who proclaimed himself a "sinner" and went right to work on his soul, Lewinsky does not seem chagrined that she had sexual encounters with the president. She is, rather, chagrined that she got caught.

This take on sexuality, which does not feature in Mary Rowlandson's narrative, is further complicated by the final narrative in which Lewinsky can be read: victim. In a move that seems both staged and crucial, a young woman in the audience announces herself to be a fellow survivor of Beverly Hills High School and of Andy Bleiler (the married high school teacher with whom Lewinsky had a five year affair before moving to Washington, D.C.): "I was, uh, subjected to his advances, like many girls our age were." While Lewinsky declines to really comment on Bleiler's character, saying that she doesn't want to be sued, the young woman finally just speaks her mind:

I have to say that I think you were wronged. And I think you were wronged when you were young by this man. And I don't think that you would have been put in this situation and had to deal with all of this had you not been victimized because you were a teenager at that time and it would have been a victimization. And I think you were wronged. And I think you're very strong to be here. [crying]

It's an intense and uncomfortable moment. Lewinsky's eyes fill with tears during the young woman's speech, and the camera pans to another woman in the audience with silent tears running down her cheeks. We can relate. But at the same time, we also get the sense that Lewinsky feels more empathy for the young woman, who was clearly herself "wronged" by this man, than she really feels ownership over a victim role that is continually read onto her and that she has repeatedly resisted. On the record with Tripp as having "no respect" for Paula Jones and Kathleen Willey, Lewinsky will go to great lengths (and this came through in her response to the "blow job" comment) to try to convince people that she has not been sexually used: "[I]t was a mutual relationship."

Lewinsky's status as an all-American heroine is crucially compromised by both the fact of her sexuality—floating around in excruciating detail—and the fact that, as she insists, she was not "forced" into sexuality by duress. Ironically, her insistence that she is the author of her own sexual adventures fuels the hostile response towards her by insisting that she take more responsibility for the big presidential mess that she authored. Her final detractor, towards the end of the documentary, deconstructs both the "victim" and the "heroine" aspects of her narrative completely:

I think you've made this more about you and your pain and not about your own agency in having all this happen. You are not an unwitting silent passive person who got caught up in something much larger than you were. You are someone who did manipulate the events, who knew that you had signed a false affidavit, knew that you were playing in the highest levels of power.

Characterizing the entire question-and-answer session as "self-serving, self-supporting drivel," he laments the fact "that we're all participating in this one-sided promo so that you can make a lot of money and so on." At the end of the documentary, then, we come back full circle to the seemingly unshakeable narrative of Lewinsky as ruthless self-promoter—the diabolical slut.

We might ask, what is wrong with Lewinsky? Doesn't she know that if she would just hang her head at the mention of her sexual indiscretions, she could be redeemed? I believe that the answer is no, she doesn't know that. She doesn't know that because she lives in America in a brand new millennium, several generations after the sexual revolution. She doesn't know that because she watches *Sex and the City* on HBO and she believes, as many of us wish to believe, that the time has finally come when female sexuality can proudly and unsqueamishly take center stage. She doesn't understand that by being gorgeous, choreographed, and totally fictional, the women of *Sex and the City* fit nicely into cultural narratives. By contrast, the realism of her encounters with Clinton, the unsatisfying incompleteness of it all, the dopey things they said to each other, their shared angst about their imperfect figures—this we cannot bear and we cannot forgive. What is it about Lewinsky that we hate so much? It is her over-exposed embodiment; it is the fact that when we look at her we see the abject, the raced, the sexed, the mortal, and the doomed. What we all are and deny being—that is the essence of Monica.

The “black and white” truth that Bailey and Barbato present in this documentary, insofar as they push any interpretation, is that Lewinsky is neither heroine, nor slut, nor victim. She is just so darn ordinary. She is just like you and me. Indeed, as Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan implicitly acknowledge in titling their recent collection *Our Monica, Ourselves* (and despite Linda Tripp's bizarre and much-ridiculed declaration to the American people that “I am you”), it is Lewinsky who represents and reflects our common cultural confusions and ambivalences. What we see in the Monica mirror is that we are not, any of us, as “free” as we thought we were.

In the end, although it was not their priority, Bailey and Barbato's documentary evokes much more sympathy for Lewinsky than Morton's highly constructed heroine. We just can't combine blow jobs and fairy tales—that is a limitation of our culture. But we can see her all-too-human attempts to deal with the insane twists and turns of her young life and realize that we are looking at our own reflection. Lewinsky is a “liberated” woman, in the limping and compromised version of the sexual revolution that has endured into the new millennium. She is doing the best she can in a society that hates her body even as it calls it out, over and over again, into the spotlight. She is showing us that if we were so exposed, it would be no joke.

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