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Mireille Darc, 1960s Subversive Dumb Blonde?

Marion Hallet

Introduction

- 1 Upon her death at 79 in 2017, Mireille Darc's biographer Richard Melloul described her on French television (*C à vous*, 28/08/2017) as a "tour de force in the 1960s – the only woman in a group of macho men"¹, and fellow guest Bernard Montiel added that "she was *un p'tit mec* herself (a little guy)"; although both argued she always maintained her glamour and femininity. Darc's ability to combine comedy with physical beauty made her an actress adored by the French public and celebrated by fans, critics, and the film industry. Unusual for most actresses, Darc injected glamorous modernity – performing a version of the "liberated woman" – into sexist comedies². Despite a substantial career as a film and television actress, documentary director, screenwriter, producer, and occasional singer, Mireille Darc has been neglected in scholarship. This article aims to mitigate this gap by unpacking the intriguing contrasts in Darc's star persona and highlighting the implications of her image for wider star studies.
- 2 Darc's absence in scholarship is not entirely surprising when we consider that only a handful of texts seriously consider French comedy, likely stemming from the genre's perceived weak cultural legitimacy and heterogeneity (Moine, 2008 [2002]: 26; Harrod and Powrie, 2018: 1). Some studies focus on actors-directors such as Max Linder, Jacques Tati (see the articles edited in Rolot and Ramirez, 1997), and Jean-Pierre Mocky (Prédal, 1988; Le Roy, 2000). There have recently been two major publications on French film comedy, although both in English: Rémi Lanzoni's *French Comedy On Screen: A Cinematic History* (2014, he mentions Darc in passing when discussing *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire*) and Mary Harrod's in-depth study of contemporary romantic comedies (2015). With the exception of texts by Raphaëlle Moine (2010, 2014), and Ginette Vincendeau (who primarily focuses on the comedies of Brigitte Bardot, 2012), there are even fewer works which dissect gender in comedy, making the topic that

more urgent for address. However, save for Lanzoni's brief mention, none give Darc any sustained attention. Mireille Darc's absence in English-language scholarship is also likely because very few of her films were exported³ (French comedy in particular being notoriously difficult to export, Harrod and Powrie, 2018: 3).

- 3 This article will focus on Mireille Darc's film career during its heyday. Darc made 46 feature films⁴ and, starting in 1963 with *Pouic-Pouic* (Jean Girault), she had a leading role in 27 of them: amongst those, nearly half are comedies (13 films), and most were moderate to major successes at the French box office. Darc is also attached to the (also male-dominated) crime genre, the other major lane of her career, including spy comedies. Her most successful comedies were made between 1963 and 1972, after which her box-office returns declined, with her highest-grossing comedies listed below (Simsi, 2000):

- *Pouic-Pouic* (July 1963) – 2,169,854 spectators in French cinemas
- *Les Barbouzes* (December 1964) – 2,430,611
- *Ne nous fâchons pas* (April 1966) – 1,877,412
- *Elle boit pas, elle fume pas, elle drague pas, mais... elle cause!* (April 1970) – 2,148,506
- *Fantasia chez les Ploucs* (January 1971) – 1,409,528
- *Laisse aller... c'est une valse* (April 1971) – 1,386,576
- *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire* (December 1972) – 3,471,277
- *La Valise* (October 1973) – 1,208,862
- *Le Retour du Grand Blond* (December 1974) – 2,195,219

- 4 This article will focus on Darc's four most popular comedies at the French box office⁵ in which she had a leading role. I will start chronologically with *Pouic-Pouic* (Jean Girault, 1963) and *Les Barbouzes* (Georges Lautner, 1964), where I will analyse Darc's nuanced dumb blonde image before discussing this persona's evolution into a more mature and glamorous version in *Elle boit pas, elle fume, pas, elle drague pas, mais... elle cause!* (Michel Audiard, 1970) and *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire* (Yves Robert, 1972).

- 5 My examination of Darc's comedic persona is firstly based in close textual analysis. By analysing the form and narrative of Darc's films, I can establish her stardom and how her characters construct different ideologies of womanhood in relation to their historical context. An essential part of my analysis concentrates on Darc's acting. Following methodologies established by scholars such as Richard Dyer (1998 [1979]) and James Naremore (1988), I dissect her facial features, expressions, voice, gestures, gait, posture and movements in order to unpack what is unique about her on-screen persona, comedic performance and the ideology which underpins it.

The Dumb Blonde Act

- 6 Mireille Darc was born Mireille Aigroz in South-Eastern France (Toulon) in 1938. She studied theatre at the local Conservatoire where she graduated in 1957 with a *prix d'excellence* (Excellence Award). After failing to gain entry to the Parisian Conservatoire, she attended a drama class taught by *Comédie-Française* actor Maurice Escande. After minor roles in a handful of French films, including the Bardot comedy *La Bride sur le cou* (Roger Vadim, 1961), Darc gained her first major role in *Pouic-Pouic*. Although my primary focus will be *Pouic-Pouic*, I would like to briefly draw attention to Darc's role in *La Bride sur le cou*. Yet only consisting of one scene, in which she plays the assistant of Bardot's lover, it is interesting to compare Vadim's presentation of Bardot and Darc. In

La Bride sur le cou, Darc has not yet fixed her style, appearing older than her actual age (23). Her hair is short, coiffed and brunette (her natural colour) and her clothes are not fitted (she wears a short-sleeved shirt and a pleated midi-skirt), starkly contrasting to Bardot's tightly fitting dress and signature blonde *choucroute*. Compared to Bardot, Darc looks unexceptional, with the camera's focus unsurprisingly on Bardot, not Darc.

- 7 Following Vadim's film, Darc turned blonde and stayed blonde, later crediting Bardot's influence on this decision⁶. Darc had a more substantial role in *Virginie* (Jean Boyer, 1962) in which she plays a Dior model, spending most of her screen time in a bikini. Her first notable role was in Jean Girault's anthology comedy *Les Veinards* (1963), in which she played a maid. The young maid (the *soubrette*⁷) was a recurring role for Darc in her early career, likely because it was common to cast emerging actresses as this secondary character to elicit sexual tension through their interactions with the male protagonist (usually their boss).
- 8 For Kathleen Rowe, who adopts a feminist and psychoanalytic approach to American comedy (1995), the female "element" of comedy is usually integrated either through feminised male characters (with Bourvil and his tender man persona a good example, as cited by Ginette Vincendeau, 2012:16) or misogynistic female characters. At the beginning of her career, Darc often played the daughter and/or fiancée figure, which, as Rowe explains, is a commodity object for the male characters. We can look to *Pouic-Pouic* as an example. Released a few months after *Les Veinards*, its legacy is usually as the film that "revealed" comedy legend Louis de Funès to wider French audiences (thus far his success was primarily on stage) yet Darc was equally "revealed" to the public through this film. She plays de Funès's daughter, Patricia, and the defining elements of her comedic yet sexy persona can be traced back to this film.
- 9 Shot in black-and-white, *Pouic-Pouic* is adapted from the successful play *Sans cérémonie* by Jacques Vilfrid and Jean Girault (1952). Darc's character is romantically pursued by Antoine, a wealthy suitor whom she finds dull yet too persistent. To get rid of him, she enlists a fake husband. In the meantime, her mother (Jacqueline Maillan) is duped into buying for her husband an oil concession in Latin America. The father plans to palm off the land to Antoine with the aid of Patricia's seduction. Thus ensues a string of misunderstandings and comic situations, with the film title as farcical as the plot (*Pouic-Pouic* is the name of the mother's rooster). Patricia is therefore very much at the service of her father and "exchanged" at his convenience – the story correlates with Rowe's oedipal model, which itself intersects with one of the major narrative axioms of French cinema: incestuous father-daughter relationships (Vincendeau, 1992). Darc is also clearly designated as an object of male desire from the first scene, as she faultlessly shoots clay pigeons and turns away each gift Antoine sends her; she then enrolls her fake husband by her (father's) swimming pool, wearing a bikini. According to Western white beauty standards, Darc is beautiful and sexy: she is tall (at 172 cm, she was slightly taller than Bardot) and lithe, with her fringed, bleached-blond hair falling in waves. Her big, brown, almond-shaped eyes are emphasised by eye liner; she has full lips and a perky, turned-up nose (which would be accentuated two years later through rhinoplasty). As central traits of her star persona, Darc's bloneness and sculpted physique led to her being cast first in the misogynistic trope of the dumb blonde in French comedies, although as I will show, she put a unique spin on the stereotype.

- 10 How could the dumb blonde hold subversive characteristics as, I argue, Darc brought forward in her comic performances? First, I have to explain what I mean by “dumb blonde” and then what I mean by “subversive” in a comedic context.
- 11 In *The Dumb Blonde Stereotype* (1979), Richard Dyer explains that the trope is deeply rooted in the idea that, for a woman, attractiveness, sexiness and brains are irreconcilable. The constant presence of the type in film and culture in general shows how much it is entrenched in everyday sexism (as in the “blonde moments” jokes or the recurring rivalry between the blonde and the brunette that is often carefully cultivated to appeal to cis-heterosexual men). Dyer (1979; 1986: 19-66) and Vincendeau (2013: 55-62; 2015), in their respective approach of the dumb blonde as embodied by Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot, analyse also how the little-girl voice is a key element of the dumb blonde image – I will look at Darc’s voice modulation as well.
- 12 In the context of carnival, Natalie Zemon Davis (1975) posits the “woman-on-top” concept: the metaphor of the unruly woman who tries, at least temporarily, to “change the basic distribution of power within society” (Davis, 131). The “unruly woman” asserts her desire but her body often transgresses traditional beauty standards, usually through being overweight. She is put on show in a vulgar way and often speaks too loud (Josiane Balasko and Isabelle Nanty are good examples of this stereotype from a 1980s French comedy context). But the unruly woman’s subversive power is not limited to these characteristics which portray her as a woman who literally and physically takes up space. For example, in American cinema, there is a tradition of comedic roles for – what is more traditionally described as – beautiful women, such as Claudette Colbert, Katharine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, or Carole Lombard’s characters in 1930s and 1940s screwball comedies, followed by – two of the most famous and so-called dumb blondes – Marilyn Monroe and Judy Holliday in the 1950s. According to Rowe, these women performed complex roles as they are “obstacles to desire, objects of desire and subjects of desire” (1995: 109). In France, there is also a tradition of actresses who specialise in playing independent women in comedies, from boulevard comedies in the 1930s (Arletty, Elvire Popesco, Gaby Morlay) to comedies inherited from the vaudeville tradition in the 1930s to the 1950s (Danielle Darrieux, Edwige Feuillère). With the emergence of Brigitte Bardot, a more marked sexual element was added to the French conception of the dumb blonde (mixing with the “blonde bombshell”) which was developed by Sophie Daumier, Dany Saval, and Mireille Darc in the 1960s. Like many other blondes before her, such as Monroe and Bardot, Darc developed, at that time, a tongue-in-cheek, shrewd version of the dumb blonde, knowingly playing with the trope. They all share an ironic dimension and audiences are perfectly aware that these actresses are playing dumb.
- 13 In *Pouic-Pouic*, Darc’s combination of wit, agency, and cunning with youthful seductiveness challenges the convention that deems blonde sex appeal and intelligence as mutually exclusive. Her character, Patricia, is actually not dumb at all, but only acts sometimes as such, and on purpose, and while she does, Darc’s performance (particularly through the inflexion of her voice) contrasts with any other type of acting that she mobilises at other times in the film. This “performance within the performance”, which James Naremore (1988) analysed in the context of melodrama, works very well in the register of comedy too. In *Pouic-Pouic*, the “dumb blonde act” as performed by Patricia (and Darc) functions as a narrative element, bringing an ironic

richness to the plot and the female character. To that end, Darc speaks in an unnatural (for her) high-pitched tone, injecting a combination of bewilderment, innocence and ingenuity to Patricia, making her all the more beguiling to male characters. She also often uses her hair to accentuate her “innocent” brand of seduction, such as when she runs her fingers through her hair before bringing it to her mouth to cover part of her smile in an attempt at (false) bashfulness.

- 14 Since her appearance in *Pouic-Pouic*, audiences were aware of Darc’s toying with this dumb blonde stereotype. Her character even tries out her calculated seduction routine for her father, asking “like that, *papa chéri?*” as she looks over her shoulder with fluttering eyelashes (fig. 1). Through her character’s acknowledgement of the constructed nature of this “act”, Darc makes sure the audience is “in on the joke” so to speak, making them an accessory in her exploits and cognisant of the circumstances behind them, thus eliciting spectatorial distancing with this constructed persona. As Richard Dyer astutely notes about Marilyn Monroe, the dumb blonde as embodied by Darc in *Pouic-Pouic* is far from being stupid. In fact, many of Monroe’s roles have ironic elements to them but those were both subdued by her own sexiness and performance style that was more on the vulnerable side (Landay, 1998: 156-158), and ignored by a misogynistic society in which the dumb blonde trope is profoundly embedded. As a result, Monroe was type-cast and stigmatised in all aspects of her life as being light-headed when she was very smart. For Darc, her performance as Patricia made it clear that she was *playing* dumb – as we shall see, it did not mean that she was not type-cast as the pretty blonde. In that way, Darc showed subversiveness very early in her career by appropriating the dumb blonde figure and becoming the subject of the joke (not the object), and making audiences laugh with her (and not at her). The performativity of the dumb blonde is both its strength and weakness, because, the “performance within the performance” is what signals to the audience that Darc is not “really” dumb, and yet the spectacle still consists of her “playing dumb”. In other words, the “subversion” is built-in the stereotype, but it also ensures its longevity.

Figure 1. The dumb blonde act as performed by Mireille Darc in *Pouic-Pouic* (1963)



- 15 Following *Pouic-Pouic*, Darc was cast in a series of supporting roles, playing prostitutes, mistresses or gangster molls. These roles, rooted in her beautiful physique, establish an openly confident sexuality with their suggestion of a semblance of financial independence and female emancipation. However, as one of the only women in these films, she appears to serve as mere ornamentation, an acting “dead end” in which she will often be confined during her decades’ long career. Her next major role (and box office success) was the black-and-white film, *Les Barbouzes* (Georges Lautner, 1964)⁸. *Les Barbouzes* was conceived as a spy parody in line with Lautner’s *Les Tontons flingueurs* (1963), which was already a spoof of the genre, but intended to be even more irreverent and zany (Laurent, 2009: 126). Darc plays Amaranthe, the French-born widow of an international arms dealer who lives in a castle in Bavaria. Now the legal owner of valuable nuclear weapon patents, Amaranthe is visited by spies mandated by their respective governments from Russia (Francis Blanche), Germany (Charles Millot), and Italy (Bernard Blier) while French secret agent Francis Lagneau (Lino Ventura) is sent to retrieve the body by posing as the dead man’s cousin⁹.
- 16 Again, Darc’s body is prominently featured in her character’s introduction. In just a few seconds, she paints the portrait of a dumb blonde *par excellence*, yet showcasing the potential ambiguity of this trope, which emerges through an ironic performance that combines innocence and daftness with seduction and intelligence. On the one hand, blondness implies virtuousness and the angelic¹⁰. However, it also connotes a temptress-like sexual appeal – with both facets often represented amongst popular French actresses (most notably Brigitte Bardot and Catherine Deneuve). The voice-over presents Amaranthe as a “ray of light”, with the camera starting with an extreme close-up of Darc’s eyes covered by a black veil before the frame widens to show her slight smile (“similar to the Angel of Reims”¹¹, a “sweet visage” says the narrator). Finally, we see a full shot of Darc as she puts the veil behind her head, revealing she was standing in front of a bedroom mirror in black lingerie. We soon learn Amaranthe is a former actress, dancer and “easy-going girl” (*fille facile*) and that she married for money (her actual name is Antoinette Dubois, a more “ordinary”, working-class-sounding name). Darc’s high-pitch tone and word choice reinforce the levity of her dumb blonde characterisation: she inflects the end of her sentences and shortens her words, making her speech more casual (a signature of screenwriter Michel Audiard who was known for using slang and common French talk). Moreover, although her husband just died, Amaranthe does not show any sorrow. Cheerful within the private setting of her bedroom, when a secretary comes in to announce the cousin (the cover of Ventura’s secret agent), she puts on the act of the affected widow, covering herself in false modesty. Amaranthe also uses a self-consciously formal language, comic because it is out of step with her working-class background. Darc goes from one mode of expression to the other with great ease, and her character keeps up this act throughout the film, duping her male opponents. Let it be reminded that Darc is a “fake blonde” (a dyed blonde), a feature that in her case connotes artificiality and a constructed, even performed, femininity. All in all, she embodies the dumb blonde stereotype again with a distance.
- 17 Darc’s comic performance in *Les Barbouzes* is located in her character’s intellect when the men who surround her believe in her ignorance and daftness. When the “barbouzes”¹² begin to fight around her home, she keeps a straight face while going about her business, acting as if the men fist-fighting across the room was a perfectly

normal situation. Comedy arises from the contrast between her apparent off-handedness and the crazy events unfolding around her. The film's romantic ending aligns with Lino Ventura's French hero persona and appeals to chauvinistic sentiments¹³ and a certain form of female emancipation: Amaranthe falls in love with Francis yet dupes him by selling the patents to a rich American for a large sum (patents that he will recover), so she remains wealthy (as she clearly expressed was her intention) and faithful to her promise (give the documents to the French government). Therefore, *Les Barbouzes* defies several misogynistic clichés, including expectations of female jealousy when the heroine learns that her love interest is already married yet enters into bigamy, as the epilogue's intertitle states. Amaranthe calls out Francis on his marital situation in a facetious manner, with Darc making ample use of her repertory of familiar "performance signs" (Dyer, 1998 [1979]: 134-150) that established her not-so-dumb blonde persona: big smile, giggles, a finger in her mouth in amusement, high-pitch voice, trivial tone (Darc's lines in *Les Barbouzes* are mostly made of litotes, such as the ironic punchline: "you'll tell *your wife* you're coming back from the Congo", while adjusting her blouse, remaining cool even though the remark has potentially explosive consequences for her couple). With *Les Barbouzes*, in continuity with *Pouic-Pouic*, we see the unique mixture of progressive ideals of female agency and intelligence presented with sexist stereotypes as a defining characteristic of Darc's comedic characters.

Unthreatening "independent" Femininity

Trying Something New: *Galia*

- 18 After *Les Barbouzes*, Darc made another episode film (also called "omnibus film"): a comedy entitled *Les Bons Vivants* (Gilles Grangier and Georges Lautner, 1965) in which Louis De Funès plays the paternal figure to her familiar "kept" woman. It was around this time that Darc also expressed fear of being typecast as the "funny girl" as she aspired to the cultural legitimacy of work in more "serious" films, later stating "I didn't want to be the little secretary anymore, the casual girlfriend, the wallflower" (Melloul, 2013: 86). In 1966, she starred in the drama *Galia*, her fourth film with Lautner. The actress collaborated with scriptwriter Vahé Katcha and Lautner to create the character of Galia, whom Darc has said was her favourite role to play because of the character's similarity to herself (such statement shows the actress's desire for the "authenticity" granted by serious drama as opposed to comedy). Although I will not dwell much on the film given that it is not a comedy, the film had a strong impact on her career, as it established her "liberated woman" persona. Following Bardot and her contemporaries, such as Marlène Jobert (*L'Astragale*, Guy Casaril, 1968) and Bernadette Lafont (*La Fiancée du pirate*, Nelly Kaplan, 1969), Darc embodied a freer and more confident sexuality than actresses like Catherine Deneuve. The film shows Darc's eponymous character enjoying the single life as an unapologetically promiscuous window dresser, embodying a carefree form of the modern woman. Galia also sports Darc's new, "signature" bob and popular clothing for young women (Capri pants, polo neck jumper, flats, and large sunglasses). Eight years before the soft porn, *Emmanuelle* series (Just Jaeckin, beginning in 1974) and the loosening of censorship in France, Darc is shown fully nude (*Galia* was released with an 18-year-old age restriction)¹⁴. However, this form of emancipated femininity, potentially threatening to the patriarchal order in mid-1960s France, is

undermined by the film, which presents any liberation gained through sex as illusory. The film ends with Galia in a relationship with an abusive macho man before ending up single and back in her hometown in Normandy, far from Paris's freedoms. Thus, Galia's trajectory is ultimately a cautionary tale. Nevertheless, *Galia* represents a turning point in Darc's career in that the youthful and naive aspects of her dumb blonde persona were watered down by these more overtly sexual elements of her image, which would become more evident in her next roles. Instead, emphasis is placed on her glamour and beauty, amplifying the ornamental aspect of her on-screen presence (de Baroncelli, 1967), shifting focus away from her active comedic performance.

- 19 *Galia* made Darc a star, but she still did not receive the “serious” (i.e., auteur) offers that she hoped for after the film's release¹⁵ (Melloul, 2013: 105), likely shunned because her association with popular comedy was too strong to shake off. After *Galia*, she collaborated again with Lautner, Audiard, and Ventura for *Ne nous fâchons pas* (1966), but her character does not even appear until nearly an hour into the film's runtime, where she (again) falls in love with Ventura's former mobster character. Alongside her fashionable clothes (including an all-white-and-cream Courrèges ensemble), her blonde bob, and drawn-on freckles on a tanned face, Darc's physique became associated with the image of female modernity: after the hourglass figures epitomised by Christian Dior's New Look in the 1950s, the ideal 1960s woman was tall, slim, and more “girly” (Steele, 1997: 52-54). After speaking to producer Raymond Danon of her reservations about appearing in another comedy, he contacted Jean-Luc Godard who offered her a starring role opposite Jean Yanne in *Week-End* (1967). Godard was “unhappy about working with Darc” (Brody, 2008: 313) and her on-set experience was notoriously negative, with the New Wave director being extremely disrespectful (including telling her how much he disliked “her and her films”, Melloul, 2013: 109). Darc was not the only one amongst her female star colleagues who missed on the New Wave because of their previous cinematic associations, especially with popular film (Romy Schneider is another example). As Ginette Vincendeau (2000: 117) explains, either actresses were new to the New Wave film business (Anna Karina, Bernadette Lafont) and were therefore entirely moulded according to the auteur's vision, or their “earlier professional backgrounds” were erased and they were “reborn” with the New Wave (Jeanne Moreau, Stéphane Audran, Emmanuelle Riva, Delphine Seyrig)¹⁶. Nevertheless, Darc writes of her pride over starring in *Week-End* in her biography. After this discouraging experience in auteur cinema, Darc returned to comedy and appeared in Michel Audiard's *Elle boit pas, elle fume pas, elle drague pas, mais... elle cause!*¹⁷ (1970). Nevertheless, on that point, *Elle boit pas...* is an apt illustration as a comedy making the transition, for Darc, from the dumb blonde to the glamorous blonde.
- 20 Annie Girardot, a major star of French popular cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, plays the main character in *Elle boit pas...*: a housekeeper who unintentionally involves her clients in a blackmail scheme after learning her client's secrets. This includes Darc's character, Francine, a famous TV host engaged to an older politician destined for a high-level position in the French government. Francine's secret is that she was involved in the *ballets roses* scandal¹⁸, which would put her future marriage in jeopardy considering her fiancé's profession. As the host of a popular talk show, Darc owns a lavish penthouse apartment and displays an impeccable taste in clothing, continuing the style established within *Galia*. She also drives a futuristic-looking vehicle (a cubic and transparent car called the “Quasar Unipower”), all of which signal cutting-edge

modernity tied to an ambitious form of modern femininity. However, the progressiveness of such modernity is lessened by the film's comedic tone. For example, *Elle boit pas...* displays a blatantly sexist perspective, notably in the way the camera adopts the point-of-view of Bernard Blier's sex-obsessed character who "sees" the women he encounters nude (Darc's character is a notable exception although he sexually harasses her).

- 21 Francine's job is as a televised "agony aunt", as she advises people on her talk show. For this part, Darc clearly draws on her dumb blonde persona. In front of the television cameras, Francine wears demure clothes (high collar dresses, long sleeves, a pearl necklace and a slightly dated, bouffant hairstyle with ribbon). While professing advice to a pregnant teenage girl in love with a middle-aged convicted sex offender, she consistently toes the line between coming off as ridiculous and very clever, keeping her composure and voice honey-toned sweet. In this instance, comedy derives from the gap between the outlandish stories of the teenager and Darc' dead-pan tone. The ironic distance of her usual persona that she creates through her voice and clothing is a significant aspect of Darc's comic style. Her performance in *Elle boit pas...* is a prime example of deliberate "expressive incoherence" as James Naremore (1988: 72) put it in his study of film acting: Darc performs a woman who is herself acting, or putting on a mask. Hitherto, my analysis of Darc's roles in popular comedies has shown that her on-screen persona combined glamorous modernity with misogynistic comedy. The actress astutely overcame the inherently sexist hurdles in comedy by acting in a dead-pan, parodic register and visibly splitting her character "into different aspects" (Naremore, 1988: 75), switching tone between false naivety and seductive cleverness (Naremore calls it "sending dual signals", 76). Darc demonstrates the strength of her comedic acting by the excellent timing of her delivery – particularly impressive as Audiard's dialogues were notoriously complicated and he insisted on making actors say the lines exactly as written (Melloul, 2013: 82). With her theatrical training, Darc articulated these lines clearly; easy to understand despite their rapid delivery. Her eloquent speech, combined with middle-to-low vocal tonality, forged a substantial on-screen presence. Crucially, this presence was reinforced by her characters' ambiguity (her "dual faces"), which audiences read as "psychological complexity" (Naremore: 80). In this way, Darc transcends the dubious sexual politics of her films by performing characters that are partly distanced, unconcerned by the sexism they encounter because focused on the bigger prize, the goals set for them by the narratives – usually financial security and emancipation, even if through marriage. However, these skills of hers (so valuable in comedy) would gradually lose their appeal to filmmakers, as the final section will demonstrate.

The Funny Blonde Becomes the Spectacular Blonde

- 22 In the satirical spy comedy *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire*¹⁹ (Yves Robert, 1972), Mireille Darc plays agent Christine, who is enlisted as a last resort by her superior, Milan (Bernard Blier) the second-in-command of France's Counter-Espionage department, to discredit his chief, Toulouse (Jean Rochefort). Toulouse sets a trap to bring down his deputy and uses a stranger ("anyone, a man in the crowd") to make Milan believe that this "normal" man (Pierre Richard, in the role of François Perrin) is a formidable secret agent. Milan sends Christine to seduce Perrin, hoping that she will confound him – but the man has nothing to hide. *Le Grand Blond* signals a change in

Darc's comedic career. While in previous films she was *actively* funny, moving the narratives forward and participating through her physical performances and expert delivery of the films' humorous dialogue, she is now almost exclusively used by filmmakers as a sex object, as a spectacle meant to be looked (and even laughed) at. In *Le Grand Blond*, her character is an intelligent and competent spy (she is the first to suggest that Perrin might not be an agent), yet her assessment is aggressively rejected by Milan who makes clear that he does not care about her informed opinion. Instead, the comedic focus is the protagonist played by Pierre Richard, particularly his burlesque, slapstick comedy and his persona as "poetic dreamer", the naïve and credulous nitwit (Lanzoni, 2014: 170-172). Opposite the gesticulating Richard, Darc is considerably more hieratic and poised, presenting an image of the elegant and irresistible – yet passive – femme fatale.

- 23 *Le Grand Blond* contains two scenes featuring Darc that reached cult status (Feutry, 2017; Reynaud, 2020; Fattebert, 2020), both entirely based on the star's glamour and the film's carefully constructed *mise-en-scène*. The first is when Richard meets her at her apartment and she wears a dress that is today still one of the most famous dresses in French cinema. In this scene, Darc greets Richard in a tight, floor-length, long-sleeved, high-necked black dress. Her bleached blonde hair flows down her shoulders and her usual thick fringe creates a sort of bright halo against the black dress which angelically frames her face. It makes her appear demure but also sleek, elegant and sophisticated, her already-tall physique elongated by the dress's cut. After inviting Richard to enter, she turns around to lead the way, revealing that her dress is backless: the back *décolleté* finishes below the crease of her buttocks, with her nudity emphasised by a thin, gold chain connecting the sides of the dress at her lower waist²⁰. This scene was lauded in promotional and critical discourse as surprisingly bold and unbelievably sexy (Feutry, 2017; *C à vous*, 2017). However, the scene has yet to be analysed in gender terms, a gap I will now begin to mitigate.
- 24 The dress was designed by French couturier Guy Laroche, who had collaborated with Darc on numerous occasions²¹. Darc chose the dress as she felt it would allow herself and her character to make a lasting impression (Melloul, 2013: 142-146). Director Yves Robert approved the design but decided not to tell Richard about it, so, allegedly, when Darc turns around and shows her back the actor's reaction is of genuine shock²² (*50' inside*, 2016). Thus, the result is comedy induced by surprise (fig. 2): the whole point of the "backside moment" is the astounding effect on Richard and, through him, the (assumed to be, heterosexual male) spectator. In accordance with the film's parodic tone, the scene highlights the infantile and regressive male fantasy of seeing a woman's buttocks. Thus, despite repeated comments about the "mythical" elegance of the dress²³, the moment functions on a rather vulgar level from a feminist perspective (Darc even admitted her embarrassment walking around set in the dress). As a case in point, the dress never "worked" outside of *Le Grand blond's* diegesis: Darc herself tried to wear it at a party in 1973 but the sexual harassment she endured by male attendees because of the seeming "invitation" to grope her put an end to the dress's short life (Melloul, 2013: 149). Nevertheless, this dress and the accompanying scene also define *Le Grand Blond* in popular cinephilia and, by extension, Mireille Darc. However, this also means that Darc is remembered as a blonde femme fatale – the lithe seductress in a sexy black dress – which then tends to eclipse her other comedic performances.

Figure 2. Comedy is in Pierre Richard's gaze in *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire*.



- 25 The other successful moment in *Le Grand Blond* comes a few minutes later (the “zipper accident” scene) which I will show is another example of Darc passively sustaining the joke rather than fully participating in it, her sexuality being used and emphasised over her own performance. After having changed clothes (now wearing a loose, pastel orange kaftan which matches her apricot tinge of the make-up on her cheeks, she kneels in front of the flustered Richard and orders him to disrobe. She starts to unbutton his waistcoat and unzip his fly, before resting her head on his lap and pouring him more champagne. However, he hastily zips back his trousers, causing her hair to get stuck²⁴. Her character’s ice queen veneer begins to crack as she becomes visibly irritated by her guest’s clumsiness: Darc’s voice becomes firmer, quicker and louder. He asks, “You wouldn’t have a pair of scissors?” to which she wearily replies, “in the bathroom”. A farcical sequence thus ensues in which Darc must crab walk on all fours while still stuck to his pant zipper, while Richard almost piggybacks her, profusely apologising before the scene cuts to a control room with Milan and his stunned team observing the absurd spectacle on a TV monitor (fig. 3). Continuing from the moment her buttocks were exposed by her dress minutes earlier, the scene shows the contrast between Darc’s hyper-sophisticated femininity and the childishly vulgar pranks generated by Richard’s clumsy movements. After Richard has cut off the lock of hair stuck in the zip, she tries to stand up but knocks her head on a bathroom shelf, and they both wholeheartedly laugh. The camera then zooms-in on Darc’s compassionate smile – in which Christine sees that Perrin is the Everyman she rightly suspected he was. At this moment, the image of the potentially-dangerous femme fatale is shattered with a laugh as the character acquires a “forgiving” dimension through indulging Richard’s hopelessness. As is the case with the film as a whole, this scene works to condone regressive, childish masculinity while praising a form of unthreatening yet still sexy femininity.

Figure 3. Mireille Darc endures Pierre Richard's clumsiness in *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire*



Conclusion

- 26 As Mireille Darc declared in her biography, she brought a “feminine presence” to the films she made with Georges Lautner and Michel Audiard (Melloul, 2013: 78). Although she was not the only woman on set, she was one of the most visible, especially because of her glamorous appearance, allowing her to occupy a privileged place in French comedy of the 1960s and 1970s (with *Positif* even calling her “the iconic actress of French detective comedies” (Courtade and Kha, 1995: 101). As one of the only women in a troupe of men in an already male-dominated genre, Darc stood out for reasons behind her striking looks. She considered her presence as adding value to the films she recognised as “a bit misogynist” (Melloul, 2013: 78). As my analysis has shown, when these comedies work in a misogynistic register narratively, Darc’s performance subverts this misogyny by bringing a degree of female independence and ironic self-mockery to the trope (she uses and mocks the dumb blonde character knowingly), creating a tension between opposites (progressive vs conservative) which is intrinsic to her success in mid-1960s and early 1970s France. Although we have seen that early on in her film career she was cast as the dumb blonde in comedies by Jean Girault and Georges Lautner, she cleverly appropriated the well-known sexist stereotype to her own ends. She used a range of nuances between her blonde and sensual eroticism and her characters’ alleged stupidity, such as by exploiting the performative parodic distance afforded by the comedy genre. In the process, she created a type of femininity that was both modern and likely attractive to female viewers who might aspire to her personal brand of female independence. Thus, in that sense, Mireille Darc’s modernity in these macho and misogynistic comedies was “subversive”. Even if her female subversiveness was deliberately softened by comedic tone, making her modernity more acceptable, it nonetheless reached a large audience (her films were very popular in France), enabling her to exist and even prevail in these films – which was no small victory for female characters and stars at the time.

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NOTES

1. Referring to the so-called “*bande à Lautner*”, or Lautner group, which included director George Lautner, scriptwriter Michel Audiard and actors Francis Blanche, Bernard Blier, Jean Gabin, and Lino Ventura.
2. A sexist comedy is understood as objectifying, stereotyping, degrading (and to some extent, victimising) an individual due to his/her gender (LaFrance and Woodzicka, 1998). Sexist humour commonly refers to jokes that are meant to be entertaining and amusing but portray one gender, usually woman, as inferior in status and lower in performance (Ford and Woodzicka, 2010).
3. *Week-End* by Jean-Luc Godard (1967) is a notable exception.
4. Are not included the films in which she briefly participated or is uncredited, in the likes of *Borsalino* (Jacques Deray, 1970), *Le Cercle Rouge* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1970) or *Pour la peau d'un flic* (Alain Delon, 1981).
5. I follow Simon Simsi's classification (2012) that the most popular comedies at the box office in Metropolitan France appear in the Top 20 of the highest-grossing films each year.
6. In her study on Brigitte Bardot, Ginette Vincendeau cites journalist Tony Crawley (1975: 78-79) who “lists 33 screen Bardot lookalikes, including the famous (Jane Fonda, Catherine Deneuve, Julie Christie, Mylène Demongeot, Britt Ekland, Marianne Faithfull, Virna Lisi, Mireille Darc) and not so famous” (Vincendeau, 2013: 135).
7. The *soubrette* is also a recurrent theatrical female part (e.g. in Molière's oeuvre, boulevard comedy) that combines comedy, youth, and sexuality. Some of these early Darc comedies are also play adaptations.
8. Lautner chose Darc after she appeared in a small role as the moll in his previous film *Des Pissenlits par la racine* (1964, reuniting her with Louis de Funès), the first of a long and fruitful collaboration – they made 13 films together.
9. Also, for no other reason than showing stunts and shootings in a deliberately parodic way (the sounds of shots are childish, toy-like), a group of Chinese men walk the castle's secret corridors – given the immense popular success of *Les Barbouzes*, it is clear that these representations, which would be viewed as racist today, were more acceptable to audiences and critics at the time.
10. For more on the symbolic, cultural, and racial significance of blonde hair, see Dyer (1979, 1986, 1997), Marina Warner (1995), Ellen Tremper (2006) and several texts in the 2016 “blond issue” of *Celebrity Studies* edited by Ginette Vincendeau and entirely dedicated to blondness and blond stars.
11. “The Angel of Reims, a sculpture at the Reims” Notre-Dame cathedral carved circa 1240, is connotative of a culturally approved image of saintly innocence.
12. The “Barbouzes” (for “bearded ones” or “fake-beards”) were a group of armed secret agents that emerged in France during World War II comprised mainly of former mobsters whose purpose was to handle “dirty work” (Laurent, 2009: 120).
13. Ventura's character's musical theme is a variation from *La Marseillaise*.
14. Although technically allowed under the French cinematographic “code” of female nudity, this was particularly surprising as actresses, much less stars, were rarely seen nude from behind, yet Darc's entire backside is filmed. *Galia* came out before the first examples of full-frontal nudity in French mainstream (notably Bardot and Jane Birkin in Roger Vadim 1973's film *Don Juan ou si Don Juan était une femme*, Vincendeau, 2013: 119).
15. The film made 1,221,456 entries in France (Simsi, 2012: 186).
16. Brigitte Bardot is a notable exception because her star status was so significant that it became a central theme explored in her New Wave films.
17. Hereafter *Elle boit pas...*
18. The *ballets roses* was a notorious 1959 sex abuse affair implicating French politicians and other prominent social figures and minor girls.

19. Hereafter *Le Grand Blond*.

20. The exposure of her bare back was already central to her signature look, with the moment in *Le Grand Blond* foreshadowed by the black, backless dresses in *Les Barbouzes, Du rifici à Paname* (Denys de La Patellière, 1966), and *Jeff* (Jean Herman, 1969).

21. The dress is now preserved at the Museum of Decorative Arts at the Louvre after Darc donated it in 1994.

22. Pierre Richard never confirmed this. It is also still possible that the scene was rehearsed, with Darc not wearing the dress until the actual filming.

23. See Dancourt (28/08/2017) and Feutry (28/08/2017).

24. The gag was already seen two years earlier in *Le Distrain* (Pierre Richard, 1970).

ABSTRACTS

In French popular culture, Mireille Darc plays the tall and seductive blonde in George Lautner films such as *Galia* (1966), *Ne nous fâchons pas* (1966), *La Grande Sauterelle* (1967), and Yves Robert's *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire* (1972). She embodied an ambiguously subversive version of the “dumb blonde” in the comedies of Lautner, Gérard Pirès, and Michel Audiard. Her persona unusually combined glamorous modernity (performing a version of the “liberated woman”) with sexist comedy. The actress astutely overcame this sexist hurdle by acting in a deadpan, parodic register and visibly splitting her character into different facets, switching tone between false naivety and seductive cleverness. It is this intriguing contrast between her comic and glamour roles in popular French comedies that I focus my attention. In this article, I will unpack Darc's comedic style by analysing the construction of her screen presence, the nuances of her comic performance and the ideology which underpins them.

french comedy, 1960s-1970s, Mireille Darc, dumb blonde, performance analysis

Dans la culture populaire française, Mireille Darc est la grande et séduisante blonde des films de Georges Lautner tels que *Galia* (1966), *Ne nous fâchons pas* (1966), *La Grande Sauterelle* (1967), et *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire* d'Yves Robert (1972). Elle incarne également une version plus ambiguë et subversive de la « blonde idiote » dans les comédies de Lautner, Gérard Pirès, et Michel Audiard. Sa persona présente en effet un côté moderne et glamour (elle interprète alors une version de la « femme libérée » des années 1960) au cœur de récits sexistes. L'actrice avait astucieusement surmonté cet obstacle sexiste en jouant dans un registre impassible et parodique et en divisant visiblement son personnage en différentes facettes. Cet article se concentre précisément sur les contrastes et les contraintes de ses rôles à la fois drôles et séducteurs dans ses comédies les plus populaires au box-office français. Je cherche à déterminer ce qui fait la spécificité du jeu comique de Darc en analysant la construction de sa présence à l'écran, les nuances de son style de jeu et l'idéologie qui en découle.

INDEX

Mots-clés: comédie française, années 1960-1970, Mireille Darc, blonde idiote, analyse du jeu

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