

An Admirer of Eleonora Duse: Marilyn Monroe

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Abstract: *Marilyn Monroe (Norma Jeane Baker Mortenson, Los Angeles 1926 – Los Angeles 1962) was a great admirer of Eleonora Duse (Vigevano 1858 – Pittsburgh 1924): for chronological reasons, she did not have the opportunity to know her personally, but from her indirect lesson, she learned the dedication to work and the constant desire to perfect her artistic career. The original photo of Duse that Marilyn had in her house, is the tangible proof of this admiration: in 1952, the photographer Philippe Halsman made a shooting that reveals how much the young American actress aspired to become like the great Italian diva. This dream has come true. This paper explains how admiration for an artist could be a productive mechanism on the artistic, spiritual and human level.*

Keywords: *Eleonora Duse; Marilyn Monroe; Diva Studies; Artistic Heritage; Anniversary;*

Introduction

A hundred years after Eleonora Duse's death (1924) and Marilyn Monroe's birth (2026), it is important to consider the development of their special artistic relationship. In fact, Marilyn was a great admirer of Duse, but never had the opportunity to meet her in person or attend one of her performances in America in 1923-24. Marilyn had an intimate cult of Duse, which lived within the walls of her home and silently projected into her work as an actress. Only those who entered her house and saw a photo of the diva on a piece of furniture could notice it: perhaps it was the most precious piece of art owned by Marilyn, guarded like a lucky charm and venerated like a relic. It powerfully indicated her professional dream and artistic ambition. This photo is the symbol of Marilyn's admiration for Duse.

This contribution considers how a photograph becomes a visual document that reveals a deeper artistic and human story. Marilyn's admiration for Duse can be understood as part of her own self-formation. Like Duse, Marilyn had little education but always tried to improve her culture and, as an actress, her artistic abilities: in fact, Duse's photo is always next to the books. For Duse and Marilyn, studying in adulthood was a sign of redemption from a poor childhood.² Under this perspective, Marilyn's marriage with Arthur Miller (New York 1915 – Roxbury 2005) denotes the same desire to have an intellectual by her side, as Duse's relationship with Gabriele d'Annunzio (Pescara 1863 – Gardone Riviera 1938).

Marilyn's admiration for Duse is a particular chapter in diva studies, which has implications for the theatre history and film studies. It may seem strange that a *dumb blonde* like Marilyn would love a *tragic actress* like Duse: but this is the model she would have liked to follow. In fact, in the last period of her life, Marilyn wanted to leave the cinema and move her career to the theater: unfortunately, death prevented her from completing this path of artistic evolution. Moreover, the admiration for an Italian diva also reveals a careful choice of Marilyn's models, because it reveals an international dimension of her artistic vision.

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² See Maria Pia Pagani. 2025. *La bambola di Eleonora Duse. Letteratura per l'infanzia e mitografia*. Padua: Edizioni Libreria Universitaria.

1. The photo shooting of Philippe Halsman

The photo kept at Marilyn's home was taken by Aimé Dupont (1839-1900) in Spring 1896, during Duse's second tour in the United States³. It was used on postcards that significantly contributed to the mass dissemination of her image as diva. In particular, this photo was often used for posters and theatre programs: it features Eleonora in Sudermann's *Heimat*, one of the most successful performances in her repertoire; Magda is an emblematic character, symbol of woman's sacrifice to achieve artistic success and human relationship.

Marilyn agreed to pose in her small Hollywood apartment next to this photo of Duse for Philippe Halsman (1906-1979), a photographer born in Riga and emigrated to the United States. After leaving his homeland, he lived for many years in Paris; even during his subsequent exodus to the United States, he always used French in his work. He was a Slavic emigrant who, along with Mikhail Chekhov (1891-1955) and Lee Strasberg (1901-1982), played a relevant role in Marilyn's artistic development⁴. The photoshoot appeared in *Life* magazine in April 1952 and significantly increased her fame.

Halsman worked using the furnishings and objects that Marilyn had in her home: he wanted to present her in the everyday life, in the truth of her commitment as an artist who was – not without difficulty – making a way in the American entertainment industry.

In the book *Sight and Insight* (1972), Halsman described his great astonishment to see that photo of Duse: he noticed Marilyn's in-depth knowledge of Eleonora, and understood that it was a genuine personal admiration⁵. It was the most unexpected and sincere thing that he could imagine finding in the young artist's home: a curious and valuable detail, to be enhanced through his brilliant and elegant photographer's gaze. For this reason, he ensured that Marilyn's poses emphasized her projection and admiration toward the model of Duse: Eleonora was the world-famous dramatic actress that Marilyn wanted to become⁶.

According to Philippe Halsman and his daughter Irene (heir of the Halsman Archive), the admiration for Duse is evident in Marilyn's constant commitment to improving her image as an artist – both physically and spiritually. Further confirmation comes from other photos from that shoot: for example, those showing Marilyn doing gymnastics exercises to improve her physical fitness using gym equipment she kept at home, or those showing her engaged in reading the volumes in her library (including Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*)⁷.

At the beginning, during the most difficult years of her career, Marilyn skipped meals and spent the little money she had on elocution lessons. And then she repeated the exercises at home, aloud, «with bare-legged and empty-stomach»⁸ in front of a photo of Duse, as Halsman portrayed her in one of his photographs and as she wrote in his autobiography, *My Story* (1974).

³ Maria Ida Biggi (ed.). 2010. *Eleonora Duse. Viaggio intorno al mondo*. Milan: Skira, p. 105.

⁴ See Lois Banner. 2012. *Marilyn: the Passion and the Paradox*. London: Bloomsbury.

⁵ Philippe Halsman. 1972. *Sight and Insight*. New York: Doubleday, p. 35.

⁶ Franco Prono. 2006. "Note su Marilyn e la fotografia". In *La bellezza di Marilyn. Percorsi intorno e oltre il cinema*, ed. by Giulia Carluccio. Turin: Kaplan, pp. 91-102.

⁷ Maria Pia Pagani. 2014. "Eleonora Duse (dal Vittoriale a Hollywood)". In *Marilyn Monroe. Inganni*, ed. by Francesca Brignoli and Nuccio Lodato. Recco: Le Mani, pp. 113-118.

⁸ Marilyn Monroe. 1974. *My Story*. New York: Stein and Day, p. 39.

2. The meaning of “*To be doozy*”

In American slang, the term *doozy* indicates something astonishing, sensational, unique, so amazing it leaves one speechless. Attested since the early 20th century, its etymology is uncertain: some trace it back to the luxury Duesenberg car brand popular in the 1920s and 1930s, others to the surname of the famous Italian actress Duse⁹. In May 1924 issue, celebrating the memory of Eleonora, the magazine *Il Carroccio* reported an excerpt from an article in *The New York Evening Post*, entitled *Join Immortals*: «Duse was destined to captivate two – almost three – generations of playgoers in America. Her first appearance here was in 1893; her last thirty years later. Each generation had to go through the tribulation of tentatively pronouncing *Doozay*, *Doozee*, and *Doosay*. The first was right»¹⁰.

With her admiration for Duse, Marilyn is also an artist who can be fully described as *doozy*. In fact, she can be said to be the embodiment of that brilliant mix of perfectionism and exceptionality expressed by this term. Marilyn wanted *to be doozy*, so she studied and applied herself with high dedication. The photographer Eve Arnold (1912-2012) also noticed her in-depth knowledge of Duse: “She took lessons in diction, singing, dancing and acting, and she kept a picture of the great Eleonora Duse propped in a corner of her dressing mirror. Once when she was having a trying time on a film, I mentioned the fact that around 1916 Duse had made her only film and been quoted as saying that she had made the same mistake nearly everybody had made, that something entirely different was needed, and that it was a pity she was too old for the films. Marilyn knew about Duse from her movie-magazine days. Garbo had been told the Duse of the Screen; and Marilyn knew about Duse’s film. She explained that the mistake Duse alluded to was to treat the screen as though it were a stage, where gestures have to be wide, facial expressions broad and projection intensified in order to reach the last rows in the upper galleries of the theatre, whereas in film exactly the opposite is required”¹¹.

3. Conclusions

The photo of Duse is not a decorative detail in Marilyn’s home, but evidence of the transmission of a performative model across generations. In 1955, Marilyn mentioned Duse in a note; there is the expression of her fear in revealing, through acting, the fragilities she felt in some specific circumstances:

Exposure – embarrassing.

The best actors. Duse had it that sometimes she wouldn’t play (not that she couldn’t but didn’t wish to expose herself in her present state)¹².

This note was not written at random. It is a significant revelation of the soul: Marilyn’s admiration for Duse was expressed not only in her success, but also in her human frailty. Marilyn had the same hesitations on the film set that Duse had on the stage, and this was a great form of consolation.

⁹ Maria Pia Pagani. 2014-2015. “Marilyn e il destino americano di Eleonora Duse”. *La Valle dell’Eden*, 28-29, pp. 115-118.

¹⁰ Anonymous. 1924. “Join Immortals”. *Il Carroccio* 10 (5), p. 528.

¹¹ Eve Arnold. 1987. *Marilyn Monroe: an Appreciation*. London: Hamilton, pp. 19-20.

¹² Marilyn Monroe. 2010. *Fragments. Poems, Intimate Notes, Letters*, ed. by Stanley Buchthal and Bernard Comment. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, p. 81.

Halsman's photoshoot is dated 1952 and this note is dated 1955: it is interesting to note how, three years later, Marilyn continued to study Duse and to hold her as a point of reference in the evolution of her life and career.

Marilyn's tragic death was studied by doctors and psychiatrists,¹³ and for many years it remained a *cold case*. On the centenary of her birth (June 1, 2026), the world press reported that Marilyn died from a medical error, and not from suicide or a conspiracy. We do not know who inherited her photo of Duse, which remained in her house until the last day.

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¹³ See Liliana Dell'Osso and Riccardo Dalle Luche. 2016. *L'altra Marilyn. Psichiatria e psicanalisi di un cold case*. Florence: Le Lettere.