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The Culture “America”: Warhol, Celebrity, Death and the Simulacrum

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Celebrity and Death—two concepts with which Andy Warhol was obsessed. In theory, they are completely different realms of existence: Death is concrete and eventually experienced by all humans, while Celebrity is the elusive prize that only the “special” people obtain. But in the post-war America when Warhol began his work, Death began to take on the same mythical qualities of Celebrity, and Celebrity began to possess some of the finality of Death. Through the proliferation of mass media and cultural commodities in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Death and Celebrity began their unified trajectory to a plane of an all-American “other” reality. Warhol’s fascination with the two subjects accounts for some of his most striking work—the Death and Disaster series and the Celebrity silkscreens. It is not coincidental that these two series were created during the same time period, and perhaps the closeness of their inception and creation accounts for some of the cynicism that comes when viewing the two series together. For when looking at Warhol’s silkscreens, it becomes obvious that only in the culture “America” is it sometimes necessary to die in order to achieve a certain “superstar” status of Celebrity; only in the culture “America” can someone find Death masquerading as separation, public domain, and immortality in Celebrity.

Quick + Easy = “True American”

“Warhol had made it clear that he had adopted the silkscreen process because it enabled him to produce pictures easily and quickly” (Bourdon 140). Indeed it was the silkscreening method of creating art that catapulted Warhol’s reputation as a cutting-edge “artist.” In the 1950s, Warhol was a commercial artist, turning out interesting but certainly not shocking images of shoes for designer I. Miller. At first, Warhol’s shoes were based on the real thing; he would draw a fairly realistic representation of an actual product. However, as time wore on, he began to draw caricatures of shoes, pictures that imitated shoes instead of portraying the real thing. It was this early in his career that Warhol began to understand the power representation has over reality, the benefits of pushing the simulacrum.

As Warhol moved from commercial artist to “fine” artist, his first work signaled the style that would become his art: the representation of the
representation, or the ultimate simulacrum. His first acrylic "paintings," Dick Tracy (1960) and Popeye (1961), are perfect examples of Warhol’s mastery of the simulacrum. They are original only in that they have been reproduced and therefore reinterpreted by Warhol, but even the initial image is not a Warholian conception. This "original recycling" is indicative of the culture “America” and its tendency to reuse thoughts, images, and objects instead of inventing new ones. “Everything can have a second birth, the eternal birth of the simulacrum…. [Americans] dream of baptizing everything a second time and only accord value to this later sacrament which is, as we know, a repeat performance of the first, but its repetition as something more real” (Baudrillard 41). But even though paintings such as Dick Tracy are a replication of an original image, they at least display Warhol’s human effort of painting. When he adopted the silkscreening process, he began to have friends scout out photographs for him which he would then turn into his “art.” The Death and Disaster series as well as the Celebrity silkscreens are perfect examples not only of the American image simulacrum but also of the way the silkscreening process allowed Warhol to take one more step away from his subject while capitalizing on the benefits and symbolic meanings in commodification.

**Simulacrum America, meet Simulacrum Marilyn**

During the early 1960s, Warhol began work on both the Celebrity silkscreens, which he would continue to create throughout his life, and the Death and Disaster series. The two sets of silkscreens were produced practically simultaneously, with such famous and seemingly diverse images as Double Elvis and Lavender Disaster both created in the same year, 1963. But while Double Elvis, a rendering of two psychotic (and virtually Siamese) Elvi brandishing pistols, and Lavender Disaster, the blank repetition of a bare room with the word SILENCE brooding above each lone electric chair, seem to be worlds apart, they were obviously connected in the mind of their creator. It almost seems natural that these subjects collided in Warhol’s art, since he was constantly trying to prevent premature Death while at the same time continually vying for the ultimate height of Celebrity. When Warhol the artist and Warhol the product of culture “America” are revealed in this manner, numerous images of Liz Taylor as Cleopatra begin to seem almost natural next to silkscreens of the atomic bomb.

“Within a few days of Monroe’s death, Warhol purchased a 1950s publicity photograph of her and, after cropping it below her chin, had it converted without any alteration into a silkscreen” (Bourdon 124). Warhol’s silkscreens of Monroe are more than just simulacrums, they are proof of how far removed culture “America” already was from reality, or how far ensconced Americans were in the reality of the simulacrum. First, there is
Monroe herself whose Celebrity is a representation of real life. Then there is the photo of this Celebrity Marilyn, simulacrum number two. Next there is Warhol’s silkscreen of this photo. Finally there are the numerous replications of this silkscreen on not one but several canvases, and these replications each take on different traits via the process of printing and slathering the canvases with acrylic. But the average American doesn’t see this when viewing the Warhol Marilyns, they simply see a movie star, a glamour queen, a dead Celebrity.

Monroe’s celebrity is a perfect example of the kind of public attention that Warhol, and indeed many Americans, dreamed of attaining. This glamorous role had a price though, for in reality, Monroe’s celebrity forced her into the public domain where her persona became a hot commodity. Every move she made was scrutinized; every piece of clothing she wore was analyzed, replicated and made available for the everyday woman to purchase. While alive, Monroe suffered from a kind of “Death in Life” via depression, anxiety, and loneliness brought about by her Celebrity. But none of that was important because she was a Star. This “stardom” made her extremely popular while alive, but it was ultimately her physical death which solidified her as a cultural icon. Her suicide was tragically glamorous; fittingly, it could have been a scene out of a movie. It was only natural for Warhol to join in the adulation of this perfect creature of Celebrity and Death, or more importantly Celebrity as Death and Death as Celebrity.

The majority of his Monroe silkscreens depict her as he viewed her public life, ranging from the idolatry Gold Marilyn Monroe to the commodity Six Marilyns (Marilyn Six-Pack). But his most revealing silkscreen of her is Marilyn Diptych. In this painting, a simulacrum masterpiece, numerous images of Celebrity Marilyn (simulacrum Marilyn) and Death Marilyn (real-life Marilyn) are side by side. Celebrity Marilyn is excessively, garishly painted, but her image, literally and figuratively, is intact in all twenty-five portrayals. But in Death Marilyn, there is hardly a clean replication of her image to be found. If she is not severely eradicated from the picture via black ink, she is non-existent and slipping off the page. It is in Celebrity silkscreens such as this that Warhol succeeds in capturing Death and Celebrity in culture “America” via the simulacrum—for it is Monroe’s superstar Celebrity image, superficial and beautifully vacant, that can remain unscathed after her Death. But it is Death Marilyn who eerily provides the force that gives Celebrity Marilyn—Simulacrum Marilyn—her special glow of the hyper-real.

**Andy: Celebrity Death Machine**

The canvas has to be overflowing with them, chock full of them: contorted limbs, twisted metal, bloodied faces, non-descript shoes, tuna fish
cans, unknown people, atomic mushroom clouds. These are the silkscreened photos that comprise Warhol's Death and Disaster series. While some of the images are isolated on a large, single canvas, the majority of them are repeated to the point of saturation on one surface. But this is nothing unordinary—like Warhol, his silkscreens must have a kind of stark coolness about them. Part of this alienation from the work comes from the fact that Warhol used media stills and magazine photos, not photos that he personally shot. The pictures in these silkscreens are sometimes taken completely out of context, which makes them even more effective in furthering emotional distance. And ironically, the more images, the more removed one becomes from the immediacy of the situation being portrayed. Warhol’s desire to distance himself from his work is not odd when one understands that Warhol wanted to be as machinelike as possible. In an interview with *Time* he said, “Paintings are too hard. The things I want to show are mechanical. ... I’d like to be a machine, wouldn’t you?” (Bourdon 140).

While Warhol tried his best through silkscreening and mechanical reproductions to become a machine, there were always smudges of acrylic to ruin his dream of creating sans humanity. But Warhol certainly did his best in the Death and Disaster series to elevate the machine to virtual superstardom. The majority of the images in the Death and Disaster series revolve around mechanical objects: car crashes, the atomic bomb, the electric chair. The other half of the paintings revolve around another kind of mechanization: the Celebrity of culture “America.” There are mug shots of America’s Most Wanted, people in various stages of committing suicide, Race Riot participants, and unknown housewives who died from ingesting botulised tuna fish (Bourdon 148). While none of these are typical Celebrities like Marilyn, Liz, or Elvis, Warhol was one of the first to elevate them to that status. It is now common to watch the nightly news and see nothing but the exact images that Warhol was immortalizing in the early 1960s. In current culture “America,” those who commit suicide, die accidentally, or kill others get their “fifteen minutes”—maybe even more if the death is overly brutal.

It’s clear that the machine takes center stage in *Lavender Disaster*, but it’s more than just the simple fact that the canvas contains fifteen images of a solitary electric chair. Obviously the electric chair assumes an air of Celebrity in this silkscreen, especially with the sign SILENCE lurking above it as if to suggest a shrine-like recognition of the almighty chair’s power. But during 1963, the year of this silkscreen, all of New York state talked about the electric chair since it was used for the last two times in Sing Sing in March and August. “This ‘modern’ form of legal execution impressed Warhol as a typically American way to go” (Bourdon 154). The criminals subject to this form of execution, already on the road to Celebrity because they had performed heinous crimes, would be immortalized via electrocution. Much like Monroe’s suicide ensured her status, their Deaths solidified their eventual Celebrity, except that by dying in the electric chair, their immortalization took on a truly
bizarre twist—that of Celebrity attained only through Death in culture “America.”

Warhol’s rendition of the unaccompanied chairs in Lavender Disaster, reproduced fifteen times and lacquered in light purple, adds another dimension to the connection between Death and Celebrity. When looking at the calm, orderly arrangement of the silkscreen, the chairs seem to reveal their knowledge of their personal predetermined Celebrity. They seem to understand that they are important enough to stand alone, without subject, and in magnificent, eye-catching color. They are a mode of Death that will forever be remembered as truly American. In just this one silkscreen, Warhol, whether consciously or not, reveals the power and connections between Death and Celebrity as well as the mechanization that is frequently involved in both.

I Shot the Celebrity Simulacrum

Both the Celebrity silkscreens and the Death and Disaster series combine to showcase a depressing display of the way Celebrity and Death are intertwined, but Warhol himself is a perfect example of this phenomenon in culture “America.” While he was already operating at Celebrity status before Valerie Solanas attempted to take his life, that event certainly seemed to foreshadow his eventual position as icon of culture “America.”

His fame before the shooting rocketed him to another plane of existence—the American “other” reality known as Celebrity—but his shooting insured the resurrection of Warhol as his own super-Celebrity simulacrum. “From then on, people would discuss Warhol’s art and life in reference to ‘before’ and ‘after’ the shooting” (Bourdon 288). After the shooting, Warhol and his art were both looked at in different terms—his art suddenly became that much more important, himself that much more famous for having survived Solanas’ attack. He rose from the dead, a phoenix of Pop, and assumed a new identity as a more sacred Celebrity.

But Warhol craved the Death in Life that Celebrity could grant him. From boyhood he was wary of germs, people touching him, premature death. By being elevated to the status of Celebrity, Warhol lost these terrors by surrendering his real self and assuming an image of Warhol that was subject to public domain. While this Celebrity drove Marilyn Monroe to depression and ultimately Death, it saved Warhol from his feared Death. It granted him all he was after—distance, adulation, and eternal “life.”

The consummate finality of this religiosity of Warhol the Celebrity culminated in 1996, twenty-eight years after the shooting and only nine years after his death, when Warhol was celebrated in grandiose American fashion by becoming the subject of a movie. Was it a film that focused on his insight into the American commodity? Was it a movie that documented his close
personal friendships with those inside and out of The Factory? Of course not. It was instead what it had to be—a celebration of the two aspects of Warhol that are truly important, the two things that continue to become inseparable in culture “America.”

It was a film called *I Shot Andy Warhol.*

**Works Cited**
