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## **Fifteen Minutes of Fame, Fame in Fifteen Minutes: Andy Warhol and the Dawn of Modern-Day Celebrity Culture**

Life imitates art more than art imitates life.  
–Oscar Wilde

Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face.  
–John Updike

If someone conducted a poll to choose an American personality who best embodies the 1960s, Andy Warhol would be a strong candidate. Pop art, the movement Warhol is typically associated with, flourished in the 60s. It was also during that decade that Warhol's career peaked. From 1964 till 1968 his studio, known as the Silver Factory, became not just a hothouse of artistic activity, but also the embodiment of the zeitgeist: the "sex, drugs and rock'n'roll" culture of the period with its penchant for experimentation and excess, the revolution in morals and sexuality (Korichi 182–183, 206–208). The seventh decade of the twentieth century was also the time when Warhol opened an important chapter in his painterly career. In the early sixties, he started executing celebrity portraits. In 1962, he completed series such as *Marilyn* and *Red Elvis* as well as portraits of Natalie Wood and Warren Beatty, followed, a year later, by *Jackie* and *Ten Lizes*. In total, Warhol produced hundreds of paintings depicting stars and famous personalities. This major chapter in his artistic career coincided, in 1969, with the founding of *Interview* magazine, a monthly devoted to cinema and to the celebration of celebrity, in which Warhol was the driving force. The aim of this essay is to analyze Warhol's portraits of famous people in terms of how they anticipate the celebrity-obsessed culture in which we now live. I shall consider various aspects of the paintings in question, such as the categories into which Warhol's sitters fall, the particular nature of Warhol's creative process, his technique, as well as the formal and visual characteristics of the representations. I shall also attempt to demonstrate how all these features correspond to or reflect the key characteristics of celebrity culture as we now know it. My argument is based on the analysis and interpretation of numerous portraits by Warhol, with particular emphasis

on those which made up *Warhol's Wide World*, a 2009 exhibition which was held in the Grand Palais in Paris. I shall also draw on Warhol's writings in an attempt to show how the American artist, whose all-pervading influence on the contemporary world and art is now universally recognized (Wolff 76), scrutinized the culture of the day for prefigurations of what fame, famous people and the general attitude to them would be like in the years to come.

Andy Warhol's love affair with celebrity was a lifelong one. As a child, the future pope of pop art collected autographed photos of film stars and had a predilection for Shirley Temple (Korichi 52–54). In the late 1940s, fresh out of the Carnegie Technology Institute and eager to make a name for himself in New York, Warhol approached various glossy magazine editors. One of them was Tina S. Fredericks, artistic director of *Glamour*, a magazine which, as its original name *Glamour of Hollywood* suggests, was devoted to stars of the silver screen before shifting its scope to career-oriented young women (Walker 4). Two decades later, when Warhol founded his own magazine, it was subtitled *The Monthly Glamour Gazette*. Fredericks suspected that it may have been *Glamour's* connotations of Hollywood magic that sparked the budding graphic artist's interest in it in the first place (qtd. in Korichi 87). Around the same time, Warhol developed an obsession with Truman Capote, whose famously provocative photo on the cover of his debut novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* fascinated the young artist. Half-jokingly, the author of *In Cold Blood* suggested that Warhol's obsessive interest in him was a continuation of his childhood fascination with Shirley Temple. The painter's fixation on Capote bordered on behavior typical of psycho fans: in addition to inundating the writer with letters, drawings and daily phone calls, Warhol would prowl outside his home and went so far as to pay him a visit one day. Finally, Capote's mother gave her son's fan to understand that he was not welcome. By the time relations between him and Capote resumed, Warhol himself had become a household name (Korichi 97–98). The fan had turned star and provoked fan frenzy himself, as evidenced by the crowd's reaction to the opening of Warhol's first museum exhibition in the Philadelphian Institute of Contemporary Art in 1965 (152, 179–180). Ten years later, seemingly unmindful of the Capote episode, the painter wrote in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*:

Some people spend their whole lives thinking about one particular famous person. They pick one person who's famous, and they dwell on him or her. They devote almost their entire consciousness to thinking about this person they've never even met, or maybe met once. If you ask any famous person about the kind of mail they get, you'll find that almost every one of them has at least one person who's obsessed with them and writes constantly. It feels so strange to think that someone is spending their whole time thinking about you. (84)

Warhol hastened to point out that this was the case with him, too, complaining that “Nutty people are always writing me. I always think I must be on some nutty mailing list” (84). It was clear that the erstwhile admirer of Temple and Capote had long since crossed over to the other side.

Warhol’s interest in celebrities was, of course, paralleled by his own desire to become famous. Commenting on Warhol’s “attraction to the persona of the youthful and famous,” McShine points out that the artist’s “identification with them is twofold, both as objects of desire and as role models” (17). As one of the painter’s biographers observes, such lust for fame came in for criticism, for instance from Capote, who believed Warhol wanted celebrity for its own sake rather than saw it as an almost unintended and unexpected consequence of following one’s vocation, a by-product of real accomplishment (Korichi 98). While it is hard to determine if and to what extent Capote’s judgment was right, the fact remains that Warhol’s strategy for achieving fame was based, among other things, on unabashedly manifesting his thirst for it (Korichi 136–137). “I’ve always wanted people to notice me,” Warhol declared in *POPism*, the book he co-wrote with Pat Hackett (47). By being famous, one is able to realize the desire which, in its most extreme form, underlies stalking: to approach the celebrity in the flesh or even become friends with him or her. In Warhol’s case, his stalking having become a thing of the past, it was more of a desire to mix with a multitude of stars: “A good reason to be famous, though, is so you can read all the big magazines and know everybody in all the stories. Page after page it’s just all people you’ve met. I love that kind of reading experience and that’s the best reason to be famous” (Warhol, *Philosophy* 78). Korichi interprets this desire as purely narcissistic (251), which is hardly surprising given the fact that narcissism is one of the key features of celebrity culture. An idolater of stars and a star in his own right, Warhol was also the maker of stars. Credited with coining the term “superstar” (Taylor and Winquist 422), Warhol applied it not just to glamorous, sexy girls such as Edie Sedgwick, Nico, Viva or Ultra Violet, who would hang out in the Factory and appear in his films, but also to his elderly, bespectacled mother, who starred in his 1966 film *Mrs Warhola* (Korichi 201–202).

If Warhol’s name has become a byword for modernity, if he himself declared that he wanted more than anything to be part and parcel of his day and age, enthusiastically stating “I love to be modern” (*Philosophy* 160), art critics tend to see Warhol’s portraiture as one aspect of his art which inscribes itself into tradition. They point out that the portrait as a painterly genre is relatively underrepresented in the latter half of the twentieth century and untypical of pop art as a movement (Cueff 10), and see Warhol as a modern incarnation of the court painter, an Atomic Age Van Dyck or Velázquez (Lavrador 13). Such attempts to place Warhol’s celebrity portraits in the context of tradition seem

particularly striking when we consider sociologist Chris Rojek's observation that "the term *celebrity* actually derives from the fall of the gods, and the rise of democratic governments and secular societies" and "suggests representations of fame that flourish beyond the boundaries of religion and Court society" (9). It is almost as if Warhol's portraits of stars and famous personalities provided such continuity. A chapter of *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* entitled *Success* shows the artist "sitting on a couch in the lobby of the Grand Hotel in Rome, watching the Stars and their hairdressers go up and down the marble staircase" (165). In the Eternal City, which has become "the new celebrity center, the new Hollywood" (165), Warhol is to attend a star-studded charity event. The luxurious surroundings, the trivial conversations, the superficial interpersonal relations, the ongoing spectacle of human vanity make the whole episode almost Felliniesque, bringing to mind the Italian director's portrayal of celebrity and glamour in the 1960 film *La Dolce Vita*. More importantly, if Rome is "a kind of museum the way Bloomingdale's is a kind of museum" (167), the exclusive hotel becomes the modern equivalent of a royal palace, each star having—in regal fashion—his or her retinue, the "hairdressers" who recur throughout the chapter. Daunted by the prospect of having to make a speech at the event, Warhol resolves to say: "Liz Taylor has changed my life: now I, too, have my own hairdressers. I've taken my business manager and my photographer and my redactor and my social secretary and made them all hairdressers" (169). In the middle of it all, Warhol seems to suddenly realize what his role is: "We were quiet for a few minutes, and I started to think about face images. B asked me what I was thinking about and I told him I was thinking about 'portraits'" (*Philosophy* 169).

It is possible to divide Warhol's celebrity sitters—rich, famous and influential—into several categories. The most obvious one includes representatives of show business: actors, such as Judy Garland, Brigitte Bardot or Denis Hopper, and pop stars, like Mick Jagger or Debbie Harry. Akin to actors and representatives of the music industry are modern-day heroes who create spectacles of their own: celebrity sportsmen Muhammad Ali, O. J. Simpson or Pele, whom Warhol views as a "[n]ew category[y] of people [who] are now being put up there as stars," "great new stars" (*Philosophy* 85). On the heels of the entertainment industry is its sister, the fashion industry, with likenesses of Halston, Giorgio Armani, Valentino, Yves Saint Laurent or Sonia Rykiel. These are, arguably, the most glamorous categories, but in creating his painterly constellation Warhol does not confine himself to the obvious and the obviously glamorous. He paints not just representatives of show business, but also business *tout court*. While tycoons like Giovanni Agnelli or Nelson Rockefeller may not exude the glamorous aura surrounding film stars, they are nevertheless associable with money, which is one of the key elements of Warhol's vision and one of his biggest personal *idées fixes* (Korichi 38–41). Big

money is, of course, tantamount to power, which brings us to the next group of Warhol's sitters: politicians, among whom are three American presidents, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter. To those who rule the modern world are roughly akin the descendants of those who used to rule the world in a bygone era and who, in some cases, still hold power, if only in symbolic rather than political terms. Warhol's celebrity portraits thus include the royalty, less powerful but more glamorous than elective politicians, and thus constituting some kind of bridge between politics on the one hand and show business and fashion on the other. The pope of pop art portrays Princess Caroline of Monaco, Princess Diana and the Shah of Iran. Numbered among his sitters are heirs to the throne, but also to vast fortunes, such as Opel heir Gunter Sachs. Modern "aristocracy" encompasses not just those who have inherited aristocratic titles or large fortunes, but also famous names, as Warhol's pictures of celebrity offspring such as Sean Lennon prove. The Warholian galaxy would, however, be incomplete if it were confined to those who make it to the society pages. Intellectuals and visual artists are also part of his celebrity gallery, though to a lesser extent than stars, aristocrats or business and political leaders. The cycle *Ten Jews of the Twentieth Century* consists, inter alia, of portraits of Sarah Bernhardt, Sigmund Freud, Martin Buber, Gertrude Stein and Franz Kafka. Among fellow painters represented by Warhol are Georgia O'Keeffe, David Hockney and Jean-Michel Basquiat. As the name of the Parisian exhibition which has inspired this essay suggests, Warhol's world is wide enough to encompass not just members of the *beau monde*, but also those who can hardly be suspected of moving in high society: Warhol's *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* series is based on mugshots of famous or, properly speaking, infamous American criminals.

If we were to further divide Warhol's sitters into groups, we would have to follow the lines suggested by sociologist Chris Rojek, who, in his book-length study *Celebrity*, distinguishes between "ascribed," "achieved" and "attributed" celebrity (17–18). The first type of celebrity results from what may be called the accident of birth, and encompasses royalty, millionaire heirs and celebrity offspring. The second category, which is based on personal achievement, includes artists, intellectuals, fashion designers, sportsmen, show business personalities and politicians, to name but a few. The last category encompasses those whose fame "is largely the result of the concentrated representation of an individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural intermediaries" (18). "Celetoid" is Rojek's term for an individual whose status is due to the attention they are given by the media (18, 20). The socialite and onetime would-be actress Cornelia Guest, portrayed by Warhol in the eighties, may be seen as a cross between ascribed celebrity and a celetoid: the scion of a wealthy upper-class family, she received a lot of media attention, which led to her being referred to as the Debutante



of the Decade or “celebutante,” the prototype of, among others, Paris and Nicky Hilton (Morris 3). The term “celeactor” completes Rojek’s celebrity nomenclature, referring to a “sub-category of the celetoïd,” “a fictional character who is either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutionalized feature of popular culture” (23). Examples of celeactors given by Rojek include Superman and Batman, “idealized representations of American heroism and the defence of justice” (25), who were both “portrayed” by Warhol on several occasions.

What is particularly important is that whatever the identity of the celebrity sitter, whatever his or her claim to fame, whether based on lineage, true achievement or mediatization and self-promotion, they are given largely the same treatment in Warhol’s portraits. Though a discerning eye can distinguish—on both the stylistic and coloristic levels—subtle, nuanced differences between the innumerable portraits of not just different personalities, but also of the same sitter (Lavrador 14, 16), the fact remains that Warhol’s style is unmistakable and unique, despite his famous claim that “stylelessness” is highly desirable in art:

How can you say one style is better than another? You ought to be able to be an Abstract Expressionist next week, or a Pop artist, or a realist, without feeling you’ve given up something. I think that would be so great, to be able to change styles. And I think that’s what’s going to happen, that’s going to be the whole new scene. (The Art Story Foundation)

Despite the inescapable connotations of depersonalization and efforts to obliterate both the artist’s subjectivity and the artwork’s uniqueness that Warhol’s *œuvre* has, his style has become his trademark. Simply put, if one sees a work by Warhol, one knows it is a Warhol. This, I would argue, has further-reaching implications for his celebrity portraiture that it does, for instance, for his paintings of food products. By painting Gertrude Stein in roughly the same way he paints Brigitte Bardot, Warhol seems to suggest that in the modern world fame is some kind of common denominator, which obliterates the particularities of individual accomplishment. The question of achievement is central to the concept of celebrity, in particular when it comes to what Daniel Boorstin defined as “celebrity-personalities,” celebrated not for achievement but simply for “well-knownness” (qtd. in Henderson 49). In other words, from the point of view of the modern celebrity culture it no longer matters what your claim to fame is and it is possible to be famous simply for being famous. It is perhaps the proliferation of such arbitrary fame that Warhol anticipates in his *Philosophy*. At the beginning of a chapter entitled *Fame*, the artist expresses his surprise at the fact that an unnamed company offered to purchase his “aura” rather than his “product” (*Philosophy* 77). He also recalls that, as a young graphic designer working on shoe advertisements, he got paid, so to speak, “by the shoe”: “I would count up my shoes to figure out

how much I was going to get” (85). The conclusion of the chapter in question is as follows:

So you should always have a product that's not just 'you.' An actress should count up her plays and movies and a model should count up her photographs and a writer should count up his words and an artist should count up his pictures so you always know exactly what you're worth, and you don't get stuck thinking your product is you and your fame, and your aura. (86)

Anyone can be turned into a celebrity, since fame is achievable with or without achievement. In fact, it may even be achieved through wrongdoing, as modern celebrity studies distinguish between “fame” and “notoriety,” also referred to as “unfavourable celebrity” (Rojek 10, 159). Reflecting on the nature of celebrity, Warhol remarks: “Nowadays if you're a crook you're still considered up-there. You can write books, go on TV, give interviews—you're a big celebrity and nobody even looks down on you because you're a crook. You're still really up-there. This is because more than anything people just want stars” (*Philosophy* 85).

Warhol's *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* is perhaps a good illustration of Rojek's claim that transgression and celebrity are inextricably linked because “to be a celebrity is to live outside conventional, ordinary life” (148). The 1964 square mural, measuring twenty feet by twenty feet, comprises twenty-two police photos of male criminals, complete with placards containing information such as “N.Y.C. Police” or “New Orleans” as well as the relevant identification numbers. The portraits of the thirteen offenders include both head- and three-quarter shots, and both front-view and side-view photos. In some cases, the subjects are shown once only, and depicted full face; in others, they are depicted in profile as well. All the photos are black-and-white, which differentiates *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* from the majority of the Warholian portraits with which I am concerned in this essay. No touches of color are added, and the photos are seemingly unretouched, with the original graininess retained. Overall, the faces of the criminals are blurred, some of them blending into the background. The spectrum of physiognomies and facial expressions is wide: some of the subjects look suspicious, others rather innocent; some seem angry, while others are smiling. The same polarization marks their physical attractiveness, which ranges from repulsive to comparatively handsome. All the photos are close-ups of the subjects, some of whom look the viewer in the eye.

The cycle anticipates a culture in which even crime can make one famous as long as the image of the criminal is promulgated by the media, and in which hunger to be in the public eye can push people to become mass murderers or serial killers. The so-called *achievement famine* may result in celebrity-hungry individuals resorting to violence in order to attract attention to themselves or

take revenge, either “on society for not recognizing the extraordinary qualities of the individual” (Rojek 146) or—if the target is a star—on those who have made it (146, 147, 149, 159, 170, 178). The achievement of notoriety would hardly be possible without the media’s contribution to it (155–156). The violence-celebrity connection inscribes itself into a culture which glorifies crime and makes it seem justifiable or even attractive (153–154). As Rojek observes, “The intention behind [mugshots] was to improve the surveillance, monitoring and control of the population. But by publicizing the physical identity of notorious figures who lived outside the law they also glamourized and mythologized them” (127). Gangster films also played a part in the process: “photography and film produced the means for not only identifying gangsters, but also romanticizing them as popular bandits” (128). Interestingly, Gabler compares individuals whose craving for fame—or notoriety to be precise—culminates in crime to show business multitaskers who write, direct and star in their own productions, as well as participate in promotional campaigns which consist in discussing their crimes in the media (qtd. in Rojek 156; Rojek 162, 169). In the light of this comparison, it is tempting to see *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* as posters advertising films whose scenarios were enacted in real life and where the hero was replaced by an anti-hero, a figure inextricably linked with notoriety (159–161). The fact that Warhol’s cycle contained an element of social prognosis was perhaps behind the aura of scandal which surrounded *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*. Intended for display on the outside wall of the New York State Pavilion at the 1964 New York World’s Fair, the cycle shocked Governor Nelson Rockefeller and the fair’s organizer Robert Moses, who decided to have it removed, arguing that none of the criminals depicted by Warhol were any longer wanted by the FBI. What they really feared was perhaps the inconvenient truth that American democracy is underlain with a longing for transgression. Rojek observes that “when one places the notorious celebrity in the context of democracy, with its equalizing functions, its timorous disdain for extremity and its grey affirmation of equal rights and responsibilities,” one immediately notices that “the figure of notoriety possesses colour, instant cachet, and may even, in some circles, be invested with heroism for daring to release the emotions of blocked aggression and sexuality that civilized society seeks to repress” (15). The artist’s suggestion that the cycle should be replaced by Moses’ portrait was rejected, and Warhol finally covered the likenesses of the criminals with aluminum paint (Korichi 152–153). Seemingly, the governor and the urban planner were both unaware of a fact emphasized in modern celebrity studies, namely that “notoriety allows society to present disturbing and general social tendencies as the dislocated, anti-social behaviour of folk demons” whose “notorious celebrity distracts us from facing the eternal questions concerning life, death and the meaning of existence” (Rojek 93). The silvery paint



Warhol was obliged to use obliterated—in 1964, at least—the potential cathartic effect of his work.

*Thirteen Most Wanted Men* also brings us to another notion central to celebrity culture. As certain critics note, the adjective “wanted” has connotations of both police hunt and sexual desire (Cueff 10). As if to confirm the erotic connotations, a year after the New York State Pavilion scandal Warhol made a short film entitled *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*, consisting of footage of young and gorgeous male *habitués* of the Factory (Philippot 8). Rojek speaks of “the charm of notoriety,” observing that “[t]he capacity to go beyond yourself, to be taken outside of routine constraints and responsibilities that govern role performance in ordinary social life, is immensely seductive” (172). The fact that some fans go so far as to propose to celebrity murderers is a case in point (15). More importantly, however, he speaks of celebrity culture and the relationship between stars and their audiences in quasi-erotic terms, referring to celebrities as “objects of desire” (190) and the celebrity-fan connection as a chain of desire. The sociologist also speaks of “magnetic attraction” (65), “chains of attraction” (10), “fan attachment” and the consequent fan “promiscuity,” which consists in the inevitable “transference of desire to new celebrity figures” (197). He also points out that fans’ desire for celebrities is doomed to remain unconsummated (63), though some fans nurture “fantasies of seducing or possessing celebrities” (66), who often tend to be “idealized sexual objects” (93), and that the image of certain stars, especially rock musicians, is *par excellence* sexualized (70–71).

This “erotic” theory is in turn inscribed into the realities of market economy, in which “[c]elebrities are commodities in the sense that consumers desire to possess them” (Rojek 15) and in which “[c]onsuming celebrity products” is one of the “manifestations of attachment” (47). Expounding on what becomes one of the main points in his study of present-day celebrity, Rojek writes:

In summary, capitalism requires consumers to develop abstract desire for commodities. Desire is necessarily an abstract desire under capitalism, because the logic of economic accumulation means that it must be transferred in response to commodity and brand innovation. This abstract quality renders desire alienable from consumers, since they are routinely required to replace strong commodity wants with new ones. The compulsion of abstract desire under capitalism transforms the individual from a desiring object into a calculating object of desire. Consumers do not simply nourish wants for the commodity, they routinely construct the facade of embodiment in order to be desired by the abstracted mass. (187)

As everybody acquainted with Warhol’s *œuvre* knows, his portraiture generally follows the principle of multiplication. This is clearly illustrated by *Marilyn Diptych*, a 1962 composition consisting of two panels subdivided into twenty-five sections

each. In total, the artwork draws on the same image of Marilyn Monroe, also used in *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, reproduced as many as fifty times. In the left panel, the likenesses of Monroe are in technicolor of orange, yellow, pink, red and turquoise—again, as in *Gold Marilyn Monroe*. Unlike their garish left-hand counterparts, the images which make up the right panel are black and bluish, which is Warhol's take on black-and-white photos. Some of the right-hand images are blurred or faded so that the actress's face is either hard to recognize or simply invisible. In his portraits, the artist would simply multiply the same image within the space of the same canvas or divide one work into panels, each of which displayed one image of the sitter, with titles which sometimes indicated the exact number of the images, as is the case with, for example, *Twenty-Five Colored Marylins* or *Eight Elvisses*. Alternatively, he would execute several separate versions of the same portrait. In terms of how Warhol's art anticipates the characteristics and tendencies which we now recognize as being those of celebrity culture, the "serial" strategy is perhaps worth considering for several reasons. First of all, the mechanical, quasi-industrial approach to painting proudly adopted by Warhol, who liked to boast about it and extol its merits, reminds us that celebrity equals commodification and that, consequently, celebrity culture is an industry, in which stars are manufactured the way ordinary goods are. Secondly, Warhol's obsessive celebrity multiplication, which one critic compares to cloning (Goldberg 22), points to the omnipresence of celebrity culture, which verges on pushiness. If, as McShine observes, in his Disaster series "Warhol uses repeated images to reinforce the obsessive way our thoughts keep returning to a tragedy" (16), it may be argued that the use of repetition in his celebrity portraiture anticipates the celebrity-obsessed society in which we now live. While serialization is symbolic of the omnipresence and pushiness of celebrity culture, it also points to another celebrity-related phenomenon. "I want to be a machine, and I feel that whatever I do and do machine-like is what I want to do" (qtd. in Berg 3), Andy Warhol famously declared, suggesting that if the artist is a machine, the artwork is to be thought of as a product. His studio was known as the Factory and he employed assistants directly involved in the "industrial" execution of his works. By serializing his portraits, Warhol reproduces the likenesses of his sitters *ad infinitum*, creating what one critic terms "endlessly reproducible icons" (Goldberg 19). As a result, the image of the sitter comes to resemble a mass-produced article and one cannot help seeing an analogy between Warhol's serial portraits of Marilyn Monroe or Liz Taylor and the serial representations of Coca-Cola bottles or Campbell's Soup cans. In Warhol's interpretation, celebrities become trademarks (Goldberg 22). In this respect, the "serial" treatment the stars receive in his paintings is consistent with the confession he once made: "The people who have the best fame are those who have their name on stores. The people with very big stores named after

them are the ones I'm really jealous of" (*Philosophy* 77–78). After all, the term *household name* may refer to both people and things. Such analogies between famous individuals and brand names, between human beings and products send us back to one of the key features of celebrity culture: the commodification of celebrity. As Rojek points out, "[c]elebrity culture is irrevocably bound up with commodity culture" since "[t]he market inevitably turned the public face of the celebrity into a commodity" (14) and "celebrities are constructed as commodities for economic accumulation" (94). The connection between stars and products is obvious in a celebrity culture inextricably linked with capitalism, in which stars become marketable commodities. The culmination of this culture is the practice of celebrity endorsement, in which the stars-turned-products are used to sell other products. Finally, the fact that the same celebrity portrait often exists in different coloristic versions may be seen as symbolic of the merciless laws of "commodity and brand innovation" mentioned earlier in this paragraph. Metaphorically speaking, Warhol's sitters change their color with the same apparent ease with which some chameleonic celebrities take on new images and artistic reincarnations of themselves in order to surprise their fans, hold their attention and perpetuate their own fame and fashionableness, at the same time retaining the basic characteristics of the "brand" which once catapulted them to stardom.

While the far-reaching implications of notoriety for both celebrity culture and society at large reveal that fame is inevitably tainted by transgression and immorality, it is equally interesting to observe the connection between celebrity and immortality. As the title of David Giles's study *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity* suggests, being famous may be seen as a way of transcending the confines of one's mortality. Warhol was perfectly aware of this relationship between fame and death. His first celebrity portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy were prompted by Monroe's death and JFK's assassination respectively. By the painter's own admission, his portraits of Elizabeth Taylor were undertaken "when she was so sick and everybody said she was going to die" (Swenson 60). Seeing Warhol's Disaster works as expressive of "the flash of fame that these little-known victims achieve in death," McShine claims that Warhol's portraits of the two aforementioned film stars and the First Lady are "tinged by the same awareness of catastrophe" because in them "death coincided with his fascination with stardom and beauty" (16,17). While the painter, who remarked: "[I]f I weren't famous, I wouldn't have been shot for being Andy Warhol" (*Philosophy* 78), realized that celebrities run the risk of being physically attacked or even killed by psycho fans and other deranged individuals, he was also the one who verbalized the celebrity-death connection by stating, "Death can really make you look like a star" (Spigel 282). In saying so, he anticipated Rojek's observation that in the case of celebrities, turned into goods by capitalist

economy, “death is not an impediment to additional commodification” because “[o]nce the public face of the celebrity has been elevated and internalized in popular culture, it indeed possesses an immortal quality that permits it to be recycled, even after the physical death of the celebrity has occurred” (189). Warhol’s own biographical circumstances and career are a case in point: the attempt on his life made by feminist extremist Valerie Solanas in June 1968 enhanced his fame (Korichi 243). “Mass communication preserves the cultural capital of celebrities and increases their chances of becoming immortal in the public sphere,” Rojek points out, supporting his claim with a quote from Graham McCann’s biography of Marilyn Monroe, which “notes the central paradox of celebrity immortality” (Rojek 78). In addition to touching on the nature of the celebrity phenomenon, the fragment in question constitutes a fitting comment on Warhol’s portraits of the world’s most celebrated blonde beauty: “Monroe is now everywhere yet nowhere: her image is on walls, in movies, in books—all after-images, obscuring the fact of her permanent absence” (qtd. in Rojek 78).

If celebrity may bring immortality, it may also turn out to be disappointingly fleeting. Warhol anticipated one of the key qualities of modern fame, namely its ephemerality, by prophesying, in what is arguably his best-known *bon mot*, that “In the future everyone will be world famous for fifteen minutes” (qtd. in Loughlan, McDonald and Van Kriekan 24), a prophecy sadly confirmed by his paintings of starlets and jet-setters of the moment whose faces are no longer recognizable to anyone four decades later (Lavrador 13). Ten years after the statement *loco citato* was made, it was completed by another prediction, this time prefiguring the meteoric rises to fame so typical of the era we now live in: “[i]n fifteen minutes everybody will be famous” (qtd. in Loughlan, McDonald and Van Kriekan 24). Interestingly, however, the gallery of Warhol’s celebrities and the particular categories into which they fall illustrate not just many of the key characteristics of modern-day celebrity culture, proving Warhol’s visionary and prophetic skills, but also the different phases of this culture’s evolution. In her study of the history of celebrity, Amy Henderson shows how the identity of the American celebrity evolved in the course of time, beginning with politicians and scholars, who were then replaced by inventors and captains of industry, in turn superseded by personalities who came from the worlds of entertainment and sports (49–53). To some extent, Warhol’s portrait gallery retraces this historical evolution from the national hero who embodies the national character and moral values to the celebrity who represents the triumph of individuality and personality which sets itself apart from the masses. One cannot help thinking that Warhol is often ironic or skeptical about the politicians, industrialists and intellectuals he paints, as if he knew their celebrity status was in a way a thing of the past. Into Richard Nixon’s portrait, which borders on caricature, the painter incorporates

the inscription "Vote McGovern," referring to Nixon's Democratic opponent in the 1972 presidential election. The President, who was later to earn the nickname "Tricky Dicky," makes eye contact with the viewer, half-smiling, as if he were trying to convince the public that, being a trustworthy and credible person, he has nothing to hide. Yet there is something unconvincing about the image the portrait projects. The upper half of Nixon's face, which strikes the viewer as unhealthy-looking and repulsive, is greenish, the lower half bluish. His eyes, mouth and teeth are painted yellow, which is also the color of the background. Nixon's suit, whose upper part is visible in the portrait, is dusty pink. The palette chosen by Warhol makes the politician look clownish and grotesque. To make matters worse, yellow, seen as the color of Judas, has connotations of cowardice and betrayal. Placed at the bottom of the composition, the handwritten inscription "VOTE MCGOVERN," in black letters on a white background, comes as no surprise and leaves no room for illusions. Of course, the irony inherent in the portrait may be seen as resulting from the simple fact that it was commissioned as part of the Democratic candidate's presidential campaign. However, when we look at other, admittedly less acrimonious likenesses of politicians such as Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter or Mao Tse Tung, we again realize that Warhol depicts heads of state using the same formula as in his portraits of show business personalities. In doing so, he foreshadows an oft-discussed modern-day phenomenon: the tabloidization of politics or what Rojek refers to as "the Hollywoodization of political culture" (186) in a world in which one has to become a celebrity first in order to become a politician, rather than the other way round (Michels qtd. in Rojek 184), and in which the borderline between politics and show business is becoming disconcertingly thin (Gamson qtd. in Rojek 185–186). Warhol's portrait of the scion of one of America's wealthiest dynasties is entitled somewhat ironically *Happy Rockefeller*. Building tycoon Samuel LeFrak refused to pay for his and his wife's portrait by Warhol, judging the painter had ridiculed them both (Philippot 30). Commenting on *Ten Jews of the Twentieth Century*, Warhol said that the only reason he had included a portrait of Gertrude Stein in the cycle was because she was from Pittsburgh, like himself. He also expressed his surprise that the cycle sold at all, speculating that such commercial success may have been due solely to the sitters' Jewishness and adding that there should be a follow-up to *Ten Jews*, a cycle entitled *Ten Jewish Rock Stars* (Philippot 40).

When using the word "sitters," we must remember that the celebrities portrayed by Warhol did not in actual fact "sit" for the portraits. This brings us to the nature of Warhol's creative process. His portraits were executed on the basis of photographs—press photographs in the case of the early works as well as some later non-commissioned ones and Polaroids in the case of the commissioned portraits, a lucrative activity Warhol pursued from the early 1970s onward—and



it is for them rather than the paintings themselves that Warhol's subjects sat. As Rojek reminds us, "[o]ne of the key elements in making staged celebrity prominent in society was the invention of photography" because "[t]he public image is logically crucial in the elevation and dissemination of the public face" (125). The sociologist adds:

Photography, then, furnished celebrity culture with powerful new ways of staging and extending celebrity. It introduced a new and expanding medium of representation that swiftly displaced printed text as the primary means of communicating celebrity. Photographs made fame instant and ubiquitous in ways that the printed word could not match. (128)

While from the mid-nineteenth century onward "[p]hotography rapidly eclipsed portraits in miniature as offering the best likeness of a subject" (125), Warhol's portraiture is based on a striking combination of the two visual media. The artist "took Polaroid photos of his sitters and photos in black and white" (Lavrador 14). The painting session was in fact more of a photo shoot. "Warhol was aided by an assistant who played the role of make-up artist and stylist. For some of his portraits, Warhol used archive material" (Lavrador 14). This was the case with *Ten Jews of the Twentieth Century*, the mugshot-based *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* or Warhol's portraits of Marilyn Monroe, based on photos taken by the film studio on the set of *Niagara*. What followed was "a multistage process" which consisted in "cropping, resizing or, to be precise, blowing up the picture, which was then transferred onto an acetate sheet. The sheet became a kind of stencil on the basis of which Warhol painted the contours of the face before adding color to both the face and the background" (Lavrador 14). The technique Warhol used for most of his celebrity portraits was synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen inks on canvas. The core of the Warhol celebrity portrait was thus the photographic image, which is one of the principal vehicles for spreading celebrity images in modern culture. Similarly, the photo shoots at the heart of his creative process bring to mind the modern photo shoots held by glossy magazines.

The result of this creative process are often garishly tinted portraits which depict the sitters' heads or, less frequently, their busts: portraits *en pied* are rare in Warhol's output. The sitters are shown in close-up, looking the viewer in the eye. Warhol lays down intersecting patches of color and scribbled drawing on top of the photos which form the basis of the portraits. The outlines are often dark and clear-cut, the colors bright and unrealistic. The background is abstracted and reduced to the minimum. The pictures strike the viewer as lacking detail and ornamentation other than the occasional samples of sinuous brushwork. They also seem strikingly flat. Most of the portraits executed by Warhol are square rather than rectangular. The painter once commented that he liked them

that way because he did not need to wonder whether they should be longer or shorter, horizontal or vertical: they were just squares. Referring to the format of his works, Warhol observed: “[a]ll my portraits have to have the same size, so they’ll fit together to make one big painting called ‘Portrait of Society’. That’s a good idea, isn’t it? Maybe the Metropolitan Museum would want it someday” (Warhol and Colacello 12).

The fact that Warhol used the photo-silkscreen process, which consists in reproducing photographic images on canvas, encourages comparisons between his portraits and photographs. The focus on the sitter’s face, the close-up, the absence of any concrete background, the flatness, the format—all these bring to mind passport photos. However, unlike passport photos, Warhol’s portraits, especially those of Hollywood stars, are exemplars of idealized, retouched and unnatural beauty. In her study of the rise of celebrity culture in America, Henderson refers to portraits of film stars “made by each studio for publicity purposes” (52) in the 1920s and 30s. “Each of the major studios had its own portrait gallery” and “studio photographers created a style of portraiture that crystallized stardom” (52). “Armed with banks of lights, large format cameras, retouching pencils, but above all with an aesthetic of glamour,” these people “coaxed celluloid icons from mere flesh and blood” (52). The resultant “packaged star imagery,” meant “to represent the quintessence of glamour” and, seen as “a major component of the Hollywood dream machine,” created what Henderson calls the “larger-than-life celebrity” (52). It was to such imagery that the young Warhol was exposed, growing up in the 1930s. As a child, Warhol collected autographed photos of Hollywood stars, whose aesthetic later resurfaced in his own works: “the heavy make-up, the close-up, the faces blown up out of proportion,” “the cult of surfaces” and artificiality, “the flatness of the silver screen” (Philippot 24). “I believe in low lights and trick mirrors. I believe in plastic surgery,” declared Warhol (*Philosophy* 63). In the “Roman” chapter of his *Philosophy*, Warhol’s interlocutor mishears the word *portraits*, thinking it to be *poptarts*, which in turn incites the painter to voice—half-ironically perhaps—a dilemma that troubles him as a portraitist:

It’s funny because if someone gets a poptart when they’re old, then is the artist supposed to make them look ‘younger’? It’s really hard to know. I’ve seen poptarts done by famous artists who painted old people looking old. So then, should you have your poptart done when you’re very young so that will be the image that’s left? But that would be strange, too[.] (169)

Whatever his doubts—and whatever the degree of their sincerity—Warhol’s obsession with making his sitters look picture-perfect resurfaced at every stage

of his creative process: the imperfections which the make-up failed to conceal were corrected by the artist when he executed the portrait itself. Plastic surgery as well as other strategies for improving one's appearance have strong overtones in Warhol's life and art (Philippot 4). As early as his mid-twenties, the artist started to wear wigs to conceal his baldness (Korichi 91). In 1957, he resolved to have his nose altered by plastic surgery (180, 300). In the early 60s, when his artistic career really took off and his first celebrity portraits were produced, Warhol also executed the *Before and After* paintings of nose jobs, which drew on advertisements for plastic surgery.

But if he looks back on the Hollywood of his childhood, Warhol also anticipates the modern-day celebrity images, retouched, airbrushed, edited, manipulated, Photoshopped, sometimes to the point of making the sitters ridiculous and unrecognizable. Real people are turned into fantasy figures, justifying the question posed by Henderson in the conclusion of her study:

To what extent has the media-generated celebrity culture contributed to what French sociologist Jean Baudrillard has characterized as a culture dominated by 'simulacra'—that is, by images with no real reference to the real world? Are we then left, in this image dominated culture, to a world that is itself but a giant simulation of reality? (54)

Warhol's portraiture is often accused of and criticized for its promotion of emptiness and superficiality. However, as Henderson reminds us, "on TV, the event is determined by the image, not its substance" (54). Importantly, vacuity and lack of depth are among the principal accusations leveled against celebrity culture, which, as I argue in the present essay, Warhol portrays and anticipates.

Warhol's portraits of celebrities are thus, on the one hand, the product of retouching and, on the other, of the artist's often arbitrary use of color. It is possible to argue that the roots of such artistic practices stretch back to Warhol's childhood, namely to his fascination with the beautified photos of Hollywood stars he was exposed to in his schooldays, echoed by his adult penchant for ideal beauty (Korichi 201) and his sense of his own unattractiveness. However, it is also tempting to see an analogy between the faces Warhol creates for his sitters and one of the key concepts in celebrity studies, namely that of the public face. Rojek's study reminds us that "[f]acial muscles, hair, make-up and clothing establish a personal front that conveys social competence" (103) and that "[a] man of note is defined by his appearance, speech and opinions. All of these qualities contribute to the cachet of the individual, the impact he or she exerts over the public" (103). The way Warhol transforms the faces of the stars he depicts is perhaps a good illustration of Rojek's statement that "celebrity in contemporary society is a version of self-presentation" (103). There is, of course, much more

to it than just taking care of external appearance: the so-called *staged celebrity* is a sum of all “the calculated technologies and strategies of performance and self projection designed to achieve a status of monumentality in public culture” (121). If Warhol’s likenesses of celebrities strike us as “fabricated”, so is the very nature of celebrity, to which “façade is crucial” (61) and of which “wearing a ‘front’ is the inescapable condition” (83). “Celebrities are,” after all, “cultural fabrications” (10), and their “construction and presentation involve an imaginary public face” (25).

The fact that Warhol remodels and “manufactures” the faces of his sitters, that he “colors in” the photography-based imprints of their facial features may be seen as symbolic of the way the public faces of celebrities are constructed. However, it also brings to mind another question: that of the public’s perception of celebrities. As Rojek notes, “fans [tend to] project intensely positive feelings onto the celebrity” (51). Positive as they may be, such emotions are also unrealistic, since “[t]he obsessed fan participates in imaginary relations of intimacy with the celebrity” (51). Warhol’s arbitrary, unrealistic use of color makes his famous sitters look larger than life, but it also seems to parallel our emotional response to celebrities, the feelings and impressions we, so to speak, inscribe into them. Whether these emotions are positive or—in the case of non-fans—negative, they are always more or less illusory, because they are aroused by people we do not know personally. The fact that Warhol’s portraits of celebrities are often close-ups of the sitters’ faces may be an expression of what Rojek sees as intrinsic to the cult of stars: the compulsion “to diminish the distance between the fan and the celebrity” (58). If, as the sociologist observes, the “intimacy” strategies used by talk-show hosts are an extension of this cinematic technique (75–76), so are perhaps Warhol’s choices regarding the cropping and composition of his portraits.

In short, Warhol’s painterly technique may be the visual equivalent of what in sociological terms would be referred to as a “para-social interaction,” that is, “relations of intimacy constructed through the mass-media rather than direct experience and face-to-face meetings” (Rojek 52). This, in turn, brings us to the media-like nature of Warhol’s portraits. The faces of Warhol’s celebrities have an unreal, fantastic quality, which critic Judicaël Lavrador refers to as “electric or magnetic” (16). This impalpable something, this secular halo may correspond to what is commonly known as “star quality,” the celebrity magnetism, the indefinable characteristics which make celebrities stand out among mere mortals, or the “aura” for which Warhol was offered a large sum of money. It is a quality for which the existence of an audience, the presence of a viewer is a *sine qua non*: “I think ‘aura’ is something that only somebody else can see, and they only see as much of it as they want to. It’s all in the other person’s eyes. You can

only see an aura on people you don't know very well or don't know at all" (Warhol, *Philosophy* 77).

In Warhol's portraits, the image is, Lavrador argues, a "trembling" one, and as such it approximates the ones seen on a television screen, just as the square format of most of the portraits recalls the shape of the screen itself (16). Warhol was a self-confessed small-screen fan, who declared, "I love television," simultaneously admitting that "television is the media I'd most like to shine in" (*Philosophy* 147), a wish which came true in the 1980s, with TV shows such as *Fashion*, *Andy Warhol's T.V.* and *Andy Warhol's Fifteen Minutes* (Korichi 253). The "televisual" dimension of Warhol's art is reinforced by the fact that so many of his portraits are close-ups of the sitters' faces, that the celebrities the American artist depicts are, so to speak, beheaded for artistic purposes. Such a tendency to dissect or dismember stars may also be a metaphor for the fragmented nature of modern stardom, which rests on fans' fickle and far-from-unconditional attachment:

In the early days of film, fans used to idolize a whole star—they would take one star and love everything about that star. Today there are different fan levels. Now fans only idolize parts of the stars. Today people can idolize a star in one area and forget about him in another. A big rock star might sell millions and millions of records, but then if he makes a bad movie, and when the word gets around that it's bad, forget it. (Warhol, *Philosophy* 84–85)

The "beheading" procedure likens the sitters to the "talking heads" which people our television screens. The difference is that Warhol's celebrities are, of course, mute, which may in fact contribute to their power to communicate their star quality: after all, as Warhol reminds us, "'Aura' must be until you open your mouth" (77). In addition, in Warhol's pictures, the background is abstracted and reduced, which brings to mind the studio walls against which we often see those who appear on television. While the artist's often unrealistic use of colors, which results in the sitters having pink hair or turquoise faces, seems to undermine the "TV screen" interpretation, the following remark made by Warhol elucidates the apparent paradox: "I'd love to be able to know everything about a person from watching them on television—to be able to tell *what their problem is*.... I would also be thrilled to be able to know what color eyes a person has just from looking at them, because color TV still can't help you too much there" (80; original italics).

Lavrador also compares the totality of Warhol's portraiture to an exclusive version of Facebook (13), which is indeed the impression you may get when you see them *en masse*, for example while viewing an exhibition such as *Warhol's Wide World*. I would, however, argue that the experience of seeing hundreds of



such portraits together in what Warhol referred to as “one big painting called ‘Portrait of Society’” is more akin to leafing through the society pages of a magazine where snapshots of various celebrities taken at different parties, in different and sometimes geographically distant locations, are put together. The silhouettes are often as if cut out and separated from the background, which reminds us that Warhol’s celebrities are also taken out of their context, lacking any concrete scenery or background. Whatever the analogies we come up with, be it to television, the Internet or the popular press, one thing is certain: Warhol’s treatment of the celebrities he portrays brings out a relationship central to celebrity culture—that between celebrity and the media, both printed and electronic. Fame is, as Henderson reminds us, “media-generated” (54) and the unparalleled explosion of celebrity we now witness coincides with unparalleled advances in the field of communications technology. Rojek notes that “celebrity must be understood as a *modern* phenomenon, a phenomenon of mass-circulation newspapers, TV, radio and film” (16), adding that “mass-media representation is the key principle in the formation of celebrity culture” (13) and that “media representation is the basis of celebrity” (16).

One of the key features of Warhol’s art is repetition. He produced series, such as *Ten Jews of the Twentieth Century*, or serial portraits of the same person, which were either separate works depicting different versions of the same representation in different colors, or one work divided, like a chessboard, into multiple squares which can reproduce the same image many times. Such serialization may, of course, as Itzhak Goldberg suggests, be emblematic of the omnipresence of images in American society (22). However, it may also be associated with the obsessive multiplication of images at the heart of modern celebrity culture, which floods us with photos or footage of the same person, very often identical or only slightly changed, reproduced endlessly by different media, some of which—such as the Internet—offer their users the possibility of endless replaying. It must be remembered that some of Warhol’s female sitters, such as Jackie Kennedy or Princess Diana, were at one time or another referred to as “the most photographed woman in the world.” In fact, repetition seems to be one of the hallmarks of media-dominated culture in general, as illustrated by the following comment made by Warhol: “*I love your Daily News commercial on television. I’ve seen it fifteen times*” (*Philosophy* 75; original italics).

In his study of celebrity culture, Chris Rojek argues that while “[t]he emergence of celebrity as a public preoccupation is the result of... the commodification of everyday life,” it results in equal measure from “the decline in organized religion” (13). According to the sociologist, “celebrities have filled the absence created by... the death of God.” As a result, “[i]n secular society, the sacred loses its connotation with organized religious belief and becomes attached to mass-media

celebrities who become objects of cult worship" (53). Rojek's observes that "God-like qualities are often attributed to celebrities" (9) who are frequently seen by fans as a source of comfort and support (52), much as deities are by believers. Warhol's representations of stars show that he was aware of this quasi-religious dimension of celebrity culture. The famous people he portrays are frequently referred to as icons, his universally recognizable female sitters being compared to Madonnas. Idolatry is, of course, inscribed into celebrity culture and we often speak of the cult of celebrity, but in the case of the stars depicted by Warhol, the connotations of idolatry are not just due to the sitters' status, but also to the nature of Warholian representation. Thus, the recently widowed Jackie Kennedy, who "in her dignified bearing, assumed the role of tragic queen" (McShine 18), may also be seen as a modern incarnation of the *mater dolorosa*. Art historian Robert Rosenblum speaks of "the supernatural glitter of celestial splendor, as when the single image of Marilyn Monroe is floated against a gold background, usurping the traditional realm of a Byzantine madonna" (36). As the title *Gold Marilyn Monroe* suggests, the large canvas is painted in various shades of gold and brown—sepia, rust, cinnamon, beige and hazel—with touches of other, cooler hues, such as gray or olive. Approximately in the center of the composition is placed what—were it not for the colors—could be likened to a passport photo of Marilyn Monroe in a barely visible frame. Against a backdrop whose color is the same as that of most of the canvas, the star of *Some Like It Hot* is depicted full face. While the contours are dark, Monroe's face is pale lavender, her hair bright yellow, her half-smiling lips red and her teeth snow-white. Turquoise is the color of her eyelids, her eye whites and of what is presumably the collar of her dress. In an interpretation along the lines of the one offered by Rosenblum, McShine compares Warhol's *Gold Marilyn Monroe* to "a gilded Byzantine icon" (17). Importantly, however, he also points out that "the object of veneration here is not a Blessed Virgin but a slightly lewd seductress, the image of whose face is still suffused with erotic magic" (17). For McShine, Warhol's paintings of Elizabeth Taylor are underlain by the artist's "attraction to the star who is of such magnitude as to become a divinity as well as a product" (18), revealing another ambivalence marking Warhol's depiction of celebrities. However, it must be remembered that celebrities constitute "at one and the same time, magnets of desire, envy and disapproval" (Rojek 93). Such ambiguity is interesting not only because, as most critics and commentators agree, it lies at the heart of Warhol's art, but also because, as I would argue, it corresponds to the way we react to celebrity culture. In other words, it mirrors our love-hate relationship with celebrity, at once adored and abhorred, deified and vilified.

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