

Our new icons - by photographer Alison Jackson

Andy Warhol was the first person to grasp our obsession with celebrity image. But did his own image ultimately eclipse his art, asks photographer Alison Jackson.

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I took the Beckhams on a trip to Japan. Not the real Beckhams, but a pair of lookalikes I was using for a shoot. As we wandered through a department store in Tokyo looking for shoes for Victoria, the whispering started. Then a crazed mob sprang up around us. My Victoria was so overwhelmed that she soon lost her icy veneer as the crowd thrust their camera phones into her face. But it wasn't their frenzy that shocked me the most. I was much more disturbed by the way they persisted even after I had explained that this wasn't the real Posh and Becks but a mere reproduction.

Andy Warhol wouldn't have batted an eyelid. He understood our obsession with celebrity culture better – and sooner – than anyone else. In 1968, Warhol predicted that, "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes". It's hard to understand in these days of *The X Factor* that his was once an enigmatic, even baffling, statement. By 1979, Warhol reiterated his claim, saying he had seen enough to be convinced he was right. In 2009, it seems he didn't go far enough; now YouTube grants us all our 15 seconds of fame if we want it enough.

Warhol's prediction was not a throwaway comment but a conviction based on his fundamental understanding of the image, the icon, and how mass production and branding had already begun to revolutionise the world. Traditionally, icons evoke a reaction on a spiritual level. As a devout Byzantine Catholic, Warhol had grown up transfixed by glittering images of Christ and the Madonna. He knew the sacred power invested in an image. His prints of Marilyn Monroe, Mao Zedong and Liz Taylor share the same composition, the same back-lighting and reduced outlines as the saints of the Catholic Church. Theirs were the original fetishised bodies: objectified and worshipped; dismembered and preserved; elevated to divine status and immortalised as icon.

When Warhol created his Marilyn prints in the months following her death in 1962, he chose an image that exuded her sex-goddess persona, not the suicidal, desperate woman she really was. He reduced her to a few defining features, the essence of the Marilyn brand, to be mass-produced. We prefer the object, the copy. The image distances us from the reality. Marilyn's suicide and the suffering of martyrs alike are subsumed by the glamour of the image.

Now celebrity has taken on a holy status all of its own, and we look to the stars to provide us with the transcendental experience that was once achieved through religion. The boy kisses the image of Kate Moss as once he clutched a religious icon to his breast. *Heat* magazine has become our altar, our iconostasis. The religious imagery and fairytales that formed our shared cultural references have been replaced by the cult of celebrity. Marilyn is the sex goddess, Camilla Parker Bowles is cast as the wicked witch, Che Guevara is the revolutionary. Celebrities have become visual shorthand for narratives that shape our lives.

At the Factory, Warhol's Superstars, the waifs and strays hoping for sanctuary and notoriety, didn't need talent to star in his movies. They were cast as themselves. As Warhol put it: "To play the poor little rich girl in the movie, Edie [Sedgwick] didn't need a script. If she needed a script, she wouldn't have been right for the part." By using actors playing themselves, his films blurred the line between image and reality. Warhol was the ultimate voyeur, constantly observing people through the lens. He watched and listened, but did not participate. Behind the camera, Warhol was in control. His fixed camera angle recreates the static, voyeuristic gaze, the grainy quality of a home movie.

Warhol welcomed his subjects to the Factory and allowed them free reign with drugs and alcohol to push their behaviour to extremes. Today, contestants on *Big Brother* and *The X Factor* need little incentive to parade themselves in front of the camera. None but the promise of their 15 minutes – or 15 seconds.

The year 2000 marked the start of *Big Brother* in Britain and the rise of the Z-list celebrity, hungry for a window of fame. When Mark Frith took over the fledgling *Heat* magazine that same year, part of his mission was to turn ordinary people into stars. By 2002, Jade Goody was posing on the cover. Goody is the most enduring of a breed of celebrity who have shot to stardom with no talent to sustain them. At a recent casting for an Amy Winehouse lookalike, I was struck by the frank admission from each of the girls that they wanted to be famous. It didn't seem to matter as who or for what they might be lauded.

And if the image divorced from reality can capture our imagination so strongly, I am also intrigued at how the celebrity faced with their own lookalike might feel. Germaine Greer famously did not recognise Kylie because "she didn't look like her image". Andy Warhol invariably looked like his. Despite considering himself to be unattractive and unsexy, the artist cultivated his own eccentric looks and constructed his own image as tightly as the prints and films he created. He had more than 400 wigs in the trademark silver grey that lent him an air of timelessness. According to friends, he would never dream of being seen without it. For a man who felt he lived life as if he were watching it on TV, the camera, the wig and all the signifiers of the Warhol brand became a protective shell, shielding the private man who still attended church three times a week and maintained an intense, closely guarded relationship with his mother.

In the end, Warhol was as seduced by the power of the image as much as anyone – and enough to let his own image eclipse his art.

* *The South Bank Show: Alison Jackson on Andy Warhol* is on Sunday, October 4 at 10.30pm on ITV1. Alison is also donating to the Art For Africa auction at Sotheby's tomorrow