

Helena Eribenne

Livid Glamour

I am researching the medial images of the “representative characters”¹ of six 20th century-born women who were instilled with high and unique creative abilities.² The research includes representations of Marilyn Monroe, Amy Winehouse, Whitney Houston, Romy Schneider, Princess Diana and Edie Sedgwick. They have been selected because, not only did they die prematurely, but also self-destructively. Additionally, there is the fact that their biographical similarities and medial representations, when juxtaposed in relation to Venus, the goddess of love, bear a resemblance. Besides my research into images of the aforementioned personas, there is my research into the mirroring of the self-destructive female icon with the supernova. The latter can be viewed from Earth some light years after it has exploded. My research uses Aby Warburg’s thesis on *Bildwanderung* (migration of images) and *Bilderfahrzeuge* (transportation of images), which, in other words, deal with objects and gestures that travel through time and space.

*“The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour”.*³

The icons under discussion here were viewed as glamorous, shining like stars, their heavenly bodies effusing light like the sun. These two types of stars – the self-destructive female icon and the sun – are experienced from afar. The sun’s light reaches Earth 8.3 light minutes after it has been emitted from its surface, and an icon’s light grows increasingly more attractive beyond her earthly days.

“Thus was star born [sic] and, in the early days of studio management, built up as ethereal, while also pushed as “ordinary.” [...] On the one hand the studio kept the star at a distance, on the other encouraged personal intimacy with her. She was a distant planet,

*worthy of awe, but also put forward as a person of talent and integrity, as if these human qualities lent her natural born right to stardom”.*⁴

One speaks of a star being born, the way it shines above and beyond ordinary stars in the galaxy, and we use the same language for personalities here on Earth. When one speaks of the death of a star, ‘live fast, die young’ can be used to convey the collapsing star and proverbially the self-destructive female icon, too. Comparatively speaking, a supernova’s death is a brilliant spectacle once its centre collapses, imploding in a dazzling display of light and colour. Supernovae, as well as the icons, are said to be self-destructive stars.

*“Some stars, the supernovae, are as bright as the entire galaxy that contains them [...] Many of the stars in Orion are hot and young, evolving rapidly and ending their lives in colossal cosmic explosions called supernovae. They are born and die in tens of millions of years”.*⁵

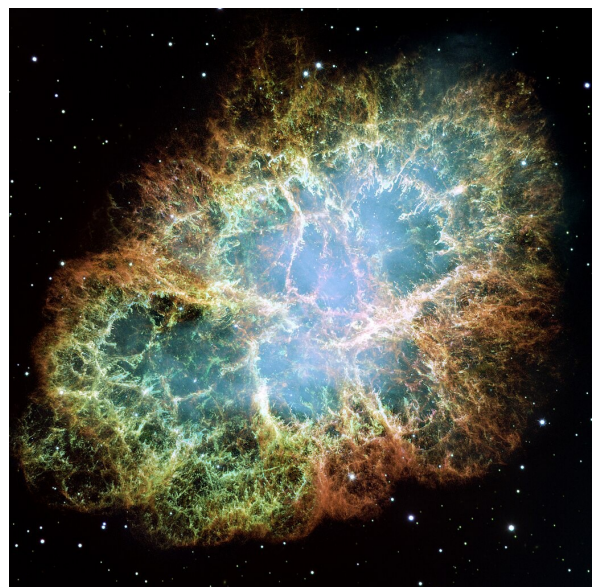


Abb. 1: Crab Nebula

The synthesis of death, time and light can be interpreted as a metaphor for the fleeting effervescent moment suspended in the photograph (film being a medium for light). One may ask how a frozen, iconic image conflates with time travel whilst simultaneously being in the here and now? Art historian Aby Warburg wrote about the rebirth of pagan antiquity and coined the term *Bildwanderung* when he discovered that images travel, (and I would say they are much like stars wandering through the Milky Way Galaxy), throughout the centuries, from antiquity to the Renaissance and indeed up until the present day.

Migrating images survive in a “psychic space”.⁶ This “psychic space” can be mapped out astronomically and Warburg made a cosmic attempt at this with his atlas called *The Mnemosyne*⁷ (after the goddess of memory). There seems to be many and various definitions of what a “psychic space” could be. Maybe it is an invisible world (or dimension), like a planet carrying messages across time and space? Matthew Rampley correctly states in *The Optic of Walter Benjamin* that “[i]nstead of the narrative of historical development one finds the idea of a cultural space, in which metaphors of vision become prominent”.⁸ This could be viewed contiguously with a “psychic space”, beyond the realm of lineal time.

According to the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an icon can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, as a “devotional painting of Christ or another holy figure, typically executed on wood and used ceremonially in the Byzantine and other Eastern Churches” and secondly as a “person or thing regarded as a representative symbol or as worthy of veneration”.⁹

Walter Benjamin argued that the reproducibility of an artwork causes it to lose its aura, that which a singular unique piece of artwork possesses through the possibility of countless reproductions made, and from multiple hard copies printed from its negative or positive frame. I argue further, building on his theory that, since “the age of mechanical reproduction”, the portrait of the icon is an image that continues to serve a cultic purpose.¹⁰

Take the image of Diana, Princess of Wales, for example; it leads the viewer from pop cultural iconic veneration to a level of holy magnification much on

the same level as a reliquary of Virgin Mary or Venus who genealogically come before her. It is not so much the image itself that does this, rather what it represents iconographically. I therefore postulate that the aura does not decrease with mechanical reproduction in this instance; on the contrary, the greater the circulation of the image and the more it is copied, the greater the aura becomes.

*“This is the transcendental aspect of the icon: that the media seems to levitate around her. And since the public’s only real way of knowing her is through this levitation, an absolutely peculiar aura is formed called the Diana effect [...]”.*¹¹

The invention of the printing press afforded widespread distribution of books and other printed material and, concomitant with a more literate public, this created greater opportunities for capital income. This can be observed in churches which sell postcards bearing the images of their buildings and the reliquaries inside them. Take Andy Warhol’s mechanical reproduction of cultural items, household goods or portraits on his screen-prints as a case in point. In a tiny “psychic space” of *Bildwanderung* and *Bilderfahrzeug*, he took common grocery or household items and created paintings in various limited editions, thereby increasing the painting’s iconography and subsequent monetary value.



Abb. 2: Andy Warhol, *Marilyn*, 1962

*“The idea of repeated reproduction was very much in the air. [...] After all, many artists painted the same subject over and over from different angles, but to paint and repaint the same subject as identically as possible seemed to undermine art’s essential value – the uniqueness of each work – seemed designed, in fact, to render it meaningless [...] During the late summer and early fall, Warhol did twenty-three Marilyn portraits. They ranged from Gold Marilyn, a small single image silk-screened onto an expansive gold field (an updating of the icon paintings of his Byzantine Catholic upbringing), to the famous Marilyn diptych, one hundred repetitions of the same face across twelve feet of canvas”.*¹²

The possibility to view a fine artwork, not own it, yet simultaneously possess it in the form of a copy is contiguous with glamour. It could be said that Warhol’s methodology is today’s NFT (non-fungible token). Rather than purchasing one reproduced image, one can become the owner of the digital version of a painting, photograph or a video clip. The aura re-emerges through scarcity despite the fact that the object in question has already been reproduced multiple times over. The prize is in the neo-liberalistic capitalism of ownership. The real figure of worship and adoration here is money and as Giorgio Agamben says, “God didn’t die, he was transformed into money”. He argues:

*“And so-called contemporary art does nothing but repeat Duchamp’s gesture by filling the museums, which are nothing but organs of the market devoted to accelerating the circulation of merchandise which, like money, have attained a state of liquidity and which they want to continue to value as if they were works of art, with non-works and non-performances. This is the contradiction of contemporary art: it abolishes the work of art and then puts a price tag on the result”.*¹³

In Agamben’s poetic essay, “Nymphs”,¹⁴ he cites Theodor Vischer who is most likely contemplating the atheist mind of the Age of Enlightenment when he quotes:

*“Vischer calls this intermediate state in which the viewer no longer believes in the magico-religious power of images yet continues to be somehow connected to them, keeping them suspended between the efficacious icon and the purely conceptual sign vorbehaltende (suspending)”.*¹⁵

The images that the media produces of the star as glamorous clearly have their roots in cultic worship. We call them stars and even more so, we call them idols. The trap is laid for the flesh and blood personalities to believe in their medial representation, mistaking their real selves and real lives for a crafted media construct. Unrealistic body images can lead to severe mental illnesses such as bulimia and anorexia, forms of control betraying their very lack. “This pop music monstrous-feminine plays out especially on the site of the female celebrity body, through a morbid fascination with ‘scary’ weight loss or weight gain, signs of degeneration, bruises on the skin and losing the singing voice”.¹⁶ An eating disorder for the star is death by glamour. Yet the paradox therein is as Berger posits, “the happiness of being envied is glamour”.¹⁷ His hypothesis supports this thesis further when he says that “the power of the glamorous resides in their *supposed* happiness” (my emphasis).¹⁸ That happiness is what ordinary mortals then try to achieve through the image-relic dichotomy, but that search for happiness is redirected into capitalism. The dead and dying star, like a supernova, is a sight and a spectacle.

Laura Mulvey correctly asserts the position of the icon as her “to-be-looked-at-ness”.¹⁹ It conflates with the artifice of glamour and in turn, glamour conversely conflates with artefacts of worship, most importantly the mass-produced photographic image. The pressure cooker of stardom is in living up to a constructed image which is accompanied with the loss of identity and re-identification with the image. “Even with the most perfect reproduction, one thing stands out: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in the place where it is at this moment”.²⁰ The magic of photography becomes a curse when the image replaces the person and becomes the reason to suspend time or even to go back in time to appear as one once did or would have liked to have.

*“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness”.*²¹

Now we have travelled back full circle to the beginning of this essay in contemplation of an image from the past being suspended in the here and now. Photography, etymologically rooted in light, is somehow like magic. There is a technique to this sorcery; when a moment from the past is captured, it is suspended onto light sensitive paper by substances such as silver, (also used in magico-religious worship, or to cross a gypsy’s palm with silver to have one’s fortune told). Photography keeps its part of the bargain of the magico-religious, and every image captured by its means, by default, pays homage to iconography. We know these icons by their images and not by any personal contact. David Mayer, writing about photography’s early days and the Victorian and Edwardian actress, states:

*“[...] my insistence that recognition, fame and subsequent notoriety or celebrity are functions and achievements of existing and arriving print technologies and that, without the several commercially viable technical advances, photography would barely have served the actress’s or theatre’s purpose. Fame, publicity, adulation, collecting, fan-dom and the full apparatus of fan-worship –even celebrity stalking –would be impossible without the attendant development in photo-engraving and print technologies [...]”.*²²

The explosive merger of a binary neutron star system produces a short-lived supernova called a kilonova. The spectacle from such a collision creates heavy metals such as silver, platinum and gold in the same manner the Earth has done. The Hollywood star system produces short lived stars using the kilonova’s precious metals by photography’s alchemical means.

The tithes paid at the altar of fame and celebrity conclude in the sacrifice of the most fragile of all the falling stars – the self-destructive female icon.

Endnoten

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2. “Livid Glamour” is an excerpt from my dissertation-in-progress entitled “Self-Destructive Female Icons”, which I am writing at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna. Professor Dr Eva Kernbauer is my supervisor.
3. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London 1972, p. 131.
4. Daniel Herwitz, *The Star as Icon: Celebrity in the Age of Mass Consumption*, New York, Chichester, West Sussex 2008, <https://doi-org.uaccess.univie.ac.at/10.7312/herw14540>.
5. Carl Sagan, *The Cosmos*, New York 2013, pp. 8 and 11.
6. Matthew Rampley, “Iconology of the Interval: Aby Warburg’s Legacy”, in: *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Inquiry*, 17(4), October 2001, p. 313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2001.10435723>.
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8. Matthew Rampley, “Archives of Memory: Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project and Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas”, in: *The Optic of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Alex Coles, London 1999, p. 97. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/icon>.
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11. Daniel Herwitz, *Star Aura in Consumer Society (and Other Fatalities)*, New York 2008.
12. Victor Bockris, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol*, New York 1989, pp. 112-113.
13. Giorgio Agamben, <https://libcom.org/article/god-did-die-he-was-transformed-money-interview-giorgio-agamben-peppe-sava>. Giuseppe Sava, original Italian interview <https://www.ragusanews.com/articolo/28021/giorgio-agamben-intervista-a-peppe-sava-ammo-scieli-e-guccione>.
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15. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
16. Susan Hopkins, “Trainwreck femininity and Whitney: monstrous feminine redux”, in: *Celebrity Studies*, 11:1, pp. 153-156, DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2020.1704477, 2020. Doyle quoted in Hopkins, p. 154.
17. Berger 1972, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 132.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
19. Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, *Visual Culture and Gender -Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Annette Burfoot, Vol.II, London and New York 2015, p. 126.
20. Benjamin 2008, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, p. 5.
21. Mulvey 2015, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, p. 126.
22. David Mayer, “The actress as photographic icon: from early photography to early film”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, eds. Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes, Cambridge 2007, pp. 74-94.

Abbildungen

Abb. 1: Crab Nebula, by NASA, ESA, J. Hester and A. Loll (Arizona State University) - HubbleSite: gallery, release., Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=516106>

Abb. 2: *Marilyn*, 1962, Andy Warhol © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by Bildrecht, Wien 2023, Photo: Tate

Zusammenfassung

I am researching the medial images of six 20th century-born women who were instilled with high and

unique creative abilities. The research includes representations of Marilyn Monroe, Amy Winehouse, Whitney Houston, Romy Schneider, Princess Diana and Edie Sedgwick. They have been selected because, not only did they die prematurely, but also self-destructively. Additionally, there is the fact that their biographical similarities and medial representations, when juxtaposed in relation to Venus, the goddess of love, bear a resemblance. Besides my research into images of the above mentioned personas, there is my research into the mirroring of the self-destructive female icon with the supernova. The German art history theories and practices founded by Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky that became popular in England and America are techniques that form part of my comparative picture analysis. I carry out picture analyses developed of artworks from the Renaissance with images of the self-destructive female icons. I then translate my interpretation of a self-destructive female icon by synthesising the meanings of the images, in particular, by reading fairy tales and mythological stories. These theories and stories support my goal of identifying the iconography and symbolism of a self-destructive female icon.⁵

Autorin

Helena Eribenne was born in London to Nigerian parents. She began her career in the theatre and moved into music, gaining recognition as a member of the pioneering acid house band S'Express. She is a photographer, director and performance artist and is completing her dissertation in the History of Art Department (headed by Professor Eva Kernbauer) at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. Helena Eribenne has lived and worked in Vienna for over 20 years.

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