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SEEING IS BELIEVING: WARHOL'S SPIRITUALIZING  
OF MATERIALITY AND THE NEED FOR  
THE HISTORICIZING OF POSTMODERNISM

**A**RT ITSELF DOES NOT INTEREST ME, only the spiritual content, maintained D.H. Lawrence. If history is the only factor that distinguishes a cult from a religion, we shall have to wait and see whether the Warhol cult can become a religion, but a parallel to Lawrence's comment could be constructed from the clichés surrounding the Warhol myth. This might be, 'history does not interest me, the spiritual or metaphysical does not interest me, art does not interest me, only the thing in itself interests me,' as if Warhol is to painting as William Carlos Williams is to poetry. Likewise, it could be argued that, in accordance with Proverbs 3:5, all rational attempts at understanding the spiritual are oxymoronic.

History, herstory or itstory concerns events that have occurred in the past and whether the present negates this or contains this depends on the level of historicizing historicity. History is written for the period in which it is produced, commenting both on the present and the past, and possibly indicating a way to a better future. The image, however, speaks not just of a temporal connection but a metaphysical paradigm. Both the image and the cadaver operate as doubles, occupying two places, here and nowhere, neither in the world nor totally absent and therefore mediating both worlds (Goodwin and Bronfen 1992: 11). Representation always has death as one of its signifiers due to its nature of resemblance and doubling.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche saw art as redemption via illusion and representations of death as potentially leading to redemption (Nietzsche 1872). Where the individual exists primarily as a consumer of objects, death is seen as an unnecessary waste, hence the obsession with serial killers, the ultimate taboo breakers. So Warhol's paintings, particularly those labelled 'Disasters' confront society with the inevitable that is, death. Car-crash <<http://www.yale.edu/amstud/r66/fr6.html>> and plane crash, the bomb, the electric chair, race riots <<http://www.sweeney.ucr.edu/egallery/warhol64.html>>, to many there appears a

distancing through repetitive-ness, but the primal shock-power, as Peter Gidal puts it (Gidal 1971: 32), remains. There is the evolution from initial shock to a distancing, yet their narrative quality places them within history, offering the total process, the relationship between involvement and non-involvement. However, through these images there is an appropriation of death's power, and they become monuments to the dead, in this sense they are spiritual, overtly manifesting a belief in the non-corporeal.

As Hal Foster puts it, major theorists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard, all prefer the simulacrum reading of Warhol, with 'referential depth and subjective interiority' victims to the superficiality of pop art. Roland Barthes sees an avant-gardist disruption while Baudrillard sees a total lack of meaning (Foster 96: 128). What this comes down to is whether, with Baudrillard, we deny any anthropomorphic status in the work, or if with Foster, we see their 'traumatic realism'. A further question is whether Warhol, as Henry Hitchings puts it (2002), trivializes what he deifies? With thirty Mona Lisas <<http://www.studiolo.org/Mona/MONA13.htm>>, sixteen Jackie Kennedys, 192 dollar bills, and 210 Coca-Cola bottles <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/gallery/image/0.8543.-11004342364.00.html>> we could be forgiven for thinking Warhol is merely poking fun at the sacred, the new gods of the twentieth century, however disturbing this mocking might be. For Baudrillard, the 'very definition of the real is that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction' (Baudrillard 1993a: 73), his definition of the hyperreal being that which is always already reproduced, all now being reproduction with no original. With absence being the condition of meaning it is only when the absence has occurred in its totality that meaning can cease to be a matter of imposed meta-narratives, and can prevail in the essence of the thing. Warhol's reproductions are knowingly non-reproductions, the non-images in the Marilyn series evoking more than the near reproductions <<http://www.studio-international.co.uk/studio-images/warhol/warhol-4b.htm>>. This is where critics like Hitchings have got Warhol utterly wrong.

Far from this being a love of the void and the meaningless, multiplication to the point of inanity, Warhol's work confronts us with our own assumptions, such as that artists must interrogate or affirm their object. There is also the Lacanian notion, as Foster points out (1996: 136) of the repetition of the repressed as symptom or signifier, but here there is the repetition indicating the real. Of course, there is the connotation that the reification of consumption has surpassed the deification of production, but the Calvinist worship of the work ethic is submerged with the Catholic love of the image. The point is not that Coke tastes the same all over the world and that this is the beauty of American hegemony, but that the product is different everywhere; each one of Warhol's Coke bottles is unique. Far from illustrating or celebrating Fordist fears of endless replication or Baudrillard's concern with the simulacra, a unifying principle and a precon-

ceived notion, a metaphor for sameness (Baudrillard 1993b: 58), the images attack the blurring of difference, something some multiculturalists and many postmodernists naively ignore. We might conclude that it is not only Warhol and his subjects that become immortal, but as with the cinematic process, here also the spectator of the singular image or multiple image within the singular frame, time and space in relation to matter having simultaneously every and no affinity, mortality and immortality in an Emersonian sense re-enforced.

Countless critics maintain with Marcel Krenz in February 2002 *Art Review* that Warhol's disaster paintings are the most arresting, but the question still remains as to whether they highlight the impersonality of death with twisted metal and mutilated bodies, or whether they evoke the spirituality of its physicality? This might disingenuously be put down to Warhol's Catholicism, and here we see the tri-partite nature of Christianity parallels the concept of the three in one Christian God. Catholics are obsessed with the physicality of Christ incarnate, the bloody Crucified Jesus hanging above every sacrificial altar, the Anglicans with the nebulous God the father, and the more recent additions such as the Pentecostals are infatuated with the Spirit. With feet poking out from under a tyre, a man flattened and made stationery by his own means to freedom, this is a statement concerning the impossibility of such a quest, the American obsession with freedom, within a purely physical paradigm. Warhol's images, particularly those of Elvis with a gun <<http://artsavant.com/features/warhol2002.html>> and the most famous series of Marilyn Monroe, portray the evil of masquerade, the very garishness of the latter's colours illustrating the fraudulent nature of celebrity. Nowhere is the stereotypically Baudrillardian point made that there is nothing behind these masks. Whatever fun we can have from predicting cyclical versions of history, as did Nietzsche, or denying its very existence, to fully grasp the significance and beauty of this art one has to stick with the historical. This is, I believe, a cultural and hence spiritual need.

Made just after Monroe's death in August 1962, Warhol only commenced to make his first photo-silkscreen pictures in this year, as well as instigating his Disasters series. These death masks emphasise Marilyn as product but there is a person behind the mask. For this reason those who maintain that Warhol is licensing relativism in every form by obfuscating boundaries between the fake and the real have overdosed on spurious hermeneutics. Warhol's illustration of Nixon <<http://www.uleth.ca/ffga-gal/collections/USA/Warhol.vote.html>> makes this clear. In the style of the Marilyn series, but layered with plastic, this image portrays the president as evil. However much Warhol covers the image of Nixon's head with sheets of scribbled upon plastic, something Bacon would later imitate, Nixon's malevolence cannot be masked. There is simplicity in this that some find offensive, hence both the dismissal and worship of the artist; the artist is the man pointing at the moon, asking the obvious yet mystical question- why

are you heathens still staring at my finger?

Warhol's combined business sense and naïveté is startling. The much later 1984 work, the malfeasant Rorschach paintings were manufactured without Warhol knowing that there were a limited number of Rorschach paintings with a direct purpose, i.e. each original was supposed to reveal something about the observers' inner psyche. We do well to remember Bruno Bettelheim's point that the word psyche, as used by Freud has been mistranslated, it meaning 'soul' not 'mind'. Warhol's giant Rorschach paintings appear as evil Hindu gods, the shadow side of the soul, the sheer size overpowering the spectator and causing them to question the process of redemption, evoking the need to be saved and the determination to find meaning in mystery.

Warhol moves on from multiple images of faces in 1962 to the full-figure paintings, which incorporated the important elements scale and overlapping. As Peter Gidal points out, two years after the Marilyn pictures, the triple and double paintings were over-lifesize. The triple Elvis is 82 by 60 inches, the double 81\_ by 58\_. The paintings created a new awareness of time in painting. With the Elvis and the gun painting, because of the dominance of films and the media, we relive the moment of drawing the gun from the holster. Because of the confusion brought about by the printing technique that makes the exact same stencil look different, the spectator associates automatically with a progressive forward movement in time. This brings the question concerning singular experience to the fore. How idiosyncratic is any experience? Is spirituality concerned with mystical oneness or individual salvation?

Warhol interrogates these two camps. Many of Warhol's images have a lack of imprint which points to dislocation of continuity. Again especially where thirty images end in a white space, the missing imprint imparts a space that defines the canvas and destroys traditional notions of framing, centrality of image, symmetry and illusion as Gidan shows especially. There is a similarity to film, where the retinal lingering of an image seen a split second previously produces automatically an after-image which objectively is not there. This is the core spiritual conjuring of the work. The artist can offer images even after they do cease to exist in a physical reality. This is similar to Jasper Johns's double-flag painting where the top is orange and green, the bottom grey and we are instructed to stare for one minute at the top one, close our eyes and then open them focusing on the bottom one. After image creation occurs in everyday life, looking at the sun or even a car crash; thus Warhol's paintings invoke internal images from the spectator that appear external and confront us with the spectre, the spiritual.

Of all Warhol's Disaster paintings that of the 'Atomic Bomb' is the most

magisterial. What occurs here is less hieromancy, divination by observing objects of sacrifice, but more objectifying evil. A vertical canvas with a blood red background and a black screen print of the atomic bomb illustrates the evil inherent in an event that supposedly caused the end of evil, particularly prescient given today's so-called war on terrorism. The fact that the war in Japan was coming to an end and that most recent scholarship maintains the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were a scientific experiment rather than a military necessity emphasises the meaninglessness of science. Warhol's atomic has transformed the event physically and metaphysically. The rising smoke emerges a gigantic beast with two horns, the Prince of Darkness conquering and uniting both heaven and earth. This single event marked America's apotheosis as both world leader to some and devil to others. In 1946, prior to the Cold War and the demise of Russia, America produced a third of the world's manufactured goods and their world dominance was inevitable. This year was also financially the best year ever for Hollywood, the American propaganda machine. Thus this painting encapsulates America's and science's most glorious moment: the death of thousands of innocent people. Warhol offers a meditation on this man made beast; by its encapsulation through mechanical and artistic means it works to contain evil's contemporary power. Luther Link maintains in his book on the Devil (the subtitle *The Mask without a Face* reminding us of the Marilyn pieces) that after the sixteenth century belief in this orthodox Devil was no longer contingent on belief in orthodox Christian theology. Thus the Devil could become a general image of evil forces outside standard theological categories. Importantly Warhol's 'Atomic Bomb' can be clearly equated with what Link classes as the most influential Satanic cult image of all time, the *Sabbath Goat* by Eliphas Levi of the mid-nineteenth century.

Theologians, priests, academics, and people on confession style television programmes say listen to me, honestly, 'I'm a mess' (Cupitt 1992: 154). For Cupitt, academic theologian and priest, this needs to be celebrated. While the continual success of possession movies of the 1960s and 1970s such as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen*, and *The Exorcist*, indicate an ever growing interest in the occult, possession as metaphor for the breakdown of identity, for Cupitt we appear to have a need to be the non-differentiated blob from 1950s B movies, which is the representation of the utterly divided self without boundaries. There is meant to be humility in this, an acceptance of a state of being that is then in need of salvation, but if there is no real self, how can there be real salvation? There is certainly no real saviour or real messengers of this saviour. Cupitt calls for people to give up on the Platonic urge to seek beyond flickering shadows of this world, to not focus on any final unity whose contemplation will bring blessedness and mastery. According to Cupitt, morality is about giving up the old ideal of a thoroughly examined and unified life. In many senses, it is about giving up memory and identity, as if stating one's difference invalidates the

other. Yet the question remains, have those who have had their history denied been now remembered so proficiently that the process of remembering can now be thought of as a ruse that offers bogus insight that the claims of postmodernism can negate?

Warhol may have agreed partly with Cupitt given his claim 'I never fall apart', the simple reason being 'because I never fall together' (Foster 1996: 136), yet there is more to it than this. Warhol's power was to encapsulate moments of history. In 1974 he began work on his 'Time Capsules', labelling and storing away boxes of everyday objects, documents, notes and letters, totalling 610 boxes by the end of his life. While Freud's mission, to turn neurotic misery into general despair, may or may not have worked, Cupitt's suggestion is that an examination of the self should not take place. Of course, in these terms, in this bland blanket theorising of postmodernism, this is all hypothetical anyway, given the non-existence of the self. It also ignores the finding of the self before it can be lost. What is so interesting about Warhol, despite his development as an artist, is his unity of self, both in his image to the world, however manufactured this may be, and in his work. Warhol was dealing with material realities that were the concerns of millions of people in reality and still are; this was not a concern with nothingness, despite his concern with loss. We may step into a Warhol exhibition and marvel not at the aesthetic or spiritual magnitude of the work but more at how much a single artefact is worth. I have stressed what meaning or interrogation of meaning there is in Warhol's work. For Lacan et al there is an obsession with nothingness, which with presence, is core to metaphysics. For Cupitt, only when we stare nothingness in the face can we accept the reality of evil. The claim that evil is reality may be correct given the unregenerate nature of the earth but evil by definition is a transgression from God. He thus negates God from reality but then states that to transcend evil would be unwise; we must become fixated with the image and stop desiring something beyond it for the medium is the message. Yet, as has been discussed, the image always points to something other, be that death or the ghost, the spiritual, or in the case of Warhol, the very object he is referring to.

In the screenplay to the 1973 film *The Exorcist*, William Blatty has Father Merrin, the older of the two priests conducting the exorcism, tell Father Karras that it is evil that attempts to destroy meaning. God is all connections to the real. The earth may reflect God and by definition God must be beyond the limits of this world and understanding, *deus cognitus deus nullus*, hence the need for intermediaries, such as people with a sense of history beyond limited memory. This could be the problem with Warhol, his *neo* and *necrophilia*. When staring into the nothingness what may be seen is a reflection of the self, but this is not necessarily the same as evil. However, the question remains, do we need to accept evil in the manner that some suggest or to celebrate it is as inevitable as

Baudrillard preaches? Warhol's works such as 'Atomic Bomb' strive to capture the moment of evil so the spectator can reflect on evil and its antithesis. By doing so the spectator broadens their basis for salvation. Warhol highlights the need for the transcendent while fetishising death. The erosion of memory can lead to evil but Warhol's documents of the past solidify the real, which is a far cry from adding to the simulacra. While the unconscious mind may be always one step ahead of the conscious, despite Proverbs 3:5, the process of thinking, of engaging the conscious mind may enable evil to be overcome by denying evil's inevitability. This is achieved not merely by the desire for historicizing historicity but more by the necessity of historicizing postmodernism.

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#### HYPERMEDIA

Car-crash

<http://ww.yale.edu/amstud/r66/fr6.html>

Race riots

<http://www.sweeney.ucr.edu/egallery/warhol64.html>

Thirty Mona Lisas

<http://www.studiolo.org/Mona/MONA13.htm>

210 Coca-Cola bottles

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/gallery/image/0,8543,-11004342364,00.html>

Marilyn series

<http://www.studio-international.co.uk/studio-images/warhol/warhol4b.htm>

Elvis with a gun

<http://artsavant.com/features/warhol2002.html>

Warhol's illustration of Nixon

<http://www.uleth.ca/ffga-gal/collections/USA/Warhol.vote.html>

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