

## WILL SELF

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“*Celebrity*,” John Updike famously remarked, “*is a mask that corrodes the face.*”

But what of those who look upon that mask, and who dream of what lies behind it? When the famous walk the streets—if they do so at all—they are constantly being incorporated into the lives of others they do not know, but who believe they know them. If moderately recognizable, they are half-recalled faces, easily confused with the friends, acquaintances, and families of those who pass them by:

“Isn’t that...?”

“Wasn’t she...?”

“Aren’t they...?”

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The media realm from which the celebrities emerge, blinking into the prosaic light of day, is too lofty an Olympus for ordinary mortals to conceive of the Gods descending from—they wouldn't recognize Zeus as anything but a swan until...

It's this villagey regard, I would contend, that people are truly in search of when they desire modern fame. They understand, at a pre-conscious level, that to be famous in this over-lit age is to be recognized by the whole society in purely situational terms. I treasure an anecdote of the comedian Spike Milligan that sums this up perfectly. One day a new neighbor moved in next door to him. When Milligan came out of his house, the man said: "I've seen you on television." The following day, Milligan emerged, and seeing the man said: "I've seen you in your garden."

On good days the celebrity is a well-loved member of a tight, little community, rather than a mass society of savage alienation. Everyone has seen him or her in the garden. On bad days, the celebrity is the village idiot, its drunk, or its adulterer. On bad days, the community wants to put him in the stocks, and so he hires a publicist to sell his story to the parish magazine.

The enduring popularity of the royal family is not explicable in constitutional terms at all, nor is it a function of their seeming continuity. On the contrary, the Windsors and their consorts are truly contemporary celebrities: famous for nothing at all, save for their ability to copulate and cut ribbons. When Andy Warhol said that in the future everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes, he recognized that this yearning to escape anonymity was, in an age of burgeoning media, far more powerful than the traditional criteria of talent or greatness or beauty. He spoke—as must we all—for himself. The lack of any talent is a condition of this success; for only by epitomizing that yearn-

ing—as the voyeuristic Warhol did—can an individual be clasped to the global bosom.

When people look upon Alison Jackson's images as satiric, I feel they have profoundly missed the point. The Duke of Edinburgh might be made uncomfortable by seeing an image—apparently of himself—watching Marilyn Monroe masturbate; but that is incidental. Nor is the irony, undoubtedly implicit, in peeping at Mick Jagger, or Madonna ironing, anything more than a superficial attribute. And if we reverse the conceit, and ask ourselves: why do we find the notion of the regal at stool unsettling? The answer is because it forces us to dig further in our own shit. No, the capacity of these photographs to destabilize us, make us think, and, above all, make us question, lies on a deeper plane.

These are scenes of neurosis, domesticity, bodily functions, playfulness, birth, and death. Before mirrors, the wearers of the masks contemplate themselves; on padded benches they undergo painful cosmetic procedures. By being jolted into seeing the Gods as exactly the same sort of barnyard fowl as ourselves—a perception even the most hardheaded among us cannot resist—Jackson drives us to contemplate the very ordinary weal of common humanity: our neuroses, our domesticity, our bodily functions, our births and our deaths.

To me, these are the true vanitas paintings of the modern era. Like those arrangements of effulgent—but rotting—fruit and flowers; those extravagant boards, groaning with gold plate and glass; those coded symbols—the guttering candle, the hourglass, the stopped watch: the glimpsed lives of Jackson's subjects are profoundly still, and fraught with symbolism. These are things that we covet—indeed, they are not things at all, but people. This is the grainy, quotidian reality we turn away from to lose ourselves in gloss and matte betrayals.

Poor Pete and Kate, poor Tom and Katie,

poor Prince Wills and Bill Gates, poor hacked-about Michael Jackson, and poor, dumb Dubya. Poor Tony, whose legacy will be dust mixed with dried blood. Poor all of them—and poor us, for, just as the flowers and the fruit in vanitas paintings was depicted rotting, so we are all in a process of decay, our faces being corroded either by our fame or our obscurity.

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*„Prominenz“, so eine berühmte Bemerkung von John Updike, „ist eine Maske, die das Gesicht zerfrisst.“ Doch was ist von jenen zu halten, die sich diese Masken anschauen und darauf brennen zu erfahren, was sich dahinter verbirgt? Wenn Berühmtheiten über die Straße spazieren – sofern sie das überhaupt tun –, werden sie ständig in das Leben anderer einbezogen, die sie gar nicht kennen, jedoch meinen, alles über sie zu wissen. Wenn sie nicht ganz so bekannt sind, werden sie im Vorbeigehen als vage erinnerte Gesichter wahrgenommen und leicht mit Freunden, Bekannten oder Familienmitgliedern verwechselt: „Ist das nicht ...?“ „War das nicht gerade ...?“ „Sind das nicht ...?“*

Die Medienwelt, aus der die Prominenten auftauchen, um im prosaischen Licht des Tages aufschimmert, ist ein Olymp in allzu schwindelnden Höhen, als dass sich gewöhnliche Sterbliche vorstellen könnten, die Götter würden herabsteigen – Zeus als Schwan würden sie erst erkennen, wenn ...