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Nico: I'll be your mirror

[Show clips: beginning of *Nico Icon*; "I'll be your mirror"; *Chelsea Girls*]

Nico was famous for being Nico. That is, she couldn't act, she couldn't sing, she was pathologically shy, but she was beautiful. This means that she was an object of desire for men, and a mirror for men, for men's vanity. Even her name was the name of a former lover, Nico Papatakis. She went to great lengths to conceal her age and her origins. Born Christa Päffgen in either 1938 or 1943, she went to Berlin as a teenager to become a model, and soon thereafter to Paris; amongst her lovers then, there was the famous actor Alain Delon, with whom she had a son. In 1960, she turned up in a cameo role as herself in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. In 1965, she moved to London to launch a career as a singer. She had affairs with Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones and with Bob Dylan, and it was in London that she met Andy Warhol, who encouraged her to go to New York and join him as one his 'superstars'. In New York, she also studied with Lee Strasberg alongside Marilyn Monroe.

Warhol brought her together with Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground to become a singer in the band that he made famous. In the Velvet Underground performances, according to John Wilcock, spectators "were subjected to multiple projected images[...]: 'Nico's face, Nico's mouth, Nico sideways, backwards, superimposed, on the walls, the ceiling, on Nico herself as she stands onstage impassively singing.'"¹ It is reported that when she saw Lou Reed for the first time

¹ Qtd in David Bourbon, *Warhol* (NY: Harry N Abrams, Inc, 1989; 218-237) 222.

that she came up to him and said “Oh Lou, I’ll be your mirror, ” whereupon he wrote the song for her. (The second line of the song is: “reflect what you are, in case you don’t know.”)

As it happens, this is also exactly what Andy Warhol claimed to be – a mirror. And so it was no accident that he saw in Nico a mirror, reflecting an ideal of himself. In Warhol’s view, that she had no acting ability and no personality was a boon. She was pure image. When one of his actors approached him with the idea of wanting to perform and wanting to be a star, Warhol answered: “You don’t have to do anything. You can be a star.”² Interviewed by Leticia Ken, Warhol also said: “I’m not sure if I should pretend that things are real or that they’re fake. You see, to pretend something’s real, I’d have to fake it. Then people would think I’m doing it real.”³ At another point he explained: “But I’m still obsessed with the idea of looking into the mirror and seeing no one, nothing.”⁴ By depleting (or evacuating) the image of the human figure from all affect and meaning, Warhol made the image into an object of exchange. In Fredric Jameson’s words: “The waning of affect is, however, perhaps best initially approached by way of the human figure, and it is obvious that what we have said about the commodification of objects holds as strongly for Warhol’s human subjects, stars – like Marilyn Monroe – who are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images.”⁵ Or in the terms set by Horkeimer and Adorno, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “No object has inherent value; it is valuable only to the

² Qtd in Patrick S Smith, *Warhol’s Art and Films* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986) 138.

³ Qtd in *Warhol’s Art and Films* 146.

⁴ Qtd in *Warhol’s Art and Films* 147.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism. In *New Left Review* I/146 (July-August 1984; 53-92) 61.

extent that it can be exchanged. The use value of art, its mode of being, is treated as a fetish.”⁶

The endless repetition of images by Warhol points to this fetishisation of the image not only in Marxian terms but also in Freudian and Lacanian terms. Hal Foster notes that

Lacan defines the traumatic as a missed encounter with the real. As missed, the real cannot be represented; it can only be repeated, indeed it *must* be repeated. “*Wiederholen*,” Lacan writes in etymological reference to Freud on repetition, “is not *Reproduzieren*”; repetition is not reproduction.⁷

Foster adds:

[R]epetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather, repetition serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic. But this very need *points* to the real, and it is at this point that the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition. It is a rupture not in the world but in the subject; or rather it is a rupture between perception and consciousness of a subject touched by an image.⁸

For Warhol, Nico served as a European counterweight to his American superstars; she didn’t stand for anything, or represent anything. Nico, in her roles as singer for the Velvet Underground and as a performer in *Chelsea Girls*, could neither sing nor act. What she could do was to be a blonde – that is, a brand like Warhol’s other blondes, repeating itself without reference to her self.

⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans by John Cumming (1944; London: Alan Lane, 1973) 158.

⁷ Hal Foster, “Death in America.” In *Andy Warhol*, edited by Annette Michelson (*October Files 2*; Cambridge, MA & London: The MIT Press, 2001; 69-90) 72-3. Italics in original.

⁸ “Death in America” 72-3.

When Nico repudiated Lou Reed and instead aligned herself with Jim Morrison (of the Doors), she also came to a turning point in her performance of self, in art and in life. With and through Morrison, Nico started to write her own songs and tried to become an artist in her own right. She extricated herself from Warhol's postmodernist commodity culture to become an avant-gardist of the old kind. In her new songs, she returned to her repressed German roots, and worked through the twin traumas of the loss of her father – who probably died in a concentration camp – and of the loss of her fatherland, most notably with her recording of “Deutschland über Alles” (1974). She composed and played on the harmonium, which gave her music a kind of medieval droning sound. Her LP *Marble Index* (1969), which she made with John Cale, was called “one of the scariest records ever made” and was compared with the work of minimalist composers Philip Glass and Steve Reich.⁹ Leaving the flash capitals of the world, she moved to Manchester, where she became part of the underground music scene.

She refused her trademark as a German blonde, letting her hair get brown and letting herself become ugly. She hated when people called her beautiful. She refused to become a mirror for a man. Instead, she said “the only thing I regret is not to be a man.” It is as if she rejected the illusion of the mirror stage, which Lacan called the “classic gesture of the self: *méconnaissance*, misprision, misrecognition.”¹⁰ By refusing to provide “the Lacanian mirror of male self-representation which confirms woman in the position of *man*'s specular double or alter-ego,” in Irigaray's terms, Nico can be seen to break on through to the other side of the looking-glass “into the

⁹ *Trouser Press Record Guide*, qtd in Index of Musician Biographies, <http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608004031/Nico.html> (14 June 2009).

¹⁰ Jane Gallop, “Lacan's ‘Mirror Stage’: Where to Begin.” (In *SubStance* 11:4, Issue 37-38: A Special Issue from the Center for Twentieth Century Studies (1983) 118-128) 121.

‘wonderland’ of women’s own self-representations.”¹¹ According to Elizabeth Grosz, in place of the Lacanian mirror, “Irigaray substitutes the speculum, the curved, distorted medium of women’s self-observation and self-representation. Her ‘mirror’, the speculum, surrounds, and is surrounded by, the contours and specificity of the female body.”¹² One could say that Nico came to represent the “other woman” – not woman as man’s other.

Discussion of production of Werner Fritsch’s *Nico: Sphinx of Ice* where Nico was played by both a woman and a man.

¹¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990) 173.

¹² *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* 173.