

Ten Steps to Creating a Modern Media Icon

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1. “Icon” is from the Greek *eikon*, which means “image,” which is everything: The name of a camera. The word for all those little point-and-click pictures on your computer screen. Greek and Roman Orthodox religious objects. Little oil paintings of saints with elaborate gold panel coverings. Anybody who represents something to someone somewhere. The image that gives a debased Platonic suggestion of reality without ever being it. So create an image — one the cameras, and therefore we, will love.
2. The image must be drastically beautiful or else compellingly ugly. It must, for women, show a smooth face of impenetrable maquillage and impeccably “tasteful” clothing (Chanel, Balenciaga, Rykiel; not Versace, not Moschino, definitely not Gauthier), a flat surface of emotional projection, the real-world equivalent of a keyboard emoticon. Icon smiling at the cheering crowds: :-). Icon frowning bravely at diseased child or crippled former soldier in hospital bed: :-(. Icon winking slyly at the crush of press photographers as she steps into the waiting limousine: ;-). There should be only one name, for preference a chummy or faux-intimate diminutive: Jackie, Di, Barbra. Sunglasses are mandatory whenever the ambient light rises above building-code-normal 250-foot candles. These can be removed or peered over to offer an image of blinking vulnerability.
3. Or else the image should be, in men, so overwhelmingly tawdry and collapsed, preferably from some high-cheekbone peak of youthful beauty, that it acquires a can’t-look-away magnetism, the sick pull of the human car wreck. (The only exceptions: (1) Athletes—Tiger, Michael—whose downy smoothness and transcendental physical abilities offer a male counterpoint that is almost female in appeal; they are the contraltos of the icon chorus. And (2) actors, whose malleable faces are so empty of particular meaning as to be innocent of intelligence.) Folds of leathery skin, evidence of drug use and chain-smoking, the runes of dissipation etched on the pitted skin of hard living—they all have them. Johnny Cash, Mick Jagger, Leonard Cohen, Kurt Cobain, Chet Baker, late Elvis: the musician in ruins, the iconic face as crumbling stone monument.
4. Basic black attire is effective but must be Armani, never Gap. This suggests wisdom and sexual power, deep and bitter knowledge of the world—but with dough. The face need never change, its very stasis a sign of rich inner troubles. Sunglasses are superfluous. They smack of effort.
5. There must be a narrative structure that bathes the icon in the pure light of the fairy tale or morality play. Beautiful princess beset by ugly siblings or nasty stepmother. Lovely rich girl mistakes the charisma of power for true character. Overweening ambition turns simple boy into gun-toting, pill-popping maniac. Feisty rebel takes on the establishment of (circle one) Hollywood/big business/government/rock music/professional sports. Prodigy singled out for great things at an early age by psycho father.
6. Indispensable words in the story: “trapped,” “betray,” “tragic,” “love,” “promise” (as both verb and noun), “happiness” (always without irony), “fame” (always with venom), and “money” (never spoken). The details of the story may change, but the overarching structure cannot: you can improvise and elaborate, but never deviate.

Sometimes a new story (thrill-happy slut consorts with swarthy and disreputable jet-setter) will be temporarily substituted for an old one that no longer applies (virginal bride is unloved by philandering husband). We can't be sure which story will win out until....

- 7 4. Death. Already, at step four? Yes, absolutely, for iconography is very much a postmortem affair.

8 The death ends the life but does not quite complete it: that is the business of story-tellers and their audience, the cameras and their lights. Death is just the beginning. It should be, if possible, violent, messy and a bit mysterious. Unwise confrontations with fast-moving industrial machines—sports cars, airplanes, cargo trucks, high-speed trains, bullets. Accidents are good, having as they do an aura of adventitious innocence, followed closely in order of preference by murder, assassination, execution and suicide. If suicide it must be either a gun or an overdose of illicit drugs, usually in colorful and nasty combination: alcohol and barbiturates, crack and benzedrine, heroin and anything.

9 In all cases, the death is “shocking” and “tragic,” though in neither instance literally.

- 10 5. Now, an outbreak of hysterical mourning, baseless and all the more intense for being so. (Nobody feels so strongly about someone they actually know.) Extended retrospectives on television. Numerous panel discussions and attempts to “make sense,” to “assess the life,” to “provide context.” Long broadcasts of the funeral or memorial service complete with lingering, loving shots of weeping crowds. Greedy close-ups of the well-known people in attendance, the bizarre fraternity of celebrity which dictates that those famous for being born in a certain family have everything in common with those famous for singing pop tunes or throwing a ball in a designated manner.

11 News agencies and networks must spend a great deal of money sending a lot of people somewhere distant to cover the death. They must then justify that expense with hours and hours of coverage. We must see images of the iconic face, beautiful or ruined, over and over and over. “Ordinary” people must be shown, on the media, insisting that the media have nothing to do with their deep feelings of loss. They must say that they “felt they knew him (her),” that “she (he) was like a member of the family.” This keeps them happy and ensures that no larger form of public participation—say, protesting a tax hike or program cut, resisting a corporate takeover—will ever cross their minds as possible, let alone desirable.

- 12 6. A small backlash must gather strength, a token gesture of cultural protest that, in pointing out the real faults and shortcomings of the dead icon, unwittingly reinforces the growing “larger-than-life” status of the image. This is the culture’s way of injecting itself with a homeopathic inoculation, introducing a few strains of mild virus that actually beef up the dominant media antibodies. Those who have the temerity to suggest that the dead icon was not all he (she) is thought to be will be publicly scorned, accused of cynicism, insulted at dinner parties, but secretly welcomed.

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- 13 The final storyline of the icon-life will now begin to set, rejecting the foreign elements as dead-ends or narrative spurs, or else accepting them as evidence that the icon was “after all” human—a suggestion that, in its very making, implies the opposite. The media coverage will fall into line in telling this story because individual producers and anchors will be unable to imagine doing otherwise. Taglines and feature-story titles will help set the narrative epoxy for good, providing catchy mini-stories for us to hang our thoughts on to. Quickie books with the same titles will begin to appear—things like *Icon X: Tragic Ambition* or *Icon Y: Little Girl in Trouble*.
- 14 The producers and anchors must then claim that they are not creating this tale, simply “giving the people what they want.” Most people will accept this because to do otherwise would hurt their brains.
- 15 7. The image will now be so widely reproduced, so ubiquitously mediated on television, at the supermarket, in the bookstore, that it seems a permanent feature of the mediascape, naturalized and indispensable. It will now begin its final divorce from the person depicted. Any actual achievements—touchdowns thrown, elections won, causes championed—fall away like the irrelevancies they are. The face (or rather, The Face) looms outward from glossy paper, T-shirts, fridge magnets, posters, Halloween masks and coffee mugs.
- 16 Kitschification of the image is to be welcomed, not feared. It proves that the icon is here to stay. The basic unit of fame-measurement is of course, as critic Cullen Murphy once argued, the *warhol*, a period of celebrity equal to fifteen minutes. Kitsch versions of the image auger well: we’re talking at least a megawarhol icon or better (that’s fifteen million minutes of fame, which is just over 10,400 days, or about 28.5 years—enough to get you to those standard silver-anniversary retrospectives). No kitsch, no staying power: a hundred kilowarhols or less, a minicon.
- 17 8. There follow academic studies, well-meaning but doomed counter-assessments, sightings, and cameo appearances of the icon on a *Star Trek* spinoff series or as an answer on *Jeopardy*. People begin to claim they can commune with the spirit of the dead icon across vast distances of psychic space. Conspiracy theories refuse to be settled by overwhelming evidence of a boringly predictable chain of events involving a drunk driver, too much speed, and unused seatbelts. Or whatever.
- 18 9. Television retrospectives every decade, with a mid-decade special at twenty-five years. The final triumph of the image: entirely cut off now from its original body, it is free-floating and richly polysemous. Always more surface than depth, more depiction than reality, the icon now becomes pure zero-degree image, a depicted lifestyle without a life, a face without a person, a spiritual moment without context or meaning. In other words, the pure pervasive triumph of cultural exposure, a sign lacking both sense and referent. In still other words, the everything (and nothing) we sought all along: communion without community.
- 19 10. Now, for a religious experience, just point. And click.