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Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story Behind America's
Favorite Movies (review)

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that Reeves' gift for films was an essential part of his self-consuming quality as a man. This engaging book captures that human problem as well as offering thoughtful assessments of the work, and evoking the texture of those wild Sixties times. If he had lived, would Reeves have broken the British cycle of boom and bust, as Halligan implies? It is impossible to say. Besides, the fragmented career, like the incomplete page at Princeton, is the ultimate work of art. It promises everything, but wisely does not deliver too much.

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**Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner.
*Radical Hollywood:
The Untold Story Behind
America's Favorite Movies.***

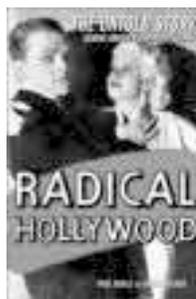
The New Press, 2002.

460 pages; \$29.95.

Sympathetic to the Left

Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, building upon the ideas introduced in their biography of leftist screenwriter and film director Abraham Polonsky, assert that many classical Hollywood studio films produced between the early 1930s and late 1940s, before implementation of the blacklist, constitute a body of work reflecting the progressive values of radical screenwriters often associated with the Communist Party. The authors, focusing upon such genres as the Western, gangster, horror, family, combat, and woman's films, argue that Hollywood screenwriters on the left were able to successfully incorporate into studio-era films storylines celebrating the triumph of common working people over the upper class and exploitive capitalist values. In developing this thesis, Buhle and Wagner, who are obviously sympathetic to the left, appear to support the accusations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and anti-communist cultural critics who maintain that Hollywood communists posed a subversive threat through their influence over film content.

Indeed, Buhle and Wagner reserve their harshest criticism for Hollywood liberals rather than right-wing politicians and



cultural figures. *Radical Hollywood* refutes the claim of studio executives and liberals that leftist screenwriters failed to control the means of production within the studio system and, thus, were unable to inoculate their political messages into the films upon which they worked. Buhle and Wagner, seeking to empower the screenwriters, such as Howard Lawson, Michael Wilson, and John Bright, upon whom *Radical Hollywood* focuses its narrative, insist that Hollywood's progressive writers were able to insert their politics into cinema. The authors, however, do acknowledge that studio executives often grafted Hollywood endings onto films, somewhat negating the issues of race, gender, and class raised by the writers.

Also, Buhle and Wagner insist that the Hollywood left was not comprised of hack artists who blindly followed the Communist Party line articulated by officials on the East Coast. In publications such as the *Hollywood Quarterly*, leftists in the film industry, along with academics, sought to articulate a film aesthetic which would incorporate more complex political ideas into popular film. In their political activities as well as film work, Hollywood communists supported the New Deal, Franklin Roosevelt, unionism, and antifascism as embodiments of the popular front.

In addition, Buhle and Wagner disagree with film scholars such as Larry May who argue that New Deal progressive themes disappeared from Hollywood films during wartime. Instead, *Radical Hollywood* argues that World War II cinema, with its emphasis upon the contribution of common people to the war effort, "marked not the simple eclipse but the filmic coming-of-age of New Deal themes" (p. 205). Perceiving the war as a reactionary cultural period only seems apparent in hindsight with the Cold War and McCarthyism.

The cultural possibilities of the Hollywood left culminated in the film noir features of the late 1940s and early 1950s, as writers about to be banished from Hollywood employed the darkness and crime themes of noir to comment upon the "deeper issues of moral erosion and individual alienation in the midst of postwar prosperity" (p. 324).

Radical Hollywood is a provocative book. The leftist proclivities of Buhle and Wagner will infuriate some readers. For example, in their discussion of *Mission to Moscow* (1943), the authors recognize the film's failure to question the Stalinist purges and show trials. Nevertheless, they observe that critics of Hollywood politics ignored such an acclaimed film as *Gone With the Wind* (1939), which "would be hard to beat as historic justification of a system vastly more widespread, brutal, and lasting than Stalinism" (p. 240). In establishing the connection between communist writers and films championing the common people, Buhle and Wagner tend to dismiss the notion that, as Gordon Wood suggests in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, concepts of the ordinary citizen demanding equal treatment with that of a more aristocratic element lie at the heart of the American experience.

As Buhle and Wagner propose, perhaps the greatest contribution of this volume is to encourage readers to rediscover the Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s in order to reach their own conclusions regarding the political implications of classical Hollywood cinema.

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**Roy Grundmann.
Andy Warhol's *Blow Job*.**

Temple University Press, 2003.

228 pages; \$22.95.

Teasing Quality

The early underground cinema of Andy Warhol points the way to the spangled postmodernism of our own times. This is not just a matter of the fascination with pop culture and those by now proverbial fifteen minutes of fame; it can be seen also in his playfulness, his manipulation of mass images, even in his refusal to communicate meaning in any conventional, narrative sense. For the Warhol of the early 1960s, as for all of us now, reality lies in the eye of the beholder.

The first factory films were minimalist embodiments of this, and *Blow Job* is one of the best known, although it is more of an idea hovering in the ether than a film that anyone has actually seen. Made in 1964, it consists of one, silent, monochrome shot in which a young man, starkly lit against a brick wall, indicates by his facial expressions and gestures that someone below the frame is performing a service that cannot be specified in a respectable journal. Roy Grundmann points out that the film's myth-in-the-ether status lies in its teasing quality. The "poser," as he calls the man, could be precisely that, because there may, or may not be anyone giving the pleasure, and, even if there were, there is no way of knowing whether it is a man or a woman. This means that viewers are faced with fundamental questions about the relationship between the seer and the seen. Moreover, if they are gay male viewers, then they are confronted with other, labyrinthine issues surrounding the nature of specifically white, gay identity.

This book is a journey into that labyrinth; queer history, cultural studies and the more abstruse aspects of film theory are our guides. In Grundmann's view, the film is a

historical document poised between Eisenhower's squeaky-clean America on the one hand, and, on the other, what might be called the countercultural break-up of the later 1960s. It spoke, therefore, for a time when gay men were grappling with the pre-Stonewall problems of visibility and invisibility, and were trying to resolve them by appropriating certain popular images, which, in themselves, were not as exclusively heterosexual as they first appeared. In this sense, *Blow Job* is a battleground of identity and language. Also, because the poser's expressions change, and his face alters as it moves in and out of the light, his image fragments into what Grundmann believes are different "visual constellations". The figure becomes "a repository of American culture that contains a pool of images that began to circulate sometime during the postwar period . . . the film [is] a sort of archaeological site in which the myths of the era become visible all at once."

The overarching myth is the multiplicity of meanings contained in James Dean. These include the suffering martyr, Richard Dyer's "sad young man", the teenage rebel and the psychopath. Dean is more than a mosaic of images, however; he is a profound, gay myth, whose death and "martyrdom" are central to the questions of gay identity and identification and the allied processes of mourning and loss.

When this book is dealing with such concrete problems, or with the relationship between the poser and Warhol's early commercial art or his later *Last Supper* works, it's impressive, vital, even moving. Elsewhere (and the story has many other aspects), it is too cocooned in theoretical jargon to be easily stomachable by the non-specialist: the concluding chapter on white, gay, male identity and race is so knotted that it drove this amateur babbling into the night. Still, even though the pudding is over-egged, it is a genuine pudding, with rich ingredients. Grundmann has written an intermittently fine study, and this gay reader, for one, will be intrigued to see what he decides to bake next.

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