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Andy Warhol's Blow Job (review)

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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historical document poised between Eisenhower's squeaky-clean America on the one hand, and, on the other, what might be called the countercultural break-up of the later 1960s.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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