



**“OUR KIND OF MOVIE” THE FILMS OF
ANDY WARHOL**

Douglas Crimp

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The Films of Andy Warhol

Douglas Crimp

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We didn't think of our movies as underground or commercial or art or porn; they were a little of all of those, but ultimately they were just "our kind of movie."

—Andy Warhol

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Preface

I conceived this book as a book, not as the collection of essays it turned out to be—a consequence of the occasional way I almost always work. I had set out to write about 1960s New York City queer culture, the culture in which I happily immersed myself when I came to the city after college toward the end of that decade. It was to be an archaeology of a world for which I use the shorthand designation “the back room at Max’s,” because the room at the back of Max’s Kansas City, an art bar on lower Park Avenue near Union Square, was where I mixed with denizens of the underground film and off-off-Broadway theater scene. Once I got down to writing, though, things took their own course. First, the topic quickly changed to Andy Warhol’s films. I projected a book about a milieu that was meant to include Warhol and the Factory, certainly, but also a wide range of other underground filmmakers such as Jack Smith, the Kuchar brothers, Ron Rice, and José Rodríguez Soltero, together with the Theater of the Ridiculous in its different guises—the Play-House of the Ridiculous and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company.¹ But I began with an essay on Warhol’s early film *Blow Job* and in the process discovered the full extent and richness of Warhol’s filmmaking by itself much more than a book could comprehend.

Like most of these essays, the one on *Blow Job*, “Face Value,” was written initially as a lecture. In the summer of 1998, I met the future museum curator Adam Budak while he was still studying at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. He invited me to speak there, and that invitation extended eventually to a tour of various Eastern European venues, including the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, and the Galerie Rudolfinum in Prague. A lecture on *Blow Job* posed some difficulties in still very Catholic and queer-unfriendly Poland. My translator in Warsaw, reproducing my talk successively, seemed to take unusually long to get each paragraph into Polish, longer than the precision of English often necessitates when rendered into another language. The audience grew more and more restive until finally some of them began yelling at the translator. Since I don’t speak Polish, I didn’t understand what was happening until I was told later by friends: The translator didn’t want to use the colloquial expressions for “blow job,” “hustler,” and so forth; nor, it seems, did he even want to use the clinical equivalents of “fellatio” and “male prostitute.” He attempted to talk his way around such unsavory notions altogether. Of course, this completely ruined my plainspoken prose and often made the sense of my talk incomprehensible, so some in the audience who spoke English well enough to know what the trouble was began shouting out the Polish words the translator should have been using.

Thus begins the story of the occasions for which I wrote these essays. The second, “Marie Montez, for Shame,” has a double origin. I had been asked to contribute to an essay collection in honor of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and thought something on Warhol might be appropriate. Around the same time, Diedrich Diederichsen, Matthias Haase, and Juliane Rebentisch came to visit me and persuade me to participate in a conference called Cross Gender/Cross Genre that they were organizing for Steirischer Herbst 99 in Graz. The conference was one of a series of events organized

by a group of Berlin-based critics under the rubric *Remake/Re-model: Secret Histories of Art, Pop Life, and the Avant-garde*.² *Remake/Re-model* also included a complete retrospective of the films of Jack Smith and an installation by Mike Kelly comprising, among other things, video interviews with Warhol superstars, members of the Bay Area psychedelic drag group the Cockettes, and various other performance figures from the 1960s and '70s.³ This seemed the perfect context for a talk on a Warhol film with drag superstar Mario Montez—a longtime favorite of mine—since it was Smith who discovered René Rivera's gifts and gave him the name Mario Montez.⁴ *Screen Test No. 2*, like *Blow Job* a film focused solely on a face, was something I'd considered writing about and since I was also thinking about Sedgwick's ideas about shame and performativity, the topic of shame seemed a natural.

I had sent "Face Value" to Callie Angell, curator of the Warhol Film Project, whom I'd recently met, and she responded with her typical generosity with two pages of meticulous corrections and discussion of interpretive points. When I sent my second essay, Callie was likewise helpful and so enthusiastic about my reading of *Screen Test No. 2* that she asked my permission to send the text to Ronald Tavel in Bangkok. Tavel was the scenarist and off-screen voice in the film. He was also someone whose work I'd known since the late 1960s, when I'd acquired a copy of his novel *Street of Stairs*, one of very few queer novels available in those days. Tavel, too, expressed enthusiasm about "Mario Montez, for Shame," and we began an exchange that would lead eventually to my writing "Coming Together to Stay Apart," about Tavel's collaboration with Warhol. Tavel was hoping to publish his screenplays for the Warhol films, and my essay began as an introduction to that sadly never-realized project.

By the time I completed writing these first three essays, I had arranged to see a fair number of the restored Warhol films. Before beginning this book, I'd had the opportunity to see only a few, and my memory of them was often vague. Here's what I can piece together of what I'd seen: As a college student in New Orleans in 1967, I saw *The Chelsea Girls* during its national theatrical release. I remember seeing *My Hustler* and *Lonesome Cowboys* in the late 1960s after coming to New York, and, more clearly, I remember seeing the early Paul Morrissey films *Flesh*, *Trash*, and *Women in Revolt* at the time they were released. (Although these latter three films were produced by Warhol, they are not credited to him by the Warhol Film Project; certainly they reflect Morrissey's sensibility, not Warhol's.) In 1981, I attended the Genoa Film Festival, where Warhol superstar Ondine showed a number of the Warhol films that he had shrewdly absconded with, and with which he supported himself over the years by showing them at whatever venue invited him. *Vinyl* was the one among these that made the strongest impression. When I began teaching gay studies at Sarah Lawrence College in 1990, *Vinyl* was one film I knew I wanted to show my students, and the college managed to locate a print. The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival (now the Mix Festival) showed *Blow Job*, also in 1990, and I saw it there for the first time. In 1995, New York's Film Forum mounted a twenty-three-film Warhol retrospective. Although I didn't attend those screenings as assiduously as I would now (since I know how rare a treat it still is to be able to see the films in a movie theater), I saw enough of them to know what was missing—indeed what we'd all been missing in those years between 1972 and 1988 when the

films were officially out of circulation.

As I started to write about the films, I also began to see them more systematically, often arranging to view films at the Museum of Modern Art's Celeste Bartos International Film Study Center. Several times, I taught a seminar on Warhol at the University of Rochester and borrowed the films from MoMA's Circulating Film and Video Library to show my students (and myself). During those semesters I was fortunate in the cooperation of the staff of Rochester's George Eastman House in programming some of Warhol's films publicly at their cinematheque, the Dryden Theatre, including the difficult-to-project double-screen films *Outer and Inner Space*, *Lupe*, and *The Chelsea Girls*. On one occasion Patrick Loughney, then Curator of Motion Pictures at Eastman House, arranged to show the five-hour-plus *Sleep*; only one or two students and I stayed through the entire film, but others came for parts of it between their other classes. In 2005, Lynne Cooke, then curator of the Dia Art Foundation in New York, invited me to program Warhol's films at Dia:Beacon to be shown every weekend from Memorial Day to Labor Day in conjunction with the exhibition Dia's Andy.⁶ This gave me an opportunity to see many more of the films. When I lectured about the films at universities or museums, my hosts would often arrange to screen the film that was my subject. In these various ways, over the years I've managed to see all but a handful of the fifty-five films that have been restored and a fair number of the twenty-eight reels of preserved *Screen Tests* (ten of them on each reel). I've been lucky enough to see *The Chelsea Girls* five times in all—including that first time as a college student in New Orleans, twice at the Dryden Theatre in Rochester, and twice in regular screenings at MoMA. I've seen *Blow Job* and *Screen Test No. 2* countless times and *Horse*, *My Hustler*, *Paul Swan*, and *Hedy* a great many times.

All of this is to say that I didn't write the essays here with extensive knowledge of the films from the beginning; on the contrary, I feel that I have a decent grasp of the full corpus of restored Warhol films only now that I've completed this book. When I set out to write about a film, I would see it, see it again—sometimes again and again—and then I'd write about it. And usually I would see it yet again and make corrections to the essay. This means that I was ignorant of the wider range of Warhol's films when I wrote the first two essays here, and, of course, this has consequences. For example, when I wrote "Face Value," I demurred at Stephen Koch's claim in his book *Stargazer* that *Blow Job* is "a piece of pornographic wit," because, as I write, "in my estimation the film is far too sexy to be regarded as primarily comic"; instead, "it is another film of the same period, *Mario Banana* . . . that does a blow job as comedy." I still think this is right, but it leaves out something crucial: In 1966, Warhol "remade" the silent *Blow Job* with sound as *Eating Too Fast*, a parody—very funny at times—of the earlier film. I knew of the existence of *Eating Too Fast* when I wrote "Face Value," but I hadn't yet seen it.⁷ Similarly, when I wrote "Mario Montez, for Shame," I had not yet seen *Screen Test No. 1*, the first film Tavel wrote for Warhol and a film in which the failure to elicit what Tavel deemed an interesting performance from Warhol's erstwhile boyfriend Philip Fagan led to reprising the scenario with Mario Montez for *Screen Test No. 2*. What could I do about these omissions? The obvious answer would be to revise the essays. But essays often have an internal integrity that can be fatally undone by revision. I've chosen a different method (following the good advice of my friend Juliane Rebentisch): an addendum to the first essay, because it seemed

necessary; one to the second, because the brief text I initially wrote for *Superstar! A Tribute to Mario Montez* at Columbia University, at the invitation of Frances Negrón-Mutaner, adds a personal note to my appreciation of Montez; and one to the sixth, because I wasn't quite finished with the subject of camp. Apart from this, the essays are essentially what they were when I first composed them.

I have attempted to refine the argument of "Coming Together to Stay Apart" very slightly, but I remain somewhat uneasy about my use of Leo Bersani's work on new forms of relationality. The redeeming occurrence of what was otherwise a largely dispiriting conference on the subject of "gay shame" at the University of Michigan in the spring of 2003 was becoming friends with Leo Bersani. (Dispiriting because my hope that a new theorization of shame might further the project of destabilizing crude identity categories in favor of a more nuanced consideration of difference was shattered by the demagogic reassertion of those very categories.) I had known Leo slightly for many years, having had dealings with him in my capacity as editor of *October* beginning in 1979, when my essay "Pictures" appeared in the same issue of the journal as his and Ulysse Dutoit's essay on Assyrian wall reliefs, "The Forms of Violence," and continuing through the publication of his famous essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in the special issue of *October* on AIDS that I edited in 1987. It is a measure of my pleasure in our growing friendship that his work on relationality presented itself as key for my discussion of Tavel's collaboration with Warhol. "I take [Michel Foucault's] summoning us to rethink the relational as a political and moral imperative (a precondition of durable social transformation)," Bersani has written of his project.⁸ This seemed to me akin to what I was attempting with my readings of Warhol's films. But I have come to feel some uncertainty about my application of Bersani's work. I am no longer sure that we can take either the lack of connection between Tavel's scenario and the film made "from" it or the superstars' narcissistic displays in the Tavel–Warhol films as what Bersani intends in his work on relationality. When I wrote "Coming Together to Stay Apart," Bersani had not yet published many of the essays and books in which he (in some cases with Ulysse Dutoit as coauthor) develops his ideas about what he calls "impersonal narcissism." I depended largely on the book in which he first proposed his project, *Homos*, where he writes, "The most politically disruptive aspect of the homo-ness that will be exploring in gay desire is a redefinition of sociality so radical that it may appear to require a provisional withdrawal from relationality itself."⁹ Such a withdrawal is what I saw as constituting the originality of the Warhol–Tavel collaborations. But whereas I do think a *nonrelation* (which is nevertheless a coming together) is the condition of those films, Bersani has gone on to propose not a *nonrelation* but rather a new type of relationality, one that does not mistake itself for—indeed actively resists becoming—a *relationship*.

There is a perhaps discernible break between the first three essays here and the ones that follow. The exigencies of my writing for particular occasions partly accounts for this too. When I conceived this book, I simultaneously thought about a related one, a memoir of my first decade in New York City, when I was finding my way as an art critic and exploring the possibilities and pleasures, just then opening up, of gay liberation culture. In 2005 and for a few years thereafter, invitations to lecture or contribute essays offered irresistible opportunities to embark on the

memoir, and so from 2004 to 2008 I worked only sporadically on Warhol. When I returned to writing about the films, I knew more of them and knew many of them better, and I had come to a clearer understanding of how Warhol's unfailing formal sense constructs their sexual politics. This became my subject in "Spacious" and "Misfitting Together," which I first presented, respectively, as the Colin de Land Memorial Lecture in New York at the invitation of Silvia Kolbowski, and at the Postwar Queer Underground Cinema conference at Yale University, organized by George Chauncey, Ron Gregg, and Juan Suárez.

The final essay, "Most Beautiful," is a hybrid. During the hiatus between the first three and second three essays here (I don't count "Warhol's Time," which I've written separately, as an epilogue to this collection), I began to pursue a newfound interest in dance film. It started with a course on an artist whose choreography influenced Warhol and whose filmmaking was in turn influenced by Warhol: Yvonne Rainer. (At the same time, reading Rainer's memoir, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life*, was another impetus to start my own.) I first screened Warhol's *Paul Swan* for a course I taught on dance film in the performance studies program at New York University, thanks to an invitation from José Muños. That same spring of 2009, Susanne Sachsse, Marc Siegel, and Stefanie Schulte Strathaus invited a group of scholars, filmmakers, and artists to Berlin to see all of Jack Smith's films, which had recently been donated to the Arsenal—Institute for Film and Video Art there, and to plan a festival of events related to the films' public screenings the following autumn. I immediately recognized the relationship of *Swan* to Smith, and determined to write about the two together for my talk at the festival, *Live Film! Jack Smith! Five Flaming Days in a Rentless World!* It was also at that festival that I got the chance to meet Mario Montez, whom Siegel had coaxed out of retirement to perform the stage version of the role that Tavel had written for him but that he had until then refused, Juanita in *The Life of Juanita Castro*. It was a momentous event.

These essays on Warhol's films are far from comprehensive in scope. I never intended to write about more than a small number of the films. There are so many of them and they are all so full of interest that it would take a lifetime, and it must be evident that I have other interests and projects. But in any case I felt no responsibility at all to write a comprehensive book on Warhol's films. That was being undertaken, brilliantly, by Callie Angell in *The Films of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné*, the first volume of which, on the *Screen Tests*, was published in 2006. Tragically, before the completion of the far-larger second volume, Callie died in 2010. That was a great loss both to me personally and to scholarship on Warhol's films, of which Callie had been at the forefront for more than two decades. I depended on Callie for so much in my own work on the films. She was always available to respond to my questions with fuller answers than a fellow scholar could reasonably expect. Her knowledge of the films was astounding. Callie was a Sherlock Holmes of researchers. She tracked down every lead and talked to everyone who knew anything about Warhol—a motley crew to be sure, and countless in number—and then she sorted out all the misinformation. One of my cherished anecdotes about her thoroughness involves going with her to the Anthology Film Archives to see *Horse*, Warhol's spoof-western made with a real horse that stands in front of the Factory elevator door. The horse's name, funnily enough, was Mighty Bird. Throughout the film's first reel, Tavel, who wrote the scenario, interrupts the action to recite the film's credits from off-camera, saying, for example, "The Sheriff is played by Gregory Battcock,"

and later, “Mighty Bird, courtesy of the Dawn Animal Agency.” Callie leaned over and whispered in my ear, “I called them. They’re still talking about the time they rented Andy Warhol a horse.” Sometime later when I wrote “Coming Together to Stay Apart,” I sent it, as I did everything I wrote about Warhol, to Callie for fact-checking. As was often the case, her corrections saved me from repeating false “facts” I’d picked up in my own research: “Although I know Tavel recalls that the ‘Horse’ horse was a ‘giant black stallion,’ I have to say, speaking as a former horse woman, that Mighty Bird looks to me to be just a regular, medium-sized horse, perhaps even a slightly small horse. Of course, any horse in a loft is going to look enormous. But I’ve ridden many horses much bigger than this one. This horse looks to me something like a cow pony (the kind of horse cowboys ride), which is at the smaller end of the scale for horses.” And further, to a specific question, “Yes, that is indeed Larry Latreille with the horse [in the middle one of *Horse’s* three reels, where there is no scripted action]. At one point, he even whispers ‘kitchy-kitchy koo’ to him. Poor tired horse....”

Callie’s generosity as a colleague extended even to my students, who e-mailed questions to her and got long, helpful, fact- and anecdote-filled e-mails back. An ever-widening circle of Warhol film-lovers and scholars gathered around Callie. Many are my good friends, and Callie’s generous spirit and love of Warhol infected us all as we exchanged our Callie-derived or -inspired Warhol lore. A very incomplete list includes Nicholas Baume, Karen Beckman, Jennifer Doyle, Jonathar Flatley, Amy Herzog, Branden Joseph, Ann Reynolds, Marc Siegel, Juan Suárez, Amy Taubin, and Lynne Tillman. Beyond this Callie Angell circle, and the people I’ve mentioned in recounting the book’s genesis, there are many more friends, colleagues, and students who have assisted and sustained me in countless ways during the period I worked on this project; an incomplete list includes Henry Abelow, Gregg Bordowitz, Johanna Burton, Lynne Cooke, Rosalyn Deutsche, Devin Fore, Martha Gever, Leanne Gilbertson, Tim Griffin, Rachel Haidu, Claire Henry, Dan Humphrey, Damien Jack, Louise Lawler, Richard Meyer, Yoshiaki Mochizuki, Taro Nettleton, Shota Ogawa, Yvonne Rainer, Matt Reynolds, Victor Manuel Rodríguez, Joan Saab, Kaja Silverman, Rachael Timberlake, Carole Vance, David Velasco, Keith Vincent, Sharon Willis, and Janet Wolff. It is through the sustenance of those mentioned here and a great many more that I have managed for so many years to keep my plural relations—any of them—from “deteriorating into a relationship,” in Leo Bersani’s memorable formulation.

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Face Value

I begin with a quotation from *Stargazer*, Stephen Koch's monograph on Andy Warhol's films first published in 1973. For twenty-five years, Koch's book was one of the few available sources of information about Warhol's film career. The films Warhol made between 1963 and 1968—and there are very many of them, more than 100, not counting the nearly 500 *Screen Tests*—were taken out of circulation in the early 1970s and only recently have again become available, thanks to the Whitney Museum of American Art's Andy Warhol Film Project and the Museum of Modern Art's film preservation work. *Stargazer* has always been tantalizing to read, especially when it was virtually impossible to experience firsthand its objects of analysis, but it's been frustrating too. For all its power of description and keen insights, Koch's book can sometimes leave an unpleasant aftertaste. Now that I'm beginning to see the films again, or in most cases for the first time, I'm able to say why. And in saying why, I hope to say something about what it is that makes them such an extraordinary achievement.

So, the quotation. It's about one of Warhol's most famous early silent films, famous for its blunt sexual title:

Blow-Job is something of a portrait film—the portrait of an anonymity. The recipient looks like a once fresh-faced, foursquare Eagle Scout, a veteran of countless archery contests and cookouts, who discovers in the process of becoming the all-American boy some weak psychic nerves that send him helplessly gliding in activities for which no merit badges are awarded, in which he discovers the body he acquired on all those jamborees and tramps in the woods becoming a bit hollow-eyed, just a touch *faisandé*. Whereupon he takes that body to the Big Apple, where he finds it to be a very sellable commodity. Large numbers of Warhol leads began their careers as homosexual hustlers. It seems a pretty safe bet that the star of *Blow-Job* belongs in their company.¹

The bad aftertaste is left partly by Koch's tone—arch, knowing, condescending—and in this particular paragraph by the charge that “weak psychic nerves” have made this man “helpless” to resist certain sexual activities, activities that will inevitably make him “a bit hollow-eyed, just a touch *faisandé*.” There is, of course, that choice of the French adjective to give just the right nuance to the accusation of decadence, an adjective that invokes being hung and gamey rot all at once. It's a word that we—the writer and his sophisticated readers—use conspiratorially against this man, assuming that he won't even comprehend its meaning. Paradoxically, though, the word choice boomerangs right back on the writer, since in the United States no real man resorts to French when he wants to call a guy a fag. Ultimately, the bad aftertaste comes down to what the whole description moves toward: Koch's presumption that this man—*this man whose face is all we see*—is a hustler. As I hope to make clear, nothing about *Blow Job*'s exquisite presentation of the face suggests the opprobrium of Koch's characterization.

These days, when we see Andy Warhol's *Blow Job*, we have no expectation of actually seeing the act of fellatio the film's title announces. We know from its advance reputation what the film will show us: for thirty-six minutes, the *face* of a man presumably getting a blow job. Perhaps we know

even more: that the film will be silent and slow; it will be projected at silent speed, sixteen (or eighteen) frames per second, as opposed to the twenty-four frames per second at which it was shot. And finally, we might know that every several minutes the film will flicker and flare momentarily into whiteness, where one of its nine 100-foot reels ends and is spliced to the next. All of these things that we know in advance about *Blow Job* conform to what Callie Angell, the late curator of the Warhol Film Project, referred to as the conceptual status of Warhol's early films, "films that can be instantaneously conveyed as ideas without actually being seen." Thus, for example, *Sleep* is "an eight-hour film of a man sleeping," and *Empire* is "eight hours of the Empire State Building from sunset to sunrise." (Neither of these descriptions is in fact correct.) "The simplicity and outrageousness of [these] encapsulated descriptions have all the efficiency of a Pop Art statement like 'a painting of a Campbell's soup can.'" But, Angell goes on to clarify, now that Warhol's early films are once again available to be seen, our experience of them is "significantly at odds with the simplicity of [their] conception."³

Of course, *Blow Job* cannot be described as thirty-six minutes of a guy getting a blow job. The shock of its pop concept is double: It's a film of a blow job that for thirty-six minutes we do not see. *Blow Job* was made during a period of police surveillance and censorship of underground cinema, which came to a head in New York City with the seizure of Warhol's early film *Andy Warhol Films Jack Smith Filming Normal Love* along with Smith's own *Flaming Creatures* and Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour*. As Angell has suggested, *Blow Job* was thus conceived as a clever "catch-me-if-you-can" rejoinder: "By undermining the sexually explicit come-on of his title with the comic prudery of his framing, Warhol parodied and subverted the expectations of both porno fans and the film censors, leaving both sets of viewers with a shared experience of frustration and disappointment, and implicating both in the same illicit desire."⁴

Much of what is written about the film involves what we do *not* see, the frustration of our desire to see the "action." "It does seem to be a real live blow-job that we're not seeing," writes Koch in *Stargazer*.⁵ And, "In *Blow-Job*, the fellated penis is the focus of attention; it's excluded from the frame."⁶ He repeats: "The film's real action is taking place very much out of frame." Its "imagined focus of interest [is] twenty inches below the frame, which the face actually on the screen never for a moment lets us forget. Perversely obdurate, the frame absolutely refuses to move toward the midriff, insists upon itself in a thirty-five minute close-up that must be the apotheosis of the 'reaction shot.'"⁷ Although Koch, like Angell, feels that understanding Warhol's films as concepts, as Dada gestures, obscures "their sumptuous beauty,"⁸ he nevertheless sees *Blow Job* as "a piece of pornographic wit."⁹ Now, it may indeed be true that *Blow Job* has witty implications for censors and porn enthusiasts, but in my estimation the film is far too sexy to be regarded as primarily comic. There are occasional snickers at screenings of *Blow Job*, but rarely real laughter, although it provoked a famously funny response at its first showing: Taylor Mead got up after ten minutes and walked out, saying to the assembled crowd as he did so, "I came already." As we shall see, though it is another film of the same period, *Mario Banana* (which exists in both black-and-white and color versions), that does a blow job as comedy.

What about what we *do* see in *Blow Job*? What about the "sumptuous beauty" that is *in* the

frame? What about that face? Certainly, as we look *at* this beautiful young man, we look *for* the signs of his sexual stimulation, which appear as the play of tension and relaxation of the face. His responses are registered in the tightening and loosening of the muscles around the mouth, the clamping shut and opening up of the eyes; but more significantly they are registered in the raising and lowering of the head.

In describing what it is we see when we watch *Blow Job*, it is important to say at the outset that after a very short time, perhaps midway into the second reel, it becomes clear that we will see nothing more than the repetition, with slight variations, of what we've already seen. We will see only the face of a man, in close-up, looking up, looking down, looking forward, sometimes looking to one side or the other. His head is positioned within the frame at some moments a little more toward the right or the left; it is rarely dead center. One possible result of the realization that this is all we will see is that we are freed to look differently. We know that nothing will happen; or to put it better, we know that what defines "happening," what counts as incident, event, even narrative, what we see and notice and think about, is very different in a film like *Blow Job* than in other kinds of films we've seen. So what I will go on to describe is the result of this realization—the realization that we will not see the blow job announced in the title, the blow job that I have every reason to believe is really taking place and is really in some sense the subject of this film.





Andy Warhol, *Blow Job*, 1964. 16mm film, b/w, silent, 41 minutes at 16 fps. Film still courtesy of The Andy Warhol Museum.
© 2012 The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, a museum of the Carnegie Institute. All rights reserved.

One could say of this film that it “narrates” a sexual act, and that as such it has a beginning, middle, and end, and even a coda. At the start, the face we see is fairly impassive, the head rather still. Soon enough, though, things begin to happen. The man tilts his head up and down and sometimes thrusts it back against the wall behind him, such that we can see only his taut chin and straining neck with its protruding Adam’s apple. His head sometimes jerks to one side or the other (the motion is quick even at silent speed) as his brow furrows and his lips purse or curl. At least once, he licks his lips. Now and then, one or the other of his hands comes into the frame—to scratch his nose, wipe his lips, press against his cheek, or run his fingers through his hair. After seven reels of these minimal occurrences that attune us intimately to this face as it expresses sexual excitement and intermittent lulls, the penultimate reel shows us the face’s blissful contortion at the moment of orgasm. Just before we see the decisive spasm, the man’s hands spring up behind his head in complete surrender. After coming, he settles back into stasis and impassivity, he scratches his nose, and the reel ends. As the next begins, a few bobs of the head and scrunches of the face suggest the man is zipping up his pants and buckling his belt. He puts a cigarette in his mouth, strikes a match, lights the cigarette, leaves it in place as he inhales, then exhales smoke that momentarily obscures the face. With obvious post-orgasmic satisfaction, he smokes, serenely looks about, wipes his nose and mouth with the back of his hand. He cradles his head in his left arm, then brings his hand to his

face and pinches his cheeks together. His mouth forms a few words of silent speech, he leans forward, and the film runs out.

All the while that we have watched this face for what it would communicate of sexual excitement, we will surely have noticed something significant about how we see the face, and how well. The film's lighting illuminates the face not from the position from which we look, but from above. Thus, when the man looks directly at the camera, his eyes are deep in shadow. His face is fully illuminated only when he holds his head back and looks up into the light. If there is any sense of frustration in *Blow Job*, it derives, I think, not from not seeing the sexual act—we really don't expect to—but from not being truly able to see the man's face. No, that's not precisely it. We do see his face, but we see it only when he does not look at us, when, sometimes in rapture, sometimes in tedium, he tilts his head back—and therefore looks away from us. Often he looks directly our way but we cannot see him looking at us. Warhol's camera captures this face and the sensation it registers, but simultaneously withholds it from us; and he does this through a simple positioning of the light as if by chance, a bare lightbulb hung from the ceiling just above and slightly to the left of the scene. We cannot make eye contact. We cannot look into this man's eyes and detect the vulnerability that his submission to being pleased surely entails. We cannot take sexual possession of him. We can see his face, but we cannot, as it were, *have* it. This face is not *for us*.

This statement would seem to contradict both of two opposing views of Warhol's films as voyeuristic, on the one hand, and as exhibitionist, on the other. According to Koch, "Even more than it does most movies, voyeurism dominates all Warhol's early films and defines their aesthetic,"¹¹ while David James argues in *Allegories of Cinema* that this cannot be so, since voyeurism is characterized by "repetitive looking at *unsuspecting* people," whereas Warhol's actors "narcissistically exhibit" themselves for "a camera whose power lies in its threat to look away."¹² Koch qualifies his notion of voyeurism in relation to Warhol's early films by suggesting that "we are held back from the sexual spectacle not by the voyeur's impulse to hide and withdraw, but by the fact that what we see is unreal, is film."¹² In fact, though, the particular ways in which *Blow Job* asserts itself as film—the fixed and absolutely delimiting framing and lighting of the subject, the slowed-down speed—don't so much complicate the experience of voyeurism as cancel it altogether. At the same time, the star of *Blow Job* can hardly be said to exhibit himself. He seems entirely uninterested in the presence of Warhol's camera; he doesn't accommodate himself to it; he doesn't even acknowledge it. As against Koch's charge that Warhol's camera is voyeuristic and James's claim that Warhol's subjects are exhibitionists, I want to claim for *Blow Job* what I will call an ethics of antivoyeuristic looking.

Blow Job is in many respects similar to the *Screen Test* portrait films Warhol began making a just around the time the former film was shot. Like each of the nine segments of *Blow Job*, the *Screen Tests* are black-and-white, silent, 100-foot-reel medium close-ups of faces shot with a stationary camera.¹³ Most of the subjects were instructed to keep perfectly still for the duration of the filming so that the filmed portrait would look as nearly as possible like a still photograph. Apart from the sheer variety of countenances, what changes most dramatically is the lighting, which is carefully controlled to produce a wide range of effects. These effects are the filmic equivalent of

Warhol's manipulation of photographs in the silkscreen process of his painted portraits, which Jonathan Flatley has argued entail a complex interplay between giving face and effacement, figuration and disfigurement, idealization and erasure, embodiment and abstraction:

On the one hand, Warhol's portraits have the appearance of being like hypograms, decorative make-up jobs that are unable to "signify" anything in themselves. On the other, the supplementary act of underscoring, *by means of make up*, the features of a face, turns out not to be simple addition, "increase," or improvement but in fact a display of the radical instability of recognizability.... The hypogramic quality of Warhol's portraits quickly slides to the prosopopoetic, inflecting *all* our face recognitions with an uncanny sense of the fictive.... There is no recognition, indeed no face, as it were, *before* the portrait.¹⁴

Warhol's formal procedures for painting or filming faces have their psychic equivalent in his subjects' self-presentation. Positioned in front of Warhol's camera, each sitter projects a persona, makes of his or her face a mask. As David James explains,

The camera is a presence in whose regard and against whose silence the sitter must construct himself. As it makes performance inevitable, it constitutes being as performance. The simple activities proffered as the subject of documentation are insufficient fully to engage the sitter and merely establish an alternative area of attention, momentarily allowing self-consciousness to slip away. The sitter oscillates between his activity and awareness of the context in which it is taking place. In *Eat*, for instance, Robert Indiana's eyes focus on the mushroom, then rove around the room seeking to avoid the very place where they must eventually come to rest. The situation is that of psychoanalysis; the camera is the silent analyst who has abandoned the subject to the necessity of his fantastic self-projection.... Alone in the anxiety caused by the knowledge of being observed but denied access to the results of that observation, the subject must construct himself in the mental mirrors of his self-image or his recollection of previous photography.¹⁵

Although this analysis holds true for many of the *Screen Tests* and other early portrait films such as *Eat* and *Henry Geldzahler*, it works considerably less well for *Blow Job*. In the latter case the simple activity that occupies the man being filmed is not directly documented at all; nevertheless, it is entirely sufficient to engage the subject and keep self-consciousness at bay for the film's duration. His only acknowledgment of the other context—camera and film crew—are the words he utters in the film's final seconds, and it shouldn't surprise us that it is only at that point that he appears to notice them. Indeed, *Blow Job*'s wit might be understood not as a commentary on the porn film but as a lesson in how to produce a really beautiful portrait—better than saying, "Say cheese." Perhaps we need to amend David James's statement that "only if you are unconscious (*Sleep*) or a building (*Empire*) can you be unaware of media attention in Warhol's world" to include getting a blow job.¹⁶

In fact, no categorical statement will do justice to Warhol's range. Although Warhol's work is extraordinarily coherent in many respects, within that coherence is a very wide variety of experimentation. Take *Kiss*, for example, another portrait-like film made up of 100-foot reels, each of its thirteen segments in this case showing a pair of couples kissing. Although an occasional flicker of awareness of the camera's presence occurs—in a sly smile and a stare at the lens—for the most part the kissing couples are so mutually absorbed that the camera's presence is effectively denied, and in any case the framing of most of the kisses is so close up that we cannot see enough of either kisser to determine anything of self-consciousness. But more interesting in our context is a film that does conform in significant ways to James's description. I have in mind the comic version of *Blow Job*, *Mario Banana*.

Mario Banana is another close-up of a face, this one a bit tighter; the face's position suggests that Mario Montez, the film's star, is prone. Mario wears a low-cut gown, a gaudy necklace, and his Jean Harlow wig, which, as Ronald Tavel, Warhol's resident scriptwriter for the early sound films, remarked, "looks like an ill-skinned white cat."¹⁷ As the reel begins, Mario looks directly at the camera, lowers his eyes in a charade of bashfulness, but just can't help looking right back at the camera. A banana enters the frame. It catches Mario's eye. He casts a knowing look at the camera. The banana moves center screen, toward Mario's mouth, and we see that the banana is held delicately, by Mario himself, wearing white evening gloves. Mario slowly peels the banana while keeping his eyes glued to the lens. He holds the fruit up, eyes it, licks it, sucks it. The mock fellatio is underway. Mario takes a bite, looks at us, chews salaciously. He licks the banana again, deep-throats it, looks at us, takes another bite. The third time Mario takes the banana in his mouth, he shoves it way in and pulls it out again five times, takes a last bite, and the film runs out. *Mario Banana*: unquestionably "a piece of pornographic wit."



Andy Warhol, *Mario Banana (No. 2)*, 1964. 16mm film, b/w, silent, 4 minutes at 16 fps. Film still courtesy of The Andy Warhol Museum. © 2012 The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, a museum of the Carnegie Institute. All rights reserved.

Unlike the man in *Blow Job*, Mario is bathed in bright light. His every facial expression is blindingly visible. His eyes look directly into ours. We don't catch him in the act; he beckons to us with his big brown eyes to watch what he can do with that banana. Tavel also wrote, paraphrasing

Jack Smith on *Maria Montez*: “Make no mistake about it, Mario Montez believes he is the Queen of the Silver Screen.”¹⁸ Mario performs every second of his four-minute role. All persona, Mario is also utterly self-conscious. Indeed, he is self-consciousness personified. Warhol himself suggested what makes Mario’s performance so touching: “He adored dressing up like a female glamour queen yet at the same time he was painfully embarrassed about being in drag (he got offended if you used that word—he called it ‘going into costume’).”¹⁹ Simultaneously impudent and chagrined, Mario coyly performs his shame of performing, of *what* he’s performing, and *as what* he’s performing.

David James’s astute characterization of Warhol’s filmic space as a “theater of self-presentation,” where people are “always trying to accommodate themselves to the demands of the camera,”²⁰ can thus be seen as a paradigm that is tested in different ways by different films. Mario Montez is all accommodation in *Mario Banana*; there is no oscillation between documented activity and awareness of context. Mario’s self-consciousness is figured for the camera as a function of the fellatio he performs. By contrast, *Blow Job*’s star makes no accommodation whatsoever. His attention appears fully absorbed by the sensation that is all his face reveals. He doesn’t perform at all; he is performed upon.

The difference between the two films is more than this difference between giving and getting, but the meaning of this particular difference in Warhol’s world constitutes a portion of its interest, certainly for contemporary queer viewers attempting to reconstruct our histories.²¹ Thomas Waugh writes of what he calls Warhol’s revision of a “key dynamic” of 1960s gay life, the “queen-hustler paradigm”: “If the queen is effeminate, intense, decked out, oral, desirous, and, to use [Parker Tyler’s 1960s word, ‘offbeat,’ the hustler—or ‘trade’—is butch, laid-back, stripped bare, taciturn, ambivalent, and ‘straight.’ The queen looks, the trade is looked at.”²² In the cases of *Mario Banana* and *Blow Job*, we might add: The queen is fully visible; the hustler is harder to make out.

Now that I, too, have referred to the man in *Blow Job* as a hustler, it is time to come back to my initial objection to Koch’s calling him that in *Stargazer*; I do so by once again turning to David James:

What distinguishes Warhol from his predecessors and successors is his disinterest in moral or narrative inflection; his willingness to allow marginal subcultures entry into the process of documentation is paralleled by paratactical formal structures that make no place for authorial possession of them. Its ingenuousness aside, Warhol’s refusal to censor, to censure, or even to create hierarchies bespeaks a toleration, simultaneously ethical and aesthetic, that inheres in all his most characteristic gestures—his collapse of the distinctions between surface and depth, between life and art, between reality and artifice, between high society and the underworld.²³

I find this portion of James’s essay especially significant for tying Warhol’s aesthetics to ethics through the disinterest in moralizing and refusal of authorial possession. I do not, however, agree that Warhol’s nonjudgmental approach implies toleration, since toleration presupposes precisely the hierarchies Warhol refuses. Toleration is not a two-way street. A dominant culture tolerates a subculture, or doesn’t, as it chooses. A subculture has no such choice. As Pier Paolo Pasolini famously wrote, “In relationships with those who are ‘different,’ intolerance and tolerance are the same thing.”²⁴ An ethical position entails not a toleration of difference but an obligation provoked by the very fact of difference. Warhol’s camera makes the fact of difference visible. It is as if

Warhol had set about, twenty-five years before the fact, to illustrate Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's first axiom for an antihomophobic analysis of sexuality in *Epistemology of the Closet*: "People are different from each other."²⁵ Different people are the intriguing constituents of Warhol's world. "The world fascinates me," he said in an important early interview, "It's so nice, whatever it is. I approve of what everybody does."²⁶ Warhol does not judge the people in his world. He gives us access to them, to their various shades of beauty, but he does not make them objects of our knowledge. They simply are. The face of the man in *Blow Job* is only a face, a face of a man, a man getting a blow job. That is all. Why then does Koch call him a homosexual hustler, and why do I?

This question returns us to the problem of voyeurism. Koch's response to seeing the face of the man in *Blow Job* is just the opposite of what for James constitutes the aesthetico-ethical stance of Warhol's work: Koch takes possession of him, assumes a knowingness about him, and censures him for what he has construed about him. This man, he avers, has "weak psychic nerves." He falls helplessly into activities without merit. He "takes his body" to the city and offers it as a commodity. He's a rotten piece of meat. Let's compare what Warhol has to say about this man. In *Popism*, he tells a story of asking the actor Charles Rydell to star in the film. Rydell failed to show up because he thought Warhol was putting him on. So, Warhol says, "We wound up using a good-looking kid who happened to be hanging around the Factory that day, and years later I spotted him in a Clint Eastwood movie."²⁷ John Giorno, Warhol's close associate at the time and the sleeper in *Sleep*, reports, simply enough, "Someone brought to the Factory this young, anonymous actor who was playing Shakespeare in the Park, a beautiful innocent guy who nobody knew and nobody saw again. Andy made *Blow Job* with him, the face of a man getting a blow job and cumming."²⁸

As much as I like these characterizations—"a good-looking kid," "a beautiful innocent guy"—I don't want to whitewash the guy in *Blow Job* (who has been identified as DeVerne Bookwalter, a young actor specializing in Shakespeare roles).²⁹ He may be innocent, but he's no angel. I'm perfectly content to think of him as a guy who's willing to stand in front of a movie camera (and a film crew) while somebody sucks his cock. For that matter, I have no problem with thinking of him as, in Koch's words, "a homosexual hustler," so long as I can call him that without thereby imagining him as an object *for me*. For if, as I am claiming, *Blow Job* constitutes an ethics of antivoyeuristic looking, I cannot *know* this man, where "knowing" means making him an object both of sexual possession and of knowledge. Koch writes of the hustler figure in Warhol's late films, "The hustler, identifying himself as the sexuality of his flesh and nothing more, proposes himself as a wholly passive and will-less being, subject exclusively to the will of others."³⁰ This may well be true of Joe Dallesandro as represented in Paul Morrissey's films, which share Koch's apparent moralizing even as they exploit a lust for the hustler's hunky body. It is possibly even true of *My Hustler*, one of the first Warhol films Morrissey worked on. But Koch has retroactively applied it to *Blow Job* as well, even while he recognizes that there is a world of difference between the films: "*My Hustler* is a piece of psychological realism. Even today [1973] writing this sentence feels strange. In 1964, one would not have expected ever to write it. It is a structured little piece of film about a probable human situation that is intended to hold the interest of all those people out in movieland. It is a film made at the end of a very long road from *Sleep*."³¹

My Hustler is in some ways typical of the sound films that immediately followed Warhol's silents. These were shot with an Auricon camera that takes 1,200-foot rolls, and many of the films consist of two of these thirty-three-minute reels. The first of these, *Harlot*, is something of a reprise of *Mario Banana*, but this time Montez is joined on Warhol's couch by three other people who watch his shenanigans with bananas. The more significant difference is the addition of a soundtrack. Three men off-screen carry on a conversation that occasionally makes reference to something on the screen. The first reel of *My Hustler* seems as if it was conceived like this, with the camera fixed steadily on Paul America sunbathing on Fire Island. The difference here would have been that the three off-screen voices discuss *only* what is seen on-screen. But this idea is immediately negated by the opening shot, which shows not the hustler but the john. The hustler first appears when the camera pans away from the loquacious queen to catch sight of Paul America walking down to the beach. After dwelling for some time on the hustler's body, a cut returns the viewer to the beach-house deck, after which a series of pans, zooms, and cuts move back and forth between the speakers and the object of their banter.



Andy Warhol, *Screen Test: DeVerne Bookwalter*, 1964. 16mm film, b/w, silent, 4 minutes at 16 fps. Film still courtesy of The Andy Warhol Museum. © 2012 The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, a museum of the Carnegie Institute. All rights reserved.

In an essay deploring the decline of Warhol's films dating from the entry of Morrissey on the scene, Tony Rayns writes, "When Morrissey insisted upon panning the camera from the sex object to the speakers, he not only ruptured the formal integrity of Warhol's methods but also, at a stroke, turned Factory films into vehicles for 'actors.'"³² At the end of this road, "Morrissey ... introduced a transparent vein of moralism: *Flesh*, *Trash*, *Heat* and the horror diptych are chronicles of all the ills that flesh is heir to. These are not only conventionally authored films, but films whose scripting and casting more or less explicitly express an authorial point of view—a mixture, as it happens, of prurience, condescension and supercilious contempt."³³ I agree with this assessment of the Morrissey films, but let's return to *My Hustler* to determine what Morrissey has actually done, if indeed Morrissey is to blame.³⁴ Rayns charges that the change in Warhol's technique signaled by panning up to the beach house makes these films vehicles for actors (he puts "actors" in quotation marks). What I take him to mean is that with *My Hustler* people stop being "themselves" and begin playing roles. But if, in front of Warhol's camera, being oneself is always already performing, what has changed? The answer is a word: "hustler." When Koch writes that this film is a probable human situation, he refers to a story the film schematically plots: A queen has brought a hustler to Fire Island, where he becomes the object of competition between the queen and a fag-hag neighbor and an aging hustler who have dropped by the queen's beach house. Hustler, queen, fag hag, aging hustler: this is what's new about *My Hustler*. It's interesting that "psychological realism" requires that we know characters in such a way as to give them the names of stereotypes. This is the kind of knowledge—a knowledge that is presumptive, knowing; a knowledge of the other for the self; a making of the other into an object for the subject—this is the kind of knowledge that *Blow Job*'s face exceeds.

Since I have spoken of the antivoyeurism of *Blow Job* in relation to ethics, I want to end with a suggestive statement by Emmanuel Levinas; I wish to do no more than juxtapose it with what I've said about Warhol's early film:

The Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context. Ordinarily one is a "character": a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice, son of so-and-so, everything that is in one's passport, the manner of dressing, of presenting oneself. And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context: the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not "seen." It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond.³⁵

Addendum: *Eating Too Fast*

I sent “Face Value” to Callie Angell, who offered a useful note about Paul Morrissey’s role in *My Hustler*:

I think that the issue of the camera movement in *My Hustler* has been rather distorted. The accepted wisdom is that Warhol had never previously moved his camera, and didn’t want to do so until Morrissey convinced him to do so; but, in actuality, there is plenty of camera movement in a number of the films from ’63 through ’65, leading up to *My Hustler*: *Tarzan and Jane*, *Batman Dracula*, *Poor Little Rich Girl*, *Restaurant*, *Afternoon*, and—particularly interestingly—in *Space*. I don’t disagree with your interpretation of the camera movement in *My Hustler*—and, I think it’s true, Warhol was reluctant to make this particular choice in this particular film, actually did shoot another reel with the same action without moving the camera, and always afterwards said he liked the second reel of *My Hustler* (in the bathroom) best. But I think it’s somehow wrong to attribute this to—or blame it on—Morrissey. Warhol was perfectly capable of using a moving camera, if he wanted to; he would of course have understood the formal implications of different kinds of camera movement (or non-movement) in minimalist films vs. commercial narratives, and he was responsible for this decision. I think there are many examples of interesting accommodations between Warhol’s hardcore aesthetic instincts and his commercial aspirations, of which this may be the first, but I also think one runs the risk of overlooking the scope of Warhol’s ambition by describing this shift simply as something he was talked into against his better judgment.

Furthermore, Morrissey has always been the one to draw attention to this moment—perhaps in a retroactive attempt to enhance the significance of his role in the Warhol films? After all, the real “other” person behind *My Hustler* was Chuck Wein, whom Morrissey never talks about.... I know *My Hustler* was deliberately planned as a commercial production, produced by Chuck and Dorothy Dean, and the stylistic differences in it were related to that intent. My gut feeling is that Morrissey was, at that point, a relatively new techie on the Factory scene, and probably not someone with all that much influence on what Andy did.¹

I was too eager to accept Tony Rayns’s views about Morrissey’s pernicious influence on *My Hustler*. I’m not a great fan of Morrissey’s films; Morrissey seems to me to have cynically attached himself to Warhol and adopted a great many of Warhol’s formal strategies only to put them to a very different, even opposite purpose. His conventionally moralistic views about sex, drugs, and all kinds of nonconformism and his often shrill Philistinism about Warhol’s artistic achievement make him an easy target for partisans of Warhol’s films. But Rayns’s argument does, as Angell suggests, also cast Warhol as too easily manipulated and thus reproduces the cliché of Warhol’s passivity. I return to *My Hustler* in “Spacious” with a rather different view of it.

When I wrote “Face Value,” I knew of the existence of a “sound remake” of *Blow Job* called *Eating Too Fast*, but I hadn’t seen it and didn’t know much about it. So when I wrote that *Mario Banana* did a blow job as comedy, I was unaware that *Eating Too Fast* even more explicitly did just that. *Eating Too Fast* was made some two years after *Blow Job* during the period Warhol was making mostly two-reel films, some of which were eventually assembled for *The Chelsea Girls*. As in several films from 1965 and 1966, *Eating Too Fast*’s camera doesn’t move in the first reel (until the very end of the reel), then becomes constantly mobile in the second. The film might have been intended for double-screen projection to highlight the contrast between the camerawork in the two reels.² Both in framing and in lighting, the first reel’s shot is virtually identical to Warhol’s *Screen*

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