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JAMES STOLLER

Beyond Cinema:

Notes on Some Films by Andy Warhol

Q: *If you were very stupid, could you still be doing what you are doing?*

A: *Yes.*

Q: *If so, why do you do it?*

A: *Because I'm not very smart.*

"Andy Warhol: Interview by Gerard Malanga," in *KULCHUR 16*

Loathing for Warhol, as it was doubtless meant to, comes by now—for some time has come—naturally: the outrageous waste of film (and money), the Reynolds-wrapped factory, the peroxide public appearances, Edie Sedgwick on the fashion page at the height of everyone else's moral involvement in Vietnam protest, and all the other manifestations of what is easily seen as an unwarranted and irresponsible success. (As I write this he is touring with his discotheque.) Once at a performance at the avant-garde theater of New York's Judson Memorial Church I saw Andy Warhol sitting very cool and very insolent on an elevated platform that seemed to be standing in, for the occasion, for Olympus; it was hard not to think that it was only a matter of time before someone would rise to the provocation and shoot, and Andy come tumbling down. But I hope it will be remembered, when he does, that he has shown movies of some interest, which some time back began to represent expansions and enrichments of the early, better-publicized efforts. For one thing, the Warhol films have seemed more and more to become showcases for other talents and other *auteurs*, although they generally retain (but even this may be changing as I write) the convention of the stationary, slightly off-balance frame, sustained until the film runs out and picked up again after reloading. Also, they all run too long

(in some cases this is the understatement of the year), with the result—given the largely improvisatory conditions—that utterly worthless passages are bound to occur, and the corollary that any favorable judgment one may find oneself expressing is really a judgment upon an imaginary, edited version of the film.

Despite this, there are many different kinds of "Warhol films," probably more than I know since I am far from having seen them all. Between something like *Vinyl* ("screenplay" by Ronnie Tavel, magnificently acted—and danced—by Malanga) and something like eight hours of the Empire State Building, there is a reasonable difference. I can't imagine anyone wanting to see a minute of the latter; and yet even here it's more notable than not that the man of the hour—well, he was then—should have made a "film" so arrogant in its disregard for any conceivable variety of public taste; a film completely undercutting, by its *reductio ad absurdum*, Jonas Mekas' apologies on behalf of the earlier and comparatively enthralling peach-eating, pipe-smoking (by one of the least photogenic art critics in town), and so forth; a film, in short, that nobody could possibly sit through!* (What's almost funny is that it's signed by two people—Warhol and John Palmer—as if its methods required a meeting of minds.) On another occasion, a Cinematheque audience was treated to a sustained close-up of a corner of a buffet table, while hands sporadically removed or replaced utensils and muffled conversation could be detected in the background. This was called *Space*, and I assume it was still occupying same long after

* I was wrong. See Gregory Battcock in *Film Culture*, Spring 1966 (an article that almost makes me want to see it).

I had fled to the double bill at the St. Mark's a few blocks away.

For people sit there! Works like *Empire* and *Space* may serve no useful purpose in the world, yet those who can temporarily forget that real film-makers are starving regularly—as the *Village Voice* movie diarist who is Warhol's staunchest defender has often reminded us—would have to be awfully pompous not to feel amused about these “films” in a way, much as I felt amused when Alfred Leslie's miserable *Last Clean Shirt* drew exactly the reaction at the New York Film Festival that the program notes said it would. With *Empire* there were the predictable stories of people going to see it—the title sounds like Uris, or Edna Ferber—and then growing violent as they began to discover what it was, as if an audience that supports a culture like ours didn't deserve and even provoke exactly this kind of thing. (As for those others of us who are happy to sit there, how convinced we must already be of the justice of our deserts! And at each new capitulation—gazing at the first half of *Poor Little Rich Girl* and seeing that “intentional” blur as the source of an unexpected loveliness—how pleased with ourselves we are!)

But Warhol, I think, has also given his audience more than it deserves. From its defiantly primitive beginnings, his cinema has evolved into an agent which examines and questions the very nature of theater and film, and which, by holding up and then stripping away masks, shrewdly and painfully inflicts upon its performers the cruelties not only of self-exposure but of humiliation; a humiliation which, one begins to suspect, only the sheer stupidity of some of these “stars” could have led them to submit to. This is the motive force of the Chuck Wein—Edie Sedgwick films, *Poor Little Rich Girl* and especially *Beauty #2*: corrosive and unpleasant meetings of Pirandello and Strindberg in which the off-camera voice of Edie's friend (Wein) gives vent to all his apparent contempt for and ridicule of her (accompanying, we may infer, his equally real fascination) while, doing this and that, increasingly helpless and confused, she virtually

asks for more. There is some of this kind of thing in the films scripted by Ronald Tavel also; in the extraordinary *Screen Test*, a transvestite, Mario Montez, is instructed by the off-camera “director” (Tavel) to lift “her” skirt, unzip “her” fly (“don't worry, the camera won't pick it up”) and scrutinize “her” penis. “I know what it looks like,” Mario Montez protests with evident disgust. Yet “she” is made to look and remind herself of . . . the awful truth. And it *is* awful, but you have to see the film, and perhaps even the whole film, I think, to understand. The beauty of much of *Screen Test* is the beauty of the rhythms of successive dissipation and renewal of an illusion: the illusion of Mario Montez as star of the silent screen. Well, Warhol has been *Herald-Tribune* property for some time, and a writer for no less aggressively hip a journal than the *East Village Other* was recently busy being appalled that Warhol had become a leading local spokesman for the homosexual experience. But homosexuality itself is not the subject of his films; in *Screen Test* particularly, there is a web of ambiguities and complexities so rich that it partakes of elements that are essential to tragedy and comedy alike, except that both categories are finally invalidated by the fact that what is happening, although absolutely dramatic, is also absolutely real, happening not only in the film but in the world.

And so, writing though I do from the outerlands of this world, it may not be irrelevant to record the extra-cinematic sadnesses, as they strike me, of the whole ambience: for example, that a young poet of uncommon gifts, the master of a distinct and promisingly private sensibility, should now be departing from his vocation to align himself with the fearful super-cool of the Warhol environment, and appear Harlow-headed in public, and publish an affectionate but mysteriously spiteful-sounding profile of Baby Jane Holzer, the first “superstar,” who apparently left or was released from the sacred fold because she wanted to play warm and human parts; that her successor, who is physically stunning if limited in style, should volunteer or be persuaded to exhibit herself in

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ways so telling of these limitations (beyond any demands traditionally made by "art") that, unless it is more a matter of *persona* eclipsing personality than I would think likely, her very life is bound to be conditioned unfairly by the public context in which these rather nasty demands are met (and I do mean her life—not, as in the case of a merely bad actress, her career). And Andy Warhol himself—what are we to make of that poor round blank face that stares at us dazedly in the *Village Voice* from behind shades and foolish candy-striped shirts, witlessly and without inflection, lending himself to exhibitionistic extravagances that are already more than we wanted of him, the famous cool extending indiscriminately to the point where it carries an embarrassing suggestion of vulnerability? Yes, it *is* embarrassing, an image we would prefer not to consider much—we are almost grateful for those shades—and what is most embarrassing is that from this man who could be pushing his fortieth year there should come no hint at all of his feelings about the peculiar kind of indignity—however profitable—he has abandoned himself to. Behind the shades, we feel, the eyes might really say nothing after all.*

Of course I am being presumptuous and obtuse and none of this is my business, except insofar as compassion for people and what one may consider their mistakes is anyone's business. My point, however, is that such responses on my part—as I would expect on others'—are more than usually inseparable from my responses to these "films" themselves. In the case of Edie Sedgwick, no less is involved than the better part of the films in question (*Poor Little Rich Girl*, *Beauty #2*): the spectacle of the "superstar" isolated not by her glory and uniqueness, but by her desolation and inadequacy. All this is something very



J. D. McDermott, Gerard Malanga, and Edie Sedgwick in Andy Warhol's *VINYL*.

strange, casting a disturbing shadow from one angle or another over the seemingly trivial action of the films; not only the films themselves but the carefully created ambience provoking conditions which make it impossible for us to take the things as films alone. They presume to engage us in other ways.

Apart from the early *Tarzan and Jane Regained—Sort Of*, whose final form apparently owed much to Taylor Mead, I can recall seeing only one Warhol film which was wholly pastoral and unneurotic in feeling, which contained or provoked none of these or other disturbing implications; and that turned out not to be a Warhol film at all, as I thought at the time, but a kind of homage, by Jonas Mekas, to Warhol—really a work of Mekas' own sensibility though seemingly in the official Warhol style. When I saw *Award Presentation* I was hung up for days on the kind of imagination that had produced it, an imagination revolutionary enough at once to conceive of a film as something so simple and to make that simplicity so pleasurable. Jonas Mekas presents the Independent Film Award to Warhol and his gang, who are formally grouped as if posing for a class portrait. The award is a basket of fruits and vegetables. Mostly unmoving from their fixed positions in the frieze, our friends, each beautiful or striking enough to hold his/her corner of the screen, proceed

* Since I wrote this, Donald Newlove in *The Realist* has provided new data: "Andy . . . had now taken off his shades and returned her looks with the big, batting brown eyes of a querulous lemur. Warhol's eyes are absolutely *strange*. They almost never have an emotion, only a gentleness."

to examine the things, eat them, pass them around, share them. I admit it, I found this film wonderful to behold—and well worth beholding. It was exactly what Mekas has said that Warhol's *Eat* was, for example, except that it was and *Eat* wasn't. Part of the difference is that the intention of *Eat* seems to have been to create irritation and boredom (one man in everlasting close-up, his face an arid mask) while the intention of *Award Presentation* was praise—coupled with the happy invitation to watch a group of watchable people engaged in a communal activity: sharing. I don't intend this distinction as absolutely qualitative or even especially suggestive, in spite of the fact that I prefer Mekas' eating movie to Warhol's. Such things can work both ways. The fascination with the sadomasochistic experience in Warhol/Tavel's *Vinyl*—a complicated and realistic performance, full of beatings and erotic role-changing, before which a viewer may be alternately amused and horrified—seems to me infinitely more honest than Mekas' treatment of a similar "scene" in his film of *The Brig*, where the violence, although comfortably disguised in the name of protest (sister of praise), is all the more salacious for having been deprived by the action-camera methods of the elegant choreographic patterns which brought a strange tension to the Living Theater production, giving it a different and validating dimension.

Mekas as critic is an equalizer or leveller, blotting out jagged discrepancies and distinctions and promoting a kind of mystical continuity between art-works. On an anonymity kick recently (why sign films? nothing is created, everything exists already, etc.), he pointed out that Andy Warhol's films are unsigned. It's not exactly true—those I've seen are untitled, but a loud voice does come on giving Andy and everybody credit—but even if it were true, it would be misleading. Mekas' disingenuous neglect of all the unpleasantnesses and complexities of these films (like his failure to write about the really black or ugly ones: *Vinyl*, *Horse*, *Kitchen*) is really symptomatic of his neglect of exactly that condition of the

created or forced outer environment which is essential to the full intended experience of them—including of course the fact that we come to see an Andy Warhol film loathing or at least doubting Andy Warhol and all he represents and daring him to prove his worth. One of Warhol's *Most Beautiful Boys* segments was a long close-up of a young man I instantly recognized from several Village productions as the late dancer, Fred Herko. I wonder what the segment would have meant to me if I had not recognized him and not recalled admiring his art and reading something about the circumstances of his death. As it is the footage became excruciatingly moving as I uncontrollably invested Herko's glowering expression with meanings brought from outside the film. It used to excite filmgoers to learn that the look on a man's face seemed to "change" as it was intercut with shots of different stimuli; it seems to me much more important to know the extent to which information from the world outside is likely to affect our response to something on a screen. Notably, of the Warhol films involving dialogue that I have seen, the least interesting were those to which I could find little or no outside information to apply: *Kitchen* was merely absurdist theater again, with Edie Sedgwick safe behind a script; *My Hustler* was like hip Paddy Chayefsky, and just as depressing. As for *The Life of Juanita Castro*—which had the distinction of evoking Andrew Sarris' first rave ever for an "underground" film—the only interesting thing about it, I felt, was its glimpse of the personality of the "real" Marie Menken, a far cry from what one would have expected the creator of her fragile little films to look like. It was Marie Menken's very evident annoyance with the lines she was supposed to repeat and with the whole project that gave the film what life it had—though it wasn't enough to keep me to the end. But the places where Warhol's "art" speaks in its own voice—which is consequently a voice worth listening to—are the places where film and gossip, which for so long have bolstered and helped sustain each other in secret, mingle openly and for the first time without shame.