

INTRODUCTION



When Andy Warhol began making films in 1963, blow jobs, although widely given and received, to be sure, were still a taboo subject. Any claim that, today, this taboo has been lifted, is a misjudgment, despite the sexual liberation of the 1970s, the public sphere's acknowledgment of "alternative lifestyles," the media industry's ever more aggressive exploitation of racy sex, the proliferation of Internet chat rooms, and a recent presidential sex scandal. Especially the last example makes clear just how deeply American culture continues to be pervaded by the private/public split. Apart from the fact that genital sex in general is still a queasy subject (its representations relegated to the realm of the pornographic), sex of the nonmarital, nonreproductive kind is entertained with even greater anxiety.

As far as blow jobs are concerned, sex censorship is firmly ritualized and yet (or therefore?) highly ironic. Representations of blow jobs are precise indices of how a modern, basically liberal, secular society determined by the private/public split visually serves up sex to its media consumers. On one level, the physical particularities of blow jobs are a godsend for Hollywood and cable television: The partner who moves down the anatomy invariably exits the frame—the realm of what is deemed representable—without disturbing the viewer's connectedness to the overall act. Even so, these physical specifics, in themselves, still pose a particularly slippery area. They foreground in charged manner that sex is about power, and power is what determines the status of gender and gender relations under patriarchy. Lacking naturalizing paradigms (the teleology of reproduction; the missionary position as centerpiece of Western sexual tradition), representations of such devious variants as fellatio and, of course, anal intercourse immediately beg the question—even more so than naturalized and accepted forms of sex do—of who may do what to whom and in which constellation. Answering this question is risky because it is potentially compromising.

One thing that makes it hard to talk about sex is that any such talk always reveals something about the talker. To simply observe and describe sex without revealing some form of personal affect is the clinician's domain, and while most of us may have little desire to excel in this speech genre, even the banal act of substituting such terms as fellatio and oral sex with "blowing" or "getting sucked off" means going out on a limb. It may reveal that, for better or worse, one knows what one is talking about. This is only compounded by the allusive—read, connotative—aspects that inhere the (self-)censoring nature of much sexual representation. Granted, Warhol's 1964 film *Blow Job* presents these issues with highly unusual charge, provocation, and irony. But *Blow Job's* exceptional status lies less in the way the film exploits sex than in the degree to which it exploits the trappings of sex talk and foregrounds the basic operative principle guiding such talk. *Blow Job*, which shows the face of a young man having his cock sucked (or so

its title alleges), but which depicts neither sucking nor sucker, potentially makes a sucker out of anyone who attempts to summarize the film's "content" (the use of quotation marks is no saving grace). If I do just this in this book, it is because the chance of earning the just-mentioned attribute puts me in good company. The perusal of much of what has been written about *Blow Job* has shown me that it is very difficult to talk about *Blow Job* without being partial to the film. To write a whole book about it in the absence of partiality is outright impossible.

The silent *Blow Job*, thirty-six minutes long,¹ consists of a black-and-white close-up of the handsome face of an unidentified young man leaning against a brick wall. The film begins by showing the man looking half down. His face is cast in shadow, as his head blocks the film's light source, located off-screen at the upper left corner above his head. Nonetheless, one can see that his head indicates body movements that possibly result from the unzipping of his fly. He may be getting ready for the blow job. Then his head tilts up, whereby more light is thrown on his face, which soon registers signs of what could be sexual pleasure. From then on, this male beauty periodically looks up or down, to the right or the left, his movements and sensations possibly caused by the off-screen blow job. Once or twice one can see the upper part of his shoulder, the collar of his black leather jacket, and his right or left hand moving through his wavy hair, indicating that he is more and more turned on. Toward the end of the film, his body movements seem more pronounced and rhythmic; they might be caused by the motions of whoever may be sucking the man off below frame. At this point, the man's facial expressions are consistently dramatic; his eyes seem to glaze over and he begins to stare; his head trembles slightly; and he bites his lip as he seems, one might assume, to be coming close to orgasm. Near the film's end, he lights a cigarette which, considering his now more relaxed facial expressions, appears to be that famous "cigarette after."

In the course of the many times I have shown this film to friends, acquaintances, and students, many have expressed views that support the description just given as being plausible if somewhat suggestive. Talking about *Blow Job* brings viewers out of the woodwork, especially when assumptions about the blow job are fed by—and, in turn, feed into—projections of gender pairings. But there have also been a smaller, consistent number of perspectives that stubbornly ward off any assumption of sex as a presumptuous encroachment on the invisible. It would be easy to dismiss these arguments for what might be their lack of imagination. But the imagination has room for more than the sexual, just as a viewer's conclusion that *Blow Job* is not about sex offers no conclusive proof that the viewer has not entertained sex as at least one possibility before (consciously or subconsciously) dismissing it. Finally, there are those who consider *Blow Job*—sex or no sex—simply boring and tedious. These views are the most alien to me. I can rehearse them rationally, but my prolonged involvement with *Blow Job*, informed by my own position (constituted, like anyone's, by multiple qualities—in my case being a white gay man, a historian, and someone who is personally and professionally fascinated with Warhol's cinema) have minimized the sense of being bored by the film. The experience of boredom would surely have taken this book in a different direction.²

Diverse as these views are, one aspect unites them. In their respective ways, they all respond to the discrepancy between the two levels on which *Blow Job* produces meaning: the denotative level, minimalist as it is in the film, and the rich connotative range opened up by the film's suggestive title, its framing, the chiaroscuro lighting, the background, the solitary male figure, the lack of what one would ordinarily call "plot" or

even mundane actions, and even the slowed-down projection speed. These qualities make the film at once full and empty, lending the image a certain aesthetic intensity that, however, the film leaves “unsupported” or “unredeemed,” stopping short, as it does, of anchoring its strongly saturated signifiers through designated signifieds.³ This tension between the film’s concrete surface display and its highly unconcrete meaning confronts those scanning the image with the fact that their own (and possibly any) reading process entails transference, reconfiguration, and abstraction. Indeed, the fact that the film’s highly concrete image tilts over at times into semi-abstract segments, showing the young man’s head shrouded in darkness or bathed in light, further compounds the reading process. Viewers thus have to negotiate the image’s own abstracting qualities in addition to experiencing somewhat self-consciously the necessarily abstracting nature inherent in any reading process. In this way, *Blow Job* not only leads to interpretations that diverge particularly widely, but it also triggers similarly diverse emotive responses, depending on such vectors as spectatorial excitement, an appreciation for the image’s oneiric qualities, thwarted expectations, and the experience of tedium.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Warhol often chose the topic of sex (whether explicitly articulated or merely alluded to in some form) as a privileged site for this complex tension between concreteness and abstraction. Because sex and sexual arousal produce direct bodily reactions, we always think of sex as something concrete—an immediate experience. But for Warhol, sex had a distinctly abstract quality. This notion may easily mislead us into accepting the cliché that Warhol was sexless and afraid to have relationships (neither of which is true). Rather, Warhol saw the world through the eyes of an artist, and a gay one at that. While gay men have been known for their proclivity to detach sex from the contexts that surround it (enjoying sex in any context and for sex’s own sake), they have also shown a particular talent for putting sex into multiple contexts—that is, for seeing sex connected to myriad mundane, seemingly nonsexual aspects of life. This is what Warhol did. He consistently saw and depicted sex as an aesthetic experience mediated by the many contexts in which it occurred, none of which, as the heterogeneity of his work attests, was privileged. Given this particular approach, Warhol’s oeuvre has provided rich fodder especially for theorists who have stressed and argued the discursive nature of sex. One scholar who has broached this topic particularly with regard to Warhol is Linda Nochlin, who in her essay, “‘Sex Is So Abstract’: The Nudes of Andy Warhol,” discusses Warhol’s sexual imagery in several contexts—the artist’s own attempts to seek arousal, his first career as a commercial artist versed in the techniques of advertising, his second nature as a compulsive collector of high and low art, of porn, painting, and photography, and his tremendous knowledge of art history and the history of visual representation in general.⁴ When Nochlin asserts that Warhol’s nudes are art, she does not deny their prurience. Warhol’s sexual images are, in fact, about sex; they are sexy and sometimes “dirty.” And they always put sex in a certain context, citing it along with the artwork’s object and theme: sex-in-advertising, sex-in-high-art, sex-in-portrait photography, and so on.

Blow Job may be less raunchy than Warhol’s nudes. What it shares with them, as part of the Warhol canon, is the artist’s pronounced aesthetic sensibility, his impulse for placing sex in multiple contexts, and the tension between the abstract and the concrete. These qualities profoundly contribute to the pleasure of looking at Warhol’s images and films. They have also paved the way for a flood of research and scholarship on Warhol’s artistic output from such diverse areas and disciplines as cultural studies, psychoanaly-

sis, narratology, semiotics, and queer studies, all of which may, at times, take cues from one another or intersect in some way and all of which have come to supplement art history as the discipline traditionally concerned with artists such as Warhol.

Warhol's multifaceted artistic sensibility compelled me to draw on several of these approaches and disciplines for the present study. My analysis of *Blow Job*, then, treats the film as being about gay sex and gay identity without dismissing other contexts through which a reading of the film may proceed. Indeed, because of homosexuality's complex position—it is Other, yet it has evolved neither in complete secrecy nor in a cultural vacuum—I will argue that to read the film in terms of homosexuality necessarily means considering multiple contexts apparently not related (or only superficially related) to it. In some cases, this has required me to launch into fairly elaborate excursions when discussing the cultural, historical, and theoretical discourses I bring to the topic. In this sense, this book is at once about much more and much less than this one film. It is about high art, popular culture, and representation in general, but it is also about a specific medium, film, and subcategory of this medium. It is about Warhol's art in general, but it is also about the gay aspects of it in particular. And it is about sex and sex talk in general (including rumors, assumptions, rhetoric, and polemics), but it is also about the history and culture of one particular form of sex and desire and about the oppression it has suffered, the survival strategies it has taken, and the problems and dysfunctions it may have.

This generously staked out field provides multiple entry points for a systematic introduction of my agenda. My decision to begin discussion of this film by placing it in the context of Warhol's overall cinematic output is simply a pragmatic choice. It is one of several possible ways of placing *Blow Job* in one of several possible contexts. It establishes a particular time, place, and mode of production to which subsequent discussions can be related.

Warhol made over 650 films, about 500 of which are three-minute portrait films, so-called screen tests, that feature Warhol's friends, acquaintances, and members of the New York art world. The other 150 or so titles are experimental shorts and features ranging in length from twenty minutes to twenty-five hours.⁵ While this level of creativity is staggering, even more surprising is that all of these films were made in a period of only five years, 1963 to 1968. Of course, these five years were not just any five years—they are, in and of themselves, worth discussing to a degree that would inexorably explode the framework of this book. Thus, historiographic shorthand will have to do. Even though the following account is a standard one, proffered before by multiple sources, it is worth recalling for its suggestive heft: When Warhol began making films, President John F. Kennedy was alive, the cold war climate had begun thawing, the United States was harboring (perhaps unfounded) hopes of reaching widespread prosperity and domestic peace, the civil rights movement was harboring (perhaps legitimate) hopes of effectively combating and decreasing racism, the American art scene was more lively, diverse, and provocative than ever, and, despite the fact that Doris Day ruled at the box office, sex was becoming more accessible for many, especially women. By the end of the year in which Warhol handed film production over to Paul Morrissey, this same country was steeped in the multiple morasses known as Vietnam; a series of American leaders, political and civic, had been assassinated; American cities were plagued by inner-city poverty, decay, and racial uprisings; the divorce rate was up; the counterculture was blooming openly; the artistic underground was already dead; Hollywood as producer of dominant entertainment was in deep crisis; film censorship had been radically modified;

and sexual and pornographic representations had found legal protection and were poised to expand into broader markets.

Suggestive as this account may be, one would be mistaken to consider the events that transpired during the 1960s simply as causes for the profound changes that occurred in American culture and society. One must also look at these events as *symptoms* of developments that began before this time. The seeds for America's various domestic crises were not sown with the assassination of John F. Kennedy but long before Kennedy assumed office. The same can be said about the conflict in Indochina. The fragmentation of American culture began after World War II, although it was largely ignored by consensus culture and simultaneously fueled and patched over by suburbia. Hollywood's demise (and with it that of the Production Code) can be dated back to the late 1940s. And if sex and sex talk became more explicit during the 1960s, it was not until the 1970s, and only among two groups—the gay male population and a small, white, upper middle class segment of straight society—that some of the promises the previous decade held out were finally being met in the flesh, the former group strutting its stuff in the public sphere, the latter predictably remaining behind closed doors.

Warhol's cinema, too, can be discussed in terms of both its originary influence and its transformative impact on a cultural-aesthetic vocabulary that was already in place before Warhol emerged as an artist. If Warhol is considered one of the fathers of the kinds of aesthetics now found in commercial advertising, music video, and movies, his oeuvre is also marked by a distinct impulse to seize on and transform preexisting images. His film work, in particular, evidences both change and unifying constants. Warhol began making films in 1963 with a sixteen-millimeter silent Bolex camera. His earliest films, produced in that year—*Tarzan and Jane Regained ... Sort of, Haircut* (No. 1), and *Sleep*—show the first steps Warhol took in experimenting with the medium. *Tarzan and Jane* is much closer to such slightly earlier Beat films as Ron Rice's 1959 *The Flower Thief* and Vernon Zimmerman's 1960 *Lemon Hearts* than to Warhol's later cinematic output. A feature-length, densely edited travelogue of sorts with retroactively added sound, *Tarzan and Jane* was made during Warhol's road trip to California that year and features underground performer Taylor Mead, the "star" of Zimmerman's and Rice's films and of many Beat and underground films of the late 1950s and 1960s. *Haircut* (No.1) also shows a strong Beat sensibility: A twenty-seven-minute film comprising, exclusively, a series of static shots, each taken from a different perspective, of a playfully homoerotic all-male haircutting party in a Lower East Side apartment, *Haircut* (No.1) is remarkable for its high-contrast expressionist lighting and aesthetic exploration of depth of field, which later Warhol films would partially or completely abolish. *Sleep* is a nearly five-and-a-half-hour minimalist film of poet John Giorno sleeping. The film's structure, consisting of multiple spliced-together camera rolls of silent, black-and-white film, provides an early indication of Warhol's desire to transcend the limitations of the equipment, which allowed for only four minutes of uninterrupted filming before the camera had to be reloaded. Even though *Sleep* is carefully edited and has multiple camera perspectives within each roll of film, the film's length, its slowed-down projection speed to sixteen (later eighteen) frames per second, and its repeated use of the same footage may paradoxically produce the false impression that the film is simply one static shot of Giorno's breathing torso.⁶

This effect is exactly what Warhol sought to produce more systematically in his most famous minimalist films of the following year: *Eat, Blow Job, Henry Geldzahler*, and

Empire. The first two were still shot with the Bolex, which Warhol mounted on a tripod to keep it static. He refrained from editing these films, letting the splices between the rolls, which register as white flashes, determine their structure.⁷ As in *Sleep* and *Haircut* (No.1), Warhol slowed down the projection speed of these films, which enhanced their length and the trance-like effect of the minimalist actions they feature. *Henry Geldzahler* and *Empire* were shot with an Auricon sound camera that could hold fifty-minute cartridges of film,⁸ but Warhol was not yet utilizing sound. Both films are similarly slowed-down and silent explorations of their respective objects. The former film is a feature-length static shot of Warhol's friend Henry Geldzahler sitting on the famous Factory couch and struggling with the persistent gaze of Warhol's camera. The latter is an eight-hour, five-minute static shot of the Empire State Building, during which the viewer's observation of the pro-filmic object is gradually supplemented, perhaps even largely replaced, by an exploration of the material property of the filmstrip itself with its chemical irregularities, blemishes, and varying degrees of graininess. The crude means of Warhol's filmmaking belie these films' formal sophistication. As Callie Angell has pointed out, the films constitute an early achievement in purist style: "a single shot on an entirely stationary camera continued over multiple assembled rolls to record a single preconceived action. By reducing his film production to these basic elements of the medium, Warhol was able to transcend the limitations of his equipment and accomplish the paradoxical effect of stillness and monumental duration in his moving images."⁹

But Warhol did not refrain for long from using the Auricon's capacity to record sound. The year 1965 saw a prolific output of Warhol films based on the basic unit of a static, thirty-three-minute-long shot (often accumulated into two- or three-reel films) featuring many of the Factory's guests and hangers-on in sometimes comical, sometimes cruel verbal and erotic interactions. For many of these films, Warhol asked scriptwriter Ronald Travel to write scenarios and dialogue, but he often manipulated the performers to disregard any preexisting script or treatment, trusting that the often charged relations between cast members would spark conflicts and repartees more original, witty, and spontaneous than those conceived by Tavel.¹⁰ Warhol's production of alternately (or simultaneously) funny and scandalizing sound films based on the thirty-three-minute unit culminated in the 1966 three-and-a-half-hour film *The Chelsea Girls*, which is an assemblage of twelve such reels (black-and-white as well as color) projected in double screen and featuring many of Warhol's friends and acquaintances. *The Chelsea Girls* not only became a cause célèbre of underground cinema, but by the following year it had accomplished what no underground film had before: It moved into commercial theaters, was exhibited across the United States, and became a genuine commercial success.¹¹

With *The Chelsea Girls* being reviewed in mainstream publications, the underground had gone above ground—and relinquished itself in the process. But Warhol was able to add to his growing fame as a pop artist a reputation for infamous (and, as some perceived it, simply "bad") filmmaking. The success of *The Chelsea Girls* led to the recirculation of some of Warhol's earlier films. In addition, the growing crisis in the dominant entertainment industry, the influx of European art and soft-core porn films into the U.S. market, and the burgeoning sexploitation exhibition circuit led exhibitors to encourage Warhol in 1967 to make a string of feature-length exploitation films with such titles as *The Nude Restaurant*; *Bike Boy*; *I, a Man*; and *Lonesome Cowboys*.¹² These films retained some of the minimalism of Warhol's earlier films, but all of them had sound and color. In addition, their static camera position was interrupted by a cluster of techniques,

including pans, zooms, strobe cutting, and postproduction editing, some of which Warhol first explored in the 1965 gay sex farce *My Hustler*.¹³ The 1967 cycle of sexploitation films showed little sex, and from today's perspective, much of the nudity featured in these films is actually rather coy. Warhol would push the envelope one more time with the 1968 hard-core fuck-and-talk tryst *Blue Movie*, but after he was shot by Valerie Solanas and nearly died, he handed over the creative rudder to Paul Morrissey, whose films of the late 1960s and 1970s he merely signed as producer.

Blow Job is thus part of merely one phase of Warhol's massive and heterogeneous cinematic output; however, conceptually it is a highly typical, perhaps even the quintessential, Warhol film. Its minimalism enables and encourages a prolonged scrutiny of the image, which has certain effects on the viewer. Some spectators may become bored very quickly. Others may be taken in by the camera's gaze onto its object, the young man in front of the camera who may be receiving a blow job. Yet others may temporarily shift their attention away from the young man and focus on the film's chiaroscuro play of light and dark or on its background, the brick wall. And some spectators may engage all of these impressions and activities during one and the same viewing. What *Blow Job* has most notably in common with many Warhol films is the concept of the tease—the promise, rarely kept yet integral to much of Warhol's filmic oeuvre, of revealing information about their pro-filmic objects, of revealing their desires, jealousies, rages, and, last but not least, sexual activities and sexual identities. When *Blow Job* premiered on July 16, 1964, at the Washington Square Gallery in New York, its title was not announced to the audience attending that evening's set of screenings,¹⁴ but the film was subsequently exhibited under this title, which is bound up with the film's concept as a tease. In *Blow Job*, the tease is pared down to a minimalist extreme, triggering a host of questions: How much will the film show of the sex act? Can this act be verified through the young man's facial expressions? Does this act actually take place? If the film is really about a blow job, who is or are the fellators? Is this a gay sex act, a straight one, or a bisexual one, which would suggest the kind of polymorphous sexuality often associated with Greenwich Village bohemia during the 1960s?

These questions point to certain qualities and raise issues that make *Blow Job* an integral part not only of Warhol's cinematic canon but also of the 1960s' underground cinema in general. Parker Tyler, who wrote an important early history of underground film, noted as early as 1969 that this cinema was marked by the scandalizing visualization of what was taboo to the mainstream proffered, among other things, by the queer sexual and gender exhibitionism of the denizens of the underground.¹⁵ It seems that, in the United States, there has traditionally been a close link between homosexuality and avant-garde film production. Even before World War II, when there was no avant-garde film scene in this country to speak of, the avant-garde films that were produced often featured homosexuality or at least a certain queerness.¹⁶ In the postwar 1940s and early 1950s, such important filmmakers as Kenneth Anger (*Fireworks*, 1947), Curtis Harrington (*Fragments of Seeking*, 1946), and James Broughton (*The Adventures of Jimmy*, 1950) brought discourses of homosexuality under their own authorial control. These films were not free of homophobia, but unlike prewar efforts, they explored the traumas and pleasures of gay awakening from a gay point of view. At least Anger's and Harrington's films engaged and furthered a particular avant-garde subgenre, the trance film or psychodrama.¹⁷ As the avant-garde in the United States slowly gathered steam during the 1950s through the immeasurable influences of such key figures as Maya Deren and,

slightly later, Jonas Mekas, avant-garde filmmaking increasingly comprised a myriad of approaches and styles. These ranged from Deren's own carefully choreographed and highly stylized 'explorations of female subjectivity, power, and movement to the aesthetic-discursive maturation of Stan Brakhage's mythopoeia and to the epic mythologism of Harry Smith's experiments with animation and graphic cinema. These artists were not concerned with homosexuality. If they treated sexuality at all, they did so as a universal force into which one had to tap to assert one's place in the world.

The continuing activities of some of these artists into the 1960s, their legacies found in the work of others, and newly emerging and reemerging avant-garde approaches, such as the compilation film and structural film, made the 1960s' American avant-garde the most richly diverse in the world. Treatments of homosexuality and gay sensibility made up merely a portion of this spectrum. However, from the late 1950s on, with the emergence of Beat cinema, gay and queer discourses began to proliferate and shed the seriousness of the psychodrama in favor of adopting a spirit of subversive, indeed, polymorphously perverse, playfulness. By 1963, a vibrant avant-garde and underground film scene was burgeoning especially in New York City's Greenwich Village with its multiple intersecting networks of artists, filmmakers, and their friends, most of whom knew one another and many of whom were involved in one another's projects in multiple functions.¹⁸ The year 1963 alone saw the production of three of the most notorious queer-themed underground films of the period: Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, and Barbara Rubin's *Christmas on Earth*. But the list of films featuring queer performers and/or themes could easily be expanded to include, among others, such films as *The Flower Thief*, *Lemon Hearts*, and a group of films ranging from Jack Smith's 1963 *Normal Love* and Ron Rice's *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1962-1967) to the Kuchar brothers' playfully queer pop fantasy, *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965). The diverse cultural and demographic makeup of this scene attests to the great heterogeneity of avant-garde films, only some of which were underground films, some of which (as evinced in Warhol's early films) mixed elements of Beat sensibility with other concerns, and some of which also received other labels and classifications, such as Baudelairean cinema.¹⁹ In addition to being an underground film, *Blow Job* also fits into the third category, with its impulse toward negating time in the decadent space of the Baudelairean elsewhere, its articulation of mnemonic impulses, its would-be defiance of social codes and contemporaneous mores, and its ironic-demonic inversion and overlap of opposite signifiers and values, such as Christian versus satanic iconography and innocuous posing versus stimulation through sex and/or drugs and pain.

Whatever subversive and transgressive qualities underground cinema possessed that made it a school for scandal, this cinema also tended to be carefully self-censoring—and there is no better example for this than *Blow Job*. On the one hand, the film's self-imposed censorship is symptomatic of the repressive context of the period. In the early 1960s, underground films became the target of police raids in New York and elsewhere. Some films, such as *Flaming Creatures*, were temporarily seized by the police; others, such as Warhol's *Andy Warhol Films Jack Smith Filming "Normal Love,"* were confiscated and lost forever.²⁰ Warhol, who was then moving within the underground film scene in Greenwich Village, quickly learned to negotiate, in films such as *Blow Job*, the oppressive conditions brought about by the repressive state apparatus's "interest" in this form of art. Like most of Warhol's cinematic ventures prior to *The Chelsea Girls*, *Blow Job* would have been exhibited on a relatively modest scale—in small, ever shifting hush-

hush-and-rush basement screenings—as part of the underground cinema it now emblemizes. But it was, of course, precisely the concept of the tease that made Warhol's films palatable to a gradually increasing audience. Even when the film was exhibited on the growing college campus screening circuit, into which Warhol gradually tapped, audience exposure west of the Hudson River was able to increase precisely because of the stable duality between the film's provocative title and its self-censorship: It could—and always can—be appropriated by straight college students and young “hip” heterosexuals in general, as it affords a certain degree of aesthetic transgression that makes these viewers feel special about their role as avant-garde consumers while shielding them from the more explicit, dramatic, and confrontational aspects of transgressiveness and taboo.

I believe it is of extraordinary importance for us to pay close and consistent attention to the film's cautious negotiation of transgression, its shielding of taboo, and, indeed, its aesthetic-discursive makeup *as* a shield. While 1960s underground film may generally be said to explore the boundaries between the permissible and the forbidden (hence, its label), homosexuality constituted a particularly charged area. A review of underground cinema's negotiation of this area may yield insight into a specific historical moment that saw alternative cultural production collide with external efforts of repression. But, in addition, the self-censorship of many of these films, and of *Blow Job* in particular, may proffer insights into the epistemology of the *discursive production* of gender and sexuality, which is inherently linked to an *epistemology of interdiction* that goes far beyond the random casting about of the NYPD. In other words, if it is true, as Richard Dyer writes with specific reference to Warhol's cinema, that “*Couch, Blow Job* and the other early films are thus not just about breaking the taboo on seeing gayness, but exposing some of the aesthetic mechanisms of the proscription and the lifting of it,”²¹ *Blow Job*'s self-censorship may not simply be the result of a repression imposed from above. Rather, it must be understood as the discursive production of what it purports to suppress—and, in turn, as the very suppression of what it purports to produce. *Blow Job*'s minimalist aesthetics and provocative framing impose a set of conditions and demands on the viewer. Reading and interpreting the film require reading into it, and these modes of reading and hypothesizing say more about the reader's psychosexual and cultural mind-set than about the film itself. What gets exposed in these readings are assumptions about gender, sexuality, morals, and truth that are deeply ingrained in Western culture and have evolved over a long period of sociopolitical and cultural engagement with gender and sexuality. I submit that *Blow Job* must be understood as a meta-commentary on a number of regimes—political and cultural, scientific and artistic—that have utilized regulatory discourses of gender and sexuality to construct identities.

At the heart of the history of sexuality itself is a whole cluster of discursive regimes that have produced a myriad of intersecting discourses and polemics. Michel Foucault has characterized this cluster as *scientia sexualis*.²² He has argued that for two centuries, enlightenment society and culture have produced a proliferating welter of discourses on sex, seizing on sexuality's polymorphous shape to establish categories and subcategories of perversions, pathologies, and sexual identities in the name of and as products of “scientific truth.” *Scientia sexualis* has intersected with social discourses, pronouncing itself the authority on hygiene and regulating behavior with regard to all areas of the body. It has intersected with and produced legal discourses, setting up punishments and punitive categories with regard to sex both as practice and as the sole foundation of identity. And it has intersected with evolutionist myths, seeking to classify and “eliminate defective

individuals, degenerate and bastardized populations”²³ for the safeguarding, indeed, for the production, of the narrowly sanctioned category of orderly and acceptable biological reproduction for family, society, and nation.

But Foucault emphasizes that particularly this last aspect indicates that what *scientia sexualis* constructed was actually the opposite of knowledge. *Scientia sexualis* became a “blanket guarantee under cover of which moral obstacles, economic or political options, and traditional fears could be recast in a scientific-sounding vocabulary”:²⁴

It is as if a fundamental resistance blocked the development of a rationally formed discourse concerning human sex, its correlations, and its effects. A disparity of this sort would indicate that the aim of such a discourse was not to state the truth but to prevent its very emergence. . . . The learned discourse on sex that was pronounced in the nineteenth century was imbued with age-old delusions, but also with systematic blindneses: a refusal to see and to understand; but further—and this is the crucial point—a refusal concerning the very thing that was brought to light and whose formulation was urgency solicited. For there can be no misunderstanding that is not based on a fundamental relation to truth. Evading this truth, barring access to it, masking it: these were so many local tactics which, as if by superimposition and through a last-minute detour, gave a paradoxical form to a fundamental petition to know. Choosing not to recognize was yet another vagary of the will to truth.²⁵

Describing Jean-Martin Charcot’s Salpetriere, an early scientific-clinical hospital and laboratory, as an exemplification for *scientia sexualis*’s dubious double take on knowledge, Foucault makes clear that the extraction of knowledge had another far-reaching consequence—it profoundly changed the role of the observer from someone who would, as it were, stumble upon a preexisting knowledge or scientific detail in unassuming fashion and would then proceed to contemplate it to someone who became much more actively involved in the discursive production of knowledge. The sex researcher and regulator became a participant, performing experiments, examining, interrogating, displaying intricacies of sex and gender, producing confessions from scientific “objects,” inducing ritual crises, inciting psychosexual reactions.²⁶ In other words, interrogators of sex became *participants* and *performers* in their own theater.

This theater of science-as-performance relied heavily on the visual: Being able to see meant being able to determine the truth. The mastery of the object became synonymous with ocularcentric mastery. But this form of mastery replicated for the self-positioning of the observer the same duality Foucault identifies at the heart of *scientia sexualis*: The will to know and the stubborn refusal to know resurface in the observer’s self-understanding as the duality between the frantic activity of producing specific acts of observing and the compulsion to disavow one’s partiality to these acts in favor of the conceit of having stumbled upon a preexisting reality and truth. Decades before a specifically Foucauldian concept of the disciplined subject was extended to the concept of the disciplined viewer, Walter Benjamin theorized this viewer as both producer and observer, subject and object, of modern visual culture, which had become the culture of the mechanical reproduction of images.²⁷ For Benjamin, the medium of film, in particular, epitomized this new visual culture. The photographic and, later, the film camera were capable of seeing details foreclosed to the human eye.²⁸ Film itself thus became a scientific tool. But film also subjected its viewers to a frenzy of rapidly changing images, shifting the viewers’ activity to one of reaction rather than action and forcing viewers to

abjure the traditional mode of contemplation in favor of a new mode of distracted observation.²⁹ In this new mode, the viewers' responses to the image were preordained and fairly accurately overlapped with—and thus became symptoms of—the discursive regimes that underscored the production of images and that largely determined the context, if not the complete outcome, of their reception.

But for Benjamin the disciplinization of the viewer of mechanically reproduced art is founded on more than the technological specificity of visual stimuli. It is also founded on the shift in content that came with mechanical reproduction. Art itself profoundly changed: The boundaries between high art and mass culture became more blurred than ever, and mechanically reproduced mass culture images themselves produced a proliferation of iconographies and iconologies that would have a lasting effect on the cultural vocabulary of twentieth century Western society.³⁰ This society became a society of reified types and stereotypes, and its culture became a culture of citationality. The tremendous impact of this mode of expression can be seen in the fact that some areas of high art that sought to reinsert themselves into the social and reinstall a link between art and everyday life did so by “stooping” to low art and using the latter as raw material for discursive rearticulations. While this was occurring long before the 1960s, the 1960s was a decade that celebrated the blurring of high and low art and of discourses of humanism and science with renewed force. The 1960s witnessed a vigorous leap into a certain postmodern sensibility that oscillated between self-consciousness and disaffection. This sensibility, emblemized by the “new sensibility” of Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, and others, optimistically championed the playful leveling of art and mass culture, of art and science, and of documentation and fictionalization, whereby all cultural artifacts would now have equal “validity.”³¹ Consumption became an integral part, indeed, the driving force, of this approach to culture, and citation became its *modus operandi*. Citation enabled the promiscuous seeking out of, celebration of, and pleasurable consumption of aesthetic-discursive idioms formerly deemed discrete, incompatible, or even inimical to one another. In addition, the move to the surface, emblematic of 1960s art and culture, facilitated the specialization of philosophical and cultural binaries in close cohabitation and proclaimed that this could be done with self-confidence and seeming impunity.

Scientia sexualis, the disciplined viewer, and the citation of such binary opposites as high and low art and fact and fiction are the concepts that define the first part of my discussion of Andy Warhol's *Blow Job* in this book. Spectatorial assumptions about *Blow Job* are worth considering with regard to how they reflect Western paradigms of producing knowledge about sexuality, sex acts, and the kinds of individuals who engage in them. And because spectatorial assumptions about *Blow Job* are just that—speculations—they also place viewers in a position that marks their responses to the film firmly with regard to discursive manipulation. These rhetorics may be triggered by the film itself, but they are part of a much larger historical and cultural environment. *Blow Job* mobilizes them not only via its self-conscious framing, its lack of sound, its tightly constructed, minimalist *mise-en-scène*, and its lighting but also through the kinds of visual associations and memories *Blow Job* can arguably be said to trigger—and these associations have to do as much with the individual viewer's history of personal experiences and encounters as with his or her status as a socialized individual and consumer of mass culture.

One further area that is important to the first two chapters of this book—and weaves through most of the discussion in those chapters—is myth. To even so much as

narrow down myth from an “area” to a concept is problematic, for there are many notions and concepts of myth, some of which will be explained later. Suffice it to say at this point that myth pertains to a discussion of *Blow Job* on multiple levels. First, *Blow Job* has garnered a mythological currency of its own. The titles denotative aspect aside, the internal censorship of *Blow Job*'s image, self-imposed and flaunted, provides the link between *Blow Job*'s content and its now mythical underground status. *Blow Job* became one of the most notorious films of 1960s underground cinema, and the fact that it was much more talked about than seen only increased this currency.

Second, *Blow Job*'s carefully crafted mise-en-scène makes it an emblematic example of the citational frenzy of the culture of the 1960s, spatializing a number of binary opposites without resolving them. On this level, *Blow Job* can be most clearly linked to myth, for, like myth, it functions as a vehicle that structures and negotiates binaries. For example, the film negotiates the relation between nature and culture, one of myth's traditional operational premises, by mobilizing several discursive regimes that articulate this great divide, including the tension between the “objective” recording and the fictionalization of an event, the tension between a “raw;” purely physical and “prediscursive” sexuality and a discursive production of the latter, and the tension, on a somewhat broader, if clichéd, level, between life and art. Moreover, *Blow Job*'s intensely citational surface display alludes to a number of visual traditions and movements from the history of modern art and film, such as dadaism and surrealism, documentary and ethnographic film, Hollywood aesthetics, and pornography. “What results from the act of enfolding these diverse discourses onto one picture plane is the image's high degree of reflexivity. I will argue that the film's self-reflexive properties question conventional ways of looking at gender and sexuality, but I will also ask to what extent *Blow Job*'s reflexivity really constitutes an epistemological advance over the paradigms it appropriates. By spatializing and foregrounding certain myths and conditions that pertain to myth's structuring impact, *Blow Job* performs a dual operation that, in turn, is closely related to *scientia sexualis* and the disciplined observer. On the one hand, the film's reflexivity tends to foreground the rhetorical nature of discourses of sex, gender, and sexuality and, as such, enables us to link these discourses to the discursive operations of myth itself. On the other hand, *Blow Job* also teases spectators into investing into these same discourses, and investing into them in a way that points to spectatorial desires to have knowledge produced as a coherent knowledge, to have truth extracted as a preexisting truth, and to have contradictions and aporias seemingly resolved in the teleology of achieving epistemological mastery.

Blow Job's mobilization of truth discourses and their questioning is actually much more complex than this description would suggest. The tension in *Blow Job* between an impression of aestheticization, fabrication, and artifice, on the one hand, and the pervasive if residual generic presence of documentary and its ethos and aspiration to simply (however “inadequately”) record a preexisting event, on the other hand, also influences our dual impression of the young man's relation to the camera in the film. As Douglas Crimp observes, since the young man's eyes and gaze are for the most part obscured by shadows, it is very hard to state with any certainty that the young man acknowledges this camera. This leads Crimp to assert that *Blow Job*'s sitter does not perform but is performed upon.³² This is an important perspective to bring to the film, because, as Crimp rightly claims, it offers viewers the freedom to revise conventional notions and expectations of textual/filmic content.³³ Crimp's reading is useful in that it suggests a general

spectatorial potential to appropriate the image in the imaginary for specific purposes. But while *Blow Job* enables this spectatorial freedom, the aesthetic qualities that make the film a teaser also provoke very much the opposite: They tease viewers into scanning the image, into attempting to possess it by studying it for a truth value it never delivers. The freedom Crimp attributes to spectatorship in *Blow Job* is thus, indeed, only a *potential* one—on this level, it is an unlimited freedom in that it also enables, precisely with the same means, a range of readings that go in very diverse directions. And these depend more on the viewer than on the film, on what kind of viewer we are talking about, on the historical moment this viewer is confronted with *Blow Job*, and on how much knowledge the viewer brings to the film about its context. (Does the viewer know the title? Has the viewer heard about the film before, and if so, in what context and with what information? Does the viewer know the film's production context and its participants? To which of the multiple visual genres alluded to by *Blow Job* is the viewer sensitized and likely to respond?) Crimp, for his part, is implementing a highly specific spectatorial position and vantage point here—that of a gay historian whose hindsight vantage point of the film's "content" and insider knowledge determine his reading.

In this sense, Crimp's reading must be placed in a spectrum of possible readings and, as such, is no less partial than any other. Coming from a position similar to Crimp's, I identify with his mode of appropriating the film. Yet, having observed time and again how *Blow Job* generally tends to turn its viewers into readers very partial to their own respective and diverse interpretations, my own set of readings of the film investigates the dynamics of partiality that *Blow Job* mobilizes. The kinds of responses triggered by *Blow Job*'s charged allusions to sexuality can be witnessed on a broader level with regard to the generally polysemic quality of Warhol's larger image canon—cinematic or otherwise—which has recently prompted Hal Foster to conclude in a related context that certain "camps make the Warhol they need, or get the Warhol they deserve; no doubt we all do."³⁴

The point for me, then, is not to cite visual proof to contradict Crimp. Indeed, those moments when one of the eyes of *Blow Job*'s young man is visible and is pointing roughly in the direction of the camera are easily outnumbered by moments when his eyes are obscured and cannot be unproblematically isolated from the larger sequence of his movements. However, while the young man's movements seem unrehearsed and spontaneous and while his facial expressions can be read as registering self-absorbed sexual pleasure, the film's overall setup makes it difficult to fully relinquish the impression that the young man in *Blow Job* at no point acknowledges the presence of the camera. (Given this setup, to what extent does my impulse to entertain the idea that the young man is aware of the camera, which is more or less directly placed in front of him, even depend on his eye contact for additional visual "proof"? To exhibit oneself to the camera does not always entail making eye contact with it, and spectatorial doubt or uncertainty as to the object's awareness of being filmed does not *necessarily, consistently* mitigate against the spectator's visual/sexual pleasure.) For me, it is primarily the context that counts here, and this context cannot be dissociated from any assumption, made in the absence of empirical proof, of what *Blow Job*'s young man may look at—and be aware of—at any given moment.

I will also argue in this book that *Blow Job*'s incitement of the desire to scan and "master" the image is itself foregrounded in and undermined by citation, whereby the impression of a seemingly "objective" filmic record of a preexisting event is produced,

paradoxically, because of the film's very inadequacy as a reliable document. It is nothing less than the film's insinuating force that encourages us to read the young man's gestures and motions as undisturbed and self-absorbed, potentially freeing some of us from the doubt of fakery, authenticating the visual and sexual pleasure some of us have as particular kinds of viewers. Crimp rightfully points out that *Blow Job*'s setup and lighting disallow ocularcentric mastery, that they refuse to yield knowledge, and that they thwart voyeurism. To add to this, one might, in fact, entertain the claim that voyeurism is predominantly a heterosexual phenomenon—it is one of the scruples of heterosexual (and heterosexist) exploitation of sexual representation, and it has been theorized by psychoanalytic discourses as a straight male domain. But if *Blow Job* thwarts voyeurism, it nonetheless makes us partial to our own readings of its image; it encourages some of us (as well as discourages others) to grant authenticity to the blow job itself, to invest in it, and even to claim, as Crimp does, that it is possible to pinpoint exactly when *Blow Job*'s young man reaches orgasm.³⁵ If this claim does not quite demonstrate ocularcentric mastery of the image, it does demonstrate a will to knowledge through scrutiny of the image and, most important, a will to take possession of the image, albeit in a very particular context and in a highly specific way. So even though *Blow Job* may ultimately disallow voyeurism, as Crimp asserts, Crimp's own reading tells me that *Blow Job* also constantly mobilizes the possessive aspects, implications, and consequences that underscore the basic act of using visual (and other) texts as evidence on which to "build a case," as it were.

In this sense, the claim that *Blow Job* unambiguously enables viewers to glean the young man's orgasm reminds me of Jonathan Flatley's useful analogy between *Blow Job* and the Kuleshov effect: "Precisely in the way that we are led to imagine that each tilt of the head and squinting of the eyes means something more than itself, *Blow Job* foregrounds how all face-reading is a matter of 'feeding the imagination.'" ³⁶ Having enjoyed the kind of reading Crimp proffers, I support it for reasons of pleasure; however, I also agree with Flatley, who claims that "it is impossible to tell if the person is 'actually' being fellated" ³⁷ and rightfully invokes David James's evaluation that performance in Warhol films is inevitable, as Warhol's cinema "constitutes being as performance." ³⁸ It is for this reason, and not because I do not believe that a blow job is given in the film, that I will henceforth call *Blow Job*'s young man a "poser." In addition, my analyses throughout this book are meant to focus on the pose as a central element in epistemologies of gender and sexuality, in identity construction, in political activism, and in historical appropriations of heroes, role models, and mythologized icons.

This, then, brings me back to my discussion of myth. As an example of Warhol's particular brand of pop art, *Blow Job* engages a number of particular mid-twentieth century pop culture myths, mythical stereotypes (such as the teenage rebel), and mythologized stars (such as James Dean). I will place these myths into the context of Warhol's larger canon of images and will discuss the particularly pronounced iconic qualities of the Warholian image, which make Warhol's canon itself citational and highly intertextual. In fact, these qualities render Warhol's canon into a veritable boutique of mythical types, stereotypes, and pop culture icons, which can be drawn into different social, cultural, and political arenas, providing a further basis for locating and debating specific spectatorial positions, readings, and appropriations. While Chapter 1 and most of Chapter 2 of this book discuss *Blow Job*'s most important aesthetic properties and how they bear on the discursive production of gender and sexuality, toward the end of Chapter 2,

I begin to narrow the focus to the main group of interest for me—white gay men. Because the film may be regarded, as I argue in Chapter 2, as a historical reservoir or “archaeological site” of mythological types and popular stereotypes, it may allow us access also to white gay male appropriations of these types via the structure of memory and the operation of intertextuality. (In this sense, my analysis of *Blow Job* is based on the premise that the film is at least as much about the decade that preceded it as it is about the decade during which it was made.) I thus move into a discussion of how, in *Blow Job* and Warhol’s larger canon of images, some of these mythological types, such as Christ and “the sad young man,” gained currency particularly for white gay male self-stylizations.

By discussing *Blow Job* as the product of gay sensibility and an expression of white gay male identity, I attempt to wrest the film away from heteronormative ways of thinking that deny the visibility of homosexuality. But, in doing so, I also seek to problematize the very mode of this kind of appropriation—not for the purpose of striking some kind of “humanist balance” or “objectivity” but, indeed, to infuse politically partisan appropriations of images with new methodological subtlety and strength. I believe that for these appropriations to survive in the current era of potentially homophobic “post-identity discourses,” their limitations must be attended to with critical acumen and their virtues must be explored and pushed into new directions. But a discussion of gay appropriations of popular culture and mythology, while integral to this book, is only one of its aspects. Indeed, the trajectory I chart rests on a paradox: On the one hand, because homosexuality is a modern invention, a product of *scientia sexualis*, and because white gay male identity in particular is largely contingent on and contiguous to larger historical designs of masculinity and white male power and privilege—in the sense that it emerged from the latter and is constantly threatened to be subsumed by it—it is important for us to acknowledge that *Blow Job*, emphatically, is *not* a gay film at all. Further, *Blow Job*’s refusal to unambiguously visualize homosexuality is not an exact correlative to its refusal to unambiguously visualize heterosexuality. To the extent that the discourses that constructed homosexuality during the past 100 years are heterosexual(izing) and heteronormative discourses, *Blow Job*, if seen as a template of these discourses, is *profoundly* heteronormative (one might even go so far as to say profoundly heterosexual). On the other hand, precisely because *scientia sexualis* has systematically othered same-sex desire into homosexuality, making it one of the Others on which it has erected heterosexuality, homosexuality has come to be the Other that simultaneously supports and disturbs modernist systems of thought. Its existence is virtually guaranteed by the very regime that oppresses and disavows it. Therefore, if *Blow Job* rehearses some of these heteronormative discourses, homosexuality must then also be an important part of the film. Homosexuality’s existence in the film, however disavowed and suppressed, must be integral to *Blow Job*—and may possibly be so in ways much more basic than the host of gay stereotypes that can be gleaned from the film. These stereotypes may themselves be only the tip of the iceberg, second- or third-order indications of larger, deeper dynamics at the heart of homosexual signification.

The middle section of this book explores these issues through historiographic and theoretical ways of thinking about homosexuality and Otherness. As a first step, it is justified to ask the question of what role, if any, *Blow Job* has played for homosexuals and, particularly, for white gay men. It becomes clear very quickly that the answer to this question has much to do with the paradox mentioned earlier and with underground cinema’s own paradoxical way of visualizing scandal. While *Blow Job* is now considered one

of the most prominent and enduring examples of the canon of gay cinema, during the first decade of its circulation it likely had very little direct impact on homosexuals. Its relatively confined, if gradually expanding, circulation foreclosed its mass exposure to homosexuals in that decade. Nonetheless, while many gay men might never have set eyes on a Warhol mm for much of the 1960s, by the end of the decade, Warhol's cinema, as it existed and expanded in popular discourses, served as important evidence of the existence of homosexuality in America. The mere fact that somewhere in the homophobic American public sphere there existed a film titled *Blow Job* was sufficient evidence of homosexuality—even though those gay men who actually did get to see *Blow Job* were, of course, under similar strains as their heterosexual co-spectators to read the film as “proof” of their own conjectures.³⁹

The main thrust of *Blow Job*'s currency for white gay men in the 1960s and into the 1970s may best be understood and measured by invoking myth. The fact that the screening of a Warhol film and the reaction of its audience would become inscribed into popular memory and circulated through gossip and anecdotes is symptomatic of the status of Warhol's films since the 1960s—they were much more talked about than seen and gained near-mythic status possibly even before Warhol withdrew his films from circulation in 1972. These films' and particularly *Blow Job*'s complex position within the public sphere—the tension between their elusive, almost hypothetical existence and their growing currency in prurient anecdotes and gay gossip—to some extent mirrors the situation of postwar, pre-Stonewall homosexuals in America. It would not be wrong to draw an explicit parallel between both as spectacles that are much more talked about than actually encountered by the mundane person. In this sense, while the mythical status of *Blow Job* may have been produced and amplified through gay gossip (thus serving as a catalyst for the proliferation of discourses of homosexuality in a public sphere that, on one level, homophobically ignored gayness), *Blow Job* also always serves as an allegory for the limitations and interdictions homosexuality has encountered on public *as well as* private levels of acknowledgment.

Because the position of homosexuality and particularly white gay male identity in the postwar American public sphere is very complex, it needs to be explored more systematically. In Chapter 3, I theorize and historicize the reemergence particularly of white gay male identity during the postwar 1940s and the 1950s with regard to the tension between invisibility and visibility, latency and manifestation. There are several conditions that produced this tension: First, the historically unprecedented privileging of large-scale homosocial spaces during World War II played an important role in allowing gays and lesbians to encounter and act upon same-sex desires even in the face of massive interdiction and punishment. Second, while many lesbians and homosexuals of color went back into their old civilian habitats after the war, white gay men used their relative freedom and mobility to move away from their prewar communities and began creating a fledgling network of urban subcultural scenes. The cultural productions of gayness that thrived in these scenes bore the stamp of the war years such that masculine identification became a pivotal idiom of white gay male sensibility. Third, the findings of the 1948 Kinsey Report on sexual behavior in the human male depathologized homosexuality and put it on a sliding scale with heterosexuality. As Kinsey's findings trickled down into the mainstream, they caused rampant homophobia, which, partly because of the inability to identify homosexuality on a mundane level, came to be displaced onto

discourses of gender. But mainstream anxiety over effeminacy in men occurred concurrently with a proliferation of “alternative” masculinities, registering, among other things, in the emergence of new types of masculine idols, such as James Dean and Montgomery Clift. In turn, while gay life was beginning to flourish in subcultures in the United States, homosexuals remained largely closeted and developed sophisticated ways of communicating with one another in the hostile public sphere—ways that increasingly exploited the newly emerging “acceptable” if alternative masculinities. In Chapter 3, I analyze these historical factors in greater depth. I discuss the self-stylizations of white gay men with regard to their responses and counterstrategies against the homophobic yet highly unstable cluster of discursive productions of masculinity.

If the reemergence of white gay male identity during the 1950s evinced a strong tendency to insert homosexuality in subtle ways into the public sphere, the every subtlety also testifies to the complex relationship of masculine-identified white gay men to public America. By appropriating and manipulating discourses of masculinity, white gay males have demonstrated that they can pass successfully for straight, protecting themselves in some instances from homophobic persecution. In this way, white gay men have also capitalized on the fact that they can always be subsumed under the category of white men, which has enabled many of them to reap most of the privileges afforded to white men in our society. Chapter 4 proceeds from these insights with a discussion theorizing the relation between gender and sexual orientation through current paradigms of identity theory. By claiming that sexual and gender identities are only constructed in and by the social, queer theory and historiography (following in the footsteps of feminist theory’s deconstruction of the concept of “woman”) have systematically analyzed historical forms of anti-gay oppression and have persuasively conceptualized counterstrategies and reverse discourses. I look at some of these theories in Chapter 4, but I also ask whether they can be brought to bear on white gay male identity to the same extent and with similar benefits as they have on the theorization of, say, lesbian subject positions and the signification of drag. Analyzing white gay men’s complex position as socialized males, I rehearse the deconstruction of white gay male identity specifically with regard to the relationship between the penis and the phallus, and I debate the virtues, limitations, and discursive limits of this theoretical approach for historical and political discourses of identity politics. I then juxtapose this approach to recent models that have sought to depart from theorizing identity in this way, as they have argued that the deconstruction of gender and sexual identity and some effects of gay rights activism have largely taken the specificity out of such terms as “gay” and “lesbian,” threatening to make gays and lesbians once more invisible by prepping them for assimilation into the mainstream.

While *Blow Job* hovers in the background of much of my discussion in Chapter 3, serving as an exemplary reenactment of some of the problematics of the tension between invisibility and visibility particularly with regard to the immediate postwar years, Chapter 4 draws on the film as an example for discussing the theoretical implications of the virtues and limitations of deconstructing white gay male identity. I use the film to demonstrate the central paradox involving white gay men: On the one hand, they have been apprehended and socialized simply as white men; on the other hand, the set of qualities that make male homosexuality inimical to heterosexual masculinity have constituted a persistent, perhaps even essential, gap that sees gay men apart from heterosex-

ual men. The discussion in Chapter 4 explores the question of whether this gap registers in *Blow Job's* aestheticization of masculinity and, thus, whether this gap can be visually apprehended.

Rather than producing a definitive answer to these complex questions, my discussion of white gay male identity provides a set of arguments that can be inserted into current debates around theorizing identity. In the last two chapters of this book, I draw on these arguments to resume a historically focused analysis of the evolution of white gay male identity into the 1960s. In Chapter 5, I expand my discussion of *Blow Job* to a group of images Andy Warhol produced from the mid-1950s into the 1960s—images that I view as not only expressing white gay sensibility but also arguably rehearsing the evolution of white gay male identity in a shifting historical context. The early 1960s saw a proliferation of mainstream discourses of homosexuality. No longer an unspoken or unambiguously demonized taboo, homosexuality became the target of liberal mainstream efforts to ethnicize and incorporate sexual Otherness in new ways. Thus, in Chapter 5, I read several of Warhol's images that depict gay icon James Dean or Dean look-alikes against this new context, and I trace two antithetical processes in these images: First, they can be read in a trajectory that exemplifies the evolution of white gay male identity via appropriations of and identifications with public figures, evincing strong parallels to major psychoanalytically defined processes of identity formation. Second, they persistently index the traumatic repressions at the heart of identity formation, and, further, they point to a certain dysfunction in the relationship of white gay male identity to masculinity.

For much of this book I focus on white gay male identity with regard to sexual orientation and masculinity. Some of these discussions are punctured by a discussion of race, pinpointing the whiteness of white gay men. Chapter 6 focuses on race more systematically, drawing on my arguments and insights from previous chapters. If white gay men's relation to masculinity has placed these men in a hegemonic position with regard to the stratum of social and sexual groups (oppressed yet privileged, persecuted yet also celebrated and integrated), how does the whiteness of white gay men intersect with their masculinity and their social positioning? In Chapter 6, I compare white gay male self-stylizations to a figure that became notorious in the early 1960s and to which white gay men have a historically close and theoretically complex relation—the white heterosexual hipster. In addition to discussing *Blow Job* as a template of whiteness as a hegemonic construct, I also consider other images from the Warhol canon with regard to questions of race and late 1950s and early 1960s hipsterism.