JOE DALLESANDRO-A "HIM" TO THE GAZE: 
Flesh, Heat and Trash

Stephen Tropiano
And [Noah] drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father’s nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.

Genesis 9:21-25

Over the past fifteen years, gay film studies has been limited to a small body of writing, devoted primarily to issues of representation and pornography. While feminist film criticism continues its theoretical inquiry into issues surrounding spectatorship, pleasure, desire and the position of the female in the Oedipal narrative, gay film studies has ground to a halt, preoccupied with separating the “positive” gay images from the “negative,” without addressing or questioning for ourselves not only our positioning within the filmic text, but the positions we occupy outside as well. As spectators. In challenging Laura Mulvey’s initial assertion that “active/passive division of labour has similarly controlled narrative structure,” Teresa de Lauretis questions whether the pleasure of the text is simply Oedipal: “how or with which positions do readers, viewers or listeners identify, given that they are are socially constructed as women or men?”

De Lauretis’ line of questioning can be extended further to examine what constitutes the gay male spectator in relation to the gaze and desire. Does the male homosexual receive pleasure from the text in the same manner as the heterosexual male? Can the male image be positioned as the erotic object of the gaze of not only gay, but bisexual and heterosexual male spectators as well?

Three films produced by Andy Warhol and directed by Paul Morrissey — Flesh (1968), Trash (1970) and Heat (1972) — appropriate the cinematic codes of gay pornography to challenge the dominant cinema’s restrictions on the display of male nudity and the expression of male sexuality, which has been traditionally linked to neurosis, violence and death. More than any other filmmaker, Warhol was a ground breaker in his frank and liberating representations of the male body and male sexuality, blazing the trail for John Waters, Rainer Fassbinder, and Pedro Almodovar. The fixation of voyeur extraordinaire Warhol on the male body was central to the artist’s early filmmaking ventures. Warhol’s Sleep (1963) featured John Giorno’s nude body resting comfortably for six hours, while later efforts, notably Blow-Job (1963), Couch (1964), The Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys (1965), Fifty Fantasies and Fifty Personalities (1965-66) and My Hustler (1965) featured the erotic antics of the Factory’s male superstars. As the artists who loved porno (“the real dirty, exciting stuff”) and took Polaroids of the male factory visitors. (“no matter how straight looking”) moved towards commercial feature length filmmaking with Morrissey as director, the camera’s erotic attention remained fixated on the body of superstar Joe Dallesandro up through Frankenstein (1974) and Dracula (1974).

The three Morrissey films featuring Dallesandro are part of a subgenre of erotic cinema which puts male sexuality on display. As Stephen Koch observes, Joe and “his naked body, curving buttocks, gangling genitalia, classic torso and good-boy face are the center of the camera’s erotic attention.” The sexuality of Dallesandro is on the brink of what Ihab Hassan identifies as the shift from genital-centered, phallocentric modernist representations of sexuality to the more polymorphous and androgynous sexuality characteristic of post-modernism.

Joe is an anti-hero, an isolated creature who hustles women and men in Flesh, can’t perform sexually in Trash, and uses his body to further his acting career in Heat. By employing the stylistics of gay pornography and the narrative codes designed specifically to put the male body on display, Morrissey positions Dallesandro’s body
as the object of the camera’s gaze. The films never reach, however, the level of hard core pornography in the depiction of sexual activity. Strictly speaking this refers to images of erection of male genitals and the actual act of intromission. Morrissey titillates the spectator with the possibility and threat of explicit homoerotic activity but maintains the position of merely teasing the viewer without any real fulfillment of those expectations.

The Male As Erotic Object

As feminist film critics challenged Mulvey’s omission of the female spectator in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” several film critics focused their attention in the early 1980s to Mulvey’s denial of the male image as the erotic object of the gaze. In his essay “Difficulty of Difference,” D.N. Rodowick accuses Mulvey of “falling back on biological essentialism” in reducing the male to the active-voyeur and the female to passive object choice. Mulvey’s denial of the legitimacy of the male as the object of the erotic gaze is highly problematic for Rodowick because she makes no differentiation between the male as identity figure and object choice, “...nor does she consider the significance of authority in the male figure from the point of view of an economy of masochism.”

In “Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema,” Steve Neale supports Rodowick’s assertion that there is an oscillation on the part of the spectator between the male image as identity figure and erotic object. Neale doesn’t find it surprising that male-oriented genres (the western, gangster and war films) “...involve sado-masochistic themes, scenes and phantasies that male heroes can at times be marked as the object of the erotic gaze.”

Using Paul Willemen’s analysis of the the films of Anthony Mann, Neale argues that the cinematic spectator experiences visual pleasure when the male image is positioned as the object of another male’s gaze, which stems, as Willemsen asserts, from a repressed homosexual voyeurism derived from seeing the male in activity (riding, fighting, etc.) and later mutilated.7 Neale argues that Willemsen’s conclusion is based on an “unstated thesis” that “...in a heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male: the look must be motivated in some way, its erotic component repressed.”8 As Neale points out, in a Sergio Leone western, male bodies are marked in a shoot-out sequence as spectacle, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, but cinematically unmarked as erotic objects and mediated by the fearful, hateful aggressive looks of the other characters, thus disavowing the eroticism of the look.9

Neale’s model runs into trouble when he discusses the male body in non-male genres, specifically Rock Hudson in Douglas Sirk melodramas and John Travolta in Saturday Night Fever (1977). Neale classifies these two male protagonists as “feminized” male bodies, with the look of the camera usually marked by a female character. Although Neale doesn’t define “feminization” in any specific terms, he implies that the illness of Rock Hudson in All That Heaven Allows (1955) and John Travolta’s solo dance numbers in Fever, which, in Neale’s words, put his body “unashamedly” on display, function in the same manner as the violence and sadism in male-oriented genres in terms of dis-
avowing the erotic gaze towards the male. Neale concludes that when the body is displayed as spectacle the body is “feminized”. What Neale fails to acknowledge is that it is not the display of the body but the cinematic code of the gaze itself which operates to feminize the male body. Neale asserts that the the “feminization” of the male is an “indication of the strength of those conventions which dictate that only women can function as the objects of an explicitly erotic gaze.” The real strength of the gaze, however, lies in its complexity. The same conventions of the code of the look are utilized to eroticize the male body. This is accomplished, however, through the eyes of the female voyeur in the circuit of the fetish. When the male spectator looks at the male body through the gaze of the female protagonist, the female character stands in as the sadistic voyeur for the male spectator, who traditionally casts the sadistic look upon the female body. The screen males who are repeatedly being looked at by female protagonists — James Dean, Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift — are masochistic — psychotic, injured, castrated or neurotic. Thus these stars are eroticized by Hollywood which integrates these characteristics into their on-screen sexuality.

The male movie stars of the 1950’s (Marlon Brando, James Dean, Burt Lancaster, William Holden), are examples of what Joan Mellen describes as screen males “crackling with undirected energy, sexually alive precisely to the degree that they do not conform,” were frustrated, confused, and, above all, vulnerable, which on the screen was “not merely acceptable, but desirable, and an indispensable aspect of male sexuality.” According to Mulvey’s model, the male unconscious can escape the threat of castration by turning the female star into a fetish so that she becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. Masochistic male characters, however, do not pose a threat to the male spectator as identification figures because these characters descend from a long line of masochistic/castrated males in Western culture, including Jesus Christ, Oedipus, and Prometheus. The sexuality of Dean, Clift and Brando is channeled by Hollywood through their masochism without disavowing their objectification as erotic objects.

When and how a male can look at another male in the cinema is socially and culturally coded. Even in television, as Margaret Morse concludes in her analysis of sports programming, men can look at men playing football because of the balance between “play and display...every look of the man at his exhibitionist like is transformed into scientific inquiry into the limits of human performance.” The emphasis on statistics and the justification of sport as a hermeneutic process (“Who will win?”) makes it possible for men to look at other men and “render it harmless.” While the disavowing of the erotic gaze on the male body in both television sports and the cinema is socially and culturally endorsed, both representations are constructed entities, mediated by the absent one—the director. Instead of concentrating on strategies of disavowal, our attention should turn to the very fact that the cinema is a mediated process, opening up the possibilities for a homosexual look to be constructed through the cinematic codes of the dominant Hollywood cinema or through the construction of a “radical” look.

The former can be exemplified in a scene

Joe and Sylvia in Heat

49 Spectator
from Ken Russell’s *The Music Lovers* (1970), in which the homosexual composer Tchaikovsky (Richard Chamberlin) refuses to consummate his marriage to his nymphomaniac wife (Glenda Jackson). On their wedding night, the gaze he casts upon her is not motivated by sexual desire, but characterized by repulsion and nausea. What Russell constructs is clearly a “homosexual” gaze because it is through the very pre-coded look by which women have been eroticized, that he reinforces Tchaikovsky’s sexual preference for men. An even more radical look is constructed in Paul Morrissey’s mediation of the camera as it concentrates on the body of Joe Dallesandro.

**Andy Warhol Presents...**

**Joe Dallesandro**

The opening shot of *Flesh* is exemplary of Joe Dallesandro’s positioning as the erotic object of the camera’s gaze. The song “Making Woki Woki Down in Waiiki” chimes over the soundtrack during a two-minute and thirty-second close-up of Joe’s face, which cuts to a medium shot of Joe’s nude body sprawled over the bed. As Stephen Koch observes, “The camera’s task is simply to pay attention to that body and the relation between subject and object couldn’t be simpler. Visually, the camera wants. Visually, Dallesandro delivers.”

According to Warhol, Dallesandro made his first film appearance by accident when he wandered into the Greenwich Village apartment where Warhol was shooting *The Loves of Ondine* (1967). When Morrissey later saw Joe’s face on the screen, he became convinced, in Warhol’s words, that Joe was “another Brando or James Dean — a person with the same kind of screen magic that’d appeal to both men and women.” Dallesandro soon joined the ranks of other Warhol pretty boys, who appeared together in Warhol’s campy western *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967), and then became the leading player in Morrissey’s subsequent works. Warhol ended his filmmaking career and became satisfied with being the name above the title (Andy Warhol presents...) with the hope of being the new Walt Disney, whose name, Warhol believed, trans-
formed everything into gold. During this transitional period, the Factory was relocated and transformed into an office. The Superstars and hangers-on defected or were eliminated by Morrissey, who ran the new Factory and restricted its cinematic output to commercial filmmaking.17

Consequently, Morrissey moved towards more narrative works, with Joe’s body at the center of each story. In Flesh, Joe (Dallesandro always played himself) is a street hustler who is told by his wife to go out and make $200 dollars to pay for her girlfriend’s abortion. After sexual encounters with both men and women, he returns home to find his wife in bed with her girlfriend, who doesn’t really need the money after all. In Trash, Joe is an impotent heroin addict in search of his next fix who lives with his girlfriend in an apartment furnished with street trash. Joe is former child star Joey Davis in Heat, who returns to Hollywood to resume his career and meets “an aging, minor, practically unknown star” a la Sunset Boulevard’s (1950) Norma Desmond played by Sylvia Miles. She seduces Joe in exchange for helping him with his career, but when she learns of his affair with her lesbian daughter, she goes after him with a gun.

Although the protagonist of each story, Joe is a passive figure — the object of the other characters’ desires, both male and female. They look at him, talk about his body, offer to pay for him, providing Joe with ample opportunity to undress for the camera, whether it be for money, drugs or employment. Joe is a commodity for the other characters as well as for the erotic gaze of the camera, a gaze which is marked, through Morrissey’s utilization of the codes of gay pornography, as a “homosexual” look being cast upon Joe’s naked body.

**The Codes of Gay Pornography**

The structures and cinematic codes of two distinct types of gay erotic cinema — the posing film and the narrative film — are employed by Morrissey to position Joe’s body as the object of the camera’s gaze. In “Hard to Imagine: Gay Erotic Cinema of the Postwar Era,” Thomas Waugh analyzes the tradition of gay erotic cin-
ema which was distributed in the 1950s and 1960s through magazines and mail-order houses. Waugh describes the posing film as “the most naked, frontal enactment of the sexual pleasure of looking at the male body,” consisting of models, completely naked or wearing a posing strap, standing in front of the camera in various poses.18

The presentational, frontal quality of the poses constantly accentuates the spectatorial status of the consumer. The posing film, refusing the spectator all entry into the frame through fantasy or identification, at the same time relegates the model’s proud exhibition of his strength to be a commodified sexual display.19

There are instances in which the subject acknowledges the camera’s gaze. In Spike Adams at Home (from the Athletic Model Guild, circa late 50s), Spike wakes up in the morning and smiles at the camera, inviting the spectator to watch him brush his teeth and eat his breakfast. Most films, however, as Waugh describes, involve an awkward look by the subject into the camera at the invisible director (and the subject). In Gable Bordeux Poses (Athletic Model Guild circa late 50s), Gable stands on a diving board and wavers between smiling into the camera and looking away from it. While Morrissey never directs his actors to look into the camera or acknowledge its presence, he does position Joe in various poses distinctly for the camera’s gaze. Before going out to work in Flesh, Joe sits in the nude on the floor and plays with his baby son. The camera captures Joe in several poses — sitting, squatting, lying on the floor — linked together by the strobe cut (editing in the camera at the time of shooting). His body is fragmented by a series of close-ups of his tattooed bicep, his smile, his chest, etc. The shots last only a few seconds, thus framing the various parts of his body as still images.

In a later sequence, Joe literally poses for a middle-aged artist (Maurice Bradell), who picks Joe up off the street and pays him $100 to stand
in classic positions (the sprinter's starting position, the discus thrower), while he sketches and takes pictures of him and lectures about the importance of body worship. In a seemingly endless diatribe, Bradell explains that body worship is behind "all art, all music, all sex, all love — if you cut it for any reason, you deprive yourself of one great chunk of life." "No sooner is Body Worship launched," Greg Ford observes, "than its practice seems annulled in Flesh, if only because such a high percentage of what is preached by the funny fossilized old windbag is unmistakable gibberish." Rather than annulling the practice, as Ford suggest, I would argue that the artist's speech not only enhances the self-reflexivity of the sequence by commenting on the very practice the spectator is engaging in, but directs the spectator's focus on Joe by diverting attention away from the soundtrack.

The artist/subject set-up is exemplary of early gay erotic narrative films, which Waugh describes as "thin contrivances for getting the models to disrobe, pose and fight" which include "innumerable bathing scenes, waking and sleeping scenes," and 'artist' plots in which the problems of sculptors, photographers and painters with their nude models invariably provided the hinge of the plot." In Trash, Joe breaks into an apartment to steal money, but finds a delighted Jane Forth instead. Joe undresses and takes a bath while Jane looks on and comments on his body ("Oh, my, you have such strong arms!...Oh, you're rather large!"). The camera pans back and forth between Joe and Jane as she describes how she was nearly raped by an artist she and her husband picked up. When Joe stands up in the bathtub and begins to wash his hair in the shower, Jane's eyes remain fixed on Joe, while the camera moves in for close-ups of his chest, biceps and face.

In a later sequence, Joe shoots up for the camera, while Jane and her husband begin to quarrel over whether she was a virgin when they were married. The strung-out Joe collapses on the floor, but the camera remains on his naked body, only to open up the space by cutting to an overhead shot. As Greg Ford observes, "the
transfer from eye-level to overhead viewpoints is hardly discernible since Morrissey never ceases to use Joe’s nude physique as the median vertical guidelines for his compositions.”

In *Heat*, Joe’s body is again eroticized as the camera remains relatively fixed on his muscular form. A conversation between motel manager Pat Ast and a tenant is visually interrupted by Joe’s appearance at the top of the stairs. The camera follows Joe while the conversation continues and is eventually sidetracked to a discussion of Joe’s looks (“Isn’t he pretty?” remarks Ast, who reduces Joe’s rent in exchange for sexual favors.)

In terms of aesthetics, Morrissey employs cinematic techniques characteristic of pornography. The flat lighting, long takes and minimal editing work in conjunction with one another to create a less idealized image. As David E. James observes, the lack of sound continuity and classical cutting prevents the spectator from being sutured into the diegetic time and space “the spectator is stranded upon his or her self-consciousness.”

The fragmentation of Joe’s body by the constant zooming and panning to his body is not being constructed in the way the classical Hollywood cinema has depicted women’s bodies in fragmented pieces. The voyeuristic camera of male patriarchy has been disavowed by the blatant exhibitionism of Joe’s body. James asserts that Joe is like a Hollywood heroine because he “can never look, only be looked at” which reduces him to “an object of visual consumption...in the film and for the film, producing moments of metaphoric reflexivity when his relation to the viewer is figured intradiagonally.”

I would argue that it is through the use of the narrative and cinematic codes of pornography, this “metaphoric reflexivity” within the text in conjunction with the blatant exhibitionism of Joe’s body, that is actually what distinguishes Morrissey’s display of Dallesandro from Hollywood’s classical construction of the female body.

**The Body as Signifier**

In his essay “Signification of the Phallus,” Lacan positions the phallus as being an intrinsi-

cally neutral signifier. “The phallus in Freudian doctrine is not phantasy...nor is it such an object,” Lacan writes, “It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolizes.” When Lacan speaks of the “phallus,” he is referring to a power, which Kaja Silverman asserts, is a “signifier for the cultural privileges and positive values which define male subjectivity within patriarchal society, but from which the female is isolated.” Consequently, male homosexuality is theorized as doubly on the side of desire. This is extremely paradoxical in relation to Joe and the erotic gaze of the camera, a homosexually constructed gaze which positions Joe’s body as the object of desire, because he is void throughout the three films as having any sexual desires toward anyone. Sex is a commodity in *Flesh*; it pays the rent and can potentially advance his career in *Heat*. Joe is impotent in *Trash* and displays little interest in sex at all (“Don’t you miss it?” someone asks. “I haven’t really thought about it,” he replies.)

The result is a desirable figure for the homosexual and bisexual spectator and a potentially less threatening one for the male heterosexual because while desire is projected onto Joe, he does not reciprocate, in addition to avoiding the depiction of male-to-male contact. While the Oedipal myth has been the framework for Western culture, the homosexual abduction myth and initiation ritual of Oedipus’ father Laius and King Pelop’s son Chrysippus, which occurs prior to Oedipus’ birth, is continually suppressed by the dominant Hollywood cinema. Morrissey is constantly setting up homosexual and other culturally taboo images, only to diffuse them, thereby subverting the spectator’s expectations. The stage is set for an older man/younger boy scenario when Joe visits Louis Waldron in *Flesh*. Instead of erupting into a highly charged sexual encounter, the two look at male physique magazines as Waldron tries to convince Joe to move in with him.

As in Warhol’s *Blow-Job*, in which the fellated penis is the focus of attention, while the camera remains on the recipient’s face, Morrissey offers the thrill without the danger, the excitation without the release. Joe is the recipient of
oral sex in the three films, but the action itself, as in Blow-Job, is never shown. Trash opens with a close-up of Joe’s backside while a young woman kneels in front of him. During the blow-job sequences, the camera remains on Joe’s upper body or on a close-up of his face, which reveals what the dominant Hollywood cinema refuses to show — the expression of the male face in a state of pleasure or ecstasy. In addition, Flesh, Heat, and Trash expose the signer of desire to the viewer in full view of the camera. In the opening of Flesh, Joe’s wife tries to convince him to get out of bed and go to work. The couple begins to make love and at one point his wife playfully wraps his penis up with a scarf and tries to convince him to leave it on when he goes to work. The veiling of the penis (the covering of what has already been revealed) emphasizes its importance not only as the object of desire, but the threat of its potential power. “The phallus is the signer of this Aufhebung [that which is sculpted, erased] itself,” Lacan writes, “which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance. This is why the demon of Shame arises at the very moment when, in the ancient mysteries, the phallus is unveiled.” Hollywood has, thus, performed a duty similar to Shame (and Shem in the covering of Noah’s nakedness).

Conclusively, issues surrounding gay spectatorship need to be examined further so we may better understand not only how we are being represented, but our positioning as spectators. By limiting our analysis of the objectification of the male image to systems of disavowal, we are theoretically short changing ourselves. As an analysis of the Morrissey films demonstrate, we must turn our attention to individual texts, explore their codes and conventions and, consequently, begin to formulate for ourselves how the male body can be objectified and eroticized and how we derive pleasure from the filmic text.

2 Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, Popism: The Warhol

8 Neale, p. 8.
10 Ibid, p. 15.
14 Ibid, p. 45.
15 Koch, p. 50.
16 Warhol, p. 239.
17 Koch, p. 50.
19 Waugh, p. 67.
21 Waugh, p. 70.
22 Ford, p. 21.
24 James, p. 79.
28 Koch, p. 50.