

AESTHETICIZING THE BOY TOY: QUEER CHILDISHNESS IN OSCAR WILDE  
AND ANDY WARHOL

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis shifts the paradigm of recent scholarship on the twentieth century figure of the queer child to focus on the childishness of queerness instead. The metaphor of the boy toy, which refers to the childish queer as represented in Oscar Wilde and Andy Warhol's work, hybridizes queer theory and cultural materialism to provide a framework for understanding how Wilde and Warhol's aesthetics are relevant to each other and to the twentieth century and contemporary queer. Wilde's work cultivates an aesthetic that is, apparently, childishly disengaged with such "grown-up" preoccupations as ethics, politics, and the social productivity of heteronormative sexual practices. While Warhol is formally faithful to Wilde's aestheticism, with respect to content he sacrifices Wilde's attachment to aesthetic hierarchies and ethical discernment. As a result, his work not only seems childishly disengaged but also creates an anti-social, anti-political aesthetic that undoes the "grown-up" pretensions of ethics and politics.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

How best to enact a subversive queer politics, especially in the service of a queer aesthetics? Perhaps the question should be phrased, how best to conceive of a queer aesthetics, especially in the service of a subversive queer politics? Either way, one must begin by admitting that the term “subversive politics” offers a contradiction in terms, whereupon the only appropriate answer becomes the inappropriate one. As the work of Oscar Wilde and Andy Warhol attests, the queer aesthetic is subversive because it shirks politics in the first instance; moreover, the queerest way to subvert politics is to prioritize aesthetics above all else. Of course, in the era of the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement, such an answer is worse than misguided. It’s incorrigible, irredeemable, and downright irresponsible. It’s politically incorrect. Small wonder, then, that such an answer should also be characteristic of the stereotypical figure of the childish queer, who has been relegated, indeed, has relegated himself, to a “time out” on account of his political incorrectness. By speaking of his “time out,” I simply mean that the figure of the childish adult gay male is not serviceable to the LGBTQ+ movement, which is not in the least subversive. To insinuate, today, that a queer’s queerness is evidence of his childishness—of his narcissism and sexual solipsism—is to be denounced as homophobic. Yet, as Wilde and Warhol’s work further demonstrates, the “homophobic” stereotype of the childish queer is centrally important to the production of queer aesthetics in the long twentieth century. In this thesis, I engage with recent scholarship that studies the figure of the queer child, but I shift the paradigm of that study so as to focus on the childishness of the queer instead. I demonstrate how Wilde’s aestheticism frames an apparently childish disengagement with politics as a necessary precondition for attaining his aesthetic ideal, while Warhol, fully realizing Wilde’s formal ambitions but at the cost of Wilde’s ethical and aesthetic discernment, creates a genuinely

childish aesthetic that irresponsibly undermines the serious pretensions of such “grown-up” preoccupations as politics.

In speaking of aesthetics, I mean to designate the prioritization of surface, style, and form, above and beyond content, which is so characteristic of both Wilde and Warhol’s work. In speaking of politics and ethics, I mean to refer to those grown-up preoccupations, such as civic integration and the imperative to satisfy heteronormative expectations, with which Wilde and Warhol, queers, and children are all stereotypically disengaged. It may be true that such a neat disassociation of aesthetics from politics is easily problematized by asking whether Wilde and Warhol are merely typical of the childish queer or whether their work is responsible, at least in part, for the discursive construction of that same paradigm. Moreover, my turn to aesthetics, which is really a return to Wilde and Warhol’s aesthetic philosophies, comes in spite of, and, at least in theory, in order to spite politics, and is, therefore, unavoidably polemical. Nevertheless, I should hate to think that my own politics might prevent me from faithfully speaking to Wilde and Warhol’s politics or lack thereof, especially since the first of my aims is to inquire into the nature of the childish queer’s “time out.” I do so not to retrieve him thence, but, instead, to insist such a “time out” is where he is most useful to any politics or aesthetics that would label itself queer, precisely because it is also where he is most useless by the standard of any politics or aesthetics that would *not* label itself queer. My second, broader aim is better to understand the childish queer and his relevance to aesthetics in the long twentieth century at a historical and political juncture when the queer himself seems to be growing up. Whether the grown-up queer will still be a queer in the anti-social, anti-political sense that we have known him is a question I ponder in my conclusion.

Besides queer childishness, what has Wilde's late nineteenth-century English aestheticism to do with Warhol's mid twentieth-century American Pop Art? The short answer is that Pop is indebted to Wilde's Decadent vulgarization of his own aesthetic principles. The success of Warhol's mass-produced Pop Art, which prioritizes style over content so well that his work is essentially meaningless, is rooted in the failure of Wilde's aestheticism, or, more precisely, in Wilde's failure to live up to his own aesthetic philosophy. Wilde, who professes at every turn to value style before content, in the final analysis proves himself incapable of thinking or doing nothing. But innocuous and inoculating Warhol perfects the art of thinking and doing nothing, or, at least, of appearing to think and do nothing, which, as far as his Pop Art is concerned, amounts to the same thing. Wilde's most characteristic work is intensely dialectical and often considers ethical questions, even despite Wilde's assertion, in "The Critic as Artist," that "the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate" (1145). Wilde's ideal is contemplative inaction, but, in his work and life, he arrives at such a posture only through the synthesis of an otherwise disruptive, whirring dialectics. Warhol halts dialectics with a freeze-frame exactitude that robs them of context and empties them of meaning. Because, as Kelly M. Cresap notices, "how we see today is imbricated with how Warhol saw," which "prevents us from taking the full measure of his influence" (25), part of my project is unbraiding Warhol's influence from Wilde's so that both may be accurately evaluated on their own terms and on the terms of their respective epochs. Among the most polemical of my ambitions, therefore, is jolting back into the motion the wheel of the Wildean dialectic which Warhol and postmodernity generally speaking so mischievously stopped. I want to do so, however, less to chastise Warhol than to reinvigorate the sense in which Warhol *can be chastised*. If Warhol is irreproachable, he's not subversive.

The model of dialectical growth, and of what happens when dialectics freeze, is pertinent to my understanding of the relationship between the child and the queer. Kathryn Bond Stockton argues that the figure of the child reads queerly in the twentieth century because the child is, paradoxically, tasked to remain innocent of sexuality while always guaranteeing its heterosexuality. Forced by heteronormative expectations into this double bind, the child may grow, psychically and symbolically, “sideways as well as up” (Stockton 6) in its effort simultaneously to arrive at, yet defer, the moment of its sexual maturation. Stockton’s model informs my reading of Wilde. I see, in his work, a dialectic between the aspiration toward a refined adult sensibility, contemplative aestheticism, and the temptations of an excessive, self-indulgent, and childish Decadence. At the centre of this dialectic is a gray zone, a liminal space where synthesis as maturation and synthesis as abjection may both occur. The latter, synthesis judged unnatural, immoral, or queer, is symbolized by Stockton’s sideways growth.

This liminal space is where the childish queer plays with his boy toys. It is where, in Wilde, the boy toy is faced with the imperative to grow up, and where, in Warhol, he is prevented ever from doing so. The metaphor of the boy toy is notable primarily for its chiasmic function. It laughs its way across the line dividing subject from object, adult from child, and player from plaything, and then, if it fancies, laughs its way back again. It is the boy toy’s disregard for social mores, its disinterest in propriety and protocol as anything more than faces to pull or games at which to cheat, which make it childish. The boy toy is the childish queer aestheticized. It is an artful figure and cannot be trusted. The boy toy makes art and sex, aesthetics and politics, and “real” and “fake” alluringly indistinct. It is ignorant of or refuses absolutes: it blurs the lines along which difference is established. It makes art lifelike and life artful. Playing with the boy toy may well leave one in doubt of



one's *own* adulthood. In both Wilde and Warhol's sense of the uselessness of art, the boy toy is irredeemably solipsistic. It will play with anything and anyone, but it will never do or produce anything useful. It has no purpose except the perverse one of purposeful purposelessness—of pursuing those narcissistic pleasures characteristic of *fin de siècle* Decadence, Warhol's Pop Art, and the stereotypical, twentieth-century childish queer.

Through comparing and contrasting how Wilde and Warhol aestheticize their boy toys, I will show that Wilde's influence on Warhol, even and perhaps especially as it pertains to the queer themes in both, is always more pronounced with respect to form than content. It may be more forthcoming to say that Wilde's influence on Warhol, especially as concerns its implications for contemporary queers and contemporary queer art, is more important with respect to form than content. The statements are different, but both gesture toward the questions at the heart of this thesis: after a century of queerness being associated with childishness—and productively so, for art, at least—how are we to understand what it means to be queer or, indeed, what it means to make queer art, now that queerness itself seems to be growing up? Furthermore, in the twenty-first century, as the queer increasingly occupies a place of social acceptability previously reserved for those who meet heteronormative expectations, what becomes of the heteronormative order, which loses the category against which it defines itself? What becomes of the aesthetics, ethics, erotics, and politics we have come to call queer and to associate with childishness? What becomes of the queer, who, in winning for himself the rights and privileges of the adult citizen, is beholden now as never before to the expectations and responsibilities accompanying those rights and privileges? What is the nature of the imperative, leveled at Decadents like Wilde and naïfs like Warhol, to be responsible, to get a life, indeed, to grow up, and what are the implications, for queers and queer art, of their decision to play with their boy toys instead?

To explore these questions, I will proceed by demonstrating the stereotypical links between queerness and childishness in Wilde and Warhol. I will examine a number of Wilde's fairy tales, namely "The Happy Prince," published in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and "The Young King" and "The Birthday of the Infanta," both published in *A House of Pomegranates*. As for Warhol, I will address certain of his Pop Art pieces that most obviously qualify as queerly childish. I will study in greatest depth two books from his juvenilia, *25 Cats Name Sam and One Blue Pussy* and *Holy Cats by Andy Warhol's Mother*. As far as I know, there is no sustained scholarly treatment of these books, which, it goes without saying, is something of a rarity in Warhol criticism. I hope to prove that Wilde's Decadent vulgarization of his own aestheticism sets the precedent for Warhol to be formally faithful to Wilde's prioritization of style over substance even as Warhol was unfaithful, with respect to content, by introducing vulgarities, such as consumer and popular culture, to the high art and avant-garde tradition. I believe that by thus popularizing the avant-garde, Warhol creates an aesthetic that preempts politics in the first instance and that, like Wilde's, typifies the queer identity as childishly disengaged with such adult preoccupations as political efficacy, civic responsibility, and the social productivity of heteronormative sexual practices.

## Chapter Two: Oscar Wilde: The Dialectics of Queer Childishness

Even Wilde's adult posture, aestheticism, advocates a seemingly childish disavowal of politics and action. Tellingly, Stockton's account of the "publicly impossible child whose identity *is* a deferral (sometimes powerfully and happily so) and an act of growing sideways" (11) is comparable to Wilde's notion of "the critical spirit," "the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing*, but *being*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming*" ("Critic" 1139). However, Wilde also insists that the aesthete's inactive posture, "Intellectual criticism," "will give us the peace that springs from understanding" (1153). Paradoxically, Wilde arrives at ethics by way of an aestheticism that, as Guy Willoughby summarizes, "embodies a commitment to the community at large, and to an expanded organic view of self and society that derives from an aesthetic appreciation, rather than moral instinct" (15-16). Obviously, then, Wilde's aestheticism is not quite apolitical, though in praxis it is ineffectual; nor is it childish in any sense of children as ignorant or innocent, though it may be accused of childlike solipsism. If Stockton's model of the queer child's sideways growth makes Wilde's aestheticism seem childish, it is because Wilde's aestheticism is formative, especially with respect to *form*, of the twentieth century stereotype of the queer as childish, and not because Wilde intended his political abstinence as a form of solipsism.

Wilde's Decadence, which violates his own code of aesthetic inaction, materializes Stockton's sideways growth. The louche lifestyle of Wildean Decadents vulgarizes the Western high art tradition in a way that anticipates, without being equivalent to, Warhol's incorporation of consumer culture into that same canon. This view of Wildean Decadence combines Dennis Denisoff's notion that Decadence "challenged ... false normativisations such as the fundamental importance of the middle-class family model, industrial progress and a common moral basis to beauty and the meaning of life" (32) with Richard Dellamora's

observation that Decadence is “always radical in its opposition to the organization of modern urban, industrial, and commercial society” (529). Wilde’s contemplative aestheticism attempts to separate ethics from aesthetics, but, as his work and life prove, fails to hold him to his own standard. Wilde’s Decadence disrupts his artful composure; thus, unlike aestheticism, Decadence has an explicitly political valence. The childish wonder of the contemplative aesthete—what Wilde calls, in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” “the true personality of a man,” “wonderful as the personality of a child” (1179)—is made grotesque by the Decadent pursuit or consummation of desire. Wilde’s Decadent consummation of his same-sex desires is the process by which the artful boy toy is materialized—that is, abjected from the realm of art into the realm of politics as the twentieth century queer. Thus, although “the beauty of material things may prepare [the aesthete’s] soul for the reception of the beauty that is spiritual” (Wilde, “Critic” 1146), the consummation of material desires, by forcing beauty from art to life, which is “terribly deficient in form” (1132), vulgarizes the aesthete’s purity of form. This latter clause describes the process by which Wilde, disastrously violating his own code through his affair with his real-life boy toy, Lord Alfred Douglas, infamously materialized his queer identity. Alan Sinfield chronicles how “The dominant twentieth century queer identity” was “constructed . . . out of elements that came together at the Wilde trial: effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism” (11-12). I would append “childishness” to Sinfield’s list. For, as the similarities between the paradoxical ideal of Stockton’s sideways growth and Wilde’s aesthetic contemplation suggest, Decadent consummation in the Wildean fashion is the process by which the latent relationship of the sexually ignorant, innocent child and the seemingly solipsistic, contemplative aesthete is abjected into the political sphere.

In recent years, Wilde's life and work have come under renewed scrutiny by critics interested in exploring their latent queer themes. As the field of queer studies expands to consider the literary child,<sup>1</sup> Wilde's fairy tales have likewise become objects of critical inquiry.<sup>2</sup> *A House of Pomegranates* (1981) is contemporaneous with *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, and, like that naughty novel, stages throughout its stories a dialectical conflict between Wilde's hedonistic proclivities and his ethicizing cultivation of a refined, prevailing Christian ideal of beautiful, selfless love. Unlike Wilde's well-beloved first collection of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), *Pomegranates*, according to Willoughby, was greeted with "widespread bafflement and hostility," likely because "readers who had enjoyed the balance of pathos and wit in *The Happy Prince* were puzzled and disappointed by the somber mood, detailed surfaces, and more ambitious moral territory of *Pomegranates*" (34). Although it affirms a straightforwardly Christian worldview that may seem juvenile when contrasted with the intrigue of Wilde's later, more complicated work, the simple innocence of the first collection is actually less relevant to my investigation of queer childishness than the second. This is because, as Willoughby notes, *The Happy Prince* is less concerned with aesthetics than its successor. In *The Happy Prince*, "Only

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarly sources that consider the relationship between queerness and childishness in literature include *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (2004), edited by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley; "Nightmare on Sesame Street: or, The Self-Possessed Child" (2006), by Bruhm; and *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and the Queerness of Children's Literature* (2011), by Tison Pugh. I do not consider these texts because they engage with questions pertinent primarily to the queer child rather than the childish queer. Although my treatment of Stockton blurs this distinction somewhat, in such other scholarly sources as these, the distinction remains quite pronounced.

<sup>2</sup> For analyses of Wilde's fairy tales from other critical perspectives, see "Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and *A House of Pomegranates*: Bedtime Stories for Grown-Ups" (2003), by Michelle Ruggaber; "Twice Upon a Time: The Importance of Rereading 'The Devoted Friend'" (2008), by Sarah Marsh; and "Dark Avunculate: Shame, Animality, and Queer Development in Oscar Wilde's 'The Star-Child'" (2014), by Rasmus R. Simonsen. I do not consider these essays because they treat stories I am not analyzing or because they consider themes beyond the limited scope of this thesis, such as readership and genre studies.

those characters who imitate Jesus' unconditional love can attain ... a genuinely liberating selfhood" (21). In *Pomegranates*, however, Wilde better demonstrates his ideal that "ethical distinctions ... must be recast as aesthetic ones" (34). Contrasting "The Happy Prince" and "The Young King" serves to illustrate the differences between the two collections' treatments of ethics and aesthetics.

"The Happy Prince" is the tale of a statue of a handsome Prince, who, aghast at the impoverishment of his subjects, implores a Swallow to peck the jewels and gold leaf from his clothes and distribute them amongst the poor and needy. The Swallow falls for the Prince and his good intentions. When winter sets in, the Swallow dies as a result of his exertions, whereupon the Prince's leaden heart breaks. Both are rewarded for their tribulations when, at the end of the story, the Swallow's corpse and the Prince's heart are hand-delivered by the Angels to God. Naomi Wood, who argues for the covert pederasty of Wilde's tales, calls the Happy Prince "A beautiful Socrates" who "dialogically teaches the Swallow to care for misery" (165). "At first," says Wood, "the Swallow acts only out of love for the Prince, but finally both are apotheosized, the one because he loved the miserable and the other because he loved his friend" (165-66). Wood's reading resonates with John-Charles Duffy's. Duffy says the "love shared between a swallow and a statue," because "non-sexual," may be "spiritually transforming" (331). But such unconsummated, "devotional friendship" models of same-sex love are, "ironically, an extension of Victorian puritanism," at least when rationalized according to the Victorian "tendency to conceive of purity and sexuality as binary opposites" (330). The Happy Prince may be a pederast but his selflessness makes him a poor candidate for a boy toy. He is more Christ than queer, and, with respect to his role as pederast, more teacher than top.

Before begging the Swallow to minister to the poor, the Happy Prince cries, “When I was alive and had a human heart ... I lived in the palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter ... now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and misery of my city” (Wilde, “Happy” 272). The Happy Prince’s boy toy phase is antecedent action, disavowed long before the distinctly moral action of the story occurs. “Action” is the operative word, for, although the statue of the Happy Prince is, obviously, stationary, he is so consumed by his Christian preoccupation with doing good deeds he becomes a proselytizer, shirking as best he can the life of contemplative inaction to which, as a statue, one would think him ideally suited. The Happy Prince’s antecedent time as the boy toy of Sans-Souci is displaced, in “The Young King,” to *Joyeuse*, the palace in that story, which is depicted as a pivotal stage in the Young King’s maturation. “The Young King” tells the tale of an “aesthetic hedonist who ... finds in artistic beauty a consoling *raison d’être*” (Willoughby 36). Like “The Happy Prince,” “The Young King” is a tale with a moral. But whereas the Happy Prince, after being picked apart by the Swallow, becomes “dull and grey” (Wilde, “Happy” 276) and is melted in a furnace, finally receiving his just desserts only in heaven, the Young King gets to give his cake away and eat it, too.

“The Young King” begins when a Princess finds herself in the family way after agreeing to a “secret marriage with one much beneath her ... a stranger, some said, who, by the wonderful magic of his lute-playing, had made the young Princess love him; while others spoke of an artist from Rimini” (Wilde, “Young” 213). The Princess dies giving birth, and, apparently as punishment for her indiscretions, is buried in “an open grave ... beyond the city gates” (213). Alongside the Princess in the grave, it is rumoured, “another body was also lying, that of a young man of marvelous and foreign beauty, whose hands were tied behind with him with a knotted cord, and whose breast was stabbed with many red wounds” (213).

This oblique allusion is to Saint Sebastian, who, fatally pierced by phallic arrows, is martyred for his homosocial devotion to his male-conceptualized God. Wilde thus foreshadows both the Young King's inheritance of his mother's susceptibility to charming arts and the Young King's own eventual, Christ-like *peripeteia*.

A "common peasant and his wife" raise the Princess' illegitimate son "in a remote part of the forest" (213) in ignorance of his royal blood. But, luckily for the bastard, the old King on his deathbed undergoes a change of heart and recognizes his grandson as his heir. Much like the twentieth century queer who moves at long last from his rural homestead to the big city, the Young King cannot hide his exultation upon arriving at Joyeuse. He issues a "cry of pleasure ... when he [sees] the delicate raiment and rich jewels that had been prepared for him" (214). Not just at ease in his new surroundings, the Young King falls into ecstatic rapture at the riches of "the wonderful palace" that "seemed to him to be a world fresh-fashioned for his delight ... with its lions of gilt bronze and its steps of bright porphyry" (214). He is caught in "one of the northern turrets of the palace gazing, as one in a trance, at a Greek gem carved with the figure of Adonis" and "pressing his warm lips to the marble brow of an antique statue" (214) of a beautiful slave. During his first days at *Joyeuse*—and, not by mere coincidence, like many young queers in the aforementioned big city—the Young King is an exemplary boy toy. The statue in his bedroom of a "laughing Narcissus in green bronze [holding] a polished mirror above its head" (215) is an apt symbol of his solipsistic pleasure: the aesthete's edifying consumption of art always risks degenerating into the Decadent's consumption of self. Indeed, when he first arrives at *Joyeuse*, the Young King "is fairly obviously a masturbator and less obviously ... a homosexual" (Duffy 334).



“All rare and costly materials had certainly a great fascination for” the Young King, but “what had occupied him most was the robe he was to wear at his coronation, the robe of tissue gold, and the ruby-studded crown, and the scepter with its rows and rings of pearls” (Wilde, “Young” 214). On the eve of his coronation, however, the Young King’s beauty sleep is troubled by dreams that awaken him to his decidedly Christian conscience, the antithesis of his infantile self-pleasuring. In a triadic dream sequence reminiscent of Ebenezer Scrooge’s in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, the Young King is visited by three visions. The first is of “pale, sickly-looking children” and emaciated proletariats slavishly weaving “the robe for the coronation of the young King” (216); the second is of black slaves on a great ship, diving even to their death for pearls for his scepter (217); and the third is of a company of knights, decimated by Avarice and Death, who seek “rubies for a king’s crown” (219). Horrified by the needless misery his expensive tastes have occasioned, the Young King exclaims to his courtiers upon waking, “There is Blood in the heart of the ruby, and Death in the heart of the pearl” (219). He rejects the fancy get-up prepared for his big day, fashioning instead a rustic outfit—the “leathern tunic and rough sheepskin coat” and “rude shepherd’s staff” leftover from his erstwhile time in the woods, complete with a “crown of wild briar” (220). His look, a knock-off of the one made famous if not necessarily popular by a certain other Good Shepherd, gets the goat of the court, the hypocritical clergy, and the masochistic plebs, all of whom expect their king to look like a king irrespective of their consequential exploitation.

Unlike his mother, whose seduction across class lines by a beautiful man making beautiful art ultimately dooms her, and unlike Saint Sebastian, who dies in order to express a similar devotion to his religious ideal, the Young King learns how to “transfer his instinct for harmonious integration from art to life” (Willoughby 36). He avoids their messy, unenviable

fates—and, as it happens, Wilde’s—by sublimating “the limited appreciation of beauty he had practiced in the palace” (36). The Young King reaches the cathedral dais where he is to be crowned and a volley of knights burst in after him. ““Where is this dreamer of dreams?” they [cry]. ‘Where is this King, who is appareled like a beggar—this boy who brings shame upon our state? Surely we will slay him” (221). Interestingly, the Young King’s Christ-like humility actually seems to qualify him as childish, at least from the perspective of a populace that longs for a kingly father figure and a well-kempt one, at that. But, as he is wont to do in fairy tales, God intervenes in the nick of time: “sunbeams wove round [the Young King] a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure ... the dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies” (221). The Young King’s subjects quickly swallow their indignation. ““A greater than I hath crowned thee”” (222), declares the Bishop, and “no men dared look upon [the Young King’s] face, for it was like the face of an angel” (222).

The Young King’s final material state is a far cry from that of the statue of the Happy Prince, which is smelted because it “is no longer beautiful,” and, therefore, in the words of the smarmy Art Professor, “no longer useful” (Wilde, “Happy” 276). Perhaps in the earlier story Wilde is mocking the critical ineptitude of the artistic establishment of his time, which fails to appreciate the uselessness of art. If so, it is appropriate that the Happy Prince becomes less beautiful as he becomes more useful. But if the apotheosis of the Happy Prince’s heart and the Young King’s final, God-given garbs are equally symbolic of divine or authorial approval of their respective action and inaction, then it seems likely “The Happy Prince” derives from a set of aesthetic and ethical criteria prior to and distinct from those espoused in “The Critic as Artist.” This observation justifies Kate Pendlebury’s claim that

“The Young King” “is easily reconcilable into an allegory of good and evil, in which the former—the young king’s pure incentive to change himself and his followers—triumphs, and the latter, represented by the hollow materialism of the court, receives its due” (130). Yet it also helps explain both Justin T. Jones’ notion that the Young King’s “rejection of art has been a ceremonial event at most” which will do “nothing to significantly change the social hierarchy of his kingdom” (895) and Willoughby’s similar feeling that “the reader is left with a nagging suspicion that the hero has managed a merely private ecstasy, ironically through imaginative engagement with his fellows” (40). In “The Young King,” readers find themselves in territory more typical of Wilde, and, accordingly, of queer childishness. The Young King is beautiful precisely because he is useless. Any effect his useless beauty will or won’t have on those around him is, for Wilde, beside the point.

Actually, as far as Wilde’s contemplative aestheticism is concerned, the Happy Prince’s proselytizing good deeds have more to do with the outrageous demands the Young King makes of his subjects, and the immoral cruelties he inflicts thereby, than with the Young King’s introspective revelation. By the time he exits the cathedral, “The Young King” is not quite a boy toy because he is no longer ignorant or innocent. He has answered the call of the Christian ethical injunction. But he is not quite a grown up, either, or at least not in the agentive, active and politically involved sense of the word. Although the Young King quits his regime of indirect cruelty, there is no indication he will embark upon one of direct compassion. If the Young King’s unselfishness can be called grown-up, it must be a paradoxical unselfishness, an *indirect* compassion. The Young King embodies that maxim which is, with respect to ethics, aestheticism’s saving grace: Wilde’s contention that “Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes to live” (“Soul” 1194). The Young King is vulnerable to charges of childish solipsism. But he

seems qualitatively, if not quantifiably, more grown-up than the boy toy, and more civically integrated than the stereotypical twentieth century queer.

In *Pomegranates*, the best representation of the boy toy that rejects or is ignorant of ethical injunctions is the titular character of the “The Birthday of the Infanta.” Like the Young King, the beautiful Spanish princess is surrounded by luxurious *objets d’art* and attired in outlandish finery, “puffed sleeves heavily embroidered with silver,” a “stiff corset studded with rows of fine pearls,” and “Two tiny slippers with big pink rosettes” (Wilde, “Birthday” 223). Because it is her birthday, she and her friends are entertained in her palace and gardens by a mock bullfight, marionettes and a dancing Dwarf. In contrast to the Infanta, the Dwarf is “misshapen and hunchbacked, foul to look at and grotesque” (234). “Perhaps the most amusing thing about him,” however, “is his complete unconsciousness of his own grotesque appearance” (228). Ignorant of his ugliness, the Dwarf mistakes the Infanta’s mocking laughter for adulation and her demand that he repeat his performance as a declaration of love. Before his encore, the Dwarf wanders about the lush gardens and opulent palace, happening, at last, upon a mirror. Staring at a loathsome creature mimicking his every motion in a “wall of clear water” (234), the Dwarf realizes that he is looking at his reflection. He realizes, also, that “the little Princess who he had thought loved him—she, too, had been merely mocking at his ugliness, and making merry over his twisted limbs” (234). Devastated, he falls “sobbing to the ground” and “[crawls] like some wounded thing into the shadow” (234). Because he is an anti-Narcissus, the Dwarf is an anti-boy toy; because she is devotedly narcissistic, the Infanta is a Wildean boy toy *par excellence*. Upon learning the Dwarf cannot dance again because he has died of a broken heart, the “Infanta [frowns], and her dainty rose-leaf lips [curl] in pretty disdain. ‘For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts,’ she [cries], and [runs] out into the garden” (235).

It may be her birthday, but if the Infanta grows, she grows sideways, narcissistically pursuing her delights innocent of their adverse effects on others. Alternatively, if the Infanta is not innocent, she is willfully ignorant, willfully refusing the call to exercise compassion. As Jones astutely observes, “Whereas the Dwarf dies as the result of his moral epiphany,” which, unhappily, is best understood as his nasty acquaintance with *immorality*, “the Infanta—as a princess of the realm of art—remains separate from the ugly reality of his death, lest she learn a platitudinous moral lesson and cease to be beautiful” (890). The Infanta’s lovely face disguises, even as it constitutes, her untouchable aesthetic perfection, which is corrosive to ethics. Unlike the Happy Prince, who sacrifices his beauty for the sake of his soul, or the Young King, who is aestheticized only paradoxically—his is beauty by virtue of virtue—the Infanta sacrifices virtue on an idolatrous altar of her own beauty. If the Infanta is simply an innocent, she may soon be faced with a new ethical injunction, a new imperative to grow up and to renounce her selfish time as a boy toy. If she is willfully ignorant she could be a Decadent, except for her refusal of knowledge. As will soon become apparent, except for her knowledge of that refusal, she could almost be a Pop Art princess—Edie Sedgwick *à la* Oscar Wilde, or, better yet, *Infanta Diptych*.

### Chapter Three: Interpreting Warhol: or, How to Train Your Toddler to Close Read

In Wilde, the boy toy is always enjoined to grow up and any failure to do so reads childishly in the queer and queerly in the child. Unlike Wilde's corrupting Decadence, which decays only in marked contrast to the upright Christian ethos of his time, Pop Art, because it will aestheticize *any* content, might as well be *empty* of content. Because they have no sense of chronology or history, Warhol's boy toys have no sense of direction, no notion of where "up" ought to be. Pop, particularly the mass-produced Pop that epitomizes art in the age of its mechanical reproduction, proliferates in any and every direction. Camille Paglia calls "Decadent aestheticism" "visionary idealism, asserting the primacy of beauty over all modes of experience" (*Sexual* 515). From Wilde's perspective, then, the trouble with Warhol is that he can't differentiate beauty *from* those other modes. "I've never met a person I couldn't call a beauty" (*Philosophy* 61), says witty, witless Warhol—hardly a surprise, given that he believes "Everybody's sense of beauty is different from everybody else's" (71). Wilde insists, "All art is immoral" ("Critic" 1136). But Pop, which does not and never will know any aesthetic or ethical standard to judge itself against, is, by its own estimation and according to any exegesis that interprets Warhol's work on Warhol's terms, only ever amoral. In this sense, Pop is ideally childish, and, unlike Wilde's aestheticism, never paradoxically so.

Which isn't to say that Pop *can't* be understood as immoral. Indeed, to figure Pop as immoral could be to interpret Warhol on Wilde's terms. Warhol, who seemingly perfects Wilde's prioritization of form before content, in fact distorts Wilde's vision by sacrificing his snobbish attachment to aesthetic hierarchies and ethical discernment. Although Wilde is undoubtedly an elitist, he remains an avant-gardist if we understand the avant-garde, like Matthew Tinkcom, "as a radical response to the reorganization of life under capitalist

political economies” that “has frequently been allied with leftist politics in order to interrogate and demystify the reshaping of everyday life under capital” (345). Moreover, if the avant-garde is thus defined, Paglia is right to say that it “was essentially killed by ... Andy Warhol from the moment he took Campbell’s soup cans, the iconography of capitalism, into his work” (“Cultural Critic”). After Warhol, it is difficult to appreciate the sense in which the avant-garde tradition of Wilde’s time, despite being in opposition to the high art establishment, was nevertheless its correlate. This is because, as David McCarthy notes, Pop “[eschews] the rigid, either/or strictures in some manifestations of modernism [i.e. Wilde’s] in favour of an art that [is] both visual and verbal, figurative and abstract, created and appropriated, hand-crafted and mass-produced, ironic and sincere” (14). Warhol cashed in on the cultural currency of the aesthetic scandal by popularizing the avant-garde, a contradiction in terms that effectively eviscerated the high/avant-garde art versus popular culture binary.

My argument proceeds from Elizabeth Edwards’ pleasantly ambiguous observation that “Art, in the disassociated sensibility of modernity (and now postmodernity) goes its own way; we wish it would not; if only it can be shown that art is involved in the good, that there is an ethical ground that can rehabilitate this errant art!” (255). Edwards’ concern, whether facetious or not, is grounded in her observation that “the enigma of Warhol’s product is the uneasy sense that it may affirm what it also criticizes, those banal objects of mass consumer culture that surround us, dull our senses, moronize us” (256). In other words, the paralyzed and paralyzing void at the centre of Warhol’s Pop Art (the place where its brain should be) is due to the fact that his distortion of Wilde’s aestheticism, precisely because it flattens aesthetic and ethical hierarchies, is invisible even to itself. Pop Art seems as childish as Wilde’s contemplative aestheticism because, like Wilde’s aestheticism, it seems solipsistic.

But unlike Wilde's aestheticism, which is, at least, self-edifying, or his Decadence, which is immoral, never value-free, Pop Art is actually solipsistic, actually stupid, actually dead to the command to be responsible, to think or do something, to grow up. Pop Art is the boy toy trapped in the frozen Wildean dialectic—but the catch is, *he doesn't know he's trapped*. Warhol's boy toys will never be forced to grow, either sideways or up. As I've said, because Pop can mean anything, it can also mean nothing. Part of my polemical interest in reinvigorating the Wildean dialectic stems from my concern that Warhol's boy toys, thanks to his popularization of the avant-garde, only *seem* oppositional or subversive of the aesthetic and ethical hierarchies that denounce them. In reality, to Pop, everything, from aesthetics to ethics and erotics to politics, is child's play.

Because Pop Art is serviceable to any politics it is essentially unserviceable to any one. It is for this reason that I see Pop and its boy toys as aesthetic figurations of Lee Edelman's negative politics, his ideal of the queer as symbolically opposed to the figure of the child. Edelman sees the child as the structuring metaphor of heteronormative futurity, the politics by which queers are disenfranchised. He frames the queer as metaphorical of the death drive, of the anti-politics that threaten heteronormative futurity. "Queerness," Edelman says, "names the side of those *not* 'fighting for the children'" (3). If "there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as ... responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself" (13). That I should want to relate the death drive to childishness is actually intuitive. If stereotypical queers are *not* "fighting for the children," they must occupy a discursive space more easily elided *with* children than with those responsible *for* children.



Michael Maizels does not discuss either children or the future in Edelman's explicit terms. Yet he makes an argument about Warhol's *Do It Yourself* series (1962-1963) that makes Warhol's painterly method analogous to Edelman's description of the queer's "sterile, narcissistic enjoyments":

By playing on a web of historical associations with the "unnatural" as both mechanical and sexually deviant, the *Do It Yourself* works suggest that for early Warhol, sexuality was not merely an effect at the level of content in his art, but was in fact woven into the very form of its (simulated) mass production. (6-7)

Maizels' reading, like mine, works primarily to queer the form of Warhol's work rather than its content. "Warhol's embrace of mass production," Maizels continues, "celebrate[s] the qualities of repetition, sterility, and immanence in much the way that traditional, heteronormative criticism triumphed singularity, fecundity, and universality" (6-7). Whereas Maizels sees Warhol's work emphasizing the unnaturalness of mechanical reproduction and same-sex erotics, I believe Warhol's work also alienates us from heterosexual reproduction, and heteronormative futurity, by uncannily twinning natural and unnatural reproduction such that one becomes difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate from the other. The boy toy plays with sex toys just as well as sex organs.

Like the boy toys of Pop Art, Edelman's politics can be figured as immoral or Decadent. Edelman's polemic clearly has roots in Wilde. Consider Wilde's formula that "emotion for the sake of emotion is the aim of art, and emotion for the sake of action is the aim of life, and of that practical organisation of life that we call society" ("Critic" 1136). Because of their apparent solipsism, Wilde's aestheticism, and his Decadence even more so, are easily incorporated into Edelman's view of the stereotyping of queers as an attempt to

signify the death drive. But, again like Pop Art, while Edelman's politics *look* Decadent and may register as immoral, they actually signify something far more incomprehensible: pure amorality. Edelman argues that, given the subversive potential of the queer's figuration as Decadent and immoral, rather than resisting such a figuration, contemporary queers should stand cheekily in for the truly annihilating solipsism for which the immoral queer is only the fear monger's straw man: the amorality of the real of natural reproduction, or its uncanny twin, unnatural reproduction.

Edelman therefore "stakes [his] claim to the very space that 'politics' makes unthinkable: the space outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears and so outside the conflict of visions that share as their presupposition that the body politic must survive" (3). Wilde, in a metaphor well suited to Edelman's polemic as well as Warhol's mass-produced Pop Art, accords reproduction "the dignity of machines" ("Critic" 1141). "Aesthetics," says Wilde, "are to Ethics in the sphere of conscious civilisation, what, in the sphere of the external world, sexual is to natural selection. Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful" (1154). Warhol offers the poor man's version of Wilde's theory when he observes, "Beauty doesn't have anything to do with sex. Beauty has to do with beauty and sex has to do with sex" (*Philosophy* 67). Edelman, by cheering the queer's figuration as sterile and solipsistic, accepts the immorality of artifice, and the artificiality of immorality, as a paradoxical means of avoiding the unthinkable amorality of reproductive processes, while simultaneously celebrating the unthinking amorality of our dumbest enjoyments, like sex and Pop Art.

As my reading of Pop through Edelman's anti-child polemic demonstrates, cultural materialism and queer theory are critical inquiries with much to offer one another.

Accordingly, the boy toy is a friend to both studies, albeit a fickle and self-interested one. It plays nicely with both because it takes neither too seriously. That is, although the boy toy is exemplary of the kind of aesthetics or erotics about which cultural materialism and queer theory can offer equally relevant and mutually substantiating insights, it is not reducible to a definitive analysis by either. Elisa Glick is the only other critic who bridges cultural materialism and queer theory by comparing Wilde and Warhol. (It is surprising, incidentally, how rarely Wilde and Warhol are compared.) Glick identifies a paradox undergirding the constitution of the long twentieth century dandy. She calls the dandy a “privileged emblem of the modern” (5). Following Wilde’s example, the dandy “embodies a relation to capitalism that is at once rebellious and complicit” (7). The dandy is complicit insofar as he “embraces the erotics and aesthetics of the commodity, celebrating the cultivation of beauty, pleasure, and style,” but rebellious insofar as he “protests against the commodification of modern life, the drive toward production, and the elevation of instrumental reason” (17).

I am persuaded, with respect to Wilde, by Glick’s reading, which is dialectical in shape and form:

I offer an alternative to the prevalent notion that dandies ... privilege style over substance, and appearance over essence ... Wilde defines the dandy as an unremitting struggle between visible appearance and concealed reality. As I demonstrate, this ongoing dialectic is the ‘secret’ of that distinctly modern form of split subjectivity we now call gay. (11-2)

Glick’s book agrees with Denisoff’s contention that Wilde performed the *fin de siècle*’s “shift from the productivist ethos that characterised the industrial revolution to a consumptionist one in which the display of taste and ownership became a key marker of identity” (39). Because there is nothing comparable to Wilde’s elitism in Pop Art, I am better

convinced by Glick's treatment of Wilde than of Warhol. Glick is, at times, too idealistic in her conviction that "Warhol's art fascinates precisely because it critiques commodified relations and self-consciously inhabits them" (136). To be blunt, if a Campbell's soup can does not a critique of capitalism make, why should a print of Campbell's soup can? Cresap suggests that when Warhol's Pop works first emerged on the critical scene, they "appeared in a high-art context, so they needed to be read with high-art seriousness. They *had* to signify; they had to be *made* to signify" (8-9). This, I think, is much the stretch Simon Watney<sup>3</sup> makes when he inverts the logic by which Warhol's consumer culture subjects are often denounced as bathetic, quipping, "Cans of soup are only 'banal' to those who didn't have to grow up on canned food" (30). That Glick and Watney see either a critique or a celebration of capitalism in Pop Art is, I fear, less evidence that Pop Art critiques or celebrates capitalism than proof that Pop Art will think, say, and do anything to be *popular*. Pop Art is flighty, flakey and faithless. It likes everyone and everything, or seems to. In telling you what you want to hear, Pop Art will only ever echo what you've already said. Pop Art is the most popular kid on the playground, everybody's best friend and, deep down, nobody's—not least because, when it comes to Pop, there isn't any deep to get down to in the first place.

Although they belong to Warhol's juvenilia, *25 Cats Name Sam and One Blue Pussy* and *Holy Cats by Andy Warhol's Mother* anticipate the shallowness of Pop and are delightful examples of his enduring interest in the aesthetics of childishness. As its title suggests, the authorship of *Holy Cats* is attributed to Warhol's mother, Julia Warhola. The front cover of

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<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, the collection in which Watney's article appears, *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (1996), edited by Doyle et al., is, despite its date, far and away the most comprehensive scholarly source on queer themes in Warhol.

*25 Cats* says it is by Warhol but the first page suggests it was “written by Charles Lisanby,” a friend of Warhol’s.<sup>4</sup> Warhol shamelessly sourced inspiration for his art. He controversially wrote, “Pop comes from the outside, and how is asking someone for ideas any different from looking for them in a magazine?” (*POPism* 20). If these works are someone else’s brainchildren rather than Warhol’s, we probably shouldn’t be surprised; though, if the opposite is true, that needn’t necessarily surprise us, either. With Warhol, nothing can be taken at face value precisely because everything must be. In any event, both books give the impression that they were created when Andy was a boy. Take, for example, the “d” left off the end of “Named” in the title of *25 Cats*, which seems typical not only of Warhol’s fondness for errors, but also of the mistakes of a child newly learning how to spell.

*25 Cats* and *Holy Cats* are slim picture books with a scarcity of text that, unsurprisingly, contain mostly images of cats. *25 Cats* delivers just what it advertises: twenty-five garishly coloured diagrams of cats, each labeled “Sam,” and, at the end, a drawing of one blue pussy. Unlike the pussy in question, Warhol’s innuendo is rather bald, amounting to little more than a dirty joke, a bit of immature humour that well exemplifies the crass aspect of childishness. The twenty-five other cats are surely in on the joke. Their eyes are wide and round, their irises coloured in a shocking palette, and their black, almond-shaped pupils either impossibly deep or totally depthless. They stare mischievously up at their readers, coyly enticing them to turn the page in a game of cat-and-mouse, their smiles enigmatic and self-satisfied as if clamped down upon the proverbial canary. Some of the diagrams depict only a cat’s head floating in abstract space, foreshadowing the disembodied

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<sup>4</sup> Because neither *25 Cats* nor *Holy Cats* are paginated, I do not cite specific page numbers. In my quotations from *Holy Cats*, where I have referenced more than one consecutive page, I have marked the page divisions with slashes, which seems justified by the book’s singsong, pseudo-poetic tone.

Marilyns and Jackies of Warhol's canonical Pop prints, while others show the creature in its entirety, posing aloofly, reclining luxuriously, or prepping to pounce. One fuchsia cat's tail isn't coloured in; another has a white iris; yet another, no pupils. One lilac kitten peeps out from between the embracing front paws of a second, larger lilac cat, presumably its mother.

Significantly, these diagrams are hand-illustrated, not mass-produced. Though they depict twenty-five "Sams," they do not depict exactly the same cat over and over. The inconsistencies from diagram to diagram are therefore not as striking as the mistakes Warhol so valued in his supposedly identical, mass-produced prints. The publisher's note on *25 Cats* stipulates that it was "PRINTED PRIVATELY CIRCA 1954 IN A LIMITED QUANTITY OF 190 COPIES." The note on *Holy Cats* confirms it was "PRINTED PRIVATELY IN THE EARLY FIFTIES." Eventually, both were reproduced in facsimile and published together in a boxed set by Panache Press at Random House in 1987. These volumes, which raise a fascinating analogy between the mass-production of books broadly speaking and the mass-production of Pop Art, are early indications of Warhol's fascination in stylized repetition. They represent a first try, a baby step. All of the typically Warholian elements are present, but none, including the imperfections, are perfected. One half wonders if Warhol intentionally created this early model imperfectly, as if to conjure up his "developmental stage," or if he really was in development, learning about his methods and themes as he went along. Such is the mystique of Warhol's childishness, which always seems least affected when most artificial.

Whatever the case, *Holy Cats* is a far more complex book than *25 Cats*, which may not be saying much. In fact, *Holy Cats* may be more complex than any other piece in Warhol's visual art oeuvre. It is too explicitly smart to be typically Warholian. To begin with, although *Holy Cats* overflows with felines, it also includes a host of other images, an

uncharacteristic move for an artist whose work took minimalism to a new extreme. To be sure, there is abstract space in the book, but the pages are crowded with hat-wearing felines, angels, stars, flowers, birds, butterflies, and other such pastoral pleasantries. There is even one doodle of a young lad walking his kitten on a leash, which, it seems fair to say, may be interpreted as a self-portrait of the artist or of the artist as a child. The drawings can be likened to sketches, as they are essentially highly sophisticated stick figures with no shading. The book's text is styled in what appears to be the same black handwriting, which is loopy and prone to flourish but never overwrought arabesque. The backgrounds of the pages of *Holy Cats* are shaded in an assortment of pastels, one colour per page, which are less intensely saturated than the colours found in Warhol's Pop Art prints. Paglia says, "With its bright colors and simple forms, Pop Art projects an innocent child's view of the world" (*Glittering Images* 148). These cats undoubtedly belong in that tradition. The backgrounds of *Holy Cats* anticipate the vivid sensationalism of his later work as if Warhol is attempting to convey a softer, dreamier notion of childhood—pinched cherub cheeks and Easter eggs and the like. Some of the cats portrayed in *25 Cats* paw and mew in this same dainty palette, while others are painted in neon fuchsia, orange, scarlet or teal.

However, *25 Cats* and *Holy Cats* even more so depart from the typical Pop Art tradition insofar as they have a narrative, a fact that would knock both pieces completely out of sync with the rest of Warhol's aesthetic enterprise if their authorship were not attributed to Lisanby and Warhola. The narrative in *Holy Cats* is simple, as in the average children's book, and formatted one line to a page. It seems fairly obvious that the narrative voice is intended to read as Warhola's. It is nice to imagine her reading it to Andy as a child. The following paragraph offers a close reading of *Holy Cats* from start to finish.

It begins with a frontispiece: three angels and the dotted outline of a fat cat, inside of which is scrawled the title. On the next page is another barely-there cat sketch and a dedication reading, “This little book is for my little Hester who left for pussy heaven / Some pussys up there love her / Some don’t / Some angels up there love her / Some don’t.” These pages feature a series of cats in an assortment of hats and poses, some cartoonishly illustrated with only two legs or perched on half-moon shapes that might be rocking chairs. Some of the cats are winged, while other of the flying creatures are impish cherubs or stately, heraldic angels. “Some like it day,” says the narrator on a page scribbled with stars and a moon. (In one corner, like graffiti, is an squiggly angel with an amorphous, phallic appendage.) Next, “Some like it night,” though the blacked-out page and its light blue scribbles, the only instance of such an inversion, depict a cat with a mane like the rays of the sun and butterflies busy over flowers in bloom. “Some don’t like it at all,” while “Some wear hats / Some wear chapeaus / Some don’t.” Certain of the preening kittens evidently think themselves fine specimens in their hats; others are clearly disgruntled by the indignity of their human attire, their mouths turned down in grumpy frowns.<sup>5</sup> “Some talk to angels,” the narrator drones on, while “Some talk to themselves / Some know they are pussycats so they dont talk at all.” Note the asynchronous, missing apostrophe from the “dont” in the previous phrase, which is typical, again, of Warhol’s intentional errors. “Some play with angels,” and, on the page depicting the young Warhol and his pet, “Some play with boys.” There is no page on which some play with girls. Instead, “Some play with themselves / Some don’t play with nobody”—what is the difference between playing with oneself and playing with nobody?—“and once in a while one of them goes to the devil.”

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<sup>5</sup> Apparently, Warhol is to thank for the “Grumpy Cat” meme in more ways than one.



Which begs the question: what the devil is Warhol up to? The obvious and best answer is that he is fooling around, having a laugh and playing a game. *Holy Cats* is irreverent and if the stakes were higher it could probably be called sacrilegious. Some of the angels are haloed and hold crucifixes aloft as prophylactics against the salacious implications that can be read between the lines all around them, or, sometimes, even glimpsed on the page. One peek at the evasive, sidelong gaze of the cat that “goes to the devil” is enough to ascertain that these felines, like the ones in *25 Cats*, are up to no good. Apart from framing the lad walking his leash as a boy that plays with boys, a boy that plays with himself, but *not* as a boy who plays with girls, *Holy Cats* casts Warhola as crazy cat lady and overbearing mother in one tongue-in-cheek stroke. There seems to be no certainty about how large a role she actually had in the book’s creation or about how much of it is Warhol deliberately making a camp spectacle of himself. The two possibilities aren’t necessarily incompatible. But, if they are not, the function Warhola fulfilled while living “with a lot of cats, all named Sam” (*POPism* 5) in a New York apartment with her son during Warhol’s most prolific years should probably be more thoroughly investigated. Warhol explains, “My mother had shown up one night at the apartment . . . she announced that she’d left Pennsylvania for good ‘to come live with my Andy’” (5). Given their unorthodox living arrangement, it is perhaps unsurprising that, in *Holy Cats*, Warhol is uniquely privileged with what is at least the nominal authority to narrate the art of Andy Warhol, a displacement of authorial voice that symbolically castrates her son, and, to the knowing audience at least, sends up Oedipal explanations of the queer’s arrested development.

Warhol himself often invites such a reading of his own queer lifestyle. “I think I’m missing some chemicals,” he says, “and that’s why I have this tendency to be more of a—

mama's boy. A—sissy. No, a mama's boy. A 'butterboy.' ... I'm immature, but maybe something could happen to my chemicals and I could get mature" (*Philosophy* 111).

Warhol's matter-of-fact, no-big-deal approach to questions of gender and sexuality may be more exasperating now than ever before, when the debate in sex and gender studies between essentialism and social constructivism is so contentious. Watney says "it is very dubious to describe Warhol as an 'out' gay man or to describe him at all as a gay man in the pre-Stonewall period. Warhol grew up in a series of urban homosexual 'milieus' that had no concept whatsoever of how homosexuality might be articulated politically" (26-27).

Warhol's most prolific Pop Art period ends before Stonewall in 1969, so his aesthetic contribution to the discursive construction of queer identities is necessarily pre-political in the sense Watney describes. That it is "dubious" to call someone "a gay man" before "homosexuality [can] be articulated politically" is a point which credits my notion that, although Wilde and Warhol are important to the constitution of fledgling queer identities in the twentieth century, the political is not the sphere in which their aesthetics are impactful—quite the contrary.

As Edwards notes, one need only think of Warhol's "charming *Mao* series (1972-1973) or the *Vote McGovern* (1972) poster of Nixon" to realize that "he is given to rendering what is not banal *as* banal" (256). "The provocation," Edwards continues, "seems to be in a reversal: taking soup seriously, taking politics frivolously" (259). Watney clearly disagrees, saying, "It is therefore yet another Warholian paradox that Warhol's work has inspired and informed AIDS activist culture interventions" (28). He gushes, "for example, Warhol's cow wallpapers, and others, present a form of interior decoration that in many respects provided the model for the cultural activist strategy of, as it were, wallpapering the streets" (28). What Watney and others who invoke Warhol to enact a subversive queer politics too rarely take

into account is that their attempt to preserve Warhol's cult status as an edgy, avant-garde artist while also rehabilitating his politically incorrect or politically unserviceable childishness is a contradiction in terms. This contradiction is formally preempted in the first instance by Warhol's popularization of the avant-garde, his subversion of subversion that always incorporates any oppositional politics within the hegemonic ethical or aesthetic structures they sought to subvert. Tinkcom helpfully elaborates, saying, "the problem is that the gay marginality that gave rise to camp has never been understood as being in any way radical in the sense that a leftist avant-garde might wish it" (348). In other words, it is tricky to queer either Warhol or his art, and even more difficult (if not impossible) to claim him for a dissident queer politics, because Warhol is already always queer in the first place. On a reduced level, my argument is very simple: no amount of criticism can make Warhol gayer than he already is, just as no posthumous politicization of his anti-politics will ever make them more subversive.

Watney raises the issue of AIDS, a subject that is not, obviously, contemporaneous to Wilde, and that Warhol's work does not explicitly treat, but which must be addressed in any discussion of the history of the twentieth century queer. Precisely because it abjected the childish queer into the political sphere even as it forced gay men out of the closets, AIDS can be said to have made that childish queer begin to grow up. Certainly many of the posters ACT UP circulated, like the AIDSGATE smear campaign indicting Ronald Reagan's callousness, look like Pop Art. But if, in the Wildean tradition of queer childishness, Pop Art de-politicized the political, Stonewall and AIDS politicized the apolitical—sex and art—in a discursive move that may be typical of the maturing queer but which owes no fidelity to Wilde and Warhol's queer childishness. Tinkcom offers the politically disinterested Tennessee Williams as an apt example of the tradition in which one can find Warhol. I offer

Larry Kramer and Tony Kushner as artists that exemplify the queer political consciousness that developed after Warhol but in a fashion unprecedented by Wilde, Williams, *or* Warhol. When, in modernity, queers began to fight for their civic rights at Stonewall and during and after AIDS, they began to leave the queer childishness of Wilde, Williams, and Warhol behind.

In the wake of Stonewall and the AIDS epidemic, the rhetoric around Pop is overinflated by ideology, by LGBTQ+ identity politics, and by what Edwards calls “the recent ‘turn to ethics’ in contemporary theory” (265-66). It is only by bursting the bubble of our own high-minded seriousness that we remember Pop was always intended to burst just such bubbles. Only the most unsophisticated interpretations of Warhol will suffice to make the vacuity of Pop Art resonate: “Art Criticism for Dummies,” if you will, or, “How to Train Your Toddler to Close Read.” The goal is not dismissively to say, as is idiotically said of Cubism, “My 5-year-old could have done that,” but to say of Pop Art, “My 5-year-old can *understand* that.” Warhol is to his *Campbell’s Soup Cans* (1962) and his *Brillo Boxes (Soap Pads)* (1964) as the child who would rather play with household objects than designated toys is to his pots and pans, bubble wrap, or cardboard boxes. Warhol is to his *Silver Clouds* (1964) as Narcissus is to his reflection, but minus the moralizing dimension of the Narcissus myth. Consider Steven Bruhm’s notion that the richness of Ovid’s tale of Narcissus and Echo, in marked contrast to its later Christian rewrite as a “moral allegory against *vanitas*,” lies “in the way it both conflates and separates desiring subjects, desiring objects, objects and subjects of desire” (13). *Silver Clouds* has just such a “dazzling and confusing” (13) effect. Indeed, like Warhol’s pussies, soup cans, and Brillo boxes, his clouds entice their audience to play with them. They ask their spectator to become a part of the spectacle, to forget the line between subject and object by submitting to the homogenizing soporific that

is Pop Art. Warhol's metallic balloons floating ambivalently through abstract space are metaphoric of uprooted ideals, not grassroots politics; of chance idylls, not long-awaited utopias; and of oblivious, carefree play, not introspective self-reflection. If Wilde's Dwarf glimpsed his reflection in one of Warhol's clouds rather than in the Infanta's mirror, his fate would have been quite different. He would be not a victim of the cruel inflexibility of Wilde's aesthetic hierarchies, but Warhol's happy fool. In Wilde's version of their tale, only the Infanta, and not the Dwarf, is a boy toy; in Warhol's, both are.

The aestheticized boy toy of Warhol's short film *Blow Job* (1964) is also a seductive figure. Like *25 Cats* and *Holy Cats*, Warhol's underground cinema seems to qualify as a less stereotypical version of Pop Art, not only because it didn't appear in the same highbrow context as Warhol's prints, but also because it is literally less stereotypical—handcrafted at least as much as any legitimate Hollywood film. I use the word “legitimate” cautiously. If Warhol seems lowbrow in comparison to Hollywood, it is indeed only by comparison and not because Hollywood was regarded as highbrow at the time. Tinkom says that “Warhol's cinema took its shape as a response to, but not a rejection of, the presence of Hollywood” (349), a stance I second because Tinkom understands that Warhol's avant-gardism isn't opposed to popular culture, but, rather, immune to highbrow pretensions and ethical injunctions. If Warhol's films are formally indebted in part to Hollywood, they are also at least equally indebted to pornography. Thomas Waugh asserts as much, saying, “porn, pure and simple, is exactly the contextual framework that is indispensable for understanding the films” (65). *Blow Job*, which consists of thirty minutes of silent, black and white film, depicts the face and torso of a young man, DeVeren Bookwalter, as he (apparently) enjoys oral sex, orgasms, and smokes a cigarette. He is a boy toy in all of the self-evident senses of the metaphor, as is his off-screen partner. Moreover, *Blow Job* helps to clarify the sense in

which, if soup cans and silver clouds can be interpreted as children's toys, innocent and frivolous and fun, they must also qualify as sex toys. Glick rightly observes how "Warhol's most radical and productive insight was perhaps how he reshaped sexuality into a cultural effect of commodity aesthetics" (139). There is no difference between Warhol's felines, Brillo boxes, and silver clouds, and the star of *Blow Job*. The most characteristic feature of Warhol's art is that, in Pop, it is impossible to tell where the boy ends and the toy begins.

## Chapter Four: Conclusion: Queer Growing Pains

In 2015, Stephen Fry, the British actor, writer and gay rights activist, tweeted the news of his marriage to Elliott Spencer, who is thirty years Fry's junior, and did so with reference to Wilde.<sup>6</sup> Surely same-sex weddings are occasions to celebrate the maturity, newfound responsibility, and social integration of the twenty first century queer, who bears so little resemblance to the tragically outdated stereotypes of yesteryear's queers? After all, what could be more archetypal of adulthood than marriage? Why, then, did Fry and Spencer wear green carnations in tribute to Fry's self-professed idol, Wilde? Not because Wilde's own heterosexual marriage provides a standard of marital bliss to which the newlyweds aspire. Nor because Wilde's ill-fated tryst with Douglas provides a particularly encouraging precedent for the fledgling couple. Why, indeed, was a plush Oscar Wilde doll seated on the table at Fry's right while Spencer signed the marriage contract at Fry's left, so that Fry was married with a boy toy on either side? It is perversely amusing to think that a stuffed Wilde simulacrum witnessed a same-sex, practically pederastic marriage and seemed to betoken Wilde's benediction from beyond the grave. But it is troubling, from a historical and literary if not humanistic viewpoint, to think that Wilde himself is now more readily associated with gay marriage and the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement than with the paradigms of Decadent excess and childish narcissism that once stereotyped queers in Wilde's very image.

Rest assured, such stereotypes are far from passé. The work of BCALLA, a provocative Brooklyn-based fashion house, is proof and then some that the childish queer still occupies a place in the popular imagination. In 2014, BCALLA announced its

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<sup>6</sup> I feel I must apologize to Mr. Fry, who will never read this thesis but whom I do admire and whose feelings I would spare. It's best not to take criticism personally, especially when it's directed at you.

Fall/Winter collection, “The Sodomites of San Souci,” with a press release that attributes its inspiration to Oscar Wilde’s fairy tale, “The Happy Prince.” The announcement not only cites Wilde but also goes on to allude to Andy Warhol, claiming, “The BCALLA Bushwick studio has become a sanctum for emerging stars and the downtown glitterati—celebrating ‘Bad taste in the best taste.’ ‘More is more’ and ‘There is no gender’” (“FW 14”). BCALLA brands its “Bushwick studio” in the tradition of Warhol’s Factory, and, by implication, positions its head designer, Brad Callahan, as Warhol’s heir. Through its outrageous Fall/Winter 2015 collection, which debuted in a pornographic short, *Colby Takes New York*, starring gay adult film actors and coproduced by the website CockyBoys.com, BCALLA further cements such a self-fashioning. The film, as much deliberate camp as deliberate kink, showcases neon-bright outfits with ruffles, fins, straps and chaps, all constructed of an assortment of plastic, sequins, feathers and fur, and stylized to reference genres from country western to science fiction to Sesame Street. By synthesizing man and outfit, sex act and sex toy, erotics and aesthetics, BCALLA’s short film perfectly exemplifies what I intend by the metaphor “boy toy.” And it doesn’t innovate on Warhol in the slightest. The leap from *Blow Job* to *Colby Takes New York* is no leap at all.

But what about the leap from *Colby Takes New York* to Fry and Elliot’s wedding? The symbolic clashes and resonances between these two pop culture phenomena are typical of what I will call the growing pains of the figure of the contemporary queer, who has been outgrowing his boy toys since Stonewall, but who really, *really* doesn’t want to give them up. Particularly complex is the open question of whether, if he does eventually put his boy toys away, the childish queer will outgrow not only his childishness, but also his queerness. Michael Warner anticipates such an inquiry when he argues that marriage, civil or religious, straight or gay, “sanctifies some couples at the expense of others” (82). Warner wonders if,



like straight people who oppose gay marriage, “gay people who want marriage” might “in turn derive their sense of pride from the invidious and shaming distinction between the married and the unmarried” (82). Warner’s questions point toward others. In a world where Stephen Fry can marry his much younger, same-sex partner, is the boy toy still a Decadent figure? Or, as Warner might argue, is the unmarried or extramarital boy toy Decadent precisely *because* such a marriage is now possible?

Cresap offers a uniquely moralizing reading of Warhol that helps orient these questions. Voguish though it is not, his reading provides a dialectical counterweight to my own and, in so doing, broadens the set of questions that can be asked of Wilde and Warhol. Cresap intuits the childishness implicit in Warhol’s naïve persona, wondering, “What are the political implications and costs of performed naïveté? When does it stop being adorable for an adult to behave like a child or adolescent? What becomes of a nation that won’t grow up, or can’t grow up?” (27). Cresap tells of a nation headed in the direction of Edelman’s non-utopia. His question counterpoises mine—it is not “what will become of the childish queer when he grows up?” but “what will become of growing up if we continue to behave so childishly, so queerly?”<sup>7</sup> These are not politically correct questions. But political correctness, which avoids the admittedly daunting prospect of having an opinion, suddenly seems the most infantilizing of Pop Art’s influences in the culture. Douglas Crimp contends “a lasting Warhol effect has been to make possible expansive approaches to contemporary art more generally, or at least to those contemporary art practices that insist on their articulation with broader social practices” (50). In his apologia defending cultural studies, Crimp goes on to say, “If cultural studies is significant to me, it is because it defines itself as political

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<sup>7</sup> I am not accusing Cresap of homophobia. The leap from behaving childishly to behaving queerly is mine, not his, and arises from the broader argument I have been making about the child and queer’s stereotypical relation in the long twentieth century.

specifically by recognizing that the political is the space of contestation in advance. Needless to say, this thwarts the adoption of any particular politics *in advance*” (57). I must insist that Warhol, who cannot see politics, is, like cultural studies, which sees politics everywhere, less able to contest the political than someone like Wilde, who understands the political as so contestable he avoids it. But this is not to say that Warhol’s work has not been politically subversive. Rather, it is to say that to be queer—when and where queerness is metaphorically related to childishness—is to be subversive of politics in the first instance. To marshal a twenty first century queer politics in the name of Wilde or Warhol’s avant-gardism is to forget that they’ve been there, done that, and, in Warhol’s case, sold us the t-shirt.

I say above that one of my most polemical aims is to jolt back to life the wheel of the Wildean dialectic that Warhol froze. Certainly queer aesthetics and queer politics as we have known them seem endangered unless their future is assured by some such drastic measure: short of going back in time, how is the queer to have a future? How will he get himself out of the bind that Warhol has locked him in, in which the popularization of subversion has begun to make his queerness seem so much less queer? In search of words more hopeful than those yet offered here, one might consult José Esteban Muñoz’s rebuttal of Edelman’s pessimism. Muñoz believes “Queerness should and could be about a desire for another way of being in both the world and time, a desire that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough” (96). He offers a critique that cuts to the core of my admittedly cynical argument about Pop:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Not to mention to the core of what I have come to understand, during and perhaps because of the writing of this thesis, as my prematurely curmudgeonly heart!

An antiutopian might understand himself as being critical in rejecting hope, but in the rush to denounce it, he would be missing the point that hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia, which is nothing like naïve but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying logic of a broken-down present. (12)

For Edelman, the child represents the future. But, for Muñoz, queers do. In my treatment of the childish queer, then, I have interlocked Edelman and Muñoz's contradictory worldviews at precisely their most improbable jointure, a move that, as far as I can tell, seems more to illuminate than to resist the "stultifying logic of a broken-down present." Perhaps this is because, as Muñoz might argue, what it meant to be queer yesterday, what it means to be queer today, and what it will mean to be queer tomorrow are never questions definitively to be answered by stereotypical categorizations like "childish" or "adult" but are best understood, plainly and simply, as growing pains. Or maybe I have stretched the metaphor of the childish queer and his boy toys to the breaking point by speaking thus of growing, whether sideways or up. Oh, well: as Wilde says, "It is difficult not to be unjust to what one loves" ("Critic" 1112). If I have overstrained the metaphor, if I have broken the boy toy, perhaps it is a sign that queers are indeed ready for something new, ready to "approach the queer critique from a renewed and newly animated sense of the social, carefully cruising for the varied potentialities that may abound within that field" (Muñoz 18).

In a sense, then, I might do best to conclude by not concluding. If Muñoz is correct and "the aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, often contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity" (1), then my anxieties may be assuaged somewhat even as the questions I ask go unanswered. If, as I have argued, Wilde and Warhol, because of their aestheticized boy toys, are stereotypically childish compared to the increasingly politically

efficacious queers of today, there may be a paradoxical comfort in Muñoz's notion that "turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations" (1). Muñoz assures the political good in language that contains more than an echo of Wilde's aesthetic theory, which is a formidable combination in both pre and post-Warhol worlds. If, as in Muñoz's view, where we've been is where we are, and where we are is where we're going, then perhaps we are not so far from our queerness after all. Maybe it is by knowing Wilde and Warhol that we best know ourselves, in which case I feel that the best this thesis has offered is an opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with the queerness of our future by way of the childishness of our past.

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