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## Staging Props and Men in Mid-Century Queer Visual Culture

After 1945, a new queer visual culture emerged that was constituted by physique magazines, private photographs, underground films, pulp novels and their covers, and works of fine art by artists such as George Quaintance, Tom of Finland, Jess, David Hockney, Andy Warhol, Robert Smithson, and Robert Mapplethorpe.<sup>1</sup> Despite differences in medium and viewership, each of these art forms shared what I call a »twilight aesthetic,« which pivoted on the ambiguities of simultaneous and oscillating queer visibility and invisibility. This aesthetic was also pronounced in mainstream film culture, especially in the sword-and-sandal films, epic films, Western films, war films, and outlaw films produced in Hollywood. These genres offered characters and circumstances that queer subjects could readily interpret as queer. Furthermore, it offered queer men the opportunity to gaze at sexually charged and staged male bodies through a homoerotic lens and thereby receive inspiration for their own aesthetic that was in parts heavily inspired by Hollywood.

In the following essay, I focus on the interconnections between the visual culture of marginalized groups and mainstream visual culture and specifically examine the role that *Twilight Aesthetics* played in this dynamic. Although props were important to queer visual culture, they were but one part of a much broader aesthetic system that expands beyond the scope of this essay. As I argue, the extensive use of props can be seen as a mode of semi-camouflage during a repressive era of censorship and state-sanctioned oppression and violence, which simultaneously hid and (re-)pre-

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<sup>1</sup> While this article serves as a preparation for my dissertation project, some aspects of the following are based on and derived from my Master's thesis, submitted at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in 2018: *Inszenierte Maskulinitäten. Camp in Physique Pictorial, 1951–1969*. I wholeheartedly thank Ty Vanover for his thorough reading and editing of this essay as well as the editors of this volume for their profound help. Research for this project was supported by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

sented the queer agenda of these magazines, photographs, and films through a process of appropriation and historicization.

### Twilight Aesthetics: *Queer Visual Culture In-between*

While the term ›twilight‹ refers to the transition between day and night, or vice versa, it also signifies the hybrid light at dusk or dawn itself, between brightness and darkness. The term thus allows us to describe the in-between state of a queer visual culture that defied the binaries of visible / invisible, conscious / unconscious, high / low culture, and mainstream / underground. The notion of *Twilight Aesthetics* also refers to the referentiality of multi-layered and coded queer images in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were published in a legal gray area, oftentimes overstepping the mark of what was legal. *Twilight Aesthetics* worked metaphorically and symbolically – long before gay and lesbian identity constructions and mainstream visibility in mass media that began in the 1970s. While lesbian artists and image producers worked, first and foremost, with and through literary publications, using visual abstraction and reduction to work against censorship, most gay male artists and image producers relied on ambiguity that approached margins of legality, deploying allusions, references, and visual codes that were largely created through the use of poses, image combinations and appropriation, costumes, set designs, and, not least, props.

*Twilight Aesthetics* made forms of queer sexuality, desire, and affection only partially visible by alluding to it, which subsequently rendered the publication of this queer visual material and the creation of queer networks possible, as in the case of physique magazines, and the photographs and film stills shown in them. By arguing against the notion of the ›closet,‹<sup>2</sup> I want to treat the queer visual culture following the Second World War as far more entangled with a supposedly ›straight‹ visual culture than it may at first appear and as far more vital with regard to the spread and migration of images. This article will focus on one aspect of these intermedial relations: the staging of men and objects by queer artists and image producers who appropriated motifs, performances, and aesthetics of mainstream Hollywood film to create their own queer imagery. It also focusses on how queer artists appropriated the aesthetic of physique photography and film for their works when this aesthetic had been established and had become a relatable source.

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2 Cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* [1990], updated with a new preface, Los Angeles, CA / London 2008; Craig M. Loftin, *Masked Voices: Gay Men and Lesbians in Cold War America*, Albany, NY 2012.

My argument is that, through the re-use or appropriation of heteronormative (but sometimes inherently homoerotic and / or queer) iconographies, performances, and aesthetics in mass media, queer subjects were able to create their own queer visual culture that cut across various media. I want to read this appropriation, in conversation with the work of José Esteban Muñoz, as a practice of disidentification that allowed exchange and fantasy through performances, literary works, and, most of all, images.<sup>3</sup> Mid-century queer visual culture articulated queer desire, which in turn led to the formation of a gay community and identity during these decades.<sup>4</sup>

### *Forging the Past in the Present: From Hollywood to Queer Culture*

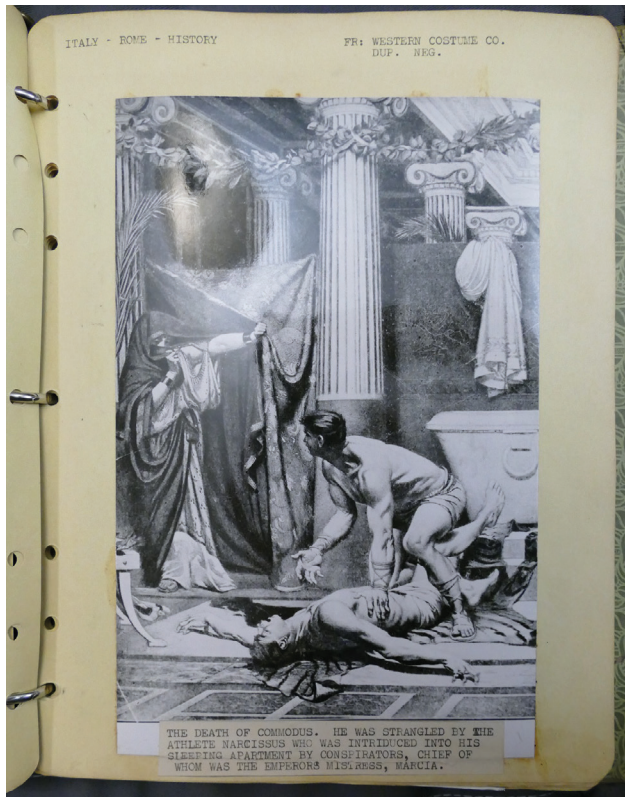
In countless American gay physique photographs of semi-nude men from the 1950s and 1960s, published in magazines such as *Grecian Guild Pictorial*, *Adonis*, *BIG* or *Physique Pictorial*, as well as in drawings, paintings, and queer underground films by Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger, James Bidgood, and Jack Smith, props played a vital role. As mentioned above, I argue that props were used in a mode of visibility and invisibility to both represent and hide queerness, being as visible as possible and as invisible as necessary by appropriating common mass media imagery. In the context of an emerging queer visual culture and community that worked across media, props served as much more than just equipment; they created a vision of a bygone era.

This vision, in itself, does not differ substantially from contemporaneous mainstream Hollywood film. Studios such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer had whole research departments to, among other things, study the past based on archeological sites, architecture, artworks, and artifacts for the studios' costume and set design depart-

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3 Cf. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Cultural Studies of the Americas 2), Minneapolis, MN / London 1999.

4 As this mid-century queer visual culture is mostly white, middle-class, and gay cis male, it also needs to be mentioned that these image worlds embody forms of racism and classism with the eroticization and fetishization of Black, indigenous, and People of Color and of the working class. While this imagery has to be considered as an important part that led to a queer liberation – and should not simply be disregarded as cheesy proto porn or just another facet of gay male Camp – it also includes forms of racism, misogyny, and classism, and even internalized anti-queer perspectives that to this day shape the discourses on (and critique of) some parts of gay culture, such as white gay cis male club culture or pornography. Cf. e.g. John Mercer, *Gay Pornography: Representations of Sexuality and Masculinity*, London / New York 2017, pp. 145–155; C. Winter Han, *Racial Erotics: Gay Men of Color, Sexual Racism, and the Politics of Desire*, Seattle, WA 2021; Tan Hoang Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representation* (PERVERSE MODERNITIES, ed. by Jack Halberstam and Lisa Lowe), Durham, NC / London 2014.



1. Page from the Quo Vadis research bible by MGM, vol. 1, copy 3, no page number

ments. As Aaron Rich has pointed out in his important article about these so-called ›research bibles,‹ the research departments' studies were at least partially based on reproductions of artworks to create a version or vision of antiquity (and historical settings in general) that seemed familiar to the audience (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> This might explain Hollywood's eclecticism and historical inaccuracy regarding historical films that seemingly never tried to create a perfect copy of antique architecture, interiors, props, hair styles or costumes, but were instead based on commonly shared references that the audience could readily identify, thus using, constructing, and disseminating a form of collective memory.<sup>6</sup>

5 Aaron Rich, The Accent of Truth. The Hollywood Research Bible and the Republic of Images, in: *Representations* 145 (2019), no. 1, pp. 152–173.

6 Hollywood's creation of a form (and imagery) of antiquity is studied in detail in: Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Designs on the Past. How Hollywood Created the Ancient World*, Edinburgh 2018.

Importantly, however, queer image producers actively queered straight mainstream visual culture by recreating and reconfiguring the image of past eras and spaces, such as antiquity or the ›Wild West.‹ By queering not just the common assumptions about and historical facts of these times but also the objects that belong to a form of a pseudo-past themselves, the props that queer subjects used transcended their utilitarian function, taking on an agency and potentiality that simultaneously hid, (re-) presented, and even performed queer sexuality, sex, desire, and affection.

Mainstream Hollywood film in the 1940s to 1960s strongly influenced contemporary queer culture. Most strikingly, mid-century epic films and cheaply produced sword-and-sandal films with lavish set designs used an incredible number of pseudo-antique props, such as statues, swords, antique-like chairs, shields, and chariots. Outlaw-films, which glamourized shiny motorbikes and leather gear, and Western films with horses, whips, guns, and lassos, were also appropriated and given new meaning by queer men, who used them to design a visual history of queerness. In so doing, they legitimized being queer by inscribing queerness in the past, a tactic that differed considerably from the use of alibis or pure camouflage. Instead, I argue that this queer historicity emerged from what queer theorists Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Elizabeth Freeman have described as an anachronistic, non-linear and non-chronological queer temporality.<sup>7</sup> What proves to be of vital importance regarding this part of queer history is Muñoz's notion of queerness:

»Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.«<sup>8</sup>

It is precisely this queer potentiality that can be found in (and distilled from) the imagery queer subjects created and distributed in the United States in the mid-twentieth century.

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7 Cf. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York / London 2005; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York / London 2009; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds. Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham, NC / London 2010.

8 Muñoz 2009 (note 7), p. 1.

*Antiquity Unchained: A Blueprint for Physique Magazines*

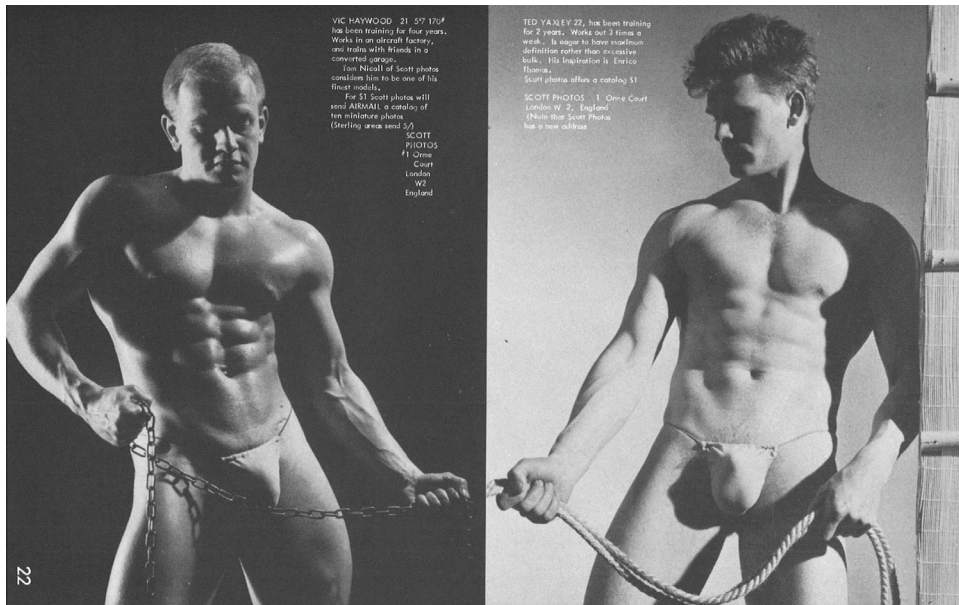
What interests me here is how props were vivified in this visual culture, how they were used through the performative interactions by and with the models and actors. Physique magazines were produced and sold as small, cheaply printed magazines or catalogs, advertising mail-order homoerotic photographs and films to gay men. My investigation will focus on *Physique Pictorial*, the most popular and influential of the hundreds of physique magazines published in this period. It was not only the earliest physique magazine to be published (beginning in 1951), but also the one with the longest print run (from 1951 to 1990), and the one with the most issues published in the 1950s and 1960s.

In a 1958 issue of *Physique Pictorial*, the reader / viewer is presented with two photographs. The photograph at left depicts a model holding a chain, while the photograph at right shows a model holding a rope (fig. 2).<sup>9</sup> The two objects almost become one through the intermedial image arrangement of Bob Mizer, the editor, photographer, and director of *Physique Pictorial*. His image combination presents both men as connected to each other, across two photographs, despite (or maybe even because of) the different backgrounds of each photograph: while the photograph on the left shows a black background, the background in the right photograph is bright, intensified by the fact that *Physique Pictorial*, like most other physique magazines, was printed in black and white. Two images, two virtual spaces, and two men merge, holding the richly (and sexually) connoted objects of a chain and a rope. Both men clasp the props with both hands and look down at the objects in their grasp. While the chain is hard and cold and the rope is soft, both are equally charged with aggressive or even dangerous connotations. The two objects almost become united at the level of the image, allowing the viewer to read the two monochrome photographs

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9 As in most physique magazines and their pages, text plays a visually subordinate but vital role, despite the perceptual focus on the images and their aesthetics, not least because of the images' size compared to the small textual elements printed on them and because of the structurally repetitive character of the textual components, but also, of course, because of the motifs of muscular, half-clad bodies that seem to attract attention better than small texts. In this spread, the two textual elements function as the typical short, (oftentimes pseudo-)biographical description of the depicted models, mentioning details about the size of the available photographs or films and how they could be ordered by mail. Especially the clearly eroticized, obviously fictitious biographies support the commercial marketing of gay male imagery and the instructive parts of these texts. But, first and foremost, they support the images that cannot contain this kind of context and thereby become even more connoted with erotic pleasure and fantasy, also by making it easier to differentiate between the almost indistinct bodies (due to the typical aesthetics, the poses, etc.), that gain at least some individuality and recognition value through the texts.





2. *Physique Pictorial*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Fall 1958), p. 22

as one. While it seems unlikely that Bob Mizer knew of the German film *Geschlecht in Fesseln* from 1928 (interestingly translated as *Sex in Chains*) with its queer plot, this page from *Physique Pictorial* can be decoded as a visual statement that shows both men not *in chains* (neither literally nor figuratively, as films set in prison with a homoerotic or queer plot might suggest), but as two men on their own, simply holding props that connect and visually bind them together, creating a tender and implicit homoeroticism for the beholder.

While a form of agency seems to be attributed to the props through the interactions ›on stage‹ by the models and ›behind the scenes‹ at the level of the medium by Bob Mizer, the models become objectified living sculptures in the movement of ›not yet‹ and ›not anymore,‹ stressing and also denying the ephemerality of the pose through the medium of photography.<sup>10</sup> It is exactly this in-betweenness of the pose that mirrors the in-between state and ambiguity of queer life, queer gender performance, and queer visual culture in this period. In the context of physique maga-

<sup>10</sup> »Als Kippfigur organisiert sie [die Pose] die Beziehungen zwischen den Medien im Modus des ›nicht ganz‹ und ›nicht genau‹, der stetigen Revision, der vorbehaltlichen Zuordnung und [...] des ›nicht mehr‹ und ›noch nicht‹[...].« Bettina Brandl-Risi, Gabriele Brandstetter, and Stefanie Diekmann, *Posing Problems. Eine Einleitung*, in: eaed. (eds.), *Hold it! Zur Pose zwischen Bild und Performance* (Recherchen 89), Berlin 2012, pp. 7–21, here p. 19.

zines and photography, images of daily poses (such as being on the phone or taking a shower) that sometimes read as clumsy, awkward, or amateurish are placed alongside filmic, glamorous, and heroic poses. While physical culture, nudist, bodybuilding, and fitness magazines, such as *Strength and Health*, had been published since the turn of the century in the US, physique magazines with their focus on male beauty (instead of fitness) differed from these while using established standards of US magazine culture for their own purposes, namely the creation of their own mass media queer visual culture. This visual culture shifted the focus from copying corporeal cultural techniques, such as dieting and training, to a new way of beholding male bodies in mass media: as erotically staged bodies, captured at a stand-still to prolong the ephemerality of the pose.

Another facet of the dynamic queer intermedial phenomenon is the aforementioned relationship between mid-century Italian sword-and-sandal (or peplum) films or Hollywood's historical epic films and queer culture. Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951), Riccardo Freda's *Sins of Rome* (1953) or Pietro Francisci's *Hercules* (1958) are just a few examples of hundreds of epic and peplum films produced in the years following World War II. The history of films set in ancient times leads back to the silent film era, but they had a revival and gained most popularity after the Second World War. Although antiquity had long served as a blueprint for queer men thinking and writing about desire, sexuality, and art before the 1950s – going back to Johann Joachim Winckelmann's accounts from the eighteenth century – it seems that the association between antiquity and sexuality was intensified by epic and peplum films and their visual spectacles in the 1950s and 1960s.

The most striking aspect of the physique magazines' adaptation and intensification of sexualized antiquity is their eclectic configuration and composition of the costumes and set designs, the textual elements such as the films' titles and their plot summaries, the models' poses, and the props they used to create a vision of a queer antiquity in the present. As Jon D. Fair notes: »What matters is not so much whether the Greeks had exceptional bodies or how perfectly ancient artists conceived them, but the extent to which the Victorians and their successors were inspired by Greek iconography to shape their own cultural ideals.«<sup>11</sup> In using the image of antiquity, the subjects behind the camera did not merely inscribe themselves within a history of historically inaccurate and overtly simplistic clichés that represented Greco-Roman antiquity as a site of lust, bodily perfection, homoerotic pleasure, and same-gender sex; they used antiquity as a justification and validation of queerness that dated back thousands of years.

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<sup>11</sup> John D. Fair, *Mr. America. The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon*, Austin, TX 2015, p. 7.



The magazines presented male-to-male fighting scenes, sado-masochistic depictions of power relations, homosocial and homoerotic bonding, and heroic masculinities through poses, gazes, set designs, and props, which created a vision of an eternal queer past that stood in stark contrast to queer ephemerality and society's denial of a queer presence and present (not to mention a queer future). The men posing for physique photographers, as Kenneth Krauss argues, perform masculinities »[...] even when posed in a way that may have compromised their machismo. At such moments they, or at least their images, look ›camp,‹ excessive, overdone, almost silly.«<sup>12</sup> With the stylistic device of exaggeration and the juxtaposition of otherwise incompatible iconographies, physique magazines re-interpreted mainstream film culture and its masculinities that were changing in the 1950s and 1960s, not least through their depictions of wrestling men in sword-and-sandal films or rebellious teenagers in outlaw films. Bodily perfection is not emphasized as in earlier (and contemporaneous) physical culture magazines. Through this disidentification with society's dominant iconographies and normative performances of gender and sexuality, physique magazines did not present a process of assimilation or plain refusal, but instead a productive working with and against dominant culture, not least by omitting female characters and the roles they play in every peplum and epic film, focusing on men only.

### *Staging Bodies, Staging Objects*

Another photograph by Bob Mizer, printed in the winter edition of *Physique Pictorial* in 1964, shows a (white) gladiator and a (white) slave (fig. 3). Multiple aspects are striking regarding this image's iconography and aesthetic. The set is cluttered: The ground, which is revealed as the studio floor in the image's foreground, is shiny and seems three-dimensional. The wall in the background mimics the fluting of a Doric column, which makes the wall appear as corrugated iron. In the background on the left, we can see a ledge with an object on top of it, and in the middle (as well as on the right-hand side) we see two circular, similarly grooved objects that seem to be shields or mirrors. Another round object without any attributable function hangs in the middle of the wall. In front of the wall stands a small, detached column, on which another object, likely a small sculpture, is placed. Behind the gladiator stands a throne-like chair with opulent ornaments of vines and a small dagger on top of it. In the foreground, the two models can be seen, one gazing out of the image, hold-

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Krauss, *Male Beauty. Postwar Masculinity in Theater, Film, and Physique Magazines*, Albany, NY 2014, p. 276.



Another scene of John Davidson  
and John Davidson from the  
filming film "Cleopatra and the Slave."  
Set of 12 4x5  
frames of this  
model's pose of  
model's only 12,  
with  
AVIC  
124 to 130, of  
Los Angeles, CA,  
California.



KEY TO THE SYMBOLS

As we have long promised, we at last have available a key to the subjective character analysis symbols used on many of the models photos appearing in Physique Pictorial. There is no charge for this, and to get a copy you need only 1.) Send a self addressed stamped envelope (any size) and 2.) along with a signed statement "I promise that the information learned on any model is for my own use only and will not be divulged to others."

There is no question but that a degree in psychology would in fact be helpful to fully interpret the key. Character analysis is largely a subjective matter, which may differ considerably from different points of view. We have tried to be dispassionate, but even we cannot be sure. Also what is true of a man today may change tomorrow through such philosophers as Schopenhauer (claimed that basic character never changes). In any case as we form new views on individual models their symbols also will change.

page 3

3. *Physique Pictorial*, vol. 14, no. 4  
(Winter 1964), released June 1965, p. 3

of Michelangelo's *David*, resting on a small column. Howard does not copy the pose, although he also stands in contrapposto, but looks in the same direction as the statuette, beyond what we can see. The legitimizing semi-nudity of art becomes immanent in this image. Their poses are, to some extent, similar, but they differ in size. Art is presented as the scaled down historical forerunner of the ultimately more important male model in the flesh.

Kenneth Anger's short film *Scorpio Rising* from 1963 shows another intermedial phenomenon based on props and their connection to mainstream film. In one central scene, a bike gang member lies in bed with photographs of the queer idol and icon James Dean attached to the wall in the background behind him (fig. 5). Not only because they seem to be autographs – or studio photographs that could be autographed – but also because of the amount of photographs and density of the image arrangement, Dean is shown as an important background figure and context to the plot of Anger's film: three publicity shots on a wall surface of approximately one

ing a carnivalesque sword. His hands are placed on the sword's grip and blade, which intensifies the scenario's absurdity. The 'slave' standing next to him looks at him, his hands in chains. The image is overloaded and eclectic and defies a definite interpretation. However, the sexually charged sword that the model on the left holds seems to suggest that we read the gladiator as the holder of power, wielding a phallic symbol. Here, the extreme excess of props intensifies a focus on the two models, upon whom the beholder's gaze can rest; their bodies are not nearly as confusing as the set.

In another photograph by Bob Mizer, showing Ron Howard, probably in the outdoor area of Mizer's LA home that also served as his *Athletic Model Guild's* studio, another performative and visual technique is deployed (fig. 4). The model is positioned beside a bronze statuette copy

square meter, with one of the photographs framed, allude to the biker as queer by showing him as a James Dean fan. The scene is juxtaposed with an excerpt from the 1953 outlaw biker film *The Wild One* starring another queer icon, Marlon Brando. Brando, playing a bike gang leader in the film, performs a form of masculinity we might call »toxic« today. Both visual references in *Scorpio Rising* are more than a justification of male strength and the celebration of outlaws, queer or not; they also exceed a purely visual reference to queer icons. Indeed, the photographic and filmic images seem to have provided the visual ground, or at least parts of it, for films such as *Scorpio Rising* and for a whole period of queer underground cinema in the US in the 1950s and 1960s. Furthermore, the fact that Brando and Dean are included in *Scorpio Rising* represents the potential of a queer reading of otherwise straight material that included moments or aspects that could be read as queer. Although the actor does not use or even touch the photographs in the background, they serve as a literal background and depict the biker as embedded within a queer visual culture that was also recognizable by other queer subjects.

Prison scenes from *The Wild One* (or other films set in the homosocial and potentially homoerotic space of the prison) can easily be juxtaposed with physique photographs or films that were set in prison, such as another spread from *Physique Pictorial* (fig. 6). The space of the prison in queer visual culture might be interpreted and decoded as a metaphor for queer subjects feeling imprisoned or as a representation of their actual experiences in prison or the rebellious aspects that being queer involved. However, it also shows how simple objects, such as metal bars, can be used as props to create a scenario that can be touched, played with, and resignified with sexual connotations. To some extent reminding the observer of medieval visual representations of Christian martyrs that show the latter with the torture device or deadly weapon that was used to kill them, for example Peter of Verona usually



4. *Physique Pictorial*, vol. 14, no. 2,  
Oct. 1964, p. 12

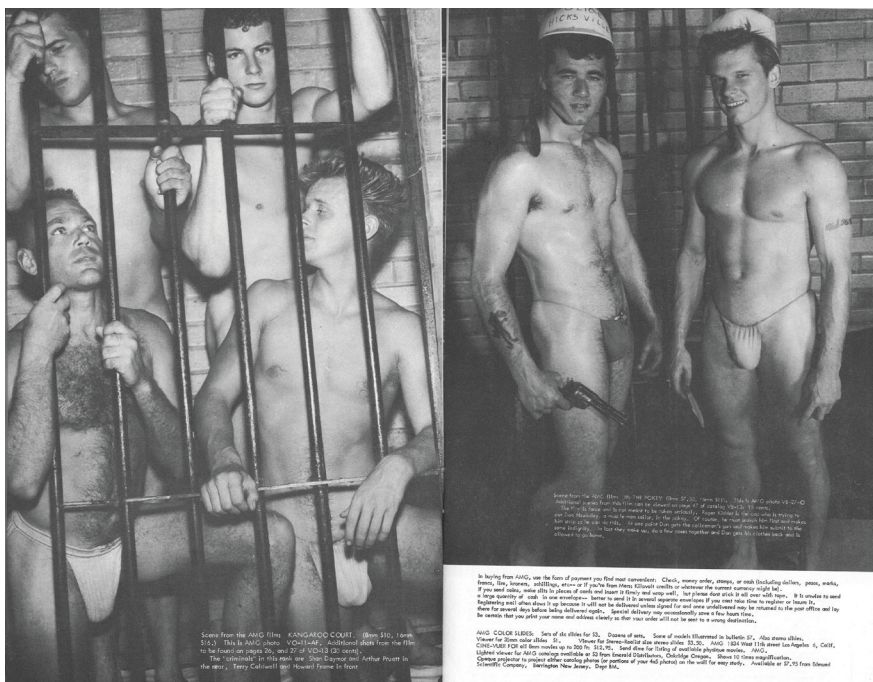


5. Screenshot from *Scorpio Rising*, directed by Kenneth Anger, USA 1964

being depicted with a scimitar or cleaver in his head, both men in the photograph on the right (from the AMG film *In the Pokey*) seem to have brought the weapons (a pistol and a knife respectively) that might have been the central instruments of the crimes that brought them to prison. But being half-naked, with the model on the right smiling at the camera / the viewer, the photograph on the right (like the one on the left page) queers the motif and topos of the prison by presenting a homo-social and homoerotic site of lust instead of a violent environment. Furthermore, the props (once again) lose their perceived dangerousness through the facial expression, the poses, the body positioning within the photographs, and the image combination across these two pages.

In Robert Morissey's film *Flesh* from 1968, produced by Andy Warhol, Joe Dallesandro plays a hustler in New York City. In one scene, we witness one of Dallesandro's encounters with a physique artist, who positions him the way he wants to photograph and draw him in the nude. This direct reference to physique culture represents it as an outdated, coded form of sexuality for elderly gay men and follows (and presents) its biggest myth: that of providing photographs and films only for artists as a template for their artistic production. The antique-like poses the hustler takes are common. In





6. *Physique Pictorial*, vol. 10, no. 4 (Winter 1960), released April 1961, pp. 10–11

contrast to these, another pose the protagonist strikes is that of being on the phone, which by 1968 had already been established through countless similar photographs in physique magazines showing men talking on the phone (or pretending to do so) (fig. 7). While copies of Michelangelo’s *David* and other pseudo-antique props or images of queer icons as props seem to simultaneously present and hide queerness, the use of the phone points to something different. As opposed to providing historical background (as in the pseudo-antique photographs and films) or literal background (as in *Scorpio Rising*), the phone is used as a prop to simply present queer men as busy, preoccupied, and connected to lovers, partners, friends, and family. It also represents a sense of contemporaneity in contrast to the images based on the past, thereby representing queerness as being directly in the present and normalizing queerness through a form of quotidian normality and innocence. Queer boys are represented as the boys next door.

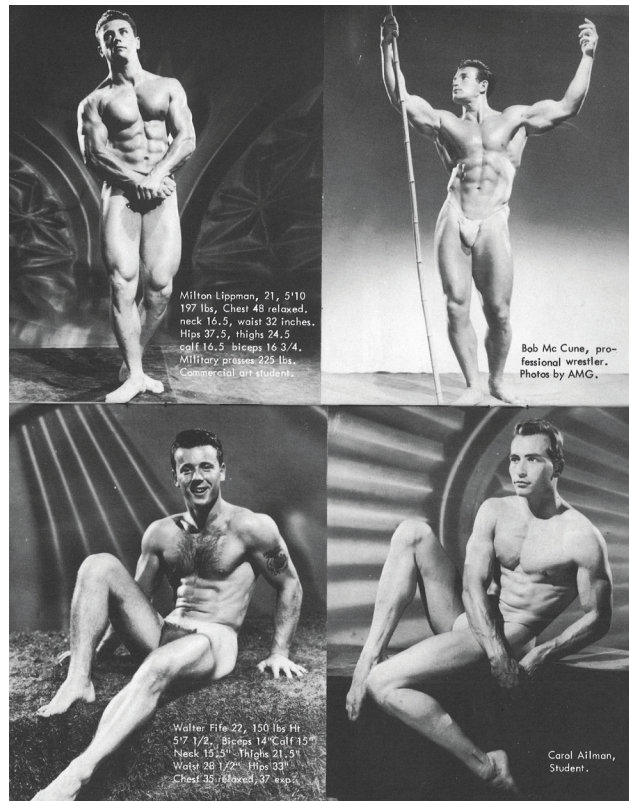
There can be no simple answer to the question of why gay men appropriated mainstream imagery, especially the dramatic aesthetics of Hollywood’s ›Golden Age‹ and, in the 1960s and early 1970s, also queer physique aesthetics and motifs from the (by then) established visual subculture. But what is beyond speculation



7. Screenshot  
from *Flesh*,  
directed by  
Paul Morrissey,  
USA 1968

is that mainstream visual culture was predestined to be appropriated by queer men for multiple reasons: it was strongly stylized and extremely artificial (in the sense of historically inaccurate sets and props that served as representations of their respective time of creation), and because Hollywood's imagery presented and embodied female hyper-femininity and male hyper-masculinity. It also presented what was legal to show at a certain point in time. In addition, Hollywood's imagery was in the process of becoming outdated and embodied opulence, full of exaggeration and on the edge of decline. The same can be said about the hundreds of Italian peplum films from the 1950s and 1960s that successively lost their charm due to the genre's inherent repetitiveness. It is no surprise that queer physique imagery, equally stylized and in the process of becoming outdated, with its exaggerated aesthetics and repetitive visual formulas, would be appropriated and re-used in the context of art, by artists such as Paul Morrissey, Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Robert Smithson. During the McCarthy era of virulent anti-queer attitudes and politics, queer performances and migrating imagery formed queer sexuality and queer masculinities, using and exceeding forms of normative masculinities through pastiche that sometimes, but not always, deployed the performative aspects and aesthetics of camp. While the bodies in physique magazines and photography might seem normative from today's point of view, they were, in fact, unusually queer in their working with and against hetero-normative/-sexist ideals by exaggerating male masculinities and disallowing them to be taken too seriously or turn toxic.





8. *Physique Pictorial*, vol. 5,  
no. 1, Spring 1955, p. 22

I would like to close with one final observation about the use of props behind the camera. Bob Mizer took glass objects belonging to his mother, with whom he lived together throughout her life, to create ornamental patterns, projected on the background of his studio (fig. 8).<sup>13</sup> In this page from *Physique Pictorial's* Spring 1955 edition, the patterns in (and on) the background frame the model in the upper left corner to enhance his small waist and big shoulders (and thereby his masculinity), while the other patterns in the two photographs in the lower half of the page allude to sunshine and the models being shone on from above and from the side respectively. All three photos show the glamourization of masculinity and of each model: indirectly through the light that Mizer sent through these objects and directly through

<sup>13</sup> At least according to F. Valentine Hooven, who unfortunately does not make a reference to the source of this information: F. Valentine III Hooven, *Beefcake. The Muscle Magazines of America 1950-1970* [1995], Cologne 2002, p. 135. Ditto for Kate Wolf who claims that Mizer created these effects »by placing pieces of crystal on an overhead projector set behind a sheet« in her article: Kate Wolf, Beyond the Muscle, in: *East of Borneo*, November 2 (2016), URL: <https://eastofborneo.org/articles/beyond-the-muscle/> [last accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> March 2022].

the headlights he used to light the models and the patterns created by light that sometimes even imitate a source of light themselves. Mizer added this element of literal, semi-material shine – of concrete crystalline objects which he used as props behind the scenes – to create abstract variations of light and shade with geometrical patterns which also resemble earlier Hollywood star photography made by studio photographers.<sup>14</sup>

*Of Copies Without an Original and Something Lost that Never Was:  
(Re)producing Queerness*

David K. Johnson stresses that the evocation of antiquity by queer men was one way to legitimize and naturalize same-gender desire by creating a folklore of a collective past.<sup>15</sup> As Thomas Waugh points out, the role of antiquity was not as significant in the middle of the twentieth century in Western culture as back in the times of gay photographer Wilhelm von Gloeden in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: »[N]ow classical references referred ironically to earlier artistic appropriations or else engaged in transforming mythological matter into a stripped-down, frankly elemental sexual modernity.«<sup>16</sup> In my opinion, this argument falls short, as I hope to have shown above. On the contrary, antiquity was present on the silver screen and in queer subculture more than ever at mid-century. It could rather be questioned how serious the role of antiquity was taken by, studied by or represented in the works of Wilhelm von Gloeden, Wilhelm Plüschow or other queer artists from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. What makes these mid-century queer images camp is their departure from a notion of authentic antiquity and from the urge to look for an alleged origin or original. This resembles Judith Butler's definition of gender in her study on drag as »a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself,« emphasizing the discursive

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14 For an in-depth analysis of Robert Smithson's early mixed media works, for which he used female pin-up as well as male beefcake imagery based on physique magazines, and the works' elements of shine, see Eva Ehninger, *Against the Biological Metaphor: Robert Smithson's Crystalline Figuration*, in: Antje Krause-Wahl, Petra Löffler, and Anne Söll (eds.), *Materials, Practices, and Politics of Shine in Modern Art and Popular Culture* (Material culture of art and design), London / New York 2021, pp. 185–205.

15 David K. Johnson, *Physique Pioneers: The Politics of 1960s Gay Consumer Culture*, in: *Journal of Social History* 43 (2010), pp. 867–892, here p. 873.

16 Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine. Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*, New York 1996, pp. 118–119.

character of gender performativity.<sup>17</sup> Returning to Winckelmann, we might even call this treatment of antiquity the »Nachahmung of Nachahmung.« As Whitney Davis notes, »in the never-completed ethical project of the *Nachahmung* of *Nachahmung*, of the coming-to-be of oneself in coming-after another who admires and imitates his image modeled in turn on someone coming-after-his-image [...], surely the ideal will be attenuated and transformed.«<sup>18</sup> Through this eclectic attenuation and transformation of an ideal without an original or origin and of imagery without historical accuracy, as in the case of Hollywood, earlier queer works of art and visual culture as well as mainstream media culture laid the foundation for distinct qualities of mid-twentieth century *Twilight Aesthetics* through mass reproduction. Indeed, the loose and apparently nonchalant backward movement towards visual culture from the past that enabled the creation of an in-between aesthetic can be seen as one key visual strategy of *Twilight Aesthetics*. Queer theorist Heather Love writes that:

»Camp [...] with its tender concern for outmoded elements of popular culture and its refusal to get over childhood pleasures and traumas, is a backward art. Over the last century, queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects.«<sup>19</sup>

The actual objects seen in mid-century queer visual culture are not actually lost. I propose to read Heather Love's description of camp as a »backward art« not only figuratively, by thinking of these objects as representing something that is lost (such as the myth of free lust and queer love in Greek antiquity), but also literally as a way back to an imagined past to create a visual culture in the present. While these props may represent the past – something that was there and is gone now, a lost object – they certainly represent something that never really was but »that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future,« to refer to Muñoz's concept of a queer utopia.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, in: Sara Salih and Judith Butler (eds.), *The Judith Butler Reader*, Malden, MA 2004, pp. 119–137, here p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty. Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond*, New York 2010, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward. Loss and the Politics of Queer History* [2007], Cambridge, MA / London 2009, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Muñoz 2009 (note 7), p. 1.

Almost every physique photograph or film shows men in strongly stylized and pseudo-antique poses. This hyper-stylization was likely due to the seemingly paradoxical character of the pose itself, which scholars have coined and described as the movement of standstill or seemingly motionless motion: »Der Körper wird durch das Innehalten in der Bewegung, in der Pose einen Moment lang zur Plastik, zum Bild. Und er ist solchermaßen *im Rahmen einer Bewegung*, die anhält,« as Brandl-Risi, Brandstetter, and Diekmann note.<sup>21</sup> Another interesting description of male poses can be found in Thomas Waugh's path- and groundbreaking study of gay male eroticism in photography and film from its earliest examples in the nineteenth century to Stonewall in 1969 of physical culture photography from around 1900, which can almost be read as a precise description of the poses in physique photography, created and published decades later:

»In the absence of the penis, the majority of the Physical Culture poses are the stern frontal assertion of phallic power that are still all too familiar, the most common poses highlighting the arms. [...] While the bulk of some other muscle is often accentuated, the athlete's arms – taut, rigid, flexed, swollen, interlinked, outstretched, or upheld – repeatedly acquire the graphic status of surrogate phallus. At the same time, the powerful aggressive-defensive signal of folded arms is inevitably one of sexual protectiveness. Other poses emphasize intimacy with the charisma of the star, with some going as far as the configurations of access and vulnerability seen in von Gloeden or in the earlier heterosexual *piquanterie*.«<sup>22</sup>

While the relationship between Hollywood's glamour and the glamour of physique magazines and photography is a different and still understudied topic that is beyond the constraints and argument of this article, the poses that Waugh describes apparently did not change (or at least did not change much) between the turn of the century and the 1950s and 1960s, which shows their imitability and reproducibility in spite of all that had changed between 1900 and half a century later. The poses' visual and performative stability – despite their inherent *instability* of being a motion of and in standstill, oftentimes full of muscular tension – may have laid the foundation for this new queer visual culture that needed to first reproduce objects, imitate genre-typical scenes and plots from mainstream film and poses and topoi from the zone of so-called high art – but apart from these areas and their discourses. Instead, queer image producers created an in-between category, a twilight zone, using, changing,

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<sup>21</sup> Brandl-Risi / Brandstetter / Diekmann 2012 (note 10), p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Waugh 1996 (note 16), p. 189.

reconfiguring established aesthetics, motifs, and performances that could be recognized or perceived as queer by other queer viewers; a queer visual culture that was too close to contemporaneous mainstream visual culture and historical visual culture to be outright forbidden and thereby invisible enough. But it was also too visible and explicit by deliberately showing queerness on all levels (regarding the images, the texts, the medium of the magazine, the way the physique studios were run), in order to overstep the legal limits regarding obscenity laws again and again and thereby pushing the boundaries and, eventually, liberating queer imagery and the individuals behind, in, and in front of them.

In American mid-century queer visual culture, the staging of objects *and* men (as objects of desire for other men) appropriated forms of the past and the present (with a link to the past, such as the sword-and-sandal films) to create a new, eclectic queer aesthetic that pivoted on ambiguity and an intricacy of motifs, signs, and allusions that often could not be reduced to one meaning. To stay within the legal limits of what could be published, queer people had to create their own visual culture that both followed dominant culture in order to stay as invisible or camouflaged as necessary, but also exceeded it to be as visible as possible.

Lastly, this queer visual culture also changed what we consider ›high art,‹ when artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Robert Smithson, and Andy Warhol made visual references to physique culture in their own works from the 1960s and 1970s. Such artists represented physique photographers at work, referenced physique aesthetics, or pictured their downfall. When most physique magazines ceased publication during the mid- to late 1960s and their aesthetics and visual vocabularies became outdated and replaced by more obvious eroticism and so-called ›hardcore‹ pornography, their visual and performative strategies, aesthetics, and motifs could be appropriated and reconfigured in the field of art.

### *Credits*

1 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Research Department Files, UCLA Library Special Collections, Coll. 323, Box 5; © Warner Brothers; 2, 3, 6, 8 Scan: Schwules Museum Berlin © The Bob Mizer Foundation; 4 The Complete Reprint of Physique Pictorial, 1965–1977, Vol. II, Köln 1997, Scan: Max Böhner © The Bob Mizer Foundation/Taschen Verlag; 5 Magick Lantern Cycle, DVD, Zweitausendeins Edition 2014 © Kenneth Anger/ZWEITAUSENDEINS; 7 Flesh, DVD, MiB 2005 © The Andy Warhol Foundation

Max Böhner, Staging Props and Men in Mid-Century Queer Visual Culture, in: Requisiten. Die Inszenierung von Objekten auf der ›Bühne der Kunst‹, hg. von Joanna Olchawa und Julia Saviello, Merzhausen: ad picturam 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1186.c16887>