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STROBOSCOPIC: WARHOL AND THE EXPLODING PLASTIC INEVITABLE

Homay King

Pops and Flashes

At least a half dozen distinct sources of illumination are discernible in Andy Warhol's *The Velvet Underground in Boston* (1967), a film that documents a relatively late incarnation of Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable (EPI) (figure 1), a multimedia extravaganza and landmark of the expanded cinema movement featuring live music by the Velvet Underground and an elaborate projected-light show. Shot at a performance at the Boston Tea Party in May 1967, with synch sound, the thirty-three-minute color film combines long shots of the Velvet Underground performing on a stage with close-ups of accent lights, an overhead projector strewn with transparent gels, and dancing figures. A disco ball, reminiscent of the mirrored half-sphere that reliably appears in Warhol's Factory films, receives frequent close-ups. As the lights play across its mosaic of mirror tiles, it reflects glints of light that float around the room. They form a constellation with a host of other small light fixtures, including one mounted on a wall that displays three rows of small, round, colored orbs that suggest fairy lights.

A spotlight provides another source of illumination. At times, it functions like a searchlight, actively scanning for figures in the black sea of the crowd (figure 2). Its shape creates a circular frame around the figures it selects, sometimes narrowing slightly into a keyhole, making temporary, quasi-static portraits out of the figures. During the Velvet Underground's performance of "Venus in Furs" (recorded version released in 1967), John Cale plays the electric viola, and the spotlight remains with him for a while. At other times, its movements grow wayward: it swings back and forth, bobbing around and tracing lines across the room, its diameter narrowing and widening more rapidly in an attention-grabbing effect akin the one that Warhol achieved with the zoom lens in films of this era.[1]

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Figure 1. Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable Show, *featuring the new sound of the Velvet Underground, with Nico Pop Girl of '66, Poor Richard's Chicago, June 12 thru June 26.* © *2013 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

Figure 2. Spotlighting, captured in Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable *(dir. Ronald Nameth, 1966). Courtesy of Ronald Nameth Films.*

With these two contrasting styles of implementation, the spotlight seems to function as an intermediary between painting and cinema, emphasizing fixed poses at one turn, and mobile gestures at the next.

Soon, we see Andy seated at an overhead projector, manipulating transparencies, the source of the colors that saturate the club. These projected color gels flatten the depth of field, giving the film and live movement more of the look of Warhol's paintings. As David Joselit notes, one of the key effects of the EPI light show was to render figure and ground indistinguishable from each other; indeed, the color washes level the separations of field between performers and audience, stage, and floor.[2] At times, the film has a monochrome look, as though the scene had been printed, not filmed, producing an effect reminiscent of Warhol's silk-screened works. Black-and-white films projected silently toward the stage provide another flattening layer; at the shows, these were often exhibited in double- or triple-screen projection. The musicians' and dancers' bodies serve as intermittent screens for these images, which sometimes feature doubles of them.

Writing about an EPI event that took place at the Dom in Manhattan's East Village in April 1966, John Wilcock describes the palimpsest effect of

the projected lights and sounds, all of which combine to create something like a panoramic multipanel, multichannel work. While one projector on the floor played Warhol's *Couch* (1964), he writes,

> two other projectors stationed in the balcony were flipped on, beaming two different movies onto the narrow strips of wall beside the stage. A colored spotlight onstage focused onto the mirrored ball that revolved in the ceiling sending pinpoints of light on predictable circuits around the room. A plastic globe glowed in cycles of changing pastel colors. . . . Colored floodlights stabbed out from the corners, caressing the dancers with beams of green, orange, purple. At one point three loudspeakers were pouring out a cacophony of different sounds; three records played simultaneously. . . . [The 1965 film *Vinyl*] was being obscured by brightly colored slide patterns from two slide machines. . . . Slashes of red and blue, squares of black and white, rows of dancing dots covered the walls, the ceiling, the dancers.[3]

I quote Wilcock's article in part because it is one of the more precise and detailed descriptions of the EPI. In addition, though, it contains three words—"pinpoints," "stabbed," and "slashes"—that make me prick up my ears. These words pop out of the text: all three of them evoke perforation. Perhaps it's not just by chance that the Velvet Underground played at a venue known as the Balloon Farm, nor that Warhol chose to say goodbye to painting that year with a flotilla of inflated silver cloud pillows. We can imagine these silver balloons being popped by a sharp needle—akin to the diamond needle a listener might place on the disc of a Velvet Underground record, where it might figuratively puncture the ears with screeching feedback. Another needle comes to mind, the hypodermic one that Gerard Malanga wields in stylized fashion in his dance to the song "Heroin" (Velvet Underground, 1967) during the EPI performances.

It is probably no accident that Warhol chose to show his film *Vinyl* as one of those projected during the EPI performances (figure 3).[4] The selection is apt for the reference it makes to the material of the record album and to his and the EPI's embrace of all things plastic. It is also appropriate in that *Vinyl* features Gerard Malanga in a sadomasochistic (S&M) scenario similar to that in which he dances in the live EPI shows. A loose adaptation of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), *Vinyl* traffics in the image that shocks—that metaphorically pierces the eye. Ronald Tavel's

script for the film references the "Ludovico treatment" of Burgess's novel: a fictional clinical procedure involving the use of violent film imagery as a form of aversion therapy. Malanga plays the juvenile delinquent and anti-hero of the story; among his crimes is "loving music" (*Vinyl*). His image is multiplied in the EPI show, with his filmed version projected behind his live dancing body. *Vinyl* already employs a mise-en-abîme structure, even before being projected during the live show: as Douglas Crimp observes, the stagy, "phony" S&M interrogation acted out by Malanga in the foreground is doubled with a scene of genuine sexual torture unfolding in the background.[5] A lit candle, which forms a key prop in the film, drips hot wax onto Malanga's body; this candle provides another small flare of diegetic light depositing traces on the skin. Paul Arthur discerns "four distinct planes of action" in the film and makes an observation similar to Crimp's: "What is determined as 'fake'—for instance, an inquisitor tearing off the pants of a seated victim in the background or Gerard Malanga yelling 'No more, no more, I can't take it'—suddenly caves in and we infer outbursts of 'real' anger, pain, sexual desire."[6] At some of the EPI shows, the two reels of *Vinyl* were shown simultaneously, projected side by side, further amplifying the hall-of-mirrors effect.

Figure 3. Still from Vinyl *(dir. Andy Warhol, 1965).*

When Malanga's character speaks the line "I never saw a flicker like this . . . it is terrible, terrible to look at," he might be speaking equally of the films administered by the doctor as disciplinary psychiatric treatment or of the flashing of lights during *Vinyl*'s projection during EPI's live show. In a case of life mirroring art and vice versa, two of the players involved in the EPI, Lou Reed and Edie Sedgwick, were institutionalized at different times and underwent shock treatments, in both cases, at least in part because of society's pathologization of the trappings of queer sexuality and subcultural aesthetics.[7] The fact that Andy Warhol's Up-Tight, the precursor to the EPI, debuted at the annual dinner for the New York Society for Clinical Psychiatry takes on an additional critical edge in this context. Here, the performers confronted bewildered clinicians with cameras in hand and posed frank sexual questions while on stage a cacophony of dissonant guitars accompanied dancers miming S&M scenarios. Seymour Krim, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, headlined his review of the Up-Tight debut "Shock Treatment for Psychiatrists."[8] As Branden Joseph puts it, the EPI "mobilized the conflictual, deterritorialized forces of electronic media toward the explosion of a newly developing, postinstitutional prison-world."[9]

A complete list of pops, shocks, and pinpricks in the EPI and its related media would likely contain yet more entries, some sinister as shock treatments, some merely mischievous. These pops take multiple forms, visual and acoustic, verbal and metaphorical. Immediately one notes the play on words they make with the movement known as pop art. Teasing out the double meanings, one might discover a joke on the inevitability of the pop popularity bubble bursting, a ritual destruction and rebirth wherein pop is slain, or simply a playful jab. These pops, though, signify far beyond the loose verbal association. This essay takes the reader on a trip through them wherein we explore their intersecting and inseparable formal, affective, philosophical, and political resonances.

* * *

In an essay on Andy Warhol's Death in America series, Hal Foster describes a notable formal aspect of Warhol's silk screens: small flecks of white canvas that show through the paint as though they were holes in the image. Foster interprets these flecks as examples of the punctum theorized by Roland Barthes in his account of the photographic image in *Camera Lucida*.[10] Foster suggests that the *punctum*—a small, seemingly arbitrary detail in a photograph that moves the spectator, piercing her

through with powerful affect—takes a particular form in Warhol's silk screens. In these pictures, the punctum "works less through content than through technique;" it is not to be found in any particular figural element of the works—in any detail or identifiable pro-filmic object, as in most of Barthes's own examples—but rather in the "floating flashes" of white produced by the silk-screen process itself: "[T]he slipping and streaking, blanching and blanking . . . this repetitive 'popping' of the image."[11] In areas where the paint has not fully seeped through the screen, we see tiny traces of blank canvas, which are generally visible only at close range. These missed spots interrupt the otherwise flawless plane of Warhol's pictures.

Similar flashes and pops—the pinpoints, stabs, and slashes of light of which Wilcock writes—twinkle across the surface of Warhol's EPI performances and their related media. Jonas Mekas, describing the live show in his *Movie Journal* column, wrote that "I have noticed how suddenly, during certain surges of colors and lights, I become electrified, my nerves become jumpy as if somewhere deep inside I were *pierced* with a knife."[12] If, in Warhol's silk-screen paintings, the punctum is to be found in the flecks of white canvas that show through the layers of paint, then, in the EPI live shows, perhaps it takes the form of these glints of piercing white light. The electric surges of which Mekas speaks might have their source in any one of the numerous sources of illumination used in the EPI, which involved an elaborate, cumbersome technical rig: the bright diamonds thrown off by the facets of the disco ball; optical patterns cast by colored slides, transparencies, and projected bits of film leader; ambient sparks from spotlights or key lights bouncing off silver clothing and other reflective surfaces on stage and in the crowd; and, of course, the pulse of the strobe light by means of which the entire visual field would blink rapidly on and off.[13]

Warhol reportedly had an idea for the Velvet Underground and Nico album that never materialized: he wanted to produce the record with a built-in crack at the end of "I'll Be Your Mirror" so that the song's final line, "I'll be your mirror / Reflect what you are," would repeat endlessly until the turntable needle was removed.[14] This hypothetical crack would be an audio version of the punctum in the sense described by Foster: a glitch that ruptures the seamless groove of the vinyl and the sound that cascades out of it. In place of smooth continuity, it produces an infinite loop of repeating mirror reflections split into frames by the distinctive crackle and pop of the needle sliding back a notch. Through their use of amplifier feedback, the Velvets produced a live version of this acoustic pinprick: the piercing sound of the guitar "looking" too directly at itself

in its electric audio mirror. While not audible in the film documentation of the EPI shows, the whip that Malanga yielded during his S&M-style dances implies yet another instrument of acoustic snap.

For Foster, the affect associated with Warhol's pops is traumatic and melancholic. The pin-sized blank spots on the silk-screen canvases are, according to his reading, a species of memento mori, reminders of death. In Lacanian terms, they are obtrusions of a traumatic reality that breaks through the reassuringly smooth repetitions of Warhol's paintings; they reveal the images' status as a mere illusion that masks an underlying void, absence, or finitude. They are, according to this style of reading, scars or cuts that commemorate the loss of the real in exchange for an endless parade of synthetic images: a hall of mirrors, like that in *Vinyl* or in other of Warhol's multiscreen projected works, in which reflections and shadows proliferate to the point where they become indiscernible from their long-lost fleshly counterparts. As Foster puts it, the rupture these flecks initiate occurs "not in the world but in the subject; or rather it is a rupture between perception and consciousness of a subject *touched* by an image."[15]

There is another way to comprehend these flashes, though, already alluded to by Wilcock, who in the previously quoted passage writes that the EPI's lights not only stab, but also "caress" the dancers. Foster's final metaphor of a subject "touched" by an image also begins to evoke this second possibility. The Lacanian interpretation envisions the ray of light as a sharp, pointed laser beam, perhaps even one that might permanently rupture its object's delicate envelope as in the popping of a balloon. This new interpretation, though—derived primarily from the descriptive possibilities latent in these works' images and sounds—figures disco illumination as a soothing radiance. A soft, lateral skimming and tracing of surfaces, a gesture more properly characterized as affirmative, or perhaps, at the risk of overplaying the metaphor, a sun rather than a pop.

Interlude: White Light

Danny Williams—photographer and filmmaker, a Factory regular, and Warhol's lover at the time of the first performances of the EPI—was the architect of the shows' lighting design. Stephen Shore, who assisted at the performances, notes that Williams "was really in charge of the lights. . . . It was totally improvised. I'd stand behind a big flood or spot that I could move around the room, or adjust the colors, or at the Dom there was a mirrored globe and I could aim it at that, or flash it at the people in the

audience or on the stage."[16] Williams is also credited with the film *Uptight #3*, which documents the Velvet Underground's appearance on David Susskind's television show on 27 and 28 January 1966.[17] This black-and-white, silent, sixty-minute film alternates between footage shot by Williams and footage shot by Barbara Rubin. The film begins with the Velvet Underground and their large, mostly leather-clad entourage entering the Newsweek building in New York and speaking to a visibly uptight, fidgety Susskind in a small studio. Just as the inaugural performance of Andy Warhol's Up-Tight confronted the institution of psychiatry, revealing its stodgy conservatism and double standards, so the Velvet Underground's television appearance would hold up a mirror to the institution of mainstream broadcast television.

Several minutes later, the group is back out on the snowy street and once again enter the Newsweek building. Williams appears in the shot wearing sunglasses as they ascend in the elevator. It becomes clear that this is a repetition of the same event but filmed from a different angle in a different style. Throughout its running time, the film alternates between Rubin's camera, which tends to be mobile in three dimensions and sometimes turns on its horizontal axis, and Williams's, whose footage, shot on Warhol's Bolex camera, displays jerkier movements. (The footage is attributable to each since the filmmakers sometimes appear in each other's shots.) The incorporation of both sets of images, even when they are semiredundant, suggests another way of enacting a characteristically Warholian inclusiveness, multiplicity, and seriality. In Williams's case, though, the redundancy is more dialogic than Warhol's. Williams's footage aggregates together with Rubin's, creating a document of the Velvet Underground's television appearance that eschews both singularity and a linear narrative.

The dialogic, collaborative, open character of Williams's film is continued in a number of shots that seem to reference similar images in Warhol's oeuvre. In a segment showing preparations for the television performance, John Cale calculatedly eats a banana, looking backward to Warhol's 1964 films *Mario Banana* and *Harlot* and forward to his design for the 1967 *The Velvet Underground & Nico* album cover.[18] The banana, a fruit with a skin (which, in the original design for the Velvet Underground's album cover, took the form of a decal that could be peeled back), likewise invokes layers and surfaces, insides and outsides, whereby, according to Warhol's method, the latter is always to be emphasized. Andy appears in proper person several times in this film; on the bus, he reads a newspaper with the headline "Hedy Lamarr

Arrested." Callie Angell suggests that Williams may be capturing the moment at which Warhol got the idea for *Hedy*, which was shot shortly after, in February 1966.[19] Williams's inclusion of this moment in the final, edited version of his own film, which was completed after the shoot for *Hedy*, suggests a careful attunement to Warhol's way of thinking and working. Two segments in the film document the group traveling by bus to and from the television studio. In the second of these, the Empire State Building appears in a relatively long take out the bus window; its inclusion reads at turns like a citation of Warhol's 1964 *Empire* and as a happenstance cameo appearance of the New York City skyline. The generosity of Williams's vision is such that these inclusions hover permanently between homage and accident. We are never quite certain whether they come from artistic intention or from simple receptivity to what the world has to offer in the way of images.

Many of Williams's filming and lighting techniques explore the relationship between appearance and disappearance. As Sterling Morrison recalls, the Velvets sometimes performed dressed entirely in white, and the effect, when combined with Williams's strobe light, was to render the musicians virtually invisible.[20] Robinson describes in an interview the way that, in Williams's films, "people will float in the frame . . . his lighting was exquisite. His whites glow as people drift in and out of fields of black."[21] In *Uptight #3*, Williams's use of high-contrast cinematography, blinding whites, halation effects that create an auratic glow, and quick, flashlike editing all collaborate to suggest an aesthetic wherein the image is always provisional: a gift given not by the seer, nor even by what he sees, but by light. This light touches and caresses both seer and seen.

Flashes and Strobes

Williams was part of the group of underground artists who were exploring the effects of stroboscopic light on the human retina at this time. This group included Tony Conrad, whose 1965 film *The Flicker* is composed entirely of rapidly alternating black-and-white frames. The film produced what Conrad described as a "whirling and shattered array of intangible and diffused color patterns, probably a retinal after-image type of effect."[22] Juan Suárez notes that Conrad also described *The Flicker* as "a hallucinatory trip through unplumbed grottoes of pure sensory disruption" and that he "acknowledged psychedelia and the stroboscopic light in rock shows and dance clubs among his sources of inspiration."[23] Strobe lights formed an integral part of EPI's aesthetic; the show first

incorporated them on 12 March 1966 in a performance at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. When gazed at directly, the light flicker has the capacity to induce altered, druglike states of mind, as well as seizures.

Stories of the use of flicker techniques to achieve hallucinatory, clairvoyant, or simply pleasant perceptual states date to the prescientific era. According to one anecdote, Catherine de Medici observed how Nostradamus received his prophetic visions "by watching the sun with his eyes closed, quickly interrupting the light with his spread hand."[24] In the nineteenth century, David Brewster, the Scottish physicist who invented the kaleidoscope, discovered that he could produce vibrant optical effects by running alongside a row of vertical railings with the sun shining behind them; he compared the patterns that appeared through this method to the "brightest tartan."[25] In the twentieth century, Brion Gysin, the artist, filmmaker, and close friend to William Burroughs, took up the quest for stroboscopic effects: along with Ian Sommerville, he invented the Dreamachine, an optical device consisting of a cylinder perforated with incisions at regular intervals, similar to a zoetrope, within which a 100-watt lightbulb shone. The cylinder rotated to produce alpha waves in the 8- to 16-Hertz range. The device was designed to be viewed with the eyes closed.[26]

Mekas describes an additional effect of the strobe lighting in notes he wrote after seeing the EPI: "We are *cut* by the strobe light into single frames, to eight frames per second or whatever the strobe frequency is, on and off."[27] Strobe-lit figures appear in freeze-frame as two-dimensional cutouts that flip on and off against a black void. This stop-motion effect is visible in both *The Velvet Underground in Boston* (1967) and in another film, Ronald Nameth's *Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (1966), shot at Poor Richard's in Chicago; both films show the brief, static frames characteristic of strobe lighting (figure 4). Gene Youngblood notes that Nameth shot at eight frames per second (fps) and printed at 24 fps in order to capture the effect of the strobe lights.[28] Mekas elaborates: "Since there is nothing but the white light in it, [the strobe] represents . . . the point of death, or nothingness. . . . You become a particle, a grain of the movie."[29] Steve Durkee, quoted by Mekas in the same text, provides a reminder that stroboscopic light differs materially from incandescent illumination: the strobe, powered by xenon gas, is "turning on and off, completely on and completely off. You can't do that with the incandescent light, you can do it only with gas."[30] The effect is a slight disruption of movement's smooth continuity so that figures appear briefly arrested into a static pose as in a children's game of statues, or perhaps the arresting red light of a police siren's strobe.

Figure 4. Ingrid Superstar and performers in Ronald Nameth's Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable *(1966). Courtesy of Ronald Nameth Films.*

Describing the lighting effects in Nameth's film, Youngblood writes,

> It's as though the film itself has exploded and reassembled in a jumble of shards and prisms. . . . Staccato strobe guns stitch galaxies of silverfish over slow-motion, stop-motion close-ups of the dancers. . . . Nameth's film is dense, compact, yet somehow fluid and light . . . extremely heavy, extremely fast, yet airy and poetic, a mosaic, a tapestry, a mandela that sucks you into its whirling maelstrom.[31]

Youngblood's evocative metaphors help to identify an additional salient formal feature of strobe lighting. While its staccato on-and-off blinking chops movements into stop-motion shards and prism facets, it also stitches them back together into a continuous, whole picture as in a mosaic, tapestry, or mandela comprised of smaller fragments. No sooner do we grasp the snapshot, than we find it gone, reanimated into a movement, as though the mechanism behind cinema's animation were being rendered as a live process.

We see a kind of plasticity in the range of frame rates among this group of cinematographic media, from the protracted 8 fps of the strobe cycle and Nameth's film to the 16 fps at which some of Warhol's earlier silent films (*Kiss* and the Screen Tests) were designed to be projected, up to the conventional film rate of 24 fps deployed in his synch-sound films. The slower frame rates, in which the individual still photographs are sometimes briefly discernible before they morph into motion, hark back to an earlier moment in film's development—the time of protocinematic mechanisms like the zoetrope, the mutoscope, and Thomas Edison's kinetoscope, as well as to a yet earlier moment, that of Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies and Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotography. The mutoscope, for example, operated by cranking an illuminated, Rolodex-like fan of cards at a rate of about 850 cards per minute's worth of viewing time, or approximately 14 fps.

These were moments of possibility, before the cinema had become fixed into a standardized rate of motion, guaranteeing a certain reliable perception of movement. It could be argued, though, that the achievement of smooth continuity in motion-picture projection curiously had the effect of rendering movement invisible—that is, allowing it to be perceived as natural and taken for granted. In the context of a mid-1960s expanded cinema production, making the frozen frames visible, as the strobe light does, and slowing down the motion paradoxically functions to *undo* the arrestation, familiarity, and commonsense naturalism that by this time had beset the experience of temporal duration in motion pictures.

Strobes and Cuts

Another way in which stroboscopic effects figure in the repertoire of the EPI is through *strobe cuts*: in-camera edits that are notable for the flashes of blank frames that they deposit as artifacts on the filmstrip. As Tony Rayns puts it, Warhol generally cut his films "simply by stopping and restarting the camera . . . [leaving] in the sound-track blip and image-track flash-frame that mark the start of each new shot."[32] Warhol's cuts in films of this period are visible on the surface of the film, not masked. Not only is there no pretense of continuity—almost every cut is a jump cut, a violation of classical narrative editing conventions—the editing also reveals its seams as visible and audible artifacts. The shutter blinks its eye, and this wink leaves a trace on the filmstrip.

At their purest, Warhol's cuts are less about exercising artistic judgment—omitting a bad take, dropping scenes that seem unnecessary

to the narrative—than about incorporating a new formal possibility that he had previously excluded from his work. There is a strangely documentary or realist impulse at work in Warhol's use of heavy, intrusive in-camera editing. The blips and flash-frames that appear on the filmstrip are artifacts of the mechanical design of the camera, indexical records of its stop–start function. Everything must be included, Warhol's axiom seems to be, even, and perhaps especially, the little flaws and scars that mar the sleek plane of the image. It is as if Warhol had realized that he needed to extend the inclusive attitude toward worldly perceptual phenomena that he had adopted through his use of the long take, to the mechanics of the recording apparatus itself.

Strobe cuts feature prominently in *Uptight #3*; here, Williams's edits are sometimes so rapid as to resemble a flicker film, an effect amplified by his high-contrast black-and-white cinematography. In 1966, Warhol, too, began to adopt the strobe cut into his filmmaking practice, clearly influenced by Williams and other artists, but deploying them in a slightly different manner.[33] In Warhol's sound films, a brief, ziplike sound, reminiscent of a whip moving rapidly through the air or a turntable scratch, accompanies the strobe cut. Warhol seems to have first used the strobe cut in *Lupe*, shot in December 1965. The film is a reenactment of the suicide of the actress Lupe Velez, who is played by Edie Sedgwick. A single strobe cut punctuates the transition between Lupe's careful preparation of her beautifully arranged deathbed and her actual, less glamorous death with her head and torso slung over a toilet. Here, the strobe cut marks an ellipsis between two temporally nonadjacent events, which is similar to the use of a dissolve in classical narrative cinema to indicate that some time has passed between points A and B. By the time of the *Chelsea Girls*, filmed in the summer of 1966, Warhol was integrating strobe cuts more frequently. Here, rather than function like chapter breaks in a narrative story, they create an effect of seemingly random interruption and spatial disjunction: semiarbitrary, even gratuitous punctuation marks thrown in more for their capacity to excite and convey affect than for their value as expository signposts to the viewer. In some cases, the cuts clip off bits of dialogue and make the characters' movements seem jerky and nonpurposeful. As Youngblood notes, Warhol's use of strobe cuts "recalls work by Brecht or Godard . . . the viewer is kept at a distance, in order to remind him that it is, after all, only a film shot with a camera, which can be turned on and off, thereby bringing a screen existence alive, or killing it again by turning a switch."[34]

Warhol uses plenty of strobe cuts in the middle section of *The Velvet Underground in Boston*. As Youngblood suggests, they can be read as

Brechtian distancing effects. But Warhol is not really a Marxist; the force that mitigates his at times crass commercialism is not didacticism or political consciousness raising but rather the affirmation of the image as such. It is not merely that the spectacle is *only an image*, an ideological mirage that needs to be dispelled by exposing the apparatus. When Warhol exposes the apparatus, the effect is more mischievous, indeed almost an opposite gesture: revealing the man behind the curtain does not so much expose the evils of the wizard as invite the humbug, in all his flawed glory, to come out of his vestibule and be part of the show. Revealing the cut, in other words, is less about breaking the image's spell than about extending it all the way down through the material substrates that presume to be underneath or outside of it, bringing the apparatus into appearance not in order to expose it but to affirm and include it. Indeed, if the show is only an image, Warhol seems to say, so too are the spectators in the club, who are just as flattened, stilled, and tinted by the lights—and ultimately, perhaps, caressed by them—as are the performers and projected images on stage. By extension, so, too, are the film's viewers, because our eyes are also affected by the strobes even though their flashes are only ghosts of the original lights, and because our faces also flicker in and out of visibility even though the lights they reflect are bouncing off a screen.

The Velvet Underground in Boston emphasizes this collapse of distinction between the actual and the artificial, and between the material and the imagistic, in more ways than one. At times, the flickering of the strobe cuts, combined with that of the strobe lights in the show, is so rapid that the images almost seem to superimpose upon one another; it becomes difficult to tell where the projected image stops and the material surface onto which it is being projected begins. Elements of the mise-en-scène contribute to this effect: a woman in a reflective silver dress and another in a silver jumpsuit writhe around, their costumes refracting the light. Toward the end of the film, the strobe cuts are so quick that the people disappear entirely into their rifts. Cuts tear apart the space of the club; the camera zooms rapidly in and out. The film's final images, though, return to a place of relative quiescence. The performance ends, the strobe cuts cease, the police arrive, and the house lights go on. The camera observes all of this in a fixed long shot. True to Warholian principle, the camera waits for the film roll to run out, continuing to shoot the performance's aftermath even though the show is over. A long-duration take from a high angle shows clubgoers lingering about on the dance floor, which is now evenly illuminated by the house lights. This unbroken, uniformly lit shot has a strangely virtual feel after all of the cuts, tints, and flashes. It is as though the relationship between everyday perception and drug-fueled

hallucination has been reversed, where the latter is the new normal and the former has taken on an unreal quality, similar to the way that the world sometimes looks when exiting a movie matinee into bright daylight.

Cuts and Circles

In some ways, the stroboscopic effects in the EPI represent a continuation of other means by which Warhol experimented with temporal duration in painting and film. In his silk screens, still forms are slightly temporalized through serial repetition with slight differences, and frozen stills are reanimated through the addition of color and variation. In *Marilyn Diptych* (1962), for example, Monroe's lock-jawed smile is made slightly more cinematic through the slight misalignment of the silk-screen frame: as the images repeat, her face becomes almost expressive. In *Sixteen Jackies* (1964), Warhol's placement of the repeated rectangular portrait frames suggests a longing to reshuffle the puzzle pieces of history. The three white rectangles are highly similar to one another, all struck from the same photograph and printed in extreme high contrast. In them, Jackie's neck looks rigid, and her face, smeared with ink, peers out from a dark, hoodlike band. When squinting, this black band almost resembles a circle or zero. These Jackies seem to suggest a static, frozen moment of trauma. Like wild cards, they are abstract and unspecified, receptive to input that viewers might supply from the outside; they also stand out as categorically different from the other frames, separate from whatever unity or continuity one might assign to the picture as a whole.

The ten blue frames, by contrast, draw from five different source images, one of which is inverted to switch its symmetry. These Jackies direct their gazes alternately toward the horizon, the camera, and the ground, both left and right, and five of them are smiling. These snapshots suggest multiple angles of vision rather than an arrested two-dimensional pose; they imply a breaking point marking a before and after of tragedy, but they are still all part of a continuous blue sheet of time.

Three additional Jackies are washed in a tentative shade of gold. Two of them appear in profile; one in the top row has a smudge of ink, suggesting a tear, on her face. A gold Jackie in the third row appears alongside a policeman who stands over her left shoulder, duplicating a blue frame placed to its lower left. The final Jackie in the work, a gold close-up, faces inward toward the rest of her doubles. The image avoids the cliché of gesturing beyond the canvas toward a brighter future, but neither does it insist on a perpetually traumatic fixation on the past. Rather, it seems to

invite us to trace out and connect up Jackie's various lines of sight with the aim of smoothing together the separated splinters of time.[35]

In Warhol's film work, the fixed camera of films like the Screen Tests (1963–66) and *Empire* is replaced by a more mobile camera that pans, tilts, and zooms. The tension between stasis and movement also manifests within individual films: *Restaurant* (1965) and *The Closet* (1966), for example, both begin with fixed, static shots that, after long waits, yield to a roving, zooming camera.[36] As Crimp notes, Warhol's early films are less static than is often assumed. *Empire*, in his reading, is a film full of ever-changing, even dazzling lights, from the "bright white screen" at the film's start, when the camera's aperture is flung open too wide, to the emergence of the skyscraper's familiar silhouette, "as if in a photograph slowly developing before your eyes in a darkroom" and, later in the film, the "swaths and streaks and dots of light" that play across the frame.[37]

In his essay "Dragtime and Drugtime, or Film à la Warhol" (1967), Parker Tyler classifies Warhol's films into two categories based on the type of temporal durations and experience they elicit for the viewer.[38] In *Empire*, this experience takes the form of waiting through extremely long, monotonous takes, an effect that Tyler calls "dragtime." *Dragtime*, according to Tyler, sets in when "the viewing time required [is] a drag exquisitely nuanced or excruciatingly redundant" and takes the forms of a "vicious circle: a closed process with no progress whatsoever, only an 'endless' self-engrossment."[39] In its circularity, closure, and lack of progress, dragtime is aligned with stasis, a kind of time that does not move forward or admit change, generally associated with Warhol's long-duration films and fixed-camera shots. What Tyler refers to as *drugtime*, by contrast, is a way of experiencing time that is psychedelic, expansive, and "laid out like a 'trip.'"[40] Tyler describes this mode at work in Warhol's *Chelsea Girls*, writing that the camera "starts zooming with the push-button ease of an addict launching on a rhythm kick. No longer is it a stand-in for the beautifully bland, impersonal, kind and so tolerant gaze of a transfixed watcher immune to boredom . . . it is as perambulant as some of the guests."[41] Drugtime is about a movement—a perambulatory "trip" as opposed to a closed "vicious circle." As Tyler's text makes clear, it is also about being moved, in opposition to the "bland, impersonal" static camera that remains stoical in the face of whatever is placed before it.[42]

The drugtime aspects of the EPI are immediately clear, from the figural references to heroin and methamphetamine to the psychedelic forms and perceptual states produced by its lighting, and, with its translation into cinema in *The Velvet Underground in Boston*, in Warhol's bursting, kaleidoscopic camera work. In other ways, though, the EPI, its duration

and sounds, emulate the model of a dragtime endurance test. As Warhol put it in his directions to the Velvet Underground, "If they can take it for ten minutes, then play for fifteen. . . . That's our policy. Always leave them wanting less."[43] The goal of leaving the audience wanting less recalls John Cale's early influences in the school of long-duration minimalist twentieth-century music. In September 1963, Cale took part in an eighteen-hour performance of Erik Satie's *Vexations*, attended by Warhol, in which the piece was performed 840 times in series by relay team.[44] Warhol's *The Velvet Underground in Boston* ends on a note that clearly participates in dragtime: when after the show concludes, the house lights go on and bouncers begin to usher the guests out of the club, but Warhol, true to his method of shooting an entire reel and including it whole cloth in the final work, continues to film until his reel runs out.

Dragtime, in these examples, seems to be less about a vicious circle than about compelling the audience to experience a type of duration that counteracts the impatient compulsion toward instant, addictive gratification, thus producing a type of boredom that has a restorative potential and the capacity to bestow renewed interest upon details that are often submerged in the normative, evenly lit flow of time.[45] These details become visible under the influence of dragtime not through pointed reference but through subtle alterations of lighting and color.

Warhol's works are filled with references to lights switching on and off, as if he were persistently exploring the slippery line that separates day from night. The moment when the house lights go up in *The Velvet Underground in Boston*, for example, signals the end of the nightclub show, a kind of breaking of the dawn that also breaks the spell of the music and ends the psychedelic trip. Similarly, in *The Velvet Underground and Nico: A Symphony of Sound* (1966), a jam session at the Factory is interrupted by the arrival of police investigating a noise complaint (figure 5). A brightening and widening of the camera's image accompanies this transition. Crimp writes of the dramatic moment in *Empire*—perhaps its only dramatic moment—when "whang—the floodlights go on."[46] Another film about which Crimp eloquently writes, *The Closet*, offers a similar transition from dark to light, when the closed door to the closet in which Nico and Randy Bourscheidt have ensconced themselves is opened wide; the pair squint their eyes as they adjust to the brightness of the day.[47] So many of the Factory regulars wore sunglasses indoors or at night, a gesture normally thought of as a way to preserve a cool, aloof semianonymity, but one that also plays with the boundary between day and night by attributing to the latter an unfounded level of brightness. And *Sunset*, a film originally designed to function as a segment of Warhol's *Four Stars*

(1967), is entirely a study of the transition from day to night and the slow, gentle, and extremely variegated changes in illumination that this transition brings. Warhol's sunset does not simply progress by degrees from brightness to ever-increasing darkness. Rather, its light levels and colors shift around, responsive not only to the sun but also to its reflections on the ocean, the camera, its lens, and film stock.

When placed alongside a film like *Sunset* or *Empire*, the stroboscopic lighting, clipped pace, and pricking flashes in the EPI might at first strike us as in resolute contrast to them, a prime drugtime foil to the glacial, minimalist dragtime of Warhol's "slow" films. While it is true that the two aesthetics are far from complementary, the works are congruent in another important respect. Dragtime and drugtime are alike in a crucial way: both promote experiences of temporal duration that are unaccounted for in typical experiences of clock time and calendar time, or, similarly, in the experience of typical cinematic frame rates and patterns of narrative continuity. Dragtime and drugtime are both queer, in the sense described by Elizabeth Freeman and others, insofar as they resist regulatory structures for measuring, evaluating, and dictating the proper timing of labor,

Figure 5. Policeman at the Factory in The Velvet Underground and Nico: A Symphony of Sound *(dir. Andy Warhol, 1966).*

life events, and relationships.[48] They also have everything to do with light, since it is the rotation of the earth on its axis that marks the hours from day to night and its movement around the sun that provides the template for the calendar. The strobe light, according to this way of thinking, only speeds up a process that already happens once a day—the slow, gentle rising and setting of the sun—and renders it less gradual, more abrupt, and less naturalized so that we may become freshly aware of it. This light can certainly burn the eyes and skin but is also the source of vitality and visual appearance.

The reading of the EPI that I have been offering in this essay goes against the grain: the EPI has been understood, rightfully, by Joselit, Joseph, and others as a work that emphasizes the negative rather than the positive face of the image. Its confrontational mode, dispersal of subjectivity, and aesthetic of piercing, blinding, even deathly and disastrous rupture certainly invite such an interpretation and risk making other readings seem like a forced fit. Flipping the EPI to its verso, though, reveals the ways that it keeps company with other dimensions of Warhol's practice. Jonathan Flatley notes that Warhol was fond of saying, "I like everything;" in Warhol's world, everyone and everything, for better or worse, have the potential to be good, to be desired, and to be affirmed.[49] All is plastic for Warhol not because the synthetic modern world has abandoned its natural roots nor even because everything is ripe for commodification.[50] Rather, everything is plastic because it is only by way of ever-morphing appearances—images always on the verge of changing with a change of the light, be it sudden or slow—that we have access to it all. For Warhol, everything can be seen, liked, and caressed only once it is recognized as part of this ephemeral world of changing appearances. The world is a picture. Not a world-picture, just a picture. A good, moving picture.

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NOTES

1. Warhol's use of the zoom lens owes a debt to Jack Smith, who used rapid zooms in and out to create a similarly psychedelic effect; for example, see *Normal Love* (1963).
2. David Joselit, "Yippie Pop: Abbie Hoffman, Andy Warhol, and Sixties Media Politics," *Grey Room*, no. 8 (2002): 62–79, quotation on 73.

3. John Wilcock, "A 'High' School of Music and Art," *East Village Other*, 15 April 1966, reprinted in *All Yesterday's Parties*, ed. Clinton Heylin (New York: Da Capo Press, 2005), 9–10.

4. *Vinyl* was shown at at least three EPI shows: the one at Poor Richard's in Chicago where Ronald Nameth's 1966 film *Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable* was shot, one at the Dom in New York City in April 1966, and one at McMaster University in Ontario on 12 November 1966, where it was shown in double-screen projection (see Wilcock, "A 'High' School," 10; and Barry Lord, writing for *Arts/Canada*, quoted in Victor Bockris's *Up-Tight: The Velvet Underground Story* [New York: Cooper Square Press, 1995], 65). That it was shown during the touring performances suggests that it was probably shown at other venues while the EPI was on tour.

5. Douglas Crimp, "Spacious," *October*, no. 132 (2010): 5–24, quotation on 9.

6. Paul Arthur, "Flesh of Absence: Resighting the Warhol Catechism," in *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*, ed. Michael O'Pray (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 146–63, quotation on 151.

7. Sedgwick did not accompany the group on the EPI's tour, but she appears in *Vinyl* and other films projected during the show and participated in its inaugural version, Andy Warhol's Up-Tight, in January 1966 at the New York Society for Clinical Psychiatry's annual dinner gathering.

8. See Tony Scherman and David Dalton, *Pop: The Genius of Andy Warhol* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 313.

9. Branden W. Joseph, "'My Mind Split Open': Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable," *Grey Room*, no. 8 (2002): 80–107, quotation on 98.

10. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 18, 43, 55.

11. Hal Foster, "Death in America," *October*, no. 75 (1996): 37–59, quotation on 43.

12. Jonas Mekas, "On the Plastic Inevitables and the Strobe Light," in *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959–1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 242–44, quotation on 244, my emphasis.

13. When the EPI moved venues to the Dom on Friday, 8 April 1966, they brought with them

> hundreds of pounds of film projectors, spotlights, strobe lights, slide projectors, and hand-painted slides borrowed from Jackie Cassen and Rudi Stern. Cassen and Stern helped run the light show early in the month. . . . "They didn't have very good equipment," Cassen said. "They were working on a wing and a prayer, as far as projectors went. I had Kodak Carousel slide projectors; they were only using film projectors. . . . But what they were really interested in was doing the films. The setup involved slide projectors on the balcony; film projectors on, or raised just above, the floor; strobe lights onstage." (Scherman and Dalton, *Pop*, 322–23)

14. Lou Reed, quoted in Bockris's *Up-Tight*, 62.

15. Foster, "Death in America," 42.

16. Scherman and Dalton, *Pop*, 323.

17. Danny Williams's work was discovered by Callie Angell, curator of the Warhol films at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Whitney Museum in New York City, who

found eighteen of his 16-mm reels among Warhol's archives (see Patricia Thomson, "Points East: Warhol Factory Filmmaker Comes to Light," *American Cinematographer* 85, no. 3 [2004]: 99–100, quotation on 99).

18. The banana motif was taken up by a wide circle of collaboration that included Ronald Tavel, the writer for *Harlot*, loosely based on a character inspired by Jean Harlow. Tavel describes the film thus: "Harlow begins the epic adventure of her banana feast. The banquet will involve a near orgy of banana consumption, but that will be virtually all there is to the action" (Tavel, "The Banana Diary: The Story of Andy Warhol's *Harlot*," in O'Pray, *Andy Warhol* [see note 6], 66–93, quotation on 68).

19. Callie Angell, introduction to the screening of *Uptight #3—David Susskind* at the Seventh Orphan Film Symposium, New York, 9 April 2010, available at https://sites.google.com/site/orphans7/home/callie-angell-intro.

20. Bockris, *Up-Tight*, 28.

21. Scott Macaulay, "Bright Light" [Reports], *Filmmaker* 11, no. 4 (2003): 12.

22. Quoted in Juan A. Suárez's "Structural Film: Noise," in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 62–92, quotation on 79.

23. Ibid.

24. B. C. ter Meulen, D. Tavy, and B. C. Jacobs, "From Stroboscope to Dream Machine: A History of Flicker-Induced Hallucinations," *European Neurology* 62, no. 5 (2009): 316–20, quotation on 317.

25. Ibid.

26. Tony Conrad echoes this idea: "For a long time I have been interested in the type of things that you see with your eyes closed" (quoted in Jonas Mekas's "An Interview with Tony Conrad: On the Flickering Cinema of Pure Light," in *Movie Journal* [see note 12], 228–32, quotation on 229). For more on the work of Brion Gysin, see the documentary film *FlicKeR* (dir. Nik Sheehan, 2008).

27. Jonas Mekas, "More on Strobe Light and Intermedia," in *Movie Journal* (see note 12), 242–47, quotation on 246 (my emphasis), originally written 16 June 1966.

28. Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P. Dutton, 1970), 103.

29. Mekas, "More on Strobe Light," 245–46.

30. Ibid., 245.

31. Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, 103–5.

32. Tony Rayns, "Death at Work: Evolution and Entropy in Factory Films," in O'Pray, *Andy Warhol* (see note 6), 160–69, quotation on 168.

33. Scherman and Dalton note that Williams may also have inspired Warhol's use of side-by-side film projection: "Williams' journals and notes include a series of 'Notes on Double Screen,' and it isn't far-fetched to conjecture that Danny's ideas had an impact on the ways that Warhol used double projection" (*Pop*, 312).

34. Gene Youngblood, "Andy Warhol," *Los Angeles Free Press*, 16 February 1968, quoted in Rainer Crone's "Form and Ideology: Warhol's Techniques from Blotted Line to Film," in *The Work of Andy Warhol*, ed. Gary Garrels, Discussions in Contemporary Culture, no. 3 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 70–92, quotation on 90.

35. In his interview by Gretchen Berg, Warhol connected the replication of the Jackie images to their temporalization: "It was just to show the passage of time from the time the bullet struck John Kennedy to the time she buried him. Or something" (Warhol, "Nothing to Lose: An Interview with Andy Warhol," interview by Gretchen Berg, in O'Pray, *Andy Warhol* [see note 6], 54–61, quotation on 60).

36. Charles F. Stuckey notes that several critics have drawn attention to the analogy between the serial form of Warhol's silk-screen paintings and a filmstrip, and that Aline Saarinen made this connection as early as 1963 in a review of the Guggenheim show *Six Painters and the Object* ("Warhol in Context," in Garrels, *Work of Andy Warhol* [see note 34], 3–33, quotation on 10).

37. Douglas Crimp, *"Our Kind of Movie": The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 137.

38. Parker Tyler, "Dragtime and Drugtime, or Film à la Warhol," in O'Pray, *Andy Warhol* (see note 6), 94–103.

39. Ibid., 29–30.

40. Ibid., 88.

41. Ibid., 30.

42. For a closer reading of several of Warhol's films as examples of dragtime, drugtime, and queer temporality, see my "Girl Interrupted: The Queer Time of Warhol's Cinema," *Discourse* 28, no. 1 (2006): 98–120.

43. Quoted in Bockris's *Up-Tight*, 29.

44. The *New York Times*, 11 September 1963, reprinted in Bockris's *Up-Tight*, 12. Warhol attended the performance (see Peter Wollen, "Raiding the Icebox," in O'Pray, *Andy Warhol* [see note 6], 14–27, quotation on 25).

45. Jennifer Doyle has written on the concept of "boredom" in Warhol's films (see "'I Must Be Boring Someone': Women in Warhol's Films," in *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006], 71–96).

46. Crimp, *"Our Kind of Movie,"* 137.

47. The idea for *The Closet* reportedly came from Barbara Rubin, camera operator in the January 1966 performance of Up-Tight and in Williams's *Uptight #3* (see Callie Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests: The Films of Andy Warhol—Catalogue Raisonné*, Andy Warhol Screen Tests, vol. 1 [New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2006], 169).

48. See Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction," in "Queer Temporalities," ed. Elizabeth Freeman, special issue, *GLQ* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007): 159–76; and the entirety of the *GLQ* special issue on queer temporalities.

49. Jonathan Flatley expands beautifully on Warhol's panaffirmative tendencies and their connection to analogy, mimesis, and "commonism" in his essay "Like: Collecting and Collectivity" (*October*, no. 132 [2010]: 71–98). Stuckey notes that several of Warhol's contemporaries, including Nathan Gluck and Ivan Karp, used the term "commonist" to describe the selection of popular, accessible subject matter ("Warhol in Context," 29n58).

50. Although it is true that Warhol at times embraced this commodity sense of "the good," projects like the EPI and his colossal body of film work were far from commercially successful. It is logical to assume that this situation was not merely due to failed effort, since Warhol's business sense was so razor sharp on other occasions.