

2014

# Stroboscopic: Andy Warhol and the Exploding Plastic Inevitable

Homay King

*Bryn Mawr College*, [hking@brynmawr.edu](mailto:hking@brynmawr.edu)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart\\_pubs](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs)



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

---

## Custom Citation

H. King, "Stroboscopic: Andy Warhol and the Exploding Plastic Inevitable," *Criticism* 56.3 (Fall 2014): 457-479.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. [http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart\\_pubs/72](http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs/72)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

Stroboscopic: Andy Warhol and the Exploding Plastic Inevitable  
by Homy King, Associate Professor, Department of History of Art, Bryn Mawr College  
Published in *Criticism* 56.3 (Fall 2014)

<insert fig 1 near here>

### *Pops and Flashes*

At least half a dozen distinct sources of illumination are discernible in Warhol's *The Velvet Underground in Boston* (1967), a film that documents a relatively late incarnation of Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable, 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 of 1967, with synch sound, the 33-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 throws off 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, which are suggestive of 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. 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 a rendition of "Venus in Furs," 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

<insert fig 2 near here>

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 Exploding Plastic Inevitable light show was to render figure and ground indistinguishable from one another; indeed, the color washes level the separations of field between performers and audience, stage and floor.<sup>2</sup> At times, the film has a monochrome look, as if the scene had been printed, not filmed, an effect similar to that in many of the silkscreened 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 show that took place at the Dom in Manhattan's East Village in April of 1966, John Wilcock describes the palimpsest effect of the projected lights and sounds, all of which combine to create something like a panoramic multi-panel, multi-

channel work. While one projector on the floor played Warhol's *Couch*, 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

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.<sup>3</sup>

I quote Wilcock's article in part because it is one of the more precise and detailed descriptions of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. 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" during the EPI performances.

It is probably no accident that Warhol chose to show his 1965 film *Vinyl* as one of those projected during the EPI performances.<sup>4</sup> The selection is apt for the reference it makes to the material of the record album, to his and the EPI's embrace of all things plastic. It is also appropriate in that *Vinyl* features Gerard Malanga in a sado-masochistic scenario similar to that in which he dances in the live EPI shows. A loose adaptation of Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), *Vinyl* traffics in the image that shocks, and that metaphorically pierces the eye. Ronald Tavel's script for the film references the Ludovico treatment of Burgess' novel and its 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." 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 stagey, "phony" S&M interrogation acted out by Malanga in the foreground is doubled with a scene of genuine sexual torture unfolding in the background.<sup>5</sup> A lit candle forms a key prop in the film, and it 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."<sup>6</sup> 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.

<insert fig 3 near here>

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 the Exploding Plastic Inevitable'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, due at least in part to society's pathologization of the trappings of queer sexuality and subcultural aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Andy Warhol *Up-Tight*, the precursor to the EPI, made its debut 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 sado-masochistic scenarios. Seymour Krim, writing for the New York Herald Tribune, headlined his review of the *Up-Tight* debut "Shock Treatment for Psychiatrists."<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup>

A complete list of pops, shocks, and pinpricks in the Exploding Plastic Inevitable 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 of words they make on 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 will take the reader on a trip through them wherein we will 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 silkscreens: small flecks of white canvas that show through the paint, as if 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*.<sup>10</sup> He 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 silkscreens. 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' own examples — but rather in the "floating flashes" of white produced by the silk-screen process itself: "the slipping and streaking, blanching and blanking...this repetitive 'popping' of the image."<sup>11</sup> In areas where the paint has not fully seeped through the screen, we see tiny traces of blank canvas, which are generally only visible 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 Exploding Plastic Inevitable 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.”<sup>12</sup> If in Warhol’s silkscreen 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> This hypothetical crack might be described as 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 sado-masochistic 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 silkscreen 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 multi-screen 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."<sup>15</sup>

There is another way to comprehend these flashes, though, already alluded to by Wilcock, who in the above-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 Exploding Plastic Inevitable — 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."<sup>16</sup> Williams is also credited with the film *Uptight #3*, which documents The Velvet Underground's appearance on David Susskind's television show on January 27 and 28, 1966.<sup>17</sup> 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 *Up Tight* confronted the institution of psychiatry, revealing its stodgy conservatism and double standards, so the VU'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, they 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, 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', whose footage, shot on Warhol's Bolex camera, displays jerkier movements (the footage is attributable to each since the filmmakers sometimes appear in one another's shots). The incorporation of both sets of images, even when they are semi-redundant, suggests another way of enacting a characteristically Warholian inclusiveness, multiplicity, and seriality. In Williams' case, though, the redundancy is more dialogic than Warhol's. Williams' footage aggregates together with Rubins' to create a document of the Velvet Underground's television appearance that eschews both singularity and a linear narrative.

The dialogic, collaborative, and open character of Williams' film is continued in 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 and Nico* album cover.<sup>18</sup> The banana, a fruit with a skin (which, in the original design for the VU'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 of that year.<sup>19</sup> Williams' 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' 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' 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' strobe light, was to render the musicians virtually invisible.<sup>20</sup> Robinson describes in an interview the way that in Williams' films, "people will float in the frame...his lighting was exquisite. His whites glow as people drift in and out of fields of black."<sup>21</sup> In *Uptight #3*, Williams' use of high-contrast cinematography, blinding whites, halation effects that create an auratic glow, and quick, flash-like 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, a group that included Tony Conrad. Conrad's 1965 film *The Flicker*, composed entirely of rapidly alternating black and white frames, produced what he described as a "whirling and shattered array of intangible

and diffused color patterns, probably a retinal after-image type of effect.”<sup>22</sup> Juan Suárez notes that Conrad 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.”<sup>23</sup> Strobe lights formed an integral part of the EPI’s aesthetic; the show first incorporated them on March 12, 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, drug-like states of mind.

Stories of the human use of flicker techniques to achieve hallucinatory, clairvoyant, or simply pleasant perceptual states date to the pre-scientific 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup> 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 one hundred-watt light bulb shone. The cylinder rotated to produce alpha waves in the eight to sixteen Hertz range. The device was designed to be viewed with the eyes closed.<sup>26</sup>

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.”<sup>27</sup> 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* and in another film, Ronald Nameth’s *Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, shot at Poor Richard’s in Chicago in June of 1966; both films show the characteristic brief static frames of the crowd and dancers produced by strobe lighting. Gene Youngblood notes that Nameth shot at 8 frames per second and printed at 24 frames per second in order to capture the effect of the strobe lights.<sup>28</sup> 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.”<sup>29</sup> 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.”<sup>30</sup> 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.

<insert fig 4 near here>

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 mandala that sucks you into its whirling maelstrom."<sup>31</sup> 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 mandala comprised of smaller fragments. No sooner do we grasp the snapshot, than we find it gone, reanimated into a movement, as if 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 eight frames per second of the strobe cycle and Nameth's film, to the sixteen frames per second 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 twenty-four frames per second 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 Edison's Kinetoscope, as well as to a yet earlier moment, that of Muybridge's motion studies and Marey's chronophotography. The Mutoscope, for example, operated by cranking an illuminated, rolodex-like fan of cards at a rate of about eight-hundred fifty cards per minute's worth of viewing time, or approximately fourteen frames per second.

These were moments of possibility, before the cinema had become fixed into a standardized rate of motion, guaranteeing a certain reliable "illusion" 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 common-sense 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 film strip. As Tony Rayns puts it, Warhol generally cut his films “simply by stopping and restarting the camera...[leaving in] in the sound-track blip and image-track flash-frame that mark the start of each new shot.”<sup>32</sup> 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' edits are sometimes so rapid as to resemble a flicker film, an effect that is 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.<sup>33</sup> In Warhol's sound films, a short, zip-like 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 re-enactment 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 non-adjacent events, 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: semi-arbitrary, even gratuitous punctuation marks thrown in more for their capacity to excite and convey affect than for their value as

expository sign-posts to the viewer. In some cases, the cuts clip off bits of dialogue and make the characters' movements seem jerky and non-purposeful. 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 which a camera, which can be turned on and off, thereby bringing a screen existence alive, or killing it again by turning a switch."<sup>34</sup>

Warhol uses plenty of strobe cuts in the middle section of *The Velvet Underground in Boston* (1966). As Youngblood suggests, their effect can be read as one of Brechtian distancing. 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 to come out of his vestibule and be part of the show, in all his flawed glory. 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 they are only ghosts of the originals, 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 club-goers 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 if 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 *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* represent a continuation of other means by which Warhol experimented with temporal duration in painting and film. In his silkscreens, still forms are slightly temporalized through serial repetition with slight differences, and frozen stills are re-animated 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 silkscreen 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, hood-like 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 on her face suggesting a tear. 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.<sup>35</sup>

In Warhol's film work, the fixed camera of films like the *Screen Tests* (1963-1966) and *Empire* (1964) 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 a period of waiting, give way to a roving, zooming camera.<sup>36</sup> As Crimp notes, Warhol's early films are less static than is often assumed. *Empire* (1964), 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 on in the film, the "swaths and streaks and dots of light" that play across the frame.<sup>37</sup>

In his essay "Dragtime and Drugtime, Or, Film à la Warhol," Parker Tyler classifies Warhol's films into two categories based on the type of temporal durations and experience they elicit for the viewer.<sup>38</sup> In *Empire*, this experience takes the form of waiting through extremely long-duration, monotonous takes, an effect that Tyler calls drag-time. 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.”<sup>39</sup> 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 experiencing time that is psychedelic, expansive, and “laid out like a ‘trip.’”<sup>40</sup> 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.”<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

The drugtime aspects of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable 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 Exploding Plastic Inevitable, its duration and sounds, emulate the model of a drag-time 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.”<sup>43</sup> The goal of leaving the audience “wanting less” recalls John Cale’s early influences in the school of long-duration minimalist 20th century music. In September 1963, Cale took part in an 18-hour performance of Erik Satie’s *Vexations*,

attended by Warhol, in which the piece was performed eight hundred forty times in series by relay team.<sup>44</sup> Warhol's *The Velvet Underground in Boston* ends on a note that clearly participates in drag-time, 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, 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.<sup>45</sup> 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 night club 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. 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.”<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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 semi-anonymity, 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 move in a simple linear fashion 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.

<insert fig 5 near here>

When placed alongside a film like *Sunset* or *Empire*, the stroboscopic lighting, clipped pace, and pricking flashes in the *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* 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- 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, life events, and relationships.<sup>48</sup> 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 it is also the source of vitality and visual appearance.

The reading the Exploding Plastic Inevitable 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.<sup>49</sup> All is "plastic" for Warhol not because the synthetic modern world has abandoned its natural roots, nor even because everything is ripe for commodification.<sup>50</sup> 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> 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; see for example *Normal Love* (1963).

<sup>2</sup> David Joselit, "Yippie Pop: Abbie Hoffman, Andy Warhol, and Sixties Media Politics," *Grey Room* No. 8 (Summer, 2002): 73.

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

<sup>4</sup> *Vinyl* was shown at at least three EPI shows, the one at Poor Richard's in Chicago where Ronald Nameth's film 1966 film *Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable* was shot, one at New York's The Dom in April 1966, and one at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, on November 12, 1966, where it was shown in double-screen projection. See Wilcock, 10, and Barry Lord, writing for *Arts/Canada*, quoted in Bockris, 65. The fact that it was shown during the touring performances suggests that it was probably shown at other venues while the EPI was on tour.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Spacious," *October* 132 (Spring 2010): 9.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Arthur, "Flesh of Absence: Resighting the Warhol Catechism," *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*, ed. Michael O'Pray (London: British Film Institute, 1989): 151.

<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick did not accompany the group on the Exploding Plastic Inevitable's tour, but she appears in *Vinyl* and other films projected during the show, and she 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.

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

---

<sup>9</sup> Branden W. Joseph, "My Mind Split Open': Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable," *Grey Room* 08 (Summer 2002): 98.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981): 18, 43, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Hal Foster, "Death in America," *October*, Vol. 75 (Winter, 1996): 43.

<sup>12</sup> Jonas Mekas, "On the Plastic Inevitables and the Strobe Light," *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillan, 1972): 244. Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> When the EPI moved venues to The Dom on Friday April 8, 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, 322-323.

<sup>14</sup> Lou Reed, quoted in Victor Bockris, *Up-Tight: The Velvet Underground Story* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1995): 62.

<sup>15</sup> Foster, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Scherman and Dalton, 323.

<sup>17</sup> Williams' work was discovered by Callie Angell, curator of the Warhol films at MoMA and the Whitney Museum, who found 18 of his 16 milimeter reels among Warhol's archives. See Patricia Thomson, "Points East: Warhol Factory Filmmaker Comes to Light," *American*

---

*Cinematographer: The International Journal of Film & Digital Production Techniques* v. 85, n. 3 (March 2004): 99.

<sup>18</sup> 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.” Ronald Tavel, “The Banana Diary: The Story of Andy Warhol’s *Harlot*,” *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*, ed. Michael O’Pray (London: British Film Institute, 1989): 68.

<sup>19</sup> Callie Angell, Introduction to the screening of *Uptight #3—David Susskind* at the 7<sup>th</sup> Orphans Film Symposium, New York, NY (April 9, 2010).

<https://sites.google.com/site/orphans7/home/callie-angell-intro>.

<sup>20</sup> Bockris, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Scott Macaulay, “Reports: Bright Light,” *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film* v. 11, n.4 (Summer 2003): 12.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Juan A. Suárez, “Structural Film: Noise,” *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008): 79.

<sup>23</sup> Suárez, 79.

<sup>24</sup> B.C. ter Meulen, D. Tavy, and B.C. Jacobs, “From Stroboscope to Dream Machine: A History of Flicker-Induced Hallucinations,” *European Neurology* 62 (September 2009): 317.

<sup>25</sup> B.C. ter Meulen et al, 317.

<sup>26</sup> 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.” Jonas Mekas, “An Interview with Tony Conrad: On the

---

Flickering Cinema of Pure Light," *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillian, 1972): 229. For more on the work of Brion Gysin, see the documentary film *FlicKeR* (Nik Sheehan, Canada, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> Jonas Mekas, "More on Strobe Light and Intermedia," "More on Strobe Light and Intermedia," *Movie Journal: The Rise of the New American Cinema, 1959-1971* (New York: Macmillian, 1972): 246. Originally written June 16, 1966. Emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> Gene Youngblood, "Synaesthetics and Kinaesthetics: The Way of All Experience," in *Expanded Cinema* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd., 1970).

<sup>29</sup> Mekas, "More on Strobe Light and Intermedia," 245-246.

<sup>30</sup> Mekas, "More on Strobe Light and Intermedia," 245.

<sup>31</sup> Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema*, 103-105.

<sup>32</sup> Tony Rayns, "Death at Work: Evolution and Entropy in Factory Films," *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*, ed. Michael O'Pray (London: British Film Institute, 1989): 168.

<sup>33</sup> 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." Scherman and Dalton, 312.

<sup>34</sup> Gene Youngblood, "Andy Warhol," *Los Angeles Free Press*, February 16, 1968. Quoted in Rainer Crone, "Form and Ideology: Warhol's Techniques from Blotted Line to Film," in *The Work of Andy Warhol*, ed. Gary Garrels (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989): 90.

<sup>35</sup> Warhol connected the replication of the Jackie images to their temporalization in his interview with Gretchen Berg: "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." Gretchen Berg,

---

“Nothing to Lose: An Interview with Andy Warhol,” *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*, ed. Michael O’Pray (London: British Film Institute, 1989):60.

<sup>36</sup> Charles F. Stuckey notes that several critics have drawn attention to the analogy between the serial form of Warhol’s silkscreen 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*. Charles F. Stuckey, “Warhol in Context,” *The Work of Andy Warhol*, ed. Gary Garrels (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989): 10.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas Crimp, *“Our Kind of Movie”: The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012): 137.

<sup>38</sup> Parker Tyler, “Dragtime and Drugtime; Or, Film à la Warhol,” *Evergreen Review* 11:46 (April 1967).

<sup>39</sup> Tyler, 29-30.

<sup>40</sup> Tyler, 88.

<sup>41</sup> Tyler, 30.

<sup>42</sup> 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* v. 28, n. 1 (Winter, 2006): 98-120.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Bockris, 29.

<sup>44</sup> The New York Times, September 11, 1963, reprinted in Bockris, p. 12. Warhol attended the performance: see Peter Wollen, “Raiding the Icebox,” *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*, ed. Michael O’Pray (London: British Film Institute, 1989): 25.

---

<sup>45</sup> 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 Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> Crimp, *Our Kind of Movie*, 137.

<sup>47</sup> The idea for *The Closet* reportedly came from Barbara Rubin, camera operator in the January 1966 performance of *Up Tight* and in Williams’ *Up Tight #3*. See Callie Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests: The Films of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2006): 169.

<sup>48</sup> See Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction,” *GLQ* 13:2-3 (2007): 159-176, and the entirety of the *GLQ* special issue on queer temporalities.

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Flatley expands beautifully on Warhol’s pan-affirmative tendencies and their connection to analogy, mimesis, and “commonism” in his essay “Like: Collecting and Collectivity,” *October* 132 (Spring 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 (Stuckey, 29 n. 58).

<sup>50</sup> 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.