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NO RAMBLING ON: THE LISTLESS  
COWBOYS OF HORSE

Jon Davies

If Andy Warhol's queer cinema of the 1960s allowed for a flourishing of newly articulated sexual and gender possibilities, it also fostered a performative dichotomy: those who command the voice and those who do not. Many of his sound films stage a dynamic of stoicism and loquaciousness that produces a complex and compelling web of power and desire. The artist has summed the binary up succinctly: 'Talkers are *doing* something. Beauties are *being* something'<sup>1</sup> and, as Viva explained about this tendency in reference to Warhol's 1968 *Lonesome Cowboys*: 'Men seem to have trouble doing these nonscript things. It's a natural for women and fags – they ramble on. But straight men can't.'<sup>2</sup>

The brilliant writer and progenitor of the Theatre of the Ridiculous Ronald Tavel's first two films as scenarist for Warhol are paradigmatic in this regard: *Screen Test #1* and *Screen Test #2* (both 1965). In *Screen Test #1*, the performer, Warhol's then lover Philip Fagan, is completely closed off to Tavel's attempts at spurring him to act out and to reveal himself.<sup>3</sup> According to Tavel,

he was so up-tight. He just crawled into himself, and the more I asked him, the more up-tight he became and less was recorded on film, and, so, I got more personal about touchy things, which became the principle for me for the next six months.<sup>4</sup>

When Tavel turned his self-described 'sadism' on a true cinematic superstar, however, in *Screen Test #2*, the results were extraordinary. Here Mario Montez was able to transform his victimised position – as an ingénue auditioning for a cruel, foul-mouthed off-screen director played by Tavel – into a potent piece of performed self-exposure; the drag queen took up Tavel's challenge and loosened her tongue as persuaded.

Warhol's dazzling collaborations with Tavel in 1965–6 are, above all else, works of meta-cinema: despite their air of disposability and casualness, films like *The Life of Juanita Castro*, *Vinyl*, *Kitchen* (all 1965) and *Hedy* (1966) are precise and probing *reductio ad absurdum* experiments in distilling the pungent essence of the performer–director relationship and in examining how the cinema can catalyse the exposure of something authentic and true about the individuals it records. Often a Warhol film's potency comes from the juxtaposition of a beauty and a talker: silence cannot help but generate verbiage, and vice versa, with speaking running self-mythologising circles of innuendo around mere physical being. In Warhol and Tavel's film *Horse*, however – a queer, absurdo-minimalist Western shot in the East 47th Street Factory on 3 April 1965 – we are left with four taciturn hunks whose lines are scripted and delivered to them on the spot by off-screen cue or 'idiot' cards: no improvising, spontaneous ramblers – or superstars – to be found here. All beauties being rather than talkers doing, *Horse* is an awkwardly arousing epic of deflated masculinity and flaccid imperial ambitions. Instead of fighting over land, the 'cowboys' spar over the love of a horse: the only attempts at territorial and romantic conquest that we see before us are the cowboys' failed seductions of the beast, equally aloof and solitary. Subjected to Warhol and Tavel's whims through three protracted reels, the actors perform with a hypnotic languor that mirrors the stillness of the eponymous star, a 'professional' named Mighty Byrd rented by Warhol from the nearby Dawn Animal Agency, who appears alongside trainer Leonard Brook on a loose mat of hay in the busy entrance to Warhol's Factory.

A masterful film about mastery's undoing, *Horse* relocates the frontier from great outdoors to claustrophobic indoors, American West to East, from the drive for colonial expansion to the explosion of social, cultural and economic boundaries that took place day in and day out at Warhol's Factory. It also recasts the Western, that most American of popular film genres, through the lens of the mid-1960s New York underground queer counterculture as if to say: *this is America now*. Scholar Chon Noriega has noted, following on from an assertion by Jonas Mekas, that 'If Warhol is America, he is nothing less than the frontier thesis of modern art.'<sup>5</sup> Noriega cites Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation*, where he identifies 'the process of the frontier myth as a "regeneration through violence"', which aptly describes Warhol and Tavel's cinema of cruelty.<sup>6</sup> Regarding his and Warhol's film-making practice, Tavel has stated, 'It's so American. What will be more American than that phenomenon: dehumanisation.'<sup>7</sup> In both form and content, *Horse* is like a downward spiral into the abyss of white American masculinity and violence, a maddening circle that mimicked the idiosyncratic structures of Tavel's uniquely self-destructing scenarios.<sup>8</sup> I would suggest that this knotty, listless queer violence that plays out in the film is what Tavel is talking about when he calls *Horse* both his 'best' and his most 'terrifying' production for Warhol:

I fully expected it to be bigger than me, to make a statement larger than I or Warhol would be capable of articulating intentionally ... And that's why I would consider it to be the best film, because the statement it made is so terrifying, not just unexpected, but terrifying and undeniable. This is what fascinated me. Nobody can deny that it is there, happening without any calculations beyond setting up a milieu. And it's happening in front of your eyes, in all its horror. It cannot be erased, cannot be denied.<sup>9</sup>

This question of articulation, of a violence tightly bound up with masculinity that stealthily escapes or negates verbalisation and instead is cloaked in a more ephemeral feeling of silent menace, seems central to grasping the 'terrifying and undeniable' potency of *Horse* that Tavel so dramatically describes.

*Horse's* slipperiness is amplified by its scarcity, so before I continue any further: a few notes on invisibility and gossip. The late Warhol film expert Callie Angell has pointed out that Warhol's withdrawal of his 1960s films from circulation in 1972 – as he sought financing for his more commercial productions with director Paul Morrissey – 'worked to increase their value in the marketplace of cultural discourse, where a growing body of recollections, descriptions, and interpretations, projected on the often blank screens of Warhol's cinema, has come to replace direct experience of the films themselves'.<sup>10</sup> Accounts of both the production and actual experience of Warhol's films vary greatly from one commentator to another, memories are faulty to the extreme and reminiscences are shaped by self-interest and the vagaries of spectatorship.<sup>11</sup> In his monograph on Warhol's *Blow Job* (1964), Peter Gidal notes,

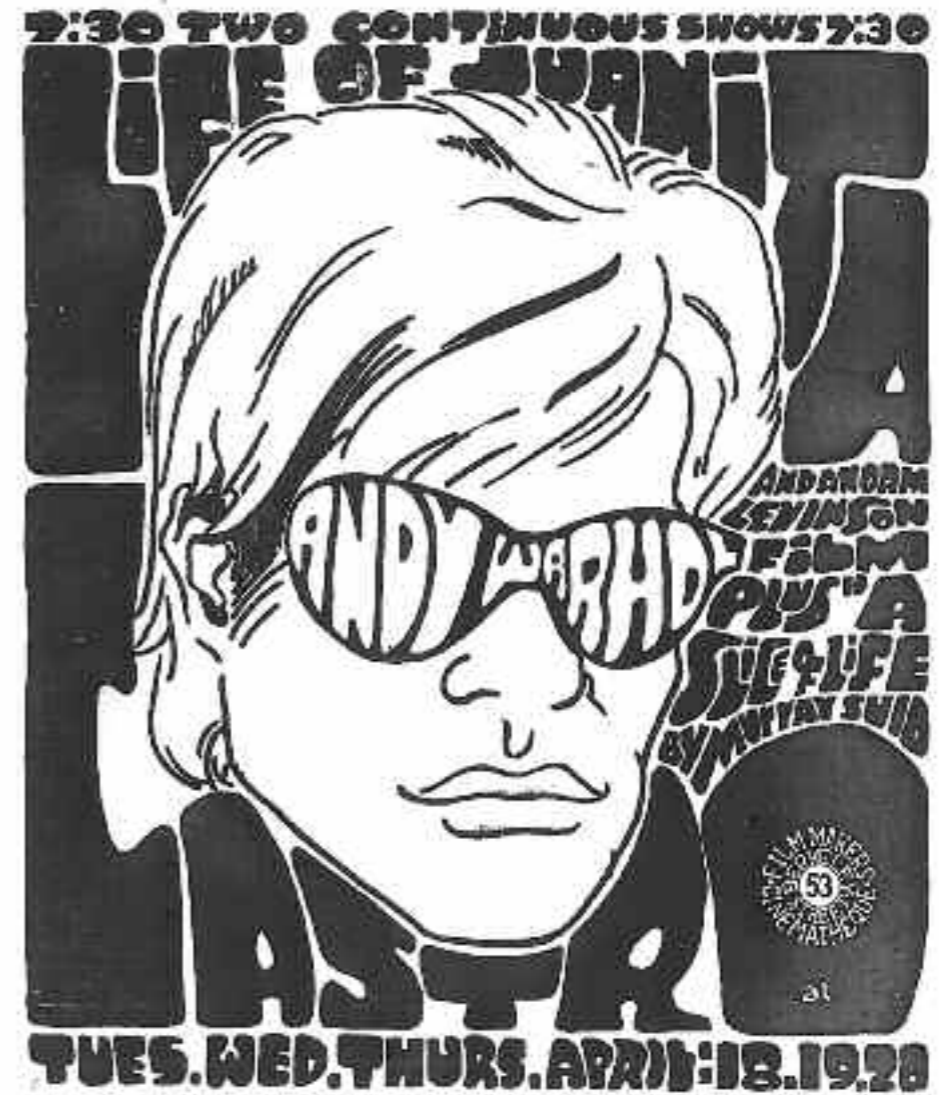
knowledge (what you then think you know when you see the actor, his gestures, his looks, his reactions) is always interfered with, as time continues whilst you look and whilst you realise your misapprehension – that what you thought was occurring (or imagined was occurring) is other than what is there.<sup>12</sup>

Such tricks of recollection only multiply thanks to the continuing rarity of opportunities to view most of Warhol's films, many of which are still awaiting proper preservation before being introduced into very limited circulation by a handful of institutions. Making sense of Warhol's cosmos therefore demands a methodology of gossip: embellishing the quotidian with trappings of the mythic, fact with fiction, gossip is the traffic in unofficial information and a form of makeshift knowledge. Taking on the identity of an unrepentant gossip also puts me in fine company with the 'talkers' in Warhol's films. While engaging in excessive talk has historically been regarded as a feminising pastime, it is a key form of self-fashioning, allowing the speaker to talk new identities and ways of being in the world into existence through the voice. My account of *Horse* and its making is therefore unabashedly fuzzy, disputable and partial as I endeavour to tell the best possible story, prioritising fantasy and fabulation above mere facts in order to do so.<sup>13</sup> That said, my earnest analysis of *Horse* is based on primary and secondary sources, and with two viewings of the film: once, on VHS at The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in 2003 while watching a number of Warhol's films during research for my MA thesis, and once on 16mm (with the second and third reels accidentally reversed by the projectionist!) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in February 2012. While a number of Warhol's films have been released illicitly on Italian DVD label RaroVideo, the scarcity of a film like *Horse* for most scholars means that it maintains its status as an ephemeral fantasy object, hazily reconstructed at best. Let's begin at the beginning, then, with Tavel's list of props:

- guns
- two bottles of milk, four drinking glasses
- a pack of playing cards
- three land deeds
- something for the horse to eat
- Faust tape

Drawn to extreme literalism in his early film titles, Warhol makes the word and idea of 'horse' his metonym for the American cinematic genre of the Western.<sup>14</sup> Scholar Douglas Crimp captures the core of the film very well: 'the [Warholian] idea that all you really need to make a movie a western is a horse'.<sup>15</sup> *Horse* indeed came about from Warhol's desire to rent a horse for the day in order to make a Western, and followed close on the heels of the mock-political family portrait that Tavel had just written for him, *The Life of Juanita Castro*. Among its peccadilloes, *Juanita Castro* introduced cross-gender casting – including a reticent turn by mannish avant-garde film-maker Marie Menken, drinking beer on camera, as Juanita – as well as dialogue unabashedly dictated to the actors right on screen by Tavel. Visually, all the performers occupy the frame at the same time – as they will in *Horse* – and are positioned on bleachers set at an oblique angle in order to face a fictional, off-screen camera. These are just some of Tavel's deconstructive tricks, and *Horse* took his brazen experimentation with establishing a ridiculous meta-cinema even further.

Angell characterises Warhol and Tavel's narrative and technical strategies for their films together as mutually deconstructing, which helps explain the dynamism and vigour of their oeuvre.<sup>16</sup> Crimp has identified their collaborations as 'coming together to stay apart'.<sup>17</sup> What Tavel brought to Warhol's vision was a sympathetic laying bare of all manner of cinematic conventions, from dialogue to setting, plot to performance. Tavel's scripts are marked by heavy repetition, intentional mistakes and absurd humour, and



reach dizzying heights of self-reflexivity. His experimental scenarios test the very limits of human performance, and were therefore perfect structures for developing Warhol's cinematic vision in the mid-1960s. Speaking about Warhol's cinema, Tavel has said 'you feel that [these] films are very much history ... the most authentic history books we have. They record infallibly how people think, because when you watch them in those silly stories performing, what you really watch is the flesh at work'.<sup>18</sup> Essentially, Warhol and Tavel put people in banal, clichéd, ridiculous and exploitative situations in order to force their performances to transcend them. Theirs was a cinema of revelation achieved through engineered, destabilising artifice, almost like a laboratory for the exposure of the self under adverse circumstances. Angell describes Warhol's conception of film in this period as 'a kind of delineated performance space, a specific temporal and physical framing within which planned or unplanned actions might or might not unfold',<sup>19</sup> while Tavel has commented, 'I thought we shouldn't tell a film what it's about, it should tell us. Set up a field in which it operates'.<sup>20</sup>

All of Tavel's scenarios for Warhol were recorded with an Auricon camera that took 1,200-ft rolls of 16mm film.<sup>21</sup> Shot with a stationary camera, with sound and no post-production editing, two of *Horse's* three single-take 33-minute reels feature the horse, Mighty Byrd, in profile, spanning the entire width of the



frame. M. B. is positioned just outside the Factory's freight elevator, within which the larger-than-expected rented horse was transported up to Warhol's studio. A payphone and a line of spectators (including Tavel's brother) flank the back wall. Tavel calls them 'overseers' and 'witnesses' in his script, and they are largely hidden behind Mighty Byrd except for their heads, which poke up above the horse to form a kind of mountainous horizon line punctuated on the right by a crescent moon (created by resident photographer/lighting Svengali Billy Name with a spotlight). Tavel very poetically described the *mise en scène* in his notes on the script:

Billy's spot placement, upper right, has the effect of a planetarium, clearer-than-real crescent moon; and as the film lightens to white in its final moments, the 16mm suddenly seems to stretch into letter-boxed format to accommodate the Michelangelo bas-relief-like look of the sequential males and animal unrolling from end to end in an unexpected and modern, shattering recall of Mannerism's equestrian dignity.<sup>22</sup>

According to Tavel, Warhol was concerned that the horse and the men in cowboy outfits signified a Western movie too explicitly at first,<sup>23</sup> and so incorporated greater evidence of the film's own making into its *mise en scène* before shooting: from the row of overseers to Name's theatrical lighting, from the visual prominence of the boom microphone held by Betty Stahl on the left to Tavel with his cue cards on the right – 'directing from within'<sup>24</sup> – which opens the film up to include not just 'the scene' but 'behind the scenes' as well. The positions of the set and camera seem designed to maximise opportunities for entropy, chance encounters and surprise reactions, placed as they are in front of the elevator and payphone, both of which

are subject to a stream of ersatz extras.<sup>25</sup> (Tavel even designates the elevator and payphone 'stars' in the notes accompanying his script for the film.) As Crimp nicely puts it, 'at no point does the action as written in the scenario take precedence over daily life at the Factory'.<sup>26</sup> The phone rings occasionally throughout the film, and various denizens of the Factory walk on set to answer it, including Warhol and Edie Sedgwick in her first appearance in one of Warhol's films.<sup>27</sup> As is typical of Warhol and Tavel's collaborations, the diegetic and the extra-diegetic realms, on set and off, planned and unplanned, promiscuously commingle to create a thrilling, highly theatrical tableau precariously balanced at the very precipice of collapse. According to Crimp, Warhol and Tavel's techniques are nothing short of 'the means for the complete dissolution of relationships and stories as we know them', so it is apropos that a feeling of crisis and chaos dominates.<sup>28</sup>

To say that the frame is densely packed would be an understatement: first off, the horse appears quite huge and – appropriately enough for its outsize presence – performs a variety of roles: star; efficient generic shorthand and prop; object of romantic come-ons; obstacle to take up space, be climbed on, obscure what's behind and frame what's in front; and to intimidate its fellow, far more diminutive actors. As a non-human species abutted by humans, the horse embodies an unbreachable difference from its co-stars, a kind of singularity that resonates with Crimp's conception of Warhol and Tavel's relationship as productively in tension. Gidal's description of the white cat in Warhol's *Harlot* (1964) could easily be applied to Mighty Byrd: 'It has a life of its own and, as such, is a disorganising principle.'<sup>29</sup> As a disorganising principle, the presence of the horse is far more unsettling than even the most anarchic human performer, and certainly more so than the inert mass of Warhol's star of his 1964 8-hour epic *Empire*, the Empire State Building. The horse's inscrutability (what must M. B. be thinking?) creates a manner of feedback loop with its corollary – the unwavering, automatic gaze of the camera eye – and the cowboys are like so many puppets playing out their farce in the charged airspace between the two gazes. Visually and metaphorically, the horse is a black hole into which everyone and everything must be drawn for the 100 minutes that the camera runs – and is the reason the film exists.

Around the horse, we have our four central human characters: Kid (Larry Latreille), Sheriff (Gregory Battcock), Tex (Dan Cassidy) and Mex (Tosh Carillo), each representing a different coarse archetype of the Western movie genre. They are trapped within the confines of the set and the unmoving camera that frames it, the meagre real estate that Warhol and Tavel have designated as their entire universe. As in *The Life of Juanita Castro*, Tavel performs the role of director on screen: to the right, we see traces of him in the shadows unveiling the idiot cards, aided by Warhol's studio assistant Gerard Malanga. Tavel also regularly crosses through the set, in front of the camera, to read the film's credits – a common Tavelism – into the boom mic, pulling it towards him out of screen left. We also occasionally hear Tavel verbalise directions to the cast, adding a second layer of dialogue that mixes with the scripted words spoken by the 'real' performers. To maximise the actors' discomfort and keep them perpetually off guard, they did not receive any directions or their lines beforehand and instead read them for the first time as they are revealed by the cards on camera. As with many of Tavel's scenarios, *Horse* was designed to be both absurd to the hilt and humiliating to the actors, who – like most Factory denizens – were to varying degrees high on drugs (in this case poppers, apparently, though typically it was amphetamines). Certain sources claim the script was developed through Tavel's conversations with the actors, which seems unlikely, but either way the dialogue consists of short and rhythmic pronouncements, concise enough to fit on the cards. Anxieties ran high among the 'unprepared and thus stage-frightened young men',<sup>30</sup> particularly in view of the actors' intimate proximity to the horse – which could lash out at any moment, and does get noticeably spooked by the more heated scenes, kicking out at least once – and to the equally unpredictable whims of their devilish young scenarist.

Many of Warhol and Tavel's films are two-reelers but *Horse* is three, giving us a 33-minute-long intermission of sorts. The third reel, recorded after the scripted film shoot was ostensibly completed, interrupts the flow from the first to the second with a *vérité* tableau of the horse alone with his trainer being fed and petted as well as visited by various Factory well-wishers. The horse is positioned in three-quarters view – its head is not in close-up as some (like Patrick Smith) have attested – with the trainer squatting next to it, comforting the performer after the indignities and chaos of the shoot; the off-screen sounds of the Factory's day-to-day buzz are picked up by the boom microphone, which is also still visible on camera. Sedgwick, Chuck Wein and others come into view, eating and smoking. Latreille (now out of character as the Kid) and the boom operator play with the mic and mischievously attempt to interview the horse: much as Tavel tries to coax Warhol's studly 'beauties' to talk when they would rather not, so Latreille tries to get the horse to open up. He seems genuinely smitten with his equine co-star – perhaps all the horse wanted was some romance, someone to buy him dinner first – and we hear M. B.'s chewing as the affable lad holds up the mic to him to establish a more ethical form of kinship than we have previously witnessed.<sup>31</sup> This 'behind the scenes' reel interrupts the action and thus serves as a marked self-reflexive device, a shot of the 'real' among Tavel's panoply of narrative put-ons.



*Horse* (1965). 16mm film, b/w, sound, 100 mins. © 2013 The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA, a museum of Carnegie Institute. All rights reserved. Film still courtesy of The Andy Warhol Museum.



Typical of Tavel's films with Warhol, the 'characters' in *Horse* are throwaways, as is suggested by their generic names: Kid, Sheriff, Tex and Mex. For Tavel, evacuating character was the most piercing way of revealing the personality of the performer that lay behind them:

The character is invented in my mind as someone to give this person something to do so that [he] will expose many truths about [himself] before the camera. Not the character. Who needs that? That's been done. ... It's the unavoidable truth of themselves and the character is totally subsidiary.<sup>32</sup>

Crimp explains it thus: 'The essential condition of "acting" in a Warhol film is that you are left to your own devices and that whatever you *do* will simply *be* the way you appear in the film.'<sup>33</sup> The four stars were a motley crew: Battcock was an openly gay art critic who had written extensively on Warhol's work, and a veteran of his 1964 films *Batman Dracula* and *Soap Opera*. He would also go on to star in Warhol's comic remake of his own *Blow Job* in the 1966 *Eating Too Fast*. Carillo was a florist and S&M aficionado with so-called 'dexterous toes' – which Tavel sought to feature in his script – who would very soon take on a more prominent role in *Vinyl*, Warhol and Tavel's adaptation of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. Cassidy was a young poet friend of Malanga – Warhol's key studio assistant and Tavel's idiot-card wrangler – and had attended Cornell University; one of his three short *Screen Tests* had been included in Warhol's series *Fifty Fantastics and Fifty Personalities* (1964–6). Latreille, who later appears as a masochist in *Vinyl*, was apparently an underage French-Canadian runaway who Steven Watson claims was Henry Geldzahler's boyfriend at the time.<sup>34</sup> In his notes on the *Horse* script, Tavel writes that the 'get out of town' line was an in-joke threatening Latreille's deportation.<sup>35</sup>

In the mid-1960s, the Western was already seen as a musty cultural product, thoroughly revised, parodied and taken apart. A key parameter of *Horse* was its classification as a Western, and Tavel insists in his notes on the script that 'A deconstructed ... western is still ... a western.'<sup>36</sup> As scholar Patrick Smith explains, Warhol's films celebrate more than critique the artifice and dishonesty of Hollywood.<sup>37</sup> Tavel describes *Horse* not as a spoof or satire but as 'a *genuine* Western ... Horses as sex objects' that tells the true, repressed history of the West left out of the now passé, straight Hollywood narratives:

*Horse's* lines imply ... an outlook and literary themes ... which, ideally, should demythologize the Western novel and film and introduce the hidden in the anthropometric image and stale ethnography of cowboys: their phallic worship, Levi competition, homosexuality, bestiality, onanism, racism, and institutionalized ignorance.<sup>38</sup>

*Horse* explores the sadism and sexual neuroses produced within all-male contexts like the mythic West, where a prescribed celibacy transforms acceptable homosocial bonding into dangerously taboo – and here violent – homosexuality. Warhol and Tavel's queering of the Western occurs not merely in how they render explicit the simmering homosexual desire among the characters, but in the camp way that they degrade the iconographic trappings of the Western genre into poses, lines of dialogue and situations that are as 'throwaway' as their stereotyped characters and ultimately as false as any other kind of drag. This sensibility was shared with Warhol's film-making influence Jack Smith, who displayed a similarly camp-deconstructive attitude in his homespun cine-homages to the beloved exotic and Orientalist celluloid spectacles that starred his deity, the actress Maria Montez.

Besides Tavel's trash minimalism and delirious self-reflexivity – which leave the film in a constant state of coming undone – *Horse* burlesques the Western movie genre through the repetition of warmed-over dialogue clichés – 'one of you two guys is a murderer', 'get out of town', 'the Indians did it', 'there'll be civilisation in this land', 'there's gold in them thar hills', etc. – as well as intentionally dumb puns and sexually absurdist declarations repeated by the cast like 'I'm a celibate', 'I'm an onanist' and 'I love this horse'. (Actually, Mex says 'I'm not a celibate' and 'I'm not an onanist', setting him apart from the white American cowboys.) In the enclosed set, Tavel also choreographs homoerotic interactions among the men and, naturally, between the men and the iconic horse. An early directive from Tavel to the actors on the idiot cards was apparently to 'approach the horse sexually',<sup>39</sup> and the men dutifully – if warily – caress, stroke and kiss the great beast on cue throughout the film. In the absence of women, the horse – referred to in the dialogue as 'she' and 'her' – becomes a source of jealous possessiveness, an abject object of desire that short-circuits the film's protracted homoerotic circle jerk. In fact, an intensely scripted seduction scene between the Kid and the Sheriff is *détourned* by Tavel when 'suddenly' the men 'rush back to the horse and start making love to it again'.

As Smith describes, the performers 'preen their theatricalized masculinity and ... engage in combative games of bondage and domination around the horse'.<sup>40</sup> After Mex hands out pieces of paper towel

representing 'land deeds' to the others, Tavel instructs the men to beat him up, and they all pounce, laying into him. Later, they hold their noses when Mex takes off his boots, as if his feet stink, and pull him off the horse after he tries to seduce the animal himself. Most of the aggression in the film is aimed at Mex: he is the maligned scapegoat for Sheriff, Kid and Tex. Sheriff wants to wipe out all the Mexicans and Indians – the terms are used pretty much interchangeably here – so he can civilise the land. The white Americans are threatened by Mex's advances on the horse and therefore see fit to punish him sexually, beating and stripping him. (Tavel's instruction at one point to 'feel' him up was apparently misinterpreted as yet another instance of 'beat' him up.) The victimised Mex is emphatically a crude Mexican stereotype, as he serves and performs for the other men's amusement and parrots dialogue of the 'gringos!' and 'aie!!' variety. The Sheriff announces to him, 'To think I could have killed you a thousand times,' one of Tavel's favourite melodramatic lines, and one he recycled often in his work. Mex replies, 'I'll bet you're glad now that you didn't.' This interaction calls to mind the pathological repetition that takes place in order to stabilise cinematic genre conventions: the stock Mexican has indeed been killed a thousand times in the annals of American film history, and must continue to be killed until the frontier myth is secured for the nation by the forces of Hollywood.

Early in the second reel, Sheriff declares, 'this is a horse opery', and a tape of the notoriously bad opera singer Florence Foster Jenkins as Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust* is played, with Mex rising up and prancing around as Marguerite. He reaches up to the heavens, gesticulating wildly and laughing as the Sheriff hangs off him, 'parody[ing] the role of Faust', as Tavel describes it in his notes on the script. The Kid observes approvingly when the spectacle is over: 'That's what we need around here. A little civilisation and culture.' This injection of operatics is a rare moment of excessive energy in the proceedings, as if expressing the theatricality and vocality that is largely repressed throughout the film. To emphasise this rupture, Tavel directed the other two characters – the Kid and Tex – to look at the opera performers 'as if they were stone nuts'. The opera signals the intrusion of the talker, the feminine and the expressive voice into *Horse*.

After Tavel walks on set and drops off a pack of playing cards, the men play strip poker to determine the rightful owner of the horse. Mex and the Kid ultimately undress down to their underwear – the other men yell 'take it off!' at them, while Tavel urges them to undress 'very, very slow', like a striptease – before they all attack the Sheriff quite brutally, including whipping him with belts, when he ends up with a losing hand. In a satisfying moment towards the end of the film, the opera tape returns and Tavel comes on set to coach Carillo in the proper operatic gestures required to emulate the diva.<sup>41</sup> Crimp notes that in *Horse* and other films for Warhol,

Tavel's scenarios come to an end before the final reel runs out ... The deliberate discrepancy – or nonrelation – between Tavel's scenario and the film made from the scenario suggests a new condition for relationality itself – a condition, that is, of our confrontations with others and with the world at large.<sup>42</sup>

As the reel winds down – we can see Warhol's infamous white flares – Tex takes the Sheriff's hat (all hats have a hard time staying on in the film) and the film comes to an abrupt end.

In the last line of Tavel's script, Tex proclaims that they were just 'having good old cowboy fun' all along. The 'horse' of the title can also refer to 'horse play' or 'horsing around', a common alibi for homosocial intimacy performed under the cover of aggression and 'boys being boys' rough-and-tumble play.<sup>43</sup> Vincent Canby, writing in *The New York Times*, described Warhol's 1968 Western *Lonesome Cowboys* as 'not so much homosexual as adolescent. Although there is lots of nudity, profanity, swish dialogue, and bodily contact, it all has the air of horsing around at a summer camp for arrested innocents.'<sup>44</sup> *Horse* is in many ways a kind of nascent, bare-bones sketch for *Lonesome Cowboys*, but with the feminine element embodied by Viva and Taylor Mead (as Ramona and Nurse) mostly absent, and all attention paid to fantasising how men alone with one another out on the range might behave.<sup>45</sup>

Reading other commentators on *Horse*, I find the brutality of its physical violence generally overstated compared to a far more insidious sense of creeping menace. 'What I *really* wanted to say', Tavel has explained about *Horse*, 'was how easily would a group of people under pressure be moved to sadistic – to genuinely inhuman acts toward each other and perhaps the horse – under pressure ... merely by telling them to do so.'<sup>46</sup> Beyond the heavily deconstructed *mise en scène* and the absurdist content, *Horse* misbehaves as a narrative feature through its listless and lethargic temporality. There is no organic flow in *Horse*: we watch as the men scrutinise their idiot cards, and palpably think through how they will enact them – you can almost see the wheels turning in their heads as they absorb their (oft-embarrassing) directions. Writer J. J. Murphy points out,

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Cast: Marie Hanken, Ronald Tavel, Mercedes Ospina, Elektra.

KITCHEN (1965)

Written by Ronald Tavel; directed by Andy Warhol and Ronald Tavel.  
KITCHEN is Pinter with his pants pulled down, an essay in sabbatical logic and evasive and word association that breeches Tavel's controversial play, *SCENER*, run at the St. Mark's Playhouse last summer.  
"KITCHEN is illogical, without motivation or character, and completely ridiculous. It is very much like real life" - Warhol.  
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GREEN MESS (1965)

Written by Ronald Tavel; starring Mario Montez and Ronald Tavel.  
The viewer is invited to measure the distance between his own concept of reality and the unique psychological outlook of a screen tested transvestite. At once, hilarious and appalling.  
"This is our best movie." - Andy Warhol.  
Cast: Mario Montez the actor; Ronald Tavel the off-screen voice.

THE 14 YEAR OLD GIRL (1966)

Written by Ronald Tavel.  
Based on a recent scandal involving a one-time Hollywood siren, this movie is an attack on the system that created, exploited, and finally destroyed her. Maria is perfect as the siren, being only a small step away from the actual embodiment of the tragically self-deluded star.  
"Mario's greatest dramatic performance." - Jack Smith.  
Cast: Mario Montez, Harvey Tavel, Mary Harron, Ingrid Von Schwan, Jack Smith, Gerard Malanga, Ronald Tavel, Uncle Rasty.

Technical and Special assistants: Buddy Wirschafter, Philip Pagan, Paul Marissey, Daniel Williams. Produced by Andy Warhol.

Because the performers don't know their lines or actions, they seem to exist in a curious state of tension, which lies somewhere between reality and fiction, between just being themselves and becoming performers at a moment's notice. As a consequence, the actors often appear apprehensive and bewildered.<sup>47</sup>

Crimp notes that here, 'Dialogue and interaction never constitute anything like recognizable intersubjectivity',<sup>48</sup> while Tavel appreciates that the actors exhibit 'intriguing "searching" adjustments (as if searching for what to say)' as they read the idiot cards.<sup>49</sup> With very little of the improvisation and spontaneity that make Warhol's talkers so memorable, we begin to regard the men here as mere beasts like the horse apprehensively awaiting their next indignity, their gazes always directed off camera more than towards each other or the viewer (as in the many Warhol *Screen Tests*, where the subjects stare out at you).<sup>50</sup> The actors are often visibly bored and distracted, and typically take up positions of leaning or collapse as if they can barely stay awake through the lengthy reels. By the final moments, everything on set is a mess.

Like the Kid's song, which describes going 'round and round', the film has no momentum or plot that progresses: one has the sense of spinning in a void. Another sung refrain throughout the film is 'beat it, beat it', which invokes both wankery and battery; it stands as the film's battle cry of sorts for its enmeshing of sex and violence. The droning rhythm of 'beat it, beat it' casts the entire production as an exercise in masturbation – in both form and content. Mere meat puppets, the men seem enclosed in their corporeal bodies and their crude roles, with no possibility of narrative or temporal development, transformation or evolution – no hope of climax.<sup>51</sup> We could say that *Horse* is non-procreative, and, like the characters, narcissistic and onanistic: to invoke queer theorist Lee Edelman's provocative formulation: there is 'no future' here.<sup>52</sup> The ultimate effect is of exposing the Western as a landscape of the masculinist death drive, a fruitless patriarchal, imperialist pantomime without end. When the script calls for all the men to drink milk – an infantilising choice better suited for children – it pours sloppily down their chins and torsos to become a visual stand-in for the spilled semen that one would expect to result from all the 'beat it, beat it' taking place. Obviously, the gun is a stand-in for a cock – 'my gun is my tool', they proclaim – but on the rare occasion when it is fired in an altercation between the Kid and the Sheriff, no sound results, as if the shot went off in a vacuum. Wayne Koestenbaum uses a gunslinger metaphor to write about Warhol's queer temporality: 'Into the viewer's viscera, Andy pumps full-strength his experience of time as traumatic and erotic. Time has the power to move and the power to stand still; time's ambidextrousness thrills and kills him.'<sup>53</sup> Could we argue that the beauty stills time and the talker speeds it up, in a similar manner to the effects of downers and uppers, respectively? Speaking specifically about the 1964 silent portrait film *Henry Geldzahler*, Koestenbaum focuses on the 'standing still' that is so palpable in *Horse*: 'Time passes, and we realize that Henry is still Henry, even after all these effortful minutes; we – Henry, Andy, you, I – are forced to remain ourselves for our entire lives.'<sup>54</sup> Another commentator on the terrifying dead time palpable in Warhol's films – and how they were very much of their era because of it – was Norman Mailer, who famously described the Tavel-scripted *Kitchen* (1965):

It was a horror to watch. It captured the essence of every boring, dead day one's ever had in a city, a time when everything is imbued with the odor of damp washcloths and old drains. I suspect that a hundred years from now people will look at *Kitchen* and say, 'Yes, that is the way it was in the late Fifties, early Sixties in America. That's why they had the war in Vietnam. That's why the rivers were getting polluted. That's why there was typological glut. That's why the horror came down. That's why the plague was on its way.' *Kitchen* shows that better than any other work of that time.<sup>55</sup>

Gidal too writes eloquently of the sinister temporality animating Warhol's work, in this case *Blow Job*: 'All this in the face of the running down and out of the temporal, a death-drive that (instead of being talked about, analysed, interpreted, then happily closed, "Well, that passed the time," and onto the next thing) we are cohabitants with.'<sup>56</sup> Perhaps Warhol's – and Tavel's – films are objects of such keen, intensive study because their flirtatious encounters with mortality and the mysteries of existence, the ineffable and intangible, are destined to slip away from the attentive viewer and aspiring analyser. Rather than filmic objects to be eaten up by an audience, they are instead wholly consuming of those who fall into their depths.

Is the source of what is so 'terrifying' in *Horse* located in the Factory? Angell describes the social space of the Factory in 1965 as orbiting around Warhol's film production:

the shooting and screening of movies ... became the main attraction in an extraordinary social scene that grew up around the artist and his art-making activities. ... The newly silvered Factory became, in part, a

functioning film studio, with camera, lights, and backdrops set up ... and with an expanding population of visiting celebrities, potential actors, technicians, and assistants available.<sup>57</sup>

The anything-goes atmosphere of the Factory is a wild frontier populated by people who wanted to be on film, to be mythic. Koestenbaum characterised it as 'a workshop for miscommunication, tableaux vivants, exhibitionism, hysteria'.<sup>58</sup> While socially and sexually wide open, the small section of the Factory that acts as a set in *Horse* is spatially constricted; by contrast, the wide-open landscapes of the Western film genre were closed socially and sexually, with heteronormative gender roles rigidly enforced in line with the genre's norms and the imposed morality of the Hays Code. Warhol's love of Hollywood poignantly grafts the most chauvinist and conservative of all genres onto the bohemian space of his Factory, a remapping of American territory achieved through the camera. Daniel Steinhart notes, 'in *Horse*, the traditional homestead mutates into the homo-stead and the continuity cutting of the *plan américain* – perfect for balancing the prairie and the cowpoke from the boots up – transforms into the relentless gaze of the immobile *plan-séquence*'.<sup>59</sup> Steinhart's witty observation emphasises how the shift in frontiers that Warhol accomplished in *Horse* on so many fronts was accompanied by a shift in technique: from camerawork befitting a Hollywood Western to that of a New York underground film, and thus from the exposition of a generic narrative to the deconstruction of a narrative genre.

Near the film's end, when Mex has brought the milk back out and is splashing it over everyone, Cassidy as Tex breaks character and goes rogue, quipping – no doubt ironically – 'this wasn't in my contract', thereby setting a boundary distinguishing what ridiculous acts he is willing and is not willing to do for the film. From this point, *Horse* descends into utter chaos, as if the film needed its performers' (reluctant) suspension of disbelief to maintain its power over them. The economy of *Horse* – so precisely summed up in this unscripted moment, where one of the male beauties asserts his own voice – is that of the reluctant straight man, performing sexually for a gay client tricks both real (the director there in front of you) or virtual (an audience you might not ever encounter), and typically more for money than for aesthetic uplift or the sheer fun of it. Thomas Waugh, building on Richard Dyer's work positing the queen and the hustler as the 'primary icons of Euro-American gay-male culture in the '60s', conceptualises what I have been calling the talker/beauty dynamic in Warhol's cinema in terms of the queen and hustler. He explains, 'If the queen is effeminate, intense, decked out, oral, desirous, and, to use [Parker] Tyler's 1960s word, "offbeat", the hustler – or "trade" – is butch, laid-back, stripped bare, taciturn, ambivalent, and "straight"'.<sup>60</sup> The gorgeous 'straight' performers' subjection to the will of the flaming gay film-makers – who are scripting their words and actions on the so-called 'idiot' cards in *Horse* – images an exploitative economy. An artist like Warhol understood the appeal and the erotic intricacies of the casting couch, considering the number of eager young things from all walks of life who showed up at the Factory looking for glamour and adventure. The power and prestige that a public image through film promised – even an underground one by Warhol – cannot be underestimated; such transgressive, bohemian publicity resonated particularly strongly in this pre-Stonewall era of whispers and innuendo. The men's distractedness – the fact that their attention is always aimed at the director and his cue cards, or the camera – is highly erotic. Crimp compares them to a group of men cruising in a gay bar: 'They solicit attention ... by feigning indifference as to whether or not it is paid ... "I am indicating that I want you only to the extent that I am showing you how desirable I am by demonstrating that I am capable of complete indifference to you."<sup>61</sup> But there is horror too: called on to massage their torsos and rub their crotches, leer at and fight with each other, the men are always and only ever being and giving to the camera, and every detail of the production is there to remind us of this. We as viewers are never placed in a position where we can pretend that these beautiful but closed-off men are acting out for the pleasure of the other 'characters', and so *Horse*'s erotics are somehow awry, even haunted. *Horse*'s greatest horror is perhaps, then, witnessing the subjection of these men to the demands of celebrity and publicity, the burden to exist for cinema alone. Perhaps more than any other Warhol film, *Horse* reminds us that there is no 'outside' beyond this set as it foregrounds the sinister economics of a Factory that made people into images.

## Notes

1. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* (From A to B and Back Again) (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1977), p. 62.
2. Viva quoted in David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), p. 274.
3. Assuming Viva's logic, non-rambling men anywhere on the Kinsey Scale are – for all intents and purposes – 'straight' in Warhol's cinema.
4. Tavel in Patrick S. Smith, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1986), pp. 481–2.

5. Chon Noriega, 'Warhol's Western: Queering the Frontier Myth', *Aztlán*, vol. 29 no. 1, 2004, p. 4.
6. Ibid.
7. Tavel in Smith, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films*, p. 485.
8. He described them thus: 'you had both the establishment and the de-stabilization of the vision at the same time, it worked in a circular fashion, where it kept resurrecting and deconstructing itself ... [a] cycle of endless resuscitation' (Tavel in David E. James, 'The Warhol Screenplays: An Interview with Ronald Tavel', *Persistence of Vision*, no. 11, 1995, pp. 56–7).
9. Tavel in James, 'Warhol Screenplays', pp. 52–4. Tavel also claims *Horse*, more than any other project, inspired the founding and naming of the Theatre of the Ridiculous (quoted in Douglas Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie': *The Films of Andy Warhol* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012], p. 154).
10. Callie Angell, 'Andy Warhol, Filmmaker', in Angell et al. (eds), *The Andy Warhol Museum* (Pittsburgh, PA: The Andy Warhol Museum; New York: Distributed Art Publishers; Stuttgart: Cantz Publishers, 1994), pp. 121–2.
11. See, in particular, Tavel's confused and uncertain ramblings about *Horse* in his second interview with Patrick Smith (1 November 1978), in Smith's *Andy Warhol's Art and Films*, pp. 496–500.
12. Peter Gidal, *Andy Warhol: Blow Job* (One Work Series) (London: Afterall Books, 2008), p. 43.
13. Gavin Butt's and Reva Wolf's vital studies of gossip and Warhol's milieu have not only influenced my thinking about Warhol's work but queer cultural production more broadly. Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World 1948–1963* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2005), and Reva Wolf, *Andy Warhol, Poetry, and Gossip in the 1960s* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
14. I like to think of Warhol's films as a kind of shadow corpus to revered documentarian Frederick Wiseman's similarly plainly titled oeuvre. Where Wiseman has built an encyclopedic chronicle of the United States through films like *High School* (1968), *Welfare* (1975) and *Meat* (1976), Warhol produces a similarly comprehensive portrait of his queer demi-monde through films like *Sleep* (1963), *Haircut* (No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3, all 1963), *Suicide*, *Drunk* and *Camp* (all 1965).
15. Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 61.
16. Angell, 'Andy Warhol, Filmmaker', p. 131.
17. Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', pp. 47–66.
18. Tavel quoted in Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: The Life, World and Films of Andy Warhol* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1991; revised and updated third edition), p. 69.
19. Angell, 'Andy Warhol, Filmmaker', p. 130.
20. Tavel quoted in Stephen Watson, *Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), p. 199.
21. Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 50.
22. Ronald Tavel, *Horse* script, 1965, archived online at <<http://www.ronaldtavel.com/documents/horse.pdf>>. Accessed 28 June 2012. Tavel's introduction to the script, which reflects on the making of the film, is not dated.
23. Tavel also claims that Warhol had dismantled a 'painted Western setting that looked terribly real' for being too authentic, but I'm not sure if this is true. Tavel quoted in Jean Stein, with George Plimpton, *Edie: An American Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 238.
24. Tavel in Smith, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films*, p. 488.
25. Smith, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films*, p. 151.
26. Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 61.
27. This is before she took on a leading role in several of them, with the Sedgwick film becoming virtually its own mini-genre later in 1965.
28. Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 63.
29. Gidal, *Andy Warhol: Blow Job*, p. 15.
30. Tavel quoted in Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 55.
31. J. J. Murphy suggests this is 'a possible reference to the popular 1960s television show *Mister Ed*, which starred a talking horse'. J. J. Murphy, *The Black Hole of the Camera: The Films of Andy Warhol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 71. Wayne Koestenbaum, meanwhile, silences *Mighty Byrd* in his reading of the horse as a Warhol surrogate: 'The beset horse's irrelevance to human sex seems a figure for Warhol's pretended remoteness from erotic reciprocity. Indeed, he allows the horse to be his vocal stand-in, for a microphone is positioned, in the film, by its mouth, as if the beast were going to break into song or give an interview.' Actually, Latreille claims to Edie that the horse was telling him dirty jokes, which suggests that its awareness of matters sexual is greater than Koestenbaum's neutering pronouncements give M. B. credit for. Koestenbaum continues, 'The horse, like the cow wallpaper, allows

- Andy to parody his own public persona as a mute who can't explain himself. The onscreen silver-painted pay phone rings several times during the course of filming *Horse*, and Andy, not stopping the camera, appears within the frame to talk on the phone. The horse's microphone picks up Andy's words. That's as close as he will get, in his films, to vocal self-portraiture.' Wayne Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol* (Penguin Lives) (New York: Viking, 2001), p. 112. Ironically, the microphone picks up the horse's 'voice' more than once throughout the film, and especially in the intermediary reel.
32. Tavel quoted in James, 'Warhol Screenplays', p. 62.
  33. Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 51.
  34. My source for information on many of the performers is Callie Angell's indispensable and encyclopedic *Andy Warhol Screen Tests: The Films of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 1 (New York: Abrams, in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006).
  35. Tavel on Latreille in his notes on the *Horse* script: 'Larry Latreille, playing Kid, was jailbait, a French-Canadian runaway who had fallen in with the Rotten Rita S-M drug groupies on the Factory's periphery ... The line is a half humorous admonition and not so humorous (almost blackmailing) threat put to Larry ...' (For source, see note 22).
  36. Ibid.
  37. Smith, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films*, p. 143.
  38. Tavel quoted in Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 154.
  39. Tavel's script actually encourages the men to 'make love' to Mighty Byrd: 'Kid, Tex, and Sheriff will proceed to make love to the horse, rubbing its mane, kissing its muzzle, masaging [sic] it along the flanks, kissing its back, legs, and behind.' (For source, see note 22).
  40. Smith, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films*, p. 165.
  41. Crimp discusses at length this scene and other on-screen 'rehearsals' in Warhol and Tavel's cinema, in 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 55.
  42. Ibid., pp. 57–8.
  43. In his analysis of *Horse* in his monograph on *Brokeback Mountain* (2006), Gary Needham reminds us that the title no doubt also alludes to the characterisation of a well-endowed man as 'hung like a horse'. Gary Needham, *Brokeback Mountain* (American Indies Series) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 69.
  44. Vincent Canby, 'Film: Lonesome Warhol: Two Theaters Showing Latest, a Western', *New York Times*, 6 May 1969. Available at: <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=980CE4D61E30EE3BBC4E53DFB3668382679EDE>. Accessed 28 June 2012.
  45. Stranded in Arizona, Ramona and her Nurse cajole the five faggot cowboy brothers (played by Joe Dallesandro and Eric Emerson, among others) in Warhol's sex comedy, relentlessly questioning the nature of their fraternal relationships, their masculinity and their prowess, in the same way that Tavel torments the cowboys in *Horse*.
  46. Tavel quoted in Smith, *Andy Warhol's Art and Films*, p. 166.
  47. Murphy, *Black Hole of the Camera*, p. 69.
  48. Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 62.
  49. Tavel quoted in Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 53.
  50. In this way, *Horse* anticipates the paradigmatically *Pop Kitchen* (1965), where, in the narrated credits, human actors are presented as no more or less valuable than their fellow cast members: mixer, fridge, newspaper, coffee, mattress, table, etc.
  51. In his 1973 *The Screwball Asses*, Hocquenghem writes, 'We do not have children. We do not secrete that kind of surplus value. ... We are thus the strongest remedy to the natalist pollution of the planet. If we were the only ones here, humanity would immediately cease: no one would be born, there would be no children or adolescents, and we would become peaceful nihilistic old men sodomizing one another.' Guy Hocquenghem, *The Screwball Asses* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2010), pp. 25–6.
  52. Edelman writes against 'reproductive futurism', his influential conceptualisation that every politic is ultimately about enshrining a future Child (and therefore the ongoing reproduction of the species), and that non-procreative queerness is the site of a 'death drive' that places us in a position to resist the Child. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2004).
  53. Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol*, p. 23.
  54. Ibid., p. 25.
  55. Mailer quoted in Jean Stein, *Edie*, p. 234.
  56. Gidal, *Andy Warhol: Blow Job*, p. 67.
  57. Angell, 'Andy Warhol, Filmmaker', p. 128.
  58. Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol*, p. 22.
  59. Daniel Steinhart, programme notes for *Horse*, 8 March 2006, The Crank Film Society, UCLA. Thanks to Daniel Steinhart for providing an electronic copy of these notes.
  60. Thomas Waugh, 'Cockteaser', in Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley and José Esteban Muñoz (eds), *Pop Out: Queer Warhol* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 53–4.
  61. Crimp, 'Our Kind of Movie', p. 62.