

Warhol in French¹

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A translator is like a violinist. I believe it was the composer Camille Saint-Saëns who said, 'All violinists play off-key, but some overdo it.' To translate is to play more or less off-key the music of a text. Translating in tune is entirely impossible.

To translate Warhol into French seems easy. His style, polished by the indispensable Pat Hackett, who often worked as his editor, appears to flow naturally, and France—or rather Paris, with its tradition of frivolous luxury—has remained a welcoming ground for his art and his ideas since the famous interview that Gretchen Berg published in 1966 that *Cahiers du cinéma* translated two years later.² French editions followed of *The Philosophy* (1977), the *Diaries* (1990), the *Selected Interviews* (2005), and *POPism* (2007).³ His novel *a* belongs to the earlier era of the Berg interview, 1965-68, and its soft rumblings fuelled by amphetamines are hardly intelligible; nonetheless, excerpts were translated in 1970 in the first issue of the journal *VH 101*, under the direction of the art critic Otto Hahn and Françoise

¹ Translated from French by Mercedes Rooney with contributions by Reva Wolf and Jean-Claude Lebensztein. A version in French, 'Warhol en traduction', is included in Jean-Claude Lebensztein, *Propos filmiques: En pure perte*, ed. Enrico Camporesi and Pierre Von-Ow, Paris: Éditions Macula, 2021 181-99.

² Andy Warhol, 'Rien à perdre', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 205, October 1968, 40-47 (translation anonymous). It is taken as a given that Warhol's published interviews and his other publications are collaborations. See the discussion by Reva Wolf in 'Translating Warhol: *turbamento*, transmutation, transference', in this issue of the *Journal of Art Historiography*. Regarding the Gretchen Berg interview, see Matt Wrbcian, 'The True Story of "My True Story"', in *Andy Warhol: A Guide to 706 Items in 2 Hours 56 Minutes, Other Voices, Other Rooms*, ed. Eva Meyer-Hermann, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2007, 00:56:00-00:57:00, and Gary Comenas, https://warholstars.org/Warhol_Danto_2.html. Paris's embrace of Warhol is underlined by Victor Bockris in the opening pages of *Warhol: la biographie*, trans. Emmanuelle and Philippe Aronson, Paris: Globe, 2015, 9-11.

³ *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975, rendered in French as *Ma philosophie de A à B et vice-versa*, trans. Marianne Véron, Paris: Flammarion, 1977; *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, ed. Pat Hackett, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989, published in French as *Journal*, trans. Jérôme Jacobs et Jean-Sébastien Stelhi, Paris: Grasset, 1990; *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, ed. Kenneth Goldsmith, New York: Carroll and Graf, 2004, appearing as *Entretiens: 1962-1987*, trans. Alain Cueff, Paris: Grasset, 2005; *POPism: The Warhol '60s*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, published in French as *Popisme: Les années 1960 de Warhol*, trans. Alain Cueff, Paris: Flammarion, 2007.

Essellier, and in 1975 in *L'Énergumène*, a periodical created by the art historian Gérard-Julien Salvy.⁴

Before looking into particular details of these publications, I would like to consider the translations of Victor Bockris's biography of Warhol, originally published in 1980 and released in two different versions, one of them notably abridged.⁵ It is clear that the shorter edition, and, in following, the first French translation, excluded a number of testimonies, purging recounted statements, such as of the sodomizing of Warhol by the well-endowed Ed Wallowitch ('Andy took it up the ass a lot'), or his exchange with his friend Brigid Polk after the death of his mother in 1972, a death about which he never spoke with anyone and that took him to the brink of a nervous breakdown: 'I change channels in my head, like on TV. I say: "She went to Bloomingdale's."' ⁶ His mourning thus becomes a pop reality TV show, an opportunity to put into practice his glorification of distancing and artificiality. Isn't art the ultimate medium to master life? 'I think', Warhol said shortly before his death, 'an artist is anyone who does something well, like if you cook well.'⁷

The first translation of Bockris's biography contains some curious ineptitudes. Warhol claimed that when he arrived in New York in 1949, he had planted some bird seeds (in French, *graines d'oiseau*) in a park and proposed the idea that magazines place advertisements to order a bird. In English, 'bird seeds' can mean seeds for feeding birds or, understood with a twist, incorrectly, 'seeds' for growing birds (which, it goes without saying, do not exist). The French translation cannot convey this comical ambiguity; in the translation, these seeds became *graines pour les oiseaux*, which made the story incomprehensible.⁸ The art critic David Bourdon's comparison of the full lips featured in Warhol's 1970s portraits to those of Joan Crawford in the 1940s was cited in the full English edition and summarized in the abridged version; in the Plon translation, the full lips become a nonsensical

⁴ 'Comment devenir un homosexuel professionnel', *VH 101*, 1, Spring 1970, 34-59 (various extracts, illustrated, trans. S. T.-M.); 'quelque part dans la 8e rue', *L'Énergumène* 6-7, June 1975, 45-59 (section 2/2, trans. Zéno Bianu). Many thanks to Hervé Vanel and Patrick Javault for alerting me to these publications.

⁵ Victor Bockris, *Warhol*, London: F. Muller, 1989, 528 pages, and in a paperback edition, London: Penguin Books, 1990, 660 pages; abridged American edition, *The Life and Death of Andy Warhol*, New York: Bantam Books, 1989, 392 pages. The translation by Pascale de Mezamat published by Plon in 1990 (*Andy Warhol*, 374 pages) follows the short version by Bantam, but removes its index. The 2015 translation by Emmanuelle and Philippe Aronson, *Warhol: La biographie*, is based on the complete edition re-released by Da Capo Press in 1997, and contains 592 pages with several deletions and without an index.

⁶ Bockris, *Warhol*, Penguin edition, 148-49, 440.

⁷ Paul Taylor, 'The Last Interview', *Flash Art*, 20: 133, April 1987, in *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 389; *Entretiens*, 392.

⁸ Bockris, *Warhol*, Penguin edition, 91; Plon edition, 60.

gibberish whereby in the 1940s Warhol had scribbled the lips of the celebrity.⁹ During an interview with his fellow pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Claes Oldenburg, recorded in 1964, Warhol answered Bruce Glaser, who was asking him how he had become involved in pop art imagery, with: 'I'm too high right now. Ask somebody else something else.' The aristocratic translator, perhaps unfamiliar with the language of recreational drug use, interpreted the first words, 'I'm too high right now', as 'I'm too high-ranking now' (*Je suis trop haut placé à présent*).¹⁰ In the translation from 2015, Emmanuelle and Philippe Aronson correct this wording (*Là, je suis trop défoncé*), but still keep the *graines pour les oiseaux*.¹¹

That is not to say the new translation always sounds accurate. Sometimes, it is just a case of unfamiliarity with the 'New York scene', within which Lichtenstein was branded 'coy' and 'tight', translated into French as *couard* ('cowardly') and *coincé* ('uptight'), but which would be more aptly rendered as *évasif* and *secretive*.¹² Other times, it's a matter of disregarding the geographic reality of North America to extend the 'hundreds of miles' separating Pittsburgh and New York to 'thousands of kilometers'.¹³ And yet, Philippe Aronson is a New York native.

The exhibit of Warhol's work at the Stable Gallery in November 1962, which really launched his career, was accompanied by a press release written by a female student from Bennington College (a women's college until 1969); however, the translation of 2015 changed her into a male student and Leo Castelli's 'wolfish smile' was transformed into a 'wolf's eye' (*œil de loup*).¹⁴ Max's Kansas City, the artsy nightclub and restaurant on Park Avenue South, changes into 'a popular nightclub in Kansas City', but later returns to New York City.¹⁵ The 'old queen' in the movie *My Hustler* becomes the *vieille reine* or 'elderly queen' instead of *vieille folle*, and the famous 'phoney' in the *Chelsea Girls* is converted into *fausset* or 'falsetto' (a misprint of *fausseté*—'falsity?').¹⁶ All this, without even beginning to count the violations of common sense, whether in English or French, such as, *Gerard était la seule face d'une pièce. Billy et moi étions l'autre*, which would translate, literally, 'Gerard was the only side of a coin. Billy and I were the other.'¹⁷

Such blunders speak volumes about the backroom of the art publishing world. In France, lacking the luxury of American university presses and an interest

⁹ Bockris, *Warhol*, Penguin edition, 461-2; Bantam edition, 285; Plon edition, 286.

¹⁰ Bockris, *Warhol*, Penguin edition, 91, 199; Plon edition, 60, 131. This four-person interview was broadcast on the radio in 1964 and first published as 'Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Warhol: A Discussion', *Artforum* 4: 6, February 1966, 20-24. It is not included in *I'll Be Your Mirror*.

¹¹ Bockris, *Warhol*, Globe edition, 188 and 88.

¹² Bockris, *Warhol*, Penguin edition, 197; Globe edition, 186.

¹³ Bockris, *Warhol*, Penguin edition, 90; Globe edition, 87.

¹⁴ Bockris, *Warhol*, Penguin edition, 181; Globe edition, 173.

¹⁵ Bockris, *Warhol*, Globe edition, 286 and 308.

¹⁶ Bockris, *Warhol*, Globe edition, 257 and 282-83.

¹⁷ Bockris, *Warhol*, Globe edition, 228.

beyond a small circle of connoisseurs, well-established publishers mostly release only safe blockbusters, with little concern for the quality of the work as long as the translation job (rather underpaid) is completed at top speed. The other details of production are along the same lines. In the first book by Warhol to be translated into French, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, the mere removal of the blank lines separating his various reflections—just as we sometimes get rid of film leaders in three-minute movies—is enough to trivialize the whole project. But after all, who is going to read these types of books?

When the responsible party is not a professional translator, but rather an art critic or a historian of twentieth-century art, as in the case of Alain Cueff, curator of an exhibition at the Grand Palais of Andy Warhol's portraits and author of the book *Warhol à son image* (Flammarion, 2009) containing a thesis on the Christian sources of Warhol, things become interesting. In *POPism*, Warhol declares that when he arrived at a party of mainly abstract expressionist painters, 'suddenly the noise level dropped', whereas in Cueff's translation, 'the noise level picked up' (*le niveau sonore s'éleva*).¹⁸ At times, the result betrays a haste or an amnesia that even extends to omitting entire sentences (for example, "'Elliot Pratt is a left-wing liberal who hates McCarthy,'" De explained').¹⁹ Lupe Vélez, the 'Mexican Spitfire' (whose suicide was memorialised by Kenneth Anger and Andy Warhol), in French becomes *la virago mexicaine* or the 'Mexican hag'.²⁰ When Warhol declares in the fall of 1962 (transformed into the winter of 1962 in the French version), 'I was thrilled to finally have a show of my own in New York', Alain Cueff, who knows full well that Warhol is originally from Pittsburgh, confuses 'my own' with 'show in New York': *j'étais très heureux d'avoir finalement une exposition dans ma propre ville* ('I was thrilled to finally have a show in my home town').²¹

On several occasions, Cueff's translation reveals an infelicitous relationship with what he calls *les gamins*, or 'kids'. The English designer Nicky Haslam claimed in 1963 that the United States did not really have youngsters: 'kids here went from being juveniles straight into "young adults," whereas in England the kids eighteen and nineteen were having a ball. Or starting to, anyway—it was a new age classification.' In Cueff's translation, *ici les gamins passaient directement de l'adolescence à l'âge adulte, tandis qu'en Angleterre les gamins de dix-huit ou dix-neuf ans baisaient pas mal —ou commençaient, en tout cas* ('kids here went from being juveniles straight into "young adults," whereas in England the kids eighteen and nineteen screwed around quite a bit. Or were starting to, anyway').²² Fucked quite a bit? Doesn't the translator confuse 'to have a ball', or to party, with 'to ball', or to fuck? Besides, translating

¹⁸ *POPism*, 34; *Popisme*, 63.

¹⁹ *POPism*, 30.

²⁰ *POPism*, 127; *Popisme*, 167.

²¹ *POPism*, 25; *Popisme*, 51.

²² *POPism*, 28; *Popisme*, 55.

'kids' as *gamins* or 'street kids' seems restrictive and does not correspond to the Warholian classification.

In his translation of the selected Warhol interviews, Cuffe calls 'high school student', 'high school junior', and 'high school graduate' *étudiant* or *diplômé d'une grande école*, confusing the traditional United States high schools, or secondary education establishments, with the prestigious university and graduate level *grandes écoles* in the French educational system (such as the *École Normale Supérieure*, *Polytechnique*, and so on), and conversely, the American college with the French *college*, or middle school.²³ To call a young teenage boy who came to interview the famous artist for a school newspaper 'student' certainly changes the situation and the tone of the scene, especially because on that occasion, Warhol insistently interrogated his interrogator, Joseph Freeman, fourteen at the time of the interview, about the colour of his eyes. Freeman–Little Joey–was quickly integrated into the Factory and Warhol included the interview, which first appeared in the Freeman's Brooklyn high school newspaper, in *Andy Warhol's Index (Book)*.²⁴

Joey Freeman made several appearances in *POPism*. He ran errands and picked up Warhol at his home at 11:30 a.m. to get him to the Factory. (According to his own testimony, Freeman and a friend used to phone Warhol on Sunday mornings. 'He was at home then and he loved talking on the phone. He'd talk for hours. We'd say: "What are you doing, Andy?" and he'd say: "Oh, I'm sucking cock." I mean, we fell about.')²⁵

Under Alain Cuffe's pen, we witness several transformations of Little Joey. On page 170 of *Popisme*, he is introduced as 'a brilliant petite female student with a mop-top haircut', but twenty-two pages later, now fifteen years old, Joey becomes 'the gofer of the Factory'; he had grown a few inches and lost his baby fat. Freeman recalled that Warhol insisted he call him 'mother',²⁶ but his real mother was always asking him, 'What do you want to hang around with all those queers for?' translated by Cuffe as, *C'est quoi l'idée d'être toujours fourré avec ces types bizarres* ('queers' becoming 'weirdos').²⁷

Here translation becomes a kind of magic operation, a series of unexpected and incoherent metamorphoses, comparable to the tricks the magician dog performs on the opera singer dog in Tex Avery's cartoon *Magical Maestro* (1952). Cuffe's magic trick was of relevance at a time when the growing taboo of paedophilia went hand in hand with the acceptance and normalization—at least among liberals—of

²³ *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 63, 119, 170; *Entretiens*, 79, 132, 181. See also *POPism*, 218, and *Popisme*, 270: 'Fred was in a collegiate outfit'; *Fred portait un costume de collégien* ('Fred was wearing a middle school uniform'). (Yet elsewhere, Cuffe correctly translates 'high school' as *lycée*; see *Entretiens*, 117.)

²⁴ *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 118; *Entretiens*, 131.

²⁵ Stephen Smith, "'He Loved Weightlifting and Buying Jewels": Andy Warhol's Friends Reveal All', *The Guardian*, 14 August 2015.

²⁶ See Gary Comenas' website: http://www.warholstars.org/andy_warhol_0710.html.

²⁷ *POPism*, 129, 149, 173, 205; *Popisme*, 170, 192, 218-9, 255.

adult same-sex relationships. But Cueff's taboos go a step further. In Warhol's last interview, the Australian art critic Paul Taylor mentions a novel by Stephen Koch, in which the hero, according to Cueff's translation, is *un type hétérosexuel, genre Rauschenberg dans les années soixante, un artiste charismatique* ('a heterosexual guy, a Rauschenberg type of the sixties, a charismatic artist'), yet, Rauschenberg's homosexuality was notorious in artistic circles (he had previously lived with Jasper Johns), and in fact Paul Taylor describes Koch's hero as 'a heterosexual Rauschenberg figure' (in other words, like Rauschenberg, but heterosexual). Elsewhere within the book of interviews, two high school juniors ask Warhol his opinion on prep schools as they prepare their interview for the newspaper of the Gunnery School for Boys, a private institution in Connecticut for children from well-to-do families. Warhol answers, 'I think they're really... ah ... terrific. All the kids are always so pretty', which Cueff translates, *Tous les gamins ont toujours de bonnes têtes* ('Kids that age always look like good people').²⁸

I do not want to give the impression that these translations are to be ignored. First of all, they exist. They read easily and give a good sense of the tone of Warhol and his biographer. But their inadequacies are worth noting. It is in their lapses and failures that translators insert their own fantasies ('I'm too high-ranking now'), their own image of Warhol, of contemporary culture, or of the world in general. The case of Alain Cueff is exemplary, and it poses a real problem. Is it due to ignorance, choice, or a strange combination of both that Cueff misses this or that fact in the texts he translates? At times, his ignorance is obvious, as seen in the nonsense he inflicts on the German journalist asking Warhol about the young flocking around him, 'This is what interests me and it interests me what it does to you', which Cueff changed to *C'est ce qui m'intéresse et ça m'intéresse ce que vous faites* ('This is what interests me and I am interested in what you do').²⁹

Elsewhere, the effort Cueff takes to erase the homosexual factors from the art world is striking, as in the *type hétérosexuel, genre Rauschenberg*. Kenneth Goldsmith, in his introduction to Warhol's last interview, with Paul Taylor, mentions the fact that Taylor died of AIDS at the age of thirty-five; Cueff discloses the death, but not the cause.³⁰ Above all, describing Little Joey as 'a brilliant petite female student', then a gofer at the Factory (at the age of fifteen, having 'grown a few inches and lost nine pounds of baby fat'), who does not hang around queers but weirdos, is truly weird.

Alain Cueff's book, *Warhol à son image*, is intent on highlighting Warhol's religious side, even at the expense of the clichés that Warhol himself had embraced. What if Warhol's film *Blow Job* (1964), for example, had nothing to do with oral sex? 'What if nothing was happening in the famous and widely theorized off-screen scene? What if the peculiar off-screen setup was but the space of pure fiction? A

²⁸ *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 385, 175; *Entretiens*, 388, 186.

²⁹ *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 124; *Entretiens*, 137.

³⁰ *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 382; *Entretiens*, 386.

perfect absence of action which in fact feeds fiction and thought. ... This is clearly not a “pipe.”³¹ Had it been a “pipe,” the movie would never have been conceived or produced.³² He points out that the head in the close-up shot belongs to an actor.³³ It does not portray sexual pleasure, he proposes; it implores and agonizes, or rather it interprets agony, with the eyes turned up to heaven, just like Guido Reni’s *Saint Sebastian* (1620-25), a painting ‘with homosexual connotations that did not escape Oscar Wilde.’³⁴

Cueff is not the only one trying to bring Warhol back into the fold of Christianity. In 2018, the Vatican Museums had scheduled a Warhol exhibition for 2019 to include the *Skulls* (1976) and paintings from *The Last Supper* series (1986). But it was cancelled. Earlier, in 2014, an article published in *Aleteia*, a website promoting Catholicism, tried its best to demonstrate the importance of religion in Warhol’s life and works, stating: ‘Widely believed to be homosexual, he remained celibate and was, according to his closest associates, still a virgin at the time of his death’.³⁵ A more nuanced approach to the role of religion in Warhol’s life has been taken in other contexts, including recently for the exhibition, *Andy Warhol: Revelation*, which opened at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in 2019, and was on view at the Brooklyn Museum from mid-November 2021 to mid-June 2022.

These new perspectives speak volumes about what Warhol, his image, and his art, have been subjected to through time. Seen as a worthless non-artist and a provocateur at the beginning of the 1960s, he became one of the best-regarded – and most expensive – painters of his time, while the characterization of his personality as satanic was replaced by another as a devout, and sometimes a sexless, Catholic. The complexity of his art and of his personality allowed for these shifts. To be sure, he manipulated his persona as much as those of others, donning various avatars in rapid succession, which prompted numerous speculations. He embraced different positions, all genuine, including his religious standpoint, yet all problematic. Indeed, what are we to make of the religious faith of a man who says he believes in

³¹ In French slang, a blow job is commonly referred to as *une pipe*, literally ‘a pipe’. Alain Cueff plays on the word ‘pipe’, alluding to the famous *ceci n’est pas une pipe* of René Magritte’s painting, *The Treachery of Images* (1929). Translator’s note.

³² Cueff, *Warhol à son image*, 156-57.

³³ The ‘actor’ of *Blow Job* (1964), who had long remained unidentified, was indeed an actor, DeVeren Bookwalter (1939-1987). He performed on stage (in Shakespeare, and in *Cyrano de Bergerac*), in movies (in *The Omega Man* and in two *Dirty Harry* films), and on television. He also appeared in a Warhol screen test film of 1964, reused in *The Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys*; See Callie Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests*, New York: Abrams/Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006, 38-39, 41, 247.

³⁴ Cueff, *Warhol à son image*, 156-57. Cueff later (page 170) mentions the ‘faces without a face’ by Kazimir Malevich and says that he painted them at ‘the end of the 1930s’ – that is, after the artist’s death.

³⁵ Kathy Schiffer, ‘Andy Warhol’s Image Belied His Life as a Faithful Catholic: Find Out Why He May Have Been a Better Christian Than You Are’, *Aleteia*, 5 November 2014; <https://aleteia.org/2014/11/05/andy-warhol-a-celibate-catholic/>.

death after death? Does he believe in God? When asked in 1977, 'Do you believe in God?' he replied, 'I guess I do. I like church. It's empty when I go', and he added that he sneaks in 'at funny hours', that he never thinks about God, and that he does not believe in the devil.³⁶ An odd believer. Personally, I can picture the religious Warhol of the latter years as a man caught in Kafka's vise: 'God can only be comprehended personally. Each man has his own life and his own God. His protector and judge. Priests and rituals are only crutches for the crippled life of the soul.'³⁷

Strictly speaking, we have moved beyond the questions of translation, but then again, what does it mean to translate? The first definition of *traduire* that appears in the French dictionary *Littré* refers to a legal term signifying 'to transfer' (a prisoner, a defendant: to prosecute). It is clear that to translate Warhol, and especially to translate him poorly, amounts to having him appear in front of legal religious or cultural authorities that have little to do with him; it means to launch a lawsuit on behalf of normalization, an act which is not without precedent. The operation of expelling a foreign body before absorbing its less toxic form has affected the reputations of many thinkers, writers, and artists, including Charles Baudelaire, who Warhol brings to mind in more than one way; such transmutations are common aspects of the shifting tides in cultural life. As André Gide said of Michel de Montaigne: 'The great preoccupation of pedagogues, when they are faced with authors of some boldness, who yet are classics, is to render them inoffensive.'³⁸

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Especially difficult to translate are the dialogues of Warhol's sound films. After a series of silent films in 1963 and 1964, Warhol purchased a 16mm Auricon camera (although the first movie he filmed with it, the eight-hour *Empire*, was silent—'our first "sound" movie without sound'),³⁹ and at the end of 1964 he shot a sound movie with sound, *Harlot* (with crossdresser Mario Montez). Warhol's subsequent movies, including *The Chelsea Girls* of 1966, were all filmed with this equipment. 'The films were shot under the most primitive conditions. The sound was recorded optically, which was inexpensive but often led to garbled, almost inaudible soundtracks. When the soundman on one set protested that the sound was hopelessly unbalanced and the batteries were dying, Andy shot the film regardless.'⁴⁰

³⁶ Glenn O'Brien, 'Interview: Andy Warhol', *High Times*, 24 August 1977, in *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 253, 258; *Entretiens*, 256, 259-60.

³⁷ Gustav Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka*, new ed., Frankfurt: Fischer, 1981, 185; *Kafka m'a dit*, trad. Clara Malraux, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1952, 155; *Conversations avec Kafka*, trad. Bernard Lortholary, Paris: Les Lettres nouvelles, 1978, 222.

³⁸ André Gide, 'Montaigne', *Commerce*, 18, Winter 1928, in *Essais critiques* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Paris: Gallimard, 1999, 684; English translation by Dorothy Bussys, *Yale Review* 28: 3, 1939, 93; rpt., *Yale Review*, 89: 1, January 2001, 71.

³⁹ *POPism*, 90; *Popisme*, 125.

⁴⁰ Bockris, *Warhol*, Penguin edition, 304-05; Globe edition, 282.

The unscripted superstars' lines were recorded using this hardly comprehensible medium. The scenes switch from lifeless to hysterical, and grasping their sequence demands intense concentration, difficult to sustain over time even for a native viewer, let alone for someone whose first language is not English. In 1990 a petition was sent to the Centre Pompidou, where a retrospective exhibition of Warhol's work was then on view, requesting subtitles be added to the sound movies, signed by distinguished personalities such as Henri Cueco, Jacques de La Villeglé, Gilles Deleuze, Mikel Dufrenne, Catherine Millet, Dominique Noguez and Patrick de Haas (who later reconsidered and withdrew his name).⁴¹ It appears the petition was unsuccessful and the movies at the Centre continued to be shown without subtitles. *Chelsea Girls* was later screened with subtitles, specially added for the occasion, at the Cinémathèque française in March 2009 as part of a tribute to Warhol organized by Nicole Brenez.⁴² (Previously, in 2003, Raro Video had released a double DVD with closed-captions and subtitles in Italian.)

I guess our film director would have been unmoved by these incidents, but they are not without consequence for the appreciation of the movies. Don't subtitles allow you to hear too much, particularly things normally inaudible? In the absence of subtitles, a French-speaking audience member hears the frequently comical dialogues in varying degrees of garbled utterance based on the abilities and state of mind of each listener, and especially when words are spoken off-screen, as is often the case. Even more than the image, marked by smudges of light and various 'accidents', the sound, operating in the interval between noise and meaning, plays on the frustration caused by the resulting gaps in our perception.

The image itself presents its own translation issues. Warhol would insist that his silent films, although shot at 24 frames per second, be projected at the slower speed of 16 frames per second, or "'silent speed'"....The result is a *ritardando* exerted over all movement and an effect that is extraordinarily alluring. Yet, that allure is faintly paradoxical ...⁴³ The speed reduction triggers overlaid textures of the subjects filmed, of the film grain, and of the flicker effect caused by the regular shifts between frame and shutter speed. Yet, at the 2009 screenings of Warhol's films at the Cinémathèque française, both the silent films and the sound movies were projected at the speed of 24 frames per second. The program of 17 April 2009 featured *Blow Job* and the little-known *Eating Too Fast* (aka *Blow Job #2*), ten *Screen Tests* and *Eat*. All these films, which were silent except *Eating Too Fast*, were projected at 24 frames per second, or 'normal speed', as the projectionist put it when

⁴¹ On the incident, see *Libération*, 29 June 1990. Many thanks to Patrick de Haas for alerting me to this story.

⁴² See Nicolas Villodre, <http://www.objectif-cinema.com/spip.php?article5148>. I owe this information to Enrico Camporesi.

⁴³ Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: Andy Warhol's World and Films*, New York and Washington: Praeger, 1973, 43. See also Jonas Mekas, 'Revoir les films d'Andy Warhol', in *Andy Warhol, cinema*, Paris: Carré/Centre Pompidou, 1990, 44-45 (It changes everything, Mekas told Stan Brakhage.)

I asked him, which decreased the contrast between the two *Blow Jobs*, the first being silent and shot with a Bolex camera with reels two minutes and forty-five seconds long that become four minutes once projected at the slower speed, the second being partly with sound and shot with the Auricon camera with thirty-three-minute reels. 'Normal'? The complexity of the textural effects of the silent movies was more or less lost.

The transfer from film to digital format alters not only the visible texture of the film, but also its material basis, substituting the intermittent shift between frame and exposure characteristic of the so-called structural film of Peter Kubelka, Hollis Frampton, or Paul Sharits with another form of discontinuity, somewhat similar to the translation from one language into another. For Kubelka, the difference is crucial, and a digital film is no longer a film, the material itself and its structural basis having disappeared and it is not even a video. 'Those who mimic classical filmmaking with digital technology are mistaken because they sacrifice the possibilities specific to digital media. Playing video games is a thousand times more interesting than watching a movie on a small computer screen.'⁴⁴

Patrick de Haas summed up all the arguments against converting film media into a digital format, especially in the case of the experimental films of the 1920s:

the release of movies in VHS, DVD or Blu-Ray formats reached new audiences. While these 'reproductions' are useful, they are also problematic. In the first place, the audience tends to forget that they are watching reproductions, the changes in format, speed, light, and so on resulting in only a pale resemblance to the original work. Indeed, most avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s devised their works with a specific medium in mind (celluloid film coated with a silver halide emulsion in a sequence of frames), a determined projection technology (reels were cranked at various speeds through sprockets gripping perforations, or sprocket holes, of the reel in a projector equipped with a shutter), and a distinct venue—the movie theater—where individuals collectively watched a work, often silent, projected on a screen of particular size, in the dark. Experimentations, such as the use of negatives or fast cutting (sometimes within single frames), only can be fully understood when one considers their connection with the actual materials that generated them. Is it not obvious that these experimentations are ruined when the film is 'transferred' to a digital DVD, likely with integrated sound, and viewed on a TV screen sitting on the couch, or glanced at quickly on the wall of a museum in broad daylight? ... The switch from celluloid to digital formats also establishes a new relationship to representational images: the

⁴⁴ Quentin Papapietro, 'Une conversation avec Peter Kubelka', *Cahiers du cinema*, 745, June 2018, 59.

substitution of a calculation of individual signs for an indexed luminous photographic impression.⁴⁵

Admittedly, Warhol's 'primitive' movies, and particularly his silent movies, avoid a tight editing in favour of a deliberate unedited quality by including the blank film leaders, or 'randomly' splicing together three-minute reels end-to-end, but in their conversion to digital format, what happens to the textural richness of the play between the filmed body and the 'body' of the film? As Warhol remarked in 1966, 'we're trying to make it so bad but doing it well'; mistakes, scratches, dust, pointless zooms, and so on, were intentionally included, 'so that everybody knows that you're watching a film.'⁴⁶ Four years later, he said, 'if you consciously try to do a bad movie, that's like making a *good* bad movie.'⁴⁷ What was left of that intention after an Italian film editor remastered it?⁴⁸ When Paul Morrissey took charge, with Warhol's consent, of the Factory films, Warhol's 1960s movies were removed from distribution in favour of the films with a more conventional narrative that Morrissey directed or co-directed at the end of the 1960s and after 1970. Today, the silent films are mostly screened in museums, often in video format, and when they are shown on reel-to-reel projectors, the projectors are not set to 16fps but to 18fps, in order to cut the intermittent strobe lighting effect, even though this effect is part of the structural perception of the work.⁴⁹

At the time of their production, Warhol's films were mostly shown at the Factory, at Jonas Mekas' Film-Makers' Cinematheque, or at educational institutions that requested them. But in 1966, after it premiered at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque at its location in the West 40s and became a commercial success, *The Chelsea Girls* moved to the Cinema Rendezvous on West 57th Street, a shift in distribution that outraged the *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther:

⁴⁵ Patrick de Haas, *Cinéma absolu. Avant-garde 1920-1930*, Valréas: Mettray éditions, 2018, 9-10.

⁴⁶ Lane Slate, 'USA Artists: Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein', transcript of a 16 mm film produced by NET (National Educational Television), 1966, in *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 83; *Entretiens*, 96.

⁴⁷ Letitia Kent, 'Andy Warhol, Moviemaker: "It's Hard to Be Your Own Script,"' in *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 189; *Entretiens*, 198. P. Adams Sitney saw in Warhol the 'ultimate precursor of structural film'; *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, 2d ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 371.

⁴⁸ *Andy Warhol: 4 Silent Movies (Kiss / Empire / Blow Job / Mario Banana)*, Raro Video, 2005. The eight-hour long *Empire* is shrunk into 60 minutes, 13 seconds. According to Greg Allen, *Kiss and Blow Job* are mastered at a 25fps instead of 16fps (<https://greg.org/archive/2007/09/14/on-the-mixed-up-films-of-mr-andy-warhola.html>). Many thanks to Enrico Camporesi for this reference.

⁴⁹ Callie Angell, *The Films of Andy Warhol: Part II*, New York: Whitney Museum Museum of American Art, 1994, 9.

It was all right so long as these adventurers in the realm of independent cinema stayed in Greenwich Village or on the south side of 42nd Street and splattered their naughty-boy pictures on congenial basement screens—or even sent them around to college outlets for the edification of undergraduate voyeurs.

But now that their underground has surfaced on West 57th Street and taken over a theater with carpets, the Cinema Rendezvous, where they have installed Mr. Warhol's most ambitious peep-show put-on, 'The Chelsea Girls,' it is time for permissive adults to stop winking at their too-precocious pranks.⁵⁰

The issue is the location: this 'extensive and pretentious entertainment for voyeurs', as Crowther describes it later in the same article, is reaching affluent neighbourhoods; the underground overflows; it no longer maintains itself in the basements that are to contain it. Its rise might well herald the execution after which the dead come back as ghosts to haunt the living. After Andy Warhol's death, his 1963-1965 films, having already suffered the purgatory of inaccessibility, resurfaced in the mortuary spaces of museums. The history of Warhol's films is also the history of their multiple translations, the conditions of their reception, and the transmutations that these displacements have brought about.

*

Translation—moving from one language to another, from one sign system to another, from one state to another—is part of the framework of cultural assimilation. To translate is to make accessible. Errors and deviations are inevitable. To translate means to convey, but to convey what? What does translation filter out of the original language and discourse? The writer Pierre de Marivaux (1688-1763) complained about the beautiful infidelities of Nicolas Perrot d'Ablancourt (1606-1664), who, in translating Thucydides, explained that a more literal translation would be dull and would not do justice to the ancient Athenian historian:

In doing so, one could answer, you prejudice the reader who would be enchanted to get to know Thucydides as he was. We imagine we see the Greek author, the ancient author with the thought processes characteristic of his time, and you deform him, wipe out his age; it is no longer Thucydides. He would be dull, you say, if you wouldn't correct him. So

⁵⁰ Bosley Crowther, 'The Underground Overflows', *The New York Times*, 11 December 1966, excerpted in *POPism*, 185; *Popisme*, 232. Many thanks to Reva Wolf for sending me the complete article. Details can be found at http://www.warholstars.org/chelsea_girls.html and <http://www.warholstars.org/andywarhol0409.html>.

what? We would prefer his dullness to your corrections, which we didn't ask for in the first place.⁵¹

Unfaithful d'Ablancourt was honest enough to warn his readers. When he translated Lucian of Samosata to accommodate modern taste, he added notes and comments such as: 'I am changing his comparison from the Love of Boys, into that of women, which is what I observe everywhere, and also for reasons of public morality, corresponding to his eagerness to please'; 'Here is a page of filth removed'; 'I do not wish to say another word on the love for boys, nor elaborate on such filth.'⁵² Cuffe does not wish to elaborate either. He avoids the 'queers' and 'high school juniors', but unlike d'Ablancourt, he keeps it under wraps, as if unaware. We can wonder what he was thinking when he did his translation.

How much emphasis should we place on a few poorly translated words? In the case of artists of Warhol's character, it is the right tone and his deliberate *laissez-faire* approach that matter. We notice immediately what separates him from those artists who tried to mimic or appropriate his approach, such as Rodney Buice.⁵³ In Buice's case, it all becomes ordinary and bland, but his slapdash job can serve to satisfy the busy viewer.

In 2003 the Museum of Modern Art presented, at MoMA PS1 in Queens, twenty-eight screen tests transferred from 16mm to DVD for gallery exhibition, now a common practice in museums and other exhibition venues, even used on Times Square's electronic billboards in May 2015.⁵⁴ There is no doubt that Warhol would have welcomed this considerable expansion of the accessibility of his art, its transfer to urban spaces and to the new audiences that it could reach, even at the expense of a significant loss. The issue is not so much the loss but rather the illusion of viewing the same thing, with no significant difference, or with indifference to the differences. We assume we are watching a Warhol movie, just as we assume we are reading his words (already mediated by the reporters who interviewed him) when we read what translators have transmitted to us. Whether transferred or translated, the flattening out effect is roughly the same. It is the slippery slope of all translations, whatever the language or the medium.

An example: at the start of *POPism*, one reads, in Cuffe's translation, 'If I'd continued like that and had died ten years ago, I'd probably be a cult figure today' (*Si j'avais continué comme ça et étais mort il y a dix ans, je serais probablement une figure culte aujourd'hui*).⁵⁵ Continued like what? Warhol and Hackett open *POPism* with

⁵¹ Pierre de Marivaux, 'Réflexions' (1744), *Mercure de France*, June 1755, II, 47 and *Journaux et Œuvres diverses*, ed. Frédéric Deloffre and Michel Gilot, Paris: Garnier, 1969, 459.

⁵² *Lucien, de la traduction de N. Perrot, Sr d'Ablancourt*, Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1654, I, 648, 633; II, 679.

⁵³ See the full-page advertisement in *Art in America* 64: 3, May-June 1976, 23.

⁵⁴ <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/142>; <http://warholstars.org/screen-tests.html#qrrf5>.

⁵⁵ *Popisme*, 25.

these words: 'If I'd gone ahead and died ten years ago, I'd probably be a cult figure today.'⁵⁶ It would undoubtedly be better understood as *Si j'avais continué à être mort...* It is a well-known fact that Warhol was pronounced clinically dead after he was shot by Valerie Solanas on June 3, 1968, until the surgeon performed the open cardiac massage that brought him back to life. This experience (the same one the composer Arnold Schönberg faced twenty-two years earlier) had a profound effect on Warhol. In 1976, the quarterly magazine *Unmuzzled OX* published an interview where this exchange appeared:

OX: Death was a constant theme in your early works.

AW: And then, I stopped because I died.

OX: —because?—

AW: Then I stopped because I died.⁵⁷

With regard to translating the classics of Chinese thought, the philosopher Feng Youlan (1895-1990) reminded us of this self-evident point:

A translation, after all, is only an interpretation. When one translates a sentence from, say, the *Lao-tzu*, one gives one's own interpretation of its meaning. But the translation may convey only one idea, while as a matter of fact, the original may contain many other ideas [...].

Kumarajiva, of the fifth century A.D., one of the greatest translators of the Buddhist texts into Chinese, said that the work of translation is just like chewing food that is to be fed to others. If one cannot chew the food oneself, one has to be given food that has already been chewed. After such an operation, however, the food is bound to be poorer in taste and flavor than the original.⁵⁸

Of course, the choice is one of being fed or going hungry. In the case of Lao-Tzu as in others, some translations are acceptable to various degrees, and others, appalling; it all depends on the player's abilities and level of commitment to the game. Translation is also an art of connections continually being established between two more or less great distances. For Walter Benjamin,

it is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language. Rather, the significance of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that

⁵⁶ *POPism*, 3.

⁵⁷ [Michael Andre], 'Andy Warhol's Interview', *Unmuzzled OX* 4: 2, 1976, 47. (This interview is not included in *I'll Be Your Mirror*.)

⁵⁸ Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (1948), ed. Derk Bodde, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958, 14-15.

the work reflects the great longing [*die große Sehnsucht*] for linguistic complementation. A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.⁵⁹

For his part, Michel Foucault remarked on Pierre Klossowski's overly literal translation of the *Aeneid*:

The fact is there are two types of translation and they differ in nature and function. Some carry across equivalences of meaning and aesthetic values between languages; it is good when they convey one and the same thing.

Others pitch one language against another, are witness to the collision, take note of the impact, and measure its angle. They consider the source language text as the projectile and the target language text as the bullseye. Their goal is not so much to internalize a foreign meaning but to divert the source language through the target language.⁶⁰

Like all forms of art, all forms of translation should be acknowledged. Languages are marvellous instruments that offer countless ways to perform music, albeit more or less off-key. Therein lies the risk. A translator is the interpreter of a text. We follow along willingly until obvious inadequacies emerge, above all when a lack of linguistic acumen is combined with an unavowed moralism. This is when we are tempted to declare, like Spinoza in his comment about the defenders of the faith, that 'the most ignorant are everywhere the most audacious and the most ready to rush into print'.⁶¹

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⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', 1923; 'The Task of the Translator', in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996, 260. <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/deconstructionandnewmediatheory/walterbenjamintasktranslator.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, 'Les mots qui saignent', *L'Express*, 29 August 1964, reprinted in *Dits et écrits I*, 1954-1975, Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 2001, 453-54.

⁶¹ Baruch Spinoza, letter to Jarig Jelles, 2 June 1674.



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