

Empire

By Cary O'Dell

On the evening of Saturday, July 25, 1964, esteemed American pop artist Andy Warhol, filmmaker Jonas Mekas and two others entered the offices of the Rockefeller Foundation on the 41st floor of the Time-Life building in New York City. There, they set up a stationary movie camera in front of one of the windows and fixed its lens upon the Empire State Building located outside the window just about one mile away. For the next six-plus hours (8:06pm to 2:42am), they filmed a static, uninterrupted shot of the upper half of the Empire State Building. Warhol later screened the finished silent film, in its entirety, for audiences under the title "Empire."

The film was named to the National Film Registry in 2004.

Considered deconstructionist and post modernist in the extreme, Warhol's 1964 epic is a deceptively simple example of both 1960's avant-garde art and the nouveau- and anti-cinema movements then taking place around the world.

For Warhol the artist, already riding a controversial wave of fame and notoriety as one of the primary innovators of so-called



Empire by Andy Warhol (1964)

"Pop" art, his extension into film seemed a natural progression. After all, what are movies except for a series of slightly altered images all strung together, not unlike many of Warhol's repetitive, silk-screened masterworks? In film, the camera takes the place of the artist's brush. (Ironic then that so many of his films would later be compared to watching paint dry.) Though he later expanded into loosely plotted productions, Warhol's first endeavors were non- or largely non-narrative in nature. They included "Eat," "Sleep" (which ran five hours), "Haircut" and "Kiss." Warhol would later admit that his first works were done simply to see if he knew how to focus and use a film camera.

Yet, despite "Empire's" simplicity (some might say pointlessness), there was something revolutionary about these experiments, these items or actions caught on film, this simple evidence of existence. It has been said, "[the films] trigger our focus on the act of looking, on the value of the frame and most of all on the film duration." At the

time of their creation, Warhol's films seemed to fit in well with much of the other radical art, in other fields, then being produced; "Empire" especially could be considered something of a cousin to John Cage's 1952 composition of silence "4'33" (though the Warhol film actually has more content than Cage's landmark "musical" work).

In any media, much of Warhol's artistic philosophy was always based upon the idea of opposites. In Warhol's world (which eventually came to include a motley crew of underground "superstars" and rough-looking hangers-on like Edie Sedgwick, Viva, Joe Dallesandro, and Holly Woodlawn, among others) if something was boring and everyday (like a Campbell's Soup can or a box of Brillo pads) it was "fascinating," "extraordinary," and "compelling." Conversely, if something was considered new, unexpected, even exciting to most people, it was immediately deemed both blasé and passé by Warhol and his crowd.

Even when a particular image was innately interesting—like a glamorous shot of Elizabeth Taylor, a newspaper headline decrying a fatal crash, or an elegant, grieving Jacqueline Kennedy—these same images were soon muted and rendered dull, even coy, via Warhol's (and the media's?) unrelenting repetition of them on canvas. Often, even the kaleidoscopic color palette Warhol applied over

them did little to differentiate or revitalize them.

Even the name Warhol assigned his workspace reflected his embrace of all things normal, even banal: his studio was deemed a "Factory," an industrialized, impersonal place devoted to emotionless mass production.

For Warhol, picking the world-famous Empire State Building as the subject of one of his films was, actually, something of a departure. This time, the focus would be on a known rather than unknown subject. The Empire State Building was already an icon—it had already far outlasted Warhol's predicted, allotted 15 minutes of fame. But, then again, Warhol had long had a running fascination with fame and with re-envisioning American symbols and icons—from Coca-Cola bottles to Marilyn Monroe. And in taking on, and reinterpreting, this famous landmark was Warhol was attempting to gleam some of its permanence and stature onto himself? If this art endured, Andy Warhol and the Empire State Building would be forever intertwined.

Most of Warhol's early movies (or "stillies," as they were coined, since they did not tend to move) were shot in real-time. If it took 15 minutes to shoot, it resulted in 15 minutes on screen. It was the process/philosophy Warhol utilized in his early "Screen Tests," his filmed, blank-faced close-ups of famous or infamous people. It's

an effect which, despite various attempts--including Hitchcock's experiments with long single takes in his films "Rope" (1948) and "Under Capricorn" (1949)--has never been fully, successfully utilized in commercial films.

But, interestingly, surprisingly, "Empire," if shown as it was intended, is not in real time—it's longer! Though shot at 24 frames per second, per Warhol's wishes, it is to be projected at 16 frames per, stretching the 6 hour and 36 minute film to 8 hours and 5 minutes when it is shown. The elongated running time only further underscores Warhol's stated purpose of the film: to watch time pass. And, indeed, in the film, time does become "readable" in methods not usually incorporated in motion pictures: clouds progress, shadows mature, dusk comes on, lights in windows blink on and off, off and on. Meanwhile, various "flaws" in the filmmaking process (from "flashes" to a reflection of Warhol himself caught in a window in reel seven) --like some of Ingmar Bergman's self-reflexive touches in his films--take on far greater importance when placed against the backdrop of this work's extreme minimalism. These random imperfections echo the pronounced drips of Warhol's early paintings, as well as the faint, incomplete blotted lines of his early illustrations and the protracted smears he achieved in many of his famous silk screens.

Because of its extraordinary length, since its debut, "Empire" has

probably only been viewed in its entirety by a handful of museum curators and catalogers and one or two of the most dogged and determined purists. Over the years, excerpts of the work, running from eight minutes to a couple of hours, however have been shown in galleries or spliced and uploaded onto Youtube. This truncation of the piece has been met with controversy as critics declared that it undermines the intent of the original work (a charge that could also be lobbied against any film, including more narrative, mainstream movies, when they are shown as "clips"). According to some, this vivisection is akin to showing only a small detail of a painting, i.e. the bottom half or perhaps the upper corner of the "Mona Lisa."

But actually viewing "Empire" in abbreviated sections is how, in various interviews over the years, Warhol seemed to suggest it was meant to be experienced. Audiences, or so he implied, should be encouraged to watch it for a time, then depart and then return to it. In short, it should be viewed as one might a painting on a gallery wall.

Ironically, then, for all its avant-garde intentions, "Empire" and Warhol's other minimalist movies, if treated in this manner, greatly harkened back to the early days of American film exhibition. After films evolved from short loops in nickelodeons to being shown in theaters, they were originally shown continuously, featurette to

featurette, with audience members coming and going throughout a morning, afternoon, or evening. Patrons purchased tickets not for a specific “show” but simply for entry and an unspecified time to sit and watch what was being played. Whenever the audience member felt he or she had seen enough, or needed to carry on with their day, they got up and left. In that sense, theaters had yet to break with the concept of an arcade or other amusement (the beach, etc.) where there were no set times, no beginning nor pre-determined ends imposed on their entertainment or how long they stayed.

While “Empire” might have paid homage to the past, it also, in numerous ways, prefigured the future. Its aquarium-like hypnotic power is now found in everything from slow-moving computer “screen savers” to stagnate webcam shots and only-every-so-often-refreshed satellite-aided images. It also seemed to have presaged the still-unfolding, developing genre of video art and the world of so-called “reality TV” which often too seems to celebrate, or at least elevate, the ordinary and everyday, from the act of shopping, to cooking, to simply getting dressed.

For many, even those who are not “art snobs,” “Empire” altered their perception. It changed forever the way they looked at both the Empire State Building (much like Christo’s now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t alterations of landscapes

with his temporary, yet monumental, “wraps” of buildings and bridges) and how they approached cinema. In short, performing the basic function of art.

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