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Writing about Experimental Cinema: Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964)

Glyn Davis

Andy Warhol's *Empire*, a film of the Empire State Building, lasts for eight hours and five minutes. It was shot over one night in July 1964, looking out of a window of the offices of the Rockefeller Foundation on the 41st floor of the Time-Life Building. Present at the filming was a group of men: Warhol and his assistant Gerard Malanga; the filmmaker, writer and curator Jonas Mekas; Henry Romney, who arranged the shooting; and John Palmer, who is usually credited with coming up with the idea for the film, and as its co-director. Very little happens in the film. The camera stares, without moving, at the building. The sky slowly darkens. Floodlights come on, illuminating the building; towards the end of the film, they are switched off again. *Empire* is a canonical work of avant-garde cinema, notorious for its conceptual simplicity and audacity, and a film that I have repeatedly returned to and wrestled with in my own writing. For our purposes here, it also serves as an illuminating example of the challenges of writing about experimental cinema.

Watching *Empire* is difficult, in more ways than one. First, it is difficult in terms of access. Unlike mainstream cinema, which is widely distributed to audiences across a variety of platforms, options for viewing experimental films can be limited. Of course, many experimental films are available in a variety of formats – on DVD and BluRay, accessible online – and are sometimes screened in cinemas. But many others are not, and the first challenge for the writer can be tracking down the film itself. A financial outlay may be necessary: your access to a specific experimental film might be limited by its location and by whether you have the funds necessary to pay for travel to that place. You may include an account of your quest to find the film in your writing, in a way that you wouldn't if you were talking about, say, a *Transformers* movie. Andy Warhol made hundreds of films between

1963 and 1968. A significant number have been restored and preserved, but many have not.

Film theorist Ara Osterweil wrote an essay about one of the latter for the magazine *Little Joe*:

In October 2013, I drive seven hours from Montréal to New York to see twelve minutes of film. Surely this is one form of insanity. My journey is to see Warhol's film *Three* at the Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center. Made in early 1964, and never publicly screened, the film is slipped from the archive just long enough to catalogue it. After a day or two of careful consideration by a panel of curators and scholars, it is returned to the vault... (134)

Here, Osterweil not only engages her readers through setting up a narrative, but provides revelations about the workings of experimental film archives.

Aside from the films stored in collections and archives, many experimental films have been created with particular exhibition strategies in mind that, again, limit access: films may have been made for showing only in specific galleries and/or may require certain screening technologies (for example, 16mm projectors). For the writer, it is necessary to detail the set-up of the space in which the film is screened, and to register the ways in which this affects the work. Readers may not have seen the rare screening, and writing about experimental cinema thus regularly includes information on the venue, its arrangement, and its atmospherics. When an experimental film changes exhibition location, this can have a significant impact on its reception; making a comparison of venues, if possible, can enhance a reader's understanding of the film. To a certain degree, writing about an experimental film involves providing a documentary account of witnessing it, in one or more locations, for readers who have not had the opportunity to do so; this is not required when writing about mainstream films.

The gallery presentation of an experimental film may be the ideal way in which it should be viewed, and the one intended by its creator. However, close readings can be

difficult to produce in such circumstances: low levels of lighting and the presence of other viewers can prevent the taking of notes, for instance. Access to a second, supplementary copy of the film – however visually inferior and removed from optimal screening conditions – can be invaluable in enabling analysis. I most recently saw *Empire* in its entirety during an archival trip to the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. The digital transfer, accessible through a touch-screen monitor in a small viewing gallery, was removed from the pulse and grain of a film print screening but enabled a level of close personal scrutiny – and an opportunity to skip back and forth through the film – that I had not previously experienced.

Watching *Empire* is also difficult in terms of discomfort. Eight hours is a lengthy running time for a film – though one with resonance, as it is roughly equivalent to the length of the work day, or a good night's sleep. The human body struggles with such an endurance test, needing bathroom breaks, sustenance, movement. Sitting through the entirety of *Empire* is a major challenge, and writing about the film has often acknowledged or drawn attention to this. Art historian Pamela Lee, for example, avoids using the first person but seems to be acknowledging her own discomfort:

Shifting from side to side, at first quietly and then with increasing impatience, we experience our body as a duration machine. The bones poke through, head lolls on the stem of its neck. With each moment that passes, the eyes play tricks while the mind wanders: we see things that aren't there or perhaps discount what is there. [...] The erect carriage of the committed cineaste gives way to the slouch and sprawl of the tired, the jaded, or the bored. (287)

Of course, not all experimental films have the distended length of *Empire*. In addition, similar types of discomfort can be experienced watching much shorter experimental films – such as Warhol's Screen Test portrait films, each of which only lasts for several minutes. Lee's comments are useful, however, in making us consider the viewing encounter with

experimental cinema, which may often be very different from more mainstream fare. When experimental films are screened in galleries, we may walk into them part-way through; identifying their start and end may not always be simple; seating, when available, may not be the most comfortable. All of these hurdles need to be overcome in order to engage with the film through writing.

How long should one spend with an experimental film to understand it, to be able to write about it? Although the description of *Empire* that I provided in the opening paragraph of this essay provides enough information for you to have a sense of the film, in order to write about experimental cinema – as with all cinema – it is necessary to spend sustained time with the work and to repeatedly re-view it. When you sit through a long film with very little change in content, for instance, your understanding of what amounts to ‘action’ shifts, and minor incidents become of interest. With *Empire*, the turning on and off of the lights on the Empire State Building attain serious dramatic weight. The largely-unchanging image starts to warp before your eyes. As art historian Douglas Crimp writes of the film:

what I found happened most was that the perspective of the building kept reversing itself, so that instead of a solid contour I seemed to be looking at a hollowed-out volume, as if I were seeing a cutaway of interior space. When that happened, I would try in vain to turn concave back to convex, to get the building to become a solid exterior again. [...] The image eventually becomes so abstract that you begin to read it like a Rorschach test. (140)

We start to drift, to read the image poetically. Curator Callie Angell noted that, for her, the building began to resemble “a rocket ship, a hypodermic needle, a heavenly cathedral, or a broad paintbrush;” the “passing light flares, water marks, and other transient phenomena of the medium occur as spectacularly as sunrises and meteor showers in the minimal scenery of Warhol’s film” (30). Angell and Crimp demonstrate a key component of much writing on

experimental cinema: that, fittingly, it often needs to incorporate stretches or instances of experimental and poetic text. While in theory it would be possible to write poetically about the *Transformers* films, experimental cinema invites such exploratory approaches.

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