**ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MODERNISM**

Entries by Mal Ahern, 3/3

**WARHOL, ANDY** (1926-1987)

SUMMARY:

Andy Warhol was a painter, filmmaker, producer, and multi-media artist. He was born in Pittsburgh, Pennyslvania and worked in New York City from the 1940s onward. He started his career as a commercial artist before moving into fine-art painting in the 1950s. Between 1962 and 1968, he made hundreds of films, ranging from a series of short “Screen Tests,” to the notorious, eight-hour film *Empire* (1965), which comprised a series of stable, slow-motion shots of the Empire State Building. Warhol’s films were notorious for their spare aesthetic and banal subject matter: he created films of people eating, sleeping, getting haircuts, and simply staring at the camera. His sound films, like *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1965, starring Edie Sedgwick) and *Screen Test #2* (1965, starring Mario Montez) show their stars sparring with an off-screen voice.

Warhol’s work was also notable for the fact that they depicted the lives and personalities of Warhol’s friends and acquaintances, most of whom were a part of New York City’s queer “underground.” His two-screen, three-plus hour epic *Chelsea Girls* became a minor hit because of its frank depiction of queer sex, cross-dressing, and drug use. After Warhol was shot in 1968, he retreated from filmmaking, but continued to create paintings and other artworks.

MAIN ENTRY:

Warhol was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and started working in New York City in the late 1940s. By the mid-1950s, he was a successful commercial artist known for the whimsical drawings he created for fashion-industry clients. During this period, he also started to create and exhibit fine-art paintings which, in terms of both form and content, drew on his career as a commercial illustrator. Warhol is best known for using the silkscreen process to “mass-produce” paintings that depicted such mass-cultural icons as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and Campbell’s Soup cans. This aesthetic was well-formed by 1962, when he had a solo show at the Ferus Galery in Los Angeles, California. The following year, he got his first movie camera.

*Sleep*, shot in July of 1963 and completed that December, immediately earned Warhol notoriety in the film and art worlds: it comprised over five hours of a man (the poet John Giorno) sleeping. The film exemplifies Warhol’s aesthetic in this period: rich black-and-white hues, a stable, unmoving camera, and uncomfortably long takes. The films *Kiss* and *Haircut no. 2*, also shot in 1963, adhere to this same format, with a twist: in each of these films, every ‘shot’ lasts the entire length of a film reel, fading to white when the reel reaches its bleached tail-end. The most distinctive and consistent part of Warhol’s aesthetic for his ‘silent’ films is that he shot all of them at 24 frames-per-second, then projected them at the silent speed of 16 frames-per-second, meaning that every film was in slow motion.

Crucially, the subject matter of the films reflected Warhol’s world: he showed the lives of queer men and women who lived on the margins of society in the 1960s. Gay and interracial couples kissed, had sex, and did drugs onscreen. Warhol’s spare aesthetic provided an unlikely frame for the “camp” aesthetic that Susan Sontag would describe in 1964. One reason for this was the fact that his entire filmmaking practice revolved around portraits of, and performances by, queer and marginal characters in the 1960s underground.

Between 1964 and 1966, Warhol shot over 500 short, silent portrait films, each comprising a single shot of one individual, lasting the entire length of a 100-foot reel. These *Screen Tests* featured such celebrities as Bob Dylan and Dennis Hopper, intellectual icons like Susan Sontag and Allan Ginsberg, art-world icons like Henry Geldzahler, and Warhol friends and associates like Billy Name and Taylor Mead. Warhol also used these films to inaugurate his cast of “superstars,” such as Baby Jane Holzer and, later and more notoriously, Edie Sedgwick. All of these films were shot in Warhol’s “Factory,” a studio space that also served as a hangout for New York’s underground.

In 1965, Warhol bought a 16mm camera that shot in synchronized sound, and shot *Screen Test #2* and *Beauty #2.* Both films feature on-screen actors (Mario Montez and Edie Sedgwick, respectively) who react to the sometimes cruel questions and comments of an off-screen interlocutor. This off-screen voice was often that of Ronald Tavel, a playwright associated with Playhouse of the Ridiculous. The same year Warhol made *My Hustler*, his first “narrative” film, and marked a stylistic shift that would characterize the latter half of his filmmaking career: it drew on the themes and style of the X-rated, gay pornography that regularly showed at cinemas in Times Square. Around this time, Warhol also started to incorporate rapid editing and camera movement into works like work, such as *Bufferin* (1966) and *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (1966).

With 1966’s *Chelsea Girls*, Warhol managed to obtain the commercial success he had just started striving for. Due to its risqué subject matter—sex and drugs in the New York underground—it became popular as a midnight movie on college campuses. The film was a dual-projection film comprising fourteen different reels, each its own single-shot vignette starring Warhol’s ‘superstars.’ Because all of the reels were shot in sync sound, the projectionist would have to follow a script in order to turn the sound on each projector up and down at the proper moment.

*Chelsea Girls* was thus an early foray into film performance, or into the sort of multi-screen, multi-media experience that many filmmakers would start to call ‘expanded cinema.’ Another work that was notable in this regard was Warhol’s “Exploding Plastic Inevitable,” a projection, music, and light-show he started that same year. The EPI starred the rock band the Velvet Underground, as well as several Warhol superstars (most often Gerard Malanga and Mary Woronov) who would dance onstage. Warhol’s then-lover, Danny Williams, managed a projector and light show which they would cast onto the stage and the audience. In the EPI, Warhol used his films as instruments in a purposefully overwhelming and disjunctive sensory experience.

All of Warhol’s films in this period were deeply collaborative efforts, and not only with the people who appear on-screen: typically, Billy Name did the lighting, and Gerard Malanga often operated the camera. Warhol was sometimes criticized for delegating so much of his work as an artist to his friends and assistants, to whom he paid little.

In the late 1960s, Paul Morrissey joined the Factory studio team, and encouraged Warhol to aspire to more mainstream, Hollywood success with films like 1967’s *Bike Boy* and *I, a Man*. The following year, Warhol was shot by Valerie Solanas, the playwright and author of the S.C.U.M. Manifesto. After the incident, Warhol was reluctant to spend much time around the drugged-out, eccentric Factory crowd, and ceded more control of his filmmaking activities to Morrissey. Morrissey went on to make the narrative features *Flesh*, *Trash*, and *Heat* under the Warhol name. In the subsequent decade, these films remained much more available than Warhol’s earlier work. Morrissey’s films resembled commercial sexploitation fare, and for decades this is what much of the filmgoing public thought of when they thought of a “Warhol Movie.”

Warhol pulled his films from circulation in the early 1970s, although a half-dozen of his films remained a part of Anthology Film Archives’ ‘Essential Cinema’ series, and stray prints showed sporadically in other locations. Mainstream critics remembered Warhol’s films for their decadence. But the avant-garde, who were more apt to seek out the films themselves, emphasized their structural-film aesthetics: filmmakers like Peter Gidal and Hollis Frampton were inspired by films like *Eat* and *Haircut*, which eschewed plot in favour of sensuous detail and rigorous formal structures. After Warhol’s death in 1987, MoMA, the Whitney, and the Andy Warhol Foundation partnered to restore and re-release his films. The subsequent decades saw several high-profile film retrospectives, including *The Films of Andy Warhol Part I* and *Part II* (in 1988 and 1994, respectively) and a series of gallery installations organized by Mary Lea Bandy of the Museum of Modern Art. With the re-emergence of Warhol’s films—concurrent with the rise of academic queer studies— a growing queer film scene embraced Warhol as its patron saint.

For further reading:

Angell, C. (2006) *Andy Warhol Screen Tests: The Films of Andy Warhol Catalog Raisonée,*

*Vol. 1*. New York: Henry Abrams and Whitney Museum of American Art.

James, D. (1989) *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton: Princeton

University Press.

Joseph, B. (2002) “My Mind Split Open: Andy Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable.”

*Grey Room* 8.

O’Pray, M. (1989) *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*. London: British Film Institute.

Smith, P. (1979) *Andy Warhol’s Art and Films.* Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.

Selected list of works:

*Sleep* (1963)

*Kiss* (1963-1964)

*Tarzan and Jane Regained, Sort of…* (1963)

*Haircut No. 2* (1963)

*Blow Job* (1964)

*Eat* (1964)

*Soap Opera* (1964)

*Couch* (1964)

*Harlot* (1964)

*Screen Test #2* (1965)

*Horse* (1965)

*Vinyl* (1965)

*Poor Little Rich Girl* (1965)

*Face* (1965)

*Kitchen* (1965)

*Beauty #2* (1965)

*Outer and Inner Space* (1965)

*Paul Swan* (1965)

*My Hustler* (1965)

*Camp* (1965)

*Lupe* (1965)

*The Velvet Underground and Nico* (1966)

*Hedy* (1966)

*Chelsea Girls* (1966)

*Bufferin* (1966)

*Bufferin Commercial* (1966)

*The Andy Warhol Story* (1966)

*Since aka The Kennedy Assassination* (1966)

*\*\*\*\* (aka Four Stars aka The Twenty Four Hour Movie)* (1966)

*Imitation of Christ* (1967)

*I, a Man* (1967)

*The Loves of Ondine* (1967)

*Bike Boy* (1967)

*Sunset* (1967)

*Lonseome Cowboys* (1968)

*Flesh* (1968)

*Blue Movie* (1968)

Paratextual materials:

**Images:**

Frame enlargement from Warhol’s *Couch*:

<http://www.moma.org/collection_images/resized/075/w500h420/CRI_113075.jpg>

Photograph of Ivy Nicholson’s *Screen Test* being shot in the Factory, circa 1964:

http://www.basisdesign.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/thefactory3.jpg

Andy Warhol with Mario Montez and camera, circa 1965:

<http://www.catch-fire.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/warhol_mario_montez.jpg>

Poster for *Chelsea Girls* (1966):

<http://www.rhianbowley.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/chelsea_girls_poster_01-693x1024.jpg>

**VIDEOS:**

*Sleep* (1963), 40-minute excerpt:

<http://vimeo.com/4880378>

*Screen Test*, Edie Sedgwick (1964)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbzBuqaFC5g

Andy Warhol and Edie Sedgwick being interviewed on the Merv Griffin show, 1965:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8sptsjCk18>

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Yale University