

Document Citation

Title	Empire by Andy Warhol
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Source	<i>San Francisco Cinematheque</i>
Date	1994 May 29
Type	program
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Warhol, Andy (1928-1987), Forest City, Pennsylvania, United States
Film Subjects	Empire, Warhol, Andy, 1964

Cinematheque

The San Francisco Cinematheque, Pacific Film Archive and New Langton Arts present

EMPIRE by Andy Warhol

May 29, 1994

Empire (1964), 16mm, b&w, silent, 8 hrs. 5 min. @ 16 fps. (7 hrs. 19 min. @ 18 fps.)

Based on an idea by John Palmer. Arranged by Henry Romney. Camera by Jonas Mekas. Filmed on the night of July 25-26, 1964, from the offices of the Rockefeller Foundation on the 41st floor of the Time-Life Building.

The best, most temporal way of making a building that I ever heard of is by making it with light. The Fascists did a lot of this "light architecture." If you build buildings with lights outside, you can make them indefinite, and then when you're through using them you shut the lights off and they disappear.

—Andy Warhol, 1975

"*Empire* is the only film Warhol made which does not have a human being as its subject. If Warhol's films can be regarded as a series of investigations into the portrayal of personality on film, then *Empire* might be seen as the control in that series of experiments. This rigorously executed, minimalist work—a portrait of a building—can be seen as a deliberate test in which Warhol attempted to isolate the 'secret' of screen magnetism by separating it from the human subject, to discover which, if any, elements of screen glamour might be inherent in the medium itself, and thus transferable to a neutral subject like a building."

—Callie Angel, *Something Secret: Portraiture in Warhol's Films* (1994)

"This image, shot from a tripod-mounted camera, never moves; projected at the slow motion speed of 16 fps and immobilized within the stationary frame of the movies screen, the film becomes equivalent in the physical presence to a painting on the wall. *Empire* is thus, on one level at least, an early example of film installation, in which the projected film achieves an object-like existence comparable to that of more conventional art works.

"Despite the monolithic immobility of its subject, however, *Empire* is, paradoxically, very much concerned with elements of temporality and the more ephemeral phenomena of light and darkness."

—Callie Angell *The Films of Andy Warhol: Part II* (The Whitney, 1994)

"The intellectual content of *Empire* clearly overshadows the visual, and the exaggerated time element is in opposition to the 'telescoping' of incidents typical of the commercial cinema.

"*Empire* is now a classic of the avant-garde. In a short period it has received extraordinary acceptance, which suggests it appeared at the right moment. Whatever influence it may have had, film will not be quite the same again. Neither, perhaps, will the Empire State Building."

—Gregory Battcock, *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology* (1967)

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"The following are excerpts from a conversation with the Warhol (*Empire*) crew—Henry X., John Palmer, Marie Desert, and the poet Gerard Malanga:

John: Why is nothing happening? I don't understand. *Henry*: What would you like to happen? *John*: I don't know. *Henry*: I have a feeling that all we're filming now is the red light. *Andy*: Oh, Henry!!! *Henry*: Andy?! NOW IS THE TIME TO PAN. *John*: Definitely not! *Henry*: The film is a whole new bag when the lights go off. *John*: Look at all that action going on. Those flashes. Tourists taking photos. *Andy*: Henry what is the meaning of action? *Henry*: Action is the absence of inaction. *Andy*: Let's say things intelligent. *Gerard*: Listen! We don't want to deceive the public, dear. *John*: We're hitting a new milestone. *Andy*: Henry, say Nietzsche. *Henry*: Another aphorism? *John*: B movies are better than A movies. *Andy*: Jack Smith in every garage. *Marie*: Someday we're all going to live underground and this movies will be a smash.

John: The lack of action in the last three 1200-foot rolls is alarming! *Henry*: You have to mark these rolls very carefully so as not to get them mixed up. *Jonas*: Did you know that the Empire State building sways? *Marie*: I read somewhere that art is created in fun. *Jonas*: What? *Gerard*: During the projection, we should set up window panes for the audience to look through. *Andy*: The Empire State Building is a star! *John*: Has anything happened at all?! *Marie*: No. *John*: Good! *Henry*: The script calls for a pan right at this point. I don't see why my artistic advice is being constantly rejected. *Henry to Andy*: The bad children are smoking pot again. *John*: I don't think anything has happened in the last hundred feet. *Gerard*: We have to maintain our cool at all times. *John*: We have to have this film licensed. *Andy*: It looks vary phallic. *Jonas*: I don't think it will pass. *John*: Nothing has happened in the last half-hour. *John*: The audience viewing 'Empire' will be convinced after seeing the film that they have viewed it from the 41st floor of the Time-Life Building, and that's a whole bag in itself. Isn't that fantastic? *Jonas*: I don't think the last reel was a waste. *Henry to John*: I think it's too playful."

—Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal* (1972)

Notes compiled by Maya Allison