Serious immobilities: Andy Warhol, Erik Satie and the furniture film

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In 1893 Erik Satie composed *Vexations*, a delicate and haunting piece of music that would eventually come to be seen as his most radical composition. While the sheet music at first appears relatively straightforward, it includes a bizarre performance note in which Satie suggests that if the performer decides 'to play this phrase 840 times in a row, it will be as well to prepare oneself in advance, and in the deepest silence, through serious immobilities'.[1] Such an uncompromising and unrelenting use of repetition in a piece of music was entirely unprecedented, and anticipated the minimalism that would come to prominence in the second half of the twentieth century through composers such as La Monte Young, Philip Glass, Steve Reich and John Adams. Furthermore, *Vexation*'s lack of a tonal centre foreshadowed the atonality pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern and Alban Berg in the first half of the century.

On 9 September 1963 John Cage staged the first complete performance of *Vexations* at the Pocket Theater in New York. Ten pianists took turns at playing the repetitions, and the piece lasted from 6.00 p.m. until 12.40 p.m. the following day.[2] Among those present at the performance was Andy Warhol, who would go on to promote in many of his early films a strikingly similar aesthetic, in which a relatively static object or person is filmed for a long period of time.[3] In *Sleep* (1963) the poet John Giorno is shown sleeping, naked, from various angles for almost five-and-a-half hours (with numerous individual shots repeated over and over), while in *Empire* (1964)

1 Quoted in Robert Orledge, 'Understanding Satie's *Vexations*', *Music & Letters*, vol. 79, no. 3 (1998), p. 386. It is generally assumed that *Vexations* is a piece for piano, although the score does not specify a particular instrument.

2 Sources are divided on whether the number of pianists was ten or twelve. In any case, Cage's decision to use a team was probably a wise one, as individuals who have attempted to perform *Vexations* in its entirety have often encountered problems. In 1970, for example, Peter Evans was forced to terminate his performance after fifteen hours when he began to experience 'frightful hallucinations'. See Alan M. Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), p. 103.

3 There is some disagreement over whether Warhol actually attended the performance, and if so for how long. See Gary Comenas, 'Notes on

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John Cage, Erik Satie's *Vexations* and Andy Warhol's *Sleep*', *Warholstars.org*, June 2009, rev. March 2011, <http://www.warholstars.org/andy_warhol_sleep_vexations.html> accessed 2 September 2014. See also Branden W. Joseph, 'Andy Warhol's *Sleep*: the play of repetition', in Ted Perry (ed.), *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 180, 202. While it seems likely that Warhol *was* present for at least part of the performance, my arguments here are not contingent on this.

4 The idea for *Empire* was suggested to Warhol by the filmmaker John Palmer, whose reflection can briefly be glimpsed in the film's last reel. See Callie Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests: the Films of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné, Volume I* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 2006), p. 153.

5 Francis Bacon, 'Of studies', in *Francis Bacon: the Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 439. As Vickers points out, 'curiously' here means 'with minute attention' (p. 773).

6 For this insight I am indebted to Ann Blair's discussion of Bacon in 'Reading strategies for coping with information overload', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 64, no. 1 (2003), pp. 13–14.

7 Quoted in Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, p. 232.

8 John Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd edn, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), p. 51. While this essay focuses on manifestations of the furniture aesthetic in music and film, analogues can be found in all the arts. For example, in painting the most prominent advocate of this approach is Henri Matisse, who asserted, 'What I dream of is an art without any disquieting or preoccupying subject, which would be… something analogous to a good armchair'. Quoted in Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: the Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I*, rev. edn (New York, NY: Vintage, 1968), p. 169.

a single static shot of the Empire State Building is maintained for over eight hours.[4] These films are often theorized as explorations of boredom, and while I do not necessarily take issue with this approach, it does strike me as somewhat limiting. I would argue that Warhol is following the lead of Satie, who developed the concept of *musique d'ameublement*, or 'furniture music'. Satie was interested in music that was not meant to be listened to closely but was instead designed to serve as a backdrop for other activities. Films like *Sleep* and *Empire* are similarly best understood as furniture films – works that open up new ways of thinking about cinematic reception by inviting a series of distracted glances rather than a focused and comprehensive gaze.

I would like to begin with a frequently quoted (and frequently misunderstood) remark from Francis Bacon's 1612 essay 'Of studies':

> Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.[5]

Many assume that the point of Bacon's metaphor is to lavish praise on those rare 'great' books that are worthy of close analysis. In fact he is drawing attention to the need for a variety of approaches to reading texts. Not every book is designed to be 'read wholly, and with diligence and attention' – for many texts, a casual and cursory engagement is more appropriate.[6]

Satie was intent on fighting for a similar kind of diversity in the consumption of musical compositions. While the normative stance towards music in Satie's day often involved 'chewing' and 'digesting' – that is, attending a performance and becoming engrossed in each musical development – Satie was interested in composing music that could merely be tasted (or at most swallowed). He describes it as follows:

> there's a need to create furniture music, that is to say, music that would be a part of the surrounding noises and that would take them into account. I see it as melodious, as masking the clatter of knives and forks without drowning it completely, without imposing itself. It would fill up the awkward silences that occasionally descend on guests. It would spare them the usual banalities. Moreover, it would neutralize the street noises that indiscreetly force themselves into the picture.[7]

For Satie, such furniture music would be pleasant yet unobtrusive, serving as the backdrop for other experiences (conversing, eating, appreciating visual art, and so on). In the words of John Cage, 'Furniture Music was Satie's most far-reaching discovery, the concept of a music to which one did not have to listen'.[8]

Among the Satie compositions that are generally considered furniture music are *Tapisserie en fer forge*/*Forged Iron Tapestry* (1917), *Carrelage phonique*/*Phonic Floor Tiles* (1917) and *Tenture de cabinet préfectoral*/*Wall Hanging for a Prefectural Office* (1923), as well a piece which easily has one of the strangest titles in the history of music, *Sonnerie pour réveiller*

le bon gros roi des singes (lequel ne dort toujours que d'un oeil)/Fanfare for Waking Up the Big Fat King of the Monkeys (Who Always Sleeps with One Eye Open) (1921). However, Satie's only public performance of furniture music took place during the intermission of a play, written by his friend Max Jacob, at the Galerie Barbazanges in Paris on 8 March 1920. Satie arranged for a small band to continually play repeated figures from Camille Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* and Ambroise Thomas's *Mignon*. He had hoped that the music would fade into the background while the audience conversed and enjoyed the picture exhibition in the theatre hall. Contrary to Satie's explicit instructions, however, audience members found themselves engrossed in the music, listening to it carefully and deliberately, causing an aggravated Satie to scream, 'Go on talking! Walk about! Don't listen!'[9]

Even though Satie only used the label 'furniture music' for a handful of his compositions, the appellation could be applied to a large number of his works. His composition for René Clair's film *Entr'acte* (1924), for example, is inconspicuous and repetitive, its various speeds and moods serving to complement the Dadaist spectacles that fill the screen.[10] And even though Satie did not coin the term until 1917, it seems clear that the idea was already in its formative stages in 1893 when he composed *Vexations*. The piece is subtle and brooding, its unyielding repetitions creating a vacuum of auditory stimuli, a numbing sameness that forces one to seek stimulation elsewhere (even if only through daydreaming, or in extreme cases hallucinating). *Vexations* is furniture music *avant la lettre*.[11]

Warhol shared Satie's interest in the furniture aesthetic, yet this crucial component of Warhol's vision has received remarkably little scholarly attention. A film like *Sleep* is often discussed as if it must be watched from beginning to end in reverent silence, but this was not the kind of viewing experience that most interested Warhol. In a 1963 interview he described the then-untitled *Sleep* as follows:

> it's a movie where you can come in at any time. And you can walk around and dance and sing. … It just starts, you know, like when people call up and say 'What time does the movie start?' you can just say 'Any time'.[12]

A few years later, he emphasized that audience dynamics were more important to him as a filmmaker than what was on the screen:

> My first films using the stationary objects were also made to help the audiences get more acquainted with themselves. … You could do more things watching my movies than with other kinds of movies: you could eat and drink and smoke and cough and look away and then look back and they'd still be there.[13]

In 1975, moreover, Warhol was asked, 'Did you try to make boredom chic with some of your early movies like *Empire*?', to which he responded, 'No. What I was trying to do is make comedy in the audience. People always have a better time, have more fun together than watching what is on the screen.'[14] Warhol thus advocated a distracted, fragmentary and unfocused mode of

9 Quoted in Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, p. 233. For more on this incident, see the excerpt from Arnold Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* (1911) in Daniel Albright (ed.), *Modernism and Music: an Anthology of Sources* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 66–70, and Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: a Surreal History of Muzak®, Easy-Listening and Other Moodsong®*, rev. edn (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 14–21.

10 For more on this composition, see Douglas W. Gallez, 'Satie's *Entr'acte*: a model of film music', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1976), pp. 36–50.

11 It is not uncommon to see *Vexations* conceptualized as a kind of proto-furniture music. Gillmor goes so far as to suggest that all of Satie's compositions could be called furniture music (*Erik Satie*, p. 232).

12 Ruth Hirschman, 'Pop goes the artist', in Kenneth Goldsmith (ed.), *I'll Be Your Mirror: the Selected Andy Warhol Interviews* (New York, NY: Carroll and Graf, 2004), pp. 41, 44.

13 Gretchen Berg, 'Andy Warhol: my true story', in Goldsmith (ed.), *I'll Be Your Mirror*, p. 92.

14 Bess Winakor, 'Andy Warhol's life, loves, art, and wavemaking', in Goldsmith (ed.), *I'll Be Your Mirror*, p. 225.

spectatorship. When Paul Arthur laments the fact that decades after the release of Warhol's films 'the audience still cannot sit still for them', he fails to answer the critical question of why they should.[15] One can imagine Warhol seeing spectators silently immersing themselves in his early films and reacting in much the same way that Satie reacted to the audience at the Galerie Barbazanges (though without the exclamatory tone, of course): 'Go on talking. Walk about. Don't watch.'[16]

In other words, many of Warhol's films are meant to be looked at but not *watched*. A failure to realize this has, I believe, resulted in Warhol's cinema being undervalued in some quarters, and has occasionally manifested itself as outright hostility. For example, Jonas Mekas recalls the outrage that accompanied the premiere of *Empire*:

> Ten minutes after the film started, a crowd of thirty or forty people stormed out of the theatre into the lobby, surrounded the box office, Bob Brown, and myself, and threatened to beat us up and destroy the theater unless their money was returned. 'This is not entertainment! This movie doesn't move!' shouted the mob.[17]

This failure to understand the furniture aesthetic has led even sophisticated spectators to diminish Warhol's cinema. No less an avant-garde luminary than Tony Conrad has remarked, 'I have never been able to cure myself of suspicions that Andy Warhol's static films … are incurably opportunistic and basically devoid of the intrinsic interest or freshness that I feel to be the real challenge of static work'.[18]

Warhol is certainly fond of filming *objects* that are without 'intrinsic interest': a building, a haircut, an empty chair (the latter is all that can be seen for several minutes in his film *Paul Swan* [1965]). In this regard Warhol is a descendant of Duchamp, who selected his 'readymades' without thought for intrinsic interest or beauty.[19] But for precisely this reason the cinematic image becomes just one of many objects available for visual consumption, and it is eventually noticed in the casual and distracted way that one might notice a couch.[20] Since, as Rudolf Arnheim has pointed out, 'Motion is the strongest visual appeal to attention'[21] (a fact well known to anyone who owns a cat and a laser pointer), static films often encourage viewers to direct their attention elsewhere. And this is generally what Warhol's audiences did. Consider Stephen Koch's description of the early screenings of *Sleep*: 'People would chat during the screening, leave for a hamburger and return, greet friends and talk over old times'.[22] Along similar lines, Pamela M. Lee has argued that screenings of *Empire* are often 'deeply social experience[s]', ones which are heavily invested in 'food and drink, music and dance … cigarettes, and most important, conversation'.[23] To call films like *Sleep* and *Empire* boring or 'devoid of … intrinsic interest', then, is in a sense to miss the point: the films are only as boring as the audiences who watch them. What is interesting about many of Warhol's films is not the content per se, but the cinematic *experience* that they engender – as well as their conceptual originality. Warhol draws our attention to the manifold components of the cinematic encounter (eating, conversing, moving in and out of the theatrical

15 Paul Arthur, 'Resighting the Warhol catechism', in Michael O'Pray (ed.), *Andy Warhol: Film Factory* (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), p. 148.

16 One should not be too quick to take Warhol at his word, since many of his statements during interviews are cryptic or contradictory. As Wayne Koestenbaum has noted, Warhol 'considered interviews to be collaborative art pieces; his job was not to convey truth but to perform'. See Wayne Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol* (New York, NY: Viking, 2001), pp. 79–80.Warhol's claims regarding the desired reception of *Sleep* and *Empire*, however, are substantiated by his own screenings of these films.

17 Jonas Mekas, *The Walden Book*, 2nd English edn, ed. Pip Chodorov and Christian Lebrat (Paris: Éditions Paris Expérimental, 2009), p. 59. The premiere of *Sleep* was less dramatic: only nine people were in attendance, and two of them left during the first hour. See John Giorno, 'Andy Warhol interviewed by a poet', in Goldsmith (ed.), *I'll Be Your Mirror*, p. 21.

18 Quoted in P. Adams Sitney, 'Structural film', in Sitney (ed.), *Film Culture Reader* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1970), p. 343.

19 For more on Duchamp's aesthetic of 'visual indifference', see Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (London: Da Capo Press, 1987), p. 48, and Katherine Kuh, 'Interview with Marcel Duchamp', in *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 2000), p. 92.

20 In fact Warhol made a film entitled *Couch* in 1964.

21 Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: a Psychology of the Creative Eye. The New Version* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), p. 372.

22 Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: the Life, World and Films of Andy Warhol* (New York, NY: Marion Boyars, 1991), p. 39.

23 Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: on Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 287.

space, and so on) that are so often overlooked in film theory. As Koch goes on to say:

> Even if one only glances at the image from time to time, it plunges one into a cinematic profundity; in a single stroke, that image effects a complete transformation of all the temporal modes ordinarily associated with looking at a movie.[24]

A critical component in this temporal shift is hinted at in Warhol's suggestion that his films start at 'any time'. This open-ended temporality is a clear precursor to the video installations that would come to prominence in the 1970s; indeed J. Hoberman has claimed that *Sleep* and *Empire* 'might be considered the original video installations'.[25] Warhol did, in fact, venture into video art on two occasions: one is his work *Outer and Inner Space* (1965), a film/video hybrid that displays four images of Edie Sedgwick rambling (often incoherently) about boredom, bullshit and blowfish; the other (less well known) is *Water* (1971).[26] This video is simply a thirty-two-minute fixed shot of the Factory watercooler, with sounds of chatting and gossip in the background. Not only is *Water* a furniture film, it also *calls attention* to its status as such. A watercooler is a quintessential site of sociality, a locus of snacking, drinking, chatting, joking, and so on – precisely the kind of object that Warhol's static films yearn to be. By offering spectators nothing but a watercooler, Warhol is going out of his way to emphasize that it is the interactions of the audience members – not the film itself – that are of central importance. Warhol rarely seemed particularly interested in the *content* of his early films; instead, he claimed, 'I'm interested in *audience reactions* to my films'.[27]

True to the contours of video installation art, Warhol wanted spectators to begin and end their viewing experiences at whatever point they desired; this applied not only to *actual* video installations like *Water* but even to films like *Sleep* and *Empire*. Of course this has always technically been an option; but before Warhol, only rarely (if ever) had a director *encouraged* such sporadic and incomplete reception. As Koch puts it, 'Warhol is perhaps the first film-maker ever to concede that his audience might not wish to see every minute of his work'.[28] Fifty years after Warhol's first films were released, many people still struggle to come to terms with this mode of cinematic spectatorship. It is difficult to imagine arriving late to a film without feeling the need to ask someone, 'What did I miss?' It is even more difficult to imagine walking out in the middle of a film that one actually *likes*. Yet if dominant models of spectatorship still demand complete viewings, the more fractional Warholian approach has at least become commonplace within the avant garde. For example, in the programme notes for his film *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* (also known as *Walden*) (1969), Mekas writes (in the third person), 'the Author won't mind (he is almost encouraging it) if the Viewer will choose to watch only certain parts of the work (*film*), according to the time available to him, according to his preferences, or any other good reason'.[29] For a more recent instance, consider Abbas Kiarostami's comments on his *Five: Dedicated to Ozu* (2003), an

24 Koch, *Stargazer*, p. 39.

25 J. Hoberman, 'Nobody's land: inside *Outer and Inner Space*', in Bill Jeffries (ed.), *From Stills to Motion and Back Again: Texts on Andy Warhol's* Screen Tests *and* Outer and Inner Space (Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 2003), p. 22.

26 Sometimes called *Water Piece for Ono*, since the videotape was produced for Yoko Ono's 'This is Not Here' exhibition in Syracuse, New York.

27 Berg, 'Andy Warhol: my true story', p. 92 (my italics). For more on *Water*, see Callie Angell, 'Andy Warhol: *Outer and Inner Space*', in Jeffries (ed.), *From Stills to Motion and Back Again*, p. 16.

28 Koch, *Stargazer*, p. 39.

29 Quoted in David E. James, 'Film diary/diary film: practice and product in *Walden*', in James (ed.), *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 170.

experimental documentary consisting of five prolonged shots of natural settings:

> You know how annoyed some directors get on finding out that someone has fallen asleep while watching their film. I will not be annoyed at all. I can confidently say that you would not miss anything if you had a short nap. … I declare that you can nap during this film.[30]

Like Mekas and Kiarostami, Warhol was an advocate of fragmentary forms of spectatorship. This became especially evident in 1964 at the second annual New York Film Festival. Here Warhol produced an installation that I will call (for ease of expression) the *Quartet Installation*. Four of Warhol's films (*Sleep*, *Haircut [No. 2]* [1963], *Kiss* [1964] and *Eat* [1964]) were shown simultaneously on Fairchild 400 projectors (which permitted the screening of 8mm films on small television-like screens). Warhol simply borrowed three minutes of footage from each film and put them on a continuous loop, resulting in films that were (according to a press release) 'endless'.[31] *Haircut* (*No. 2*) displays a visit to the barber, *Kiss* comprises a series of closeups of couples kissing, and *Eat* shows the artist Robert Indiana munching on a mushroom. While these three films are, in their original versions, each under an hour in length (unlike the more prolonged *Empire* and *Sleep*), they all feature neither sound, narrative nor teleological development, and very little movement (with the minimal movement that *is* seen slowed down to sixteen frames per second). In other words these are all furniture films, works that invite a partial, momentary and distracted glance. They were originally accompanied by La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #9* (1960), a minimalist work whose score consists only of a horizontal line. In this case the music was realized via the simultaneous playing of four taped recordings of a very loud sustained tone produced by a bowed brass mortar. When officials asked Young to turn down the volume, he withdrew his composition altogether, leaving Warhol's four films to continue playing in silence.[32]

No longer was it necessary (or even possible) for one to see a film from beginning to end. A film could be visited distractedly for a few moments before moving on to a new film. (This is precisely the point of the split screen that Warhol would later use in *Chelsea Girls* [1966]: 'I put two things on the screen … so you could look at one picture if you were bored with the other'.[33]) This practice is in some ways an institutionalization of the surrealists' mischievous habit of theatre-hopping, in which they would enter a theatre and begin watching a film *in medias res*, only to leave abruptly at the first hint of boredom to intrude on another film, and so on. But Warhol's *Quartet Installation* also has deep affinities with a common form of reception associated with the medium of television: channel surfing. Here one derives pleasure not from immersing oneself in a particular programme but rather from distractedly sampling numerous programmes (or, to use Bacon's term, 'tasting' several shows).

Given Warhol's love of television, it should come as no surprise that he sought to create films and installations with televisual properties. As he put

30 The quotation comes from Abbas Kiarostami's *Around Five* (2005), a documentary on the making of *Five*.

31 Quoted in Branden W. Joseph, '"My mind split open": Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable', *Grey Room*, no. 8 (2002), p. 85.

32 The multiplicity of screens used in the *Quartet Installation* would eventually be revisited in Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable productions (1966–67), which featured several film and slide projectors running simultaneously, along with numerous records playing, lights flashing, and a barrage of other visual and auditory stimuli. The Warhol film clips that were used for these productions were called *EPI Background* reels, a title which further hints at Warhol's interest in the furniture aesthetic. For an excellent historical account of the Exploding Plastic Inevitable and its relationship to the *Quartet Installation*, see Joseph, '"My mind split open" ', pp. 81–107. See also Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests*, pp. 264–79.

33 Joseph Gelmis, 'Andy Warhol', in Goldsmith (ed.), *I'll Be Your Mirror*, p. 166.

it, 'in the late 50s I started an affair with my television which has continued to the present, when I play around in my bedroom with as many as four at a time'.[34] Warhol's own viewing habits are reflected in his *Quartet Installation*, in which spectators are given precisely four film loops with which to perceptually 'play around'. And his assertion that he has 'always *believed* in television' is a devotional statement of almost religious fervour.[35] Not only does the *Quartet Installation* enable the spectator to 'jump' from one screen to another, but the 'endless' duration of Warhol's film loops echoes the interminability of television programming. As Greg Uhlin points out in his essay on Warhol and television, 'Televisual time can be first characterized as the experience of infinitude', adding, 'the extended duration of Warhol's early films indicates a desire for the process of recording to be continuous and unending'.[36]

What are the implications of Warhol's intermedia experiment? In part, it serves to complicate facile taxonomies that have long emphasized the supposed gulf between cinema and television. The most famous theorization of the distinctions between film and television – Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* – was written in 1964, the year in which Warhol created his *Quartet Installation*. McLuhan asserts that film is a 'hot' medium (one that is 'high definition', or filled with information), while television is a 'cool' medium (one that is 'low definition', leaving much to be 'filled in or completed by the audience').[37] I have never found McLuhan's categories to be particularly helpful. He seems to suggest that the limited information provided by television screens (which traditionally offered a mere 480 scan lines) requires the viewer to complete the image in a way that is not necessary in cinema. It is difficult to take this distinction seriously, since as Noël Carroll points out in his perceptive rebuttal of McLuhan, 'We don't do anything to "fill in" or to "complete" the TV image; we just look'.[38]

Contra McLuhan, many media theorists have argued that while cinema invites a gaze, television merely invites a glance.[39] Clearly such distinctions are becoming increasingly problematic in our post-medium age,[40] in which some spectators gaze at large, looming, high-definition television screens while others glance distractedly at films on computer screens and iPods, (and this is not to mention the proliferation of complex television dramas from companies like HBO and Netflix that require viewers' careful attention). Still, there is a kernel of truth in such theorizations: television viewing is, in general, less immersive than film viewing (which suggests a greater sense of agency on the part of the television viewer). I find Steven Shaviro's reading of McLuhan especially persuasive:

> [Television] is a part of our everyday experience; it quietly insinuates itself into our personal lives. We get so deeply involved with television precisely because it doesn't imperiously demand our attention. It is simply there, day in and day out, like wallpaper or *a piece of furniture*.[41]

With his *Quartet Installation*, Warhol sought to 'cool down' the medium of film so that it would be less intrusive and more participatory. His early films

34 Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (New York, NY: Harvest/HBJ, 1975), p. 26.

35 Letitia Kent, 'Andy Warhol, movieman: "It's hard to be your own script"', in Goldsmith (ed.), *I'll Be Your Mirror*, p. 187.

36 Graig Uhlin, 'TV, time and the films of Andy Warhol', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2010), p. 6. Seemingly endless films were a constant fascination for Warhol. **** (*Four Stars*) (1967), shown just once, is twenty-five hours in length, and many of Warhol's unrealized projects sought to push cinematic duration to even more extreme levels: he considered making a thirty-day-long film called *Warhol Bible*, as well as one that would last six months entitled *Building*.

37 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 22.

38 Noël Carroll, 'TV and film: a philosophical perspective', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2001), p. 28.

39 An argument first articulated in 1982 by John Ellis in his *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, rev. edn (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), pp. 127–44.

40 I borrow the term 'post-medium' from Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

41 Steven Shaviro, 'The life, after death, of postmodern emotions', *Criticism*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2004), p. 128 (my italics). It is worth noting that Lou Reed describes Warhol's *Empire* as 'wallpaper art' in the song 'Style It Takes'. See Lou Reed and John Cale, *Songs for Drella*, © 1990 by Sire, Warner Bros. Records. W2 26140. Compact Disc.

and installations challenged deeply held assumptions about cinematic spectatorship by appropriating the furniture aesthetic so closely associated with television. While many spectators (such as the surrealists) had approached film this way before, Warhol was creating some of the first films that *demanded* this kind of reception.[42]

As the *Quartet Installation* suggests, one of the most pivotal components in the furniture aesthetic is radical repetition. When a composition or a film takes some unexpected turn, our attention is piqued – we become interested in what the next development will be. But when a musical phrase or cinematic shot is repeated ad infinitum, the artwork fades into the background and our attention becomes focused elsewhere. In visual art, this repetition often leads to a degradation of signification. This was Warhol's goal: 'the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel'.[43] Whether it is serial repetition (painting after painting of the Campbell's soup can) or repetition within a single work (*100 Coke Bottles* [1962], *100 Dollar Bills* [1962], *100 Soup Cans* [1962]), Warhol obsessively repeats images until they are drained of all meaning, producing a kind of perceptual catatonia. It is reminiscent of Gertrude Stein's famous 'a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose',[44] in which the word 'rose', through repetition, loses its semantic content and becomes a hollow phoneme. Identical shots are repeated again and again in *Sleep*; and in *Empire*, while no shot is repeated, a quick glance at the filmstrip reveals frame after frame with essentially the same content.[45] It is true that the Empire State Building's lights occasionally turn on and off, and Warhol and Mekas can briefly be seen changing reels. Apart from such minor changes, however, the film repeats the same photogram obsessively. Ron Padgett's poem 'Sonnet: Homage to Andy Warhol' (which was inspired by *Sleep*) brilliantly satirizes Warhol's repetitions:

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Of course, on one level, this poem simply offers a comically literal onomatopoeic evocation of the sound of snoring. But beyond this it subverts conventional modes of reading literature in much the same way that Warhol's films subvert conventional modes of cinematic spectatorship.

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[42] Throughout his career, Warhol undermined simplistic (and arbitrary) dividing lines between media through a process of blending and appropriation. As Uhlin astutely notes, 'Warhol's artwork… frequently interrogated the properties of one medium by use of another – photography as painting, film as portraiture, and tape recording as novel'. See Uhlin, 'TV, time and the films of Andy Warhol', p. 3. Warhol's *Quartet Installation* adds another media hybrid to this list: film as television.

[43] See Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: the Warhol Sixties* (San Diego, CA: Harvest/HBJ, 1990), p. 64.

[44] See Gertrude Stein, 'An elucidation', in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 186.

[45] For more on Warhol's use of repetition in *Sleep*, see Joseph, 'Andy Warhol's *Sleep*'.

[46] 'Sonnet: Homage to Andy Warhol' by Ron Padgett, ©1964, reprinted by permission of the author. The poem can also be found in *Film Culture*, no. 32 (1964), p. 13. Angell mistakenly describes the poem as 'thirty-five lines of *z*'s'; however, true to the form of the sonnet, the poem has only fourteen lines, each with thirty-five *z*'s. See Angell, *Andy Warhol Screen Tests*, p. 150. For a more detailed treatment of Warhol's influence on Padgett, see Reva Wolf, *Andy Warhol, Poetry and Gossip in the 1960s* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 94–101.

How does one 'read' this poem, exactly? Should one carefully consider each line, one at a time, or simply glance at the poem holistically? Is it the *sight* of the repeated *z*'s that is important here (a sight which, when focused on for several seconds, inevitably makes the reader drowsy), or is the *sound* crucial too? In other words, should the poem be read aloud, and what might such a reading sound like? However these questions are answered, Padgett's use of extreme repetition creates a strikingly Warholian aesthetic. When one looks at the *z*'s for more than a moment, they lose their status as semantic or graphemic indicators. Like Warhol's incessant shots of Giorno's sleeping body, Padgett's repetition results in a deflection of the attentive eye. One can glance at the work momentarily, but giving it focused and thorough consideration is exceedingly difficult.

None of this is to suggest that a distracted viewing is the only 'correct' way to view Warhol's early films. As Arthur notes, 'Depending on what we make of the image, we may leave the theatre, doze off, fantasise, yell at the screen, [or] *treat it like a "normal" movie experience*. The list is not endless but it is distinctly Warholian.'[47] There is obviously nothing wrong with giving furniture art one's close and undivided attention. I sympathize with the audience at the Galerie Barbazanges who found Satie's furniture music too mesmerizing to ignore. I also sympathize with those rare cineastes who have sat alone and watched *Empire* in its entirety, overwhelmed by the originality and beauty of Warhol's monomaniacal vision. To a large extent the distinction between furniture art and its antithesis – immersive art – is in the eye of the beholder, not an immanent part of the work itself. Some listeners have found themselves entranced by the minimalist splendour of Satie's *Vexations*; others have put on a recording of a more intricate composition (such as Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* [1859]) to listen to distractedly while reading the newspaper, getting dressed or washing the dishes. Some spectators have watched Warhol's *Sleep* with an alert and fascinated eye; others have watched a seemingly more demanding film (like Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* [1946]) while simultaneously eating dinner, going through mail or tidying up the living room. Of course, watching a film in a cinema rather than at home makes a distracted viewing experience somewhat more difficult, but it does not preclude this option altogether – it is hardly uncommon to see spectators in a theatre whispering to neighbours, playing with their mobile phones or kissing. My goal is not to prescribe a certain mode of reception, but merely to draw attention to a dimension of film spectatorship that is often overlooked: the ways in which viewers can derive pleasure from components of a cinematic experience that have little to do with the film itself.

But does this mean that boredom can be summarily dismissed as a component of Warhol's vision? Not necessarily. Warhol was fond of saying 'I like boring things', although he was somewhat fickle on this point: on one occasion, he left a screening of *Sleep* after only a few minutes (much to the chagrin of his colleague Mekas), reasoning,

47 Arthur, 'Resighting the Warhol catechism', p. 152 (my italics).

> Sometimes I like to be bored, and sometimes I don't – it depends what kind of mood I'm in. Everyone knows how it is, some days you can sit and look out the window for hours and hours and some days you can't sit still for a single second.[48]

48 Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, p. 64.

In Koch's version of the story, Mekas ties Warhol down with rope at the *Sleep* screening, only to find out later that he has escaped. This anecdote is most likely apocryphal, however, since Warhol tells a similar story involving Mekas forcing someone else to see *Sleep* by tying him to a chair.[49] In any case, Warhol does seem to imply that he finds *Sleep* boring. But one must tread carefully here, resisting simplistic dichotomies (that *Sleep* and *Empire* are either interesting *or* boring, for example). Warhol's static films are interesting precisely *because* they are boring. Or, to put it another way, the *content* of Warhol's films is often boring but this is what makes the *experience* of watching them so potentially interesting. The viewer is no longer strictly bound by the terms of the conventional spectatorial contract. As Michael Snow has argued, there is usually an implicit

49 See Koch, *Stargazer*, pp. 35–36, and Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, p. 64.

> social contract that a spectator makes in going to a cinema theatre. This, of course, comes from the theatre (plays, live performances), but the 'contract' is: Events which will have determined durations usually take place on the screen (stage), and I will sit here and experience these durations.[50]

50 See Justin Remes, 'Sculpting time: an interview with Michael Snow', *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 56 (2012), p. 17.

Warhol offers a new contract: spectators are no longer tied to their seats with rope – either literally or metaphorically – but are free to look at the image as much or as little as they please, much the way they would a photograph or a painting. The duration of the *film* may be predetermined, but the duration of its *viewing* is indeterminate.

The hostility that many have expressed towards the very idea of films like *Empire* and *Sleep* is often inextricably connected with the assumption that they are supposed to be watched in their entirety and with close concentration. When seen as furniture films, however, this hostility often melts away. I have witnessed this distinction in the classroom. When I have asked my students to watch just ten minutes or so of a static film from beginning to end in silence, the experience tends to be awkward and arduous. But when I have shown such films while conversing with students, telling jokes, sipping on beverages, and so on, everyone suddenly finds themselves *enjoying* the screening. This is the kind of spectatorial shift that Warhol was interested in creating:

> that had always fascinated me, the way people could sit by a window or a porch all day and look out and never be bored, but then if they went to a movie or a play, they suddenly objected to being bored. I always felt that a very slow film could be just as interesting as a porch-sit if you thought about it the same way.[51]

51 Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, p. 260.

This observation highlights another problem with seeing Warhol's films as explorations of boredom: the term is generally used as a pejorative. When we call something boring, we often mean that it is laborious, even painful. When Warhol says that he likes boring things, however, he is not confessing to being some kind of masochist but expressing a fondness for the quotidian, the inconspicuous, the *uneventful*. This is the kind of 'boredom' that one encounters when sitting on one's porch, and it is a pleasant experience. As Malcolm Le Grice emphasizes, if Warhol's early films engender boredom, then it is 'a functional boredom', one deliberately employed to create a new kind of audience dynamic.[52] The only reason that Warhol's films are likely to evoke a painful kind of boredom is if one attends a screening expecting a traditional motion picture and waits for something to happen. To say that nothing happens in *Sleep* and *Empire* should not be seen as an insult – if anything, it is the *raison d'être* of the furniture film. As Warhol himself writes, with great pride, 'When *I'm* there, they tell me, nothing happens. I make nothing happen.'[53] In other words, if one *realizes* that one is watching an uneventful furniture film, the experience becomes quite different. Frances Colpitt contends that when an audience becomes bored in the face of conceptual art (and Warhol is mentioned here as an example), 'The root of the problem is in the unpreparedness of the audience',[54] but this is not to suggest that the only way to enjoy furniture art is to be primed in advance. The patient viewer may well discover the work's merits without any preparation and gradually move beyond boredom. As John Cage writes in his book *Silence*, 'In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting.'[55] In other words, it may take a few minutes to resign oneself to the fact that nothing will happen in a film like *Empire*, but once one does so, the film moves into the background and one is left with a startlingly unique cinematic experience, one that I would argue is very interesting. Wayne Koestenbaum notes that 'Warhol's images can seem stupid, mute, until you stare at them long enough to travel through stupefaction to illumination'.[56] Much the same could be said of Satie's *Vexations* – what at first seems stupefying gradually becomes an intriguing and provocative experience. Dick Higgins expresses it thus: 'Is [*Vexations*] boring? Only at first.' As time passes, Higgins argues, *Vexations* simply becomes a part of the 'environment', eventually engendering an ever-intensifying 'euphoria'.[57]

This euphoria was particularly prevalent during a recent screening of *Empire* at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. On 19 February 2011, the film was shown in its entirety to an audience who tweeted their responses to the experience, with each tweet recorded in Mark Leach's book *#Empirefilm*. Many of the tweets are cinephile wisecracks, very much in line with Warhol's desire to 'make comedy in the audience': 'I for one welcome today's announcement that Michael Bay is on board to direct the 3D IMAX remake of Warhol's "Empire"'; 'say what you want, but it still has a more sensible plot than avatar'.[58] But many also suggest the highly participatory

52 Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (London: Studio Vista, 1976), p. 94.

53 Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, p. 50.

54 Frances Colpitt, 'The issue of boredom: is it interesting?', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 43, no. 4 (1985), pp. 359–65.

55 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 93.

56 Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol*, p. 11.

57 Dick Higgins, 'Boredom and danger', in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Breaking the Sound Barrier: a Critical Anthology of the New Music* (New York, NY: Dutton, 1981), p. 21. Ina Blom also discusses this kind of aesthetically satisfying boredom, pointing out its 'capacity to cause disappearance on two different levels which must be experienced as reciprocal: the work will disappear into the surroundings, and the spectator will disappear into the work'. See Ina Blom, 'Boredom and oblivion', in Ken Friedman (ed.), *The Fluxus Reader* (London: Academy Editions, 1998), p. 66. For more on the role of boredom in Warhol's cinema, see Peter Gidal, *Andy Warhol: Films and Paintings. The Factory Years* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1991), pp. 80–90.

58 Mark Leach, *#Empirefilm* (Lexington, KY: CreateSpace, 2011), pp. 15–16, p. 37.

nature of the cinematic experience. There are several discussions that suggest the audience is deriving pleasure from watching the film while doing other things, such as whispering, telling jokes, eating popcorn, drinking whisky, taking acid or cheering. In fact the audience seems to cheer – as if at a sporting event – whenever there is any minuscule change on the screen: 'building's floodlights went on!!! (The crowd erupts!!!)'[59] This is a common response to Warhol's cinema: since there are so few changes in his mise-en-scene, those which do occur are often greeted with great enthusiasm. Consider Dave Hickey's description of a screening of *Haircut*. After the audience has witnessed several minutes of a barber clipping away at a man's head, a minor change is introduced: 'Then it happened. The guy getting the haircut reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and casually lit one up! *Major action!* Applause. Tumultuous joy and release! Chanting even.'[60] One is also reminded of David Bourdon's description of Warhol's cinema: 'Suddenly, the performer blinks or swallows, and the involuntary action becomes in this context a highly dramatic event, as climactic as the burning of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind*'.[61]

Some have difficulty adjusting to this furniture aesthetic, particularly in an institution of high art. As one spectator tweeted, 'I can't believe I just shouted outloud [sic] in a @MuseumModernArt theater'.[62] And it is striking how many tweets suggest that the experience was not boring (as many anticipated), but interesting and even (somewhat surprisingly) fast-paced: 'We thought #empirefilm would be endurance but it's gone by so fast – and with great entertainment. It's really almost over?'; 'time has gone by surprisingly fast!!'; 'But seriously, I don't find this boring at all'.[63] And of course, the very idea of encouraging the audience to tweet during *Empire* rather than directing them to turn their mobile phones off (a standard injunction preceding screenings in mainstream venues) further suggests the central role of audience participation. One spectator even asks, contra McLuhan, 'is film still a hot medium?'[64] I suspect that Warhol would have been delighted to see the 'cool', active, participatory approach of the MoMA audience, an approach that made the experience of watching *Empire* anything but boring. Furthermore, the fact that Warhol uses a quintessential work of architecture in *Empire* to encourage a form of distracted spectatorship is especially compelling in light of Walter Benjamin's remarks on architecture: 'Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective'. He adds that 'the optical reception of architecture … takes the form of casual noticing rather than attentive observation'. This is precisely the form of reception that Warhol sought.[65]

The furniture aesthetic that Warhol attempted to bring to the cinema was almost certainly inspired by his own habit of listening to the radio and watching television distractedly. This habit was a crucial element in Warhol's creative process: when painting, he found it useful to 'have the radio blasting opera [or in some cases, rock and roll], and the TV picture on (but not the sound)'.[66] This configuration served as the basis for the

59 Ibid., p. 83.

60 Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Los Angeles, CA: Art Issues, 1997), p. 97.

61 David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), p. 178.

62 Leach, *#Empirefilm*, p. 55.

63 Ibid., pp. 11, 44, 47.

64 Ibid., p. 16.

65 See Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility', trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: the Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 40.

66 Warhol and Hackett, *POPism*, p. 8.

premiere screening of *Sleep*, for which the silent image, televisual in its interminability, was accompanied by a radio tuned to a pop station: 'if a person were bored with the movie, he could just listen to the radio'.[67] In other words, Warhol was intensely interested in – and inspired by – the furniture aesthetic in a broad range of media. Like Satie, he was committed to the value of artworks that could be attended to casually and intermittently, works that could be tasted rather than digested. As Satie passionately asserted, furniture music 'fills the same role as light, warmth, and comfort in all its forms. … A man who has not heard "Furniture Music" does not know happiness.'[68] One is tempted to say the same of the furniture film.

67 Joseph Gelmis, 'Andy Warhol', in Goldsmith (ed.), *I'll Be Your Mirror*, p. 165.

68 Erik Satie, *A Mammal's Notebook*, trans. Antony Melville, ed. Ornella Volta (London: Atlas Press, 1996), p. 200.

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