Sleepers and Sleepless

On Andy Warhol's First Film, Sleep

Drorit Gur Arie

In 1963, shortly after buying his first 16mm movie camera to experiment in cinematic work, ANDY WARHOL documented his lover at the time, poet John Giorno, sleeping through the night. *Sleep*, Warhol's first movie—featured at the Petach Tikva Museum of Art as a historical project accompanying the exhibition "Insomnia"—embodies his aspiration to perpetuate unstaged life conditions. Warhol wanted the film to be equal in length to an average night's sleep of eight hours, but due to technical difficulties he eventually shot less footage, and stretched the film by means of slowdown and editing to six hours. Despite the "shortening," the film's first screenings elicited furious responses. The audience, accustomed to narrative films, demanded a refund when they realized that they were viewing a continuous static sequence showing a sleeping man.

The intimacy inherent in a film documenting a vulnerable and defenseless man sleeping could have been generated only through the gaze of someone observing a sleeping lover, as Klaus Biesenbach maintained. The film is infused with intimacy, exposing the moment before or after lovemaking.[1] The project was given many interpretations,[2] but Warhol himself provided a convincing explanation:

I could never finally figure out if more things happened in the sixties because there was more awake time for them to happen in (since so many people were on amphetamine), or if people started taking amphetamine because there were so many things to do that they needed to have more awake time to do them in. [...] Seeing everybody so up all the time made me think that sleep was becoming pretty obsolete, so I decided I'd better quickly do a movie of a person sleeping.[3]

John Giorno, on his part, recounted that on Memorial Day weekend in 1963, he and Warhol came back from a party, after which he fell asleep right away. He woke up in the middle of the night to find Warhol sitting beside him, watching him sleep. Warhol took a lot of speed in those days, his sleep was troubled, and he spent his nights staring at his bed partner. In the morning Warhol asked Giorno whether he would like to be a movie star. “Of course,” the young poet answered, “I want to be just like Marilyn Monroe.”[4]

Cinema was Warhol’s true passion. During 1963-64 he created quite a few basic, short “silent” movies which explored the potential of the medium in depicting a portrait, sexual desires, and routine everyday activities, such as *Haircut*, *Kiss*, *Eat*, *Blow Job*, etc. *Sleep*—the first film which required more sophisticated editing—is a slow film portrait, much like
painting or still photography. Warhol’s compilation of repeated footage in his editing was influenced, according to Callie Angell, by a concert performance of Erik Satie’s *Vexations*—an eighteen-hour-and-forty-minute-long performance during which the same brief piano score was repeatedly played 840 times.[5] Jonas Mekas, the guru of American avant-garde cinema and the founder of a leading New York-based cinematheque archive, said about filmmaker Stan Brakhage, that he arrived to New York especially to watch the much talked about *Sleep*. Brakhage had the film screened privately in the normal speed of 24 frames per second, and was deeply disappointed. Mekas implored him to watch the entire six hours again projected at 16 frames per second as Warhol intended. This time he left the screening hall overwhelmed by the film’s artistic impact, saying that this was a film by a great artist, who introduced a totally new view of the world. It is the minute mediumal intervention, as characteristic of Warhol, that generates the new perspective.[6] Warhol never meant his films to be seen “as film,”[7] but rather to expand the boundaries of the medium and push its limits. His films are clearly those of a visual artist who creates something between painting and a moving picture. The lighting, mise-en-scène, and static quality all attest to an attempt to create a cross between painterly and cinematic possibilities.

The news about Warhol’s sleep movie attracted massive publicity even before the film was edited and screened, and his conceptual daring continued to provoke

reactions even among those who never saw it. *Sleep*, Fred Camper maintained, “has long been one of the most famous of unseen films.”[8] Once the initial objection dissipated, however, it turned out that the slow motion and the avoidance of effects gave rise to a deeply meaningful work. The film requires active participation on the viewer’s part, much like an abstract painting or John Cage’s music. Even if in our contemporary world, accustomed to voyeuristic websites, it no longer appears all that radical—the stretching of the ethical borders between the private and the public by a myriad of new technologies instilled it with a previously denied legitimacy.

1 Klaus Biesenbach, “Image Body Machine,” in exh. cat. *Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures*, curated by Mary Lea Bandy (Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2004), pp. 14-15; the sexualized point of view is expanded in *Blow Job* (1964), where everything which is not shown takes center stage. The beauty lies in the gap between what we imagine and what we see or experience. *Blow Job* shows only a face, a neck, and sometimes an upper body. This avoidance is one of the forces setting in motion a voyeurism which strives to be satisfied. In *Blow Job*, the head thrown back represents a moment of sexual excitement in the photographed organ, but even after a full 45 minutes the situation remains intact, and the static cinematic sequence does not support the sense of climax.

2 See: Daniel Birnbaum “The Art of Pierre Huyghe,” *Artforum International Magazine*, *Encyclopedia.com* (January 2000); Pierre Huyghe exhibited a homage to Warhol at Manifesta 2 in Luxembourg (1998). In his *Sleeptalking* he screened a soundless excerpt from Warhol’s *Sleep* featuring Giorno blinking 40 times in a row on one side of a glass partition, while on the other side Giorno’s voice was heard recounting the film’s evolution. The space of the installation created a dreamlike occurrence where visitors on one side of the glass could see the audience watching the film on the other side, and wondered whether this was reality or a special visual effect.

3 Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* [1980] (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 41-42.

4 John Giorno, “Commentary,” in *Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures* (n. 1), *op. cit*., p. 238.

5 Callie Angell quoted in: Mary Lea Bandy, “Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures,” in *Andy Warhol: Motion Pictures* (n. 1), *op. cit*., pp. 17-18.

6 See: Victor Bockris, *Warhol* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 222-224. Thanks to Daphna Raz for the information.

7 In Warhol’s films—which included blurred scenes and “snowy” screens and were based on improvization—the “superstars” were unskilled talents, influenced by Hollywood’s glamour days of the 1940s and 1950s. Many of them were transvestites, drug addicts, or rich kids rebelling against their parents, and other free souls of the 1960s.

8 Fred Camper, “The Lover’s Gaze,” http://www.chicagoreader.com/movies/archives/2000/0400/000428_1.html