Warhol and Cinema. Could there ever be a more natural fit? In some sense, as his epic career paralleled the golden age of cinema, it was almost inevitable that Andy Warhol would pick up a movie camera and explore the “poppiest” of the arts. His rich obsessions that ran through his work, from his lifelong passion for photography and the allure of celebrity, to other preoccupations: iconography, portraiture, the elevation of the mundane to the fetishized - all predisposed him to be a filmmaker. Warhol’s Factory was of course his famous studio, and in the parlance of the film industry, he was the studio head. He was also the writer, the producer, the director (later he would hand-off the directing role to longtime collaborator Paul Morrissey) and the pop art impresario/pied-piper who wrangled the talents of his “Superstars” - his stable of socialites, junkies and hustlers - into his cinematic endeavors.

His earliest films take a decidedly unconventional approach to the medium, virtually abandoning narrative and cinematic technique in favor of something closer to portraiture. And like his series prints, the early films are fascinated with variation and repetition. The painterly films, among them KISS (1963-64) and EAT (1964) and perhaps his most infamous work EMPIRE (1964), the 8-hour continuous shot of the Empire State Building, have a largely static feel, yet beneath their surface, urge us to consider underlying references to Hollywood and our relationship to movies. COUCH (1964) for example, which infers the so-called casting couch, features a famous couch from The Factory, and an array of “Superstars” engaged in both mundane activities and a variety of sexual encounters. While there’s plenty of “action” in the film, its continuous, locked-down camera angle and distant lens keeps the audience as observers, forcing us into our traditional cinematic role of voyeur. The goings on are impersonal and the opposite of a movie, like the conspicuousness of an iconic building without, for example, a colossal gorilla climbing it. (Incidentally, when asked why he filmed the 8-hour static shot of EMPIRE, Warhol quipped, “To see time go by” - the exact opposite impulse of a movie, whose constant manipulation of time and space takes us out of the world where we don’t seem to witness time or anything else as we willingly suspend our disbelief.)

Later films, CHELSEA GIRLS (1966) and TRASH (1970), feel a bit more conventional in their approach to narrative, but there’s still a steely distance, and an intention that’s much different than what we might call "a movie". Even late work like 1973’s notorious midnight movie FRANKENSTEIN (aka FLESH FOR FRANKENSTEIN) an overwrought spectacle of campy perversion and grotesqueness - originally released in 3D, is ultimately a film about film and centered on notions of the appropriation of celebrity and fame. The canonized stars that appear in Warhol’s lexicon of imagery, those perfect specimens of us, the ones that are just like you & me only better in every way - most famously of course Marilyn Monroe, but also Liz Taylor, Audrey Hepburn, Marlon Brando, John Wayne, et al. - all represent an acknowledgement of his (and our) obsession with celebrity and larger-than-lifeness. The cinema of Warhol is populated with a decidedly different breed of beautiful people. The pimps and hustlers of TRASH are glorious pretty boys on the surface of their true raunchy underground darkness. And Baron Frankenstein (played with visceral lasciviousness by Udo Kier) is himself a necrophiliac monster, ultimately worse than his gory creations. But just like the fetishized Marylin or James Dean, Warhol’s “Superstars” mirror the same notions of stardom only fame feels now, in the midst of the shock and raunchiness, quite a bit more sleazy. And that might be the point.
Unlike his contemporaries, Stan Brakhage (DOG STAR MAN, 1961-64) who used cinema to conceptualize fundamental abstractions like light, motion, and juxtaposition, or Kenneth Anger who’s psychodramas FIREWORKS (1947) or SCORPIO RISING (1963) establish the potential of deeply personal exploration in cinema, Warhol’s cinema, like his all of his work, acts as a relentless reflection of, and perhaps a way of owning up to, the dominance of popular culture as our irrepresible guilty pleasure. This mirror that Warhol insists on manifested itself as an interesting idea that was never actually pursued. Warhol, who produced the debut album for Factory house band The Velvet Underground, suggested a novel idea for their moody ballad “I'll Be Your Mirror”. He proposed that the album be pressed with a purposeful scratch in it so that the line “I'll be your mirror” would repeat infinitely on a record player until the listener was forced to move the needle themselves. How’s that for a pleasant reminder of our incriminated role in all of this?