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## The Burns Effect: Documentary as Celebrity Advertisement

*A great nation deserves great art.*  
—NEA slogan

*History made them famous.  
Ken Burns makes them real.*  
—PBS website

*Good business is the best art.*  
—Andy Warhol

With the broadcast of his sprawling four-hour epic, *Andy Warhol: A Documentary*, Ric Burns gives PBS's Good Housekeeping Seal of approval to the former enfant terrible of the art pantheon, and moves himself a little closer to the position in the documentary film world occupied by his more famous brother. Though barely a quarter of the length of Ric Burns's eighteen-hour series on New York (*New York City: A Documentary*), and representing only a fraction of the screen time taken up by such Warhol cinematic marathons as *Sleep and Empire*, this new treatment is still more than twice as long as Burns's previous artist portraits and, at a cost of \$3.6 million, considerably more expensive. Digital video and nonlinear editing may have opened the gates to low-budget documentary filmmakers, but at \$15,000 a minute, Burns's *Warhol* has certainly raised the entry bar for film production's higher echelons. Given the current prices for Warhol's paintings, perhaps budget costs and screen time estimates for documentaries about artists are likely to wind up more or less in sync with the market value of their work.

In the meantime, while the world awaits Ken Burns's next multi-hour series, *The War* (on World War II), the buzz around Warhol reminds us once again of the extraordinary impact these two brothers have had on the world of documentary filmmaking. Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* may have grossed more than \$200 million and won an award at the Cannes Film Festival, but at the end of the day it's the Burns brothers who have had the most decisive influence on the way documentary films are made and, more importantly, how they are perceived by the American public. Aside from Bob and Harvey Weinstein, it's hard to think of a

family that has dominated an area of independent film production the way Ken and Ric Burns have dominated PBS documentaries over the past twenty years—an impact that is hardly limited to the television audience, since there probably isn't a school media center in the country without one or more sets of Burns documentaries, CDs, or companion books in regular circulation. Seeing a film by Ken or Ric Burns has, in a way, become a rite of passage for students, as American as the Pledge of Allegiance.

Since the eleven-hour series *The Civil War* (1990) attracted forty million viewers and anointed Ken Burns as “the most accomplished documentary filmmaker of his generation” (*The New York Times*) and a producer of “heroic television” (George Will), Ken and his brother Ric, collaborators on *The Civil War* but working independently since, have produced nearly a hundred hours of prime-time programming for public television. Their two- or four-hour portraits of individuals (Thomas Jefferson, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mark Twain, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Jack Johnson, etc.) or multi-hour series on American themes (*Jazz*, *Baseball*, *New York City*, *the American West*) have become public television's gold standard. If PBS had a documentary brand, it would be Burns.

In fact PBS has come closer now than ever to making that brand official. On January 13, 2007, John Boland, Chief Content Officer of PBS, announced that Ken Burns had signed a fifteen-year exclusive production contract that will allow the fifty-three-year-old filmmaker to live out his professional career at PBS. “Ken has the remarkable ability to educate and entertain at the same time,” Boland said, “combining the everyday drama of history with gripping storytelling. He's an American treasure and the very essence of what we at PBS consider the best in television.”

Perhaps the most recognizable feature of a Burns film is a slow, sometimes excruciatingly slow, camera move on a black-and-white photograph, bookended by a couple of beautifully shot interview sound bites with a writer or historian. For better or worse, this is, as historian Stephen Ambrose remarked, how most Americans get their history these days. Of course, Ken Burns didn't invent the technique of using a movie camera to animate still photographs—a possibility that's been around since the fluid head tripod first appeared—and while we can't hold him totally responsible for turning it into a cliché, it's something that wouldn't have happened without him. In fact, slow zooms and pans on photographs have become so popular

that they've recently been incorporated into video editing programs like Apple's iMovie and Final Cut Express as, yes, the "Ken Burns Effect." One of the desktop video websites introduces the program by saying, "Let's have a look at how you can 'Be Like Ken.'"

The technique was used extensively and effectively in *The Civil War*, where the lack of archival motion pictures made it a necessity. Burns broke down individual photographs into long shots, medium shots, and close-ups, linked by pans, zooms, and cross-dissolves, creating visual narratives and a sense of space and time from a single two-dimensional image. The slow, methodical movements have an almost hypnotic effect, drawing viewers into the film. Combining these visual effects with an evocative musical score and readings from soldiers' letters and other original documents, Burns's series captured the Civil War's sadness and sense of loss and established a bond with a PBS audience in a way that no documentary had probably ever done before. Always capable of articulating what he does with absolute clarity, Burns has called himself an "emotional archaeologist"—an appropriate description for someone with his almost uncanny ability to draw meaning and emotion from what might, in another filmmaker's hands, remain mere images. For a pre-cinema subject like the Civil War, the technique made absolute sense, and used judiciously it can be remarkably effective. Whatever one may think about Ken Burns's stature as a documentary filmmaker, it's important to acknowledge that he is very, very good at what he does. In less experienced hands, however, the limitations of the "Burns Effect" make it difficult even for members of the Burns inner circle to be entirely successful. In spite of having Ken as a consultant, Ric as creative adviser, and Buddy Squires, Ken's regular director of photography, shooting the interviews, Amy Stechler's *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo* (85 minutes, 2003) lacks the smoothness and overall aura of a typical Burns project.

Indeed, the moving camera technique can even be overdone by its established masters. In Ric Burns's *Ansel Adams: A Documentary* (95 minutes, 2002), the camera rarely holds on a photograph long enough for the viewer to appreciate Adams's careful framing and composition. The camera is in almost constant motion, so the photographer's work blends seamlessly with archival motion-picture footage and other still photographs in a way that makes it impossible to distinguish Adams's images from anyone else's. A reason for this might be found in one of the video websites devoted to the "Ken Burns Effect," which explains that "zooming and panning across photographs gives the feeling of motion, and keeps the viewer

visually entertained.” This desire to keep the viewer “visually entertained” may also be the reason behind the endless and repetitive helicopter shots through Yosemite’s canyons that reappear throughout Burns’s film on Adams. Beautiful as these shots may be, they make little aesthetic sense in a film about a photographer who had the legs of his tripod firmly anchored to the ground and his eye clearly focused on the ground glass.

Animating photographs is, however, only one aspect of the signature style of the Burns brothers; it takes more than fluid camera moves to hold the attention of a television audience and to attract multi-million-dollar production budgets. Although there are stylistic differences between the brothers’ work—Ken’s tends to be slicker and more formulaic, for instance—the full arc of the “Burns Effect” applies to both: first, the choice of a subject whose importance is beyond question; second, extensive research, leading to rarely seen archival film and photographs and quotations from original documents read aloud by well-known actors; third, interviews with unfailingly articulate historians, critics, and writers, beautifully lit and shot in flattering close-ups; fourth, a solemn, authoritative narration spoken by a friendly, authoritative voice, e.g., David McCullough or Ed Hermann for Ken, David Ogden Stiers or Christopher Plummer for Ric; fifth, a complete marketing package featuring books, CDs, and a wide variety of ancillary merchandise aimed at the home television audience and also schools and libraries; and, last but not least, music. Music, music, and more music, usually running continuously from the beginning of a program to the end. If there’s one thing the Burns style abhors, it’s silence. And if there’s one thing it abhors more than silence, it’s brevity: never say in one hour what you can say in four, and never say in four what you can say in twelve. Think of the Burns Effect as the anti-YouTube.

The Burns style is instantly recognizable, and this reliable predictability is one of the reasons for the filmmakers’ success. “Documentary” used to suggest (and some films still bear out this suggestion) shaky, hand-held camera work, scratchy sound, and minimal production values; subject matter in such films is expected to overshadow technique. In a Burns film, on the other hand, form and content come together effortlessly; these programs are always produced on an extremely high technical level: you’ll never see an out-of-focus shot or a bad camera move, nor will you strain to hear an inaudible line of dialogue. Not a hair is out of place. Most historical documentaries combine archival motion picture footage with interviews shot on video, and the subtle difference in image quality between the two mediums produces a

psychological cleavage between past (film) and present (video). Burns interviews, on the other hand, are almost always shot on 16-millimeter film, so the past and present come together seamlessly; as a result, the whole program takes on the look and feel of History. Moreover, the interviews are always held within a rather narrow range of expression that might be called High Earnestness (think Charlie Rose). No one gets excited or upset; emotions are kept carefully in check. In this way, the Burns brothers can take on serious subjects in a respectful, thorough manner that does not make great demands on the audience—other than time. Like all filmmakers, Ken and Ric Burns undoubtedly have to make compromises along the way, but these compromises are never visible. As a viewer, you always feel that they have full, unlimited command of their material. “The fuel of filmmaking is the control you have of a powerful medium,” Ric Burns told an interviewer from indieWIRE recently (August 31, 2006): “That control is really the only reward—that and when every now and then a moment on film seems to sing.” Sometimes, though, these moments of cinematic singing seem few and far between.

Documentaries often challenge conventional wisdom in a way that’s unsettling or provocative, but you’re not likely to find yourself anxious or upset after watching a Burns documentary; the experience is like eating a good, satisfying turkey dinner . . . sometimes even more than one. Of course, there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with films that don’t challenge any prevailing assumptions. The problem is that, over the past fifteen years, this style of safe, expensive, non-challenging filmmaking has imposed itself as the only way high-end public television documentaries are to be made—particularly those funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities or the National Endowment for the Arts, the main funding sources for cultural and historical programs destined for PBS.

When the NEH began giving money to filmmakers in the 1970s, no direct links yet existed with public television. Producers were encouraged to work with PBS, but neither party was obligated to do so, and single programs often had no place in a lineup devoted primarily to series. Frustrated by a large number of funded yet unfinished—or, if finished, often unseen—projects, the NEH began demanding that prospective grantees secure in advance firm commitments for national broadcast of the films they were proposing. Today, it’s highly unlikely that a filmmaker can expect to receive even a scripting grant without such an agreement or the strong likelihood of getting one. Since the most “successful”

documentaries—i.e., those fully funded and nationally broadcast—were usually produced by the Burns brothers or by someone working in a recognizably similar style, filmmakers duly noted what it would take to get funded and what would appeal to PBS shows like *American Masters* or *The American Experience*: multi-part series or portraits of individuals that were non-controversial and were produced in a way that would insure ongoing corporate and foundation sponsorship, adequate marketing budgets, and a generally reverent audience that had come to expect a certain kind of product.

Several years ago, the Canadian Centre for Architecture organized an exhibition about Disney theme parks that was called *The Architecture of Reassurance*; the point was to call attention to a building style that makes you feel comfortable about who you are and about your place in the world. In a way, the Burns brothers' filmmaking style satisfies a similar need, offering a cinema of reassurance that provides a temporary safe haven in a troubled, uncertain, culturally incoherent world. Other filmmakers may concern themselves explicitly with the hot topical issues of the moment, but Ken and Ric Burns appear to be working on a higher plane, concerning themselves with History, with subjects that become, in their capable hands, Universal Truths. One reason why historical fictions (e.g., *Thirteen Moons*, *The Devil in the White City*, etc.) have become extremely popular over the past ten years may be that they offer a kind of security, providing the satisfactions of an ordered fictional experience that's built on events that actually did occur. A Burns film plays a comparable role in the documentary film context, serving up history in an attractive and familiar form. Perhaps *The Civil War* would have been an enormous success whenever it was broadcast, but the fact that it came out around the time of the first Gulf War seems a stroke of particularly good fortune. Turning the attention of audiences back to one of the defining moral events in American history, a brutal war judged to be undertaken for a just cause, this series evoked a kind of melancholy nostalgia, and also served to provide periods of welcome and edifying diversion from the anxiety and bewilderment of the present.

In this context, Andy Warhol is, upon reflection, an interesting and ultimately obvious choice. Once the symbol of the degenerate New York cultural underground, Warhol has, in recent years, come to seem almost respectable; indeed, it would be hard to think of a twentieth-century American artist with better name recognition. And yet, in spite of his fame, Warhol himself remains an enigma, an albino chameleon once described as the *Citizen Kane*

of the art world. A master of self-promotion through seeming indifference while he was alive, Warhol succeeded in achieving a celebrity stature that has continued to increase since his untimely death in 1987, and his artworks have appreciated in value accordingly. His Pop Art paintings of Campbell's soup cans, his Brillo boxes, his images of Mao Tse-tung and Elizabeth Taylor, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, once scorned and ridiculed by the art establishment, now command millions of dollars when they appear at auction. Moreover, though many of the collections of objects in his \$600-million estate were sold by Sotheby's after his death, the Warhol Foundation in Pittsburgh will probably be cataloguing what's left for the rest of the twenty-first century.

Warhol has, of course, been the subject of previous documentary films, perhaps most notably *Andy Warhol: The Complete Picture*, a 105-minute program produced by Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato for England's Channel 4 and Bravo in 2003 (described on the DVD jacket as the "definitive look at the life and creative world of a revolutionary"); but at that point the artist had not yet undergone the Burns treatment. Ric Burns was not a big Warhol fan when he was approached about this project, just as his brother was not a jazz aficionado before taking on *Jazz*, but the world of Warhol and his entourage may have appealed to a filmmaker who is an admirer of Martin Scorsese and who once told an interviewer that *Goodfellas* and *Raging Bull* are arguably the two greatest documentaries ever made (*indieWIRE*, August 31, 2006). In any event, whatever reservations one might have about Ric Burns's style of filmmaking, one could not be faulted for harboring high expectations for a new, big-budget, four-hour program produced by one of America's premier documentary filmmakers. Whether *Andy Warhol: A Documentary* succeeds in meeting those expectations or not, the film tells us a great deal about the state of documentary filmmaking in the United States and about the current cultural landscape in general. Andy Warhol may have survived Valerie Solanas's bullets, but the dead weight of the "Burns Effect" in this case is another matter entirely.

On one level, Warhol presents a standard version of the American Dream story: Andrew Warhola, a painfully shy, sickly, yet somehow inwardly self-confident young artist from working-class Pittsburgh, watched over by an obsessive, overprotective mother, comes to New York to seek his fortune, and there he is transformed into Andy Warhol, successful commercial illustrator—and, then, as the film repeatedly assures us, into the greatest artist of the second half of the twentieth century. In spite of the false modesty of its title ("A" Documentary, not

“The” Documentary), Warhol is a supremely self-assured piece of filmmaking, with a single message driven home relentlessly for four hours: Andy Warhol is a great artist, a genius, certainly the great artist of the second half of the twentieth century (Picasso tenuously occupying the first half), and, possibly, the greatest artist of modern times.

The film begins with a black-and-white newsreel clip of Andy in his best “I- couldn’t-care-less” interview mode, speaking to a British journalist. Warhol agrees with his interviewer that he is not an original artist: he doesn’t create anything new, he says, because it’s easier not to. When asked if this is a joke he’s playing on the public, Warhol answers that it isn’t. After this, the film wastes no time getting down to brass tacks. A voice, perhaps Philip Bosco’s, informs us that Warhol “was the most American of artists and the most artistic of Americans, so American in fact that he is virtually invisible to us. . . . In Warhol, the simplicity of the typical American citizen and the simplicity of artistic genius are so intermingled that we cannot distinguish them, nor properly credit his Americanness or his genius.” These words are ascribed on screen to Dave Hickey. It’s an interesting quality of moving-image media that when you hear a statement like this, without time to reflect, it doesn’t seem as nonsensical as when you see it written out and can appreciate its evident vacuousness. Just what is the “simplicity of the typical American citizen”? And how does it intermingle with the “simplicity of artistic genius”? And, who, you might conceivably ask, is Dave Hickey? The film seems to assume that we should know, or that we will be too embarrassed to ask. A moment later, art historian Neil Printz gives his assessment of Warhol: “I think he’s a touchstone of the culture we live in—a touchstone for the entire culture of the postwar period. I think he is probably the most important artist of the second half of the twentieth century, maybe the most important artist of the twentieth century. If we needed to find a visual form just to distill what it’s like to have been alive in the last fifty years, the image would come somewhere from the corpus of Andy Warhol.” Next, Warhol biographer Stephen Koch weighs in: “Andy was one of the very impressive artists of ideas. His art always suggests something about life that can be formulated in philosophic terms.” Critic Wayne Koestenbaum follows, informing us that the career of the fictional Marjorie Morningstar, the story of a girl “moving from nowhere to somewhere,” provided one of Warhol’s most enduring self-images. “A Star is Born,” Koestenbaum goes on, “is the narrative of Andy’s life,” and we’re told it’s important to know that Warhol probably signed paintings “Andy Morningstar.” Probably? It would be interesting to see one painting he chose to sign that way. But what would be the need to come up with

evidence for such assertions? Throughout the film, Koestenbaum consistently delivers the most flamboyant, over-the-top pronouncements—for example: “Andy was the greatest philosopher of stardom who ever lived.” “He wanted to steal as much reality as possible. He was voracious and acquisitive before reality.” “What Warhol did was transubstantiating garbage and making it valuable.” It’s a testament to Ric Burns’s talent that statements like these don’t come off immediately as preposterously inflated. In any case, the film’s overall narrative arc is laid out in the first ten minutes: the twentieth century is divided into two eras—B.A. and A.A. (Before Andy and After Andy). The next four hours are devoted to identifying points along this unquestioned timeline.

Warhol’s narration, written by Ric Burns and James Sanders, offers the same kind of breathless hyperbole as the interviews. “In three astonishing years at the beginning of the 1960s,” we are told at one point, “Andy Warhol would turn the art world upside down and take American culture by storm . . . Grasping as no one before or since the function of fame in a mass society, he would force us to confront and reenvision the world we live in, permanently transforming the world around us, at once fulfilling the promise of the American Dream, and at the same time redefining it, reinventing it, and calling it into question.” That pretty much says it all. At the very end of the film, Irving Blum has the last word: “I just celebrate the guy’s genius.” After four hours of unrelieved hype, this actually seems like a refreshing understatement.

If you can keep up your attention, the film does have its interesting moments: curator Donna De Salvo’s explanation of Warhol’s blotted-line technique; the story of his first job at Vogue magazine; Bob Colacello’s description of the church Warhol attended regularly as a young boy and the influence the icons on the wall might have had on him. And one thing a substantial budget can give you is access to a wide range of expensive archival footage, so it is possible for us to get a look at Warhol at work on his films or large silk screen images in The Factory, a radiant Susan Sontag getting ready for her Warhol close-up, Salvador Dali mugging for the camera, Jonas Mekas walking through Warhol’s loft, and a young Jane Fonda caught briefly in the corner of the frame at a press conference. Unfortunately, we are rarely given time to savor these moments on our own; the camera never rests, and nothing passes by without commentary. Footage of Warhol’s appearance at the Dom on St. Mark’s Place in 1966, for example—a multimedia spectacle involving light projections and the music of the Velvet Underground—runs almost silently in the background as Laurie Anderson, in her flat, clinical drone, explains to us the conclusions to be drawn from what is going on. As for Warhol’s

childhood, it is generally presented through a signature Burns moment of slow camera moves over still photographs; this seems a welcome relief from the frenetic pace of the archival footage in some other sequences, but when the same slow camera moves are used later to recreate Valerie Solanas's shooting of Warhol, the effect seems all too self-conscious and contrived, and it falls flat.

Few art historians would question Warhol's general importance and influence, yet in the end the extravagant claims for his artistic genius seem considerably less persuasive than is the evidence of his unerring instinct for fusing art and commerce. Perhaps this is what Dave Hickey means by asserting that Warhol was the "most American of artists"; but while having a canny business sense may well be necessary for achieving great commercial success in the contemporary art world, it can hardly be seen as definitive proof of true genius. In any case, it is worth remarking that the proclamations of Warhol's genius in *Warhol* are not the opinions of disinterested observers but of people who have a vested interest in Warhol, Inc.:

artist/photographer Billy Name, former "manager" of the Factory; image-creating critics like Dave Hickey and Wayne Koestenbaum; former *Interview* editor Bob Colacello; collector/dealer Irving Blum; Warhol biographers Stephen Koch and John Richardson; and filmmaker Vincent Fremont, a former VP of Andy Warhol Enterprises. A similarly homogeneously opinionated cast of promoters appears in Ric Burns's film on Ansel Adams and Ken Burns's film on Frank Lloyd Wright.

Unfortunately, the use of authoritative "experts" of this sort to make a case—that is, to tell viewers the right things to think—has become one of the enduring clichés of contemporary documentary filmmaking in the United States. One reason is that a lineup like this gives filmmakers an easy way out: your film doesn't have to make the argument through analysis and the presentation of substantial evidence; the experts will make the argument for you, by making a series of emphatic and oracular pronouncements. And since the specific credentials of these experts are usually not known to the audience, their authority consists essentially in their having been chosen by the filmmakers in the first place. Dave Hickey, for example, may be well known to some people who follow developments in the art world, but he is very likely not a household name for the majority of public television viewers. And yet, the statement about Warhol's "Americanness" that opens the film, read by a narrator, is attributed to Hickey with the same degree of gravitas that you might give to a quotation from Shakespeare, Karl

Marx, or Tolstoy. In the past, it was a filmmaking axiom that a judiciously placed negative statement can often serve to reinforce the positive claims by taking into account the possibility of other views, but no one deviates from the party line in this film. Indeed, the only mildly negative comments appear in relation to Warhol's sometimes cavalier and voyeuristic treatment of the manifestly self-destructive behavior of his associates, but these tendencies are noted in passing and are not judged as compromising Warhol's stature in any serious way, or calling into question the nature and extent of his achievement. Not once in four hours is there a dissenting voice questioning Warhol's talent and influence or his elevated status in the art world; once established, his genius is understood to be virtually limitless and all-encompassing: Warhol is not only a great visual artist but one who did nothing less than reinvent cinema and American culture in general along the way. This is the Great Man theory of art history, with a vengeance; if Stephen Ambrose is correct in declaring that Americans are now getting their history from Ken Burns, we may soon be getting our art history from Ric. Unsuspecting viewers could easily come away with the impression that this estimate of Warhol's overwhelming artistic genius represents a universal consensus. This, too, has become a crucial aspect of the "Burns Effect": the determination to identify subjects who might be presented as examples of unquestioned "genius"—Eugene O'Neill, Frank Lloyd Wright, Thomas Jefferson, Mark Twain—so that the certified importance and seriousness of the film itself will remain beyond reproach. This kind of self-congratulatory cheerleading may work for an hour or two; after four hours of Warhol, it becomes oppressive. Unfortunately, this uncritical, celebratory attitude toward documentary subjects has now become a trend, reflecting a form of narcissism that now passes for high culture. We may not yet have a Hagiography Channel, but it would not be surprising if one were on the horizon.

Two recent examples of what we might call the celebrity school of filmmaking—films about celebrities in which only celebrities are interviewed—are Sidney Pollack's *Sketches of Frank Gehry* and Patricia Leibovitz's adoring documentary portrait of her sister Annie, *Life Through a Lens*. The cast of *Sketches* includes charter members of the Gehry Fan Club such as Michael Eisner, Dennis Hopper, Barry Diller, and Michael Ovitz—and, of course, Pollack himself, an acclaimed Hollywood director, sometime actor, longtime friend of Gehry, and a celebrity in his own right. The Leibovitz documentary, on the other hand, is a veritable cornucopia of celebrities, since the subject is herself a celebrity photographer, best known for photographing celebrities, all of whom speak of Leibovitz in glowing terms. One of the best is Vogue editor

Anna Wintour, doing a perfect imitation of Meryl Streep playing Anna Wintour, who says that the most striking thing about Annie is that: “She cares ... she cares ....” In Pollack’s film, cultural historian Hal Foster is given a few minutes of screen time to offer a dissenting opinion on Gehry’s genius. He is, however, filmed from a most unflattering angle and is not given the room to develop the kinds of arguments he has made elsewhere (e.g., in his essay “Master Builder” in *Design and Crime*, published by Verso in 2002). For a moment, photography critic Vicki Goldberg plays this role in the Leibovitz film, with an almost offhand comment about how good Annie Leibovitz is at capturing the essence of our celebrity culture, which is, after all, quite shallow.

Dave Hickey, author of the collection entitled *Air Guitar* and someone with a reputation as a maverick art historian and as an incisive, independent, outspoken cultural interpreter, could possibly have played this critical role in *Warhol*, but he too seems to have been swept up in the general uncritical enthusiasm (he is also listed in the credits as one of the film’s associate producers). Nor is the cumulative deadening effect of the interviews in *Warhol* helped by the monotonous delivery of Laurie Anderson, who serves as the program’s narrator, or by Jeff Koons, who is often used to supply the voice of Warhol. Both Koons and Anderson are, however, bona fide celebrities, as is executive producer Diane von Fürstenberg. Even if these people weren’t already celebrities, their simply making an appearance in *Warhol* might have served to transform them: in describing the “Ken Burns Effect,” Wikipedia informs us that the term has also been used outside the realm of cinematic technique “to refer to a person who gains an increased degree of celebrity after appearing in a Burns documentary.”

Seeing *Warhol* at the Film Forum in New York, where it played for two weeks without an admission charge, viewers had the sense that the extreme sharpness and detail of the interview close-ups on a theater screen were almost hyperreal; the tight framing of the faces removed them from any particular sense of place, transforming them into enormous visual icons, like portrait paintings done by Chuck Close. By comparison, the effective “reality” of the archival footage of Warhol and his entourage—old 16-millimeter films, often washed out and grainy—was ultimately diminished by the visual power and scale of the interview images, if not by the extravagant words of those who were interviewed. In this regard it is interesting to compare the interviewees in the Channel 4 production *Andy Warhol: The Complete Picture*, a group that includes Warhol biographer Stephen Koch and Warhol collaborator Billy Name, both

of whom also appear in Burns's film. In the Channel 4 documentary, Koch and Name are only two faces included in a much larger and more varied cast of characters than the critics, writers, and single collector who figure in *Warhol*, and rather than presenting these participants in the same tight close-ups, director Chris Rodley and his cinematographer chose to frame them in a variety of ways; his images are no less carefully composed than Burns's close-ups, but they are often shot at a medium distance that locates these people as individuals in a particular environment, not in some anonymous space—without distracting the viewer from what they have to say. Gerard Malanga, for instance, Warhol's studio assistant, is filmed outside in the street, from a high angle, in a shot wide enough to include flowers, rays of sun, and a fire hydrant, so that it comes to resemble a painting in its own right. A husband and wife, owners of a shoe company who hired Warhol to create drawings for their advertising brochures in the 1950s, are filmed in their home, with a huge wall of books slightly out of focus in the background. Art critic/philosopher Arthur Danto appears in what is probably his living room, slouched in a chair, a Warhol Brillo box placed prominently behind him. While Danto, Koch, and others do analyze and explain Warhol's work, none of them makes the extravagant claims of genius that routinely punctuate Burns's film.

One could make a similar stylistic comparison between Ansel Adams, *Photographer*, an hour-long portrait directed and edited by John Huszar in 1980, and Ric Burns's more recent *Ansel Adams: A Documentary* (2002). Huszar's modest yet deeply affecting film brings Adams's personality and working method to the foreground without resorting to hyperbole, incessant music, or a constantly moving camera. The opening minutes of each work are telling: Huszar's film begins with shots of nature in Yosemite, then Adams appears as a tiny figure walking across the vast landscape (a shot that Burns makes use of in his own film, though in a different context and with an end credit and acknowledgment). As Adams's diminutive figure makes his way across the landscape, we hear the photographer's words on the soundtrack. In contrast, Burns begins with a series of fade-ins and fade-outs on several of Adams's photographs, the camera always moving, while we hear the voice of MoMA photography curator John Szarkowski telling us what was essential about Adams's work; this is, in general, the same technique that is used in the beginning of Burns's *Warhol*. One of the most powerful moments in Huszar's film occurs when four of Adams's extraordinary photographs appear on the screen, one after the other, in absolute silence. We are not being told anything, just asked to look. The film is not perfect—Adams's visit to Georgia O'Keefe in

New Mexico, for example, is somewhat forced, though it is quite wonderful to see the two old friends together, if only just for the record. Of course, Huszar had the advantage of dealing with a subject who was still quite alive and accessible at the time the film was made, and who had not yet been fully anointed as a genius. However, in our current cultural climate, the fact that Rodley's film on Warhol and Huszar's film on Adams may be better films than Burns's is irrelevant: neither will ever have the visibility and name recognition of the Burns brand, nor will they ever come to possess a fraction of its marketing muscle.

And in the end, marketing is really what this is all about. A month after the Warhol broadcast on PBS, the lead article in *The New York Times Style* section on October 26, 2006, was "The Selling of St. Andy," a report that explained in great detail how Warhol's tongue-in-cheek commercialism has now taken hold to an unprecedented degree. Jewelry designer Robert Lee Morris, "a former member of the artist's circle," is quoted as saying that "We're seeing Warhol energy peeking out from everywhere ... all the ways that his reach has extended into the moment." For Morris this involves a jewelry line with dollar motifs and the Brillo logo, but this past holiday season also featured books, carpets, mugs, T-shirts, tote bags, and Levi's jeans called Warhol Factory X—merchandise to be found in Macy's, Nordstrom, Urban Outfitters, and Fred Segal. Not to be left behind, Barneys New York has licensed a denim jacket with Warhol's portrait on the back, a banana-print hooded sweatshirt, and limited edition Campbell's soup cans. Joel Wachs, president of the Pittsburgh-based Andy Warhol Foundation, told *The New York Times* that revenues have quadrupled in the last five years, generating more than \$2 million in royalties in 2005. Other artists have taken notice: more than three hundred were represented at a recent licensing trade show in New York. What this has to do with art as we know it may be open to question, but its importance in a celebrity-driven culture devoted to branding is beyond any doubt. Burns's *Andy Warhol* may not have begun as a conscious marketing tool, but one can easily understand why the Warhol Foundation would welcome such a venture with open arms, as an extremely effective way of extending the Warhol brand into new markets. You could not hope to come up with an advertising campaign, no matter how ambitious, that would do a better job.

When *The Reeler* asked Ric Burns why he ended his documentary account rather abruptly in the late 1970s, he replied that he wanted to leave open the possibility of doing another four hours on Warhol's later career. In an article in *The New York Times* (September 20, 2006),

Burns emphasized how hard it was to raise money for the project, and noted that he was still \$225,000 short of his \$3.6-million budget. Given the current state of Warholmania, he may have an easier time finding backers for Warhol II.