

# NEW YORK OBSERVERS

At this year’s Tribeca Film Festival, two filmmakers point their cameras at Gotham’s ever-changing landscape. CITY’s Erin Bremer speaks with Amos Poe and Douglas Keeve about shooting the city they call home.

**W**innowed down from a record 4,600 submissions, some 200 films will greet audiences at this year’s Tribeca Film Festival presented by American Express when it opens April 23. Founded to revitalize downtown Manhattan after 9/11, Tribeca is now entering its seventh year. On the eve of the festival, CITY caught up with two filmmakers whose documentaries in competition each focus on an iconic piece of New York history. For *Empire II*, Amos Poe filmed the Empire State Building and other sights from his West Village apartment for an entire year. He then compressed over 60 hours of footage into a three-hour homage to the city. Across town, Douglas Keeve documented the history and reinvention of the once-“democratic” but nearly defunct Gramercy Park Hotel, which debuted its controversial top-to-bottom redesign by hotelier Ian Schrager and artist Julian Schnabel in 2006. Keeve’s *Hotel* and Poe’s *Empire II* are just a part of the festival’s 2008 lineup, available in full at [www.tribecafilmfestival.org](http://www.tribecafilmfestival.org).

## AMOS POE / *EMPIRE II*

*After filming early performances by such artists as Patti Smith, Blondie, and the Talking Heads at legendary venue CBGB, Amos Poe edited the material and released The Blank Generation in 1976, establishing himself as one of the fathers of indie documentaries. For his latest film, Empire II, all he had to do was look out his window.*

CITY: Where did you get the idea for *Empire II*?  
AMOS POE: I was moving into this apartment and, of course, the view was the whole thing, so the first thing I moved in was the camera with no idea of what I was doing, really. But I just kept filming and capturing imagery over the course of a year, which

is what I like about it: It’s not premeditated in some way. There’s no script, and you don’t have to go out and raise money and all the usual stuff that you do when you make a new movie. It was really just experiential. So as things were going and I would fool around with the camera, it started to dawn on me that what I was doing was kind of a remake of Andy Warhol’s *Empire*, which is such a classic of conceptual filmmaking.

So Warhol wasn’t the original inspiration?  
No. It became one of the reference points, but I realized that I was doing it so differently than what Andy did. It’s not black and white. I kept thinking that I was going to add sound or spoken word or music or something and then it just kind of grew out of that. I shot time lapse, so a lot of it was one-and-a-half seconds every 30 seconds. And I never looked at [the footage] the whole year I was

shooting it. I just said, “Okay, it’s either going to work or not work but I’m not going to look at it until it’s done.” I gave myself exactly a year, so I moved in on November 1, 2005, and the film was finished shooting October 31, which of course would be Halloween.

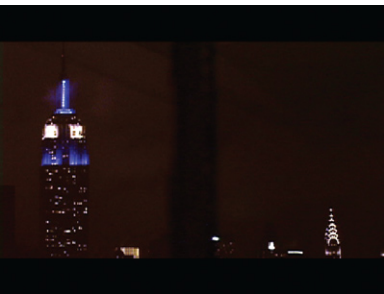
And you had the perfect vantage point for the Village Halloween parade, which ends the film. Is it chronological, the way it’s edited?  
It’s chronological but there’s no editing involved at all. I realized that I did not want to edit one frame [even though] I ended up with 60 hours. So, how do I end up with three hours if I have 60 hours without cutting anything? That’s where the whole digital thing comes in. I just told the computer to make it 2,000 percent faster or 20 times as fast. So, what you’re seeing is not only time captured intermittently but then ultimately compressed 20 times as fast, which is what gives you the whole energy of New York.

So you just sporadically turned the camera on and off throughout the year?  
Yeah, I would turn it on for a few hours, and then turn it off when I got bored. Then I would turn it on for another few hours or a day or 10 minutes or whatever felt like the right thing, so it was completely like how you feel during the day. So, whenever I would look out the window and I would see something and go, “Oh, hey, that looks cool; I wonder what that’s going to look like in the camera,” I would turn the camera on and make it out of focus or high-contrast or make it really dark, whatever. So, basically what you’re seeing is a chronological year but totally edited in the camera and there’s no editing involved in the picture at all. So what I realized when I tried to lay music on there was that any music worked with it because the visual has a rhythm of its own because of the time lapse and the compression.

Along with your own spoken words, the soundtrack features everyone from Lucinda Williams to The Ramones. How did you pick the music?  
I knew that for three hours, or even if they watch three minutes of it, I needed to take the audience on an emotional journey. So, the journey that they were on was going to be done through music, so sometimes the music will pick you up and sometimes the music will soothe you.

And all of the natural sounds, the rain and thunder and sirens and wind, were added in post-production?  
Yeah, so while the imagery is completely accidental, the sound is actually completely manufactured — the contrast between those two ideas.

How does this film fit into the remodernist movement that you’re a part of?  
The remodernist movement: I’m not even sure what that means, actually. It’s just a bunch of kids who said, “Hey, you’re a remodernist. You want to be a part of our crowd?” And I said, “Sure, why not?” [*He laughs.*] I’m not completely sure.



STILLS FROM *EMPIRE II*.

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I guess remodernist is the next variation of post-modernist, which is to take something that was in the culture before and then turn it into something else, like taking it out of context. So it’s kind of what pop art was in a way. I was using Warhol as kind of a soup can. It’s like redoing that but it’s done in a completely remodernist way because it’s using the technology and the sensibility of contemporary rather than nostalgia.

Tribeca will be the first North American audience to see the movie. What was it like showing this New York film last September at the Venice Film Festival? Have you shown it anywhere else?  
The fun part of this movie is that when you show it in any [other] country, you’re basically bringing New York to that place. So, if you show it on a big, huge screen in Venice, it brings New York to the Venice skyline. I showed it in a 16th-century Turkish steam bath in Greece. It looked really cool inside this four-century-old piece of architecture.

Do you think that viewers around the world have responded to it the way that viewers at Tribeca will?  
I think they have a different point of view because for them it’s also something slightly exotic. New York has a fascination outside that’s different than for us who live in New York and kind of take it for granted. It’s like we don’t look at the Empire State Building in the same way. Warhol’s thing was that he recognized that the Empire State Building is like a “star,” he called it: “Empire State Building is a star,” or “a movie star,” and it’s there all the time in the skyline. We just don’t get it that much. But people other places are like, “Whoa, Empire State, ah, *fabuloso!*”

So you’ve screened it in Turkish baths and various other locales. Do you have an intended venue for this film?  
Well, I thought that the best venue for it would be in very large piazzas, you know, very large scale, but it turns out that it’s also working in theaters. I think we’re still trying to figure out where we’re going to show it in New York. One idea is to show it in Grand Central Station in the evenings and the other one is to show it in a movie theater.

Many of your films seem to draw considerable inspiration from older, landmark movies — *Empire*, of course, but also *Breathless*, *Taxi Driver*, and films like those. What draws you to them and inspires you to reinterpret them?

I’m self-taught. I didn’t go to film school. So what happens is that every once in a while you see a film and you go, “Wow, that’s what I want to do,” and you try it in your own way. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. With *Unmade Beds*, I was really trying to not even make a film. I was uneducated in filmmaking but I was so ambitious and so obsessive that I just wanted to make a film movement and that’s how the New York, the indie, whatever you want to call it, underground thing got started. [It was] from that and my film, *The Foreigner*.

New York seems to be the one constant in your films, from *The Blank Generation* in the 1970s through *Alphabet City* in the ’80s to this year’s *Empire II*. How do you think New York has changed over the years?  
I think in many ways New York has gotten a lot better. I know a lot of people don’t believe that, but I think New York back then was so drug-infested, crime-infested. It was depressing. It was depressed. Okay, it was creatively energizing, but in many, many, many ways it was much worse than it is now. I mean, yes, the architecture of those yuppie apartment buildings on the Bowery are awful on some level, but they’re much better than what it was before. So, I’m definitely not one of those people who thinks the past was better. I definitely think even filmmaking is more fun now in a way because you can do it in digital, you can put it on YouTube, and a lot of other stuff. So, I’m not a nostalgist for nostalgia’s sake — “It was better.” I’m more like, listen, there are still problems. But, you know, if you really remember what it was like, it was horrible. I mean everybody was on heroin, you know? Crazy. So that doesn’t mean it can’t be crazy now, but I definitely prefer it now than then.

Lower Manhattan, and Tribeca in particular, have played a large part in that evolution. How do you feel going into the festival?  
I’m supremely excited because it’s the best venue for my work ever. And this may be one of the best things I’ve ever done, too, one of the most fun movies I’ve ever done, so I’m really excited about it. I’m really excited about the venue. I’m excited about the festival. It’s the most interesting film festival in the United States at the moment. It’s definitely got the most energy. Some of the older ones, like Sundance, have a certain cachet and business and all that kind of stuff, but I think in terms of excitement, to have a film festival in New York, that’s riveting, that’s great.