

ANDY WARHOL' S INSTANT QUEER CINEMA

Whether as trash artist, camp pornographer, or cold fish of 60s NY cool, Andy Warhol's prolific output and influence across various media is simply staggering. Often overlooked, is his work as a queer filmmaker, but over a thirteen-years, Warhol was responsible for over 80 films. In these he formulated a radical, fag-art cine-sensibility, which was instrumental in the relaxation of US censorship laws, and has been imitated - but rarely bettered, ever since.

Warhol - the Movie, remains a long awaited epic, with no filmmaker prepared to stake his or her reputation. Instead we've seen a cornucopia of movies on various Warhol groupies, consigning the *Thin-White-Duke* (of Bowie's song) to the sidelines. Director Oliver Stone started this *Any-Andy* sub-genre in 1991, with Crispin Glover's cameo performance in *THE DOORS*. No expense was spared for this hyper-real re-creation, of the legendary, acid-hazed meeting between Jim Morrison and Andy!

I SHOT ANDY WARHOL was an abominable adaptation of the Valerie Solanas story. Frankly, we expected something with more teeth about the feminist writer of *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto (Society for Cutting-Up Men)*, who emptied her .32 revolver into Warhol's chest while they shared the elevator in Andy's studio. He barely survived. Solanas had been hanging-out with Warhol's notorious entourage, largely at the artist's expense. She had written a script, and claimed she was motivated by Warhol stealing it to make a movie. Somewhat incongruous since she repeatedly hassled Warhol to do just that! Solanas ended up destitute on the Lower East Side, and died after consuming vast quantities of dodgy heroin. Fabulous true story, pity about the movie!

Surprisingly, David Bowie rendered a worthy, low-key Andy performance, in Julian Schnabel's commendable movie on New York graffiti artist and Warhol buddy: *BASQUIAT*. It will soon be difficult finding a celebrity-actor who hasn't played Andy! Any more Andy's handy?

None of these *Any-Andy*'s are avant-garde, underground-art movies, like Warhol's early films. The cheapest of them would have budgeted at least a-dozen Warhol *originals*. In closer synch with Warhol's means of production, are Bruce leBruce's early films. *NO SKIN OFF MY ASS* is a modest aspirant to the Warhol/Morrissey period, if perhaps too reverent. Bruce's second film, *SUPER EIGHT-AND-A-HALF* is an audacious homage/parody of Warhol's whole career as played by Bruce himself, bulging with satire and sarcasm, lacking nothing except the name - *Andy Warhol's Super 8:5!*

Despite the hype and huggermugger littering the Fag-Art circuit, Warhol's contribution to queer cinema has never been fully recognised. Critics concentrate on film-form and mode of production, because Warhol's radical innovation was the rejection of content. Yet his films are packed with 'real' queers, lesbians, transsexuals and transvestites, indulging promiscuous behaviour bordering on pornography. They are documentary archives of New York gay lifestyles; a brave new generation of artists and intellectuals, coveting a shit-kicking queer agenda.

Andy Gives Cinema Head

His earliest films, from 1963, are black & white, 16mm, short (most under 60 minutes) and silent. Most last under an hour and were made for New York underground cinemas. What impressed filmmakers and critics, was their primitive formalism. Editing, camera movement and technical embellishments are almost absent. Because early film production techniques developed so rapidly, this type of "naïve", elemental filmmaking had been lost. Audiences had quickly learned cinema's formal language, which conveys the time period covered within the plot in the shorter running time that a film lasts. Warhol rediscovered the unusual effect of filming in real time (running time being equal to the period covered within the story).

Zoom into close-up on *BLOW-JOB*:

' A rather vacuously rugged guy... looks into the distance, waiting for somebody to begin giving him what the title so succinctly proclaims. A masculine shoulder covered with black leather skims the bottom of the frame, someone kneels invisibly, the action begins. The length of the film purports to be the length of the fellation. ... Yet it does seem to be a real live blow-job that we're not seeing. The climax - it's Warhol literalism - seems intentionally (and indefinitely) postponed ... to extend the work to its running time of thirty-five minutes.'

- *Stargazer*, Stephen Koch [Marion Boyars, 1985]

BLOW-JOB is a portrait film, its star was a hustler in real life; but his screen image subversively suggests an all-American-clean-cut-boy.

Warhol's passive voyeurism (as artist) magnifies this same impulse in the viewer, provoking identification with the passive male (outside the frame). Sexual orientation is presented as androgynous, ambiguous and ambivalent, continuously changing and impossible to tie-down, radically challenging conventional presumptions about sexual identity and normality.

Back in 1964, *BLOW-JOB* was considered shocking and pornographic; it could only be screened in private film clubs. Parker Tyler says in *Underground Film* [Da Capo, 1995]:

Warhol knew what he was doing when he chose ... fellatio as a subject. ... The camera allows us (as if it were a handicapped peephole) to see only the head of the passive partner in this sexual act ... modified by the built-in suspense of the prelude to orgasm. ...

Typically Warhol's *B-J* exhibits...

... Defiance of legal taboos regarding exhibition of the sexual act-not to mention defiance of optional moral taboos and taboos of good taste.

Blonde Big Brother

From his New York studio, Warhol continued mass-producing *avant-garde* movies. *COUCH* (1964) comprises thirteen reels of 16mm, unedited film. For each reel, three or four people were asked to sit on a couch and do anything they liked, while a stationary, unmanned camera rolled. The stars of this proto *Big Brother* are trannies, hustlers and queens from New York's streets - not professional actors. No cameramen or director was on set, which minimises exploitation and avoids inhibiting the subjects. In several reels, protagonists engage in poly-sexual orgies. These films soon provoked legal confrontations with censors.

Off-set, Warhol befriended many of the beatniks and dropouts he filmed. This young generation of social outcasts were intelligent and creative, helping develop groundbreaking approaches to verité-style filmmaking. Andy was also turned-on by the sexiness and rebellious lifestyles of these cute, sexually ambiguous bohemians. Although inclining towards bi- rather than homosexuality, they were clearly available, but were also social and political shit-kickers and, heavily into drug abuse. (Some later became founder members of the Gay Liberation Front [GLF] in 1969.) They were poor and shared overcrowded apartments. On East 47th Street, Warhol had procured a spacious, old warehouse for his studio. His newfound friends began turning-up with bags and squatting. Andy now had his entourage.

First in was Andy's 20-year old 'partner', Gerard Malanga. He was arrogant, self-confident and intelligent, renowned for his Elvis-like looks; he was picked-up from poverty by New York's homosexual literati surrounding W. H. Auden. Malanga initially helped Warhol produce screen-prints, but was on set when Andy was filming *KISS* (1963). One performer (Naomi Levine) didn't want to kiss her chosen partner and Malanga stood-in as a satisfactory kisser, beginning a prolific career as a Warhol superstar.

Billy Linich was a 21-year old hairdresser who shared an apartment with Freddie Herko, a dancer. Andy visited their apartment and was impressed by Linich's design ability; he'd covered the interior with silver, reflective tinfoil, like a giant hall of mirrors. Warhol invited him to decorate the studio, but Linich had a large circle of eccentric friends, who regularly visited him there. They included the Sugar Plum Fairy, the Mayor, Rotten Rita, Mr Clean, the Duchess - Brigid Berlin (aka Brigid Polk) and Ondine. They were notoriously known as the Mole People on NY's underground scene, because they lived on speed-amphetamine, staying awake night after night. Soon they were Andy's crowd and suggested a name for Warhol's studio - the Factory. Herko and Ondine developed especially close friendships with Warhol; Ondine described himself as a '*running, standing, jumping drug addict*,' and became the Factory's star-performer.

Warhol's older artist friends (like Lichtenstein) were alienated, claiming the new scene became too male-homosexual-ist, drug-gy and elitist when he started making movies. He began wearing tight black-leather outfits over women's frilly knickers and when anyone visited the Factory, Andy made his assistants '*find-out how big their cock is*,' before letting them in! Camping-it-up, the mole people called Warhol Drella - an amalgam of Dracula and Cinderella.

As if Andy's production entourage wasn't queer enough, Factory film screenings went even further. Extravagant all-night parties were planned, celebrating Warhol's glamorous, queer low-life aesthetic. Warhol famously thrived on creating tensions, thus invites were distributed to transsexuals, junkies, prostitutes, rent-boys and thieves, as well as rich socialites, and art-world movers and shakers. A full and often volatile cross section of NY society. The studio spaces were decked in reflective silver foil, psychedelic oil lamps splashed amorphous shapes around the walls, speed and marijuana were abundant, incense burned. The Master himself presided *under* proceedings, walking-in on a dog lead held by new boyfriend Gerard Malanga, to the blasting, sonic assault of in-house band, the Velvet Underground providing a live soundtrack.

Still-Life on Film

Andy would stop at nothing to achieve pure naturalism in his movies. Cinematic realism shows this is impossible, limited by the inescapable restraints of the medium; but as a committed artist, Warhol relentlessly strove for the unattainable, thereby breaking new ground. Not all his friends were so robust in their visionary zeal and when sensitive or damaging conflicts arose, Andy always put his artistic integrity first. His friendship with Freddie Herko ended abruptly when – unable to retain Warhol's attention and high on a cocktail of psychedelic drugs, Herko leapt to his death from a fifth-floor window. Upon being told of the tragedy, Warhol responded, '*Gee I wish he had told us, we could have filmed it.*'

In 1964, Warhol enlisted another filmmaker - Paul Morrissey; *MY HUSTLER* was their first collaborative film. It incorporated camera movement [shock- horror!], nudging towards mainstream cinema techniques. The camera concentrates on the near-naked body of a hunky rent boy, while his bitchy sugar daddy invites guests to admire and fantasise over the hunk.

Meanwhile behind-the-scenes, Andy had promoted Billy Linich to studio PA. Unfortunately things got the better of him and he wound-up going crazy, moving into a Factory bathroom and locking himself inside for weeks on-end, with a bath full of pure crystal speed. When Warhol finally noticed, Billy had to be carted-off to la-la-land!

For his most enduring film on sexuality Warhol established a microcosmic gay, lesbian and transsexual community, to shoot *THE CHELSEA GIRLS* in 1966. Lasting over three hours, it's shot on ten reels mixing colour and black and white. Each reel contains a different scenario with a new cast, filmed in an alternative room of the decadent Chelsea Hotel. Every episode was shot as a single take (without cuts) running in real, or "reel" time.

Two reels are continuously screened simultaneously, but their order is left to the projectionist. Watching this film is a unique experience. Conflicting scenes and actions are often shot through psychedelic lighting, with sporadic camera movement. It demands intense concentration, as you become increasingly disorientated. Theatrical improvisation, by New York's drug-high, poly-sexual low-lives, enhances this effect. For the viewer it's an emotional roller coaster – funny, sad, beautiful and frightening. Even more bizarrely, regardless of the running order, alternative, simultaneous sequences recurrently become associated. This blurs coincidence and continuity...

In 1967 Warhol directed his last film, the high-camp extravaganza *LONESOME COWBOYS*, which exposes the hidden homoeroticism of cowboy buddies in Westerns. J Edgar Hoover (infamous, cross-dressing, closeted FBI Director) upon hearing of *Lonesome's* Western wang-fest, declared the film to be the greatest threat to civilisation, undermining the very fabric etc, etc and promptly ordered secret dossiers be compiled on Warhol, and his associates. Back then, cock sucking could make you an enemy of the State!

Warhol represented queer desire in a society that prohibited its expression, through social taboo. This was the climate in which gay men lived. Warhol offered an alternative approach, defying and subverting social control. Instead of reaching-out, he remained behind his peephole, but opened-up the view to wider public spectatorship. By affecting extreme passivity, Warhol publicly exposed hidden desires, reflecting the absurd fears of society at large. Putting himself in the media spotlight and under public gaze, forced society to confront its own hypocrisy.

'L'il Joe never once gave it away'...

Paul Morrissey directed most Factory-*Warhol* films from '68; his remit was to make commercially successful movies. *Andy Warhol's* name became a generic designer label, applied to all Factory output. Morrissey's films are more comical and conventional, but use Warhol's realism and homoeroticism. The naked torso of Factory star-discovery Joe Dallesandro (former rent boy and AMG model) is the central attraction of Morrissey's low-life glamour trilogy: *FLESH*, *TRASH* and *HEAT* (1968-70). Joe embodied the Warhol ideal: dangerous, beautiful, aggressively passive - a junky hustler with a world-class ass.

All Yesterdays Parties

After his near fatal shooting (by Solanas – see above) in 1968, Warhol realised he must rethink his lifestyle. If any old Sapphic psycho could stroll in with a gun, perhaps open house at the Factory wasn't such a good idea. Everything changed. The excesses and the entourage were curbed; Andy became reclusive. However there was still a little more mischief to make. Warhol was determined to take revenge on his assailant, even if only as a defiant challenge or bad joke.

This was the film, *WOMEN IN REVOLT*. Blatantly a parody of Solanas' faux-feminist struggle, it features three transsexual superstars, Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, and Holly Woodlawn, founding a women's lib vanguard with the acronym, 'P.I.G s' – Politically Informed Girls! Ever cautious, director Morrissey thought it reckless, but *Women* received critical acclaim when released in 1972, and thankfully, no reaction from Solanas.

Cash for Trash

Warhol's screen prints of popular icons (Monroe, Jackie Kennedy, Mao etc.) represent subjects of pop identification, highlighting moments of Pop(ular) sensibility. Andy transformed an incisive, camp appreciation of consumer culture into a trash aesthetic. By continuing to apply his name to Factory produced movies and artworks (effectively made by others) Warhol was radically undermining out-dated notions of authenticity. Now that anything could be mass -produced and consumed, Warhol recognised that traditional notions of art were outdated and irrelevant.

Warhol died in 1987. As a Pop Artist, Andy Warhol - *ironically*, discovered the last great *avant-garde* concept, by mass-producing the “concept” of art as a commodity. Future authentic-originality seems unlikely, leaving repetition of repetition for the foreseeable future.

Chris Barber & Gavin Mitchell

QX's WARHOLMANIA HIP-LIST

Few prints of Warhol's earliest films survive; their value ensures they're rarely screened.

Paul Morrissey films on video include (*Andy Warhol's*) *Flesh*, *Trash*, *Heat*, *Women in Revolt*, *Blood for Dracula* and *Flesh for Frankenstein* – released by First Independent.

Pride Video releases *No Skin off my Ass* and *Super-Eight and a Half*.

The Doors (Guild) and *Basquiat* are available on video.

Stargazer by Stephen Koch [Marian Boyars, 1985] is the best book on Warhol's cinema. The definitive biography – *the Life & Death of Andy Warhol* by Victor Bockis, is published by Fourth Estate [1998]; Andy's own books include *Warhol Diaries* and *From A to B and Back Again* (or ABBA, where the group got their

name).

Tate Modern permanently displays renowned Warhol prints.

Hard-core Warhol fetishists covet the Velvet Underground albums/CDs: White Light White Heat, Velvet Underground, and Andy Warhol – A.W. also designed banana cover (Lou Reed, John Cage and Nico, performed live at Warhol's Factory parties while the films played.)