



Morrissey, Paul (b. 1938)

by Gary Morris

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Filmmaker Paul Morrissey was the auteur who created many of the "Andy Warhol films." His works unflinchingly document modern urban subcultures, including the lives of drag queens, hustlers, and addicts.

Born in New York City on February 23, 1938, Morrissey was the son of a Bronx lawyer. He grew up in Yonkers and was educated at Catholic schools. He studied cinema at Fordham College and began making short experimental films as early as 1961.

A chance visit to a Manhattan screening of Andy Warhol's *Sleep* in 1963 led to a more purposeful trip to Warhol's Factory, where Morrissey's combination of business savvy and creativity soon gained him considerable control over the day-to-day operations at that legendary space and eventually made him the driving force behind the majority of what were known then, and continue to be viewed by many, as "Andy Warhol films."

These include such legendary works as the double-projected *The Chelsea Girls* (1966), early Joe Dallesandro epics, such as *Bike Boy* and *The Loves of Ondine* (both 1967), and the first of the commercially released features, *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968).

Morrissey's claim of auteur status is confirmed simply by looking at a list of his duties on these films, which encompassed almost everything except the acting. Even on the high-profile *Trash* (1970), he directed, wrote the story and screenplay, and served as both cinematographer and camera operator.

Morrissey was literally the straight man in the Factory. His unfazed occupation of that fabled space, with its parade of damaged denizens from disreputable drag queens to dream-boy hustlers, is reflected and extended in his best films, which take an unflinchingly vérité look at a variety of modern subcultures, most tellingly the daily life of junkies and hustlers (*Flesh* [1968], *Trash*, and *Mixed Blood* [1984]).

Some of his work represents a breakthrough in detailing the lives of the urban walking wounded, as, for example, the clinically recorded process of shooting up heroin in *Trash*. Typical of Morrissey's complex worldview, *Trash* is equal parts comedy and tragedy, reveling in the absurd activities of the drag queen-hustler couple, while bringing a surprising poignancy to their lives.

Other Morrissey films are viciously funny, decidedly politically incorrect takes on subjects the director clearly finds troubling or irritating, as in the 1971 *Women in Revolt*, a camp-drenched send up of women's liberation played by drag queens.

It is a tribute to Morrissey's skill with actors that these films have an almost documentary reality, as if Morrissey, like his mentor, simply turned the camera on his subjects and left the room, although this was far from what happened.

Morrissey's best films are the queer or queer-inflected ones that feature powerful, shrill, unassimilable

personalities starving for self-expression and respect. Examples of these memorable portraits include Sylvia Miles's washed-up B-movie slut in *Heat* (1971), Udo Kier's queenly vampire in *Blood for Dracula* (1974), and that Tom of Finland drawing-come-to-life, Joe Dallesandro, in all their films together.

A quintessential image in the Morrissey canon is that of a beautiful, passive, nude or nearly nude male (often Dallesandro) surrounded by powerful predatory females or drag queens, who delight in undermining the masculine posing and stupidity of these presumed paragons of heterosexuality. *Flesh*, *Trash*, *Heat*, and *Mixed Blood* figure prominently here.

While this trope can be traced to Warhol's use of the debased, self-consumed, passive hunk in his earliest, pre-Morrissey films (for example, *Horse* or *My Hustler*), the fact that it recurs so often in Morrissey's own career suggests the hold it has on his--and the culture's--imagination, a curiosity worth exploring given Morrissey's heterosexuality.

During Morrissey's most productive period, from 1968 to 1973, he brought Warhol's innovations--ordinary people as "superstars," a fixed camera objectively recording a scene, the episodic or nonlinear narrative, cinematic camp, and indifferent nudity--to much larger audiences, middling commercial success, and favorable critical comment.

His films have been a decisive influence on the independent film movement, particularly on the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s, but unlike other independent icons of the 1960s and 1970s such as John Cassavetes, he remains a marginalized figure. Unheralded except in cult circles, he has been unable to get financing for a film since *Spike of Bensonhurst* (1988).

Part of Morrissey's marginalization is attributable to his political stance--he agrees with critic Maurice Yacowar's label of "reactionary conservative"--which seems to contradict the spirit of the independent film movement and calls into question the validity of his own films as shrill but heartfelt celebrations of the outsider.

Part of the problem may also be his abandonment of the queer-camp ethos in most of his work following his two European horror films. The critical and commercial failures of *Madame Wong's* (1981), *Forty Deuce* (1982), *Beethoven's Nephew* (1985), and *Spike of Bensonhurst* may indicate that, separated from his strident "superstars" and perhaps from the blessing or curse of Warhol's imprimatur, he simply lost interest.

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