



## Warhol, Andy (as filmmaker) (1928-1987)

by David Ehrenstein

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Andy Warhol.  
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As a painter Andy Warhol (the name he assumed after moving to New York as a young man) has been compared to everyone from Salvador Dalí to Norman Rockwell. But when it comes to his role as a filmmaker he is generally remembered either for a single film--*Sleep* (1963)--or for works that he did not actually direct.

Born into a blue-collar family in Forest City, Pennsylvania on August 6, 1928, Andrew Warhola, Jr. attended art school at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. He moved to New York in 1949, where he changed his name to Andy Warhol and became an international icon of Pop Art.

Between 1963 and 1967 Warhol turned out a dizzying number and variety of films involving many different collaborators, but after a 1968 attempt on his life, he retired from active duty behind the camera, becoming a producer/ "presenter" of films, almost all of which were written and directed by Paul Morrissey.

Morrissey's *Flesh* (1968), *Trash* (1970), and *Heat* (1972) are estimable works. And *Bad* (1977), the sole opus of Warhol's lover Jed Johnson, is not bad either. But none of these films can compare to the Warhol films that preceded them, particularly *My Hustler* (1965), an unprecedented slice of urban gay life; *Beauty #2* (1965), the best of the films featuring Edie Sedgwick; *The Chelsea Girls* (1966), the only experimental film to gain widespread theatrical release; and \*\*\*\* (*Four Stars*) (1967), the 25-hour long culmination of Warhol's career as a filmmaker.

Warhol's filmmaking career can be neatly divided into three parts. Between 1963 and 1964 he made silent films: black and white works shot with a newsreel camera capable of producing 3½ minutes of footage. In these films, movement on the part of his subjects was discouraged. *Sleep*, *Eat*, *Haircut*, and *Kiss* come from this period, along with the portrait films *13 Most Beautiful Boys* and *13 Most Beautiful Women*. But some liveliness breaks through in the Hollywood-shot film featuring Taylor Mead, *Tarzan and Jane Regained Sort of*.

When Warhol secured a 16mm synch-sound camera capable of holding 35 minute-long reels in 1965, the second part of his filmmaking career commenced. Warhol discovered that two continuous shots could make for a feature-length film; and so with different collaborators he set about making them.

Off-off Broadway playwright Ronald Tavel supplied scripts for such deadpan satires from 1965 as *Vinyl*, *Horse*, *The Life of Juanita Castro*, and *Screen Test*. Chuck Wein, who co-directed the *Poor Little Rich Girl* series starring Edie Sedgwick, contributed a different approach to *cinéma vérité*, attempting to use the camera to discover an "inner truth."

Paul Morrissey entered the picture in 1966, contributing a dramatic quality to certain sequences of *The Chelsea Girls*, which he co-directed. This two-screen-projected three and one-half hour work was hailed as the Greenwich Village answer to *La Dolce Vita* (1960) in its depiction of a variety of demimondaines.

The third and final stage of Warhol's filmmaking career occurs when he turned to color film. In color, with superimposed reels atop one another during projection, \*\*\*\* (*Four Stars*) is at once more ambitious and more experimental than the earlier works. Later broken up into several films including *The Imitation of Christ*, *The Loves of Ondine*, and *Tub Girls*, it represents Warhol at the apogee of creative freedom.

*The Imitation of Christ* is particularly noteworthy as the screen's first epic non-love story: the would-be lovers being too self-involved to take much notice of one another.

Warhol's contribution to gay cinema is of incalculable importance, and it is an artistic tragedy that his works (controlled as they are by his estate and not available for video release) are so little known today. Out before outness was a way of political life, he was looked down upon by more conventionally masculine gays as too swish to "pass."

The casual homoeroticism of *Haircut*, little-noted at the time of its first screenings, is unmistakable today.

*My Hustler* is particularly interesting. Part one consists of a conversation on the deck of a Fire Island cottage between acerbic "sugar daddy" Ed Hood, fag-hag Genevieve Charbon, and semi-retired hustler Joe Campbell, as they watch Hood's latest acquisition, Paul America, lie on the beach. Part two is a long seduction scene in a bathroom as the older hustler seduces the younger. Towards the end, legendary wit Dorothy Dean also attempts to woo the younger man.

Shot two years before *The Boys in the Band* surfaced off-Broadway in 1968, *My Hustler* is a treasure-trove of gay slang and attitude from the period. Moreover, it is also interesting as a historical footnote in that at the time it was shot, Campbell was being kept by a well-heeled, deeply closeted investment banker named Harvey Milk.

*Horse*, a western made four years before the Morrissey-helmed *Lonesome Cowboys* (1969), is far more homoerotic, dealing as it does with gay S&M rituals.

More significant, one of the most striking scenes in \*\*\*\*(*Four Stars*) finds actor (and Warhol impersonator) Alan Midgette falling in love on camera with a British youth identified only as Dingham. It is an utterly simple affair--like all of Warhol at his best in the years prior to the attempt on his life and his later transmogrification into the first of the Reagan Democrats.

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## **About the Author**

**David Ehrenstein** is author of *The Scorsese Picture: The Art and Life of Martin Scorsese* and *Open Secret: Gay Hollywood 1928-1998* and has contributed to numerous journals, newspapers, magazines, and television shows.