

Jonathan Jones on films about Andy Warhol

Andy Warhol in his Factory in 1968. Photograph: Santi Visalli Inc./Hulton Archive

The talking heads are remembering speed and heroin, Rotten Rita and Ondine. It wasn't Danny's lighting that made the Exploding Plastic Inevitable unforgettable, says one of them, it was my coloured projections. Someone else recalls fighting over cables. Over the reminiscences, silvery monochrome footage shows a pale wraith in an immaculate wig in a loft papered with aluminium foil. There's a soundtrack that sounds a bit like the Velvet Underground, but isn't (that, presumably, would be too expensive). Even the feedback seems half-hearted.

It feels like a terrible waste of time to have sat through two new documentaries about Andy Warhol's Factory, and I say that as a dedicated Warhol fan. I have, in my time, read much of his book *A, a Novel* – no more than a transcript of taped chatter by Factory inhabitant Ondine – and I do not regret it. I've been moved by his paintings of plane crashes and nose jobs, and I don't take back a single tear. I think Warhol was a great artist. But at this point I'd rather gaze at the Empire State building for eight hours than see another biopic or documentary that claims to recreate the strange and mysterious world of his New York studio.

There is a startling amount of Andy Warhol in recent cinema, and too much entirely about the people who surrounded him. It's not surprising, of course, and Warhol only has himself to blame. He would go and be interesting. Most artists live adventurous lives – being an artist is itself an adventure – and yet few have created as much drama around themselves as Warhol did. The son of poor Slovakian immigrants who barely spoke English, he was physically ugly, gay in a straight age, and drew with competence but nothing you would call genius. But Warhol turned himself into a prophet of modern life, who presided over a beautiful and grotesque alternative community, the Factory, that simultaneously parodied and invented the 1960s.

He turned from painting to cinema and from cinema to homespun philosophising, and, when he died suddenly in 1987, he left behind a perhaps insoluble mystery about who he really was: the cold manipulator of superstars, or the devout churchgoer who secretly helped out in New York soup kitchens? The bland observer of celebrity, or the tragic painter of death? There is, I still think, a great film to be made about this consciously strange individual. Unfortunately, none of the endless production line of Factory films even comes close to, or dreams of, overturning the stupidest, most discredited myths about Warhol and his New York.

Was he cold, remote, cruel? Some books say not, but who cares? Not the screenwriter or the documentary maker trying to interest backers and producers. In recent years, art historians have uncovered several unexpected Warhols in the copious archives he kept. There is Warhol the friend of poets, whose early associates in the New York avant garde were all serious writers; there is Warhol the religious artist, whose apparently sincere and deep Christianity was only revealed after his death by his friend John Richardson. But these alternative Warhols don't cut it with film-makers convinced that audiences like their avant garde as inhuman as possible, to reassure them that in the end it's better to be a suburbanite than one of those weird artists.

It started just four years after Warhol's death, with Oliver Stone's 1991 film *The Doors*. Admittedly that film didn't do as much harm to Warhol as it did to its hero Jim Morrison, who – it's hard to remember now – was actually quite cool, until Stone turned him into a clunking American monument. Anyway, Jim meets Andy in New York and the pop guru gives him a telephone. Someone gave it to him to talk to God, the bland Warhol explains, but he can't think of anything to say. The Lizard King can, the film implies.

It wasn't much of an appearance but it did set a tableau religiously adhered to by film-makers ever since: put your actor in a wig, cover his face with white powder, give him something inane to say, and then contrast him with more manly and hearty representatives of the counterculture. That's exactly how Warhol is played by Guy Pearce, in the recent Edie Sedgwick biopic *Factory Girl*. Here his rock antithesis is Bob Dylan, who actually did loathe Warhol, and was his rival in 1960s Manhattan.

At least Dylan is an interesting character – or should be – to set against Warhol. Increasingly, in the Warhol cinema factory, the artist is just a shadowy figure behind the foreground comings and goings of the misfits and wannabes who were drawn to his studio. This tendency began with Mary Harron's 1996 work *I Shot Andy Warhol*, a biopic of Valerie Solanas, author of the *Scum Manifesto* (Scum being the acronym for Society for Cutting Up Men), and attempted Warhol assassin. Unless you think artists deserve to be shot, it's hard to see why Solanas deserved this degree of attention – although Harron's is one film that does try to be realistic about 60s New York, instead of just morbid. Since it was made, however, an army of also-rans in the Warhol story have come out of hiding (in some cases literally). Watch these films and you soon get to know Chuck Wein, Billy Name, Brigid Berlin and a host of lesser hangers-on. It can't be long before *I was a mouse under the Factory floorboards* gets greenlighted. Warhol's *Factory* was a rolling tableau of

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bohemians and freaks whose casualty rate was high, but not high enough to save filmgoers from a new wave of reminiscence-mongers. Wein, who in *Factory Girl* is portrayed as a stylish young Harvard graduate, appears in Esther Robinson's forthcoming documentary [A Walk Into the Sea](#) - a greyed hippy talking about his own screenplay - working title, Edie, Andy and Chuck.

In another new documentary, *Face Addict*, the fashion photographer Edo Bertoglio revisits Manhattan from the small Italian town where he now lives, to remember and reconnect with the people he knew there as a participant in the new wave scene in the late 1970s and early 80s. These were the years when, after a period of conservatism and caution following his shooting by Solanas, Warhol once again played a central part in avant-garde New York, befriending young artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, and musicians like Debbie Harry.

Warhol hovers in the background of *Face Addict* like a hidden god; the sensationalism of *Factory Girl* is replaced by a reverence so deep that Walter Steding, a punk violinist whom Warhol once managed, is filmed with an adoring respect for every detail of his existence. All the people in the film, with the exception of a brief appearance by Debbie Harry, are bit players in the story of Andy Warhol's New York.

On the other hand, [A Walk Into the Sea](#) tells the story of the director's uncle, Danny Williams, a boyfriend of Warhol and resident of the Factory who vanished in 1966, apparently drowning himself off the New England coast. What really happened to Danny? The evidence that Danny Williams was damaged by the poisonous atmosphere at the Factory is comprehensive. The people Warhol attracted, says John Cale in the documentary, were not so much damaged as incomplete. And that's how the film feels, how all these films feel. They delve into the details of New York's cultural past yet none of them can tell us why we should be interested. There is one question every film-maker needs to ask him or herself before embarking on a Warhol project: do you admire him as an artist? Does his work mean anything to you personally? Because if you don't see more in Warhol than his fame, why waste your time and ours?

The trouble with all these films is their assumption that art happens elsewhere, long ago, to bizarre characters. Art, if it matters, is about your life and mine. One day someone will make a film that actually tries to imagine being Andy Warhol, or Danny Williams. Until that leap is made, the Factory will remain about as worthwhile on screen as an encounter with some old drunk in the East Village who claims to have seen Warhol, once, across a crowded room. [A Walk into the Sea](#) is released

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on August 17. Face Addict is released on August 22.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/aug/14/andywarhol.documentary?gusrc=rss&feed=film>