

■ Andy Warhol

Gilda Williams

Received with vast acclaim when it aired in September 2006 on US public television (scoring a staggering 100% positive rating on www.rottentomatoes.com), Ric Burns' four-hour *Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film* will stand for a long time as the artist's most satisfying film biography. Opening with a stream of hyperbolic testimonies to the artist's greatness, from Dave Hickey ('he changed the world') to filmographer Stephen Koch (whom I would credit with the film's most lasting insights), Burns' documentary makes utterly explicit its position regarding the artist's monumental place in history: the first half of the 20th Century belonged to Picasso, the second half to Warhol, the film concludes. But even before the opening credits roll, the viewer well understands that we are not here to question Warhol's achievement, only to watch the myth unfold. Burns, in sum, is a believer.

Yet Burns – brother of the famed documentarian Ken Burns, and whose previous film subjects have included Eugene O'Neill and Ansel Adams – is no starry-eyed hagiographer. What makes this film, with its strong backbone of solid research, so admirable is its willingness to address the thornier questions in the artist's life. How important was pre-Stonewall homophobia in the early rejection of Warhol? Answer: very important. Did Warhol exploit his unpaid 'superstars'? Probably yes, in fact almost all his early entourage left him. (Not mentioned in the film, the sole early Factory survivor at the time of his death in 1987 was wealthy heiress Brigid Berlin, who had worked her way down from superstar to receptionist over more than 20 years of service.)

Still more uneasy questions arise. How responsible was Warhol for the suicidal deaths of Edie Sedgwick, Freddie Herko and the other Factory casualties? The verdict, ultimately, is that his passivity in these instances was irresponsibly heartless, beyond the dictates of his 'I try not to care' artistic persona. We may love the artist and the man, but we must condemn Warhol's refusal to help his (admittedly self-destructive) friends. And finally, did the 1968 shooting signal the end of his creative powers? Not entirely; images of the spectacular *Shadows*, 1978, and *Skulls*, 1976, convincingly refute this alleged decline. But, with by far most of the film devoted to the five-year Warhol miracle of 1962-67, Burns mythologises this period above all, when the artist was at the height of his stunning self-construction, reaching an artistic zenith rarely matched in all art history. And the hours of footage devoted to the mid 60s – of Warhol brilliantly infuriating a hack TV interviewer, or presiding over the Velvet Under-



ground's multi-media stage extravaganza like the phantom of the opera – leave us speechless with awe and pleasure.

One reason Burns' film holds together so well is because it is structured by a thesis which marries his subject perfectly with the task of film biography. That thesis, as expressed at the beginning of the film by Koch, claims that although Warhol himself possessed no sense of linear narrative, focusing in his work only on the ever-present 'now', paradoxically his own life story is a masterpiece of coherent storytelling. A classic rags-to-riches tale, from impoverished immigrant's son to Greatest Artist on Earth, the consistency across his life and his work form Warhol's most sublime artwork (as others have remarked before). In recounting this master Warholian narrative, Donna DeSalvo – the sole female critic in an otherwise all-male commentary – speaks of his 'prophetic' first illustrated article, aptly titled 'Success is a Job in New York'; of how 'fitting' it is that the first painting exhibition by this consumer-culture creature took place in a department store window. We reflect on the strange foreboding of his final work, *The Last Supper*. The Andy Warhol Story – the rise and rise and rise of Andy – is an ideally constructed film vehicle, and Burns takes full advantage of its convenient, personality-driven clarity. The result is this unusually watchable and informative, made-for-TV movie.

At first *Andy Warhol: The Documentary Film* seems merely to tread the usual ground ('He was born Andrew Warhola ...'), at best peppering the story with such insights as Hickey's observation that Warhol had 'no idea of bourgeois life', having climbed from the bottom to the top of society without stopping in between. The film then soars unexpectedly to some real high points, among them a lingering analysis of the well-chosen *Blue Liz as Cleopatra* (1963), preferred to, say, the over-seen *Marilyn*, and the lengthy, almost real-time account

of Valerie Solanas's shooting, the most powerful and dramatic sequence of the film. Moreover, Warhol's own films, usually ignored in preference to the paintings, are given their due prominence, with rare scenes of Robert Indiana in *Eat*, 1963, and the fabulously erotic tableau, *Haircut*, 1963. Burns puts a foot wrong here, however, laying his violin soundtrack over silent films such as *Sleep*, 1963, inflicting the imagery with cinematic sentimentality that is nowhere in the original.

More first-hand accounts of the core Factory moment would have given this documentary greater art-historical weight. Billy Name, Irving Blum and Ronald Tavel provide the only insider voices from those heady early days. (Interviewees Vincent Fremont and Bob Colacello joined the Warhol entourage later, while absentees include Gerard Malanga, Henry Geldzahler, Viva and so many others, all perhaps weary of repeated requests to return to the same ground for the past 40 years. Chuck Workman's overlooked 1991 bio-doc *Superstar – The Life and Times of Andy Warhol* is more valuable in this respect.) To his credit Burns never attempts to iron out Warhol's contradictions. What emerges is a figure like that described by Homi Bhabha in his 1997 analysis of the late Princess Diana: a 20th-century 'transindividual' – at once blessed and damned, they acquired a cult status verging on divinity. By the end, biographer Wayne Koestenbaum is drawing parallels between Warhol and Jesus, no less, albeit in a knowing way. Anyone who has ever suspected contemporary art of providing for some a religion substitute – complete with saints, prophets and apostles – need look no further than this film for confirmation. ■

Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film was at Prince Charles Cinema, London on October 26.

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