

Introduction

Paul Morrissey may be America's most undervalued and least shown major director. In a career spanning more than twenty years he has made more than a dozen feature films of consistent weight and moral concern, with a distinctive aesthetic. While he has been often appreciated for individual films (or scenes), few writers have followed up on John Russell Taylor's 1975 assertion that the films Morrissey made for Andy Warhol "can stand comparison with anything else the cinema of today has to offer."¹ In the publishing splurge that followed Warhol's death and his Museum of Modern Art retrospective, Morrissey remained an obligatory name in passim but has hitherto not been accorded a full study.

Some reasons for this neglect are obvious. For one thing, Morrissey's doggedly personal course detached him from all film movements, major or minor. His views make him unique among American independent filmmakers: he is a reactionary conservative. Aesthetically, his roots in Warhol's minimalism excluded him from both the commercial and the art-house mainstreams. Yet his faith in character, narrative, and the discriminating deployment of the cinematic apparatus also barred him from the avant-garde. Also, Morrissey stayed outside of the politics of the New York underground film movement. Though Robert Frank and Emile de Antonio were Warhol's friends and influences, neither Warhol nor Morrissey was involved in their New American Cinema Group, which convened in September 1960, or in any later derivative.² Morrissey proudly avers, "I'm totally independent of the independents."³

When Morrissey is mentioned in the Warhol retrospectives, it is often with resentment. Remnants of Warhol's entourage have not forgiven Morrissey for refusing to work with anyone using drugs or for otherwise introducing efficiency and order into the Factory, the large loft in which Warhol

conducted his various art and social enterprises.⁴ Gerard Malanga remembers Morrissey as Warhol's "sort of hatchet man." As superstar Viva remembers, Morrissey was "a real nine-to-five – the only one. He wanted to make money, be commercial. He dealt with the press. Paul could deal with everybody. He was quick . . . very quick. That's it. There was nobody else."⁵ Stephen Koch recalls Morrissey as always "a kind of anomaly in the Factory," unlike all the refugees from the street culture: he was "a very typical young man in a hurry. That was not really the Factory style: Pushiness was out."⁶

Opinion is more dramatically divided on Morrissey's influence on Warhol's films. The Old Guard avant-garde contend that because of Morrissey, Warhol "quickly faded as a significant film-maker" after *The Chelsea Girls* (1966).⁷ Or as Stephen Koch puts it, "something absolutely grotesque happened to Warhol's two finest gifts: his visual intelligence and his taste. It was simply this: Degradation."⁸ (The gargantuan ten-day auction of Warhol's collection of some art and much junk in 1988 may undermine any such blanket assumption about Warhol's taste.)⁹ Tony Rayns condemns Morrissey for "abandoning the formal integrity of Warhol's cinema and deliberately setting out to make films which would catch and hold an audience's interest." As if interesting an audience were not bad enough, Morrissey made "conventionally authored films . . . whose scripting and casting more or less explicitly express an authorial point of view – a mixture, as it happens, of prurience, condescension and supercilious contempt."¹⁰

To the astute John Russell Taylor, "the sign of Warhol's coming of age as a filmmaker has been his acceptance, around the time that his collaboration with Paul Morrissey began, of that basic axiom of the cinema, that what the camera really photographs is not the outside but the inside of people." Taylor continues: "The most immediate effect of Morrissey's influence might be regarded as 'going commercial.' Not that that seems to have been the prime intention; rather, Morrissey seems to be a much warmer, more outgoing person than Warhol, and his films therefore have a far more human touch."¹¹ In the same spirit, Madeleine Harmsworth in the *Sunday Mirror* heralded Morrissey's *Flesh* as "a film – unlike the others of Warhol's I have seen – of great humanity, even of innocence."¹²

As well as allegedly "selling out" to commercial film, Morrissey remained overshadowed by Warhol's celebrity. Although Morrissey was solely responsible for *Flesh*, *Heat*, and *Trash*, they still are often called Warhol films.¹³ Films Warhol financed, but otherwise had nothing to do with, either creatively or consultorily, remain lumped into the Warhol canon. In an otherwise insightful study, David James misnames Morrissey's films *Heat* and *Flesh* for

Frankenstein as “remakes of specific films” and cites them as the third phase in Warhol’s “analysis of the history of Hollywood.”¹⁴ The confusion over the films’ authorship persists along with the uncertain authorship of much of Warhol’s other work. For Warhol often farmed out his work to friends, family, and followers to finish or even to sign with his name.

More broadly, Peter Wollen suggests that Warhol assumed a machinelike impersonality in order to “enter, in phantasy, a world of pure seriality and standardisation.” So “rather than producing images of commodities, he was repackaging packaging as a commodity in itself.” Warhol reduced the identity of his subject “to the purely symbolic dimension of the name, functioning like a logo: ‘Andy Warhol,’ like ‘Coca-Cola’ or ‘Walt Disney.’”¹⁵ Though Warhol openly shrank from artist to logo, Koch calls Morrissey just Warhol’s “collaborator” on even the “commercial sex farces” of which he acknowledges Morrissey is “their factual director, their creator, their energy.”¹⁶ Conversely, Morrissey sometimes serves as convenient scapegoat. Koch blames Morrissey for the new explicitness of Warholian pornography in *Blue Movie* (originally titled *Fuck*, 1968), of which Morrissey disapproved and with which (its star, Viva, confirms) he had nothing to do after setting up the lights and camera.¹⁷

It is probably inaccurate to speak even of “collaboration” in the Warhol–Morrissey films. In Parker Tyler’s words, Warhol was at most “a filmic auteur by default,” who “functioned with very little directorial power, leaving script and the coaching of actors largely to others, while using the paltriest methods of editing.” Even on the scripted *Horse* (1965): “*Auteur! Auteur! Where is the auteur? Only the stationary, faithfully grinding camera really remained in charge of affairs on this occasion at the Factory.*”¹⁸ *My Hustler* (1965), commonly cited among Warhol’s films as a turning point from the meditative toward the narrative, began with someone else’s story but was enlivened by Morrissey’s stylistic venturesomeness.¹⁹

Paul Morrissey was the presiding force of creative control in the “Warhol films” from *My Hustler* to *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967). The casting, cuing of actors, prompting of plot, arrangement of location, editing, and “whatever directing these films had, came from me,” Morrissey avows. Morrissey even set the lights and prepared the camera; all Warhol had to do was operate it. With the advent of outside financing on *L’Amour* (1972), Warhol gave up even his minimal activity running the camera, turning it over to Jed Johnson, and withdrew from the set. The designers of the film’s advertising gave the director’s credit to Warhol. Warhol needed Morrissey’s directing because “Andy was genuinely trying to explore though he couldn’t say what. He was so flustered and so insecure about what was going to

happen that he was happy to leave all that to me.” So, in fact, it was Morrissey and not Warhol of whom Antonioni approved: “His characters do and say what they want to and are, therefore, wholly original in contemporary films.”²⁰ Morrissey says,

There wasn’t much direction in these experiments but whatever directing was done, I did. Andy just aimed the camera. It was Andy’s notion – and it did grow into a kind of “concept” – that the camera should not be turned off. But I could see there was a law of diminishing returns, which Andy couldn’t see. Once I was fully in the driver’s seat, long before *Flesh*, then I went for more effects, with a story and longer shooting that I would then cut down. *Bike Boy*, *I, a Man*, all were done like that and then edited down.

Obviously Warhol had no influence on the films we will discuss here as Morrissey’s. “Andy would just give me the money and let me do what I wanted. He had an encouraging tendency, always asking what he could do for you. Maybe *The Power of Positive Thinking* was the only book he ever read. He wasn’t stupid but he didn’t come across as intelligent. But he was. He knew what he could do and what he couldn’t.” According to Morrissey,

Andy wasn’t really capable of any kind of complicated thoughts or ideas. Ideas need a verb and a noun, a subject. Andy spoke in a kind of stumbling staccato. You had to finish sentences for him. So Andy operated through people who did things for him. He wished things into happening, things that he himself couldn’t do. In that respect he was like Louis B. Mayer at MGM.

Morrissey suggests that

Andy probably never even read the books written for him by others. Words were extremely difficult for him to put together or to deal with. He certainly never had any kind of aesthetic. Because he made so little sense, people were not only finishing sentences for him but inventing things that he might have meant and ascribing to him ideas he was unable to comprehend.

In David Ehrenstein’s view, “Film, for Warhol, was a figure of social exchange, a network of private meanings made public, a field of free-flowing absolute research.” Still, Ehrenstein reduces Morrissey’s influence to the post-1967 “packaging” of Warhol’s films.²¹

To his credit, Warhol did not claim the dubious film authorship he is given. When students at the University of California, Los Angeles, asked

Warhol exactly what he contributed to *Heat*, he replied, “Well, uh, I go to the parties.”²² Here is a typical Warhol interview, conducted by Joseph Gelmis:

GELMIS: How do you see your role in getting [an actor] to do what he does?

WARHOL: I don’t do anything. That’s what I don’t understand.

GELMIS: What’s your role, your function, in directing a Warhol film?

WARHOL: I don’t know. I’m trying to figure it out.

Paradoxically, the more Warhol denied creating “his” films, the more he seems to have been credited with them – and with a becoming modesty! But Gelmis concludes that Warhol’s “film primitivism may really be the natural expression of his vision of life.”²³ In his eulogy, John Richardson called Warhol a “saintly simpleton.”²⁴ Morrissey lays a strong claim to have directed the crowning achievements of “Warhol’s cinema.”

Morrissey’s anonymity may also derive in part from one aesthetic principle he shared with Warhol, self-effacement – though Warhol managed to make his spectacular. Morrissey translated Warhol’s antiemotional detachment into allowing the actor predominance over the film’s director. As he described their early “experiments” to *The New York Times* in 1972, “Andy and I really try not to direct a film at all. We both feel the stars should be the center of the film. . . . When a movie is all one director’s eye, it’s devoid of life.”²⁵ Morrissey rejected “cutting away from people and treating people like objects” for the more humanistic purpose, “to give the performers the films.”²⁶ This was actually the crucial ethic in Morrissey’s aesthetic. It resulted in what John Russell Taylor called “documentaries of the human spirit, of subjective rather than objective reality.” Morrissey’s works, Taylor says, “play scrupulously fair with their characters: the films do not build myths, they merely record them.”²⁷ In attempting to revive the power of stars in Hollywood’s heyday, Morrissey sometimes took an extreme position:

A couple of hundred years from now if you look back on the 20th century you will remember the movie stars. They are the people who truly dominate. Not Picasso with his dinky wall decorations which have no relation to people. People aren’t genuinely interested in what he’s done – and he’s considered the greatest artist of the 20th century. People are interested in film and the performers. . . . I don’t think they’ll talk much about the directors. Or the painters. Or the writers. But I think Holly Woodlawn will be remembered.²⁸

Be that as it may, Morrissey rejected the idea of “half-baked intellectuals . . . that film is a vehicle for the director. Call it an old idea or an original idea – movies are vehicles for stars.”²⁹ But not, Morrissey would add, for conventional actors. Morrissey based his cinema on the performances and improvisations of “nonactors” (but see the next section).

Out of respect, Morrissey allows his actors to define their characters’ own terms for our compassion. Typically, in each film there is at least one scene in which a character’s chatter suddenly turns back around us and we find ourselves feeling empathy for that person. It may be a whore’s memory of a gang rape (in *Flesh*), a garbage lady’s indomitable dignity (in *Trash*), an aging woman’s pathetic need for her young stud (in *Heat*, so to speak), a vampire’s craving for lost purity, or a tyrannical composer’s brutish grasp for affection. Especially in the *Flesh* trilogy and in the costume (or “monster”) movies, a monologue that begins in the remoteness of a squirming specimen ensnares our common humanity.

Morrissey’s transvestite stars are especially effective in thus transcending their alienation. This is what prompted John Russell Taylor to call Morrissey/Warhol “sublimely unpatronizing.” He continues: “They accept their ‘stars’ absolutely on their own terms; the stars are whatever they want to be, whatever they think they are, and that is that. They are not representative of anything but themselves. And after all, why should they be?” The transvestite actor Holly Woodlawn in *Trash* is an apt example: “As far as the film is concerned she is a woman, and so as far as we are concerned she becomes a woman too. In this performance the power of inner conviction overcomes any prosaic misgivings.”³⁰ She remains persuasively a woman even when we see her quite male chest.

In two other senses Morrissey embraces human castoffs. In casting, he revived the forgotten thirties star Maurice Braddell (of *Things to Come*) for *Flesh* and *Women in Revolt*, and in *Spike of Bensonhurst* gave Ernest Borgnine one of his last good roles. Geraldine Smith, Joe’s wife in *Flesh*, resurfaces as the whore Toni in *Mixed Blood* and again as the hero’s mother in *Spike of Bensonhurst*. Morrissey doesn’t have a company of performers but he remembers the forgotten. More important, he respects humanity that others spurn.

Kathy Acker finds Morrissey politically effective, as well. Acker believes that his films “made the art world, then the United States generally, accept, even admire those whom they had formerly condemned: drag queens, strippers, young homeless kids, not hippy pot smokers but actual heroin addicts and welfare victims.”³¹ In this respect Warhol seemed also to speak for Morrissey when he described members of his entourage as “leftovers of

show business” who are “inherently funny”: “I usually accept people on the basis of their self-images, because their self-images have more to do with the way they think than their objective-images do.”³² To reveal and to cast them, then, was to accept them, in a way as humanist as it was filmic. As Morrissey told Neal Weaver, “With us, people can be whatever they are, and we record it on film. If a scene is just a scene, with a lot of ideas that have nothing to do with the people, you don’t need to make a movie, you could just type it.”³³

Morrissey’s valued performers were generally of two opposite styles. Some were histrionic, relishing the chance to “act” as flamboyantly on-camera as off, most notably as the transvestites Holly Woodlawn and Candy Darling. Morrissey’s transvestites, like the other Warhol “superstars,” were already well-known New York presences who were invited to drop in to “perform” in front of the camera. At the other extreme, his early features rotated around the handsome but unexpressive Joe Dallesandro, a passive object of predatory and voyeuristic attention.

The eighteen-year-old Dallesandro happened by John Wilcock’s apartment, which Warhol and Morrissey had borrowed to shoot *Loves of Ondine* (a ninety-minute excerpt from the twenty-four-hour * * * *). To enliven the flagging film, between reel changes Morrissey invited Dallesandro to portray Ondine’s physical education instructor. His interplay with Ondine and Bridget Polk so improved the film that Morrissey used Dallesandro again in *Lonesome Cowboys*. Dallesandro was widely approved as a new spirit in the Warhol films. David Bourdon found him unique “because he lacked even the slightest trace of self-mockery or campiness.”³⁴ As the more orthodox director George Cukor pointed out, “Joe Dallesandro does some enormously difficult things – walking around in the nude in a completely unselfconscious way. . . . [In *Trash*] He really made me understand, more than any other film, what a drug addict was.”³⁵

Morrissey continues to cast both the histrionic and the inarticulate. As late as *Beethoven’s Nephew* (1985), he starred a veteran of the Molière theater (Wolfgang Reichmann) as Beethoven, and a handsome medical student (Dietmar Prinz) as the nephew. In *Spike of Bensonhurst* (1988) Morrissey cast the scene-chewing veteran Ernest Borgnine against the natural Sasha Mitchell. From both extremes Morrissey draws performances generous in either nuance or flash.

But “performances” they most definitely are. “None of my central characters – neither Joe nor the kids in *Forty-Deuce* or *Mixed Blood* or *Spike* or the *Nephew* – ever behaved in front of the cameras as they did in real life. They were usually happy and talkative but I’d tell them not to smile.

I wouldn't tell them what to do or think, I'd leave that to them. But I always say, 'No, one more time, but don't smile.' A smile is a kind of surrender to fate. It eliminates any kind of tension. It implies acceptance and therefore a kind of commitment." During the shooting of *Trash*, Morrissey instructed Dallesandro: "Stop the Method moping – just talk. And whatever you do, don't smile unless you *don't mean it!*"³⁶

Morrissey rejects the entire tradition of Method acting as an aberration: "A John Wayne – who I think is the greatest screen artist – doesn't change his personality for the part" any more than a Rembrandt would feel an obligation to paint as Van Dyke or as Hogarth. The Method actor, like Paul Muni, "is an actor, not an artist, a sort of journeyman craftsman – and very uninteresting." Morrissey preferred to cast "people whose reactions on film are as close to their own personalities as they would be in real life." Morrissey told his American Film Institute audience that "anybody can take film. Anybody can edit film. The hard thing is to appear in front of the camera and be interesting. I think you're either interesting or you're not. I don't think anybody can learn to be interesting in front of a camera. That's the part of filmmaking that is a mystery."³⁷

Morrissey bristles at interviewers who call his performers nonactors. "We don't handle non-actors," he says. "Everybody we handle is an actor. . . . We're proud of our films because they have such great performances in them. . . . acting in the great 'star' notion of acting – people living close to the reality of their personality."³⁸ Perhaps not surprisingly, Morrissey admires Ronald Reagan: "Reagan never had to invent himself. He's the same now as he was in movies in 1937."³⁹ At the beginning, "William Holden was awkward and mannered but Reagan was never self-conscious. He projected what he had perfectly."⁴⁰ "He's the kind of actor I like and the kind of politician I like. There's a connection."

Morrissey's actors were so convincing that their "performances" were often overlooked. But, he says, "The films were experiments in character. Neither of us wanted the people to be themselves in front of the camera. We weren't trying to make goddam documentaries." He resents Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (1967) because "it exploited this guy. She got him drunk in front of the camera so he'd cry for her. And she thought she was following us! Didn't she realize our people were acting? They were improvising. It was all artificial, all performance." Paradoxically, the only scene in which the artifice of performance is explicitly referred to – Ondine flipping out while playing Pope in *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) – has fed the myth that the Warhol films simply recorded the actors' lives. So did the fact that Morrissey's characters tended to have their performer's names. But that

convention began with John Cassavetes's ground-breaking *Shadows* (1959). As David James explains, "The close identification between actor and role, in which the actors' use of their own names implies that the situations they rehearse are personally felt rather than professionally assumed, is supposed to empower their fictional interaction with the added energy and credibility of the quasi-therapeutic working through of real-life relationships."⁴¹ The new cinema's realism and its adaptation of cinema verité technology conspired to make Morrissey's composed, albeit exploratory, fictions seem to be accidents of reality.

The rich ambiguities around Morrissey's transvestites have particularly drawn insightful comment – though it's usually attributed to Warhol instead. For Gregory Battcock, this "sexual dualism as represented on the screen can be taken as further proof of Warhol's [*sic*] intent to unmask the sexual fraud of the contemporary cinema. The usual presentation of sex is a product of the art of packaging technology and it is illusion, facade, and gesture that we buy."⁴² For Stephen Koch, the bisexual hustler and the transvestite in Warhol's (or Morrissey's) work are "linked for all their apparent difference by a common obsession with the mystery of how a man inhabits his flesh." Where the transvestite "builds a life upon the denial of his anatomical reality" the hustler "proclaims himself to be 'just a body.'" The former, as if a pure psyche, transcends his flesh; the latter reduces himself to flesh, but both embody the same dilemma.⁴³ For David James, where the male hustlers seem to absent themselves from their bodies when they assume the female function of passive visual/sexual object, "the transvestites need to maximize rather than minimize their presence. Their acting consequently is a hyperbolic, highly gestural pastiche of fragments of different codes of femininity, with the interaction between the different degrees of it and the various vocabularies for it being the source of multiple narrative ironies."⁴⁴

Morrissey's nonscripted cinema thrived on the transvestite performers, who of necessity had been living out a role (in their case, the wrong gender) and so did not need a script to feed them lines or a self. Moreover, their exuberant exhibitionism was perfect for Morrissey's noninterventionist aesthetic. It also provided an intense psychological arena for Morrissey's cinema to explore. Finally, their sharp wit and minds often produced astonishing twists and revelations. Morrissey fed his actors lines between takes, then let them extemporize around their specific subjects, or more precisely, pour out their style until a soul gleamed forth. "My films are different in being largely 'uncinematic,'" Morrissey says. "I like nonstop dialogue. I seldom show anybody just doing something. I want people always talking."

Rather than script his films, Morrissey would film the actors' improvised chatter, then edit the scene down to the core that he would discover in his actors' creation. As Viva recalls, "The script in the Warhol–Morrissey movies was the common body of experience vibrating in the space between the actors. The success of the films was dependent on our ability to summon our lives' experiences to the front of our brains, the tips of our tongues, so tangible as to be almost visible out in front of our craniums."⁴⁵ Morrissey's strategy of filming his performers' improvisation differed from the other great American independent, John Cassavetes, for whom improvisation was a mode of rehearsal before filming began. As Morrissey gained confidence, experience, and a budget, he began to plan and even script his films. But even his most polished works – *Mixed Blood*, *Beethoven's Nephew*, and *Spike of Bensonhurst* – retain the flavor of the freshly spoken. Free from any obvious script or directorial fist, Morrissey's cinema refines what Louis Marcorelles called "lived" language.⁴⁶

Even with his nontransvestite performers, when Morrissey began one of these early films he did not know where his performers' invention would lead him:

I don't have any preconceived ideas of who the characters are. I just give the actors general, cliché parts to play and I find they put in lots of nuances that a writer wouldn't come up with. That's why I always like new actors or fresh ones, young ones, people who haven't done too much, because they have more new things to offer in the way of characterization. There's nobody who makes films, I think, in quite such an irresponsible way.⁴⁷

Furthermore, as David James remarks,

Both the personae assumed in the fictional narratives and the more consistent if not more real personae the actor assumed in everyday life remained unstable. Consequently, the drama of the Warhol narratives, even through the most 'commercial' of the Morrissey collaborations, resides in the interplay between the different levels of artifice in any one actor/character as much as in the interaction between the characters, even though each is a means of production of the other. Up to *The Chelsea Girls* and * * * *, the primary interest lay in people assuming roles; subsequently, as genre and narrative provided more stable fictional frames, it lay in people falling out of them.⁴⁸

In a tradition that began with Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's *Pull My Daisy* (1960), Warhol (that is, Morrissey) relentlessly anatomized "the in-