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I SHOT ANDY WARHOL

The scintillating fiction-feature debut of Mary Harron and one of the most controversial independent films of the 1990s, *I Shot Andy Warhol* stars an electric Lili Taylor as Valerie Solanas, a militant feminist whose attempted murder of Andy Warhol brought instant fame to her radically anti-male *SCUM Manifesto*. Dropping out of grad school in the midsixties, the brilliant yet volatile Solanas survived in New York City as a destitute artist, sex worker, and panhandler, soon striking up a friendship with Warhol superstar Candy Darling that brought her briefly into the orbit of the world's premier pop artist. With vivid, hallucinatory attention to historical detail, Harron captures the explosive cross-pollination of New York's political and artistic countercultures as well as the creativity, snobbery, and decadence at the heart of the legendary Factory. Anchored by pitch-perfect performances—and featuring a blistering score by John Cale as well as covers of sixties hits by some of the nineties' most iconic bands (R.E.M., Wilco)—*I Shot Andy Warhol* is an incisive portrait of a rebel without an outlet and the soon-to-be-lost generation she came to define.

Film Info: United States | 1996 | 103 minutes | Color | In English | 1.85:1 aspect ratio

PRODUCTION HISTORY

In a 2024 interview with *Screen Slate*, director Mary Harron explained that, having worked as a researcher on a documentary about Andy Warhol, a copy of Valerie Solanas's militant feminist tract *SCUM Manifesto* had caught her eye in the window of a left-wing bookstore. "When I started reading, I was really struck by it," said Harron. "By that point, I had interviewed practically everybody in the Warhol circle, including Warhol himself . . . I was amazed, because, apart from saying that she shot him and she was crazy, nobody had ever talked about Valerie Solanas."

Harron initially wanted to explore Solanas through an "antidocumentary" format, "a reverse hagiography" that would focus on this fringe member of the Warhol Factory demimonde, which had included cultural icons like Lou Reed, Paul Morrissey, and Edie Sedgwick. Besides charting Solanas's descent into mental illness, the film would attempt to trace the collision between divergent strands of 1960s counterculture, as Solanas's uninhibited disgust at misogynist society clashed with Warhol's detached, ironic take on American culture. During her tenure as producer of the short-lived PBS documentary series *Edge* (1991-2), Harron pitched her concept to eventual *I Shot Andy Warhol* producer Tom Kalin, who suggested that she make it a biopic. "I was unconfident about doing that," Harron admitted, "because I hadn't done a drama. He gave me a lot of confidence." In the next few years, Harron researched Solanas's life and collaborated on

a screenplay with Daniel Minahan, who would go on to direct for television shows such as *Six Feet Under*, *The L Word*, and *Deadwood*.

To craft an evenhanded perspective on a rebellious iconoclast like Solanas—an out lesbian who hosted a feminist call-in radio show an entire decade before Stonewall—Harron and Minahan incorporated her own writings into the script. Interspersed throughout their biographical portrait are scenes in which the character of Solanas faces the camera to recite passages from the *SCUM Manifesto*, shot in the style of Warhol's screen tests. As the director has explained: "Obviously, the screen tests are silent . . . But my idea was to take the design . . . and give Valerie a voice within it. I also wanted it to be separate from the rest of the world. To me, it was like Valerie's in heaven and she's speaking to us." For these sequences, Harron first chose photographer Billy Name—Warhol's onetime lover, who was responsible for some of the most iconic images taken of the Factory scene—but his footage, which attempted to evoke the chiaroscuro lighting of Warhol's own photographs and movies, proved too dark for a narrative film.

Preproduction for *I Shot Andy Warhol*—financed primarily by the pioneering independent production company Killer Films—centered on finding the right cast to embody the film's (in)famous historical personages. Harron recalled that lead actor Lili Taylor "signed on before there was a script, when the film was still a forty-page document that I'd written out. After I saw her in *Dogfight* [1991], I never considered anyone else. She was such a remarkable actor. This was very early New York indie film days, when there was much less pressure to cast a huge movie star."

I Shot Andy Warhol was filmed in 1995 on location in Detroit; Newark, New Jersey; and New York City, including at the Chelsea Hotel and Studio 54. In a 2000 interview with Tod Lippy, production designer Thérèse DePrez explained that it "took forever for Tom Whelan, the location manager . . . and I to find a location for the Factory, which was obviously the key part of the movie. We finally found a space . . . in Chelsea, before Chelsea was 'Chelsea.' . . . Then we foiled the entire place, as Billy Name had done originally." A major component in convincingly evoking the look and feel of the Factory was recreating Warhol's signature silk screens. "We researched where Warhol found his images, then had to get those approved by the Warhol Foundation," DePrez recalled. "Then we made the actual screens. Painting all the backgrounds, stretching all the canvas, priming all the canvas, making all the frames. I have a photograph where you can see the entire floor of the space covered with Poppy pictures and the Brillo boxes." Many of the details from the mock-Factory's realistic set design—paintbrushes, tools, film projectors—were purchased from thrift stores and garage sales.

From its inception, *I Shot Andy Warhol* was subject to considerable controversy. Lou Reed, a member of the Velvet Underground, felt that it granted undue glamour to the person who had attempted to assassinate his best friend; when Killer Films tried to buy the rights to his band's music for the soundtrack, Reed nixed the deal. Instead, for the Factory party scene, indie-rock outfit Yo La Tengo performed as a VU-like band vamping on a VU-like garage-rock number. Yet John Cale, another VU founder, contributed to the original score. Meanwhile, critics, audiences, and special-interest groups protested the film's supposed glorification of Solanas's violently anti-male ideology.

Nonetheless, *I Shot Andy Warhol* was met with mostly positive reviews from American critics and proved a modest success at the box office. The film not only solidified an emerging Killer Films as one of independent cinema's boldest production houses but also jump-started Harron's career, leading to her risk-taking, taboo-breaking features to come, such as *American Psycho* (2000) and *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2005).

MARY HARRON BIOGRAPHY

Mary Harron was born on January 12, 1953, in Bracebridge, Ontario, Canada. Her family was deeply entrenched in the arts: her father was Canadian actor and author Don Harron; her first stepmother was American actor Virginia Leith, who starred in Stanley Kubrick's *Fear and Desire*; and her second stepmother was Canadian folk singer Catherine McKinnon. When Harron was six, her parents divorced, and she spent her early childhood living between Toronto and Los Angeles. At thirteen, she and her family relocated to England, where she eventually attended St Anne's College, Oxford University. During her time in England, she dated future UK prime minister Tony Blair.

After graduating from Oxford, Harron moved to New York City. There, she became part of a burgeoning punk-rock scene and contributed to the influential magazine *Punk*, where she conducted a landmark interview with the Sex Pistols—the first for an American publication. During the 1980s, she moved back to England and wrote cultural criticism for the *Observer* and the *Guardian*. Later in that same decade, she worked as a film researcher and, eventually, wrote and directed documentaries for British cinema and television.

In the early nineties, Harron returned to New York City, where she produced the short-lived PBS documentary series *Edge*, about American pop culture. A connection with producer and screenwriter Tom Kalin encouraged her to write the script (alongside Daniel Minahan) for what would become her feature-film debut, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, about the militant feminist Valerie Solanas. In the late nineties, Harron helmed episodes for acclaimed American television series like *Homicide: Life on the Street* and *Oz*.

Harron's sophomore feature would prove even more contentious than her first. Adapted from Bret Easton Ellis's darkly satiric novel about a yuppie serial killer, *American Psycho* (2000) was protested as violent and antifeminist. Despite or perhaps because of this pushback, the film became a critical and box-office success. Harron went on to direct episodes for TV's *Pasadena*, *The L Word*, and *Six Feet Under* in between *American Psycho* and her next feature, *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2005). In yet another polarizing entry in Harron's filmography, Gretchen Mol plays the real-life 1950s cheesecake and bondage model.

Over the past two decades, Harron has directed episodes for *Big Love*, *Six Degrees*, and *The Nine*, among other television shows; she also directed the TV movie *Anna Nicole* (2013) and the miniseries *Alias Grace* (2017), written by actor-filmmaker Sarah Polley. Harron's most recent features are *The Moth Diaries* (2011), a young-adult vampire movie; *Charlie Says* (2018), a drama about the Manson family; and *Dalíland* (2022), a biopic of surrealist painter Salvador Dalí. She currently lives in New York City with her husband, filmmaker John C. Walsh, with whom she wrote the screenplay for *Dalíland*.

An Oral History of *I Shot Andy Warhol*

Mary Harron in Conversation with Elizabeth Purchell

What was your background before *I Shot Andy Warhol*, and what drew you to Valerie Solanas as a subject?

I became a journalist after I finished college. I helped start *Punk* magazine, the first punk fanzine. And I was writing about music, not because I was a music person but because I'd gotten involved in that scene, in the early years of punk. I was interested in film, but I wasn't making films yet. Then I went back to England, where I had spent my teenage and university years.

I was also very obsessed with the Velvet Underground. I was somebody who, even as a teenager, became interested in the Factory after I saw pictures in a magazine. The first time I went to CBGB—which was in 1975, very early on, to see the Ramones—Lou Reed was there. At the end of the '70s, I wrote a history of the Velvet Underground for a British music paper. And then I wrote a big piece, many thousands of words, about Warhol; I called it “Pop Art Pop,” about Warhol's effect on music, in terms of sensibility—with the Velvets but also just his sensibility generally. In the process of doing that, I interviewed everybody around the Warhol Factory—Gerard Malanga, Viva, you name it—and interviewed Warhol himself. In my life, I met him twice, I think.

Valerie Solanas obviously came up, but I just thought she was a crazy person and knew she'd written the *SCUM Manifesto*. Around that time, my interest in film really grew. I then got a job in television, and I was working on a documentary program as a researcher for a Warhol documentary and we interviewed everybody—this time on camera. Warhol died when we were just beginning it.

And again, I'd hear about Valerie Solanas, just in passing. While I was working on the documentary, in London, I passed a left-wing bookstore, and there's the *SCUM Manifesto*. I was like, Oh my god, somebody published it! So I went in, I read it, I bought it, I read it on the way to work, and it was just cataclysmic. It had such an effect on me. I don't know what it was like when you first read it, but it's like: This woman is a genius. Her analysis is so powerful and so funny.

That started me, and I just conceived this idea of some kind of radical documentary that would take the most despised, pariah person in this social scene, who turned out to be the most interesting person in that story. And that started a seven-year journey before the film got made.

What was it like seeing Warhol's films for the first time?

I spent a summer going to a theater in Notting Hill Gate in London—the Electric Cinema—watching Warhol movies. And then at college, someone took me to see *Trash*, and then I saw *Heat* and *Flesh*.

When I was researching the documentary, I looked at Warhol's screen tests, his Super 8 work, the more underground films. And that all influenced me, and that fed into my work in documentary, which fed into how I eventually filmed *I Shot Andy Warhol*. By the time I came to make this film, I would use Super 8 film in

my work, I would mix black and white and color—I'd be working with a lot of different film formats. So I think I learned a lot from looking at Warhol's work.

How did your conception of Valerie and her story change as it moved from a documentary into a narrative? And what was the impetus for that?

Well, you really couldn't make any kind of conventional documentary about her because there's no footage. And very few people knew her. I got a job as producer-director on a show during the American elections in '92. That gave me enough money to rent an apartment, put a deposit down. And I met Diane Tucker, this young woman on the show that I was working on who had just left college, who was very interested in feminism, and was a terrific researcher. So I asked her to join me in this unpaid, lonely crusade. We both got very, very committed to it and obsessed with it.

It was so wonderful to really do that kind of detective work, pre-internet. Uncovering the story of Valerie Solanas piece by piece. There was no internet then, so I spent many months in the main reading room of the New York Public Library, looking through old magazines, going through any reference to Valerie, going through the books but also microfiches of newspapers, finding some material that was written at the time—and there was so little. Diane contacted all these sort of '60s feminists, such as Kate Millett, Ti-Grace Atkinson, etc.

I couldn't track Valerie's family down because they had married and changed their names. I finally tracked down someone—even though Valerie was a lesbian, she also had lived with a man sort of quite happily and met him at a Burger King in Queens. There's something touching and sad about her. She's very sparky, tough, and swaggery.

What would you say were the key ways into the story through your research? I'm assuming Jeremiah Newton would be one of those key people to talk to.

I was working on the script with my best friend, Dan Minahan, who's now a famous director. He wrote a lot of Candy's character. In our conversations, we had this idea of a girl who looked like a boy, dressed like a boy, and a boy who dressed like a girl—the boyish swagger of Valerie and the ultra-femininity of Candy. And that they were friends. I don't know for sure that Candy was the first person to take Valerie to the Factory, but it's likely. Jeremiah had many memories of Candy, such as the filming of the TV show and of her doing auditions for *Up Your Ass*.

Was there anything you felt you weren't able to uncover during the research phase? Or, by the end of it, did you feel you had a complete conception of Valerie? Was there still a lingering mystery to her?

Her early life. This always happens: after the film came out, when I was in Seattle, her niece contacted me. I met with her, and she was really sweet, and she really liked the film. She said that she and her mother—Valerie's younger sister—had felt it was very accurate. So you know, once you make something, then you find out, you fill in the blanks. But in her early life, there was, in the psychiatrist's report, information about her being sexually abused by her father, being a prostitute. She actually had a son that I didn't know about.

There's been so much interest in Candy over the past couple years. Why do you think that is? And if you were writing the script now, do you think your characterization of her would change at all?

The irony was that Candy was very much embracing old-school movie femininity. And we love her for it. That was her, and Valerie was Valerie. They were both outsiders, both sort of rebels, in a way, because they were going so against the grain. And they were both very brave.

Candy, I find enormously brave. And so talented, also. I'd seen *Women in Revolt*—she's just hilarious. She's a sort of Marilyn Monroe comedienne. And her life, because of the illegal hormones and poverty—they (Valerie and Candy) were very poor. The fact that they both had so few resources to fall back on is part of the sadness of both of their stories. If Candy had family money, she might have had proper doctors and could have gone to Europe and had a proper transition and not taken illegal drugs. And Valerie, when she started developing schizophrenia, would have had more family support and not been on the streets.

Candy had not yet transitioned, but in the end, we cast for Stephen, who doesn't look like Candy, really, but I think gives such a beautiful inner performance. He's really great in the movie. In retrospect, I don't know if I would necessarily have cast somebody trans, but I would have been open, I think.

In the '90s, you start seeing this string of films where you have Andy Warhol as a character—Crispin Glover in *The Doors*, or David Bowie playing him in *Basquiat*—the Factory as a setting. In a lot of these films, it's just kind of using these people as signifiers of an era or a scene. Why do you think that became the shorthand, and how would you say your conception of that scene and these people differs from the other movies being made around that time?

Well, in *The Doors*, Crispin Glover's sort of signifying New York decadence, and in *Basquiat*, that's obviously an '80s Warhol. I was interested because I actually love Warhol as an artist. I think he's a complicated person—not always a well-behaved person but a great artist. Also very, very vulnerable, and he could be mean, could be vulnerable, was fragile, was also tough.

I think Jared Harris did an incredible job. One of the things that happened when I was auditioning the film was that people would come in as Warhol, and they would play it very kind of mean and bitchy, kind of judging him—and Jared came in and just played the vulnerability, the innerness. He's one of the great actors of our time and gave such a deep performance. He found some tapes—he contacted the Warhol Foundation, and he found some recordings of Andy's voice, and he just listened to them. He did a very deep dive into Warhol the same way that Lili did on Valerie.

Was Lili your first choice to play Valerie?

Once I saw Lili in *Dogfight*, it was like, she's Valerie. Lili is such a great actress who brings you in. I had to cast somebody who was maybe more charming, really, than Valerie was in real life; I knew it had to be somebody who could bring the audience into this character, bond with this character.

What was Lili's reaction to the script?

Lili signed on before the script. I had done a sort of forty-page treatment. She had already read the *SCUM Manifesto*, because I guess the *SCUM Manifesto* was doing its rounds. As I was writing the script—at some point, over about a year, while I must have still been writing it—I would turn up at her apartment, and we would talk about what I was doing. I did research packets for all of the cast—for Michael Imperioli as Ondine, for Candy Darling’s actor, for everybody. They got their little packages of photographs and articles and stuff like that.

Since so much of that era was on film, or otherwise photographed or documented, did you feel a responsibility or a need for it to be a one-to-one duplication, or did you want to put your own version of it?

I came out of documentary film, so I tend to want to be very accurate. But Dan Minahan actually, at some point, had to push me to make the project work from the script—that I wasn’t going to go to hell if I changed things a little bit. So I was always kind of like, “Oh, but that didn’t happen that way.” But sometimes you really do have to let it go a bit.

The original script had a more curt ending for Valerie—just saying that she died of emphysema, and not that *SCUM Manifesto* had become a feminist classic. I was wondering—

The ending was suggested by Killer Films. They wanted a happier ending, or a more upbeat note, and I sort of gave in to that. But honestly, I should have gone with my own bleak instincts, a bit like Samuel Beckett. Valerie was still alive when I started trying to research this. God, she would have hated the fact that I was making a film, because what Valerie wanted was total control. She would have been very unhappy. But at the same time, she might have liked it—if people were that interested in her.

I went to this welfare hotel in the Mission District in San Francisco, and I talked to the caretaker there. I was curious whether Valerie had still been writing, and they opened the door to her room, and there was a typewriter and a manuscript. But her niece said her belongings would have all gone to her mother, who probably would have destroyed it.

Would you say her enduring popular appeal as a feminist figure is because of the film, as opposed to her just being a footnote before the film?

I think there’s power in her manifesto—when I read it, it was like a lightning bolt. To me, she’s like a prophet. What she was saying about the relationships between men and women, in her satirical way—writing in the early- to mid-60s—was so profoundly accurate. Not even really hardcore feminists were seeing this as clearly about that power dynamic.

In my days in the New York Public Library, I went through a lot of magazines, because those are very good—not serious books but popular magazines, women’s magazines. It was completely, tacitly accepted as a fundamental truth that women were intellectually inferior to men. Intellectually, morally, weaker in every way. And even serious magazines just took this for granted. It’s a bit like when you read about race, and you realize that an entire civilization—world civilization, really—is based on a lie or an illusion of what female inferiority was.

How do you reconcile Valerie’s influence with some of the more transphobic politics of hers?

She was transphobic. I know there have been attempts to soften that, but she had this very reductive idea of biology. What I find great and inspiring and brilliant in Valerie is not to do with her theories about biology, which seem very rigid and obsessive—the idea of men having fewer chromosomes or something and that therefore, in her view, men cannot be women.

There's a whole other way of defining gender: gender is also in the mind. For someone of my generation, gender was kind of a prison. I grew up in a prison, I think—being born in the '50s, and then growing up in the '60s and '70s—a prison of the low expectations of women, of what a woman was. And that's not just biology, it's ideology. It's what we think femininity is, or masculinity. I think the debates now are very complex and sophisticated about identity.

I think that's one of the things that really holds up about the film—the way it inserts Candy into this as an oppositional figure to Valerie's character, but also kind of shows Valerie's, for lack of a better word, problematic-ness in those sorts of issues.

I hate historical feminist films that make something feminist by just scrubbing anything awkward out of the character and making them have present-day attitudes. Valerie was a woman who went to college in the '50s. It was kind of remarkable that she had the vision she did. But then she had a very binary, oppositional view of women versus men. What's funny is that she was friends with Candy. And, in some ways, Valerie shooting Andy should not have been in the cards. It doesn't make any sense in terms of the manifesto, because she considered gay men as kind of semi-allies. I think she just wouldn't have approved of the idea—biologically, because her ideas were so based in biology—that men could become women.

At the same time, there's a scene where we have Jeremiah and Candy and Valerie watching the feminist bra-burning, and Candy is just horrified by how masculine these women are. Valerie's like, "I'm ahead of them all." I'm hoping that, in some ways, a new generation will enjoy that, or be able to argue about those ideas in it. When the film first came out, there was much more focus on Warhol and the Factory, but to me, the dynamics of Valerie and Candy and Jeremiah are as interesting.

Can you talk more about the creation of the soundtrack for the film. I feel like the '90s was a period when it was really common—when period films would have newer artists covering old songs—and the film does that, but it also has a lot of new songs by newer bands like Pavement, Wilco, and Yo La Tengo.

I remember my first meeting with Randy Poster (music supervisor) and at first I was like, "No, we can only use original music from the period." I was hardcore about authenticity. And we couldn't afford music rights. Just "Walk On By," which I was determined to have in for Candy because it's one of my favorite songs, cost \$30,000 on a very low-budget film.

We couldn't use any Velvet Underground music because Lou Reed said no. But I was friends with John Cale, fortunately. I had known him since the punk days, and he wrote a great score, so that—well, we sort of have the Velvets in. And then we had Yo La Tengo cast as the band at the Factory party.

What was it like working with Cale on the score?

John said “We’ll have a string quartet, and then when we record, we’ll double it up, so it’ll sound like eight instruments.” Then I came to his house, listened, and said “It sounds so European, can we speed it up?” That became the opening music, which I think is great. It just gave the film this tense dynamic. Everything he did was beautiful. And it’s a small film, so it could have a sort of minimalist score.

How has the audience response to the film changed over the years, and what do you hope people will take away from the restoration?

I would just love a young audience to see it. I have two daughters, and I want them to see it in its proper version. Their notions of gender are so much freer. I’m very impressed with the youth, actually. I’ll just be interested to see what they think about how we present these dramatizations of Candy and Valerie. I’m very excited because when we had a screening a year and a half ago with Lizzie Borden [director of *Born In Flames*], I was amazed that so many young women were in the audience.

Valerie thought of herself as a revolutionary. People are interested in revolutionaries now, I think. I just hope that—you know, all you want out of a movie is that it lasts for a few years, and that it still has something to say to people.

MARY HARRON SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 1989 Various episodes for *The Late Show* (television series)
1991 “The Thing Is . . . Hotels” (episode for the TV series *Without Walls*)
1994 *Winds of Change* (documentary)
1996 *I Shot Andy Warhol*
1998 “Sins of the Father” (episode for the TV series *Homicide: Life on the Street*)
“Animal Farm” (episode for the TV series *Oz*)
2000 *American Psycho*
2002 “The Bones” (episode for the TV series *Pasadena*)
2004 “Liberally” (episode for the TV series *The L Word*)
2005 “The Rainbow of Her Reasons” (episode for the TV series *Six Feet Under*)
The Notorious Bettie Page
2006 “Roberta’s Funeral” (episode for the TV series *Big Love*)
“Masquerade” (episode for the TV series *Six Degrees*)
2007 “You’re Being Watched” (episode for the TV series *The Nine*)
2008 “Community” (episode for the TV series *Fear Itself*)
2011 *The Moth Diaries*
2013 *Anna Nicole*
2015 “Quid Pro Quo” (episode for the TV series *Constantine*)
“Reunion” (episode for the TV series *The Following*)
2017 *Alias Grace* (TV miniseries)
2018 *Charlie Says*
2022 *Dalíland*

CAST

Valerie Solanas.....Lili Taylor
Andy Warhol.....Jared Harris
Candy Darling.....Stephen Dorff
Stevie.....Martha Plimpton
Ondine.....Michael Imperioli

CREDITS

Director.....Mary Harron
Written by.....Mary Harron, Daniel Minahan
Additional scenes and dialogue by.....Jeremiah Newton
Cinematography.....Ellen Kuras
Editor.....Keith Reamer
Music.....John Cale
Produced by.....Tom Kalin, Christine Vachon

