

Portrait of the Artist as **EXPLOSIVE DEVICE**

Robert Fulford examines the role of the artist in some recent and not-so-recent films

"... psychopathy has become endemic among artists and writers, in whose company the moral idiot is tolerated as perhaps nowhere else in society."

—CLEMENT GREENBERG, 1949

A famous painter lives in public fantasy as a bomb that may go off at any moment, scattering the shrapnel of genius in all directions while endangering everyone in the vicinity, not least himself. Certainly that's how Pablo Picasso appears in *Surviving Picasso*, how Jean-Michel Basquiat emerges in *Basquiat*, and how Andy Warhol looks to the woman who tries to kill him in *I Shot Andy Warhol*. Artists live risky lives, and the risk is not theirs alone. They seem to stand outside the usual rules of conduct—they have, to adapt Greenberg's remark, a licence to practise moral idiocy. The result, in each of these movies, is melodrama, the transformation of complex life into morality tales simple enough for afternoon TV.

Makers of feature films, true to the tastes of our historic moment, meet art only on the level of biography. We are a story-telling civilization (it's our principal activity), and we expect life to present itself as orderly narration. We want an artist's career to be a structured parable—and artists often co-operate, some



East for Life 1956 Kirk Douglas as van Gogh and Anthony Quinn as Gauguin
Courtesy: The Film Reference Library, Toronto International Film Festival Group

Opposite: Julian Schnabel's *Basquiat* 1996
Willem Dafoe as Greg and Jeffrey Wright as Jean-Michel Basquiat
Photo: Eric Liebowitz
Courtesy: Alliance Releasing

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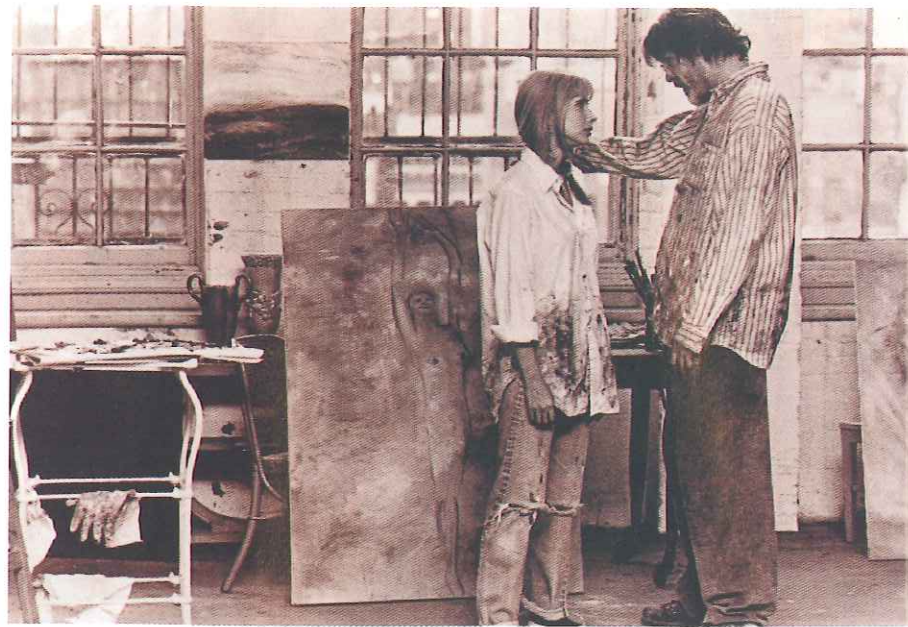
can lead to suicide or fatal overdose.

unknowingly (van Gogh), others out of narcissism (Warhol), still others because they appear to be living out a script someone else wrote for them, lurching toward the disaster of an early grave (Basquiat).

A dramatic film about an artist can't be anything like the art documentaries that appear in odd corners of television and sell on video-cassette in museum shops. Directors of art documentaries are required to take a reverential, hagiographical approach. Even the normally hard-boiled Henri-Georges Clouzot utterly surrendered to the prestige of his subject in the most famous art documentary, *Le Mystère Picasso* (1957); he let Picasso rabbit on about the "risk" he takes in the act of drawing, to the annoyance of an audience that knows he can throw the damned drawing away if it doesn't work. Picasso played himself as a twinking-eyed elf, enthusiastically collaborating in the mystification of his art.

In dramatic films, on the other hand, elves aren't wanted. What drama needs is danger—a fire burning furiously within, or a set of responses, like Warhol's, that are unpredictable enough to be terrifying. (A confession: the first time I met Warhol, at The Factory in New York, I enormously liked him—and then, back home in safe Toronto, had a nightmare starring Andy as a monster.) Vincent Minnelli's *Lust for Life* (1956) is a film that never stops burning; Kirk Douglas's tortured and tongue-tied van Gogh is an artist whose fire never goes out. This remains an attractive Hollywood biography; no one will ever call it sophisticated, but primitive energy makes it still worth watching after four decades. Kirk Douglas's talent hasn't yet frozen into mannerism, and Anthony Quinn's Gauguin seems fresh and real. Minelli's version of van Gogh's psychology isn't exactly clear: the man seems equally upset by the weakening of his religious faith, his failure to sell paintings, and his quarrels with the impatient Gauguin. But there's hardly a moment when *Lust for Life* fails to elicit sympathy for its subject and curiosity about his work.

That's a claim you couldn't make for Carol Reed's painfully didactic *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965), in which Charlton Heston as Michelangelo paints the Sistine Chapel for a stern Pope Julius II, played by Rex Harrison ("Your commission is to decorate the ceiling"). This account, adapted, like *Lust for Life*, from an Irving Stone doorstopper, presents Michelangelo as an unreliable contract worker and the pope as a chronic nagger. *Pope*: "When will you make an end?" *Michelangelo*: "When I'm finished." There's precious little ecstasy involved here, and the agony seems to be mainly over missed deadlines—a remarkable theme



New York Stories 1989
Nick Nolte and Rosanna Arquette (*Life Lessons*)
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Courtesy: The Film Reference Library,
Toronto International Film Festival Group

for a big-studio movie that cost twelve-million 1965-dollars. Michelangelo just can't get his work done! The filmmakers and the audience know why: he's a genius, and geniuses act that way. But the pope, for most of the film, refuses to understand, like most patrons. There's a heart-warming ending, though. Just before dying, the pope sees the completed Sistine Chapel and confesses he would rather have been an artist than a pope—a point he didn't bother making earlier, when he threatened to bring Raphael in to finish the job.

In most films about artists, danger is mainly psychological, though mental illness can lead to suicide (van Gogh) or a fatal overdose (Basquiat). But in two remarkable film biographies of artists, the story turns on a murder. In 1946 Kenji Mizoguchi, the great Japanese director, made *Utamaro and His Five Women*, a lush, sex-drenched film about one of the great *ukiyo-e* artists. Utamaro Kitagawa helped create the popular culture of woodblock prints late in the eighteenth century, when he developed a stylized image of female beauty that persists to this day: slender, long-faced, with narrow, coquettish eyes and dreamy expression. Mizoguchi carefully recreates the environment of geishas and their patrons that Utamaro's work celebrated. At the story's climax, a woman close to the artist murders her lover and the courtesan who stole him, then explains why—to kill for love gives meaning to life. Utamaro, at first appalled, soon discovers that he's perversely thrilled and exhilarated. At the film's end, his artistic energy flowing, he's pouring

out the erotic images for which he's been famous ever since.

The late Derek Jarman, whose films deliriously celebrated homosexual love, used a killing committed by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio in Rome around 1606 as the dramatic focus of *Caravaggio* (1986). He also used Caravaggio's paintings as storyboards for his film, and it's not hard to see why: Caravaggio anticipated cinematic composition and invented the shadowy chiaroscuro adopted in the twentieth century by everyone from German expressionist directors in the nineteen-twenties to the producers of *The X-Files*. Jarman's actors take their places in tableaux copied from Caravaggio, so that the atmosphere perfectly expresses the subject. Like Mizoguchi with Utamaro, Jarman admits the audience to the world of Caravaggio's dreams.

Both Utamaro and Caravaggio emerge as individualists who also expressed the essence of their times. There may not be much of the individualist about Lionel Dobie, played by Nick Nolte in "Life Lessons," Martin Scorsese's contribution to the three-director film *New York Stories* (1989), but Lionel certainly has the zeitgeist mastered. His personality sums up the combination of machismo, ambition and remorse that made the New York School what they were. In Richard Price's perfectly pitched script, Dobie is a middle-aged abstract expressionist who has been showing in New York for twenty years but doesn't know where his next idea will come from and fears it may not come at all. Frustrated and discouraged, he pumps himself up by playing Procol Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale" over and over again on his paint-smear tape deck. He's losing Paulette (Rosanna Arquette), his young-enough-to-be-his-daughter lover and assistant. She enthralles and obsesses him; at its most intense moments, this excellent half-hour film is an essay on sexual longing. She's only the latest in his long series of women, but he's taking this loss hard, as if it might signal the end of something, a crumbling of his sexual confidence and maybe an end to his talent as well. He stumbles around like a wounded, old bull, trying to paint himself out of despair, and more or less succeeds—Scorsese leaves his hero at a moment of optimism, with a new show opening and a new assistant/lover appearing on the horizon. Of all these films, Scorsese's is the only one that's wholly fictional; not surprisingly, it also feels the closest to reality. For one thing, it emphasizes at every turn the sensual viscosity of paint. For another, it has Lionel telling Paulette, "You make art because you have to—you have no choice." A moment later he admits that it sounds ridiculous, which of course it does; it also sounds true.

Canadian director Mary Harron knows celebrities in all their varieties—daughter to the actor Donald Harron, stepdaughter to the novelist Stephen Vizinczey, she's spent years covering arts and entertainment stories for the BBC and British newspapers. Her first film, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, leads the audience through the

frantic, schizoid life of a victim of the celebrity cult, Valerie Solanas, founder and only member of the Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM). Valerie was destroyed by the poisonously tense atmosphere surrounding Andy Warhol, where everyone affected an insouciance that only Andy could truly fake. Her anger and her blank-slate ambition smash themselves to pieces on the rocks of Andy's indifference. (He had a way of elevating absent-mindedness to the level of a cardinal sin.)

After working her way through college as a prostitute, Valerie—played with jagged, urgent humour by Lili Taylor—hits New York with a plan to be a writer. After a friend introduces her to Warhol (Jared Harris's performance catches precisely his icy, affectless curiosity), Valerie appears in a Warhol film and sends him a play she's written, which he promptly loses. When she demands the return of her manuscript, she's told to go away and stop bothering busy people. On June 3, 1968, she returns to The Factory and shoots Warhol, almost killing him. It was the only way to get his attention.

Mary Harron effectively imagines the atmosphere of The Factory and the deadpan cruelty of its cool habitués, but she can tell us nothing about Warhol in art. What interests her is the energy field of fashion and fame he generated. In Julian Schnabel's *Basquiat*, on the other hand, Warhol appears as an influential artist who helped turn Jean-Michel Basquiat, a Haitian-American graffiti artist, into a quick sensation in the galleries, the first black to play that role in New York.

As Warhol, David Bowie wears an authentic white fright wig and uses all the right gestures, but he somehow makes him more feminized than he actually was; Bowie's Warhol is self-consciously faggy, as if to emphasize his bitchiness. Schnabel's script, however, makes Warhol genuinely kind to Basquiat, even as he sees collaboration with the young man as a way to revive his own waning imagination.

A rival of Basquiat's among eighties art stars, Schnabel has surprised almost everyone with this film. It's not only an accomplished debut (unlike David Salle's unwatchable *Search and Destroy*), it's also sweet-tempered and tender, a little hymn of appreciation for the painter *The New York Times* called "the art world's closest equivalent to James Dean." Schnabel's directorial style, though it occasionally verges on MTV surrealism, is usually shrewd and pointed. Even his touches of magic realism work: when Jean-Michel looks up at the sky, and the sky turns into a Pacific wave with a surfer dancing on it, surrealism becomes eloquent storytelling.

Schnabel's great asset is his Basquiat, the wonderfully charming Jeffrey Wright, from the Broadway cast of *Angels in America*. A beautiful boy in dreadlocks, he meets his girlfriend, Gina Cardinale (Claire Forlani), when she serves him in a coffee shop; he



Surviving Picasso 1996
Anthony Hopkins as Pablo Picasso
plays with young Claude
(Joe Gecks) and Natascha McElhone
as Françoise Gilot in the Merchant
Ivory Production
©1996 Warner Bros.
Courtesy: The Film Reference Library,
Toronto International Film Festival Group

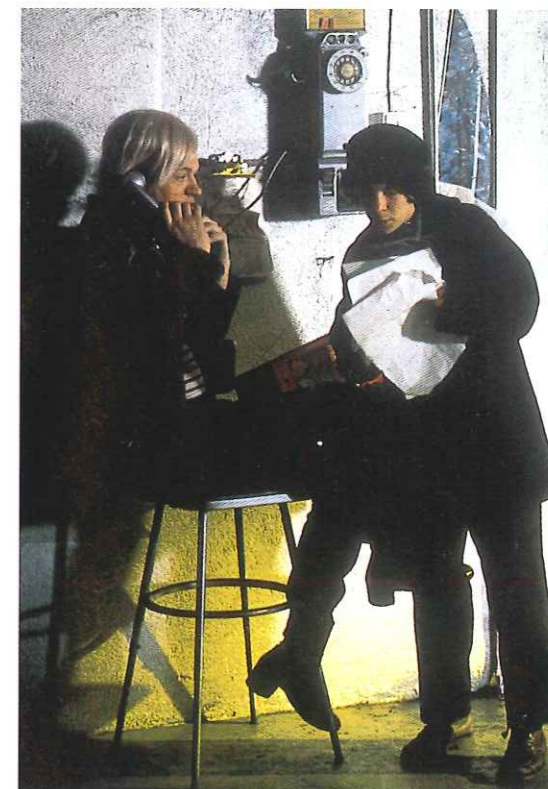
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introduces himself by pouring syrup on the table and drawing her face in it with a fork. That ploy wins her, and Basquiat's inarticulate charm conquers many others, from the critic René Ricard (Michael Wincott) through to the dealer Mary Boone (Parker Posey) to the collector Bruno Bischofberger (Dennis Hopper), though it fails to impress an obtuse journalist played, in a precise cameo, by Christopher Walken.

Lost in the mists of heroin, this Jean-Michel is still unformed when the overdose kills him at the age of twenty-seven. Schnabel clearly cherishes his memory, but doesn't deny that he was unreliable, moody, quick to anger and unfaithful to Gina—but then, he was an artist, and therefore dangerous to know. Van Gogh haunts this story as he haunts modern art. As the actor playing Ricard says, quoting from one of his *Artforum* articles, "Everybody wants to get on the van Gogh boat ... No one wants to be part of a generation that ignores another van Gogh." But while the New York art scene could save Basquiat from van Gogh's obscurity, it couldn't save him from self-destruction.

By all accounts, Picasso's performance as moral idiot was not only tolerated but encouraged by an awed and adoring circle of friends, lovers, helpers and dealers. Can his dire reputation for private tyranny be what attracted the unlikely team of Ismail Merchant and James Ivory to his story? Did they imagine the outrageous moral anarchy of Picasso would help them break free of all those films of self-denial and deference—*Howards End*, *The Remains of the Day*—in which characters act only within rigid limits? Ivory has always been an unassertive director, bowing before the needs of script and art direction (not to mention culturally accredited actors). He thinks the sudden upward flight of pigeons in a Florentine piazza is about all the symbolism required in *A Room with a View*, and there's no need to trouble his audiences with the anxiety thrumming beneath E.M. Forster's unrippled prose. This time Ivory is working with a simple-minded and episodic script, cobbled together by his longtime collaborator, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, from Arianna Stassinopoulos Huffington's 1988 diatribe, *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer*—which in turn depended heavily on Françoise Gilot's 1964 memoir, *Life with Picasso*.

Gilot presented herself as the one who got away, the Picasso mistress who was not driven to suicide or madness by his capricious despotism. Jhabvala adopts that stance for the film, letting the actress playing Gilot (Natascha McElhone) serve as narrator, reflecting the turbulent decade spent under Picasso's roof, from late in the Second World War to the mid-nineteen-fifties. Gilot discovered quite early that she was bound to a man who could not take her as seriously as she took herself—perhaps could not take



I Shot Andy Warhol 1996
Jared Harris as Andy Warhol
and Lili Taylor as Valerie Solanas
Courtesy: Malofilm Distribution

anyone but himself seriously—and was in any case involved, much of the time, in an art that used the female image with a furious brutality. Picasso's feelings about women, expressed with cold frankness in hundreds of paintings and drawings—notably, *Les Femmes d'Alger*—were deeply ambivalent; Françoise eventually discovered that she was not to be an exception.

Picasso's life, in this context, looks like van Gogh's revenge: Picasso exploits others before they get a chance to exploit him. Ivory gave this role to Anthony Hopkins, who rewarded him with "a great performance"—that is, a performance in which the audience can never stop admiring the actor long enough to get in touch with the character. He manages to look as barrel-chested as Picasso, but otherwise he just keeps reminding us of his virtuoso talent as an actor. The character at the centre of *Surviving Picasso* is thin gruel—more interesting than compelling, more annoying than horrifying. He's certainly no approximation of that sacred monster who in life was this century's most potent example of the explosive and dangerous romantic hero, the culture-hero of dreams and nightmares. The movie large enough to encompass the personality of Picasso still awaits its creator, but perhaps it is the fate of all film biographies of artists to fall short. An art form built on liquid visual invention, the movies have the greatest difficulty coming to terms with the powerful and intractable images of painters. And a form of narrative that always gropes for the moral centre can only stumble when it confronts people living by an ethic that almost no one else ever quite understands. ■