

MEDIA REVIEWS

The Velvet Underground

Todd Haynes, director. Criterion Collection Blu-ray. 2021.

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doi:10.1017/S1752196323000214

With his 2021 documentary *The Velvet Underground*, director Todd Haynes returns to a cultural moment that has long fascinated him: Popular and experimental art of the 1960s and 1970s. The film presents a history of the influential band, seeking to contextualize their work in a multimedia sphere. *The Velvet Underground* presupposes some basic knowledge of the Velvets, but is widely accessible and visually arresting. Haynes's film serves as an excellent next step for those familiar with the Velvet Underground and interested in knowing more about the artworlds that shaped them. While it is unlikely to present information that is surprising for scholars or serious fans, the film crafts a multimedia portrait of the band that reflects their place within the artworlds of their development. In this way, it is ideally suited to the classroom.

As a director, Haynes has long been interested in music, both on its own terms and as it shapes and is shaped by popular culture. His first film, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), tells the saga of Carpenter's life using her music as a soundtrack and Barbie dolls as actors. That same focus on music as/in culture shaped his *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and *I'm Not There* (2007), which focus on glam rock and Bob Dylan, respectively. Haynes brings this understanding of music as a cultural harbinger to *The Velvet Underground*.

With their connection to New York's *avant garde* art and cinema scene, it would be impossible to examine the Velvet Underground without an eye to the visual. Haynes creates visual collages featuring the works of Maya Deren, Jonas Mekas, and Jack Smith, among many others. *The Velvet Underground* uses a split screen throughout much of the film, juxtaposing new and archival interviews with film excerpts and examples of visual art. The film shows the Velvet Underground within their New York City art scene, emphasizing the band's connection to Andy Warhol's Factory and La Monte Young's Dream Syndicate.

The Velvet Underground presents new or difficult to access materials. Many short films are included courtesy of the Andy Warhol Museum. While new interviews with many of the main players—including Lou Reed, Nico, and Andy Warhol—are impossible, Haynes does present new talking head-style conversations with John Cale, Maureen Tucker, Jackson Browne, and Jonathan Richman, among others. In addition, Haynes incorporates archival interviews and performance footage. In the Criterion 4k release, these materials look and sound better than previously possible.

Perhaps the defining feature of Haynes's documentary is its difference from the traditional "rock doc."¹ While it does feature performance footage, *The Velvet Underground* is not structured like the classic 1960s rock documentaries of the Velvets' contemporaries. It lacks the *verité* approach of 1970s *Gimme Shelter* (dir. Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin) and eschews the singular focus of *Woodstock* (1970, dir. Michael Wadleigh) or *Monterey Pop* (1968, dir. D.A. Pennebaker). Instead, Haynes plays with the form in ways analogous to the Velvet Underground's music itself,

¹The collection *Mapping the Rockumentary* provides more context for these films of the 1960s and 1970s. See Gunnar Iversen and Scott MacKenzie, eds., *Mapping the Rockumentary: Images of Sound and Fury* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

updating the rock doc. He brings an avant garde eye to a traditional, popular form, incorporating the visual approach of the experimental films he references, all within a work that presents biographical and chronological information about the band and its members.

In this way, Haynes's film is part of a developing trend in music documentaries. Taken alongside Brett Morgen's *Moonage Daydream* (2022), *The Velvet Underground* shows an approach to the rock documentary form that seeks to mimic the subject and their art.² The influence of music video and experimental film on both these recent documentaries is clear. Such formal experimentation invites audiovisual analysis that can illuminate both the film itself and its subject matter.

For all these reasons, *The Velvet Underground* is a rich text well suited to the classroom. (It should be noted that the film includes some strobing light, particularly in the performance footage. Care should be taken in selecting sections for in-class exhibition.) Its original release posed some challenges to this use, though. Until 2022, Haynes's documentary was only accessible on Apple TV, so any instructor planning to show portions of the documentary in class through that service would need a continuing subscription. The Criterion Collection disc, available as of December 2022, presents a more convenient solution for use in teaching. The disc contains a booklet with an essay written by Greil Marcus, which serves to contextualize both the band and the work of this documentary, as well as special features not accessible on Apple TV. Chief among these is a conversation among Haynes, John Cale, and Maureen Tucker, offering some insight into the filmmaker's relationship to the band and their music. The Criterion Blu-ray also features complete versions of some of the experimental films excerpted in *The Velvet Underground*. These films, in particular, could be useful in classroom presentations, helping to illuminate both the artistic milieu of the band and the audiovisual choices Haynes made in the editing of his film. The disc also offers an annotation option: One can watch the film with subtitles that identify each film or television excerpt. This tool allows the viewer to follow Haynes's audiovisual research process, opening avenues for even deeper exploration. *The Velvet Underground* could also be fruitfully paired with essays from the recent collection *The Velvet Underground: What Goes On*.³

The Velvet Underground is both a fascinating historical document and an audiovisual work ripe for analysis in its own right. It does not aim to be a definitive text on the band, but rather an artistic response to The Velvets' work. In this, Haynes's documentary provides an opening for continued scholarly work on this influential band.

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²For more on *Moonage Daydream* and rock doc form, see Lisa Perrott, "Moonage Daydream: Brilliant Bowie Film Take Big Risks to Create Something Truly New," *The Conversation*, September 13, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/moonage-daydream-brilliant-bowie-film-takes-big-risks-to-create-something-truly-new-190347>, accessed March 1, 2023.

³*The Velvet Underground: What Goes On*, edited by Sean Albiez and David Pattie (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).