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# **BODIES, TASTE AND PLEASURES: THE CINEMA OF JOHN WATERS**

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**Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Film Studies**

**School of Media, Film and Music  
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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

## **THESIS SUMMARY**

This thesis focuses on bodies, taste and pleasures in the films of John Waters. Through a textual analysis of the film texts, this thesis studies the bodies on screen, the cultural ramifications of their taste, and the place they occupy in the social world. I argue that Waters' aesthetics of bad taste contain a joyous world of visual excess that upends hierarchies of distinction, parodying the categories of gender, race and class, and celebrating the dethroning of seriousness (Sontag 2018). Building on the work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu, I read the body as a site imprinted by power and knowledge, regulated by gender and taste. By placing the body at the centre, I aim to re-evaluate the critical consensus around Waters' cinema.

'Pope of Trash', 'Prince of Puke', and 'People's Pervert' are some of the titles awarded to filmmaker John Waters, whose career has been studied as the paradigm of the cult auteur. This thesis aims to further the discussion of Waters' cinema beyond the impasse of transgression. By granting similar importance to Waters' underground, independent and Hollywood years, I expose the limits of the domestication discourse, which suggests that his late-career lost edge and got assimilated by the system (Levy 2015, Moon and Sedgwick 1994). Scrutinizing the critical points of proximity and distance between the earlier and later works, the thesis addresses the importance of laughter in Waters' cinema and argues for the film's running representation of queer utopia.

This thesis is organised thematically, albeit those themes order the films in almost chronological order. It examines the underground years<sup>1</sup> and its grotesque world of cheap thrills; beauty, ugliness and the revolting woman; the strategy of

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'underground' is critically examined in Chapter 1 as a label that follows Waters' cinema and that, I argue, has created a powerful myth about his cult status.

queering suburbia; nostalgia and musical utopias; cult authorship and operations of taste. It concludes pondering Waters' status in today's American popular culture.

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To all unruly bodies disenfranchised by capitalism: I dedicate this thesis to you.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Theory is *anything* but disembodied”  
(Haraway 2004: 68)

A woman on her fifties fondles her breasts, gazing at herself in the mirror. She has teased peroxided dyed hair and smudged make-up, she is missing some of her teeth. She wears a one-piece BDSM black leather outfit that exposes her cleavage, part of her stomach, and a vertical stripe of her legs. Modelling in front of her nephew, she releases moans of excitement as she caresses her body. “All right, Aunt Ida, all right”, he cheers approvingly. After the unusual family bonding moment, the two characters have a conversation on dating. The hairdresser nephew has no interest in going out with boys, to the concern of his aunt. When Gator claims that he is not homosexual, and that is perfectly fine with him, Aunt Ida protests: “I worry that you'll work in an office, have children, celebrate wedding anniversaries. The world of the heterosexual is a sick and boring life!”

Discussing my thesis at conferences, seminars and writing sessions, I have found myself coming back to this one scene from *Female Trouble* (1974) (Fig. 1). It is a scene that showcases a strong sense of alienation—from narrow beauty standards, straight couples and office jobs—while provoking laughter, a laughter full of joy at finding a sense of recognition in otherness. It suggests a world turned upside down, a glimpse of queer utopia, yet those feelings of futurity are imbued with a sense of nostalgia. The film, from 1974, opens a window to a world of trash pleasures, yet that world is irremediably fixed on the past, forever out of reach. Laughter, however, connects the bodies on the screen with those of the audience, creating attachment between unruly bodies. This thesis emerges, in no small part, from that scene. The humour showcased in the scene uses travesty—a farce based on the reversal of hierarchies—to confront heterosexuality, that, within this space, is problematized and

mocked. Revolting femininity and deviant pleasures emerge from Edith Massey's performance as Aunt Ida. Her presence alerts to aesthetic reworkings of taste.

Bodies in the cinema of John Waters inhabit a Carnavalesque space that celebrates a "world turned upside down" (Bakhtin 1984:275). In this suspension of normality, everything can be called into question. Within this filmic world of visual excess, drag queen Divine<sup>1</sup> is the "most beautiful woman in the world", there are serial killers' suburban mothers, rosary-anal beads, and talking Virgin Mary statues. Through 'bad taste', a term that Waters has branded as his signature style (Waters 2005:2), his cinema celebrates otherness, elevating what society casts as low and parodying what is been held as high. This otherness is associated with freakery, fatness, queerness, and criminality; forging an alliance of misrepresented bodies that, while making fun of fixed categories of identity, are continuously addressing mainstream society. These films mock normality and provide rich, merry and colourful glimpses of alterity.

Baptised by William Burroughs as 'the Pope of Trash' (Levy 2015:268) and known by Baltimore's press as 'the Prince of Puke' (McCauley 2018), Waters has forged a career as a cult filmmaker across decades. From his first steps in underground filmmaking with the Dreamlanders in the late 60s and early 70s to his studio films produced in Hollywood in the 1990s and 2000s, Waters has directed four shorts and twelve feature films that share a joyful vindication of queer politics and trash cinema, always playful with the limits of transgression. Waters' shock value, firmly planted in an intersection of cult and queer cinema, remains popular and in continuous process

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis refers to Divine as a drag queen. I defend that the moniker drag queen encompasses the act of gender crossing in different artistic and professional outlets. Divine was a drag performer that participated in pageants (as explored in the documentary *I Am Divine* (2013)), worked in theatre, released techno music, did professional appearances and advertising and died just before making it in television (Jay 1994).

of commercialization, as the Criterion Collection releases demonstrate (*Multiple Maniacs* in 2017, *Female Trouble* in 2018, *Polyester* in 2019). To study Waters' cinema is, therefore, to study bad taste and shock value in relation to changes in cinema and culture.

## **Literature Review**

Academic contributions on Waters' cinema can be broadly divided into two categories: those who study Waters as a cult auteur, and those who focus on the queer, trash aesthetics. Yet, because Waters' is still living part of popular culture, there are many other non-academic contributions producing a discourse on Waters' authorship. In this section, I will survey and summarize the existing literature on the subject.

### **Non-Academic Works**

The most important discourses of authorship are those put in place by the filmmaker himself. Waters' has spoken at length about his career in his books—particularly those that describe the filming of his films, *Shock Value* (2005, covers the years 1964-1977) and *Mr. Know-It-All* (2019, for the years 1981-2004), amongst others—lectures, media appearances and art shows. Other sources are reviews and journalistic works, some of which are compiled in James Egan's books of interviews (2011). Egan's archival research for the book was donated to the Enoch Pratt Library, a collection I had the privilege of accessing in a short visit to Baltimore in 2017. Other relevant historical sources of information on the Dreamlanders are Robert Maier's *Low Budget Hell: Making Underground Movies With John Waters* (2011), Cloe Griffith's *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* (2014), Jay Bernard's *Not Simply Divine* (1994) and the documentaries *Divine/Trash* (1998) and *I Am Divine* (2013). Recently published, a very comprehensive research of Waters' career, *John Waters FAQ: All That's Left to Know About the Provocateur of Bad Taste*, by Dale Sherman (2019),

encompasses Waters and Divine's biographies, Dreamlanders history, short studies of the films' production and reception, and other thoroughly investigated trivia.

### Cult Authorship Studies

The category of scholarship that firmly establishes Waters as a cult auteur mainly focuses at the early 'underground' stage of his career (1964-1977), or until the independent production of *Polyester* (1981). Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983) dedicate a chapter to Waters' career in relation to the history of the Midnight Movies phenomenon. Similarly, Stevenson's *Desperate Visions: The Films of John Waters and the Kuchar Brothers* (1996) and McCarty's *The Sleaze Merchants: Adventures in Exploitation Filmmaking* (1995) who also choose to focus on Waters' early work in the context of underground, independent and exploitation cinema history. Guy Barefoot studies Waters' career as a process of adaptation that reconciles trash aesthetics with trash cinema (2017). Most importantly for this thesis, *Underground USA: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon* (2002) Mendik and Schneider write how Waters' films can be studied with the Bakhtinian concept of the Carnavalesque. Presenting terms such as carnival, grotesque, subversive laughter, lower stratum and unofficial culture, this contribution stands out as particularly relevant in order to study Waters' humour.

Cult cinema is often described as an umbrella term rather than a fixed concept; therefore, anthological works prescribe an outline of issues that can help theorize a definition. First, the oppositional stance on its reception: there is an existing audience that is alienated by mainstream culture and establishes a 'deviant subculture' around the films, "displaying a preference for strange topics and allegorical themes that rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics" (Mathijis and Mendik 2007:11). Second, there is a shift in taste that undertakes a reinterpretation of 'bad

cinema', undertaking an explicit defence of bad taste and rejection of notions of technical excellence and quality (Sconce 1995:385-386). Third, the value of transgression: the appeal of showing things that escape morality and censorship laws, taboo-breaking, disputing "commonsense conceptions of what is normal and acceptable" (Mathijis and Sexton, 2011:97). Fourth, the figure of the cult auteur as an exceptionally skilled salesman (Betz 2003, Jancovich 2002). Waters' career as a writer, stand-up raconteur and cameo actor is presented as an example of the romantic cult auteur (Mathijis and Sexton, 2011:68). Fifth, and most importantly, the importance of nostalgia, camp and intertextuality as elements that constitute the anatomy of cult (Mathijis and Mendik, 2007:2). All of these elements shape the understanding of how Waters' cinema is produced and received, providing him with a framework that will both sustain him and constrain him at times.

Waters' cult authorship casts a large shadow. Emmanuel Levy returns to Waters in *Gay Directors, Gay Films*?<sup>2</sup> (2015), in which he dedicates an overview chapter to Waters' career. The reason why I have included his work within the cult authorship studies instead of queer cultural studies is twofold. First, despite Levy's intentions to centre the book around "the effects of sexual orientation on the career, film output, and sensibility of [...] homosexual directors" (2015:XII), the chapter traces a detailed historical outline of all of the films against the context of their cult reception. Even with some analysis of Waters' camp affiliations (2015:288-290), Levy's mainly focuses on producing criticism of the films and contextualizing their influences. Secondly, Levy's hypothesis –that Waters ceased to be subversive after *Desperate Living* (1977) and was "co-opted into the mainstream" (2015:321)– encapsulates the cult studies consensus on Waters' cinema. The Hollywood

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<sup>2</sup> Levy had previously explored Waters' career briefly in his book *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (1999).



domestication stance explains somehow the limited critical attention that has been paid to the post-*Hairspray* films. This thesis aims to challenge this established notion. On the topic of authorship, in 'John Waters Goes to Hollywood' (2003), Metz offers an overview study that analyses Waters' 'post-suburban' narratives of dysfunctional families with reference to Freud's "Family Romances". This contribution, that recounts Metz's personal encounter with Waters, promises a post-structural authorship study and ends up reproducing an archetypal cult fascination with Waters' persona.

### Queer Cultural Studies

Queer cultural studies constitute the second category that examines Waters' cinema. Cultural studies examine cultural practices in relation to axis of power, producing "intellectual practice of politics" through readings of the films (Hall in Walton 2012:19). Queer cultural studies narrow down their analysis under the framework of queer theory. The different contributions here range from studies on Divine's stardom, individual readings of the films and case studies on camp, genre, and gender subversion.

Waters and Divine's queer affiliations are hailed by seminal queer scholars (B. Ruby Rich 2013, Judith Butler 1990, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990). In collaboration with Michael Moon, Sedgwick writes 'Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little Understood Emotion' (1994), a dialogue that interrogates intersectional issues of embodiment through Divine's stardom. Fatness, drag, and gender identity are at the forefront of this contribution, which establishes divinity as "a combination of abjection and defiance" (1994:214). First focusing on the formation of the queer self, the closet of size, and Divine's public statements on cross-dressing and being; this contribution broadly surveys episodes of transgression on the early films (from *Multiple Maniacs* to *Polyester*). Divine's stardom is further scrutinized in Karl Schoonover's 'Divine:

Towards an Imperfect Stardom' (2010), that proposes to read the performer's queer and fluid stardom alongside Third Cinema's hybridity and embrace of imperfection. Some works praise Divine's parody of gender (Harries 1990), yet other contributions alert to the "appropriation" and "symbolic theft" of femininity (Studlar 1989:6) that only reinstates the patriarchal order (Studlar 1989, Tyler 1991).

Chris Holmlund's *Female Trouble: A Queer Film Classic* (2017a) is the most recent contribution that focuses on an individual film. Despite its title, the monograph seems to prioritize interviews with the cast and crew and the historical and sociological context of the film over the textual analysis of the film itself. Holmlund firmly plants *Female Trouble* on the U.S. counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s and rejects the film's cult, camp, and gay affiliations. *Pink Flamingos*' queerness has similarly been studied by Anna Breckon (2013), a contribution that focuses on the text anti-assimilationist politics and radical negativity.

Despite the prominence of Waters' early films, the title that has received most scholarly attention is *Hairspray* (1988). The most inspiring contribution in this group for my research comes from Danna Heller's book (2011), whose chapter 'Hair with Body: Corpulence, Unruliness, and Cultural Subversion' brings to the fore many ideas that resonate with this thesis, mainly, the concept of "unruly bodies".

Other scholars have interpreted Waters' body of work in terms of camp and gender subversion. In the chapter 'Beyond the Critics Reach: John Waters and the Trash Aesthetic' (2005), Matthew Tinkcom proposes a Marxist reading of camp, a term he defines as "an alibi for queer men to labor" within the contradictions of capitalism (2002:5). From that starting point, Tinkcom focuses his study of Waters' cinema on melodrama, performance and casting, mainly through *Female Trouble* (1974), *Mondo Trasho* (1969) and *Polyester* (1981). Finally, the only work that pushes

against the so-called domestication of John Waters is Derek Kane-Meddock's. In the chapter 'Trash Comes Home: Gender/Genre Subversion in the Films of John Waters' (2012) he articulates a feminist reading of gender in *Pink Flamingos*, *Polyester* and *Serial Mom*. Rather than reiterate the "fragmented approach" (2012:205) that firmly divides Waters' early and late-career, Kane-Meddock concludes that Waters' cinema can be read not simply a story of mainstream appropriation, but an ongoing process of engagement with genre and gender subversion, in which is perhaps the closest contribution to this research.

### **Scope of the Research**

The thesis employs the methodology of textual analysis, with close reading of the films' texts, drawing upon queer theory and cult cinema studies. As the thesis will focus on taste, bodies, and pleasures in the cinema of John Waters, the works of theorists Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu and Mikhail Bakhtin frame the theoretical discussion.

Studies of Waters' cinema have often focused on what makes these films edgy and transgressive: the excess of their trash aesthetics and shock value. Meanwhile, the humour that accompanies them, and its affective ramifications<sup>3</sup>, have often been overlooked. This thesis investigates issues of queer embodiment within the cinema of John Waters, reading laughter as a bodily matter and taste as a system of political ordering. By looking at the cinema of John Waters from this angle, this thesis sets to produce a contribution to knowledge that integrates his body of work and challenges the Hollywood co-optation discourse. First, because Waters' cinema was always commercially oriented; even the early shorts of the 1960s, which are, more than

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use the term affect following the feminist cultural studies approach that reclaims the study of emotion and feelings as attachments that shape "the surfaces of individual and collective bodies" (Ahmed 2004:1).

anything, amateur filmmaking exercises, demonstrated the drive of self-promotion and showmanship marketing skills. “I always wanted to sell out. Problem is, nobody wanted to buy me”, jokes Waters (2003:138). The steady rise in the films’ budget and production size, even in the so-called underground years, demonstrates the mainstream status of the later years was not accidental<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, the mainstream success was always ambivalent, since those Hollywood years were never profitable for the industry: as I will reveal, the films rarely covered their cost to the studios. However, the 1990s, falling outside the scope of most scholarly studies, remain Waters’ most prolific filmmaking years, producing a paradox that deserves to be investigated. Moreover, in many ways, the later films share some of the themes of the earlier films, either actualizing them or producing a commentary over those earlier works. Dedicating parallel attention to the underground and mainstream years<sup>5</sup> will allow me to unearth the film’s points of critical proximity and distance. My aim is to ponder Waters’ evolution through the years in order to excavate changes in cinema and culture. By producing close readings of the films’ themes, aesthetics and influences, I argue, it is possible to gain a better understanding of Waters’ career and what that means for queer and cult cinema, then and now.

This thesis covers Waters’ career from *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) to *A Dirty Shame* (2004). It does not study the first long-feature *Mondo Trasho* (1969), nor the early shorts *A Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* (1964), *Roman Candles* (1966), *Eat Your*

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<sup>4</sup> In his last book, Waters mocks naïve misconceptions about his success: ‘The press always used to asked me, “Did you ever imagine that one day you’d be making Hollywood movies” “Well...yes,” I’d think, vaguely annoyed, “I’m not some kind of idiot savant. Didn’t I have a successful puppet-show career at twelve years old” I’d want to bellow. “Read *Variety* at fourteen? Make my first underground movie at seventeen? I was no slacker”, I yearned to shriek” (2019:15).

<sup>5</sup> This underground/mainstream dichotomy in Waters’ career is a fictive one, I argue through this thesis. Firstly, because underground is a powerful myth (more on this in Chapter 1). Secondly, because this approximation to the mainstream was hardly sudden and successful, as explored in Chapters 4 and 6.

*Make Up* (1968), or *The Diane Linkletter Story* (1970). There are several reasons for skipping the study of the early years; mainly, that these preliminary works were exercises in filmmaking and therefore have had a very limited public life. The shorts were only shown once or twice upon their release, and years later they have only been exhibited free of charge as part of career's retrospectives<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, *Mondo Trasho*, Waters' first long feature film, is the only title that has only been released on VHS and not DVD and remains now out of distribution. Filmed without direct sound and edited with a soundtrack that functions as dialogue<sup>7</sup>, the rawness of its style makes this film closer to the early shorts than to the posterior works. This thesis skips these earlier works privileging the study of Waters' commercialized, distributed and internationally released films: a body of work of eleven long-feature films. Waters' cinema is arranged in a thematical order that follows a slightly tarnished linear chronology.

## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter one explores issues of bodies, gender, and taste in relation to power and cinema by tracing connections from the contributions of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu, and Mikhail Bakhtin. I interpret their works to provide a theoretical framework to the thesis establishing the focus on bodies and the role of cinema as a technology of biopower. Summarizing Foucault, Butler, Bourdieu and Bakhtin's contributions, I then ponder questions about the intelligibility of the bodies, the function of censorship and transgression, taste and the political order of the world, and bad taste in relation to trash and camp cultural history. In this chapter, I argue that

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<sup>6</sup> Retrospectives like the Film Society Lincoln Center 'Fifty Years of John Waters: How Much More Can You Take?' (2014), the BFI 'It isn't Very Pretty... The Complete Films of John Waters (Every Goddam One of Them...)' (2015) and the Art Show 'Indecent Exposure' (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Music rights are arguably one of the reasons why this film is not included in the Waters' catalogue: upon its release, all of its soundtrack was unlicensed music.

questions of power, taste and aesthetics are fundamental to ground the study of Waters' cinema.

In chapter two, I argue that episodes of cheap thrills and shock value are the first articulations of Waters' bad taste cinema. *Multiple Maniacs* and *Pink Flamingos* establish their allure as cavalcades of perversion that openly perform transgression. Often blurring distinction between fiction and reality, the low-budget status creates a raw filmmaking style that showcases cult indexicality by playing with the real to exploit the audiences' desires to be shocked. This chapter pays attention to the corporeal incarnations of those transgressions and the connections they establish between the filmic bodies and the bodies of the audience. Grotesque and excessive, these films create a carnivalesque space of celebration and visual pleasure; a site where freak shows, Catholic carnivals, the monstrous, queer performances, and white trash collide.

If chapter two established the grotesque bodily spectacles that bad taste cinema can offer, chapter three focuses on its gendered ramifications, exploring revolting femininity in *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*. I argue that female bodies are monitored and regulated by beauty and ugliness, two concepts that are intricately in the narrative of these films. The first part of the chapter focuses on Divine's stardom and gender trouble and then traces connections between issues of queer embodiment in beauty and criminal stardom. The second part of the chapter focuses on *Desperate Living*'s ugliness, and how it presides over the film's sites and bodies, invoking shame. I conclude that, due to their investments in revolting women, beauty and ugliness, the films depict bad taste as a feminized site.

Chapter four continues to explore the femininity of bad taste with a focus on housewives in suburbia. This chapter continues the linear chronology with *Polyester*

(1981) but then jumps ahead to *Serial Mom* (1994) and *A Dirty Shame* (2004). Reading suburbia as a metaphor for the mainstream, this chapter examines otherness, politics of respectability and the disruption of normality as shared themes by these three films, themes that mirror Waters' mainstreaming journey across the decades. Queering suburbia, these films enact parodies of Douglas Sirk's melodramas to reinvent the household, reorganize the family and empower the insanities of the housewives through melodrama, true crime and sex addiction.

Chapter five centres on the nostalgic musical utopias in *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby*. This chapter explores bad taste as a sentimental rewriting of history, particularly studying the retrospective celebration of rock and roll folk culture of the early 60s and 50s. The first part of this chapter explores the queer alliance of fat and black bodies, reading the racial politics of *Hairspray* first through representations of whiteness, and then through the film's performance of disidentification and its celebration of black culture. The second part of the chapter studies *Cry-Baby* as a pastiche of the Fifties' nostalgia that barely contains the teenage sexual desire that fuels the musical numbers. Feelings of longings for the past fuel these films, where history is rearranged in order to create contained capsules of queer utopia.

Chapter six closes the study of Waters' cinema exploring issues of authorship, art, taste, and cultural distinction in *Pecker* and *Cecil B. Demented*. These films explore how taste organizes the social world and parody the ways in which deviant cultures constitute a type of social capital. Placing the city of Baltimore as a character-inducing background, these films defend their own stance against the upper-class, artistic distinction of New York and the revenue-obsessed, show-business Los Angeles. Toasting to the end of irony, and celebrating their cinematic immunity, these

films acknowledge the changes in industry and culture, and the impossibility to return to the past.

This thesis concludes summarizing the contributions of the chapters and considering some of the ways in which Waters' cinema is now more relevant than ever. Last, it evaluates the value of transgression and shock value and repositions the importance of humour to understand how contemporary notions of political incorrectness fail to adhere to Waters' cinema.



## **CHAPTER 1: CINEMA AND BIOPOWER**

What is it that circumscribes this site called “the body”? How is the delimitation made, and who makes it? Which body qualifies as “the body”?

What establishes the ‘the’, the existential status of this body? Does the existent body in its anonymous universality have a gender, an unspoken one?

What shape does this body have and how is it to be known? Where did “the body” come from? (Butler 1989:601)

Cinema is populated by bodies, and bodies carry with them marks of class, gender, sexuality, race, size, and aesthetics: ultimately, bodies embed the world. Bodies are constructed sites, situations imprinted by power and knowledge. Bodily beings precede consciousness, and process of embodiments cannot be separated from the political systems that organize and rule over those bodies. Yet, as well as subjected to relations of powers, bodies are also at the core of production for affective relationships, experienced sensations, and embodied pleasures.

This chapter considers the materiality of the bodies and their cultural affiliations. To start to question the meaning of the body, as Butler does in the quote above, is to arrive at a barrage of questions that delve into modes of being, or modes of striving to exist. Without aiming to provide a singular direct answer to Butler’s philosophical inquiries, this chapter aims to map out some of the theories by Foucault, Butler, Bourdieu and Bakhtin in relation to the body, and consider the ways in which their contributions can enrich film studies and ground the study of Waters’ cinema. As the chapter will demonstrate, notions of power, knowledge, gender, and taste are rooted in the body. Hence, conceptualizing power, bodies, gender, and taste within the cinematic apparatus will provide a foundation for the rest of the thesis. Examining and summarizing Foucault, Butler, Bourdieu and Bakhtin’s theoretical contributions, in that order, this chapter provides a shared understanding of their work, a framework that helps conceptualize cinema as a technology of production, power, and the self. These different categories of technology, outlined by Foucault and reinterpreted here

by me, establish the cultural axis of cinema. The first two categories technologies of power and production- review some of the ways in which film studies have approached bodies, censorship and transgression. The last category, technology of the self, focuses on issues of taste. Introducing Waters' cinema, in this last section I explore definitions of 'good' and 'bad taste' cinema alongside notions of camp, trash and queer excess.

### **Michel Foucault**

Foucault has been referred to as the “grandfather of ‘body studies’” (Richardson 2010:10), and the importance of his contribution is a consensus generally acknowledged across disciplines. Placing the body at the centre, he was able to conceptualise its importance in understanding history, science, knowledge and power. Also crucial to Foucault's work are the prominence of the subject, the distrust towards essentialism and ‘reason’ understood as a universal scientific and philosophical truth, and the discursive view of History.

Discourses for Foucault are “regimes of truth” (1980:131), articulations of knowledge that produce the effects they name. To say that history, reason, and bodies are produced means that they have undergone a process of construction. Construction is a crucial term to understand the mechanisms of power as an active force – one that simultaneously offers promises of emancipation: regimes might be dismantled when their discourse is exposed. Foucault, therefore, proposes a new task: “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (1980:133). Under that intellectual task of challenging hegemonic knowledge and truths we find his work on genealogies.

Inspired by Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Ethics*, Foucault dedicated the advanced years of his career to write genealogies, that is, theoretical inquiries that look into the subjugated knowledge of history and its history of opposition, struggle, and resistance.

Foucault's genealogies look at sexuality, mental illness, and prisons and delinquents, de facto addressing the outsiders of history, "peripheral subjects" (1980:98). At the very core of the concept of genealogy we find the highlighted task of exposing "a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (1998:376). The body is consequently considered as a "surface of [...] events" (1998:375), a canvas in which power imprints and creates subjects.

Bodies are not fruits of nature, he contends, but sites of society that represent aesthetics, taste, wealth and control. They are constructed, trained, modified, improved and classified by society. Through the disciplinary control of the body, there is a process of subjugation of the soul. Subverting the idea that the material body is the prison of the soul, Foucault defends that through disciplinary control of the body and surveillance, the subject is created and controlled: "the soul is the prison of the body" (1995:30).

Ever since the rise of capitalism, power is no longer limited to a physical monarch and his right to order death. In *Discipline and Punishment* (1995) Foucault explores how power now is focused on the control of the population, and such control is pervasive: it is based on the internalization of power. Foucault's understanding of power surpasses repression. Moving beyond binaries and dialectics, the idea that Foucault introduces is that power is not just a restrictive force, it is not a single thing, possessed by a few and exercised from top to bottom; instead, power consists of a multiplicity of forces and relations. It is invested in everything, and there are no spheres safe of power. However, escaping a totalitarian view, Foucault also notes that the possibility of struggle is inherent to power. "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1978:95). This concept of resistance is what makes

Foucault's writings so relevant for emancipatory political movements. Feminists and queer theorists will adopt, develop and expand on this idea. If life is invested in power, and power demands of our participation, it is in that participation that we can find the possibility of rupture and disobedience.

Foucault's notions of power are ultimately rooted in the body. Making a distinction between sovereignty power and disciplinary power, he studies how power nowadays is not circumscribed in the physical authority of the monarch, but carefully constructed through surveillance. Disciplinary power gets to the core of the self through a vigilant process of observation and stylization of gestures of the bodies. The Panopticon model under which prisons were constructed is the perfect illustration for the working of the disciplinary power. The Panopticon shaped the prison in a way that the guards had complete view access to the prisoners, but these had no way to know if the guards were there. The uncertainty of not knowing if they were being watched guaranteed that their conduct was always policed.

With the rise of capitalism, rather than just possessing a tight grip on death (the so-called "deduction-function"); power started to be defined by its control over life. And that is what Foucault explains with the term of biopower. Biopower works "administering life" (1984:260), and it works with two different strategies:

One of these poles—the first to be formed, it seems—centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls [...]. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity [...]. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a bio-politics of the population.* (1978:139)

The first of these strategies, Foucault argues, shapes the body as a machine with the aim of making it as docile and efficient as possible. The second one is

concerned about the social body, which needs to be contained in certain structures. Sexuality, for example, is placed and limited to the bedroom of the heterosexual bourgeois family (1978:3). Biopower does not simply repress any other manifestation of sexuality— instead, it moulds sex as a productive force. Beyond that, sexuality has come to define the truth of who we are, as it has the power to unveil or fix a confessional identity, and, most importantly, comes inscribed by the aesthetics of existence. Aesthetics of existence are defined as “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men [...] seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (1990:10-11). Aesthetics of existence dictate the life of the subject through the different techniques of the self.

Power can function by means of exploitation, domination, and subjectivation. It is the latter that Foucault wishes to focus on, and this form of power by subjectivation presents the possibility of studying how the power/body relation works. In ‘The Subject and Power’ Foucault explains “my objective [...] has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made into subjects.” (1982:777). Human beings are made into subjects through several operations of subjectivation (*ajutissement*): the technologies of the self. Technologies of the self are “truth games” that help humans to make sense of what they are. A new set of procedures (these joints of knowledge and power that Foucault calls “technologies”) work together around the objectification of the body, and they help constitute the subject:

This form of power applies itself to everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him by his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him (1982:781)

Subjectivation is then a process marked by an individuality that masks a greater social control. What Foucault describes is the total embodiment of politics in the social and individual body. In order to explain the process of that embodiment, he considered the importance of spatiality with what he named heterotopias. One of the very few times where Foucault mentions cinema in his writings is in his article 'Of Other Spaces', to illustrate his concept of heterotopias. Heterotopias are enactments of utopias. Described as spaces beyond the realm of the real, that "suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (1986:24), heterotopias are systems of both inclusion and exclusion that manifest the embodiment of power in specific spaces, such as mental institutions, schools, prisons, but also theatres, boats or cinemas. Heterotopias are inherent to all cultures or human groups, and they are characterized as being related to states of being in crisis and or deviation. Another principle that defines them is the juxtaposition of different spaces into a "single real place", located in a particular timeless break with tradition, either as eternal places that accumulate time (museums, libraries, cemeteries), or liminal sites (festivals, carnivals). Ultimately, heterotopias are defined by their function in relation to other spaces: "their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill-constructed, and jumbled" (1986:27).

Much of the work of Foucault is grounded on escaping the binaries established by the so-called Western rational discourse, consequently embracing contradictions and paradoxes, and multiplicity of forces, in the existing discourse. A fundamental part of that task that permeates several of his works is the dismantling of the individual identity. Instead of investing in different categories of sexual orientation and desire, he prefers to defend an unfixed realm of "bodies and pleasures". Similarly, he

concludes, “maybe the target nowadays is not to understand what we are but refuse what we are” (1982:785). As a possible defence against absolutist forces of power than invest and invade the body and enforce its subjectivity, the disavowal of fixed categories of identity is a necessary step in order to reimagine a better future.

### **Judith Butler**

If Foucault established bodies as “surface of events”, Butler argues for a conceptualization that considers them “not as a ready surface awaiting signification, but as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained” (2006:43). Before being an important epistemological concept, bodies are first and foremost material realities that exist within a given social-political order. Nevertheless, Butler also notes that “as a field of interpretative possibilities, the body is a locus of the dialectical process” (2004:28). Paradoxes and contradictions reunite in the body, which at the end of the day is the place where culture meets gender and gender meets the subject.

Departing from an analogous desire to dismantle “the category of women as a coherent and stable subject” (2006:7) of feminism, Butler takes Foucault’s notion of multiplicity of power to explore sexuality and gender. She identifies how Simone de Beauvoir’s claim “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (in Butler 2004:24) points to the dissolution of sex and gender. Neither are natural realities, but “regulatory ideals” (1993:54) that give form and rule over the bodies. Butler argues that the bodies come in genders, or better yet, that “gender is a way of existing in one’s body”, a mode of existence that is rooted in cultural manifestations (2004:29). Sex and gender are discursive categories that pass as the real in order to reinforce sexual difference. “The “coherence” and “continuity” of the “person” are not logical or analytic features”, she discusses, but “socially instituted and maintained forms of intelligibility” (2006:23).

The concept of intelligibility is of great importance for Butler and coexists alongside the concept of normativity. Normative practices are those who relate to the existing gender norms; meanwhile, intelligibility is a domain that prescribes existence. Further developing Foucault's work on sexuality, Butler examines social rules of coherence that mask sex and gender dissidence. Those bodies and pleasures that do not fit into the heterosexual matrix are abject beings outside intelligibility. However, and this is fundamental, those abject beings cannot fall outside the domain since they have been constructed by the very norm that rejects them (1993:11). Butler's attempt to rethink the "intelligible domain" in which abject bodies strive to matter is what constitutes her as one of the most prominent figures in Queer Theory. Butler defines queerness as a strategy of assigning a resignification to a shaming word, "the politicization of abjection in an effort to rewrite the history of the term, and to force it into a demanding resignification" (1993: 21). That resignification is made possible with critical agency. Critical agency is a key concept to understand how it is possible to disrupt the norm, to break away "the heterosexual ceremonial" (1993: 225). Butler rejects the notion of "reverse discourse" and is cautious about using queer, warning the readers that the history of the slur cannot be simply erased and reverse for the free will of a speaking subject.

There has always been an 'I' that has been 'gendered', and that 'I' cannot exist prior to the conditions of subjection. The question is, then, how can we escape the heterosexual matrix, and resist this process of gender-subjection? The answer to that question is twofold. First, that regulatory ideal is neither "essence" nor "material fact", but "enforced cultural option which has disguised itself as natural truth" (2004:37). Genders, Butler proposes, are not inescapable insofar they are constructed. As long as



its meaning or function are contested, “the very multiplicity of their construction holds out the possibility of a disruption” (2006:44).

*A performance of reiterative effects*, gender is an act that creates itself by means of reiteration and it is continuously policed. To say that gender is performative does not mean that is simply chosen at will, she warns, for genders are not clothes, nor do clothes define gender (1993:231). Instead of taking gender as a given reality, a truth that lives inside our bodies, Butler defends that it a performance because as “act, gestures, and enactments” (2006:185), gender creates the effect that it names. Derrida’s statement that “there is no nature, only the effects of nature: denaturalization or naturalization” (in Butler 1993:1) is taken to explore how gender is simply a “fabrication” of discourse (2006:185), as there cannot be inner truthful gender identities. If gender is constituted through the repetition of action through time, then it demands a constant re-articulation, as it is “a norm that can never be fully internalized” (2006:192), a source of failure and ambivalence, since it can never be embodied. “The original”, Butler reveals, is “nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original” (2003:43): ultimately, all gender expressions are imitative, copies without an original.

Butler argues that drag is potentially subversive because it destabilizes the illusions of gender. “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (2006:188). Erasing the boundaries between male and female, inside and outside, true self and performative self, drag enforces fluidity and invites ambivalence. To the critical voices that say drag functions to reinstate gender norms, i.e., what a woman should be or look like, Butler responds that the matrix of gender is inescapably inscribed in all bodies, and sometimes it needs to be reproduced to allow us to speak, for there cannot be utterances outside the

discourse, for gender constitutes all subjects. Yet, reflecting the artificiality of gender expressions, drag dissipates ‘femininity’ as a stable category, and pushes back on normativity. Writing on parody, Butler argues that

Parody requires a certain ability to identify, approximate, and draw near; it engages an intimacy with the position it appropriates that troubles the voice, the bearing, the performativity of the subject such that the audience or the reader does not quite know where it is you stand, whether you have gone over to the other side, whether you remain on your side, whether you can rehearse that other position without falling prey to it in the midst of the performance. [...] To enter into parody is to enter into a relationship of both desire and ambivalence. (1998:34-35)

While drag and parody are not the same, the abovementioned definition establishes them as two related terms. Drag uses parody, and parody, like camp, is less an object than a relation between objects, a relation that is often influenced by identification, desire, and ambivalence. Drag and parody bring an invitation to trouble and laughter, two fundamental tools in the pursuit of a feminist world. Laughter and trouble help to dethrone “serious categories” (2006: xxx), and most importantly, help manifest “a radical shift in one’s notion of the possible and the real”. (2006: xxiv). The pleasures that they contribute aid to displace stable categories and identities and reimagine a world outside the heterosexual matrix.

### **Pierre Bourdieu**

Unlike Foucault and Butler’s writings, the work of Pierre Bourdieu is not dedicated to producing genealogies, nor can it be considered a philosophical inquiry. Instead, Bourdieu is a theorist that produces his work in the field of sociology, and it is therefore most concerned with the social sphere and its ordering and stratification. In the preface to his work *Distinction: A Social Critique to the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu warns against the taboo by which intellectual works of arts and their artist are separated from their conditions of existence (2010:xv), revealing his intention to study cultural production within the context of industrial consumption and social

reception. From this materialistic standpoint, Bourdieu traces a sociological investigation around the concept of taste.

Taste, for Bourdieu, are “manifested preferences” (2010:49) and “acquired disposition[s]” (2010:468) that help us to make sense of the world around us. “Simultaneously ‘the faculty of perceiving flavours’ and ‘the capacity to discern aesthetic values’”, Bourdieu argues, taste is “social necessity made second nature, turned into muscular patterns and bodily automatisms” (2010:476). Taste is not simply a form of perception, and an act of cognition, but a process of embodiment. It is linked to the body not only for the visceral reactions, but because it directly intervenes over the body, generating postures, gestures, modes of speaking and ways of moving through the world.

“The schemes of the habitus [...] owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will. [...] They embed what some would mistakenly call values in the most automatic gestures or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body —ways of walking or blowing one's nose, ways of eating or talking—and engage the most fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world, those which most directly express the division of labour (between the classes, the age groups and the sexes) or the division of the work of domination, in divisions between bodies and between relations to the body” (2010: 468, my emphasis).

In other words, taste articulates the matrix in which we exist. It commands the social world. In Bourdieu's famous words, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (2010: xxix). The demarcation is inescapable, for taste does not need any individual's awareness, or willingness, to mark one's place. “Social subjects, classified by their classification, distinguish themselves by the distinction they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar” (2010: xxix). A fundamental part of studying taste is studying bad taste, for distaste is often a virulent reaction against others in the social sphere. Classification is a key concept since it refers to the process that connects taste to the social subject and its class. Taste is,

therefore, a field of signification that produces not only meaning but also judgement and value, connecting aesthetics to processes of power. Bourdieu attempts to devoid the term from any creative and charismatic approximations and says instead that “cultural needs are products of upbringing and education” (2010: xxiv). He argues that “the ‘eye’ is a product of history reproduced by education” (2010: xxvi), which is to say, cultivated taste is simply another form of capital.

Bourdieu uses the term cultural capital to expand on the Marxist formulation of capital. Capital cannot be defined in purely economic terms since going beyond things and collections of things cultural capital is a fundamental currency in late capitalism. Cultural capital is an asset, a form of revenue, that can be either inherited or acquired, and it is, in any case, guaranteed by education (2010:73-75). Cultural capital produces “legitimate dispositions” (2010:8): expressions of taste that reign over others. Associated with the term, we can find the legitimization of forms of culture, producing an effective hierarchy within the artistic world.

Hierarchies are further reproduced in society to the point that they effectively structure the world in schemes of the habitus. The habitus, for Bourdieu, are the set of principles or “systematic configurations” that arrange the social space of different lifestyles. It is a term that functions by being necessarily “internalized” and is both a “structuring” and “structured” construction (2010:166). Alongside taste, habitus dictates ways of living. “At stakes in every struggle over art there is also the imposition of an art of living” (2010:49), continues Bourdieu, a concept akin to Foucault’s aesthetics of existence. To argue about taste can seem pointless because our taste seems “natural” and unequivocal to each of us – because it is weaved together with our habitus, it reproduces our dispositions and casts away those who do not agree with us. Ultimately, having bad taste means to lead a questionable life.

At the core of notions of good taste and bad taste we can find the distinctions that separate the social world. Whereas good taste is associated with Kantian notions of ‘pure pleasure’, based on contemplation and disinterestedness, bad taste is always referred to as the lower, vulgar enjoyment (2010: xxix-xxx). The taste that is despised is therefore linked to satisfactory and immediate embodied sensations. This so-called “network of oppositions” (2010:470), between good and bad taste, high and low culture, Bourdieu defends, is at the core of the functioning of the social order:

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. This is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed [...] deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences. (2010:xxx)

Despite existing hierarchies of distinction, however, Bourdieu notes the “collective participation in festivity” of popular entertainment. The enjoyment of cheap spectacles, and comedic performances, “satisfy the taste for and sense of revelry” (2010:26). Comedy and popular entertainment emerge, therefore, as practices that cut across the rules and conventions of the proper world of good taste, and seemingly disrupt and overturn those distinctions.

### **Mikhail Bakhtin**

A scholar of literature and semiotics, Mikhail Bakhtin is a Russian philosopher most known by his work on dialogism, a concept that explores the constant and dynamic evolution of language that changes affected by and affecting society and culture. Refusing the monolithic utterance of speech, Bakhtin examines instead the heteroglossia of discourse and multiplicity of voices. Those concepts —dialogue and heteroglossia— alongside his research interest in laughter and folk culture would feature prominently in his work on carnival. Studying the carnival, Bakhtin traced a genealogy of laughter.

Originated from a thesis on Rabelais' work and humour, Bakhtin's carnivalesque draws a model for subversive art and 'anti-canonical aesthetics' (Stam 2015:69) that rejects the Renaissance values of harmonious beauty. Carnival is a time of feast that brings a temporary suspension from the rules of the official world. A communal and popular release before the constrictions of Lent, carnival celebrates an alternate realm "filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" (Bakhtin 1984:11). The official world turns upside down, or inside out, "from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (1984:11). The celebration is inevitably unstructured and open – it does not belong to the artists but to the people, and the people live through the carnival, because performance and play are intertwined with the real.

Whereas traditionally Western culture values the spiritual and heavenly, the "upper stratum" (1984:309), the Carnival celebrates the grotesque materiality of the body, its earthly foundations, the lower stratum. The grotesque body is exaggerated and is excessive: it opens all orifices and therefore is in continuous connection with the world. The body eats and drinks, sweats, bears children and defecates. All those carnal experiences are celebrated in the Carnival, that opposes the seriousness of religious sentiments and rituals. The grotesque celebration of the carnal materiality of the body disrupts the illusion of the private, intellectual mind. By calling attention to the animality of human life, the carnivalesque and grotesque celebrations disrupt notions of privacy and individuality and disclose "the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. It leads men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and stable" (1984:48) Alluding to the

bodily humours and desires, the grotesque encapsulates the ambivalent joys and horrors of the mortal experience.

The carnival brings change, renewal and release in the form of laughter. Carnival's laughter is "ambivalent", joyous and sardonic, "it asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (1984:12). For Bakhtin, laughter symbolises resistance towards authoritarian and dogmatic discourses because it rejects all seriousness and violence.

The social, choral nature of laughter, its striving to pervade all peoples and the entire world. The doors of laughter are open to one and all. Indignation, anger, and dissatisfaction are always unilateral: they exclude the one toward whom they are directed, and so forth; they evoke reciprocal anger. They divide, while laughter only unites; it cannot divide. [...] Everything that is truly great must include an element of laughter. Otherwise it becomes threatening, terrible, or pompous; in any case, it is limited. Laughter lifts the barrier and clears the path" (1986:135)

Carnival laughter contains a "a joyful and triumphant hilarity" (1984:38) with the potential to offer resistance and regeneration of power. The carnival is a cultural production that attests how everything always changes. Bakhtin separates the laughter of the carnival from other forms of humour. Carnival laughter is universal in scope, physically manifested and full of merry and joy. It is not only liberating but regenerating also.

The carnival, for Bakhtin, is filled with utopic potential built upon the temporary suspensions of barriers and hierarchies, and the communal celebration of folk culture. As a release from the rules and dogmas of official religious truths, the carnival subversion is collective and participatory. To claim that the carnival is participatory means that it is communal and open, an event that invites all people to take part and join in. The carnival must be participatory because it is a cultural expression based on humour and folk culture, which are not individual but shared by society, and as such, "belonged to all the people". Bakhtin argues, "the truth of laughter

embraced and carried away everyone; nobody could resist it” (1984:82). The universality of laughter is therefore limitless and contains the universe.

### **Cinematic Technologies**

This section expands on the work of Foucault, Butler, Bourdieu and Bakhtin by tracing connections with film studies. Following Foucault, going beyond interpretations of cinema as a medium, art form, historical document and/or cultural text, I argue for cinema to be studied as a technology of production, of power and the self, a technology that by means of performativity intervenes in the realm of taste.

Technologies are new set of procedures, junctions of knowledge and power. Disciplines are mechanisms of power that do not operate on a major scale. Instead, disciplines focus their attention to minor detail and work as microphysics of power that penetrates apparatuses and institutions. Therefore, to describe cinema as a disciplinary technology implies that we understand its relation to power: power within cinema is not always visible; it is not based on coercion or a prominent figure of authority, rather, it works by relying on its multiplicity, and the deep infiltration on the bodies. Ultimately, cinema functions as “a mechanism that coerces by means of observation” (1984:189). Disciplinary technology, argues Foucault, is always first aimed at the body, “to forge a docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (1984:17). If bodies are malleable, filmic bodies—those bodies that enter the screen—must undertake a double process of construction. First immersed, trained and constrained by the biopolitics of society, they are then further forged at the hands of the cinematic industry.

Based on a classification that Foucault makes in the seminar article ‘Technologies of the Self’, I argue for three different modes in which cinema operates on the body as a disciplinary technology. First, cinema as a technology of production



that creates docile bodies, a technology of control based on observation and self-surveillance. Second, cinema as a technology of power and the establishment of censorship as a regulatory practice of the industry and state that mandates what can be shown. Third, cinema as a technology of the self, a machinery that enforces realms of taste, inviting individuals to enforce “a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality”. (1997:225). Focusing the discussion on Waters’ cinema, I outline here ideas of bad taste, camp, and trash as particular ways of living and performing the self.

#### Technology of production: Docile bodies in cinema

Film studies have considered the multiple ways in which “the body engages with the film event [...]: senses of vision, tactility and sound, philosophical issues of perception and temporality, of agency and consciousness.” (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2010:4-5). Bodies are “necessary condition and support of the cinematic process”, argues Stephen Shaviro. Images are not simply fantasies, nor nightmares of the unconscious. To reclaim the importance of the cinematic body means to reclaim the materiality of the image. Film theory should consist, therefore, in a “theory of the affects and transformations of the bodies” (Shaviro 1993:257). In other words, if cinema is a disciplinary technology, it first operates by training, shaping, and producing filmic bodies.

Filmic bodies are often docile bodies. According to the work of Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, the captivity of the Hollywood bodies points to the similarities between the film industry and the slave plantation economy. She defends the notion of ‘Hollywood Plantocracy’ to understand how the perpetuation of White colonialism is very much present in the film industry: “from its roots in the commodification of the

body to its perpetration of the narratives and power/knowledge systems of hierarchy in terms of race, class, gender and sexualities” (1999:47). The Plantocracy is a system that controls and disciplines the bodies, holding them captive (1999:2). Cinema similarly holds ownership over bodies, through contracts, studio and audience demands, renaming its stars, enforcing re-education and morality, and finally, constructing Whiteness as a universal ideal that systematically “others” the non-whites and propels them to the margins. The Hollywood Plantocracy is based on a strict division and reorganization of the bodies that actively promotes the heterosexual matrix that Butler coined. White, able-bodied, wealthy, binary gendered and part of a heterosexual relationship are the main attributes of the intelligible bodies, the bodies that appear on screen. Other bodies that exist outside this order are labelled as “freaks” if represented at all, and they are somehow concealed or contained in order to neutralise the threat of discomfort they may cause (Richardson 2010:37).

Biopower also functions by actively creating, investing in the body and manufacturing stars. Richard Dyer’s contribution points out at the significance of stars as commodities that embody values, aesthetics, ideology and regulations. “The body”, argues Dyer, “is a ‘problem’ because to recognise it fully would be to recognise it as the foundation of economic life; how we use and organise the capacities of our bodies is how we produce and reproduce life itself” (2004:135). The film industry is inscribed in the bodies of the stars, and star appearances are manufactured as a form of labour. The resulting image is produced according to the regulations of the market.

The technology of production of bodies is not limited to those onscreen, but it goes and reaches those of the audience. Onscreen bodies can form a genre of bodily films, where bodily excesses are displayed as a cinema of sensations. Linda Williams describes as “gross movies” those who elicit a physical response and “display

sensations that are in the edge of respectable” (1991:2). Showcased bodies seem to correlate with popular films with “low cultural status”.

Pornography, horror, and melodrama are genres that feature instances of ‘ecstasy’ and ‘rapture’ (1991:4), and a prominent display of bodily fluids. The continuity of sensations, from the open bodies onscreen, to the bodies of the audience that physically respond to those sensations, is materialized in the form of arousal and orgasm (for pornography), shudders and sweat (for horror), and tears and sobs (for melodrama). In their excess, these genres draw pleasure from perversion, that is, amongst the feelings they elicit in their spectators, there are “visual and narrative pleasures” (1991:4). The combination of desire and ambivalence, between gross bodily reactions and the enjoyment they bring, is another feature of the abject. Barbara Creed writes: “Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure [...] but also a desire, having taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject” (1999:253). Abjection is rooted in the body, on its flesh and boundaries, and on the pending threat of disease and mortality. As Shaviro writes, cinema “assaults the eye and ear, it touches and it wounds. It foregrounds the body, apart from the comforting representations that I use to keep it at a distance” (1993:260). Upon breaking the Cartesian body-and-mind dichotomy, we find that bodies are inescapable in cinema and that their materiality is always subjected to processes of power, both on the filmic bodies on display and on the pending sensations of the bodies of the audience.

#### Technology of power: Censorship

“Debates about the censorship of popular culture have always been debates about the social control of its audiences”, argues Richard Maltby (1995:41). Censorship seems to be a paradigmatic example of a vertical exercise of power,

exercised top to bottom. Within the American context, the instauration of the Production Code has been studied as a battle “about the cultural function of entertainment and the possession of cultural power” (Maltby 1995:41). With the control of the cultural discourses at stake, cinema quickly established itself as an industry, subscribing to the economic and political interests of the status quo. The call for regulation responded to cinema being considered a very dangerous entertainment, aggravated by its popularity with the lower classes. The puritanical and religious groups pressed during the first decades of the twentieth century in order to obtain the establishment of a censorship board that would guard against immoral degeneration. The pressure groups were calling for a restoration of American values, and the industry responded by adapting a code that would regulate the content of films. One of the reasons why Hollywood was so eager to adopt such rules for self-censorship was to ensure distributions of the films. It made much more sense from an economic point of view to adopt a unified document that guided the morals of the films, that to risk approval after the film was made and had to be submitted to each one to the individual authorities. “Self-censorship, in other words, was good for business” (Black 1994:14). Cinema, therefore, functions as a technology where power operates to optimize productivity, securing and protecting capitalist interests.

Based on productivity and the urge to control the evil messages of cinema, the Production Code can be studied as a document key to the construction of Hollywood as a “moral city”. The document not only “banned nudity, excessive violence, white slavery, illegal drugs, miscegenation, lustful kissing, suggestive postures and profanity from the screen” but also promoted “the institutions of marriage and home, defend the fairness of government and present religious institutions with reverence” (1994:1). The heterosexual couple, God, and the homeland are issues held in complete authority.

Good taste, despite being seldom clarified or defined, is often invoked to disguise the biopolitics at play: the process by which power infiltrates the body, and the myriad of ways by which those norms mould the body of the “species” (Sawicki 1999).

However, as Annette Kuhn defends following Foucault, power not only represses, but also produces, therefore the history of censorship cannot simply be the history of the prohibition of certain gestures or actions within cinema and the interference of certain institutions (1988:2-5). Instead of inquiring what censorship is, or does, Kuhn switches the focus to the way it functions. Hence

Censorship ceases to be a reified and predefined object, becoming instead something which emerges from the interactions of certain processes and practices. Censorship, in short, would be seen (to adopt the terminology of Michel Foucault) as part of an apparatus, a *dispositif*. (1988:6)

Rather than a straightforward demonstration of hierarchical forces at play, censorship reappears as a “network of relations” (1988:7) that does not simply offer a dichotomy between the censor and censored, the institutions and the filmmakers. Instead, Kuhn argues for a reconciliation of the text and its context; the cultural and institutional, for censorship is often a realm where opposite forces of power operate. Rather than abiding in a lawful and ordered world, films are constituted and constrained by censorship, playing with limits of acceptability and shock value. Censorship might function as a disciplinary technology, but since where there is power, there is always resistance, societal norms of intelligibility are always contested.

Transgression always encompasses the limits that are set to be transgressed (Foucault 1997:73). Yet those limits are not fixed, as a line waiting to be crossed, instead, they are in constant articulation. The act of transgression, therefore, is the act of crossing a boundary, one that simply displaces the limit somewhere else. “Transgression”, argues Foucault, “carries the limit right to the limit of its being” (1997:74). The cinema of transgression is, ultimately, in constant conversation with

the boundaries of the market and its legal articulations. Both despite and thanks to censorship, a certain type of cinema is fuelled by a playful desire to test the limits. Such desire creates an effective ‘spiral’ of transgressions (Foucault 1997:73) that tries to transcend the bounds of censorship at the same time that it gains shock value and subversions capital in its defiance of the status quo (Wilson 1993:110-111). Hence, the existence of some forms of cult cinema, exploitation films and/or paracinema is rooted in this promise. The lure of the screen lies in the potentiality of offering episodes of transgressions that work both with and against the system. The multiplicity of power, therefore, represents the prospects and perils of showing cinematic transgressions. While censorship mandates produce visible boundaries that warrant the economic interests of the industry, the margins of the industry (cult, exploitation, paracinema) profit from testing those boundaries, showcasing appealing episodes of transgression.

#### Technology of the self: Queer Aesthetics and Taste

An understanding of aesthetics describes the term as the philosophy of art. Aesthetics are also sets of principles or realms of taste that produce judgement on beauty or talent. Foucault’s notion of ‘aesthetics of the self’ refers to “the process of subjectification as an art” (Simons 1995:76), ethics of an art of living in the absence of Christian humanistic morality. The aesthetics of existence constitute a “third axis” of subjectivation, alongside knowledge and power (Deleuze 1999:79-80). To describe cinema as a technology of the self means to reveal its function as a process of subjectivation, one which simultaneously exposes the commonality of aesthetics, knowledge, and power.

The communality of aesthetics, knowledge, and power offers a new path for analysis. Feminist interpretations highlight the complicity of aesthetics “in strategies of power. [...] When power is strong, is strong because it also operates on an aesthetic

level, on the level of pleasure and desire” (Honi Fern Haber 1996: 139). Pleasure and desire reveal themselves as crucial sensations insofar they run alongside those two axes of subjectivation. Similarly, cultural studies scholar Andrew Ross asks, “in recent years, it has become a commonplace to concede that knowledge is power, but how do we recognize the full social and cultural effects of that equation, unless by expressions of taste?” (1989:5-6). Taste, argues Ross, deserves critical attention because it manifests the materiality (and consequences) of that union of knowledge and power.

As a junction of aesthetics, knowledge, and power, realms of taste are embedded in cinema. They shape bodies and pleasures. Mainstream cinema, operating under so-called good taste, conceals the reproduction of biopolitics by creating certain stylization of bodies, actions, and gestures that are reproduced, repeated, and reiterated creating a domain of intelligibility that is continuously under surveillance. It forms a sort of symbolic space that functions as a regulatory ideal.

Bad taste, however, operates under a different set of rules. “To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about. If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation” (Waters 2005:1). The words that open Waters’ *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste* perform a calculated transgression while invoking bad taste as integral to Waters’ authorial brand. To claim bad taste means to question taste itself, what is good and what is bad, what is beautiful and what is ugly, hierarchies of distinction that differentiate between subjects and situate them on the material world. Waters notes,

*One must remember there is such a thing as good bad taste and bad bad taste. It's easy to disgust someone; I could make a ninety-minute film of people getting their limbs hacked off, but this would only be bad bad taste and not very stylish or original. To understand bad taste one must have very good taste. Good bad taste can be creatively nauseating but must, at the same time, appeal to the especially twisted sense of humour, which is anything but universal (2005:2, my emphasis).*

Waters' definition of bad taste echoes Susan Sontag's foundational text 'Notes on Camp', in which she writes, "Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste" (2018 [1964]:32). Ross, on his part, describes camp as "an operation of taste" (1990:310) and explicitly refers to Waters' cinema of bad taste<sup>8</sup>. Camp then emerges as a fluid concept, and as such, difficult to point down. Those who study it (Sontag 1964, Newton 1972, Booth 1983, Ross 1989, Meyer 1994, Cleto 1999) generally agree on the "slipperiness" of the concept. "Tentatively approached as sensibility, taste, or style, reconceptualised as aesthetics or cultural economy, and later asserted/reclaimed as (queer) discourse, camp hasn't lost its relentless power to frustrate all efforts to pinpoint it down to stability" (Cleto 1999:2). In lieu of such unstable grounds, I argue, Waters' bad taste cinema is akin to camp but the two terms cannot be conflated.<sup>9</sup> Instead, I propose to study Waters' bad taste as a performative mode that adapts through changes in the cultural landscape, indebted to camp and trash cinema and culture.

While some of the first works on camp (Isherwood 1954, Sontag 1964, Booth 1983) referred to it as a sensibility, or "a certain mode of aestheticism" (Sontag 1964:54), later works study it in the context of gay subculture and explain camp as a performance of queerness (Meyer 1994, Cleto 1999). According to Esther Newton, camp is "not a thing" but "it signifies a *relationship between* things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality" (1972:92). Some critics of camp have argued that it takes a fine intellectual or artist to build such an anti-intellectual approach to

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<sup>8</sup> "Camp's patronage of bad taste, which thrives today in the work of John Waters and in the cult 'bad film' circuit, was as much an assault on the established canons of taste as Pop's erotization of the everyday had been." (Ross 1993:68).

<sup>9</sup> This precarious equilibrium can be illustrated with an anecdote: 'Camp' was the theme for 2019 Met Gala, organized by Vogue editor Anna Wintour. The media's coverage of the event referred to Waters' cinema as an illustration of camp, yet the filmmaker was not invited and did not attend.



taste, in other words, that only those that enjoy a great deal of cultural capital can defend that something is so bad that is good. “Camp arose as a form of recognition among the members of an intellectual elite, so sure of their refined tastes that they could proclaim the redemption of the bad taste of the past” (Eco 2007: 408). Under this view, camp is interpreted as a token of superiority, one that is rendered an ineffectual critique when it departs from the privileged intellectual’s living room. Nonetheless, queer theorists like Meyer claim that the depoliticization of camp is not one of its attributes, but simply a result of the conceptualizations that failed to unveil camp’s queer potential. “There are not different kinds of Camp. There is only one. And it is queer” (1994:5). Meyer defends the political potential of camp and its ability to embody a “specifically queer cultural critique” (1994:1), a cultural critique that, through reusing waste<sup>10</sup>, addresses society by attacking the hierarchies of taste.

Waters’ bad taste is, I argue, not simply camp, but a form of queer excess. Queerness, explains Butler, is the resignification of a slur. The shaming of the word now signals defiance, an understanding of queerness as a celebration of abjection. To be queer means to be othered, beyond fixed categories of sex and gender. Queerness is a political strategy that demands recognition enacting “performativity as citationality” (1993:21), that is, through iterations and repetitions, manages to hijack the discourse, turning the shaming term into “a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” (1993:228). The utopianism of queerness has also been defended by José Esteban Muñoz, who adventured that

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<sup>10</sup> This idea resonates with Andy Warhol’s philosophy of left-overs: “I’m not saying that popular taste is bad so that what’s left over from the bad taste is good: I’m saying that what’s left over it’s probably bad, but if you can take it and make it good or at least interesting, then you are not wasting as much as you would otherwise. You’re recycling work and you’re recycling people, and you’re running your business as by-product of other business. Of other directly competitive business, as a matter of fact. So that’s a very economical operating procedure. It’s also the funniest operating procedure because, as I said, leftovers are inherently funny” (1979:93).

perhaps we are not yet queer, and queerness is a futurity that warms our present with potentiality (2009). Signalling a departure from lesbian and gay politics of assimilation, queer carved a new space that loosely would bring together all things “non-, anti-, or contra-straight” (Doty 1995:73). Against idea of a fixed sexual identity, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that biological sex, gender assignment and gender identity as well as sexual orientation, desires, identities and affective ties do not necessarily correspond or align and cannot therefore be categorized into a closed container category (1993:6-7). Queerness therefore emerges to assemble “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and *excesses of meaning* when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (1993:7, my emphasis). Queer, then, would be that which exceeds, spills and transgresses.

Waters’ bad taste presents queer “excesses of meaning” alongside the carnivalesque grotesque, which is similarly defined by “exaggeration, hyperbole and excessiveness” (Bakhtin 1984:303). Its parodies and travesties<sup>11</sup> refuse homogeneity and seriousness: they transform the filmic world in an outlandish celebration of a world turned upside down and inside out. Gross-out fuels the carnivalesque laughter: it plays up bodily “gestures and secretions” and “is dominated by libido rather than rational thought [...] tremors and spasms rather than being restrained by order and cognitive skill” (Mendik and Schneider 2002:208). In Waters’ bad taste, the pleasure in gross-out transforms into shock value capital, which is both a degeneration –since it elevates the low– and a regeneration –since it recycles the trash.

Underground and trash are other terms that brand Waters’ cinema (Connolly 2018, Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983, Holmlund 2017, Levy 2015, Tinkcom 2002)

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<sup>11</sup> As explored in the introduction, travesty is a farce based on the reversal of hierarchies, and is one of the logic symbols of the carnival (Bakhtin 1984:11).

Underground cinema has been described as “a rubric rich with romantic connotation” (Hoberman in Tayler 1995:iv). Throughout this thesis, I do not use the concept of underground cinema in historical terms, to refer to the New York-based underground cinema of the 1960s; nor do I understand the underground as a film practice that can be outlined in ideological terms or as a praxis. Instead, I allude to underground cinema as an elastic grouping of works that reflects countercultural practices of reception<sup>12</sup> and reflects the dismantling of the “high/low” cinematic cultural divide (Betz 2003:202-203). These are the films of Russ Meyer, Hershell Gordon Lewis and Doris Wishman (Mendik and Schneider 2003:3), Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, the Kuchar Brothers and... John Waters (Reekie 2007:137). Because of its countercultural affiliations, underground stands as a very powerful myth. Throughout this thesis, I circle back to ‘underground cinema’ to describe Waters’ career up to *Polyester* because continuous inspiration from and engagement with the underground myth brands, early on, Waters’ filmmaking and encompasses his cult authorial reputation<sup>13</sup>. Despite the contemporary pervasiveness of the term independent cinema, underground cinema reflects a certain historical convergence of a series of cinematic influences, aesthetics, and reception practices that shape Waters’ cinema and that he purposely amplifies in *Cecil B. Demented*, as chapter 6 will explore.

Trash cinema encompasses what I.Q. Hunter, defining the term alongside exploitation films, describes as “an unpretentious mode of disposable filmmaking”, (2014:483). Akin to waste, trash is cultural production detritus whose importance

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<sup>12</sup> On the affective experiences of countercultural embrace of underground cinema see Staiger (2000).

<sup>13</sup> In his thesis ‘Underground Exploiteer: John Waters and the Development of a Directorial Brand, 1964–1981’, Connolly explores how Waters’ early career receives influences and engages with the notion of underground “through a combination of practicality, insight, personal predilection, and industrial circumstance, he crafted the public persona of not just a filmmaker, but an underground exploiteer who placed equal emphasis upon the creation of the cinematic and the extra-cinematic within his work” (2018:284).

resurfaces alongside twentieth-century consumerism. “Trash cinema”, explains Guy Barefoot, “can seem like a case-book example of the return of the repressed, as films buried by disapproval and neglect come back to haunt us” (2017:4). Given the unstable grounds of camp, Barefoot explores trash as an “elastic textual category” (2017:21) that can refer to everything coded as low, underground or marginal—trash aesthetics—or to a particular form of cinematic expression—the trash label. Waters’ cinema, he summarizes, adopts both.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, as Sconce concludes, debates around trash are “linked to issues of taste; and taste, in turn, is a social construct with profoundly political implications” (1995:392).

Reemphasizing the importance of reading aesthetics alongside notions of power and knowledge, in this section I have outlined Waters’ cinema relation to bad taste, camp, underground and trash, concluding that within these different cultural concepts there is an overarching notion of queer excess.

## **Conclusions**

This thesis identifies in bad taste a new aesthetic of the self, one that performatively challenges aesthetics and power. Bad taste creates a queer spiral of transgression that calls into question the existing order – its heterosexuality, aesthetics, values and taste. Waters’ cinema of bad taste draws upon camp and trash cultures and finds pleasure in queer excess, a pleasure rooted in the laughter that celebrates a world turned upside down and inside out. This chapter has argued that cinema is a technology junction of power and knowledge, where good taste aesthetics enforce the discursive norms that regulate bodies. Waters’ bad taste sets out to deconstruct those norms by flagging carnivalesque aesthetics of queer excess, in which non-normative bodies

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<sup>14</sup> “Trash has thus been used to refer to the disposal materials of consumer society but also marginalised people, while a trash aesthetic has functioned as networked entertainment as well as a challenge to social norms” (Barefoot 2017:68)

enjoy performing episodes of transgression. Against the grip of power that cinema exerts as a disciplinary technology, I argue that Waters' cinema intervenes in these discourses by upending and reversing traditional understandings of power, knowledge, taste and gender, celebrating a temporary suspension of official truths in which laughter pervades all bodies and pleasures.

## CHAPTER 2: CHEAP THRILLS: THE GROTESQUE AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

“People do not eat faeces as a joke”  
(Miller 1997:118)

Cheap thrills thrive in Waters' firsts long-feature films *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) and *Pink Flamingos* (1972). Their cheapness comes directly inherited from the materials conditions of the low-budget independent production, that would imprint the aesthetics of the films. Filmed with a single camera, a newsreel single-system Auricon, illegally rented from TV stations, and a single piece of lighting equipment (Waters 2005:5), the films have a raw amateur aesthetic. A single long take, with either a medium or a long shot, records pages and pages of dialogue, while the characters go through long dramatic diatribes. The camera does not move but zooms in and out. In several scenes, when a new character is entering the room, the tightness of the set space requires that they enter the frame by walking directly from behind the camera. This causes the blurring of the frame as the new character accidentally blocks the lighting of the scene, and the image only gets back to focus when the actors hit their mark and occupy their position in the *mise-en-scène*. The handmade aesthetics of settings and costumes reinforce an amateur theatrical feel. The primitive filmmaking oscillates between the documentary-esque and the theatrical.

As early works, their thrillingness originates in a carnivalesque *tour de force* of transgression. *Multiple Maniacs* features a freak show, a Via Crucis, a lobster-rape, and a monstrous prosecution on the streets of Baltimore, all in a day in the life of Lady Divine. In *Pink Flamingos* two families battle for the title of the filthiest people alive. These flimsy narratives open the door to humorous episodes of transgression, short vignettes of filth that operate as cinematic attractions. Cinema of attractions “directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure

through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself” (Gunning 2006:384). From a puke-eater, or a singing-anus, to sex with giant lobsters or chickens, the pleasure of these attractions is firmly rooted in the dirty lower-stratum of the body. In *Multiple Maniacs* and *Pink Flamingos*, the body is reimagined as the main site for bad taste, one that operates “performing acts”<sup>1</sup> that shake expectations of taste, beauty and sexuality. Disturbing representations of heterosexuality and homosexuality, the films' politics of filth are queer politics that celebrate a temporary suspension of the official straight world in favour of the freak show, grotesque, filth, and abjection. The embodiment of bad taste, I argue, is linked to the Carnavalesque tradition, that employs humour as a tool of cultural critique. The medium of laughter connects the filmic bodies with the public bodies: *Multiple Maniacs* and *Pink Flamingos* provide cinematic spectacles that shake the spectators on their seats and provoke bodily reactions. Indisputably “gross” in their freakish perversions, my argument is that these two “celluloid atrocities”<sup>2</sup> are sensational comedies fuelled with “power to excite” (Williams 1991:3).

Cheap thrills enhance the raw and primitive visual style to heighten emotions of shock, nausea, disgust, and excitement. This amateur rawness raises, as the analysis will explore, questions about the indexicality of cult cinema. Indexicality here refers to the ontology of the image: the indexical sign has an “existential relation to the object it represents” (Mulvey 2006: 175), like a footprint, the indexical is a trace of the real. However, as Doane notes, the index “occupies an uncomfortable position in the complex taxonomy of signs” (2007:1) since Peirce “applied the term “index” to such diverse signs as a footprint, a weathervane, thunder, the word “this,” a pointing

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1 In *Multiple Maniacs*, “performing acts” is the euphemism for sex that Bonnie (Mary Vivian Pierce's character) repeatedly employs.

2 As advertised in the original poster for *Multiple Maniacs*, along with the line: 'You won't believe this one!'

finger, and a photographic image” (2007:2) which created confusion about the term. Acknowledging that confusion, in this thesis, I refer to cult indexicality to discuss how the films point at the real, tracing at what is “brought before the lens” (Sontag in von Ooijen 2011:7). The index “takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object” (Pierce in Doane 2002:69). *Multiple Maniacs* and *Pink Flamingos* exploit the photographic imprint to marvel in their otherness and transgressions.

This chapter investigates the convergence of the freak show, grotesque, and carnivalesque in *Multiple Maniacs* and *Pink Flamingos*’ cheap thrills, which I argue that can be studied alongside the model of cinema of attractions. Privileging the focus on the body and its place in the world turned upside down, I argue that the films’ aesthetics play with corporeal sensations, heightening senses of laughter and disgust, playfully evoking the real and exciting the audiences with episodes of queer perversions.

### **Multiple Maniacs (1970)**

Taking its title after Herschell Gordon Lewis' *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964), *Multiple Maniacs* has been described as “a monster movie for people who would rather watch a comedy” (Yablonsky 2017). As Waters' first length feature-film with directly recorded sound, this self-proclaimed “celluloid atrocity” is also his first work with recognizable treats concerning performance, dialogue, and aesthetics of transgression. With a limited budget of 5,000 dollars, a loan from Waters’ family, the production of the film was limited yet had a significant improvement from earlier works. The single-system 16 mm camera they rented from a TV station recorded direct sound, which allowed for the possibility to record dialogue. In *Multiple Maniacs*, Waters’ first time writing dialogue, along with a single camera whose soundtrack “needs to run slightly



ahead of the picture in order to match up when projected” (Sherman 2019:142), created a specific visual style, where the actors seem to be in freeze at the start of any scene—to make sure sound is being recorded—the camera is fixed on the ground and moves through zoom most of all—provoking the professed “zoom abuse” (Bailey 2016). On top of that, editing was done over the original film, which caused a lot of spliced marks. The underground status of the film was embedded in the aesthetics as much as the themes. Dark, overexposed and grainy images feature in *Multiple Maniacs*' episodes of transgression and reinforce the low status of sex, violence and religious parody. Featuring visits to church, visions, infant saints, miracles and a crucified Jesus Christ, this monstrous comedy exploits grotesque imagery, carnivalesque joy and shock value to shake the audiences. This section studies the freak show in the cavalcade of perversion, Catholicism and parody in the Stations of the Cross, and grotesqueness and meta-referentiality in *Lady Divine as Godzilla*.

### Freak Shows

A freak show named ‘Cavalcade of Perversions’ opens *Multiple Maniacs*. Carnival barker Mr David (David Lochary), dressed in Circus tailcoat jacket, necktie and white trousers and armed with a microphone appears in the centre of the frame, and welcomes audiences with the following speech:

“Yes, folks, this isn’t any cheap X-rated movie or fifth-rate porno play, this is the show you want. *Lady Divine’s* Cavalcade of Perversions! The sleaziest show on earth! Not actors, not paid impostors, but real actual filth that has been carefully screened in order to present to you the most flagrant violation of natural law known to men. These assorted sluts, fags, dykes and pimps know no bounds. They have committed acts against God and Nature. Their mere existence will make any decent person recoil in disgust. You want to see them and we’ve got them! Every possible thing you could think of!”

The speech—that emulates the aggrandized mode of presentation from the freak show showmen—is designated to attract a crowd, and it does so by calling attention to its exploits of transgression. Mr David is not only addressing the passing

by Baltimoreans, but he is also addressing, and welcoming to, the *Multiple Maniacs* audience. This opening speech has a deictic function in that it showcases the film's erasure of boundaries: David Lochary plays Mr David, Divine plays Lady Divine, and Edith Massey plays *herself*<sup>3</sup>. The characters, in borrowing the actor's clothes and names, seem to be traces of the actors' personas. This show, warns Mr David's, minds credibility and prides itself in authenticity and transgression. It signals excess and sexual dissidence. The allure of perversion manifests itself as a safeguarded insight for suburban folks into the Circus, where they are allowed to look down at the freaks. At the same time, this creates a nod to cult cinema audiences<sup>4</sup>, since the subtext of the speech is saying, "no decent person would want to see this, but we know you are not decent, so welcome to our Freak Show".

The freak show tradition, explains Robert Bogdan, is a form of showbusiness that consisted of "the formally organized exhibition of people with alleged and real physical, mental, or behavioural anomalies for amusement and profit" (1988:10). Rather than a fixed category, freakiness exists in relation to cultural norms. In other words, "the "freak's" body is the product of the institution or discourse known as the freak show" (Richardson 2010:X). The freak is, therefore, representative of a category that effectively functions as the Other (Fiedler 1996: xiii) and the freak show is, beside spectacle, a "cultural ritual" (Garland Thomson 1996:4). As a ritual, Bogdan argues, the freak show did not so much die but mutated into other devices, enforcing our cultural understandings of horror, disability and deviance.

*Multiple Maniacs'* freak show is the Cavalcade of Perversion, a site where the freaks do not exhibit any physical anomalies, nor bodily transformations – they are

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<sup>3</sup> Massey plays a barmaid in Pete's Hotel waterfront bar, which was her occupation at the time.

<sup>4</sup> "Cult films offer ways to enjoy transgression safely", note Mathijs and Sexton since "they cross the boundaries of time and custom, but at the same time are comforting for those who attend them precisely to enjoy the aura of difference" (2011:102)

neither ‘born freaks’ nor ‘made freaks’ (Bogdan 1988:6). Instead, all of their show consists in novelty acts, in which they perform their ‘outrageous’ abilities such as “two actual queers kissing each other”, a drug addict going “cold turkey”, two guys licking a girl’s unshaven armpits (Fig. 2), a “puke eater” and a naked human pyramid. These novelty acts—showcasing nudity, drug use, and sexual dissidence—are performances of perversion. Perversion, like freakiness, is coded as a deviation from the norm, “product and vehicle of power” (Dollimore 1991:10). Perversion also indicates desire and pleasure: something that the Cavalcade exhibits proudly. Rather than displays of transgression (something that the film reserves for its second act), the Cavalcade acts places its focus not on the showcased performances but in the comic horrified reactions of the straight spectators (Fig. 3). The freaks, as well as the respectable citizens, are all played by the Dreamlanders, Waters’ troupe of bohemian fellow artists and friends<sup>5</sup>, which are cast repeatedly throughout the film. For their wigs and ‘straight’ costume-wear, the citizens’ attendees appear somehow campier than the freaks. Their grimaces and pouting reactions are captured at length, and the dialogue in the sequence is indistinguishable as all their complaints are voiced at the same time, producing a Greek chorus cacophony. Amid the action, some actors look directly to camera, some laugh covertly. Their performances as narrow-minded heterosexual couples are as much exaggerated and aggrandized as the freaks. The Cavalcade then serves then as a representation to the “us vs them” dichotomy (Holmlund 2017b:135), with the freak show being a metaphor for the generational divide of the 1960s U.S. counterculture,

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Dreamlanders’ is the unofficial name of the group, adopted later in life. ‘Dreamland Studios’ was Waters’ own invention for the team behind *Multiple Maniacs*. The name has freak show affiliations: Dreamland was the third park in Coney Island, with a famous Big Circus Sideshow that included ‘Lilleputia’ Village, where more than three hundred dwarf lived, exhibits of ‘exotic’ non-Western people and other disable people (Bogdan 1988:55-56).

and drugs and sexual displays coded as perversion.<sup>6</sup> Yet the scene seems to suggest not to take this perversions seriously. Making fun of the horror experienced by the straight citizens, the Cavalcade reveals the workings of shock value, where outrage is repurposed into a commodity.

The tension between the freaks and the squares implodes in the final act of the Cavalcade when the spectators meet Lady Divine. The spectacle of the circus quickly dissolves as Lady Divine assaults the audience at gunpoint, stealing their wallets, and even murdering some of them. The Cavalcade then reveals itself as a gimmick, not simply designed to sell manufactured perversions to the “square” world but to directly steal from the respectable citizens in a direct attack to the status quo. Reversing the device that was set up to exploit them, the freaks take revenge on their audience. Criminality, therefore, arises as a demolishing strategy to break through the pathology, ridicule, and exploitation associated with the freak show. Enfreakment can be a trap, a process that, as Garland Thomson describes, seeks to “stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies the freak-hunters or showmen colonize and commercialize” (1996:10). The freaks in *Multiple Maniacs* display their deviance to lure normal people, reclaim the use of violence, and then get revenge.

Waters’ fascination for outlaws and criminals is a constant throughout his work (one that is further explored in Chapter 3). In *Multiple Maniacs*, this fascination plays with the boundaries of the real when Lady Divine claims participation in the Tate murders. The killings of actress Sharon Tate and four other people in Cielo Drive, Los Angeles, on August 8, 1969, took place just before the start of the shooting of *Multiple Maniacs*. “Since the real killers hadn’t been apprehended yet, I decided that Divine would take credit”, explains the director. “I figured that if the murderers were never

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<sup>6</sup> Holmlund’s book (2017) dedicates its fourth chapter to place the Dreamlanders into the 1960s and 1970s countercultural context.

caught, there would always be the possibility that *maybe* Divine really *did* do it” (2005:62). The fact that Waters chose to reference the murders even before the Manson Family was apprehended and the crime achieved its cult status is both surprising and revelatory of the film’s intertextuality as well as their criminal and generational affiliations. *Multiple Maniacs*’ constructed showmanship invokes authenticity through real life events and doing so, it purposely tries to erase the boundaries between life and art. This erasure is indebted to the Bakhtinian concept of the carnival, understanding the term as a playful celebration of the earthly pleasures that mocks truth and authority, “a popular practice that deflates official seriousness and exposes social artifice and the monologic language of authority” (Edward and Graulund 2013:104). In *Multiple Maniacs*, the carnival laughter addressed to the ‘Church’s cult’ (Bakhtin 1984:7), includes several episodes of Catholic parody.

### Catholic Carnival

The carnival, argues Bakhtin, uses laughter as a celebration, to mock the status quo. “It builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state. Laughter celebrates it masses, professes its faith” (1984:88). Throughout what can be considered the second act of *Multiple Maniacs*, Catholic rites and imagery are reversed in full blasphemy and transgression. However, although the representation is fuelled with episodes of outrage and disgust; the tone of the sequence is so joyous that the religious theme gets conflated with queer desires. In this section, I argue that the film’s Catholic carnival is fuelled with desire and ambivalence.

After being raped in an alley by two glue-sniffing junkies, Lady Divine envisions the apparition of the Infant of Prague. Not a Saint, but a religious statue

canonically crowned<sup>7</sup> for the number of miracles, favours and prayers answered (Mace 1935: 24-30), the Infant of Prague was a popular folklore figure within Baltimorean working-class households. Example of religious kitsch, in *Multiple Maniacs* the religious figurine is materialized into flesh: a toddler with a velvet cape and a four ribs royal crown leads Lady Divine into Church, opening the door to the upcoming religious transgressions.

In *Multiple Maniacs*, episodes of religious transgression are based on the juxtaposition of the dirty lower status of the body to the serious upper stratus of the soul. The carnival takes place in a site without boundaries, where the order of the world has been suspended, and humour and play are in a “continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, from numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings” (Bakhtin 1984:8). Employing sacred rituals alongside laughter and grotesque imagery, *Multiple Maniacs* rewrites Catholic parables and rites, imposing queer meanings into the religious symbols. According to Mary Douglas, the importance of rituals lies in that they “enact the form of social relations”, making visible the operations of culture and power. “Rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body” (Douglas 2002: 158-159). Through rewriting religious rituals, the film arguably presents its own queer cult liturgy.

Episodes of the New Testament are recreated as Divine’s visions. First is the miracle of the Feeding of the 5,000, when Jesus Christ fed the multitudes that were reunited to listen to his Gospel. These religious vignettes are represented with the same cast than the Cavalcade of Perversions, so Christ is played by George Figgs, the same actor that played the heroin addict “going cold turkey”. The miracle is represented as

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<sup>7</sup> The canonical coronation is a catholic ritual enacted by the Pope by which a religious image is crowned.

sideshow magic: a smoke explosion that brings cans of tuna and pre-packed sliced bread to feed the starving people (Fig. 4). The multitude comically jumps on the industrially produced food and devour it in a gluttonous and ludicrous fashion: a humorous recreation of the “feast of fools (festa stultorum)” (Bakhtin 1984:5). The second religious vision is a central episode of Lent: it commemorates the Gospel retelling of the night of Maundy Thursday, one of the first episodes in the Passion of Christ, in which Jesus prays in Gethsemane while the apostles sleep, and is later betrayed by Judas (played by David Lochary) and apprehended by the Roman Officers.

Lady Divine's prayers get interrupted by seducing Mink (Mink Stole), a ‘religious whore’ that cruises the church. Minks whispers “think about the Stations of the Cross” while using a Rosary for anal stimulation. The third Catholic vision is then recounted as Lady Divine’s delirious orgasm. The suffering of Christ during the Stations of the Cross, also known as Via Crucis, is alternated through parallel editing to lesbian sex in the church, with Divine’s moans presiding over the Via Crucis. An immediate interpretation of the scene reveals the intention to outrage. Waters described the creative process of *Multiple Maniacs* as one who “finally worked Catholicism out of my system” (Egan 2011: 79), a consistent strategy within Queer Catholic artists such as Jean Genet, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Pedro Almodóvar (Hanson 1997, Maggi 2009, Mira 2013); artists that employ parody to perform an appropriation of catholic theatricality with transgression as the goal. To transgress means to trespass the limits or boundaries, yet those limits are not fixed but relational, and the act of transgression necessarily involves the limit. In relation to the blasphemous representation of the Rosary job, Waters explains: “Catholicism just *lends* itself to that so well; it *dares* you

to be blaspheme, almost, and I guess I fall for it: I take the dare.”<sup>8</sup> The invitation to mockery and parody seems readily available for queer artists raised on the strict yet flamboyant Catholicism. The rich imagery of saints, virgins, miracles and holy objects is redeployed with profane intentions, a performance of serious play. “The Church may have exploited the carnival as a means to contain subversion, but the carnival exploited the Church as means to celebrate subversion” (Reekie 2007:15). Reekie’s words highlight the intricate interrelation between Carnival and the Church, a binary model in which their two opposite terms sustain, reference and need each other in their opposition. In *Multiple Maniacs*, this connection reaches the peak of transgression when the Rosary job—the scene that allegedly made the censor cry (Crucchiola, 2016)—is edited next to the suffering of Christ during his last hours. In these scenes, the spirit of the Carnival not only penetrates the Church but directly mocks the Easter tale, a traditional period of abstinence. It is humour from the lower-stratum body that calls for a reaction, plays with disgust by bringing human decay in the form of fluids and excrements. Catholic imagery is invoked to represent a celebration of the world turned upside down. Yet an interpretation that only focuses on shock value fails to consider the meaning of transgression as something that necessarily involves the limits of what it transgresses. The length of the sequence, as well as the crafted mise-en-scène and detailed narrative fidelity to biblical events, testifies to the importance of the religious sentiment. Although I have demonstrated how shock value and bad taste guide the scene in sacrilegious tones, I also think it would be equally mistaken not to consider the ambivalent feeling of Catholic perversion and desire that *Multiple Maniacs* undertakes. Mary Douglas’ concept of social systems as sites “built on

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<sup>8</sup> The interview continues: “They are so many things you are told not to, that you just have more fun by doing them all. So, I am not sorry I was brought up Catholic, because I think it gave me that special warped view of things that all Catholics have -and thank God for that world view! I think it makes you more theatrical” (Chute 1981:101)



contradiction” and “at war with themselves” (2002:173) fills the carnival with ambiguity. Warning that the only true blasphemer is the true believer, Elisabeth Wilson argues that transgression “depends on, and may even reinforce, conventional understandings of what it is that is to be transgressed” (1993:109). I am not suggesting that the carnival simply functions to reaffirm the official world, as other critics have suggested (Eco 1984). Instead, I follow the Foucauldian analogy that describes transgression as a flashlight in the night which “gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation” (Foucault 1977a: 35). Transgression helps to identify and to name the obscurity that surround us. Tracing back to Waters' blasphemous invitation, it seems that through the carnival we can find interesting intersections of queer and Catholic theatricality, where the dare to blaspheme and to transgress influence each other in a continuous displacement of boundaries.

Where the Cavalcade of Perversion stages blatantly simple episodes of transgressions in the form of the freak show, the religious interlude embodies a carnivalesque parody of Catholicism that reveals both desire and ambivalence, distance and longing. The blasphemy here is precise and merciless and yet somehow strangely poetic. This ambiguity reveals the workings of transgression which, as a spiral, questions all placements.

#### Lady Divine: Venus to Godzilla

In a sense, *Multiple Maniacs* can be described as a story about becoming a maniac through a journey to the grotesque. Commonly interpreted in relation to the “peculiar, odd, absurd, bizarre, macabre, depraved, degenerate, perverse” (Edward and Graulund 2013:1), the grotesque is a style defined mainly by exaggeration and

excessiveness (Bakhtin 1984:303). The grotesque inhabits the threshold of humanity, awaking fears and desire towards the unknown: it carves a path to monstrosity. The film encapsulates this path through Divine.

Upon her first onscreen appearance, posing naked and admiring her face in the mirror, Lady Divine appears to be emulating Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus*<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 5). Sensually lying down in a bed, with the nude backside of the body exposed to the gaze of the spectator, and with the face reflected in the mirror, the Venus figure invokes questions of "gender and selfhood" (1989:36). The camera focuses on the body as a site of classical beauty that *confronts* its viewers, whose gaze is rendered unstable, both *seen and seeing* (Foucault 1989:5). The elegance of the mise-en-scène, unusually white and minimalistic, is perhaps the only point in the film that performs classical good taste. The scene represents an aesthetic climax, where the over-exposed lighting of the scene results in a blurring of the textures of her flesh that highlights the body's silhouette. Impersonating the pose of one of the most respected classical nudes in Art History, the feminized back figure of Divine confuses the audience, unsure of how to read the performer's gender: "played by a strange woman or a very strange man in drag" (Brewster 1970). The performance of classical beauty simply lasts a fleeting moment, but its importance resides in that it foreshadows a transformation from Venus to Monster.

After Lady Divine and Mink leave the church, the film abandons the religious interlude and enters the horror mode. In the third act of the film, the conflict between characters escalates, and after a series of misunderstandings and accidental crossfire, all the characters except for Lady Divine end up dead. Violence is explored to the

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<sup>9</sup> Also known as *The Toilet of Venus*, *Venus at her Mirror*, *Venus and Cupid*, or *La Venus del espejo*. Completed between 1647 and 1651, it was a rare example of nudity considering the importance of the Spanish Inquisition.

goriest details, yet without abandoning the humorous tone: there is little realism in Divine's stabbing performance, or the special effect sound recorded gunshots. Anticipating the climaxing scene in *Pink Flamingos*, Lady Divine joyously devours Mr David's organs, smiling and gagging while chewing on his heart. As in the *Cavalcade of Perversions* and the *Stations of the Cross*, here the body re-emerges as a vital site for the comedy of horrors.

*Multiple Maniacs*' reaches a grotesque climax of bodily horror and laughter with Lobstora, "the penultimate atrocity in the film's stations of filth" (Needham 2016). The monster appears just as Divine, after killing and eating her victims, is in the process of losing her mind. "I am a Maniac!", she claims, "oh, but what a state of mind that can be!" A giant lobster then enters the frame, crawling to Divine, and rapes her and the half-naked drag queen screams to the top of her lungs while she is surrounded by corpses and covered in blood (Fig. 6). When the lobster leaves, Divine laughs hysterically. Inspired by kitsch postcards of Provincetown in the 1960s (Waters 2005:x), Lobstora functions as an intersection of the horror genre of Herschell Gordon Lewis and the surrealist avant-garde of Salvador Dalí. As a point of contact between the human, the animal and the monstrous, the lobster rape represents the embrace of the grotesque. As such, the scene celebrates the disruption of logic and linear narrative progression, whilst it produces a hybrid diegesis that oscillates between the real and the fantastic. Lobstora is a visual attraction that exploits shock value, attacks cinematic conventions and flaunts the cheap D.I.Y. means of production. The papier-mâché texture of the creature, as well as the visible legs of one of its two operators<sup>10</sup>, render an analogical look of cheapness that awakens the laughter of the audience. Such

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<sup>10</sup> Lobstora was the first collaboration between artist Vince Peranio and Waters.

laughter is rooted in the suspension of belief – audiences acknowledge the rejection of realism and sophisticated special effects in favour of the pleasures of this cheap thrill.

If the first rape caused the religious interlude, the second rape marks a turn for the monstrous. After encountering Lobstora, Divine transforms in a monstrous figure that, akin to Godzilla, takes it to the streets of Baltimore, chasing people, stealing cars and causing as much havoc and revolt as possible. When Lady Divine, previous Venus, actual Godzilla, terrorizes the denizens of Baltimore, she is embodying the grotesque. Monstrosity, however, is not necessarily perverse or disturbing: it can also be full of pleasures. “A grotesque world in which only the inappropriate is exaggerated is only quantitative large, but qualitatively is extremely poor, colourless, and far from gay” argues Bakhtin, before inquiring “what would such a world would have in common with Rabelais’ merry and rich universe?” (1984:308). *Multiple Maniacs*’ merry and rich universe closes with a hilarious persecution through the streets of Baltimore. Lady Divine, spume fuming out of her mouth, dressed in a bloody white swimsuit and a fur coat, chases a crowd of young and hip-looking people that cannot hide their enjoyment. The ending of the film represents a mirror in reverse to the opening scene of *A Hard Day’s Night* (dir. Richard Lester, 1964), where The Beatles are gleefully escaping their fans, a multitude of distressed teenagers, and they are running on the streets of London, chased by the cameras. In *Multiple Maniacs*, Lady Divine is driven to a state of madness beyond distress, and the crowds run from her but with a palpable expression of joy in their faces, an outcome of the amateur character of the production. The long take scene is recorded with erratic camera movements, shot from the top of a car. The images of the crowds running around do not respect cinematic conventions of continuity editing, as the rule of the 180 degrees of action is ignored, and the group runs past an old blind man that reappears on three more occasions, giving the

impression that the multitude is simply circling back and forth around the block. These technical failures, however, do not diminish the enjoyment of the scene. That enjoyment is yet another proof of the carnival spirit: the boundaries between reality and performance seem suspended, Divine is not a scary monster but a source of laughter, and everybody seems to be participating in the spectacle, and at that moment, there is no life outside of that joy.

In this section, I have explored *Multiple Maniacs*' freak show, religious interlude, and monstrous turn; and their engagement with the grotesque and carnivalesque. Its cheap thrills (the Cavalcade of Perversion, Lobstora, the final chase) invite the audience to join in, erasing the boundaries between fictional and real murders, characters and performers, stage sets and the spontaneous city. Within the turn for the transgressive, in the film's religious interlude, there is room for ambivalence: if transgression involves its borders, the religious parody contains both sardonic mockery and desire for the Catholic mode. In this heteroglossia, *Multiple Maniacs* enters firmly the carnivalesque mode.

### **Pink Flamingos (1972)**

Colourful, corporeal, lusty, humorous, folksy and rebellious, *Pink Flamingos* is perhaps Waters' most important feature film for the breakthrough it represented in his career. The film is inscribed in cinema history due to its contribution to the Midnight Movies, a historic phenomenon of cult cinema. In the filmmaker's own words, "even if I discover a cure for cancer, the first line of my obituary is bound to mention that I once made a film where Divine eats dog shit. Which would be OK with me" (Reitz, 2000). Emblematic for its original ending, *Pink Flamingos* has elicited more academic responses than any other film in Waters' career. The film has been read against industrial practices, exhibition and reception methods (Hoberman 1980,

Stevenson 1996) genre and gender conventions (Kane-Meddock 2012) and psychoanalytical theories (Studlar 1989). Closer to this research project are some contributions that contextualize *Pink Flamingos* as queer cinema. Karl Schoonover (2010) and Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994) approach the issue through the stardom of Divine, while Anna Breckon (2013) focuses on the erotic political potentiality of the text. Breckon's assertion that "Waters's work functions not as an exemplification of later queer theorizing but constitutes a richly perverse archive that still offers an enabling resource for contemporary queer thinking" (2013:515) profusely resonates with this thesis, however, our analyses reach very different outcomes: Breckon bases her work in Lee Edelman's antisocial thesis, a theory that rejects futurity and embraces the anti-redemptive social negativity, while this thesis refutes the film's refusal of empathy and considers the affective ramifications of laughter and glimpses of queer futurity. Considering the film's contribution to the "history of laughter" (Bakhtin 1984:59) I read *Pink Flamingos*' queerness as indebted to the Carnavalesque humour. In his classification of cinematic traits that inherit the Carnavalesque spirit, Stam names *Pink Flamingos* as an illustration of a category of films that "aggressively overturn a classical aesthetic based on formal harmony and good taste" (1992:110). While the film does that—explicitly, as it is stated in the promotional poster as "An Exercise in Poor Taste" —I would like to argue it also performs many other traits of the Carnavalesque cinematic list Stam provides: "Films that use humour to anarchize institutional hierarchies [...] or direct corrosive laughter at patriarchal authority. Films that comically privilege, whether visually or verbally, the "lower bodily stratum" [...] Films that celebrate social inversions" (1989:110). The following analysis understands how the film combines the Carnival aesthetics and the politics of filth, incorporating comedy to showcased perversions.

*Pink Flamingos* is the story of a war between two families in the fight for the title of “the filthiest people alive”. It showcases nudity, incest, forced insemination, foot fetish, exhibitionism, cannibalism, coprophagy and a singing anus, among many other transgressions. Erik von Ooijen describes the film's structure as “a break with plot-oriented dramatic function in favour of the paratactic aesthetics of the burlesque or the sideshow, where one trick follows after another” (2011:9). The following section places *Pink Flamingos* within the concept of white trash. Reading the film’s portrayal of white trash as a carnivalesque celebration of visual excess, from mouth to foot, and anus to mouth, the analysis unveils *Pink Flamingos*' anatomy of filthiness and its queer meaning.

### White Trash Bodies

The corporeality of the body; with its fluids, excrements, glands, desires, phobias and perversions, occupies a crucial role in *Pink Flamingos*. The opening credits firmly locate the filmic body in white trash America through two cultural landmarks: the pink flamingos' ornaments, and the trailer-house (Fig. 7). The plastic pink flamingos were designed by Don Featherstone in 1957 as ornaments—a fashion that expanded from Florida to all the lawns across the United States. Serving their function as “a straightforward attempt at working-class neighbourhood beautification” (Tucker 2012) they were a signifier of class, one that was ironically co-opted by Waters. In their plasticity and colourfulness, the flamingos have now become an example of Waters' contribution to American Kitsch, since the film has made them objects loaded with irony. Placed on the piece of land where Babs Johnson (Divine)<sup>11</sup> lives, the pink flamingos that title the movie do not play any crucial role in the diegesis

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<sup>11</sup> The character is first introduced as Babs, which later is revealed to be an alias: the character’s true name is Divine. To discuss the character then I refer to Babs/Divine, whereas when I name Divine, I am referring to the performer.

of the story; they simply guard the trailer-park where the family lives. Their importance is enlarged by the title because, as Waters has himself admitted, he was looking for a not too controversial title that concealed the film's excess. The flamingos, effeminate pink and mass-produced plastic as they are, function as a loaded object that reconciles the camp aesthetics of the second half of the twentieth century with a portrayal of trashy America. American trailer-parks were an inspiration to Waters when he drove across the country from East Coast to West Coast (Waters 2005:2). The inscription of the pink flamingo guarding over the trailer park, albeit historically inaccurate<sup>12</sup>, has been sealed over the concept of white trash.

White trash is a concept that raises issues of class, race, taste and identity that are intricately tied to the history and context of the United States. Newitz and Wray (1997) explore the term as a harmful stereotype, "a useful way of blaming the poor for being poor" (1997: 1-2), and they concur with Gwendolyn Audrey Foster in that the concepts alludes to a failure of whiteness itself: "White trash becomes a term which names what seems unnamable: a race (white) which is used to code "wealth" is coupled up with an insult (trash) which means, in this instance, economic waste" (1997: 8). Tracing back on the history of the concept, Wray explores the term alongside 'crackers', which in *Pink Flamingos* is also the name of one of the characters that live in the trailer-park. These were derogatory terms bound to designate white workers alongside black servants or slaves. Also employing historical research methods, Nancy Isenberg interprets the term in relation to the "untold history of class in America". In a country whose democracy and social structure were built on the myth of social mobility, Isenberg argues, white trash takes hold as a "way of classifying human

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<sup>12</sup> Such association seems to be historically inaccurate, as Allan Berubé explores in his ethnographic contribution to *White Trash: Race and Class in America*: "I've caught myself actually believing that we and our neighbours all had fabulous pink flamingos in our yard. I am sure-and so is my mom- that none of us ever did"(1997:37).



failure” that considered the poor “a permanent breed” (2017:1). In addition to being a social category, white trash evolves as a style and cultural practice. On its function, Wray argues:

The term reveals itself as an expression of fundamental tensions and deep structural antinomies: between the sacred and the profane, purity and impurity, cleanliness and dirt. In conjoining such primal opposites into a single category, white trash names a kind of disturbing liminality: a monstrous, transgressive identity of mutually violating boundary terms, a dangerous threshold state of being neither nor the other. [...] White trash names a people whose very existence seems to threaten the symbolic and social order. (2006:2)

Wray’s understanding of white trash as a boundary term that inhabits the margins implicitly relates it to cultural understandings of grotesque. White trash emerges, then, as an expression of American grotesque that encapsulates anxieties of poverty, unruly femininity and bad taste. *New York Magazine* special issue ‘White Trash Nation’ (1994) described the concept in aesthetic terms—“candy-apple lipstick, chipped cherry-red nail polish, fishnet stockings, rhinestone earrings and dime-store barrettes, Candie’s mules, tattoos”—and ascribed them to a form of behaviour associated to publicly maligned women such as Paula Jones<sup>13</sup>, Tonya Harding<sup>14</sup>, Roseanne Arnold and Courtney Love. “The country is becoming underclass—laden, illiterate, promiscuous, and just plain fat”, writes Friend, voicing the anxieties of the era into a category that encapsulates everything that is wrong with the nation, from illegitimate children and rising divorce rates to serial killers. White trash’ excess,

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<sup>13</sup> The feature begins by describing Jones, the first woman that accused President Clinton of sexual misconduct, through the words of her brother-in-law Mark Brown: “Paula dressed—shit, provocative ain’t even the word for it. You could see the crease of her ass, and at least two lips, maybe three. If a woman dresses to where a man is almost *seeing* it...”. The ellipsis here implies Jones’ so-called ‘provocative dressing’ is proof of character and makes her complicitous to the sexual advances she received. Her allegations, writes Friend, are archetypal of the age of white trash.

<sup>14</sup> Friend writes: “She of the bleached, permed hair; the blank, cheap eyes; the rabbit-fur coat and the job working at Spud City [...] She whose ex-husband, Jeff Gillooly, just sold the X-rated video of their wedding night to Penthouse, which has made it available to a bemused public through an 800-number”, blaming Harding simultaneously for her “cheap eyes” and for being a victim of revenge porn: all in very bad taste.

linked to femininity and animality, emerges as a threat to the patriarchal order. “White-trash culture commands us to “squeal like a pig!” And we’re oinking”, writes Friend. Here, I suggest that *Pink Flamingos*, a text filled squeals and oinks, uses white trash’ visual excess and stigma in order to fuel its carnivalesque celebration.

Carnavalesque celebrations are festive, colourful and merry, but they also encompass a world of grotesque imagery, abject affects and perverse desires. Laughter offers relief but also a certain mocking abrasiveness. *Pink Flamingos* offers simultaneous bodily pleasures and episodes of disgust. Considering the film’s episodic structure, I have divided the carnival routines into displays of abjection, spectacles of queer defiance, and a final act of transgression.

#### Displays of Abjection: Eggs, Chickens, Saliva and Semen

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is a foundational text to understand the concept of abjection. To Kristeva, the abject is neither an object nor a subject, but a process, a state of being ‘in between’. Motivated by bodily sensations and reactions, the abject is related to waste, to the borders of being, to the anxiety produced by the unruly corporeality of having a body. “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” (1982:4). Clipped nails, menstrual blood, fallen hair, spit saliva, mucus, faeces, a corpse: all these elements represent a fluid relationship between the inside and the outside of the body, and they firmly opposed the myth of the “own and clean self” (1982:53), a binary model that opposes high-minded reason against the lusty, corporeal lower-stratum. Kristeva explores the importance of filthiness in relation to the abject and concludes: “Filth is not a quality in itself, but applies only to what relates to a boundary and, more

particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of the boundary, its other side, a margin” (1982:69)

The concept of abjection traces back to filthiness. Kellye McBride explores the relation between abjection and filthiness, and the process of othering that it implies in the film, interpreting filthiness as a campy rewriting of the abject. Both concepts share a link to transgression, and they offer no distinction between being and acting. “If abjection describes what the process of othering entails and helps us navigate our polarizing social world, then filth can help us learn to laugh in spite of it”, she concludes (2017). McBride argues that laughter is a strategy of resistance, revelling in otherness which is materialized as filth. Beyond the textual, laughter in the film mobilizes the audiences’ response to abjection and filth. Kristeva studied abjection in relation to desire: the abject “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced” (1982:1). Filth and abjection would therefore provoke an ambivalent laughter, one that expresses joy but also nervousness and disgust.

The ambivalence that Kristeva describes is also present in W. I. Miller's and Sara Ahmed works on disgust. Both authors start by examining an entry from Darwin's travelling diary where disgust is defined as “bad taste” (Miller 1997:1, Ahmed 2004:82). Ahmed defends disgust is ambivalent since it involves a mix of repulsion and desire (2004:84). W. I. Miller also considers the seductive powers of disgust:

Even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention. It imposes itself upon us. We find it hard not to sneak a second look or, less voluntarily, we find our eyes doing “double-takes” at the very things that disgusts us (1997:X)

The attraction towards disgust and the abject is a crucial element to understand the humour in *Pink Flamingos*, a film that places filthiness as a virtue. Anna Breckon defends that the film “reconfigures the value of the experience of disgust”, making the

disgusting experience one of its major attractions. Breckon explains this process as “privileging the fascination and lure of the abject [...] over the fear and loathing that arises from the need to consolidate identity” (2013:527). Filthiness, and the disgust and shocked reactions it produces, are the “erotic glue” (2013:529) of the abject subjects. Breckon's argument is that film offers a “political mode of relationality based on disgust” (2013:517) that works by the thwarting of empathy. Reading *Pink Flamingos* through the anti-redemptive theory of social negativity, she chooses to defend this idea focusing her analysis in Edie, the Egg Lady.

Edie (Edith Massey) appears on-screen in her underwear, in a playpen, and it has a strong fixation with eggs. The narrator presents Edie as Divine's 'retarded mother', an infantile adult that the family watches over. She has a crush on the Egg Man, a uniformed worker that brings over eggs in a suitcase to the Trailer-park, and she spends her days in the playpen asking for eggs, playing with eggs and enthusiastically eating eggs. In the birthday party sequence, the Egg Man proposes marriage and Edie merrily accepts, and then the two characters leave the trailer-house, the Egg Man carrying the Egg Lady in a white wheelbarrow that sports the sign 'Just Married'. Edie is, by far, the most innocent character in *Pink Flamingos*: not only is the only character that never exerts any violence, or attempts to, she is also the only character in the film to enjoy a traditional happy ending. So why would such a naïve character be selected to defend the refusal of empathy in *Pink Flamingos*? According to Breckon, the character represents “a perverse sex object that blurs the boundaries between adult and child, human and animal” and whose function in the narrative is “to shock and repulse” (2013:524). As she acknowledges, the repulsion is inextricably linked to how the character is embodied:

Much of Edie's capacity to disgust is located in the actor's, rather than the character's, intractable attributes. In other words, to be disgusted by the

character Edie is in part to be disgusted by the actor's embodiment. Furthermore, intensifying empathy's appositeness – and hence making conspicuous its likely absence – is the fact that Edie's (the character's and the actor's) embodied deficiencies resonate as being consequent of a low class status. (2013:523)

The low-class status that Breckon mentions refers to the fact that Massey was a non-trained actress, working-class barmaid, older than Waters and the rest of Dreamlanders. Her screen presence seems to confuse many scholars, that blur the performance with the performer. Sedgwick praises Massey charming stardom, considering all the obstacles she had to overcome, the “prohibitions and exclusions constitutive of our culture's representational codes Massey defied by performing” but this appreciation is nevertheless accompanied by a description of Massey as “a probably retarded older white woman” (1993:236). In a similar fashion, Stevenson also backhandedly praises the Egg Lady as “disturbingly credible” noting her that her “inability to handle memorized dialogue gave her delivery a mechanical quality that in other circumstances might be deemed as genuine brain damage” (1996:13). Leaving aside the erroneous diagnosis over Massey's mental capacities, these contributions reveal how the film erasure of boundaries is amplified by the otherness in Massey's performance. Upon these interpretations, the Egg Lady merges with Massey and Massey with the Egg Lady: there is no separation between performer and performance. Breckon's contribution bases the refusal of empathy on Massey's screen presence, which is exclusionary, for she proclaims her disgust and lack of empathy toward the Egg Lady to be universal. Yet, as I have argued, she is the most naïve character, the one that never exerts violence and has a traditional happy ending. Among the film's many displays of perversion, Edie the Egg Lady is hardly the one of them.

There is laughter within those episodes of perversion, a laughter that is debauched and sardonic. Studlar describes perversion in *Pink Flamingos* as a “a cult phenomenon that seems to catalogue perverse acts with the same enthusiasm as

nineteenth-century sexologists” (1989:3). Expanding Freud's concept of perversion, that covered every practice that expanded beyond a narrow understanding of sex as heterosexual, genital and penetrative, Studlar identifies in this film performative rituals that showcase “perversion as an outlaw sexuality, a revolutionary excess of desire unhinged from accepted values and celebrated as social deviance” (1989:5). This excess and performative perversion, argues Studlar, are rooted in the feminine body. In other words, *Pink Flamingos*' perversions do not only transcend the heterosexual intercourse but playfully perform social deviance by de-eroticising their sexual episodes and exploring them as ludicrous episodes of feminine transgression.

The Marbles' bedroom sex scene is a good illustration of this problematic. Rather than representing the utilitarian and reproductive sex that the bourgeois, heterosexual bedroom is supposed to invite to (Foucault 1987:3), Connie and Raymond Marble are depicted in a podophilic sixty-nine, licking each other feet, and wearing each other's underwear. Their butler, Channing, uses their outings to dress in their employer's clothes and play impersonating them, in a fetishist fashion reminiscent of Genet's *The Maids* (1947). Used as an unwilling accomplice, Channing is the inseminator to the Marbles' lesbian adoption business. He chooses not to have intercourse with the victims and instead masturbates into his hand and proceeds to inject his semen. The close-up of a woman's vagina being forcefully inseminated is one of the filthiest in the movie, according to Waters, and one that was always cut after the film was reviewed by censorship boards. The most sexually explicit, however, one that Waters says he would cut out now<sup>15</sup>, is the incestuous blowjob. When Divine and her son go to curse the Marbles' house, and Divine offers to blow Cracker as a 'gift of Divinity', a close-up graphically records all the details. Perhaps the most pornographic

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<sup>15</sup> See the director commentary in *Pink Flamingos* 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Release DVD.

shot of the film, it was conceived as a nod to the legal battles (and consequent social outrage) of *Deep Throat* (1972). Much like all the other sexual encounters throughout the film, the scene is not designed for erotic arousal but to display excitement in the form of 'cheap thrills'. Instead, the blowjob is presented as a double transgression, as van Ooijen identifies, one that encompasses both the fictional incest and the actual explicit sex act being recorded, resulting in "a kind of joyous and queerly carnivalesque activism where one representational taboo is transgressed under the guise of another" (2011:8). In the end, the action is interrupted, and the blowjob remains unfinished, leaving behind a sense of failure.

The most deviant sexual encounter in the film -or the one that is most ethically criticized (van Ooijen 2011:9)- is the 'sex with chickens' episode at Crackers and Cookie's date. The date itself is described by him as a show for Cotton, who seems to be Cracker's partner, but as a voyeur she does not wish to be touched. The 'show' consists of heterosexual intercourse with the addition of two live chickens. To Cookie's horror, Crackers approaches the bed with the two animals and places them between their bodies (Fig 9). The scene is recorded in an agitated state, full of movements and screams. The chickens get decapitated in the process and their blood spurts over the character's naked bodies. The closure of the scene shows Cotton orgasmic climax. The scene is not only ethically flawed in the animal exploitation, as von Ooijen notes, but on the comedic representation of an episode of non-consensual sex, where a woman (Cookie) screams in protests for the duration of the scene. Breckon relates the episode to the confrontational and anti-redemptive politics. The sadistic tone of the scene certainly shows an unmistakable desire to annihilate any assimilationist process: it exploits the shock value of its sex and violence. However, alongside the capitalization of abject perversions, the film also celebrates queer moments of Carnavalesque

subversion that provide spectatorial identification. When powers are inverted and the world is celebrated upside down, the queer utopia is enacted through the reconciliation of feelings of disgust and laughter. In the following section, I explore three scenes that thrive with queer feelings of defiance.

### Spectacles of Queer Defiance

Babs/Divine's birthday party celebration is a sequence that illustrates how the film invokes the queer Carnival spirit. The scene showcases a large group of secondary characters, whose presence highlights the countercultural value of the scene. The party takes place outside of the trailer-house, and it allows the spectator to have an inside look at the lifestyle depicted. The whole birthday scene does not have any recorded sound, instead, a garage soundtrack accompanies the party. First, Babs/Divine opens the presents, while The Tyrones hit 'Pink Champagne' plays on the background. The birthday presents are a collection of objects that highlight the character's extreme personality traits: crabs medicine (hypersexuality), a butcher's cleaver (violence), poppers (cheerfulness, hypersexuality), vomit on a tissue (filthiness) and a pig's head (filthiness, bestiality). Everybody eats cake from their hands, except Edie the Egg Lady, who eats eggs in her little playpen, lovingly fed by her date, the Egg Man. There is a burlesque dancer putting on a show, dancing with red hair and a snake around her neck, and there is a band playing live music. The big attraction, however, starts when the soundtrack abruptly changes from 'Pink Champagne' to The Trashmen 'Surfin' Bird'. The tune accompanies the presence of a man in a thong, who appears to be a contortionist (another novelty act) taking the stage at the party. When the song energetically starts singing the part that sampled from The Rivingstons' "Papa-Oom-



Mow-Mow”, his anus starts contracting, opening and closing, as if it were mouthing the lyrics along. The camera closes the setting from a medium shot to a close up of the anus, and the obscenity of the explicit shot is punctuated with the joyfulness of the song. The singing anus is one of the cheap thrills of the film that unavoidably connects *Pink Flamingos* to the Medieval celebration of faecal and corporeal humour, of the “lower bodily stratum”. The anus, with its excremental functions, “is a democratizer. It not only levels food, but reminds us [...] that we the eaters of that food are not immune to its leveling powers” (Miller 1997:99). The anus destroys illusions of class and purity with the reality of the human body. Being the lowest, it means that it sustains a hierarchy, the lowest is a foundation to the upper part of the body. Miller explains: “for this reason, however, the anus is also a temptation. It can be seen as the gateway to the most private, to the most personal space of all. It signifies the removal of all barriers of otherness” (1997:101). Consequently, if the anus is the ultimate taboo, to expose it, to flaunt it, breaks boundaries and transgresses the proper representation of the body. The importance of the anus here lies not only that in the connection it provides to Bakhtin's work on the grotesque, but in that it resonates with Queer theory and sexualities. The importance of the anus, according to Paul B. Preciado:

The anus is a universal erogenous centre that escapes the anatomical limits imposed by sexual difference. Roles and practices are universally reversible there (because who doesn't have an anus?) [...] The anus creates a space of technological work. It is a factory that rebuilds the post-human contra-sexual body (2016:24)<sup>16</sup>

In his work, Preciado brings together Donna Haraway's work on sex and technology to Butler and Foucault's and concludes by launching a manifesto that opts for a contrasexual revolution, one that reinvents the queer body. “The aim of this

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<sup>16</sup> In the original text: “El ano es un centro erógeno universal situado más allá de los límites anatómicos impuestos por la diferencia sexual, donde los roles y registros aparecen como universalmente reversibles (¿quién no tiene ano?) [...] El ano constituye un espacio de trabajo tecnológico; es una fábrica de reelaboración del cuerpo contrasexual poshumano.” [My translation]

contra-sexual practice is to modify the ordinary uses of the sexual body, subverting their biopolitical reactions” (Preciado 2011). The anus is celebrated as a centre of power in the queer reading of sexuality. The anus’ openness or closeness represents, according to Butler, the re-inscription of “the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines” (2006:180), it is a bodily margin that represents the heterosexual and homosexual construction. Moon and Sedgwick, in their conjoined article on the intersectional stardom of Divine, share Miller's exploration of the low status of the anus, as a stigmatized orifice, and they conclude: “the rectum is demonstrably not a grave<sup>17</sup> nor the anus simply a cut in this representational scheme. This pink, flaming asshole not only makes an impressive show of something we think deserves to be called self- determination, it speaks, and indeed sings” (1994:241). The ‘singing anus’ is a simple transgression, one of the 'cheap thrills' that the film hides in order to engage spectators. It is another recreation of the freak show, and for its concordance to the rock and roll tune, it is gaily outrageous. The offensiveness this might provoke, the provocation it invites us to, is based on cultural taboos and fears of the bodily reactions. Most of the shock value and cheap thrills in *Pink Flamingos* are based on body orifices or excrements, and sexual attraction towards non-genital, nor-sexual objects. The anatomy of filth connects mouth to anus, in the singing anus, and anus to mouth, in the closing scene.

One of Raymond Marble’s perversions, albeit the most heterosexual act showcased in the film, consists of flashing up and masturbating in front of young girls. Raymond enjoys exposing his penis, that as a visual joke, is adorned with a sausage or a turkey neck. The association of the food with genitals is another proof of the “waste as food” theme of the film (Moon and Sedgwick 1994:230) as well as a humorous

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<sup>17</sup> This references Bersani’s text ‘Is the Rectum a Grave’ (see Bersani 2010).

example of how the film amplifies everything to the point of insanity. The first time that Raymond pries on two teenage girls, he surprises them, masturbates furiously, and then steals their purses when they run away terrorized. The second time he tries to get away with this, however, he encounters a young woman casually sitting on a bench, retouching her make-up. Looking up, she sees Raymond's intentions, and she responds by smiling mockingly and revealing one of her breasts, caressing it in a mocking imitation. Raymond reacts by looking confused. She then lifts her skirt to reveal her own penis, whilst mimicking Raymond's onanistic gestures, openly laughing at him. Elizabeth Coffey, the actress that played this role, in her pre-gender confirmation surgery, recounts her role as an empowering experience: "Rather than be the joke, I got to make the joke" (Holmlund 2017b:151). Carole Ann Tyler examines the scene as a token of gay drag humour, which she describes as phallic, aggressive and based on distancing effect (1991:44), in which the drag queen is placed as a phallic woman. Tyler's analysis reads:

The spectator, initially aligned by the camera with Raymond, can only laugh insofar as he refuses to identify with Raymond; otherwise the joke is on the spectator too. The transvestite's gesture in this sequence is almost literally a punch-line, as the look at (not of) a shocked and visibly displeased Raymond in the reverse shot reveals. The film clearly confronts the male heterosexual viewer at this point; his laughter is a defensive response to the castration anxiety suddenly evoked and evaded by making what is literally a transvestic identification with the phallic woman. (1991:44)

The reverse shot of Raymond's horrific reaction invokes laughter, and I concur with Tyler's reading that this comedic moment confronts the male heterosexual gaze, as it has been doing through many moments throughout the film (as the artificial insemination scene, for instance). But rather than to explain laughter as a reflex to the castration anxiety, I argue that the scene first aims to subverts expectations, as it inverts the natural outcome of the action, with the assaulter running away, and secondly, it contradicts cisgender conceptions of the body. The transgender body is displayed for

shock value, patently, but that does not undermine the powerfulness of the moment of disclosure. The scene illustrates a shift in power, and the transgender character is empowered without resorting to violence. Considering how potentially dangerous would it be, for a transwoman, to openly confront and mock a sexual abuser, the scene best works as an imaginative transgression, a celebration of the world turned upside down, a triumph on a symbolic domain.

### Carnavalesque Attractions

So far, I have explored how *Pink Flamingos* contains both displays of filth and abjection and queer defiance and euphoria. In this section I will study the film's attractions, analysing how the iconicity of the film and its cult status are indebted to Divine. Babs/Divine appears in the film as an outrageous crossover of Jayne Mansfield, Clarabelle the Clown, and Godzilla: a look that was designed by Van Smith in his first collaboration with Waters<sup>18</sup>. Divine's hairline was shaved back to give more room for make-up, a space that was quickly occupied by extremely sharp eyebrows that punctuate and preside over her whole forehead. The artificial, and over-the-top eyebrows add dramatism to her expression and place the focus on her winged, cat eyes, adorned with plenty of glittery blue and silver eyeshadow. The lips are overpainted, the cheeks are rouged, and the hairstyle is a bouffant of yellowy blonde hair with dark roots. Striking and garish, this is a look that extends beyond the character and marvels in drag extravagance. Extravagance is yet another feature of the grotesque, as is it based on amplifying strategies. It has been said that "to be extravagant is to be wasteful and excessive, [...] to show off and to lack in moderation" (Edwards and Graulund 2013:71). The extravagance in Divine's performance extends beyond the diegesis and

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<sup>18</sup> Van Smith would continue working with Divine (as his make-up artist), and as Waters' Costume Designer through the rest of his filmography.

breaks up the fictive instance in three key scenes with direct address, a term I explore below.

In the film first direct address, Babs/Divine walks through the streets of Baltimore (Fig. 8). This scene parodies and pays homage to *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), directed by Frank Tashlin and starring Jayne Mansfield, and the Argentinian sexploitation *Fuego* (1969), with Isabel Sarli. Dressed in a short wrap dress, with a fur stole hanging on her shoulder, Babs/Divine walks as if the city was her catwalk. The camera tracks her going up and downstairs in the Baltimore Harbour, with the accompanying soundtrack playing Little Richard's 1956 hit 'The Girl Can't Help It'. In Tashlin's film, Mansfield's character walked through town to the rhythm of the song, apparently unaware of the aftermath of the reactions her body causes: melting ice, boiling milk, breaking glasses. These excessively graphical and arguably cartoonish reactions are physical representations of masculine desire. In *Fuego*, Sarli wanders the streets of New York while the passing-by cars stop to admire her figure and invite her for a ride. In Waters' recreation of the scene, the scene is recorded in a documentary fashion, with the camera hidden away in a moving car, capturing the reactions of the standby Baltimoreans that are unaware of their participation in the film. The uninformed extras all react by turning their heads to get a better look at her: her figure is visually followed by almost every person in the frame.

The scene engages the cult audience by having Babs/Divine's break the fourth wall, looking directly to camera several times. At first, this could be interpreted as another feature of the amateurish filmmaking: the performer seems to be looking across the road to keep track of the car. However, in one of these gestures, the performer seems to be directly addressing the spectator: smiling, she pouts her tongue. Putting her tongue out is a sexualized gesture that breaks down the illusion of the naïve

bombshell. Whereas the Jayne Mansfield's character seemed unaware of the reactions to her walk, Babs/Divine is not only conscious, but she is actively seeking attention. The walk, look and gestures are not addressed to the pedestrians around her, whom she passes without paying attention, but are a direct address to the film's audience. This acknowledgement suspends the fictive cinematic mode and it creates a moment of "ontological strangeness" (Brown 2012:xiii). According to Tom Gunning, early cinema<sup>19</sup> was not dominated by narrative, but by a vaudevillian engagement with what Eisenstein named 'attraction'<sup>20</sup>. An attraction is "aggressively subjected the spectator to 'sensual or psychological impact'" and it privileges "exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption" (Gunning 2006:384). Babs/Divine's winks to the camera, as forms of direct address that were commonly celebrated in the early cinema of attractions<sup>21</sup>, are displays of that exhibitionist confrontation that seeks to flaunt the shock value of her drag.

This mode of direct address is further aggrandized towards the end of the film, as Babs/Divine and her family finally capture and judge the Marbles. The Marbles' fake trial is celebrated in the countryside fields surrounding the trailer-house. The naturalistic setting is contrasted against the figure of Babs/Divine, dressed in the iconic red fishtail gown that features in the movie poster. She has called a press conference to announce her crowning as the filthiest person alive, and the cameras record her through medium-shot and close-ups, closing the frame to better capture her facial

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<sup>19</sup> Gunning mostly refers to cinema until 1906, when "showing, displaying, and exhibiting are film's specific qualities" (Buckland 2014:45)

<sup>20</sup> Cinema of attractions continued, after 1907, and it can still be found in contemporary cinema as "it provides an underground current floating beneath narrative logic and diegetic realism" (Gunning in Brown 2012:4). The concept has been very influential in film theory and applied to blockbuster and special effects cinema.

<sup>21</sup> "The performers in the cinema of attractions greeted the camera's gaze with gusto, employing glances, winks and nods. With the establishment of a coherent diegesis, any acknowledgment of the camera became taboo, condemned by critics as destructive of the psychological effect essential for an involved spectator". (Gunning 1991: 261)

expressions. In one of the most reproduced fragments of the film, Babs/Divine clearly states the politics of filthiness for the attentive journalists: “Kill everyone now! Condone first-degree murder! Advocate cannibalism! *Eat shit! Filth is my politics! Filth is my life!*” (my emphasis). The politics of filth symbolise queer politics, for filth epitomizes the low and dirty, waste and excess<sup>22</sup>. The delivery is so loud and frantic that it transforms the antisocial message into a triumphant declaration. It is in the scene that Divine's stardom becomes more evident, as she acts as a trailblazing force through the resolution of the plot. Karl Schoonover reads her stardom as a sample of queer defiance: “Divine’s star body rebukes the idea that “positive images” will release queer people from answering the nearly impossible demands placed upon them. Her image refuses the impossible task of quantifying what queer desire contributes to the world”. It is a defiance in direct confrontation with assimilationist identity politics, using filthiness as a symbol for the underground value of her work, rebuking “the compensatory gestures of a liberal culture bent on either concealing or refashioning, in a more palatable form, the surpluses that the homosexual body represents” (2010:177-178). Moon and Sedgwick, on their part, define these gestures as “glamour fits”, which represent:

A certain interface between abjection and defiance [...] seems to be related to interlocking histories of stigma, self-constitution, and epistemological complication proper to fat women and gay men in this century. This combination of abjection and defiance often produces a divinity-effect in the subject, a compelling belief that one is a god or a vehicle of divinity. (1993:214)

This is a useful definition to explain the process of re-signification of queerness itself. The celebratory tone of the scene cannot be understood without the history of homophobia and fatphobia experienced by Divine, who during his teenage years

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<sup>22</sup> The interrelation between queer and filthiness is part of queer cinema history, as Juan A. Suárez studies: “Filth amplified a queer vibration in sexuality and the body, and it seems no coincidence that many artists who worked with junk and excreta were queer – Warhol, Smith, Rauschenberg, Ludlam, Schneemann,[...], and the Kuchars” (2015:44)

suffered serious bullying and had to be escorted to school by the police<sup>23</sup>. The queer potential of the scene is directly related to the suffering of being the Other. When Babs/Divine exclaims, just after the sentence of the trial, “I AM DIVINE”, this statement encapsulates several meanings. First, it shows a triumphant moment for the character, who has effectively *won* the title of the filthiest people alive and does not care to hide behind an alias anymore. Secondly, this infamous crowning represents a celebration of the world upside down. 'Divinity' is a concept akin to Max Weber's concept of charisma, which he defines as the means by which a person is “set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” Those exceptional powers, he continues, “are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary” (Weber 1947:359). Flaunting her charisma, Divine refuses any victimization and therefore opens a path of empathy and spectatorial identification. Last, and most importantly, by proclaiming her name, while directly addressing the camera with a gun, in a medium shot, Divine is erasing the boundaries of the text and blurring the distinction between the diegesis and the real world. Babs is no more. *Pink Flamingos*’ “indexical aesthetic” according to Erik van Ooijen, “immediately directs our attention towards the actions of the actress rather than the character” (2011:8). This is especially evident in the duality character/performer of Divine, whose body centres the theme of film, filthiness. In the final shocking act of *Pink Flamingos*, Divine eats shit, a transgression that seals the character’s crowning as the filthiest person alive, and Divine’s queer and cult stardom.

When the film’s story seems to be coming to an end, the voice-over—narrated by Waters, with a heavily inflated Baltimore accent— alerts the audience to the final

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<sup>23</sup> Bullying, and its influence over the creation of the Divine's persona is further explored in the documentaries *I am Divine* (2013) and *Divine/Trash* (1998).



act of transgression, the film's biggest cinematic attraction. Continuing the freak show mode of presentation, much like the carnival barker in the opening of *Multiple Maniacs*, the author-narrator warns: "Watch, as Divine proves that not only is she the filthiest person in the world, she is also the filthiest actress in the world! What you are about to see is THE REAL THING!". The voice-over effectively "suspends the fictive stance" (von Ooijen 2011:9), entering a new mode of narration that amplifies the film's biggest attraction.

Filthiness becomes real as Divine, no longer a character but a performer, directly addresses the camera, squats next to the little dog and collects the excrement on her hand. The editing is continuous, without any cuts.<sup>24</sup> Divine sits on the floor, with the turd in her hand, in a medium shot. She looks directly into camera, smiles, and then introduces it in her mouth. The camera zooms into her expression in a wobbly and discontinuous movement. She chews, smiles, spits it out, and pulls out her shit-stained tongue, in a delighted expression, and her close-up (Fig. 10) is the last thing we see on the screen before the credits announce The End. If the authenticity of the act of perversion was called into question, the scene would lose performative shock value. As it is, *Pink Flamingos*' final act of transgression invokes the iconicity of cinema as well as its indexicality, the trace of the real<sup>25</sup>. Because the index is, according to Mary Ann Doane, "sutured to its object by a physical cause, a material connection" (2007:4), the act of eating shit functions as a powerful transgression. The affect of disgust is

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<sup>24</sup> Waters later explained: "It couldn't be fake. It had to be one continuous shot, turd-to-mouth, so to speak. [...] I realized filmgoers would have trouble believing it even without a cut. (2005:13)

<sup>25</sup> I am not invoking here the indexicality of cinema explored by Peter Wollen to explore Bazin's theories of realism and cinema (Wollen 2013, Gunning 2007), Instead, I am discussing indexicality in relation to van Ooijen's work on *Pink Flamingos* (2011), reading the concept of the index as term that functions "to point, to connect, to touch, to make language and representation adhere to the world as tangent—to reference a real without realism" (Doane 2007:4).

profound because the scene is filmed as factual, not fiction, in which the excrement is an imprint of reality, and therefore the materiality of shit amplifies the sense of horror and abjection. It is a compelling example of the workings of bad taste cinematic attractions: the scene is both disgusting, shocking, over-the-top, cheaply made, and original. Most importantly, it could not be censored against because it does not have any real weight as a perversion, as Waters argues:

It's a first, and it's a last, in Cinema History. There are no laws against it, cause no one is ever going to do it again. It's not even on the Bible. It's not even a sin! [...]. Only babies and monkeys do that, really, so it's innocent.

The innocence that Waters claims it is tied to the fact that, although as an act of filthiness is absolute, it is also a childish transgression, one that is punctuated by the song in the soundtrack, Lita Roza's (*How Much is the Doggie in the Window*). The song, from 1956, with lyrics as nursery rhymes and a smooth melody reported to be Margaret Thatcher's favourite song (*The Telegraph* 2009), is a classical tune, which only adds irony to the scene.

The dog-shit-eating scene overcomes previous episodes of transgressions and closes the narrative of filthiness, which has come full circle. The reaction that we may experience from the scene—disgust, shock, amusement or recoil—is based on the indexicality, that traces to the real, as well as the direct address that, overpowered by the narration, frames this as the final cinematic attraction. The exhibitionist mode is enhanced through the grotesque humour that connects, as the singing anus did before, anus to mouth. Divine's proclamation on the press conference was literal: with eating shit, the anatomy of filthiness has been sealed.

The gimmick paid off. New Line Cinema released a trailer that would demonstrate the film's cult appeal by “selling a particular type of cinematic experience—raucous, startling, countercultural” (Connolly 2018:155). Without showing any footage from the film, the trailer documented reactions from shocked

spectators who had just left the theatre: “Divine”, “outrageous”, “absolutely marvellous” and “the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen in my life” are some of the sample answers that the audience has to offer after seeing the show, highlighting the enjoyment of bad taste and shock value as selling points. On Waters’ request, the film opened in New York at the Elgin Theater at midnight (2005:21). The Midnight Movie screening phenomenon represents, according to Mathijs and Sexton, a convergence of the late sixties underground and avant-garde cinema theatres with exploitation cinema and countercultural sensibilities, a “staple of alternative cinema exhibition” which was characterized by “a hedonistic and wildly extravert context of rambunctious yet joyous celebrations” (2011:14). As part of this newly established cult cinema tradition, *Pink Flamingos* played at midnight at The Elgin Cinema “two nights a week, then three, four, and finally seven” (Waters 2005:21). *Pink Flamingos*’ bad taste and shock value became then historically connected to Midnight Movies, and Midnight Movies came to be associated with the film’s sleaze (Sconce 2007:3).

## **Conclusions**

Placing the grotesque queer body at the centre of their narratives, *Multiple Maniacs* and *Pink Flamingos* exploit shock value in the form of carnivalesque episodes that involve excessive and humorous portrayals of sex, violence and religion. The Rosary Job, the lobster-rape, the singing anus, the eating-dog-shit- are exhibitionist episodes of shock value that are firmly rooted in the Do-It-Yourself, low-budget material conditions of the production. The primitive filmmaking cajoles spectators with cinematic attractions that blur the distinction between the fiction and the real, directly address the audience and amplify therefore the shock value of its representations of filth. The clumsy camera work, poor lighting, zoom abuse and long

takes create a hard, raw, documentary look, that is both playful and participatory. In his foundational text *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explains:

Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While Carnival lasts, there is no other life outside of it (Bakhtin 1984:7)

The recording apparatus of cinema might appear to be a direct contradiction of the spontaneous and temporary Carnival spirit. However, *Multiple Maniacs* and *Pink Flamingos*, on its primitive filmmaking style and exhibitionist presentation, inherit the vaudevillian character of early cinema of attractions, an “earlier carnival of the cinema” (Gunning 2006:387) that directly assaults its spectators. Due to the theatricality of the production, the same actors, in different roles, reappear in the text; playing those characters in their own clothes and with their own names, erasing the boundaries of the text and reinforcing a feeling of Carnavalesque spontaneity. The Midnight Movie circuit that embraced these films and converted them into cult classics recreated a mode of reception which also replicates the carnivalesque communal experience. There was “no other life outside” because the films erased the straight world outside of the theatre and the viewing experience was a festive celebratory event.

This chapter has examined the cheap thrills of these films beyond the antisocial label some attach to them (Breckon 2013, Needham 2016), arguing instead for their sensational pleasures and gross. The aggrandized presentation of the freak show, the anticlerical laughter of the Carnival, the Grotesque depiction of bodies and the subversive humour are some of the elements employed by Waters to produce pleasure. Such pleasure, I argue, should not be explored as a psychoanalytic dark corner of the mind, but as a carnal experience, one that addresses the joys and horrors of having a body, and one that connects our spectatorial bodies to the extreme bodies displayed on the screen. Seeing Lobstora appear from out of nowhere and crawl upon Divine’s

screaming body, Divine eating dog-shit, a singing anus displaying freakish movements: these cinematic attractions transgress the boundaries of horror, shock, disgust, desire and laughter that descend upon our bodies. These celluloid atrocities not only have to be seen to be believed, but they also have to be seen to be *lived*.

### CHAPTER 3: REVOLTING WOMEN: BEAUTY AND UGLINESS IN *FEMALE TROUBLE AND DESPERATE LIVING*

“The unruly woman is the undisciplined woman. She is a renegade from the disciplinary practice which would mold her as a gendered being. She is the defiant woman who rejects authority [...] She is the offensive woman who acts in her own interests. [...] She is trouble”.  
Karlene Faith (1993:1)

After the Midnight Movie success of *Pink Flamingos* (1972), Waters produced and directed two more films that would complete the Trash Trilogy<sup>1</sup>: *Female Trouble* (1974) and *Desperate Living* (1978). The Trash Trilogy encompasses the last days of strictly D.I.Y., self-funded filmmaking for Waters, a period in his career that has also been known as “low-budget hell” (Maier 2011:133). These two films can be read as a response to *Pink Flamingo*'s large shadow of celebrated shock value. After the dog-shit-eating gimmick, the manufacture of transgression would never be so immediate, as the horizon of expectations had been forever altered. Waters has expressed his inspirations and concerns for both films in these terms: “*Pink Flamingos* was a hard act to follow [...] so I wanted the ideals, rather than the action of *Female Trouble* to be horrifying” (1981:94). The impossibility to top earlier episodes of shock value pushed the following films to embody a different type of transgression. Leaving the ‘cheap thrills’ behind, *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* embark on new modes of filmmaking that place melodrama and the feminine at the centre.

The films are focused on revolting women, where revolting has the dual meaning of repulsive and subversive. Transgression, here, is firmly rooted in the unruly female body, a site of laughter and tears. Kathleen Rowe’s description of the unruly woman conceptualises it as “an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative forms of comedy and the social practices of

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<sup>1</sup> This follows Waters’ own demarcation (Waters 1989).

carnival [...] willing to offend and be offensive” (1995:10). Building a bridge between femininity and transgression, beauty and monstrosity, Rowe’s contribution is influential in that it codes the unruliness of the female body as a cultural expression of political dissent. Female unruliness departs from feminist interpretations of Bakhtin’s writings on grotesque and carnivalesque (Rowe 1995, Russo 1986). If the official, patriarchal world represses women’s laughter, argues Rowe, is because laughter challenges symbolic systems that structure the social world; yet this expression of feminist resistance has been less critically examined than other cultural productions more centred on women’s suffering. However, there are powerful links between comedy and melodrama: their popularity, low status and association to femininity make them “much fruitful ground for feminist cultural production” (Rowe 1995:14). In examining unruly femininity in this film, I will demonstrate how bad taste is a feminine realm that is inextricably associated with women.

In this chapter, I have chosen to employ the concept of revolting women (instead of following Rowe’s “unruly woman”) because revolting encompasses agency and disgust. Revolt originates in the body, so revolting bodies are both repulsive and subversive, “gross and radical” (Heller 2011:75), as they carry with them the abjection they produce *and* the possibility of rearticulating such abjection. The female body is revolting because femininity is often monstrous (Creed 1993) as it constitutes an alterity to the normative male body (Irigaray 1985). Women are revolting when their corporeality transgresses boundaries of the social order (Brazier and LeBesco 2001), rejects a fixed position and threatens the patriarchal law (Schoenfelder and Wieser 1983). Revolting bodies are feminine bodies circumvallating sites of gender

discomfort -they represent the threat of queer femininity<sup>2</sup>. This chapter focuses on the study of revolting femininity through the films' representations of beauty and ugliness, and the many ways in which aesthetics are intricated with gender and class. I argue that *Female Trouble*, a film that weaves together beauty and criminality, reflects the gender trouble around working-class cheap and tawdry femininity and the threats of the bad girl and the bad mother. Parallel to this, I study Diane Arbus and Jean Genet's influences over the film. In the second part of the chapter, I examine *Desperate Living*'s architecture of ugliness and the ways in which the film deals with queer shame. The chapter then concludes pondering the different critical and popular reception these films received.

### **Female Trouble (1974)**

With a budget of 27,000 dollars (doubling *Pink Flamingos*), a filming crew and a professional editor to assist Waters, *Female Trouble* stands as the most ambitious title of the Trash Trilogy, critically coined as Waters' *Citizen Kane* (Holmlund 2017a: 22-23). *Female Trouble* abandoned the raw filmmaking style in favour of a more ambitious tone and settings: everything is aggrandized in this melodramatic comedy, or comedy in the mode of melodrama.

Following Linda Williams, melodrama is best described as "a filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess" (1991:3). This emotional excess, which manifests itself in the form of tears, can be too much. Debates on melodrama have identified its prominence of female sentiment, as well as its "powerless" and "voiceless" narratives (Grimstead 1971, Vicinus 1981). In other words, melodrama is the genre of misrepresented subjects, a realm of feminine suffering. The representation of

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<sup>2</sup> As they do in the Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey's collaboration *Women in Revolt* (1972). The film, which could also be described with Waters' words for *Desperate Living* "a lesbian melodrama about revolution", is a 70s comedy about the women's liberation movement.



emotional excess is inherited from the theatre, and the theatrical mode emphasises “codifying the language of bodily gesture, facial expression and intonation” (Gledhill 1987:19). Understanding the concept not as a noun, but adjective, Peter Brooks describes melodrama not as a genre but as a mode of expression, “an important and abiding mode in the modern imagination” (1995:xviii) that shares with psychoanalysis the focus on the desire, and tribulations, of the ‘hystericized’ (emale body (1995:200-2). Studies of melodrama are central to feminist film theory, because on melodrama we can find ambivalent ideological operations of patriarchy and the continuous negotiations of the boundaries between good and evil, the public and the private. Melodrama also raises question of reading strategies, masochist identifications, fantasy versus realism. More to the point of this chapter, melodrama brings “a manipulation of the heartstrings that exceeds the bounds of good taste”, as Linda Williams defends (2001:11). Revisiting some of her previous work on melodrama, Williams concludes that it is a genre that is praised when its excesses are disguised, but which fails when it cannot be contained. Going beyond that, she argues that the melodramatic mode is an American tradition that runs deep and has always been in some way present in the mainstream. “Melodrama”, she concludes, “is a fundamental mode by which American culture has dealt with the problem of “moral legibility” (2001:43). In *Female Trouble*, the moral conflict draws upon societal fears of revolting femininity and crime.

The melodramatic mode enhances and structures *Female Trouble*, grounding it in a tradition of low cultural artefacts that is both parodied and debased. The film explores the life and death of heroine Dawn Davenport, from her rebellious high school years to her life as a runaway single mother, waitress, stripper, thief; and consequent marriage, her show business career as a ‘crime model’, and ultimately, her death in the

electric chair. When Dawn meets the Dashers, owners of the exclusive salon Les Lipstick, the couple offers to sponsor and guide her modelling career. The Dashers propose to launch Dawn's career as an experiment under the motto "crime is beauty", brainwashing Dawn by making her shoot liquid eyeliner and eating mascara brushes. When her delusion backfires and she murders her Hare-Krishna daughter and several spectators in her debut show, Dawn is arrested and sent to court, where she is found guilty and sentenced to death. Conceived as a star vehicle for Divine, *Female Trouble* reimagines the epic women's film biopics -weepies focused on family, motherhood, and marriage- alongside 50s exploitation titles such as *I Want to Live!* (1958)<sup>3</sup>. While previous works enacted blurry lines between Divine-the-actor and Divine-the-character, here the cult indexicality is purposely avoided in favour of a theatrical performance. As a way of doubling down her performance assets, Divine plays a secondary role as Earl, a masculine character that has sex with Dawn and fathers her child. Given the film focus on feminine topics, and the heightened drag performance, here I propose a feminist reading of the film text that first considers the gender challenges positioned by the film, and then moves to analyse the unruly women at the core of the narration, and their path towards beauty and crime.

### Gender troubles

Introducing *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler references female trouble, a euphemism on menstruation that simultaneously shows and conceals the rendering of a regular female bodily function as problematic, related to illness and not meant for open discussion. Nonetheless, Butler also noted that the euphemistic term is "laughable", and "and laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism" (1990:30). The title 'female trouble' pokes

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<sup>3</sup> Waters mention this influence in a conversation with critic Dennis Lim in the Criterion Collection edition DVD.

fun at a taboo –menstruation- whilst also puts femininity into question by slipping the term into the drag queen protagonist. Divine, the drag queen playing the heroine Dawn Davenport, brings into *Female Trouble* a queering dimension on the melodrama. Butler argues that Divine’s performance in the film functions as a parody on the naturalness of gender, presenting a contradiction since her female impersonation “suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real” (1990: viii). As explored in Chapter one, this is consistent with Butler’s work on gender as a performance. ‘Passing as the real’ is a contentious point of debate in the scholarship that examines the gender tribulation of Divine’s stardom. Whereas the film never breaks the illusion of female impersonation, as the character of Dawn Davenport is unambiguously a woman, it calls attention to drag itself, posing questions of femininity, symbolic gender theft and parody.

Trouble, in *Female Trouble*, reveals an inherent risk to the patriarchal order, as the title encompasses both the dark secrets of vilified femininity and the potential danger of being female in a world that devalues women. In the film, Dawn Davenport engages with a wide range of troubles: against the school authorities, against her family, against a random one-night stand, against motherhood, against neighbours, against marriage, against show business and against the law. She leads a life of anger and unrest that betrays the quiet, complicit and obedient mandates of the feminine “divine composure” (Cixous in Rowe 1995:31). Because of her excessive body, appetite, and behaviour, Dawn is a potential feminist heroine, “transgressive” as it exposes the rigid dictates of female behaviour and “lays claims to her own desire” (Rowe 1995:31).

Some feminists, however, have described drag, or female impersonation, as a sort of cruel satire akin to blackface, a performance fuelled by misogyny. Second-wave

feminists observe in drag a “casual and cynical mockery of women” (Frye 1983:137) that, exercised from a position of power, only reflects male privilege (Williamson 1986)<sup>4</sup>. Dan M. Harries, in his article on Divine, concurs with those critiques conceding that “Divine's parodic (and often misogynist) representation of certain aspects of traditional women's roles in patriarchal society has drawn justifiable criticism from feminists and others” (1990:14), yet does not explain or describe those misogynist episodes. From a more ambivalent stance, Gaylyn Studlar studies Divine's perverse femininity in the context of the Midnight Movies, which, according to her, marvelled in their commodified transgression but fail to threaten the patriarchal order. Studlar's work importantly recognizes how cult cinema's transgressions are tied to the feminine body, a topic I explored in this chapter, in which femininity is coded as low. However, her contribution deploys what is now a conservative view of sex and gender. Because Divine acts from a “masculine-sexed body”, Studlar claims, “Divine's appropriation of the cultural signs of female subjectivity becomes a symbolic theft and transformation that leaves men free to ridicule femininity as a self-styled excess” (1989:6). Despite this, she notes, there is a patent threat in Divine's performance, based on gender playfulness, for it “demonstrates that sexual identity has no biological mandate and is not a condition of genitality” (1989:8). It seems to me that if the latter is true, and biology and genitals do not demarcate sex nor gender, it makes little sense for her to attribute symbolic theft to Divine's so-called “masculine-sexed body”. Furthermore, as Waters wrote in *Shock Value*, Divine's appearance was “even more bizarre out of drag than he did in” (2005:X). As Moon and Sedgwick explore, there is much more to drag than wearing feminine clothes, and Divine's stardom, rather than

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<sup>4</sup> Williamson writes: “The man in each case isn't being undermined: female characteristics, and by implication women, are. There is nothing inherently radical about men dressing as women. After all, under all those skirts and stuffed bras there's still a perfectly safe penis” (1986:48).

being an either/or option standing in the gender binary, it offers “a powerful condensation of some emotional and identity linkages [...] between fat women and gay men” (1994:213-214). While some researchers see Divine as a man parodying a woman, queer studies see Divine as an intersection of historically disenfranchised identities.

The scene when Dawn and Earl meet and have sex, seals this problematic by presenting a parody not only of gender itself but of heterosexual relationships. While hitchhiking, Dawn is picked up by driver Earl, who takes her to a stained mattress in the road. Their sexual intercourse, with skid marks underwear included, emphasizes the humorous incongruence of the situation. Esther Newton establishes that the principle of opposition, “masculine-feminine” is central to drag, and that this opposition can be played out in different ways, through the sartorial system, or throughout a performance that plays with the inner subjective self and the outer social self (2001:100-101). Dawn and Earl (Fig. 11) illustrate this opposition by constructing the sexual encounter as a nod to cult audiences, where the thrill of the scene is embedded in the possibility of gender play. Furthermore, presenting Earl as a liquor-drinking driver in grease-stained clothes, and hunting cap, the film performs a masculine impersonation as much as female one, expanding the reach of the gender parody. It is femininity, however, that is at the core of *Female Trouble*’s spectacle, and centres the narrative of trouble.

#### On Beauty: Cheapness & Glamour

Describing Divine’s “combination of abjection and defiance” (1994:214), Moon and Sedgwick come up with the term ‘glamour fits’, which I interpret as episodes where female rage and resistance transform into style. Dawn’s biography is propelled by them. In her high school years, in the girls' bathroom, Dawn and her

friends Chiclette and Concetta are secluded in a space they abhor. The teenage girls (all played by adult women) enact exaggerated gestures -smoking, fixing her hair, applying make-up- that demarcate their otherness and make them stand out as bad (Fig. 12). White lipstick, acne, and tall hair-sprayed bleached hair code their rebellion- they are reprimanded by teachers and parents for their style. Continuously regulated by the authorities, these teenagers perform fashion as a distinct way of showing discontent to the established order. The cha-cha heels are a symbol of that rebellion.

In what is arguably the most comedic episode in the film, Dawn throws a glamour fit when she gets a pair of flat shoes for Christmas, stomping over the presents and pushing her mother under the Christmas tree. As her conservative parents argue, “nice girls don’t wear cha-cha heels”. They are coded as an object that sets Dawn apart from the traditional suburban family she comes from. Studying counterculture and style, Dick Hebdige explored fashion choices based on “the most mundane objects – a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motorcycle -which [...] warn the 'straight' world in advance of a sinister presence -the presence of difference” (1988:2-3). For those who embrace them as demarcators of their difference, as Dawn does with the cha-cha heels, the objects “take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of self-imposed exile.” (1988:2). The importance Dawn invests in the cha-cha heels, using them as a trigger object for her running away, mark a literal exile, a descend into cheapness.

‘Cheapness’ is the quality that enforces Dawn’s life as a single mother and ‘career woman’. A symbol of tawdry femininity, cheapness in the film is a style that consists in colourful outfits that expose a lot of flesh, bouffant hair-dos with a lot of hairspray and heavily delineated arched eyebrows – it represents a form of debased glamour. First uttered as a form of magic spell, glamour is understood as a fluid

concept that undergoes a transformation alongside society changes of the twentieth century. Hollywood cinema made it “into a mass commodity” (Wilson 2007:100). As a result of that, in the post-war society became something readily available, crystalizing fears of “cheapness and vulgarity”. Dyhouse argues: “anxieties about social class and women’s role in the post-war world encouraged women to censure each other for looking ‘tarty’ or ‘common’ (2011:109). As a revolting woman, Dawn encapsulates the stigma around ‘vulgar’ working-class and single mothers, which constitute a threatening figure that the film highlights with references to the true crime story of Alice Crimmins<sup>5</sup>.

In 1965, Alice Crimmins discovered that her two children had been abducted from their bedroom overnight. When she, a divorced working-class single mother, alerted the police, she became first and only suspect in the investigation. Immediately distrusted by police because she “didn’t look like a ‘Mother’” (Jones 1980:273) for her hairdo and make-up, Crimmins was accused of murder despite lack of evidence. Known as a ‘sexpot’ and ‘housewife with hamster morals’, Crimmins’s trial revolved around her tarnished morals, as she had dated several men outside of marriage, and her ‘cheap’ looks and excessive style: “striking redhead in her twenties, with thick make-up, hip-hugging treader slacks, flowered blouse and white high-heeled shoes” (Borowitz 2005:659). Her case, argues Ann Jones, reflects the patriarchal anxieties towards women at the time, trapped between the rigid structure of the nuclear family and the women’s liberation movement (1980:277-9). *Female Trouble*’s allusions to Crimmins invoke the threats of tawdry working-class femininity.

The film’s ample sartorial system illustrates this through Van Smith’s high

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<sup>5</sup> There are two references to Crimmins in *Female Trouble*: First, Ms. Dasher openly says to Dawn in preparation for her act: “Remember Alice Crimmins!”. Second, Dawn last meal is veal, which is what Alice Crimmins alleges she feed her children the night before they were abducted and murdered.

fashion costume designs: Dawn's outfits epitomise an array of features of unruly femininity: working-class affiliation, sexual availability, criminal disposition, post-1950s stardom. This is perfectly encapsulated in the wedding dress, an outrageous parody of Priscilla Presley's wedding outfit that, through the see-through fabric, exposes her pubic hair (Fig. 13). Challenging the claims to purity traditionally associated with the whiteness of the wedding gowns, the dress functions as yet another token of female indecorousness and revolt.

Dawn's glamour also draws inspiration<sup>6</sup> from a 1966 Diane Arbus' photograph included in the portfolio *A Box of Ten Photographs*: "A young family in Brooklyn going for a Sunday outing. Their baby is named Dawn. Their son is retarded. NYC, 1966" (Fig. 14). Dawn has a strong resemblance to the mother in the photograph: tadpole eyebrows, teased black hair, and similar clothes, but most importantly, a similar expression of discontent. As a form of intertextual reference, Arbus' presence on the film text calls attention to the representation of grotesque, freak and revolting bodies. Like Waters, Arbus' shared a fascination with the freaks -female impersonators, dwarfs, nudists- but also with the so-called American normality. Her portraits of suburban families, upper-class women on strolls, and grimacing children, depict everybody as freaky. In her portraits of the freaks, they symbolize a form of resistance and defiance. Her photographs cling to their legendary status<sup>7</sup>. "Arbus in fact inserted herself, almost desperately into these worlds of difference", Halberstam writes, "and tried to use her photographs to force viewers to be aware that they do not

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<sup>6</sup> The inspiration from the photograph was addressed by Waters himself in the retrospective of his career celebrated in the British Film Institute in 2015, and the presence of the name Dawn confirms the connection.

<sup>7</sup> She expressed it in *An Apperture Monograph* as: "there's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats" (2011: 3).



see everything or even anything” (2011:104), in fact creating an archive of queer revolting bodies from the past.

Critics of Arbus (Russo 1994, Hevey 2010, Blyn 2013) accuse her of practising voyeurism by portraying the grotesque from afar and taking advantage of her privileged position to exploit the freaks. As recounted by Russo, these critiques are best illustrated by an anecdote: in her later years, she was refused attendance in a “convention of midgets” in Florida that told her “we have our own little person to photograph us” (Russo 1994:77). Sontag argues that Arbus’ photographs reflect a descent into an “appalling underworld” (1978:44) that privileges a sense of horror. “Her work shows people who are *pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive*, but it does not arouse any compassionate feelings” (1978:33, my emphasis). Sontag’s own sense of repulsion can be harsh- “In photographing dwarfs, you don’t get majesty and beauty. You get dwarfs” (1978:29), which seems contradictory to her critique of the lack of compassion in Arbus’ work. When she ponders, “do they see themselves, the viewer wonders, like *that*? Do they know how grotesque they are?”, she is acknowledging her refusal of empathy.

“Do they know how grotesque they are?” is a powerful question that illustrates how beauty and the grotesque coexist in art and the social space. Sontag refuses to allow any identification with the freaks. The question shows a sense of disturbance that mirrors those thrown by the critic Rex Reed on his review of *Female Trouble*: “Where do these people come from? Where do they go when the sun goes down? Isn’t there a law or something?” (1975:58). Sontag and Reed’s repulsion is, I argue, a negative emotional reaction to what they perceived as ugliness, a word that, in its etymological roots, means “to be feared or dreaded” (Henderson 2015:9). However, those fears and dreads are in the eye of the beholder, while the film text explicitly

discusses the significance of beauty.

Beauty is a site of contestation in *Female Trouble*. It is claimed upon Aunt Ida (Edith Massey) as an embodiment of queer politics and humour. Modelling a black leather BDSM outfit, with ratted blonde hair and heavily applied make-up, she struts and poses, while others are cheering her looks. It is in this outfit that she utters the lines: “I worry that you'll work in an office, have children, celebrate wedding anniversaries. The world of the heterosexual is a sick and boring life!”. The scene catalyses an inversion of hierarchies that celebrates queerness, a subversion that is located on her body, in the form of fat revolt. The inversion of hierarchies is further illustrated in the scene in which Dawn recovers from an acid attack. While the doctors treat her as a victim -the compassion Sontag discussed-her friends effectively reassure her by telling her how unique, original and extreme her beauty is. “Pretty, pretty?” asks the new Dawn tentatively observing herself in the mirror. By reversing the concept of beauty, the film creates a space where she feels content enough in her own skin to dance through the streets of Baltimore in a disfigured face while wearing a blue and golden leopard-printed dress. As yet another iteration of Mansfield’s walk in *The Girl Can’t Help It*, the film recreates a more prominent version of Divine’s famous walk in *Pink Flamingos*. The soundtrack is set to ‘Dig’, a 1956 single from Nervous Norvus: an uplifting and zany ukulele song with the lyrics: “D-I-G means look, D-I-G means stare, D-I-G means see, D-I-G means glare, D-I-G means to use your eye, so dig dig dig you crazy guy”. A passer-by’s eye pops out. The scene is set to draw the gaze of the onlookers, exploiting the visual pleasure of Dawn’s spectacle.

“Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger” (1986:213), recalls Mary Russo on her work on the female grotesque. The dangers of making a spectacle of oneself are related to the spaces a body can occupy, and when

we are talking of female, fat, revolting bodies, the space they can take in the symbolic order are so limited that they seem condemn to fall outside of intelligibility. They can be either silenced or invisible. Taking, however, the Foucauldian argument than when there is power, there is also resistance, there are thriving possibilities in making a spectacle of oneself.

To be beautiful is part of the feminine social contract, and the looks themselves are just a means to an end, an end of female subordination (Wolf 1991). Beauty functions then as an unattainable ideal, a technology supposed to discipline docile bodies. Some feminists refute the usefulness of reclaiming beauty since, after all, the problem is not only the restrictiveness of rules of weight or age but on the existence of those rules or restrictions (Cooper 1998, LeBesco 2004). LeBesco, supporting the work of Susan Bordo, states: “fat cannot be beauty, because beauty is purity/innocence” (2004:52). The beauty that *Female Trouble* portrays is one that, associated with the female grotesque and unruly femininity, assaults boundaries and, like the carnival, celebrates the suspension of tradition and social order. It goes as far as to celebrate beauty in crime.

### Crime is Beauty

Crime is an extreme expression of revolt. In *Female Trouble*, this expression emerges within the frustrations of domestic life. Furthering the parody of melodrama, the film’s violent episodes all revolve around the family and the household. Mother and daughter relationships are acute points for conflict in melodrama, which often reflect idealized and demonized representations of femininity. The roles of mother and wife are contentious with violence. Dawn embodies an evil Mother (Kaplan 1992) who hits her daughter with the car aerial, binds her to bed, calls her ‘retarded’ and fails to provide food or education. Taffy, as a result, is a distraught kid that longs for her father,

only to discover that he is an alcoholic that tries to rape her, and whom she ultimately murders. Within that scene, which contains vomit, explicit nudity, gore and sexual violence, the film enters a site of unease: the transgressive episodes that it showcases have little to do with the merry cheap thrills of *Multiple Maniacs* and *Pink Flamingos*. This new obscure recreation of filth is further developed in *Desperate Living*.

“Our experiment involves beauty and crime. We feel them to be one. We have a theory that crime enhances one’s beauty. The worse the crimes gets, the more ravishing one becomes”. This statement, uttered by Donald Dasher, discloses the resignification of crime and beauty that the film undertakes. From the opening credits that dedicate the film to convicted felon Charles ‘Tex’ Watson, whom Waters befriended visiting him in prison, to the electric chair closing scene, *Female Trouble* launches an ambivalent defence of criminality, one that is provocative at times, in its pursuit of laughter, yet also sincere whilst threatening, when it identifies crime with beauty and abjection. In this section I will discuss how *Female Trouble*’s representations of crime oscillate between these two modes.

Understanding crime as a form of stardom is the film’s most provocative proposition, one that exposes the logic that being a criminal is perhaps the fastest route to becoming an overnight celebrity. The criminal’s notoriety, famous for the wrong reasons, attracts nevertheless public attention and achieves celebrity status. To be famous is the ultimate commodity for late capitalism (Rojek 2001, Holmes and Redmond 2007). When the upper-class Dashers offer Dawn a career in show business as a ‘crime model’, crime becomes a form of show business and murder a performance. The scene that illustrates this best is her debut night-club act -one that mirrors Divine’s real-life appearances and alludes to the Midnight Movie spectacle.

If famous bodies are loaded with meaning, “embodiments of the social

categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives, [...] categories of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on” (Dyer 2004:16), Dawn Davenport embodies societies’ fears of the serial killer and the unruly woman. Dawn’s criminal stardom is unequivocally a female one: she emphasizes this by repeatedly stroking her breasts and crotch throughout the performance, while her friends and fans in the audience smear make-up on their faces, in the form of rapture that celebrates the performances’ revolt. Furthermore, her nightclub act publicly positions her alongside other infamous criminals of the time – “I framed Leslie Bacon! I called the heroin hotline on Abby Hoffman! I bought the gun that Bremmer used to shoot Wallace!”- while simultaneously reinforcing her sexual availability - “I had an affair with Juan Corona! I blew Richard Speck!”.

Within the frenzy of the performance, Dawn asks the audience, ‘who wants to die for art?’. “I DO!”, responds a hippie in the audience and gets shot immediately. Adding another layer of provocation, murder transforms into laughter. The humour here resides in exaggeration, as a Surrealist proposition “of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd” (Breton in Julious 2003:224) becomes literal. The chaos that ensues is similarly incongruous and shows, much like the trial scene, a humoristic inversion of hierarchies.

The criminal is the ultimate figure of the Other, so its defence means a disavowal of the authority of the state (Ferrell 1998, Ball 2016). Foucault’s characterisation of crime as “a *coup d’etat* from below” (Simon 1991:34), drawn from Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, similarly draws on criminality as a political struggle. Still, the point of reference for the “crime is beauty” formulation is not criminologist

or political philosophers but the work of writer Jean Genet<sup>8</sup>. Genet is a proto-Queer author<sup>9</sup> who wrote about his experiences in juvenile reformatories and prisons, from his life as homeless, thief and prostitute, of his detestation of France and the traditional family. In accepting society's epithets of oppression, Genet was celebrating abjection and giving it a new resignification. Crime and criminals are held in the highest esteem in Genet's world, and they represent the highest aesthetic value:

I recognize in thieves, traitors and murderers, in the ruthless and the cunning, a deep beauty - a sunken beauty. [...] My books narrate them. They have adorned them with qualifiers thanks to which I recall them with gladness. I have thus been that little wretch who knew only hunger, physical humiliation, poverty, fear and degradation. From such galling attitudes as these I have drawn reasons for glory.

Genet here draws explicit connections between criminals, beauty, and the processes of resignification of abjection. Identifying himself as one of the wretched, 'unliveable' bodies, he embraces criminality in order to get rid of any sentiment of shame and to replace it with pride. In 'The Gay Outlaw', Bersani argues that Genet achieves resignification by "erasing cultural relationality itself" (1996:152), which means that instead of subverting values, he performs a "meta-transgressive *dépassement* of the field of transgressive possibility itself" (1996:163), a radical reinvention of the possible and the real. In a similar fashion, *Female Trouble* surpasses definitions of beauty and success, as "crime is beauty" unveils the correlation between criminality and queerness. In Genet and Waters' ethical worlds, the beauty of crime represents an attempt to blur the distinctions between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, and "crime and political resistance" (Ferrell 1998).

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<sup>8</sup> Genet is greatly admired by John Waters, who gave Divine her famous pseudonym partly after the imprisoned transvestite protagonist of the novel *Our Lady of the Flowers*, as he admitted to J. Hoberman on the Opening Night of the Film Society of Lincoln Center's retrospective "Fifty Years of John Waters: How Much Can You Take?"

<sup>9</sup> Proto-queer identifies traces of queer theory in history before queer studies were coined. Genet is arguably proto-queer since his work "not only challenges the label 'homosexual' but the very idea of sexual scripts" and shows evidences of "reclamation and inversion of homophobic insults" (Richardson 2009:143)

*Female Trouble's* endorsement of crime is genuine, I argue, when the film commits to the defence of crime as an expression of revolt and social deviance. The film functions as a fairy tale in reverse, where the execution in the electric chair is not a tragic event but a sign of success. Dawn is at her happiest when she is about to die, for as she explains to her prison girlfriend, the death penalty is “the biggest award I could get on my field”. At the end of the film, with a disfigured face, a shaved head, no make-up, and a plain uniform, Dawn looks queerer than ever (Fig. 15). The prison, like in much of Genet’s works, represents a refuge beyond the boundaries of society, a place where queerness can thrive. In *Miracle of the Rose*, Genet writes: “The death on the scaffold is our glory. Harcamone had “succeeded”” (1966:6). Success, femininity, beauty, and stardom are notions that *Female Trouble* overturns. Waters' description of beauty is “looks you can’t forget” (2005:128). The film seals the unforgettable by tracing a celebratory alliance between cheapness as glamour, revolting femininity and crime.

### **Desperate Living (1977)**

Described by Waters as “a lesbian melodrama about revolution”, *Desperate Living* closes the so-called Trash trilogy, films that have been grouped together by their “aesthetic, tonal, and thematic similarities” (Connolly 2018:186). Indeed, *Desperate Living* shares with *Female Trouble* the focus on female revolt, and queer kinships within a story filled with violence and crime, but there are fundamental differences between the two films. The most obvious is the absence of Divine: the actor's popularity resulted in his involvement in other projects, and during the filming of *Desperate Living*, he was touring in Europe with the theatrical production *The Neon Woman*. Waters’ production unit manager, Robert Maier, notes however that behind this schedule conflict there was a tacit desire, from both Divine and Waters, to test their

creative career independently from each other. This influenced the film's box office outcome, but also, Divine's absence similarly altered the tone and aesthetics of the film. Waters noted:

After *Female Trouble*, I decided what I really wanted to do was make an X-rated movie without any sex or violence. But since I had already used sacrilege and scatology as themes and figured crippling diseases such as polio might turned audiences off, I decided to play it safe [...]. *Desperate Living* is a monstrous fairy-tale comedy dealing with mental anguish, penis envy, and political corruption. Its target audience is very neurotic adults with the mentalities of eight-year-olds. (2005:158).

This director's statement reflects the multiple forces at play that intervene in *Desperate Living*: a film that is committed to further bad taste and shock value but also seeks to scape previous cheap thrills, distancing itself from *Pink Flamingos*' cinematic bodily spectacles. There is also an aesthetic and thematic departure: whereas *Female Trouble* is devoted to the idea of beauty (albeit criminal beauty) that clings into Divine's stardom, *Desperate Living* is a film invested in ugliness, whose very title suggests unease and discontent. The following analysis investigates the tensions that inhabit *Desperate Living*: the diegetic tensions between suburbia and a criminal town, butch and femmes, fascist authorities and revolting subjects; but also the tensions between genres (the aforementioned "monstrous fairy-tale comedy"), performances (a Dreamland film without Divine?), and filmmaking practices. These tensions coexist in *Desperate Living*'s world of ugliness.

### Ugliness Explained

'Ugliness' encapsulates asymmetry, imperfections, failure and deformities. Traditionally, artistic representations of ugliness have served to signal evil. "Just as evil and sin are the opposite of good," resumes Eco, summarizing Rosenkrantz, "so is ugliness the 'hell of beauty'" (2007:16). However, the foundation of this configuration is not as simple as it seems, for beauty and ugliness, as much as good and evil, are far from concrete terms, and instead, only make sense in their particular contexts. To



create a close definition of ugliness seems like an impossible task, for ugliness is relational: it involves both the object and subject of its utterance. Mark Cousins proposes an approach to ugliness alongside Douglas' notion of dirt as "matter out of place" (Cousins 1994:63). Hence, ugliness would be located in the trespassing of boundaries, an undetermined site. Classical definitions of beauty, on the West, are focused on order and proportion, they allude to the Platonic world of ideas, integrity and totality. Ugliness, in contraposition, seems to occupy the threatening liminality, as it polices the cultural border. Gretchen E. Henderson argues that, due to its relationality and constant evolution,

'Ugly' can be targeted as isolating but can also serve as a communal rallying cry to confront social fears. Its identification can also expose social tensions in need to redress or on the verge of change. [...] Cultural groups that have historically been constrained on social or aesthetic borders – as 'monstrous', 'blighted', 'primitive', 'degenerate' and more- to some degree have been made ugly by fear; and invite reconsideration of 'ugly' in alternative context. (2015:125).

Concepts such as beauty and ugliness rule over the social order. What is called ugly does not necessarily follow any aesthetic criteria, Eco argues, but to the socio-political discourse (2007:12). Ugly therefore is anything that disturbs the established normality. But more importantly, Henderson argues that "culturally speaking, ugliness intermixes deteriorating and regenerating matter that is, essentially, the nature of being human" (2015:128). In other words, ugliness functions a sort of *memento mori*, a category that embodies the fears and anxieties that revolve around being a body. The unstable nature of being human that Henderson notes brings together ugliness with deathly horrors, the grotesque and abjection.

*Desperate Living* is a film that dwells in these senses of dread, ruling over the film's plot: when suburban housewife Peggy and her maid Grizelda kill Peggy's husband and have to flee the city, a sex-obsessed policeman directs them to the criminal town of Mortville, under the fascist government of Queen Carlotta. Upon

arrival, Peggy and Grizelda are forced to an ugly makeover by the authoritarian queen, but they are hosted and welcomed in town by Muffy and Mole, a lesbian couple that cooks rats for them and takes them to lesbian bars. They become lovers, but Peggy cannot let go of her middle-class mentality and betrays Grizelda, Muffy, and Mole in order to serve Queen Carlotta. A citizen army of angry lesbians, with rabies-infected Princess Coo-Coo as their leader, breaks into the castle and kills Peggy. In this fairy-tale ending, the revolting women revolution triumphs and is celebrated with a cannibal feast where they eat Queen Carlota.

*Desperate Living's* ugliness is univocally connected to feminine queer ugliness. When a woman is called ugly, she is being cast as worthless for, as the analysis of *Female Trouble* established, beauty is a firm gender mandate that constricts female bodies. Ugliness is, therefore, a category for failed womanhood. When that ugliness is coined as queer, that failed womanhood is associated with the figure of the ugly, manhating lesbian. Halberstam writes, "lesbianism has long been associated with female masculinity and female masculinity in turn has been figured as undesirable by linking it in essential and unquestionable ways to female ugliness". (2002:359). If beauty is the private domain of "'pretty' femininity", ugliness then emerges as "an intentional deviation" and "resistant practice" (Eileraas 1997: 122). Whereas beauty is a currency within capitalism, ugliness is the realm where queerness -in the most disenfranchised possible sense of the term- can thrive. In 'Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability', Mia Mingus reasons:

We must shift from a politic of desirability and beauty to a politic of ugly and magnificence. That moves us closer to bodies and movements that disrupt, dismantle, disturb. Bodies and movements ready to throw down and create a different way *for all of us, not just some of us* (2011).

Understanding the meaning of ugliness as a cultural practice is central to my analysis of *Desperate Living*, a film that plays with the politics and poetics of ugliness.

First, I will discuss ugliness in spatial terms, reading the suburban home and the criminal town of Mortville. Then, I move to consider the bodies that inhabit those spaces, paying particular attention to the queer female bodies in revolt.

### Ugly Sites

*Desperate Living*' filmic space has been described as a "phantasmagoria of filth" (Palladini 2017:116), a term that connects the otherworldliness of the fairy tale genre with Waters' bad taste and shock value. In this section, I defend that the film's spatial configurations expose heterogeneity, juxtaposition and ambiguity. If the architecture of cinema is a journey that involves "crossing several borders" (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010:39), *Desperate Living* opens a door to a marginal sexual world (Rubin 2007). For a heterosexist society, argues Gayle Rubin, queer urban lives offer concentrated pools of perversion. Mortville represents a nightmarish vision of those fears: an isolated queer criminal community that represents societal fears. Rubin argues that "according to the mainstream media and popular prejudice, the marginal sexual worlds are bleak and dangerous. They are portrayed as impoverished, ugly, and inhabited by psychopaths and criminals" (2007:161). The streets of Mortville, within the film, are dystopic social spaces that are ruled by negativity and ugliness.

The film's credits are the entry point for this ugly sense of otherworldliness. Bringing together the high and the low, elegance and bad taste, wealth and waste, the credits of *Desperate Living* invoke an aggrandized mode of presentation: a high-angle stationary shot of an elegant dinner table setting with a cooked rat in the centre (Fig. 16). The image, which features on the poster of the film, speaks about the status of trash as a visual realm that celebrates waste and contaminates wealth. Subtly alluding to *Pink Flamingos*' bodily transgressions of "waste as food" (Moon and Sedgwick 1993:236), the served rat abjection also pays tribute to the cult film *Whatever*

*Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), where the Bette Davies' character serves a rat hidden under a silver serving tray to her disabled sister, played by Joan Crawford. The scene, and its consequent histrionic reaction, is arguably a crucial moment in the "history of camp" (Ross 1989:136). Referencing this moment in *Desperate Living* signals that Hollywood is perhaps not as far away from Waters' underground production as it used to be.

Rats are also a symbol of urban decay. They are usually used as a metaphor for poverty, filth and disease. For instance, calling someone a rat is a form of expressing despicable and untrustworthy behaviour. Yet, as a symbol of the low, they can also be celebrated. Banksy chose them as a metonymy for street revolt:

They exist without permission. They are hated, hunted and persecuted. They live in quiet desperation amongst the filth. And yet they are capable of bringing entire civilisations to their knees. If you are dirty, insignificant and unloved then rats are the ultimate role model (2005:82).

Rats are a de facto mascot of Baltimore, a city that thrives with vermin' stories, as documented in the zine 'Infestation! A Smile Hon You're in Baltimore! Production' (2004) and the documentary *Rat Film* (2016). They constantly reappear throughout Waters' body of work as a symbol of filth and bad taste. In the film's poster, however, the cooked rat alerts us of an incongruent element inserted into an upper-class setting, which functions as a metaphor for Waters' first foray into the world of suburbia.

The first ten minutes of the film bring to the fore the word of suburbia as a threatening place of enforced normality, a topic that will be critically examined in Chapter 4. The Gravel residence, which is Waters' family home, an upper-class mansion in Lutherville, is the first ugly space: a site of female imprisonment that juxtaposes the upper-class ideal with gender anxieties. It first anchors the wife and mother, Peggy Gravel, played by Mink Stole, as a distressed housewife. Stole's performance, screaming "Don't tell me I don't know what Vietnam is like!" when the

children's neighbours throw a ball and break a window, is both comic and melodramatic, and as in *Female Trouble*, it is modelled after questions of female discontent. The location reflects a specific site of female domesticity, but also reflects a particular slice of time in America ("this isn't a communist day-care centre", she barks), one that reflects post-war anxieties about the place of women. We learn that Peggy has just been released from a mental institution on his husband's orders, despite the doctor's objection, and that she is kept at home on medication the suburban home functions as a sort of mental asylum. Sedated by her husband, alienated by motherhood and on a hysterical nervous breakdown, Penny Gravel appears as Waters' reinterpretation of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

Similarly subordinated in the suburban site, yet not subdued, is the maid Grizelda, played by Jean Hill. Grizelda's revolting body -super fat, black, and working-class- is presented in direct conflict with the patriarchal figure in the household, Mr Gravel. In the kitchen, he discovers Grizelda stealing their liquor and bank account documents. When he threatens her and grabs her, she tries to startle him by reminding him of the monstrous status of the female body – "I don't want no white men looking at my Tampax!". The husband tries to reassert his dominance over Peggy and Grizelda, but female revolt proves stronger than him. Finally, in their master bedroom, he tries to administer more tranquilisers when Peggy screams that he is about to kill her. Grizelda goes to help, knocks out her opponent, and proceeds to kill him by sitting on his face. The long medium shot of Grizelda's expression while she is suffocating the husband is a testament to queer cinema as "full of pleasure" (Benshoff and Griffin 2004:54). Her big grin expresses nothing but pure joy, happiness with sexual overtones from the corporeality of the murderous act, but one that also celebrates the ending of precarious employment by ending the life of her direct oppressor, a wealthy white man,

by simply using her flesh and weight as a weapon. The murder illustrates Kent's concept of counterabjection, where the corporeality and weight move from a marginalized position to a position of power. *Desperate Living* mirrors here the Fat Positive zine *FaT Girl*: “the superhero Fat Girl threatens, “Shut up or I'll sit on you!” (2001:142).

The death of the husband (much like the throwing of the Christmas tree in *Female Trouble*) propels the narrative chain of events, making the two revolting women abandon the home. Escaping by car, they end up in the forest, a transient space where they re-encounter the patriarchal authority, in the form of a police officer. The ugliness of the scene resides in the fleeting relationship that the two women are forced to have with a figure of authority. Wearing lingerie and lipstick, the officer coerces them to give him a ‘wet kiss’ and their underwear. In return, the women would not be set free, but they can avoid prison if they make their way to the criminal town of Mortville. This is perversion that is both transgressive – as it involves an authority figure in the role of sexual deviant - and childish. The repulsion of the scene does not arise from the graphic spectacle of what is depicted, but to the horrified reaction of the two women at being harassed.

Senses of horror increase when they reach the film’s main ugly site, Mortville. Mortville represents a dystopic space that is simultaneously open and closed, operating as a sort of prison and a refuge for outlaws. Suggesting mortification and shame rather than deathly horror, the criminal town embodies ugliness as a way of life: it is supposed to represent the worst possible place to live. This ugliness, however, is mostly artificial. Unlike Waters’ previous films, which were mostly shot on location in the city of Baltimore or their immediate surroundings, *Desperate Living* was mostly shot on a built set in a farmland in Hampstead, forty miles away from the city (Sherman

2019:190). Waters wrote:

With *Desperate Living* I got a little closer to my dream of making a film entirely in a studio. I hate reality, and if I could have my way, everything I captured on screen would be fake -the buildings, the trees, the grass, even the horizon. (2005:167).

As a result, the work of art director Vince Peranio gained more importance than ever. This meant that a lot of the film's budget was destined to building a scenery that was supposed to completely transformed the appearance of the countryside landscape. However, as the increased budget<sup>10</sup> was being used to build a "town without pity" that was mostly erected using garbage materials and literal junk, the ugliness of Mortville did not give a sense of higher production values. Whereas *Female Trouble* had a distinct aesthetic feel from previous works, mostly by its parody of melodrama and its own interventions on beauty and glamour, *Desperate Living*'s use of trash as primary material seems like a return to the most literal interpretation of bad taste, albeit one that does not share the spontaneity and documentary look of *Pink Flamingos* and *Multiple Maniacs*. The dark fairy-tale tone, with sombre orchestral arrangements, are quite distinct from the underground cheap thrills.

Mortville has been compared to the American Hoovervilles of the 1930s, shanty towns that were created as a result of homelessness after the Great Depression, "the downside image of the 1930s American culture of glamour" (Palladini 2017:124). Mortville is an ugly site that reeks of deprivation and disease. Corpses are part of its scenery (Fig. 17). The denizens are at once dangerous and miserable. The *Pink Flamingos*' trailer seems luxurious in comparison: Mortville is mostly filmed in desaturated colours. Unlike expressions of white trash and cheap glamour, it simply reflects the stigma, and not the pride, of poverty.

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<sup>10</sup> *Desperate Living* had a budget of \$ 65,000 to *Female Trouble*'s \$ 27,000 and *Pink Flamingos*' \$10,000.

The deprivation of the town is exacerbated when contrasted with the exorbitant wealth of Queen Carlotta's castle. The castle's exterior settings emphasize the Disneyesque scenery, while the lush interior sets reflect the dark underside of luxury. Royal thrones, jewellery and laced walls coexist with rabies potions, gang-bangs, cannibalism and murder in the kingdom of Queen Carlotta. Portraits of Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson and Ugandan dictator Idi Amin decorate the walls, portraying the government as a fascist bad taste dystopia. Devoid of logic, Queen Carlotta's ruling of the castle is at times horrific (violently administering death to their subjects) or childishly provocative (forcing their subjects to celebrate 'Backwards Day'), but ultimately is both. Nominating her gay-presenting guards to have sex with her and screaming 'Seize her and fuck her!' Queen Carlotta is a parody of a tyrant, one that allegedly reflects the ugliest form of social control. Palladini argues that the film then functions as an allegory for "class struggle" as a "matter of *taste*" (2017:117), a taste that she argues oscillates between pleasure and disgust.

There are but few episodes of pleasure, however, in *Desperate Living*. As the film advances, the film seems more and more committed to horror. Exposing the stigma of poverty, Mortville does not harbour pride nor defiant abjection, but mostly feelings of disgust and shame. The importance of these emotions, Sarah Ahmed argues, resides in that they "work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies" (2004:1), Shame and disgust cling into the Mortville's denizens bodies, who despite their queer modes of relation project very ambivalent messages of their own queerness. The next section explores how *Desperate Living*, being perhaps the most openly queer of Waters' works, is also the less joyous and celebratory.

### Queer Ugly Bodies

Ugly bodies have been said to represent "the site where multiple cultural tensions



are negotiated and where potential models of identity are interrogated and confirmed” (Baker in Henderson 2015:28). Given the relationality of ugliness, this means that ugly bodies reflect the cultural fears and anxieties of the culture that denominates them ugly. In other words, ugliness is a strategy to codify otherness. *Desperate Living* reflects a queer otherness.

*Desperate Living*’ ugly bodies embark on a constructed process of uglification. Upon their arrival in Mortville, Peggy and Grizelda are conjured to Queen Carlotta’s castle, where they are forced to visit the town’s ‘ugly expert’. In their next scene, they have gotten rid of their white middle-class outfits to fit into the town: the two women are now colourfully styled to the point of excess, changing their natural complexion as much as possible. Blonde Peggy has her hair dyed brunette and wears a golden raincoat over an off the shoulders top and fuchsia trousers. Grizelda’s afro is bleached, and she wears a sleeveless green sequin top with a purple tutu. Outside of the diegesis, Waters mirrors this process attributing the ‘ugly expert’ title to costume designer Van Smith, who is instructed to bring out the actors’ worst features in order to exploit their “inner rot” (2005:133). The most affected by Smith’s work was Dreamlander Susan Lowe, who transformed her appearance to embody butch Mole to the point of being unrecognizable to her children (Waters 2005:135)

The explicit construction of ugly bodies reinforces the notion that there is no natural beauty or ugliness, and in fact, the film invites its spectators to blur the boundaries between the two. The Mortville make-overs are fashionably extreme, full of colour and glitter, yet they are an object of ridicule. This ugliness that is meant to mortify the people of Mortville is not chosen nor celebrated, but forced upon them. Comparing *Desperate Living* and *Female Trouble*’s explicit celebration of cheap glamour, I encountered the question, is *Desperate Living*’s aesthetic mortification a

metaphor for queer shame?

Shame is an emotion that accompanies socially constructed taboos. “When it brushes you”, explores Sally Munt, “it tends to leave a residue to which other emotions are easily attached, namely envy, hate, contempt, apathy, painful self-absorption, humiliation, rage, mortification and disgust” (2007:2). Munt understands shame to be a sticky bodily experience, and as such, it is not easily to isolate or identify because it is “enmeshed within the self” (2007:3). Sedgwick similarly reads shame as a linked to stigma and as a “form of communication” that “in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity” (2003:36). Most importantly, shame is the less discussed side of pride. If Stonewall established a standardized gay pride as a form of assimilation, in shame we can find queer alienation from “contingents of gay policeman, lesbian mothers, business leaders, corporate employers, religious devotees, athletes and politicians” (Halperin and Traub 2009:9). In other words, in queer shame we can observe a model of resistance for the the bad queers. In *Desperate Living*, the bad queers are embodiments of criminality and antisocial behaviour.

Shame accompanies different manifestations of queerness throughout the film. It first manifests when Grizelda seduces Peggy, and while Peggy is first taken aback by the audacity of her former maid, she later succumbs, muttering to herself: “if it’s good enough for Gertrude Stein...”. Their lesbian affair mirrors their adjustment to Mortville. In the lesbian bar, Grizelda drinks and enjoys the performance art (where a topless Cookie Mueller whips a man in chains), but Peggy feels unease and out of place: she leaves the lesbian bar and calls the other women ‘dykes’. While Grizelda is quickly part of the gang, Peggy’s own feelings of shame make her switch her allegiance to Queen Carlotta. She is, in her mind, not unlike the other lesbians: her homophobia is intricately with her classism.

Sentiments of queer shame also accompany the butch/femme pairing of Mole and Muffy. Mole's butchness is cast as anger: she represents the cliché of the man-hating, scary lesbian. Muffy however is a voluptuous platinum blonde dressed in see-through nightgowns. Played by Liz Renay, a "stripper-author-painter-personality-standup comedienne-movie star" (Waters 1989: xi)<sup>11</sup>. Muffy's glamour is reminiscent of Jayne Mansfield or Dolly Parton: a bombshell parody of femininity. In flashbacks of their lives before Mortville, the film emphasises the archetypical butch/femme duality, a lesbian articulation of gender (Munt 1998:2). Mole was 'Wrestling Rita', a professional wrestler with a leopard printed bathing with a vulva on her belly, while Muffy was a suburban mother and wife. The butch/femme pairing, argues Butler, "cannot be explained as chimerical representations of originally heterosexual identities", for the replication of distinct gender roles, within a queer context, suggests that "gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy" (1993:43, original emphasis). Yet queer shame manifests not upon their butch and femme identities, but in the suggested threat of masculinity. When Muffy admits having erotic dreams with men, Mole is jealous. "I am a man!", she screams, "a man trapped in a woman's body!", and Muffy simply replies, "oh, but Mole, you don't have the same deal". The laughter, here, seems directly addressed to the lack of a penis, something that both mocks the butch's masculinity, as a form of failure, and the femme's queer identity—portraying her as a 'failed lesbian' that would be happier in a heterosexual relationship.

The problem of the lack of a penis can seemingly be solved with sexual reassignment surgery. Set on saving her relationship, Mole goes to the John Hopkins

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<sup>11</sup> Her casting inaugurated Waters' 'stunt casting' tradition, where offbeat celebrities were casted for cult value, a trend that would continue with the collaboration of Pia Zadora, Patty Hearst, Traci Lords, Debbie Harry, Sonny Bono, Tab Hunter and many others, later in his career.

Hospital at gunpoint and forces the medical staff to perform a phalloplasty on her. Spectators do not get the procedure, but the result: the grotesque reconstructed penis is a very obvious prosthesis covered in fake blood (Fig. 18). When Muffy sees this surprise gift, she recoils in horror and vomits. Her disgust is so amplified that she urges Mole to get rid of 'it', and she does, cutting it off and throwing it out the window, where a dog grabs it and eats it. The scene discloses that Muffy really did not want her partner to be a man; it was only a coy about making Mole's jealous, a misunderstanding that seems to reaffirm the lesbian couple. However, Mole's crotch is now an open wound and a source of shame. The ugly spectacle of the "hideous phony sex-change penis", as described by the script (Waters 1989:164), functions as an othering strategy that visibly mocks the transgender body. The obvious falseness of the prosthetic, in consonance to the film's artificial settings, represents a great moment of departure from *Pink Flamingos*. Coffey's transness, in *Pink Flamingos*, is disclosed for shock value, but a sense of pride and celebration is palpable. *Desperate Living*, however, simply reveals fear and dread.

The film's articulation of queer shame also touches upon gay representation. Moon and Sedgwick discuss *Desperate Living*'s shame in the representation of the gay and fascist guard squad. The guards, dressed in black leather fishnet tops which identifies them with the San Francisco's leather subculture, are caught mid-orgy by the lesbian revolutionaries and murdered, which Moon and Sedgwick describe as a "perhaps the most spectacularly self-hating moment in Waters's films" (1993:238), one that "seems to register the pressure of a genocidal wish against gay men, a wish that [...] has been endemic in our culture for the past century, never more than it is today.(1993:235). They attribute the palpable homophobia of the scene to Waters' cultural "inversions" in which "male-identified gay men, middle-class by definition

[...] can figure only as abject villains in the plots of his films” (1993:233). This queer shame, they conclude, mocks gay men but reaffirms the film engagement with the unruly female bodies.

Despite the preponderance of shame, there are fleeting moments of queer celebration and pride in Mortville. The lesbian bar, with glory-holes for breasts, and performance art where topless women whip chained men, offers a glimpse of a space where these women can create a network of relations. From those connections, a sense of solidarity and collective struggle arises, and towards the end of the film, the lesbian revolutionaries manage to overturn the fascist government of Queen Carlotta ending the mandate to live in a state of constant mortification. The film closes with a feast, during which the denizens enjoy eating the roasted corpse of Queen Carlotta, stuffed like a pig (Fig. 19). However, the ‘happy ending’ cannot distance itself from ugliness: we are left to assume that, since Carlotta’s corpse is infected with rabies, they will all die.

To reclaim ugliness is to defend that all bodies matter. Yet, this ugliness, as Mingus notes, needs to be ‘magnificent’ in order to be able to hold and support “people and communities that are ugly, undesirable, unwanted, disposable, hidden, displaced” (2011). As the least joyous film from the Trash Trilogy, *Desperate Living* thrives in dread, instead of laughter.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has critically explored the ways in which *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* have articulated the aesthetics of female revolt. Putting female-centred issues at the core of their narratives, the two films attempted a strategy of departure from early works, abandoning the exploit of earlier transgressions in favour of higher production values and a more sophisticated form of filmmaking. I have

argued the different ways in which ideas of beauty and ugliness monitor and inscribe women's bodies, depicting the low as a feminized site.

While neither of these films enjoyed the popularity of *Pink Flamingos*, they stand out as favourites amongst the cast, crew and fanbase. There is a critical consensus that *Female Trouble* is Waters' best work (Levy 2015, Holmund 2017, Halter 2018), offering the most out of Divine's performance skills and exerting a palpable influence over the rest of his filmography, particularly the female-centred films set in suburbia I study in Chapter 4, and the operations of taste and stardom I address in Chapter 6. *Desperate Living*, despite being the least successful of all the films in the box office, stands as a favourite of Waters' hardcore fans (Waters 1989, 2005). Caught between the transgressions of the past and the ambitions of the future, *Desperate Living's* economic failure suggested the end of the trash era. "After *Desperate Living* tanked at the box office in 1977, I knew I needed a new business plan", explained Waters. "Videos were just coming out, and suddenly nobody wanted to go see weird movies in a theater at midnight anymore" (2019:16). The aftermath of *Desperate Living*, then, motivated Waters to seek new audiences outside of the exploitation market, reaching out to suburbia, as I explore in the next chapter.

As they revolve around ideas of beauty and ugliness, these two films demonstrate the extent to which aesthetics and power are imbricated, and how cultural categories divide and organize the social world. Even though female bodies exist in a constant state of scrutiny and surveillance, as these films seem to say, they also carry in their flesh the possibility of revolting. Questioning the oppressiveness of beauty and ugliness, interchanging their value and blurring the boundaries between the two, opens the door to gender trouble.

## CHAPTER 4: QUEERING SUBURBIA

Opening with aerial shots that capture the greenery of the lawns and blueness of the sky, John Waters' *Polyester* (1981), *Serial Mom* (1994) and *A Dirty Shame* (2004) introduce the spectators to the world of suburbia. The artificial sweetness of the scenery is punctuated by the orchestral music that accompanies the image. The grandeur of the soundtrack—a timeless classical orchestra piece—sets the tone of the setting as a conservative territory. In *Polyester* and *A Dirty Shame*, a chorus of angelic feminine voices sing the name of their protagonists, Francine and Sylvia. The camera then ventures into the home, seamlessly entering and admiring the décor and objects that furnish it. The travelling shot is in continuous movement until it finds its central object: the housewife. With the focus of the camera firmly planted on her, the action of the film might begin. The similarities in the openings of these three films provide the ground to study them together, as they showcase the common themes of housewives and suburbia.

Waters' career post *Desperate Living* (1977) initiated a mainstreaming approach that has been described by Waters as his attempt to disseminate bad taste to a wider audience, “spread[ing] the cancer to the shopping malls” (Nakas: Undated). The shopping mall imagery is essential to his aphorism because it makes explicit the material conditions of cinematic capitalist production and consumption. These films were leaving behind the arena of the cult Midnight Movie circuit in search of more conventional exhibition sites—the shopping malls—where they might gain wider demography. The shopping malls stand in direct opposition to the dirty, urban and cool Midnight Movie theatres. Consumerist, wealthy and fabricated, the mall is a by-product of suburbia. The strategy to spread the cancer to the shopping malls established suburbia as a metaphor for the mainstream (Coon 2014), both in an industrial sense,

as a physical approach to distribution in the suburbs, and within the cinematic universe, placing the suburb at the centre of the narrative.

By doing so, these films were abandoning in some way the aesthetics of filth and transgression, and re-inventing shock value by surprising audiences with newfound respectability. *Polyester* (1981) first introduced bad taste into the “normal” American way of life. Instead of depicting the lives, fights, and quest for notoriety of a group of outsiders, *Polyester* tells the story of a distressed housewife, Francine Fishpaw (Divine), with an acute sense of smell, and her struggle to keep a clean and tidy home and a normal family living happily inside. Contrary to her wishes, her husband owns a porn theatre, their teenage children are taking drugs and skipping school, and her mother steals from her. Also, she is an alcoholic. *Serial Mom* (1994) paints a much brighter picture of suburbia, in which life seems to be peaceful and the family happily well-adjusted, until the weekend when Serial Mom Beverly (Kathleen Turner) breaks free into a murderous spree that executes a couple of neighbours, in a parody of true crime and courtroom drama. Dwelling with sex instead of violence, in *A Dirty Shame* (2004) Sylvia (Tracey Ullman) suffers a head concussion that turns her into a sex-addict. Finding herself as part of Ray-Ray group of sex-positive apostles, she will fight against the neighbourhood's conservative 'neuters'.

Waters' new ‘shopping-mall-attack’ strategy was not so much of a rupture to the early Trash aesthetics as it may superficially appear. Housewife suburban despair had been satirized and foreshadowed in *Desperate Living*'s initial sequence. Melodrama and family disenfranchisement were also depicted in *Female Trouble*, showing Dawn Davenport's difficulties in playing the role of abiding teenager and giving mother. The importance of family kinship also features in *Multiple Maniacs* and especially in *Pink Flamingos*, in which family ties and affects are integrated into



the battle of filth. However, the existing literature argues that Waters' work post-1980s undertakes a process of domestication. The domestication theory<sup>12</sup> argues that Waters' cinema loses edge as “the gross-outs get *domesticated*, deodorized, and depilated as they get dematerialized” (Sedgwick and Moon 1994:239, my emphasis), and abandons his original art of transgression for a cinema which is “sedate, fluffy, and trivial” (Levy 2015:303). Because of the general domestication consensus that “Waters's films carry less and less any sense of their politics emerging from queer subcultures” (Tinkcom 2002:188), little scholarship has been dedicated to the study of these films. A very notable exception is the work of Derek Kane-Maddock, where the author describes the domestication theory as “the propensity to brand Waters as a provocateur who lost his edge in Hollywood” (2012:206) and challenges this assimilationist understanding of Waters' career by exploring his thematic shift through *Pink Flamingos*, *Polyester* and *Serial Mom*. Reading the paradoxes and contradictions in Waters' disenfranchisement of underground cinema<sup>13</sup>, and the unstable position he came to occupy in Hollywood, Kane-Maddock uses Esteban Muñoz's “working on and against” model (2012:208) to explore the ambiguities and complexities of Waters' unstable critique and parody of both genre and gender. This chapter studies the ways in which these three films challenge the domestication theory by queering suburbia.

*Polyester*, *A Serial Mom* and *A Dirty Shame* bestow an understanding of queerness as an ongoing action. Instead of understanding queerness as identity, I here use 'to queer' as an attempt to escape a fixed categorization that will somehow betray

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<sup>12</sup> The idea of domestication was similarly coined and popularized by the press (Sloman 1983, Mieczkowski 1986, Turan 1988, Aufderheide 1990, Hoberman 1998).

<sup>13</sup> On the dichotomy between underground and Hollywood, Kane Maddock notes: “Although his subversive parodies of gender and genre share an emphasis on performativity, they have been mistakenly perceived as the products of two self-contained and diametrically opposed filmmaking spaces, underground cinema and Hollywood, neither of which are as consistent or as isolated as is frequently implied” (2012:206)

the instability and fluidity of the term, as well as its potentiality to challenge established rules and conventions (Butler 1993, Doty 1995). An understanding of queering as an incomplete process allows for the existence of fluctuating positions, marking “a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception” (Doty 1995:73). Abandoning the realm of the heterosexual matrix, queer is a “deviation from normalcy” which includes, among other things, the sexual. Under this view, that contemplates the importance of deviation, to queer encompasses other actions: “As a verb-form, “to queer” has a history of meaning: to quiz or ridicule, to puzzle, but also, to swindle and to cheat” (Butler 1993:176). To those meanings, I add subverting, parodying, transgressing: transformations of the existing culture that refuse to settle for a fixed position on the margins. ‘To queer’ means to attempt to overstep into a mainstream arena and eventually overcome the rigid rules that enforce it. The implications of this definition are that, instead of reading queerness as a character attribute that easily identifiable on-screen, queerness is a fluid process that embeds the cinematic sensibility. If, as Doty suggests, queering “implies taking a thing that is straight and doing something to it” (2000:2), what are these films doing to suburbia, a space that has been described as the “straightest place imaginable”? (Dines 2010:1).

### **Definitions of Suburbia**

Suburbia can be defined as an umbrella concept that contemplates housing habits, its change and expansion during the twentieth century and the biopolitics<sup>14</sup> that accompanied them: “an emergent architectural space, a set of values and a way of life” (Silverstone 1997:3). Defined by their opposition to countryside and urban environments, the suburbs were a space designated for the nuclear family to flourish,

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<sup>14</sup> I am here using a feminist Foucauldian interpretation of biopolitics that focuses on mandates on sex and reproduction (Haraway 1999).

where they were given privileged space to produce (childrearing) and to consume (furniture, electrical appliances, automobiles...) and rigid gender roles were enforced, privileging the feminine mystique of domesticity (Friedan 1992).

The history of the suburbs is the history of enforced gender roles. Friedan's seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique*, detailed the rigid gender rules that American society enforced after World War II, taking the women outside the workforce and into the home. It was in the realm of domesticity where they would achieve self-realization by fulfilling their own femininity, which meant a life dedicated to the husband, the children, and the home (1992:38). Friedan studied how the motto 'Occupation: Housewife' had been sold by the media as the American Way of Life, and how the fiction of the feminine mystique ran parallel to the "explosive movement to the suburbs" (1992:214). With a garden to cultivate, a husband to serve dinner and drinks, and children to tend to, the suburbs offered a space where such femininity could be cultivated far away from the noise and pollution of the city.

Beyond gender, the suburbs came to represent a "Cold War ideological apparatus" (Medovoi 2005:19), a process which Leerom Medovoi describes as a consequence of the Fordist economy and its continuous need for mass consumption in order to safeguard its production model:

Suburbanization on such a mass scale allowed automobile companies in turn to market cars that the millions of relocated workers now needed to commute [...] It also eventually led to the rise of the shopping mall, a suburban alternative to urban commercial districts [...] in short, suburbanization established the mode of mass consumption necessary for Fordism to starve off another accumulation crisis, absorbing as it did the excess production capacity unleashed by postwar demobilization. (2005:17)

The promised wealth of suburbia came to represent the white, middle-class American dream. The dream, however, proved unstable, and suburbia is now understood as a contradictory site, as it both contains and conceals utopian dreams and their counterpart fears and anxieties when that dream proves unattainable (Silverstone

1997, Webster 2000, Beuka 2005). As a domestic space, it is deeply tied with issues of family and femininity, providing the perfect habitat where the housewife can flourish. Middle-ness is an important attribute that provides the key to understand the way the suburbs are represented. From films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *The Graduate* (1967), *The Stepford Wives* (1975), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *American Beauty* (1999), and *Donnie Darko* (2001), we can read a genealogy of suburbia as the ordinary default, a bland background to be contrasted with spectacular cinematic excess (Forrest et al, 2017:6-7). This concept allows a way to interpret suburbia as a site where the normal is confronted with the abnormal or Other. Cinematically, the suburbs represent a landscape of default normality that is invoked in order to be transformed.

In Waters' *Polyester*, *Serial Mom* and *A Dirty Shame*, that transformation is engaged in a process of “queering suburbia”, where the representation of normality - an American, white, middle-class, heterosexual normality- is placed at the centre of the narrative, only to be destroyed from within. Change would not be brought by an invasion of external forces, such as visiting Others conquering the suburbs: instead, in these three films, the housewife is the agent that propels change and forever alters the suburban peace, queering normality. For their depiction of domestic life, family attachments, and female sensibility, these three films fall into the category of women's films. The driving questions of this chapter are, what is suburbia, how does Waters' cinema depict it, and how do they transform each other. Reading the queering of suburbia through the decades, and across genre conventions, I first study *Polyester*'s odorous melodrama and incongruous juxtapositions. I then continue reading *Serial Mom*'s true-crime and gore horror parody, followed by *A Dirty Shame* gross-out comedy in blue-collar suburbia.

### **Polyester (1981)**

*Polyester's* suburbia is where Waters' bad taste first encounters the American middle-class. The title of the film encloses an incongruence of suburbia: its ambivalent class status. "Polyester—cheap, shiny, yet durable, both artificial and aspirational, symbol of the synthetic and degraded", writes Gorfinkel, "suggests the excesses and promises of the American 'good life' under capitalism, its plastic both miracle and scourge" (2019). *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste* classifies polyester as one of its entries, identifying the viscous and industrial fabric as an illustration of bad taste inclination "to improve on nature" (Stern and Stern 1991:10). Polyester then emerges as a symbol of the bad taste associated with middle-class expansion. Whereas in the early films bad taste was associated with the grotesque body, enfreakment and white trash, in this new iteration, bad taste addresses middle-class' fears, parodying the conventions of normality and exploiting the disorder of the social space.

Moving from the urban gutters to the suburbs represents an economic ascend, which is immediately obvious in the aesthetic of the film. The wealth imbued in the cinematography of the opening credits reveals the increased production value (with a budget of \$ 300,000, courtesy of New Line Cinema, to *Desperate Living* ' \$65,000), in which a helicopter shot captures an aerial overview of the trees and houses. When the camera lands, a Steadicam travelling shot seamlessly enters the home<sup>15</sup>. The French Provincial style mansion has sky blue walls and matching cerulean velour sofas, but the camera does not linger in the décor until it arrives at the upstairs bedroom, where Francine, in her bra and girdle, is getting ready in front of a mirror. "A fountain in every garden; a mirror in every room – this is a basic rule of French décor", describes

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<sup>15</sup> This was the first film where Waters did not operate the camera himself.

Catherine Oglesby in *French Provincial Decorative Art* (1951:133)<sup>16</sup>. The cinematic setting of the mirror reveals the influence of the Sirkian system. Arguably “the auteur” of melodrama, Douglas Sirk’s influence is evident in *Polyester*, whose rich and colourful mise-en-scène sets the scenery for an excessive mode of expression. In melodrama, the home is where everything happens, a site “filled with objects... that becomes increasingly suffocating” (Elsaesser 1987:61). The ‘suffocating’ objects represent the hidden contradictions in the representation of issues of femininity, domesticity, and family relations in “the idyllic, whitewashed, straight, suburban paradise of Eisenhower’s America” (Lang 2017:239). If suburbia is a space that represents an idyllic, unattainable utopia, the reversal images are the fears and anxieties that the dream might be corrupted. Melodrama blooms in suburbia because the house, the domestic space, is a site filled with class and gender anxieties. The multiple mirrors in *Polyester* alert us of the inconsistencies of what the screen is showing us, reflecting on the act of looking at, and performing in front, as both real and unreal.

All the little gestures that Francine undertakes in her bedroom – moisturizing, applying deodorant, trimming her eyebrows and nose-hairs, stepping into a white dinner dress and gloomily checking her weight on the scale – make visible the tasks of beauty and care that rule her body (Fig. 20). “Recalling the boudoirs, bedside tables, and ornate mirrored vanities of Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows* and *Written on the Wind* [...] Waters flags private zones where women ponder the tensions between artifice, reality, and self-definition”, describes Elena Gorfinkel (2019). *Polyester* navigates those gendered tensions by presenting suburbia, the so-called realm of normality, as a

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<sup>16</sup> The Fishpaw's house includes a mirror in every bedroom, the dining room, and the living room.

site filled with incongruent juxtapositions<sup>17</sup>: overpainting French Provincial décor to the American landscape, casting Divine as a devoted housewife, simultaneously paying tribute to Douglas Sirk and William Castle. Weaving together cleanliness and miasma, wealth and failure, metropolis and nature, underground and Hollywood cinema, *Polyester* depicts suburbia as an admixture, a jumble recollection of post-war America that circumvallates the trouble of the housewife, “the woman who is given the woeful task of enforcing domestic order (moral and otherwise) and who becomes the locus of its fundamental disorder (her sentiments run rampant)” (Gorfinkel 2019). Those tensions, between order and disorder, expose the incongruences of suburbia. Locating Francine at the core of those incongruences, I examine first the smells and sensations of Odorama, the camp pairing of Divine and Tab Hunter, and conclude examining the suburban failures in *Polyester*.

#### Odorama: the smells of suburbia

The release of *Polyester* brought a new technology, Odorama, whose function was to attach smells to the audio-visual medium of cinema. Different from other olfactory systems that released smells through individual vents underneath the audience seats (Smell-O-Vision), or through the air conditioning system (AromaRama), Odorama simply used a scratch-and-sniff card, that contained ten numbered pink circles. When their corresponding number flashed on the screen, the numbers had to be scratched and smelled. As a new technology, Odorama had to be explained to the audience, so the film included a prologue where white coat Dr Arnold

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<sup>17</sup> I borrow this concept from Esther Newton, who describe camp as “a philosophy of transformations and incongruity” (1979: 105) that shares the characteristics of incongruence, theatricality and sense of humour. “Camp usually depends on the perception or creation of *incongruous juxtapositions*” (1979: 106, original emphasis). Because of that oscillation between perception and creation, I decide against explicitly identifying Waters’ cinema as camps (as it was explored on chapter 1). However, I use here ‘incongruous juxtapositions’ as an apt description of *Polyester*’ ambivalent amalgamation of taste.

Quakenshaw, “Prominent Ear, Nose, and Throat Expert” explains the wonders and perils of Odorama (Fig. 21):

Through this nose comes some of life's most rewarding sensations, and we plan to share with you some of the most beautiful odors known to mankind. Unfortunately, this same nose... is also responsible for bringing us some odors that are rather... repulsive. We have not shied away from this distressing fact. You will experience some odors that may shock you. But the producers of this film believe that today's audiences are mature enough to accept the fact that some things in life just plain *stink*.

Odorama serves three functions in *Polyester*. First, it invokes the power of sensational cinema, a cinema that “privileges the communal space of the theatre as a social environment and an outlet for pleasure where anticipation explodes into riotous screams, laughter, and retches” (Russell 2018:239). Whereas in previous chapters these sensations were understood as laughter and recoils of disgust product of the representation of the grotesque body, *Polyester* exhibits a new technology that explicitly involves a physical sense, olfaction. Consequently, the use of Odorama surpasses Waters' early films bodily transgressions by taking the corporeality of the comedy one step further.

As an outside screen device, Odorama also plays homage to Waters' admired filmmaker William Castle<sup>18</sup> and the 'Gimmick' tradition. A favourite recourse of exploitation movies in the 1950s, Castle's Gimmicks were “innovative tricks to attract audiences by addressing them more directly than Hollywood cinema is accustomed to doing” (Leeder 2011:775). Using artifices such as a skeleton flying down on the theatre during a horror scene (*House on Haunted Hill*, 1959) or a vibrating device that was hidden underneath the seats, mimicking the attack of a spine parasite that feeds on fear (*The Tingler*, 1959), Castle demonstrated palpable showmanship. Described by Waters

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<sup>18</sup> Waters explores Castle' influence in the chapter 'Whatever Happened to Showmanship?', part of his book Crackpot: “King of the Gimmicks, William Castle was my idol. His films made me want to make films. I'm even jealous of his work. In fact, I wish I were William Castle. [...] Forget Ed Wood. Forget George Romero. William Castle was the best. William Castle was God” (1987:15) .



as “ludicrous but innovative marketing techniques” (1986:14), these gimmicks were characterized by their low cultural status and their interactive nature that required audience participation -a cinematic phenomenon akin to the Carnavalesque spirit of the Midnight Movies.

The final function of Odorama in *Polyester* is to introduce bad taste into the suburban world. Smell can be, Russell argues “the most intimate sense regarding disgust, as it has the potential to facilitate the incorporation of the disgusting object through particles of scent” (2018:243). The odours in Odorama connect the audiences' feelings to Francine's, physically assaulting them with the smell of farts, skunks, gasoline and dirty shoes. Francine's exacerbated sense of smell symbolises her hypersensitivity and commitment to cleanliness – a strategy to cope with disorder. Yet, as she continuously faces Odorama's bad smells, this strategy reveals a sense of failure, the impossibility to overcome pollution. Through Odorama, bad taste materializes outside the screen, “pervasive and invisible”, threatening with disgust and contagion (Miller 1997:66). Interestingly, when the smells are good, the tastefulness of Waters' representation of suburbia also seems to be called into question. The plastic artificiality of air-freshener and new car smell are fitting examples of what suburban housewife Francine considers tasteful. Consumerist and artificial, *Polyester*' suburbia stinks.

#### Camp Romance: Divine and Tab Hunter

Another strategy through which the film reflects the incongruent juxtaposition of suburbia is by bringing together Divine and Tab Hunter's stardom. In this section, I consider their performances in *Polyester* as a juxtaposition of cult underground and classical Hollywood stardom.

*Polyester* has been described as a “treatise on the besieged middle-class woman” (Gorfinkel 2019), with a female protagonist that, “unlike the heroine of *Pink*

*Flamingos*, seeks to contain the smut that threatens her vision of idyllic home life” (Kane-Maddock 2012:207). Francine acts as the housekeeper: she calls her family to dinner using a little bell, serves his husband a drink from the bar trolley, and asks her family to say grace before eating. Yet her commitment to the suburban ideal represent forms of failure, as none of the members of the family seems to respect one or appreciate Francine. Her role is that of the victim in melodrama: she embodies the failure of the suburban ideal.

Failure, in the suburbs, is akin to familiar discontent. Having failed in marriage (her husband runs away with his secretary) and motherhood (the children are juvenile delinquents) Francine hits rock bottom and sinks into alcoholism. Her drinking problem is another melodramatic convention, a symbol of her frustration. Drinking is a “visual metaphor” for failure. “Wherever characters are seen swallowing and gulping their drinks as if they were swallowing their humiliations along with their pride, vitality and the life-force have become palpably destructive, and a phoney libido has turned into real anxiety” (Elsaesser 1987:65). Forty minutes into the film, Francine goes on a drinking binge. A sad accordion melody plays while she gulps and gulps all types of alcoholic beverages, waking up in stained clothes in a bed filled with empty bottles and air fresheners. Francine's crying face and smeared makeup is framed in a high angle shot close-up that reinforces the powerlessness of the character.

Divine compared his role as Francine in *Polyester* to Joan Crawford's in *Mildred Pierce* (1945), where the suffering and pain of the mother-heroine substituted the rage and iciness of their previous roles, changing their star image with a compelling performance (Engstrom 1981). Despite industrial differences and oppositional taste between Divine and Waters' careers and the Classical Hollywood Studio System, both *Polyester* and *Mildred Pierce* put motherhood, sacrifice and pathos at the centre of

their narratives. Pathos, derived from the Greek word for suffering, is a crucial element in melodrama, as the path that connects emotion and femininity in the story, synchronizing the spatial, temporal and emotional dimensions. According to Mary Anne Doane, the function of pathos is that it “indicates that emotion has invaded discourse or representation, and this invasion seems always to be tinged by the illicit, the slightly scandalous” (2004:2). The 'slightly scandalous' alludes to the low status of the melodramatic genre, but it can also be read as a defiant attitude to the rigid familiar structures and gender roles. As the studies in melodrama undertaken by feminist film theory have explored (Gledhill 1987, Doane 1987, Mulvey 1996), melodrama is a genre that encompasses mountains of contradictions, exposing traumas and fears of patriarchal culture whilst simultaneously singing praise of traditional feminine values: sacrifice, selflessness, care, familiarity. If melodrama is the genre of the disenfranchised, the cultural implications of pathos resonate with the women's underprivileged role in society. In *Polyester*, pathos is paired with humour. Because the film is primarily a comedy, the melodramatic collapse of the family can be read as a critique of societal codes. Hence the pain of the housewife/mother would represent the unavailability of the domestic ideal of the feminine mystique. And because the character Francine is played by a man in drag, the stylization of femininity that conforms woman's films (Doane 1987:180) is further exposed. The mimesis of feminine gestures that invoke the woman's films genre is doubly called into attention: if films like *Written on the Wind* (1956) already employed mimicry as a “political textual strategy” (Doane 1987:182), *Polyester's* distancing irony pushes the issue further. Melodrama allowed Divine to perform in a new light, much as *Mildred Pierce* did for Joan Crawford.

Francine's love interest is Todd Tomorrow, played by 1950s Hollywood "Boy Next Door" Tab Hunter. If Odorama was the film's gimmick, casting Tab Hunter as Divine's counterpart was the second selling point<sup>19</sup>. The pleasure of seeing aged Hollywood heartthrob Tab Hunter cast as Divine's love interest in a Waters' film, reveals a lot about *Polyester*'s mainstream transition. Hunter's presence conveyed respectability and wider appeal that nevertheless also conferred cult cinema sensibility and ironic distancing. Hunter's crossover, from Warner Brothers to an independent New Line low-budget title, fits well the description of cult stardom achieved by the faded Hollywood star, a model created by Mathijs and Sexton to investigate the late careers of Bette Davies and Joan Crawford, "who moved from the mainstream to the margins of the exploitation circuit after their mainstream heyday" (2011:81). At the peak of his stardom, Hunter represented the All-American 'Sigh Guy', 'Swoon Bait' or 'Boy Next Door' of the Eisenhower era (Hunter and Mueller 2005:1). One of the last stars to sign an exclusive long-term contract, he was loved by teen audiences and sneered at by the critics. Caught in the last years of the Star Studio System, a time that can be best described (paraphrasing Gramsci) as a crisis where the old system was dying but the new alternative was not yet born, Hunter asked to be released from Warner Brothers and was forced to pay 100,000 dollars to buy himself out (2005:220), a decision that he came to regret as "career suicide" (*Tab Hunter: Confidential*, 2015). In debt and without the studio's support and stable income, Hunter's cinematic career post-1959 started transitioning to Cult Cinema, starting from low budget B movies - *Operation Bikini* (1963), *Ride the Wild Surf* (1964)- followed by Spaghetti Western- *Vengeance Is My Forgiveness* (1968), *Bridge over the Elbe* (1969)- and *Dinner*

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<sup>19</sup> Waters writes: "Odorama wasn't enough. We needed a star. A bankable one. A Hollywood star to play the male lead[...] One with a name that theater owners knew, one they'd never imagined working with the filthiest people alive" (2019:19).

Theatre. In this context, it was feasible for Waters to approach him for *Polyester* (1981)<sup>20</sup>, and Hunter took the job, which turned out to be a significant point in his trajectory:

Despair that comes from having your career nose-dive before you're thirty years old? I know all about it. But I also know the hilarity of having your career revived, twenty-five years later, thanks to a canny cinematic prankster and his cross-dressing star. My work with John Waters and Divine was a high point of my professional life, even though it led to another label being hung on me that I have no use for: Gay Icon. (2005:5)

Hunter's gayness, concealed during the most significant part of his professional acting life, was masked during his Hollywood years by publicity dates with female stars like Natalie Wood and Debbie Reynold. Hunter's clean-cut, wholesome American persona protected him from scandal even when he was outed by tabloid magazine *Confidential*<sup>21</sup>. In 1981, his decision to collaborate with Waters and Divine in 1981 -against the advice of his agent- was a complicitous act of defiance that “outed” him and effectively relaunched his career<sup>22</sup>.

Hunter's star image fully embeds the character of Todd Tomorrow. Todd first appears onscreen as a stranger that locks eyes with Francine in a red light: driving his white convertible, he spots Francine and pouts at her, tongue in cheek, before drives off. The reverse shot shows a captivated Francine nervously biting her nails: this is the first set up for the upcoming storyline. The second set up is Francine's erotic dream. After fantasizing with a sexual encounter in her kitchen with the pizza delivery boy, Francine's subconscious goes back to Todd, who appears topless against a black

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<sup>20</sup> Waters admits: “Tab Hunter fit the bill perfectly. He was still handsome, could act, had fifties movie-star baggage and carried a hint of tabloid notoriety. Better yet, he didn’t had an agent at the time to talk him out of it” (2019:20).

<sup>21</sup> The documentary *Tab Hunter: Confidential* opens up with Hunter's arrest for attending a gay house party, in 1950, an event that sensational tabloid *Confidential* would expose years later. Allegedly, this event was filtered to the press by his previous manager, Henry Willson, in exchange to keep media silence on Rock Hudson's sexuality (Hunter and Mueller, 2005:172).

<sup>22</sup> Hunter recounts in his autobiography: “For both John and me, our collaboration paid huge dividends: “I'd helped “legitimize” his brand of movie, and he made me “hip” overnight” (2005:316).

background (Fig. 22). The towel around his neck suggests that he has been exercising – and his gaze is fixed on the camera, that steadily closes the shot until it only frames his face. The scene is set to display a lustful gaze over Todd's naked wet torso, painstakingly captured by the camera, enacting Francine's fantasy. The neglected suburban housewife is therefore privileged as a desiring subject, whilst the male counterpart is presented as a commodified body. Todd's status as heartthrob for middle-class and middle-age suburban housewives is fully established in the shot.

Francine officially meets Todd in *bad taste*: in a road accident where the couple exchange pleasantries over a decapitated corpse. Wearing bright red trousers and a white and blush windowpane blazer and matching vest, Todd Tomorrow is handsome and seductive. “I've got something I want to show you”, he says to Francine: “It's long... it's sleek... and it's powerful” he brags, whilst Odorama number 8 appears on the screen, signalling Todd's new car. The couple leaves the accident site and goes on a day trip to the countryside. The musical sequence that follows vibrates with campiness and encapsulates *Polyester*' queer take on melodrama: Todd and Francine go on a car ride on the countryside, stopping to feed and pet the horses, jumping into the hay in a barn. The meaning of the scene is twofold: on a literal interpretation, the countryside represents an idyllic break from the constraints of society. Releasing a bird from his hands, Todd Tomorrow stands as a masculine figure linked to nature much as Ron Kirby (Rock Hudson) was in *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). Much as in Sirk's cinema, here the masculine character represents wildness and succeeds as a romantic interest in taking the entrapped housewife outside of suburbia. The *beatus ille* is transferred to Francine, who is at her happiest at that point– a feeling that is reinforced by the barrel organ sound and lyrics of the song 'The Best Thing': “the first good thing to happen to Francine”. The sequence closes with Todd and Francine gaily running on

a field, in slow motion, their figures bathed in twilight lights. Weaving a handkerchief out of her hand, and throwing infatuated looks at Todd, Francine embodies the romantic ideal faultlessly. However, whilst the melodramatic genre is displayed as a *tour-de-force* fantasy, the scene is underlined by a distancing irony that queers the heterosexual romance<sup>23</sup>. Despite the joyful attitude of the couple; the colourful fabrics of their attire and Todd's flashy new convertible clash with the simplicity of the natural landscape, rendering them out of place Sunday drivers in the countryside. The garishness of their clothes and vehicle disrupts the illusion of the *beatus ille*. The off-key vocals of the song<sup>24</sup> are another sign that betrays the tastefulness of the sequence. Whereas in previous Waters' film *Bad Taste* was explicit in the precarious cinematography and editing, in *Polyester* its presence is far more nuanced, with the flawless camera work and higher production value being twisted by the satirical use of other elements, such as costume, sound, and performance. Part of the pleasure of the sequence resides in the odd pairing of Divine and Tab Hunter as romantic interests. The antithesis is not so: rather than opposing forces, the two performers pair well, producing an intersection of Hollywood stardom and cult sensibility, queerness and irony. That intersection is what *Polyester* ultimately creates: a new mode of expression that adapts bad taste to mock mainstream cinema codes, in this case, Hunter's studio past and the women's film melodrama genre. In his work on gender and genre, Kane-Maddock describes this process as “‘working on and against’ traditional representational strategies”. Waters' “selling out” strategy is paradoxically determined by his refusal to continue on the same position where he was crowned, on the margins of the industry, instead opting to bid for off-brand respectability “by engaging with the

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<sup>23</sup> Heterosexuality ends up signifying “both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself” (Butler 1990:166)

<sup>24</sup>The song was interpreted by Bill Murray, in another attempt at stunt casting.

limitations of mainstream media the director has expanded his focus from ridiculing gender norms to parodying the conventions of Hollywood storytelling” (2012:208). As the great romantic musical sequence is simultaneously a parody of a perfume commercial, beyond mocking the conventions of the melodrama and the aspirations and norms of suburban life, *Polyester* rewrites bad taste.

#### Failures of the ‘American Dream’

The film’s continuous play with incongruence -via mixing good and bad smells, homages to Castle and Sirk, underground and Hollywood stardom- dispels the myth of suburbia as a site of conformity and normality. Instead, *Polyester* calls attention to its failures because it exposes the ludicrousness of the American Dream. Failure, explores Jack Halberstam, “goes hand in hand with capitalism”, as it “requires that everyone live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth even as profit for some means certain losses for others” (2011:88). Focusing on the fears and anxiety of suburbia, *Polyester* mocks capitalistic notions of success by parodying class status and happy endings.

Symbols of class are juxtaposed and rearranged throughout the film for comic effects. An example of this is Todd Tomorrow’s art-house drive-in, where they show triple bills of Marguerite Duras’ films and caviar and champagne are available at the concession stand. The drive-ins that boomed in post-war America represented a cheap alternative to the traditional cinema theatres, and they became a site for youth audiences and exploitation movies. By imposing the highbrow sensibility of *Cahiers du Cinema* (Fig. 23) on a drive-in, the film upends the sense of social order. Todd’s cinema of sophistication contrasts with Elmer’s pornographic Charles Art Theater, yet it simultaneously ties together the two models of cinematic exhibition as incongruous juxtapositions of taste. By depicting a suburban house which is directly financed by



the exhibition of titles such as *My Burning Bush*, and connecting exploitation practices with the French Nouvelle Vague, the film effectively interchanges high, low, and middle ground class symbols.

The interchangeable status of taste and class is further reflected in Cuddles, played by Edith Massey. Her character perfectly encapsulates the economic incongruences of suburbia: she is Francine's previous domestic servant, thanks to the inheritance of the fortune of her employers, becomes upper-class. Her meteoric class ascend is celebrated in a debutante ball, where 63-years-old Massey presents herself in the upper-class society. The incongruence of her aged body reemphasizes the comedy as if its to say, by reversing class status, the film pokes fun at the upper-class traditions of class and the promises of virginity that surround it. Dancing with her chauffeur, with whom she is soon engaged, Cuddles overcomes the distinctions of the social world, as she encompasses the upper and lower class. This parody subtly disparages the American Dream and its myth of class mobility – despite its wealth, Cuddles is othered: she is despised by her supposed peers in the shops where she tries to shop.

*Polyester*' commitment to the suburban failure seals the film's ending. Towards the end of the film, Francine seems to have partially reconstructed her aspirations of a "normal American family" with her rehabilitated children and Todd. Yet there are two narrative twists designated to terminate her happiness. On the one hand, Elmer and his secretary plan to kill her to avoid paying the divorce settlement, and on the other, her mother and Todd are having an affair, and plan to commit her to a mental institution to inherit the house and the divorce settlement. The resolution sequence takes place in the house, and again the site reopens as a space of conflict, filled with tensions that arise from the feminine and familiar ideals.

When Francine wakes up in the middle of the night, she finds that Todd has left the bed and looks for him. Sombre melodramatic music sets the expecting mystery tone of the scene, and Francine continues exploring the house, sniffing around as if she were trying to identify the foreign element in her house. Smelling, at this point of the film, represents Francine's sensitivity and extremely acute mode of perception, a sense that allows her to interpret the outside world -allowing her to discover her son's glue-sniffing habit or her husbands' affair. Also, the smells also physically introduce us in the world the character inhabits, reinforcing the spectatorial identification with Francine. A Steadicam shot further highlights the character's subjectivity: as she descends down the stairs, she finds her mother and Todd embraced in a kiss in the cerulean velvet sofa. Francine reacts with horror to the ploy, and after hitting them both, her mother shows her a bouquet of flowers than is then interchanged with a pair of dirty tennis shoes (Odorama number 9). This gesture is very representative of the silliness of *Polyester's* parody of the melodrama.

When the children kill Elmer and his lover, Todd and LaRue plan to blame Francine, commit her to a mental institution, and take the inheritance. Their plan involves selling the house, getting rid of Lulu and Dexter, and moving to Miami, where they can finally enjoy their “free, white, rich and happy” dream life. Their conventional desires, fitting of their upper-middle-class expectations –fancy clothes, a purple Cadillac- indicate *Polyester's* suburban failure. In this iteration of suburban anxiety, what is threatening is normality itself.

*Polyester* first introduces villains that are, in appearance, much more normal than other characters of the film, yet that normality -as with the anti-pornography neighbours, and the anti-abortion demonstrators- is clearly marked as evil. The parody of the conservative protesters, much as the anti-porn demonstration that we saw at the

beginning of the movie, categorizes the group as insane villains. Wearing stencil protesting signs with messages like “Abortion: The Second Holocaust” and a baby doll tied to a crucifix, screaming “murderer” and “what if Einstein's mom had had an abortion?”, the parody of the religious bigots is magnified and exposed as ridiculous. Instead of performing bad taste in a self-contained world of freaks, the film applies it to the realm of normality. In *Polyester*, suburbia is portrayed as a terrifying space, not because it might be plagued with violence, crime or sexual anxiety, but because their “good citizens” are terrifying and oppressive. Their normality encompasses a disciplinary regime that is constantly policing bodies, directly attacking what they consider unruly or disorderly behaviour: pornography, masturbation, abortion, divorce.

In the last scene of the film, Francine sprays an air freshener: temporarily erasing the bad smells, she seems to have found peace. However, much as in the films of Douglas Sirk, the semi-happy ending in *Polyester* is tainted with sadness and failures, for the climax reflects on the suffering that Francine has gone through, and how close has she been to have been defeated or eliminated by suburbia. Yet the sweetness of the artificial air-freshener odour prevails: with it, the stink of suburbia is transformed into good bad taste. In this section, I have studied how Waters’ bad taste first encounters suburbia, and the incongruous juxtapositions that produces in terms of genre and class. In the upcoming sections, the incongruous juxtaposition of Waters’ cinema incorporate true crime, and sexual addiction, to the suburbs.

### **Serial Mom (1994)**

This is a true story. The screenplay is based on court testimony, sworn declarations, and hundreds of interviews conducted by the film-makers. Some of the innocent characters' names have been changed in the interests of a larger truth. No one involved in the crimes received any form of financial compensation.

With a false claim on the true nature of the narrative events that will be presented ahead, *Serial Mom*'s opening credits announce the importance of criminality and courtroom drama proclaiming its identification with the true crime genre. A popular genre across media-magazines, books, radio serials, podcast, tv series, tv films- true crime can be best described as a subgenre of crime that employs the 'real' authenticity of events as fuel to hook audiences into the murder mystery narrative. Scary and thrilling, true crime can be explained as a product of the “tabloidization of crime” (Murley 2008:79), a sort of entertainment product based on real-life trauma and violence. “Publishers themselves generally define the genre of true crime as consisting mainly of true stories of sensational and dramatic murder”, summarizes Anita Biressi (2001:15). The low cultural status of the genre, as well as its fascination with gory and gruesome violence, relate to Waters' shock value tradition, as the courtroom drama scenes in *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* demonstrate. As detailed in *Shock Value*, Waters is an avid consumer of trials (2005:113-127). In the early nineties, with the launch of Courtroom TV (Murley 2008:123) and in the cusp of the O.J. Simpson trial, *Serial Mom* both homages and parodies a genre with rising popularity.

To discuss *Serial Mom* as a parody of true crime (Fig. 24) inevitably takes us to discuss the parody of suburbia. Albeit an initial analysis could establish the opposition of the terms, suburbia and crime exist not solely on opposition but in collaboration. For once, as a site defined by their opposition to the city, the suburbs are built on the negation of the urban anxieties. The promise of the suburb is the

promise of security, a heterotopia of 'safeness'<sup>25</sup> where the middle-class dream of domestic bliss can exist. "From its origins, the suburban world of leisure, family life, and union with nature was based on the principle of exclusion", defends Robert Fishman on his work on *Bourgeois Utopias*: "work was excluded from the family residence; middle-class villas were segregated from working-class housing, the greenery of suburbia stood in contrast to a grey, polluted urban environment" (1990:4). The polluted urban environment is especially acute in Waters' native Baltimore, a city with a history of racial segregation, neighbourhood inequality, riots and one of the highest homicide statistics in the country. As an industrial city in decline, the African American population that had migrated to the city constituted the vast majority of public housing, whilst the white population moved to the suburbs (Corkin 2017:8-15, Taylor 2001, Williams 2014)<sup>26</sup>. Later represented in *The Wire* as 'Bodymore, Murdaland' (2002-2008), Baltimore, Maryland is a place where economic inequality and unemployment were directly correlated with drug culture and criminality. Crime and violence belong to the inner city, where there is systemic deprivation, whilst suburbia is a white enclave where people assume to be safe. The suburban world in which *Serial Mom* is located was created to scape that crime and violence, to negate its proximity. It follows that one of the anxieties of suburbia is to be reminded of that violence. When suburbia is a dystopia, crime appears as a contrast to the superficial peaceful, middle-class normality. A recurrent question in crime narratives, "How safe

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<sup>25</sup> Suburbia is a heterotopia since it juxtaposes countryside and city, privacy and community. The landscape is re-arranged to "create new spaces where microcosm of society are transformed and protected" (Low 2008:154).

<sup>26</sup> The racial segregation of Baltimore as a result of public housing policies is a topic well explored in Stanley Corkin's work on *The Wire* (2017) and Theo Anthony's documentary *Rat Film*. The reversed effect of the expansion of white suburbia, according to a demographical study quoted by Corkin, is patent: "While in 1950, almost two thirds of the region's white population lived in Baltimore, only 12.5% lived in the City by 1997" (Corkin 2017:13)

is safe?” (Peach 2000:110) reminds us that the boundaries of the safeness of suburbia are always being renegotiated.

Such negotiation takes place in *Serial Mom* opening sequence. Initially, its portrayal of the suburban family appears to be a reversed statement of *Polyester's* suburbia. Whereas in *Polyester* the house décor and familiar setting introduced bad taste and alerted of the incongruences of the suburban dream, *Serial Mom* seems to contemplate the pleasantries of a nuclear family household run by a strong feminine housewife. Beverly (Kathleen Turner) prepares breakfast for the Sutphin's family. Far away from Francine's loneliness and quiet desperation, Mom runs the household gleefully, greeting the garbage men, appreciating the singing birds outside of her window. Described in the script as “a trim, fortyish, pretty Betty Crocker of the 90's”, the Mom in *Serial Mom* appears to be an updated 1950's cookbook textbook copy of the feminine mystique. With an open smile, Mom serves fruit salad and cereal to her kids and husband in a kitchen table scene that sets the tone of domestic bliss. She appears to be more of a stereotype than a character- she is soon described by one of the characters as “Beaver Cleaver's mother”- but the film's queering of suburbia demands that the illusion of the perfect housewife is to be disrupted. When Dad condemns aloud from his newspaper “Hillside Strangler gets his college degree in prison”, Mom distractedly replies, “We all have bad days” to her husband insistence on the death penalty. Her empathetic response is highlighted by her actions during the scene. While the rest of the family is sitting down, engaged in conversation, she is moving around them, distracted by the presence of a disturbing element: a fly in the kitchen. The loud buzz mutes the rest of the sounds in the scene, stealing attention from the conversation and subtly embedding Mom's subjectivity. The presence of the insect is disturbing, and she does not stop until she kills it. Her gesture surprises the

rest of the family, that was not expecting the sudden bang, and the camera closes up on a frame of the scattered corpse of the fly over a white kitchen tile, where the last credits appear on screen: 'written and directed by John Waters'. The authorial signature questions the initial domestic suburban bliss by re-introducing bad taste in the suburban setting, in the form of the splattered dead fly on the breakfast kitchen table.

A visit from the police is the second element that disrupts the suburban peace and breaks the equilibrium. The Sutphins are asked a few questions because their neighbour Dottie Hinkle (Mink Stole) is being harassed with obscene phone calls and letters. The corniness of their reaction to the 'P' word, trying to protect their teenage offspring from hearing it, underlines the comedic tone of the scene, one that reaches a climax when Mom walks to the window and sings to the birds outside to prove "life doesn't have to be ugly". The layout of the scene functions as narrative exposition to introduce the Sutphin family: Dad (Sam Waterstone) is a dentist, Misty (Ricky Lake) is a college student and flea market dealer with a strong interest in boys, and Chip (Matthew Lillard) is a high school student and horror film fan that works weekends on the video-club store. Mom is the carer of the family, and her status as the housewife allows her to pass undercover, at first, as a "nice and normal lady". The first two acts of *Serial Mom*- setup and confrontation- revolve around the suburban awakening of 'Serial Mom', her enjoyment of violence and her family's gripping realisation of who she is, while the third act is a true crime and courtroom drama parody that returns to the "crime is beauty" theme. I first examine the figure of the criminal housewife as suburban product and threat and then examine the defence of criminality that the film undertakes.

### Criminal Housewife

Much of the pleasure in *Serial Mom* comes from learning how abnormal is normality. Projecting the figure of the serial killer onto a suburban housewife, *Serial Mom*'s comedy intertwines exceptional violence with everyday life. The film subjectivity is aligned with the criminal housewife, Beverly Sutphin, a character that despite her domestic bliss and "intense wholesomeness" (Turner and Morrow 2018:160), enjoys torturing her neighbours with prank phone calls ("is this the Cocksucker residence?"). The calls establish early on the spectatorial identification with Mom, as we, the audience, know something about the protagonist that the rest of the characters ignore: who Mom truly is beyond her "nice and normal lady" façade. The reveal of that information establishes complicity through Mom's gleeful joy in contrast to her uptight neighbour, Dottie Hinkle (played by Mink Stole). A split-screen divides the two side of the conversation, where Dottie, with a ginger perm, shivers in fear and anger in opposition to Mom's Doris Day-esque bob haircut, mocking banter and contained laughter. By bringing together Kathleen Turner and Mink Stole, the film integrates two distinct types of stardom, creating an intersection where Hollywood and cult cinema meet that symbolises the abnormality of normality. Furthering the theme of suburbia as a metaphor for the mainstream, *Serial Mom* uses an A-list Hollywood star<sup>27</sup> as the subversive agent in the domestic setting. Her comments are as offensive as they are wacky: "Isn't this 4215 Pussy Way? [...] Let me check the zip - 212 Fuck you?". The use of profane language in the film is contained, much to the contrary to the loud screaming and swearing of Waters' early shock value, yet the restraint stresses

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<sup>27</sup> Kathleen Turner's career, albeit very popular in the 80s, declined in the mid-90s "as a result of a devastating combination of illness, addiction, and [...] an unfair reputation for being hard to work with" (Marchese 2018). She has been described, alongside Melanie Griffith, as one of the actress that encountered professional hardships for being an ageing women in Hollywood (Fairclough-Isaacs 2014).



the weight of the cursing words, accentuating their impact on the setting. This is how *Serial Mom* integrates bad taste into the suburban lawns: whereas a superficial analysis might conclude that the beautification of suburbia and the loss of profane language provoke a domestication of previous transgressions (Sedgwick and Moon 1994, Levy 2015), the film, in fact, emphasizes the importance of obscenity and violence by contrasting them against the white canvas of suburbia. “Their shockingly ordinary conditions [...] are highlighted in order to make the thrill, the joke or the sexual encounter all the more astonishing” (Forrest et al. 2017:6). The pleasure of Mom's subversive behaviour is enlarged by her conformity to suburban ideals. A flashback reveals the past grievance that caused her attack on Dottie: she rudely stole her parking spot in the grocery store. The fact that such an ordinary grievance could provoke such an extreme reaction is where the comedy resides. Mom is a housewife that takes her good taste and code of behaviour to the extremes.

Her criminal behaviour escalates as the film progresses, and the second act of *Serial Mom* starts off with her first murder. The breakfast opening scene already anticipated a PTA meeting at Chip's high school, and as part of her motherly duties, she attends the meeting with a homemade fruitcake for Mr Stubbins. The tension raises after the teacher suggests therapy for her son, making a pathology out of his love of horror cinema and placing the blame on her as a mother. The character replicates the figure of the teachers in *Female Trouble* and *Hairspray* acting as mean authority figure that, much as the neighbours in *Polyester*, defends the status quo by openly excluding and oppressing those who are different. As a vengeance, Mom waits in her car and runs over Mr Stubbins, hitting his body with her blue station wagon, and then running the vehicle over him. A medium close-up of his corpse lying on the ground, with a bloody face and the gum falling off his mouth, closes the scene. Her second murder

is similarly motherly inspired: she kills the jock that had stood up her daughter Misty, only after suggesting she should lose weight before they date and showing up at the flea market where she works with another date. She uses her neighbour Rosemary's recently acquired flea market fire poker to stab him, piercing him from the back to his stomach, and pulling off his liver whilst extracting it. The third and fourth murder victims are the Sterners, a neighbourhood couple that crosses Beverly by forcing his husband to attend the dentist clinic on a Saturday. She stabs the wife with scissors and then kills the husband by crushing him with the air conditioner. All of her murder weapons are domestic objects of suburbia: in her fifth murder, she uses a leg of lamb to bludgeon Mrs Jenson (Fig. 25), who refuses to rewind, and then feeds it to her dog to make it disappear in a nod of recognition to Almodóvar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984). All these murders are filmed in an explicit slasher fashion, where violence is explicit and gory, and *Serial Mom* moves in fast, mechanical gestures that are punctuated by syncopated staccato soundtrack (described in the script as "Mom's Psycho Theme") that locates the tone of the scenes in the B-horror genre that is being parodied.

*Serial Mom's* identification with gore and B-horror cinema is explicit in the film's use of intertextual references. As evidence of Chip's love for horror cinema, the film includes footage from *Blood Feast* (dir. Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1963), *Strait-Jacket* (dir. William Castle, 1964) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (dir. Tobe Hooper). Referencing these films pays homage to cult cinema history, subscribing *Serial Mom* -a Hollywood production with an estimated budget of thirteen million dollars, the biggest project in Waters' filmography up to 1994- with the underground

anti-mainstream sensibility of the Midnight Movies<sup>28</sup>. The offbeat sensibility is over-imposed on the suburban world, where Chip and Mom's enjoyment of the cinematic violence is interpreted by other characters (Mr Stubbins, Dad, the police officers) as a dangerous interest: they take taste as a moral issue. *Serial Mom* represents a diametrically opposed cinematic taste in the character of Mrs Jenson, an elderly citizen of suburbia who adores *Ghost Dad* (1990) and *Annie* (1982) yet is selfish and ill-mannered in customer service. After she rudely storms off the video-club store, Chip mutters that her behaviour might be explained by the "influence of all those family films". If there is a perverted taste, the film suggests, is Mrs Jenson's, who goes home to sing along to *Annie's* 'Tomorrow' while her dog licks her feet. What *Serial Mom* does, rather than corroborate the hypothesis that consuming on-screen violence produces real violence, is to suggest, with the use of intertextual horror films, that we read Mom's murders with pleasure and laughter. Bringing to the fore the cinematic enjoyment of gore, murder and gruesome episodes, *Serial Mom* aligns itself with the sensibility of the Midnight Movies and calls attention to its own construction.

The pleasure of consuming cinematic violence that was manifest in *Multiple Maniacs* is reintroduced in *Serial Mom*, a fact that the film acknowledges when Chip mockingly quotes *Multiple Maniacs'* Mr David's words on the dinner table: "I'm so happy I could shit". Similarly, *Serial Mom's* enjoyment of violence updates *Female Trouble's* celebrity criminal theme in the context of a late century media-obsessed society. The "tabloidization of crime" (Murley 2008:79) takes crime to suburbia via television, which the film illustrates with a *The Joan Rivers Show* cameo, where Rivers discusses "serial hags: women who love men who mutilate". The humorous portray

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<sup>28</sup>This section deliberately discusses B-movies, horror, gore, and Midnight Movies next to each other, not with the intention of equating the terms, but with the intention of creating a category of cult cinema sensibility that describes the many references that the film observes.

of serial killers as the new movie stars and sexual icons is reinforced in other scenes, where Mom caresses a picture of Charles Manson, or initiates sex with her husband feeling excited after her first killing. It is later revealed that Mom owns a serial killer scrapbook filled with clips from newspapers and, among others, a dedicated picture of Richard Speck (Fig. 26). If Dawn Davenport claimed to have blown Speck in an incendiary speech in *Female Trouble*, in *Serial Mom* his semi-naked photograph decorates Mom's scrapbook. The serial killer scrapbook materializes the film's associations with true crime, and it exemplifies the parody of the true crime genre and the suburban trope that the film undertakes, exploiting the comedic value of pairing these two worlds. As discussed early on the chapter, suburbia is a feminized space; so is true crime, as the genre is mostly consumed by women and features best-selling female authors (Browder 2006, Murley 2008)<sup>29</sup>. Much as melodrama interrogates patriarchal structures in the private domestic space, true crime questions the relation of women and violence. The thrilling consumption of murder as entertainment “subverts the strong cultural taboo against women showing interest in violence” (Murley 2008:153). The film pushes the taboo further by queering the genre's gender norms where “the victims are female; [...] the killer or killers are male” (Browder 2006:930). Beverly's reading habits-*Helter Skelter* (2015 [1974]), *Hunting Humans* (1990)- are not atypical of a suburban housewife, the difference is that in this story, she embodies the active role of the killer.

The eccentricities of Mom are unveiled by the police and her family as the film progresses: her compulsively consumption of true crime literature, her long-distance

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<sup>29</sup>“True crime is a female genre-it attracts more women readers and fans of particular writers and types of true crime [...] Women comprise the majority of fan-letter writers and attendees at book signings, and evidence from Internet true-crime fan sites and Web logs with comment functions bolsters the theory that the genre has a largely female readership” (Murley 2008:47-48).

friendship with Ted Bundy (whose voice is played by Waters), her violent reactions to gum and careless driving. As her family becomes more and more concerned and suspicious, Mom's nonchalant attitude remains, and the character navigates happily through her normal life, completely at peace with her neurosis, despite being closely watched by everyone and escorted by a never-ending row of police cars on the family's Sunday visit to Church. She is soon identified as a murderer, and the radio announces it and gives her a new alias, 'Serial Mom'.

'Serial Mom', a serial killer housewife, occupies a new space in the intersection of Waters' traditional bad taste and the world of suburbia. The heroine does not share aesthetics with the queer monsters of Waters' early film underground era, nor she goes in loud tirades against the established order. However, her subversion is tied to her commitment to normality, something that Kane-Maddock describes as a “cultural aberration, the consequence of Waters’s engagement with the restrictions inherent in normative Hollywood representation” (2012:208). Serial Mom hates gum, seatbelt-less drivers, rude neighbours, people who lie to their dentists, the “brown word”; she likes birds, Barry Manilow, making the perfect meatloaf for dinner and recycling. She represents good taste in suburbia, something that is especially obvious when compared to her neighbours Dottie and Rosemary -both portrayed as noisy, judgemental and hypocritical women with questionable taste, dressed in loud flower pattern textiles, Fabergé eggs collectors. In contrast, Beverly Sutphin is always dressed impeccably in simple tones (primarily white and blue colours), drives carefully and is always nice to garbage men. She observes rules of good taste and conduct, endorsing the values of suburbia, except for the fact that she punishes transgressions with murder.

### Defending Criminals

The suburban world appreciates homogeneity (Marsh 1990, Beuka 2005) and filters out outsiders, so when 'Serial Mom' is identified by the radio the Sutphin family receives a very different reception from their community at Sunday morning Mass. The Catholic congregation receives Beverly coldly, staring at her with still shock and horror, and the sequence ahead vibrates with tension: the uptight setting, where every attendee is primly dressed in their finest outfits, clashes with the narrative expectation of upcoming action that will resolve the second act. This rising tension is not devoid of humour: the topic of the service being 'Capital Punishment and You' functions as a timely parody. With the police waiting outside to have enough evidence to arrest Mom, the sermon reflects back on Dad's early defence of the death penalty, and a close-up of his concerned expression confirms that he is very aware of the relevance and seriousness of the topic. The priest says:

Jesus said nothing to condemn capital punishment as he hung on the cross, did He?! If ever there was a time to go on record against the death penalty, wasn't it that night? Capital Punishment is already the law in the State of Maryland!...So what are we waiting for, fellow Christians? Let's just do it!

Giving voice to the religious fundamentalist support of the death penalty is a strategy of exposing the absurdity of their logic, much as the abortion clinic scene did in *Polyester*. Subversion, here, is not based on episodes of shock value but on the political commentary that employs humour as a discursive tool that mocks the conservative values. Capital Punishment was in use in the state of Maryland until 2013, which is something that the film needed to address in relation to the "crime is beauty" thesis. Whereas *Serial Mom* does not openly preach, as *Female Trouble* did, that crime equals beauty; the film actively sides with the criminal. All the patriarchal figures of authority are rendered ridiculous, or powerless, in comparison to Mom's audacity and strength. That refusal of the authority and the law is part of what explains

contemporary fixations with serial killers, argues David Schmid, for the serial killer “both outrages and thrills us by his [or her] seeming ability to stand outside the law, to make its own law” (2005:24). In other words, if the thrill of serial killers resides in their rejection of order and law, they can stand as revolutionary outlaws against the numb conformity of suburbia.

The film illustrates this rejection of suburbia in the car chasing sequence that starts in the outskirts of the suburbs only to culminate in a punk bar establishment in the inner city. Mom chases Scotty while the rest of the Sutphin family follows Mom, and the police follows them all. The chase culminates at the Hammerjacks club, where riot grrrl band Camel Lips are playing. Mom throws the stage lights over Scotty's head, only to later spray him with hairspray and set him on fire, whilst the crowd cheers her name to the astonished reaction of the Sutphins. This action sequence constitutes a climax, one that closes the second act of the film with Mom's arrest. The crescent speed in the chain of events, the use of several vehicles and locations and the multitude of extras involved underline the sequence as perhaps one of the most cinematographically complex in Waters' body of work, and almost certainly one with the highest production value. The increase in budget is palpable and it translates into a visual style that slightly loses the staged *mise-en-scène* of previous Waters films -something that characterized not only the underground hits or the Trash trilogy, but also *Polyester*, *Hairspray* and *Cry Baby*. The professional production and the sophisticated camera-work and editing that conform the sequence place *Serial Mom* a step closer to Hollywood.

In an interview in *The Charlie Rose Show* upon the release of the film, Waters explained: “What I am asking you in this movie is to like Kathleen Turner's character, even though she kills people. And I think [...] it's a feel-good movie, which is odd, considering it is about a mass-murderer” (1994). The empathy towards the criminal,

ultimately, is where the subversive political potential of the film resides. *Serial Mom* subverts true crime first by feminizing the figure of the serial killer, which has traditionally been understood as exclusively male. Women, in true crime, are often secondary characters that can be blamed for their relation to violent men, either as “the “seductive” victims, or “emasculating” mothers or wives of the murderers [...] [and/or] as the “helpmates” of serial murderers” (Schmid 2005:232). But most importantly, *Serial Mom* subverts true crime by disavowing the most conservative aspect of the genre: the tendency to side with police and prosecutors and defend incarcerations. By the third act of *Serial Mom*, Mom’s self-defence in her trial is so entertaining that wins over the favour of the jury and the audience, subscribing to the trial entertainment described in *Shock Value* -“the best defendant to watch is one who is guilty and unrepentant, but who denies his guilt” (Waters 2005:114). Preceding the O.J. Simpson era by only a few months, the release of *Serial Mom* certainly offers a sociological portrait that points to the conclusion that “in the words of a 1994 National Examiner headline: “Serial Killers are as American as Apple Pie” (Schmid 2005:25). In his study of Serial Killer Cinema, Robert Cett reads the film as a cynical paradox:

The mass commodification and celebration of the criminal perhaps negates and even excuses the acts, in the futile effort to contextualize them, when the killer becomes a famous celebrity, ironically a spokesperson for self-indulgence, although motivated by a desire to maintain her sense of decency. Such ironies are ultimately irreconcilable, and the world that tries to do so is ultimately in a hypocritical chaos. (2003:403)

As much as the film pokes fun at true crime, suburban values, and our celebrity-obsessed culture, the sympathy that the film embeds into the protagonist Serial Mom is neither provocative nor ironic, as the familiar subplot demonstrates. Despite their initial shock and horror, by the end of the film the Sutphin family is more united and happier than they were at the beginning. Misty has a loving boyfriend, a reporter who has written a book on Serial Mom. Chip has launched a successful career in media as



Mom's agent. Dad is still the loving husband, yet the events have changed his politics, and he now campaigns against Capital Punishment. They love and support Mom with full knowledge that she is guilty. The parody resides in the film's disenfranchisement of true-crime 'good versus evil' (Murley 2008:4) that rewrites the genre. Making a Serial Killer out of a suburban housewife, the film has not destroyed the nuclear family or its patriarchal foundations, as *Polyester* did, but it has produced a reaffirmation of affect and kinship around the figure of the mother murderer. *Serial Mom*'s "feel good" happy ending is inextricably tied to criminality. In this section, I have explored how the figure of the criminal housewife subverts the safety of suburbia in what is Waters' biggest production. With *A Dirty Shame*, I explore Waters' last feature film alongside exploitation and the cinema of gross-out.

### **A Dirty Shame (2004)**

The story of suburbia runs along with the history of the twentieth century, and the century's ideas on living standards, wealth and community. Only a few years into the new millennium, in a post 9/11 society, *A Dirty Shame* depicts the deflation of the American dream where suburbia is not what it used to be. Despite the blueness of their skies and greenness of their trees, the habitants of Harford Road struggle to make sense of the world they inhabit. Built around a state highway that connects Baltimore with Harford County, Harford Road is a middle ground between the city and the countryside, a profoundly conservative space. As the *Washington Post* review of the film depicts, the universe of *A Dirty Shame* enacts a particular representation of a time and space:

It's blue-collar America, where in quiet neighborhoods behind the strip malls, small homes sit within 10 feet of each other, well-tended, usually with a lot of pickup trucks in the driveways. The men work in the steel mills or as cops or firefighters or in retail; the women still have their hair done elaborately then shellacked to a kind of plastic permanence; everybody is Catholic, everybody works like hell [...]. It's a place full of gun stores (three in two miles of Harford Road) and gas stations and American Legion Posts and O's and

Ravens fanatics and deer hunters and wrestling fans who all think the Sun has become a commie conspiracy and vote Democratic except when they back a Bob Ehrlich. It's everywhere the literati, the cognitive elite, the ironic, the damn NPR subscribers wouldn't visit if you paid them! (Hunter 2004)

This is a vision of suburbia that largely differs from the 1950's middle-class ideal of white femininity, nuclear family, and upward mobility that *Polyester* and *Serial Mom* negotiated with. Class is an important factor in the disagreement; after all, an idealized vision of suburbia demands that uncomfortable truths, such as economic inequality, be kept outside. *A Dirty Shame*'s Harford Road millennial suburbia exists in a pre-financial crisis era. The economic centre of the cinematic universe is the Stickles' family convenience store, an independent business where the family works. The store becomes a communal space for the 'neuters' – the original denizens of Harford Road- who feel threatened by the presence of 'diversity' and long for the past and its values. Scrapple-eating, white-skinned, and blue-collar, *A Dirty Shame*'s denizens of suburbia start to voice their discontent and organize decency rallies, crying for “the end of tolerance”. In their antagonistic status as the films' villains, they seem almost to foreshadow the 'Make America Great Again' Trump era<sup>30</sup>. Whereas *Polyester* and *Serial Mom* placed the family and their home at the centre of its narrative, *A Dirty Shame* mostly takes place outside, on the lawns. Casting aside the intimacy of indoors, yet still within the world of suburbia, the film reflects a portrait of a community. We do not get to see the characters in their realm of privacy, only as they present themselves on their lawn. Lawns are liminal spaces: private yet simultaneously under the scrutiny of the public eye, a boundary space between the

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<sup>30</sup> In the 2017 preface to her book *White Trash*, Nancy Isenberg explores the idea of “embedded appeal” to analyse the 2016 American election and how Trump won the sympathy of the white working class. “‘Make America Great Again is another way of saying that hard work is no longer automatically rewarded as a virtue. It tapped the anxieties of all who resented government for handing over the country to supposedly less deserving classes: new immigrants, protesting African Americans, lazy welfare freeloaders, and Obamacare recipients asking for handouts [...] This was how many came to feel “disinherited”’(2017:xxvii-xxviii).

home and the outside world. In the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault challenges the construction of the discourse on sexuality as a force that must be repressed. According to his genealogical study, the Victorian times and the rise of the bourgeoisie enforced rigid secrecy around sexual matters that was written into the architecture of the domestic space: “Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction” (1976:3). *A Dirty Shame* undoes this process by taking sex outside of the bedroom and placing it on the lawns, reversing the sexual discourse.

### Sexploitation?

Sex is a point of contention in *A Dirty Shame*, one that causes domestic and social unrest. From the opening scene, where Sylvia (Tracey Ullman) refuses her husband's sexual advances to when she later catches him masturbating in the bathroom, sex is placed at the centre of the family drama. Sylvia's sex-negativity is performed as anger that disturbs the family's peace, as it is directed against her husband (Chris Isaak) and especially against her daughter's Caprice (Selma Blair), who is under house arrest for “indecent exposure”. With huge prosthetic breasts, Caprice is a teenager burlesque and stripper dancer that goes with the name 'Ursula Udders'. She enrages Sylvia by refusing to conform to a prude lifestyle in her domestic entrapment, and her unruliness is rooted in her body. Almost cartoonish in size, her breasts function as visual puns that proxy her sexual desire. Much as *Polyester*'s Lulu, she expresses an explicit teenage desire to dance lewdly, abandoning the prison of the house in order to perform unruly femininity (in Ursula's case, to meet her fans). Dressed with a black see-through top and sparkly denim shorts, and sporting a blonde perm, Ursula (Fig. 27) looks like a busty version of *Showgirls*' Nomi Malone (1995), yet the way the character moves, the music she dances to, and the way she discusses her vocational career do not match

with the millennial aesthetics. The most significant dissonance is the character's tune, a song that reappears throughout *A Dirty Shame* whenever Caprice breaks into dancing: the 1957 rock and roll classic *Red Hot*. The music, as well as the character's unruly femininity and big breasts, constitute a veiled reference to the cinema of Russ Meyer. Meyer's cinema offers a sleazy representation of aggressive female sexuality, one where big busts signal female attractiveness and a large sexual appetite. Meyer's influence as a sexploitation filmmaker is obscurely hidden in *A Dirty Shame*. Unlike the explicit celebration of Hershel Gordon Lewis in a *Serial Mom*, that screened footage from *Blood Feast*, this reference is never fully materialised in *A Dirty Shame*, and it fails in bringing Meyer into the world of suburbia. One of the reasons for this failure is casting. Because of Selma Blair's recognizable stardom, the audience knows that her bosoms are prosthetics, and in their artificiality, and extra size, they almost become a comic prop, like a fat suit. Albeit the character seems to subscribe the 'larger-than-life' bad taste tradition, the performance is underlined by the artificial prosthetic, which aligns her body with the preponderance of fat suits in mainstream Hollywood gross-out comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000 (Lebesco 2005:231)<sup>31</sup>. Connected to blackface, the fat suit has been conceptualized in fat studies as “fat minstrelsy” (Lebesco 2005:236), as it mirrors the performance of a marginalized identity while erasing the marginalized subject from the text, as a way of containing the fear and anxieties that arise from an 'othered' body<sup>32</sup>. When Ursula's transgressive body reveals itself to be silicone, its plasticity reveals its limits: the prop diminishes the transgression of the obscene corporeality of the flesh. Hence the prosthetic materiality

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<sup>31</sup> Contemporary films that LeBesco uses as examples: *America's Sweethearts* (2001), *The Nutty Professor 2: The Klumps* (2000), *Big Momma's House* (2000), *Austin Powers 2: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999), *Shallow Hal* (2001).

<sup>32</sup> The late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century fixation with the fat suit needs to be interpreted alongside societal growing fears of an obesity epidemic, and the growing media obsession with fat bodies, with the launch of *The Biggest Loser* in 2004 (Mask 2012:155).

of her body clashes against Waters' aesthetics of earlier transgressions, and the erotic energy of Meyer's female characters never fully materialises.

The counterpart to Ursula's desire, recipient of her erotic force, is her number one fan, the biker Fat Fuck Frank. Fat Fuck Frank is a disruptive presence in suburbia: standing at the Stickles' lawn with flowers for Ursula is enough to cause embarrassment to Sylvia and her husband, an embarrassment that grows as they note the observing gaze of their neighbours from DC over Fat Fuck Frank's screaming admiration. Their shame is traced back to her daughter, whom they disavow because of her open sexuality. In the sequence that follows, their disapproval extends from their own lawn to their neighbours': the commute to work presents an overview of the sexualized neighbourhood through Sylvia's disapproving gaze. The neighbourhood normality is disrupted, in her eyes, by open expressions of sexuality: an old couple's display of affection, a naked man taking out the garbage, identifiable gays and lesbians. The landscape reinforces the sexual theme, as the trees and bushes are staged to resemble breast, anus, butt cheeks, vulvas and erections. A graffiti reads "B-O-N-E-R". The comedic tone of the sequence is both sexually positive and explicit yet almost naively childish. Vaughn introduces himself to a Bear family (Mama bear, *husbear*, and Baby bear) which growls in appreciation, a cartoonish parody of an urban sexual tribe reinterpreted as a sexual parody of Goldilocks and the Three Bears living in the suburbs. When a suburbanite woman playfully asks, "isn't it strange that every man in this neighbourhood has a penis?", the film reveals the joy and pleasure of discussing sex: there is a feeling of transgression, of crossing over a taboo, because the topic is offensive to some, yet when examined closely, the topic discloses its goofiness.

The Stickles' familiar convenience store becomes a neighbourhood gathering spot where the decency rallies start to organize. Big Ethel and neighbour Marge "The

Neuter” (Mink Stole) claim that perverts are taking over the neighbourhood, and to that perceived threat they must react. Someone left a dildo on a wishing well. A woman complains that she is “viagra-vated”, and neighbours agree that her husband “has no right to be that hard”. What is more interesting about the neuters in *A Dirty Shame* is that they are not merely appalled by diversity, a coded term for homosexuality; they seem to recoil from sexuality in any form or expression. Not only epitomes of perversion are being passed unto others, classifying and othering what is different; they deem sex as something shameful that should never be openly discussed nor enjoyed. Their outrage and shocked position to the “pornification of society” makes some of the arguably funniest scenes in the film: 'Only you can prevent fornication' is the hilarious slogan of these new Victorians. They are pushing for sexuality to get back in the closet, whilst the reality they need to face is a new social regime in which bodies “made a display of themselves” (Foucault 1978:3). The lesbians have taken over the soccer field, the postman openly buys “girly magazines”, and there is (metaphorical) pubic hair floating in the air.

Whilst the 'neuters' function as the villains of the film, the role of the heroes is reserved for Harford Road's sex-addicts. Silvia becomes one of them after a head concussion. Head concussions have great narrative consequences in *A Dirty Shame*, as in a fantasy comedy fashion, we learn that ‘accidental’ head concussions cause a sexual frenzy, turning the subject into a perverted being. The fantastical transition is represented in a musical montage that combines black and white footage of exploitation films such as *Maniac* (1934) or failed arthouse *Boom* (1968) in rapid editing, accompanied with a soundtrack of angelic voices that add a mystical tone to the transition. Finally, the letters ‘W-H-O-R-E’ cover the screen (Fig. 28), a reference

to Jean Luc Godard's use of *graphisme*<sup>33</sup>, using words as a new form of visual language (Forde 2014). Sylvia's sexual awakening goes from accident to miracle when messiah Mr Ray-Ray (Johnny Knoxville) materializes, standing in the road with a phallic fuel drum and an open mouth, ready to "service" her. With his rockabilly mechanical overall and swaggering steps, Mr Ray-Ray is an overtly sexualized presence whose erotic force is reinforced by the stardom of the performer. Whereas Tab Hunter's Todd Tomorrow added Hollywood glamour to *Polyester*, Knoxville's Ray-Ray evokes the juvenile gross-out of the new millennium. *Jackass*' debut on MTV in 2000 brought the grotesque bodily humour and shock value to reality television. The success of the show, consisting in "short clips featuring gross-out gags and life-threatening stunts, with no script, no actors, a minimal budget, and enough images of excrement to justify the double entendre of the title" (Sweeny 2008:136) opens up interesting questions about the production and reception of Bad Taste in the twentieth-first century. By casting the then-popular Knoxville, Waters secured the funding for the film, while at the same time acknowledged the relation between *Jackass* and his early works.

Additional thematic return to Waters' early work is the catholic miraculous imaginary embedded with sexuality. Much as in *Multiple Maniacs*' Stations of the Cross sequence, *A Dirty Shame* represents orgasm as a form of religious ecstasy. However, unlike *Multiple Maniacs*, there is no nudity or sexually explicit scenes: Ray-Ray's cunnilingus to Sylvia on their first encounter is not shown but implied. Special effects are used to create the catholic sexual symbolism of the scene: Sylvia's crotch is on fire, the title "apostle number 12" appears on her forehead and when Ray-Ray is exiting the scene, the character performs mouth to mouth resuscitation on a road-killed

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<sup>33</sup> Specifically, *A Dirty Shame* uses words as visual symbols over the image as in the film *Une femme est un femme* (1961)

squirrel that like Lazarus, is called back to life (through CGI animation). The head concussion functions as a miracle that creates a fantasy world where everything that Sylvia encounters reminds her of her sex addiction: 'The Pussy Cat Song' playing on the radio, an old neighbour is subtitled discussing sex with her whilst in reality is trying to shop for batteries. The comedic value of her addiction comes from the language in which sex is discussed (where 'discovering the oyster' and 'sniffing in the cabbage' are coded terms for cunnilingus) as well as the inappropriateness of the setting. Upon a visit to her mother-in-law in the nursing home, Sylvia and her husband join a circle of elders dancing to the Hokey Pokey. A 360-degree tracking shot captures the gleeful expression of the dancers. Entering the centre of the dance troupe, Sylvia steals the show with a lusty dance that incorporates going down and grabbing a bottle with her vagina. The moving camera captures the horrific reaction of the elders and their carers that follows, building comedy from the chaos of the sex panic.

### Sexual Perversions

Sex, as represented in *A Dirty Shame*, produces an array of reactions, most importantly laughter, disgust, and horror, and it is clearly distanced from affective relations and does not seek to provoke arousal. As the central theme of the film, sex is always being discussed, albeit barely shown. The film goes to great lengths to expand the definition of what sexuality even is, and it ends up offering a catalogue of sexual perversions. As an evolving concept through the eras, and the different discourses on sexuality, Dollimore conceptualizes the term as encompassing:

- (1) am erring, straying, deviation, or being diverted from
- (2) a path, destiny or objective which is
- (3) understood as natural or right -usually right because natural (with the natural possibly having a yet higher legitimation in divine law). (1991:104)

Ray-Ray's twelve apostles embody sexual nonconformity by presenting their bodies and desires outside of genitalia-centred hetero/homocentric relations. Dingy



Dave has a philia that makes him a dirty worshipper, getting aroused by literal filth. Officer Alvy enjoys dressing and performing as an adult baby. The splashers enjoy spilling food over their bodies. A swinging couple enjoys making “human sandwiches”. Loose Linda wants “to fuck the entire Baltimore Police Department”, Paul Paul declares himself in “bush patrol”, Fat Fuck Frank is simply Fat Fuck Frank, and Sylvia is a “cunnilingus bottom”. Detaching the sexual practices from gender identity and sexual orientation, the catalogue of perversions is unstable and deconstructs established categories. Ray-Ray’s garage, the setting where the apostles are introduced, provides a safe space where the apostles can unveil their sex addiction freely, as they are part of a secret cult that cultivates their own differentiation free from the repressive suburban gaze. However, these perverts do not plan to stay on their lane, and when their leader screams, “Let’s go sexing!” they throw themselves to the suburban lawns, cruising as they advance. He has sex with a tree that immediately blooms white flowers, signalling ejaculation. This messiah has not only powers but also a following of apostles.

Despite Ray-Ray’s reassurance to Sylvia that sex must abide by an ethical code (“safe, consensual, and doesn’t hurt others”), as the narrative of the film advances, the sex-addicts undertake a process of zombification, effectively invading the suburbs by “converting” the neuters as they advance. Sylvia ventures to the night by herself, actively looking for sexual companions, pursuing bus and taxi drivers, neighbours, and even car-accident victims. She is a wayward woman looking for trouble<sup>34</sup>, along with the religious heretic, a recognizable figure of perversity. In her new sex-addict mindset, she goes to liberate Caprice from her punishment/home arrest, and mother

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<sup>34</sup> “Even more disturbing [...] than the masterless man is the masterless, wandering woman, perversely straying and inviting others to do the same” She has no reason to fear the night, because she is actively looking for “trouble”. (Dollimore 1991:119-120)

and daughter join her sexual energy to go visit the stripper biker bar, rewriting their kinship relations as they are dancing lewdly. Chasing them are Vaughn and Big Ethel, neuters that try to reunite the old structure of the nuclear family. After another head concussion, Sylvia retorts to her previous neuter personality and is horrified to find herself sitting on the face of a biker. A psychiatrist is invoked to help cure the Stickles' family sex addiction.

According to Freud, a kid "begins life in a state of polymorphous perversity" which is incompatible with sexual difference and civilization, so perversity must be repressed, or sublimated. Foucault agrees with Freud in the centrality of perversion, "endemic to modern society" (Dollimore 1991:105), but he denies the repression hypothesis, for our culture "actively produces" perversion. "Perversion is the product and vehicle of power, a construction which enables it to gain a purchase within the realm of the psychosexual: authority legitimates itself by fastening upon discursively constructed, sexually perverse identities of its own making", summarizes Dollimore (1991:10). Sylvia's "runaway vagina" is a perversion that an authority-the psychiatrist- pathologizes through the diagnostic. While Vaughn rapidly accepts the categorization as a problem that the family must front together, Big Ethel does not buy into the psychoanalytical exploration and asks in disbelief, "being a whore is a disease?". *A Dirty Shame* produces its own fantastic theory on the origins of perversion (the head concussions), and their arbitrary nature somehow enforces the narrative of the film. When some horny squirrels end up provoking a domestic accident, Caprice also becomes a neuter. The reversal concussion throws images from wedding cakes, family holidays, cats. The word 'N-O-R-M-A-L' extends over the screen, while Caprice's breast deflates. Normality appears to have won.

Embracing the conservative neuter lifestyle, the reconciled family attend an AA meeting for sex addicts. The scene has a confessional nature, where perversions are 'labelled' and explained, keeps adding entries to the catalogue of perversions (rimming, tickling, roman showers, masturbation, etc.). The way they discuss sexuality materialises a confession of sin, embedded with catholic guilt. Their pursuit of chastity is challenged by lust, as Ray-Ray and the apostles infiltrate into the meeting, ready to cruise the recovered sex-addicts.

The climax that follows is a scene of confrontation between the addicts and the neuters for the control of the suburban lawns. The decency rally is invaded by the zombie/addicts, and the fight retreats to the Stickles' convenience store where flying objects continuously provoke head concussions, spreading the sex addiction. When Ronnie the Rimmer converts Marge the Neuter, the decency rally has evidently lost the battle. A bus of elders leaves the area, whilst a parade of sex apostles occupies the streets. A group of naked suburban citizens stand on the road forming the word 'sex', continuing the playful *graphisme*. "Today, Harford Road, tomorrow, the world" shouts the sex cult to the night. World domination seems to start in suburbia.

I have examined, so far, the film's depiction of sexual perversion and its failed engagement with sexploitation. In the section below, I consider how the film disavows the cinematic attractions of early Waters' film in favour of the special effects, and, as a result, the film stands closer to Hollywood's gross-out comedies, and that constitutes some of its failings.

### Gross-Out

Towards the ending of *A Dirty Shame*, David Hasselhoff appears as himself, defecating on a plane. Next, a CGI animated turd descends from the airplane and hits Vaughn on the head, converting him into a sex addict. Hasselhoff's presence in the film

is significant due to its randomness. Unlike the casting of Liz Renay (*Desperate Living*) and Pia Zadora (*Hairspray*), that functioned playing a character “against type”, Hasselhoff simply plays his celebrity self, much as Roseanne Barr and Suzanne Sommers do in *Serial Mom*. Yet those cameos worked under a different premise: the cult casting of the earlier films added an offbeat underground sensibility, while Barr and Sommers’ stardom reinforced the “murder as entertainment” true crime theme. The *Baywatch* star’s appearance does not operate within either of those premises. Firstly, because Hasselhoff cameos became a recurring trend in Hollywood comedies (*The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, 2004, *DodgeBall*, 2004, *Click*, 2006), rendering his appearance in *A Dirty Shame* devoid of any cult sensibility. Also, the narrative purpose of the cameo to cause yet another head concussion- is a flimsy excuse, one that it feeds the film’s flaws, adding randomness into the illogical force that propels the story forward. Likewise, it evidences of how *A Dirty Shame* transforms bad taste into commercial gross-out.

Commercial gross-out had proven out to be a very profitable genre for Hollywood comedies, a trend that consolidated in the late 1990s as all the penis-related jokes of *There’s Something About Mary* (1998) dominated in the box office (King 2002, Speed 2010). It can be argued that these Hollywood gross-out comedies celebrate the lower part of the body, and its excrements and fluids, yet their compliance to rules -production and industrial norms, as well as gender norms- prevent the identification with the Carnavalesque and its utopian celebration of anarchy. “It would be wrong”, argues Stam, “to see the beer-fuelled carousing of fraternity boys in *Animal House* as a Bakhtinian celebration of people’s culture, since fraternity boys and their macho rituals form an integral part of the power structure which authentic carnival symbolically overturns” (1992:135). As the *American Pie* saga shows, commercial

gross-out is inextricably related to an expression of garrulous white masculinity (Sweeny 2008, Walsh 2010). The mainstream success of this humour disrupts and alters Waters' shock value tradition. Critics of *A Dirty Shame* were right to observe that its shock value largely differs from the shock value in *Pink Flamingos*. Those differences are rooted in more than three decades of social change, and the consequent evolution in mainstream cinema, humour, and above all, taste. Whereas *Polyester* and *Serial Mom* successfully used melodrama and true crime in their parody of suburbia, *A Dirty Shame*, from its use of props (artificial breastplates, sexual bushes, CGI animated turds) to their casting choices (Tracey Ullman, Johnny Knoxville) is too close to Hollywood gross-out comedies, which renders the film less original and funny.

The film's final scene stands on that contradiction. When sexual liberation has spread over the neighbourhood, Sylvia has an enlightened moment, in which she sees the new sex act, the one that Ray Ray had been foreshadowing throughout the film that she would envision: head-butting. How is head-butting sexual? The film does not say. But the new act seems to transcend categories of sexual identities, as it rewrites sexuality as simply bodies and pleasures that equate orgasms with religious enlightenment. There is no higher power than sex, the film concludes, and the celebratory 'head-butting' orgy that follows is replete with miracles: the flowers bloom, Dingy Dave walks over water, people levitate in orgasmic ecstasies, Big Ethel resuscitates from her heart attack happy to be a sex addict, and, finally, Ray Ray levitates over the neighbourhood, ejaculating from the top of his head. The CGI load rises to the suburban skies and then splashes back to the screen, as if propelled toward the audience, baptizing the collective spectator (Fig. 29). The ejaculating stream evokes a scene in *Scary Movie* (2000) in which one of the characters propels her sexual partner to the ceiling with the force of his ejaculation. Ejaculations are commonly

displayed on teenage gross-out comedies such as *Something About Mary* (1998) and *American Pie* (2000), in which the depictions of bodily fluids do not attempt to transgress, to cross any cultural borders, but to openly display and reinforce white masculinity and boyhood (Greven 2002). *A Dirty Shame*'s ejaculating shot coexists within that gross-out comedic tradition, and as such, it compromises the subversiveness of the happy ending.

## **Conclusions**

Exploring the concept of the perverse dynamics, Dollimore concludes: "if perversion subverts it is not as a unitary, pre-social libido, or an original plenitude, but as a transgressive agency inseparable from a dynamic intrinsic to social process" (1991:33). In relation to *Polyester*, *Serial Mom* and *A Dirty Shame*, I take these words to mean that the subversion of queering suburbia resides less in individual acts or characters than collective understandings. The social space in these three films constitutes a suburban world that is filled with the dangers, fears and problems of normality, where the promised happiness is always at odds with the white, heterosexual, and upper-class biopolitics.

Compared with Waters' catalogue of early transgressions, suburbia is an image for the mainstream. *Polyester* manufactured bad taste combining the Dreamlanders' performance and crafts with old Hollywood talent and glamour. The result was acclaimed by audiences and critics alike, and although Odorama proved costly for New Line Cinema (Maier 2001), the film succeeded in launching a mainstreaming approach that would be consolidated with the success of *Hairspray* (1988). By 1994, that position was sufficiently established to finance the \$ 13,000,000 budget for *Serial Mom*. Upon completion, the film was met with some resistance by the studio, which wanted to condemn *Serial Mom* and to introduce a narrator, amongst other changes (Hemphill

2017), that was finally avoided due to the director's resistance and Katherine Turner's support<sup>35</sup>. Much like earlier Waters' films, *Serial Mom* did not do too well at the box office when it was released, although in the long run the film has been proven profitable through television license rights and had a Blu-Ray release on its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The studio resistance to the release of *Serial Mom* evidences that Waters' Hollywood years were never as profitable and untroubled as the domestication theory might suggest. On the contrary, the assimilation process was always troublesome, with the difficulties reaching a critical point with the NC-17 rating<sup>36</sup> of *A Dirty Shame* for "pervasive sexual content" (Bailey 2016). As recounted in the documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, according to his contract, Waters had to deliver an R-rated film. In the process of appealing against the NC-17 rating, it became apparent that the MPAA was not singling out a specific episode of transgression, as for example *Pink Flamingos*' singing-anus. Instead, the board "stopped taking notes", as it was the overall tone of the film that was pernicious, rather than anything that was explicitly shown. The safeness of the sex portrayed ("you can't get pregnant, you can't get AIDS", defended Waters) was not taken into consideration during the appeal, proving that the system actively punishes perversions, considering perversion anything that deviates from the monogamous heterosexual pairing. The NC-17 rating meant that the queer politics of the film were undisguisable, and were observed by the censors, nudity or not nudity. Whereas the early films were made outside the studio system and did not have to comply to any rating system until years after, *A Dirty Shame* was very much a Hollywood production,

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<sup>35</sup> "It was the worst experience I had with a studio", Waters recounts. "The studio hated it even though it was exactly the script they had bought, and Liz Smith, of all people, saved us because she wrote a column saying, "leave Serial Mom alone." I think Kathleen went to her when the studio was trying to change stuff. They were furious" (Hemphill 2017).

<sup>36</sup> This category, that replaced the X rating in 1990, has been described as the commercial kiss of death for its economic restrictions: "The MPAA signatories shunned the distribution of mainstream NC-17 films. Few mainstream movie houses would play NC-17 films. Most major video-store chains refused to carry NC-17 films. (Sandler 2007:170).

and, as such, had to abide by such rules. Following his legal obligations, Waters had to release the film with an R rating, which resulted in the release of a “neuter version”, heavily redubbed in order to avoid the explicit sexual terms. As this version censored sexual content, it effectively altered the meaning of the story and rendered the film humourless. A fiasco for critics and audiences alike, *A Dirty Shame* effectively ended Waters’ filmmaking career, as the limits of the Hollywood years were manifested. Ironically, he lost the battle against censorship in his late career, at the same time as he was being criticized for losing edge, being assimilated by the system. In that paradox resides the importance of queering suburbia: transforming the mainstream space with subversive sexual politics is a precarious mission, criticized by many. As I have argued in this chapter, *Polyester*, *Serial Mom* and *A Dirty Shame* provide useful case studies to study that process of transformation and the laughter and perils that accompany it.



## CHAPTER 5: NOSTALGIC UTOPIAS

“Nostalgia is to memory as kitsch is to art”  
(Charles Maier in Padva 2014:13)

After the most extended pause in his filmmaking career (1981-1988)<sup>37</sup>, during which he wrote *Flamingos Forever*, the sequel of *Pink Flamingos*, an abandoned project due to lack of funds, Waters released the most profitable film of his career: *Hairspray* (1988). With a PG rating, this film effectively changed Waters’ career and secured his filmmaking popularity during the next decade. *Hairspray* pleased audiences and critics alike, and the film remains Waters’ most commercially successful enterprise. The film has been continuously revisited in several adaptations: as a Tony awarded Broadway musical, a Hollywood remake in 2007, and a live television adaptation for NBC in 2016. Arguably, *Hairspray* stroke a chord in popular culture, and, consequently, it has received even more scholarly attention than *Pink Flamingos*. The film was, sadly, Divine’s last performance, as the actor passed away shortly after the film had been released. With his death determining a closing era for the Dreamlanders, the aftermath of *Hairspray* marked, however, a new start, since, for the first time in his career, Waters had a lucrative offer from New Line Cinema to finance the follow-up *Cry-Baby* (1990). Situated in past decades, centred on teenagers, and paying particular attention to 50s and 60s music, both films launch colourful nostalgic utopias of the Fifties and Sixties. This chapter studies the films in their shocking likeable softness whilst questioning the evolution of Waters’ Bad Taste and the politics of those nostalgic utopias.

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<sup>37</sup> During those years, Waters taught in prison and published two books, *Shock Value* (1981) and *Crackpot* (1987).

### **Nostalgia: Longing for a past futurity**

Nostalgia is the feeling of yearning for the past. The term, derived from Greek *nostos*- and *algia*-, literally translates as a longing for homecoming. In contrast to history, nostalgia is defined by its affective implications -since it is a sentiment, it cannot maintain the fiction of objectivity- as well as the impossibility of its plight, because what is missed is “forever out of reach” (Jameson 1987:118). Whereas history attempts to be factual, reliable, unemotional, and realistic, nostalgia stands as fictional, fantastic and sentimental (Padva 2014:4-5), painting a “glossy picture” of the past (Jameson 1991:287). The critics of postmodernism argue that nostalgia tends to sanitize the past, presenting a clean-cut, depoliticized commodity for the postmodern consumer instead. Self-indulgent and hedonistic, nostalgia would end up being “an ahistorical defence of the status quo” (DaSilva and Fraught 1982:49). Some other critics examine the ambivalence of the concept. Mark Le Sueur acknowledges escapism but reclaims the social effects of nostalgia for our present and future. Similarly, Stevlana Boym argues, to the feeling of “loss and displacement” we need to add “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (2001: xiii). Many contributions appreciate the fluidity of nostalgia as a term that cannot be materially fixed or defined but is instead a ‘response’ (Hutcheon 2000:207), an ‘affective critique’ (Dwyer 2015:4) and/or an “emotional landscape” (Padva 2014:3).

Reading nostalgia as an attachment allows for an open understanding of the bittersweet feeling the term might bring as a concept that connects pain and hope. Reading nostalgia as a queer attachment helps us understand the term as an escapist longing that reimagines the past. Queer nostalgia symbolises the union of failure and utopia. Failure is queer, defends Halberstam, given that "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity

combined with wealth accumulation" we find that "failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well" (2011:2-3). The failure of nostalgia resides in that longing sentiment that betrays linear time, establishing instead a new affective relation to the past, one that negates the official historical truth and reimagines something else. That reimagining of things past is nevertheless embedded by utopia: betraying facts and history, the past is altered to forge a dreamed futurity.

Cinema has cultivated nostalgia with great success. The moving image captures a moment fixed in time, but also generates an illusion, so films can copy, recreate and parody past decades into spectacles full of life. That duality is embedded in the medium: "A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images -of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life." (Boym 2001: xiii-xiv). Nostalgic films, as the often-referenced *American Graffiti* (1973) provide escapist entertainment with the colourful recreation of a past moment in time. Fifties nostalgia – a period that according to Dwyer is not limited to the 1950s, but covers the post-Second World War era until the Kennedy assassination in 1964- is symbolically tied to certain symbolic objects, such as greased hair, milkshakes, leather jackets, polka dots skirts and jukeboxes, to name a few. The historic convergence of the birth of rock and roll and the rise of teenagers as a new economic class created a new cinematic genre, the teen picture. Far from being forgotten with the passage of time, the figure of the rebellious teenager dancing to Fifties music re-emerged in cinema. Popular, profitable, and enamoured with stylization and tropes, the cinema of 'pop nostalgia' (Dwyer 2015:4-5) that preceded *Hairspray* – *Grease* (1978), *Hair* (1979), *Back to the Future* (1985), and *Dirty Dancing* (1986), to name a few- had created a powerful musical nostalgic myth.

The pleasure of that cinematic nostalgia was musical, and musicals, as Richard Dyer explores in *Only Entertainment*, are utopic in nature. The utopianism of entertainment, Dyer explains, “is contained in the *feelings* it embodies” (2002:20, my emphasis). He continues arguing how music, along with other non-representational signs, echoes the intensity of human emotions. Nostalgic musical films tend to move audiences because they mobilize the affective charge of songs, the sensitive pleasure of the oldies “foster[s] generational solidarity” (Shumway 1999:38) whilst evidencing the passage of time. In the case of pop nostalgia that looks back into the Fifties, the past is not so much accounted for but reimagined as a field for spectacle. In *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby*, I argue, this spectacle is a nostalgic utopia that transfers a Carnavalesque celebration to an imagined past.

But what is utopia? Literally meaning ‘no place’, utopia was famously coined by Thomas More to describe an ideal society. Ernst Bloch, one of the most prominent philosophers of utopianism, understood utopia as an “anticipatory illumination” (1988:xxiii), a term that describes the idealism of art. Hope fuels utopia, feeding a “wish-landscape” fulfilment (1988:xxxix). Utopia is nostalgic because it is based on the longing of a non-place. In a conversation with Bloch, Theodor Adorno argued that “utopia is essentially in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself, as something false, it always points, at the same time, to what should be” (Bloch 1988:12) This notion fits into Muñoz’s ideas on ‘queer utopia’ as a potentiality that propels us forward. It is in the realm of performance and aesthetics, Muñoz establishes, that utopia embeds a futurity of “new and better pleasures”. For Muñoz, utopia and queerness have in common “the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009:1). This utopianism of queerness signals an embrace of multiplicity, a rejection of fixed time

and forms in favour of otherness and difference in collectivity. Queer nostalgic utopias, in cinema, reconstruct the past not as it was, but as it should have been, free from the official truth. In the world of Waters, utopia means a celebration of the word-turned-upside-down.

The integration of a popular dancing show amongst Baltimore teenagers is the utopic landscape of *Hairspray*. The film examines the change in aesthetics and politics from the 1950s to the 1960s. The alliance of fat and black bodies, united through songs and dances, challenges the white status quo. *Cry-Baby*, on its part, goes further in the suspension of disbelief as the nostalgic utopia is embedded in the musical genre. Defined by Waters as “*Grease* on acid”, *Cry-Baby* shows the class conflict between the ‘drapes’ and the ‘squares’, while creating a portrait of a fun Fifties adolescence of juvenile delinquency. The film, charged with erotic tension, performs nostalgic utopia as it ascribes the Confederate Flag carrier white trash family as a loving community that celebrates its anarchic freedom. The analysis in this chapter studies the political undertones of the utopic recreation of past times -1962 and 1954- paying particular attention to the colourfulness, and musicality, and the combined pleasure they provide.

### **Hairspray (1988)**

Named after a hair styling product, *Hairspray* materializes its position in the landscape of pop nostalgia -preceded by *Hair* (1979) and *Grease* (1978). Choosing a particular trend in hairstyling as a metaphor to code the past fits Jameson’s definition of postmodern nostalgia as “a commensurable set of images” (Jameson in Benson-Allot 2009:145). The films’ stylization of the past is fixed on a particular object, which can be read as commodification of history, yet such stylization does not inescapably depoliticize the text nor the era. Instead, it raises aesthetics as a political matter: hairstyles are loaded with history and meaning, they represent the cultural zeitgeist.

*Hairspray*'s opening scene introduces the 1962 nostalgia alongside Waters' performative excess. The credits roll in into the presentation of the backstage of The Corny Collins Show- and corniness ensues. 'Hairspray', by Rachel Sweet, plays announcing the importance of the era symbolic object: teased hair. The song, composed in the 1980s, performs the voice of a teenage girl that is obsessed with hairspray to her mother's disapproval. As the only song in the soundtracks specially composed for the film, it emphasises the construction of the nostalgic view of the film, as a 1988 reinvention of 1962. Images of adolescents' boys and girls in the colourful tv set getting ready to feature in the scene. Visual excess dominates the 'getting ready process' (Fig. 30), and the exaggerated gestures of the performers -spraying their hair while eating chips, smoothing their eyebrows, applying white lipstick, bra-stuffing- draw attention to the enforced fashion nostalgia while also highlighting the malleability of the bodies. For Heller, the scene shows "the erotic promise of becoming a spectacle" (2011:62). Much as the opening of *Polyester*, this scene showcases the 'getting ready process' to accentuate the performance of the body.

Whereas the film trailer explicitly compared *Hairspray* to *Grease*, the film's sartorial system carefully represents a distinct era. Ruffled blouses, full skirts and shapeless shift dresses in pastel tones, and especially the big bouffant hairdos, create a specific aesthetic universe. The opening sequence announces the featuring importance of teenage bodies and their transient corporeality: skin imperfections, sexual drive, lack of adult curves. In Waters' own words, "you learned how to be a teenager from the show" (1986:89). This portrait of adolescence is highly exaggerated inasmuch it is humorous. The film quickly sets the three interrelated generic modes – teen pic, dance-musical, and comedy- that operate in *Hairspray*'s nostalgia. It also introduces the show as a default white space, as we will explore below.

As a comedy with a fat protagonist and a storyline about the civil rights movement and integration, *Hairspray* has been critically studied on its representation of fatness (Heller 2011, Stukator 2011), blackness (bell hooks 1993) and the politics of nostalgia (Benson-Allott 2009, Dwyer 2015). Most of these contributions reach a similar understanding of the body-politics of the film. As Dwyer summarizes, “the difference registered in *Hairspray* is a source of both personal pleasure and collective political liberation” (2015:107). Heller goes as far as claiming the film is Waters’ most subversive work, insofar subversion

operates according to the assumption that “we can never get outside the system we wish to subvert”. To call a popular movie subversive is thus to say that the movie functions in such a way as to internally transform the cultural codes to which it ostensibly adheres. (2011:51)

Conversely, Benson-Allot and Matthew Tinkcom provide a counterview by critically examining the film’s account of race. Benson-Allot argues against nostalgia, exploring how *Hairspray* “depoliticize[s] political history” (Benson-Allot 2009:143), as it erases the past of the civil rights movement. Instead, she concludes, the film produces “a commercial Cinderella story, neatly packaged in just under ninety minutes, with lots of great songs to dance to and a plucky little heroine to root for” (2009:153), seeking mainstream success and feel-good value. Similarly, Tinkcom accuses *Hairspray* of depicting the fight for integration as “positive change” brought by “well-meaning white people” (2010:200). My reading of *Hairspray* will attempt to integrate the white saviourism critique into a discussion that appreciates the resistance and celebrated intersectionality of the film’s politics. And because the bodies in *Hairspray* connect, communicate and rebel *through* dancing, dancing needs to be at the centre of the analysis.

Dancing is a bodily discourse, a way to materialize corporeality. As an art form that rhythmically encompasses bodies to music, dancing makes visible politics of the

flesh. “By enlarging our studies of bodily “texts” to include dance in all of its forms”, arguments Jane C. Desmond, “we can further our understandings of how social identities are signalled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement” (1993:34). Opening a cinematic window to 1962, *Hairspray* interrogates the boundaries to the movement of the bodies, posing the question: Who is allowed to move freely? Dancing constitutes a fundamental part of *Hairspray* not only as a cultural materialization of the body, but because it provides much of the pleasure and entertainment that the film has to offer. The film showcases unapologetic messages of body positivity and racial integration not despite the musical spectacle, but *through* it.

In 1962, rock and roll music was “virtually synonymous with dance”, argues R. Pruter (1991:188). Dancing was how music was experienced, consumed, and appreciated<sup>38</sup>; the different dances were folk inventions, a fundamental expression of the Fifties youth popular culture (Belz 1970:91). In *The Story of Rock*, Belz traces their origins back to 1940s jazz dances (the Bop, the Lindy and Jitterbug, to name a few) and establish them as an expression of the Afro-American communities. The music along was also indebted to black America: rock and roll intertwined Pop’s “subject matter” to Rhythm and Blues’ beats. Non-coincidentally, rock and roll crystalized a time in history “when white young people insisted on dancing black, and black young people insisted on being treated as citizens” (Decker 2013: 248). As a materialization of America’s interracial culture, rock and roll raises issues of cultural appropriation and racial segregation. Racial conflict was always inscribed in the music and dances, since, as dance scholar Cynthia J. Novack notes, “it was not simply by chance that this

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<sup>38</sup> “Kids on “American Bandstand” [...] would review records in terms of their danceability. “It’s got a good beat, you can dance to it. I’ll give it an 89”, was the classic line that many writers would make much condescending fun of years later” (Pruter 1991:187-1988). American Bandstand was the national broadcast of The Buddy Deane show, parodied into The Corny Collins Show in the film. The line ‘it has a good beat’ is repeated in the film when one of the characters is criticized upon choosing a ‘black’ song, *Shake a Tailfeather*.



crossing of boundaries occurred during the development of the civil rights movement” (1990:34). Ultimately, to talk about rock and roll and its dancing means to talk about race.

However, to discuss race does not mean simply discussing blackness. Following the work of Richard Dyer, whiteness is an invisible racial category, privileged by its supremacy (1997). In this fiction, ‘Others’ are racialized, whites simply are. As long as whiteness continues to pass unexamined, it will be perpetuated as the universal ‘default’. Hence, exposing the discourse and practice of whiteness becomes “a necessary part of any anti-racist project” (Wray & Newitz 1997:4). To study *Hairspray*, a film that dwells into the conflict of blacks and whites dancing together, also means to examine whiteness as a racial category, and more specifically, to study how whiteness approaches black culture. In the case of *Hairspray*, the approach is a nostalgic endeavour that depicts a wishful rewriting of the past.

#### Whiteness in *Hairspray*

If dancing is a “discourse of the body” (Desmond 1993:42), to dance in The Corny Collins Show is to speak from a mainstream space. Similar to the national broadcast ‘American Bandstand’, Corny Collins is modelled after a real Baltimore programme called The Buddy Deane Show. These programs had great popularity, and aired daily:

“American Bandstand” was a particularly interesting phenomenon, a daily dance party placed in front of the television camera. The performers, ordinary high school students neither professionally trained nor specially selected, attended the show every day after school. The “regulars” became celebrities with whom the home viewers identified. (Novak 1990:34)

The regular dancers in the show were part of the committee, which functioned as a star system: the teens dated each other, and their romances and feuds were

integrated into the narrative of the show. This ‘star system’ was an exclusionary platform, since the mainstream was co-opted by white, thin, cis-normative bodies. Like the Buddy Deane Show, The Corny Collins Show is racially segregated, with the occasional black-only ‘Negro Day’. “The Buddy Deane Show” introduced black music and artists into the lives of white Baltimore teenagers”, says Waters (1986:97), whilst actively discriminating against black people. It is in this contradiction that *Hairspray* thrives. Dwyer argues:

*Hairspray* represents The Corny Collins Show as participating in the same decontextualization of rock’s racial and sexual politics that is repeatedly discussed by rock historians and critics: seeking the spoils from a white, suburban mass market, recording and broadcasting institutions in the Fifties “shunned controversy, exploited black performers, bleached the music, and promoted white rock”. (2015:106)

In many ways, the history of whiteness is the history of colonialism. The Corny Collins Show’s engulfment of black culture parallels how whiteness thrives by employing imperialist tactics: profiting from stealing resources of a disenfranchised Other. In the words of Dyer, “Imperialism displays both the character of enterprise in the white person, and its exhilaratingly expansive relationship to the environment” (1997:15). What whiteness has come to represent is entrepreneurship, which in the neoliberal market equals economic success and masks exploitation.

The Corny Collins Show is dominated by the blonde and petite Amber Von Tussle, the most popular dancer. Early on, the film positions Amber as an antagonist, stealing votes from other contestants for the Miss Auto-show contest. Her figure is contrasted to heroine Tracy Turnblad, interpreted by newcomer Ricki Lake. As a chubby and gleeful teenager rushing home from school to watch the Corny Collins show, Tracy begins as an outsider spectator to the show’s mainstream success. The editing showcases the connection between the characters with the number ‘Shake a Tail-Feather’, where the two girls are filmed in similar close-up shots of their hands

and bottoms. Tracy dances at home, along with her best friend Penny, to the black and white screen in the living room to her mother's disapproving glances. By contrast, Amber occupies the spotlight on the show along with her heterosexual companion, Elvis lookalike Link<sup>39</sup>. Ultimately, the story of *Hairspray* is the story of Tracy supplanting Amber, conquering a place on her own right in the mainstream, stealing the love interest and dancing her way to the top.

Tracy Turnblad incarnates teenage girlhood in strict wholesomeness. She is fat, but much unlike Waters' other fat protagonists, her size does not suggest anger (like Dawn Davenport) nor suffering (like Francine Fishpaw). Instead, her fatness is what differentiates her from the crowd, her corporeality being a source of pleasure -for her body is a tool to dance, and to dance is to celebrate herself. Tracy is accused by her mother of being a 'hair hopper', a 'teenage Jezebel' who overuses hairspray and little to zero interest in what her teachers and parents have to say. She does show unawarded enthusiasm for The Corny Collins Show, to which she dances along with the screen, and boys, specifically Link, Amber's boyfriend. Tracy shows extreme confidence in her dancing abilities and her attractiveness. After lying to her parents to sneak into a dance contest with Peggy, she simply enters the dancefloor and infiltrates herself amongst the committee.

The perfectly ordered dancefloor is composed of several lines of teenagers, shot in a high angle that the best view of the dancers. We learn that black folks are also excluded from the contest, as a couple is refused entrance on the door. When Tracy decides to join the already started dancing number, she crosses the scene to be placed a central spot of the shot, placing herself in between Amber and Link. Teens clap and snap their fingers in preparation for the Madison. Popularised by the real Buddy Deane

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<sup>39</sup> The actor that plays Link, Michael St. Gerard, would, in fact, play Elvis in a TV series (*Elvis*, 1990) and the 1989 film *Great Balls of Fire*.

Show, the Madison is a dance style with carefully choreographed diagrammed footwork that incorporates handclaps and other gestures -the Basketball, the Double Cross, the 'M', the 'T time'- to Corny's instructions. Tracy's lively movements get the attention of the other dances, an encouraging smile from Link, and a disdainful one from Amber.

During the actual dance contest, Tracy gets together with committee member Fender, and they make it to the top three contestants, where they are elected as the winners by popular vote (thanks to the applause-o-meter). Tracy is exultant, since this prompts an invitation by Corny to audition to be a regular member of the show's committee. Amber's animosity grows. In the slow-dance that follows, when the couples are slow-dancing to Gene Pitney's 'Town Without Pity', she mouths 'whore' to a bewildered Tracy. Noticing that Tracy is attracting Link's attention, Amber then proceeds to kiss him, as if reclaiming her place as the girlfriend, and Tracy responds by passionately French kissing Fender. Even Peggy gets an aggressive kissing partner. The dancefloor is revealed to be filled with teenage couples rubbing their bodies together whilst making out. The humorous tone of the scene nevertheless points out to the sensuality function of the dance.

The Slow Dance was popular with all groups, black and white. It was done at all levels of proficiency and all styles of footwork and technique. The degree of affection the partners had for each other usually determined how closely they would hold each other. The main excuse for the existence of the very close variety was that it gave the kids the opportunity to rub their bodies against one another under the guise of innocent (or not so innocent) entertainment. (Pruter 1991:207)

The Slow Dance, with its required intimacy and implicit sensuality, is one of the reasons behind the show's segregation. Integrated dancing arouses white fears of racial hybridity. During Tracy's audition, she gets asked, "Would you swim in an integrated pool?". What the question implies is that both activities -swimming and dancing- pose a risk that is inextricably related to the closeness of the bodies. Tracy

responds affirmatively, stating that she is “all for integration” -she also dances with her black schoolmates in Special Ed. Her fatness, her working-class origins, and especially, her alliance and proximity to blackness position her as a “white other”. Amber, who stands as the representative of proper white femininity, confronts her on this, first by asking if she doesn’t think that she is “too fat for the show” which is “not filmed in Cinemascope” and then plainly protesting to the show’s presenter: “Cornny, can’t you see? That girl is a trash can!”. Tracy is the first agent to disrupt the established order because as a fat girl, she is an abject white. Her fatness makes her ‘other’, and because she cannot achieve white fragility, she cannot be a damsel. Her voluptuousness makes her close to black people. Her entrance on the show marks the first step towards integration.

To celebrate her entrance in the show Tracy dyes her bouffant hair blonde. The hairdo is not attempting to ‘pass’ for a natural blonde, as it has a strong peroxided yellow tone, and keeps the dark brunette underlayers and fringe. In association with her successful incorporation to the show, Tracy is parodying Amber’s whiteness: “Now all of Baltimore knows that I’m big, blonde, and beautiful!”. By appropriating her hair colour (in a trashier version) Tracy’s new hairdo comes to signify her taking over Amber. When Amber is expelled from the show for her fat-shaming comments, Tracy takes her place leading ‘The Ladies’ Choice’, for which she partners up with Link, who soon after breaks up with Amber. Furthering her mainstream success, she continues the ‘whitening’ enterprise working as a model for Mr Pinky’s Hefty-hideway, a shop for plus-sizes.

“Eat up, girls! Eat up! Big is beautiful!” says Mr Pinky upon welcoming his customers. The shop is filled with middle-aged black and white women that browse the colourful attires while eating doughnuts (Fig. 31). Pink tones dominate the setting.

Mother and daughter appear on the scene to negotiate the contract. Edna, who first opposed Tracy's obsession with the show, is now acting as her agent, willing to obtain new gowns for herself. Fatness, in the scene, is presented as something to embrace: the shop then functions as a welcoming site, one where femininity does not need to be exclusionary. Mother and daughter visibly bond over the Hefty-Hideaway, and after getting new hairdos, Tracy exclaims 'Welcome to the Sixties!'. Part of her mainstream success has been transferred to Edna, who abandons the housewife domesticity and teams up with Tracy's show business life.

The role of sweet and supporting working-class housewife was considerably against-type for Divine. Unlike the queer monsters and divas of the early Trash trilogy or distressed Francine (*Polyester*), Edna's disrupts expectations by being pragmatically dry and down-to-earth. Her first appearance on the film, ironing in her nightgown with grey hair wrapped up rollers, is completely un-glamourized. Similarly, her performance is similarly stripped down from previous 'larger-than-life' volume. Edna's dry remarks -a contrast to Divine's usual over-the-top delivery- represent the voice of reason to Tracy's idealistic nature. Using Divine's stardom in an entirely different light was part of the film mainstreaming strategy. *Hairspray* managed to surprise spectators by employing 'nice' as the new shocking.

Casting Divine as the matriarch further emphasizes the queerness of the Turnblad's family. Edna and Tracy's family resemblance is accentuated on Teen Day when mother and daughter sport the same outfit by Mr Pinky – a flowery top with a green pencil skirt. Positioned next to them, Amber and Velma (played by Debbie Harry) are also sporting the same slash neck pink dress and blonde updo (Fig.32). Positioned on both sides of the same frame, and crossing looks at each other, the film offers a dichotomy of rival mothers and daughters, where the white, thin, and upper-

class status quo encounters an opposition. When Tracy positions herself in solidarity with the integrationist protesting outside of the studio, Velma asks Edna: "is your daughter mulatto?", a reminding phrase of the exclusionary nature of whiteness. Being radicalized, fat and pro-integration, Tracy betrays whiteness.

Opposite Tracy and Edna's working-class unruly corporeality, Amber and Velma Von Tussle stand as representative ideals of thin white femininity. With them, bloneness and thinness signify restraint and maliciousness. Velma, played by singer Debbie Harry, resembles the attires and haughtiness of Connie Marble and Donna Dasher. As in *Female Trouble* and *Pink Flamingos*, the Von Tussle's upper-class status goes hand to hand with their villainy. In *Hairspray*, their evilness is tied to their whiteness, as they are shown directly benefitting from racism.

The white racial order is protected by the wealthy. In *Hairspray*, those are the executive president of the tv station, Alvin Hodgepile, and the Von Tussles, owners of the (segregated) Tilted Acres' amusement park. As Mr Von Tussle (Sonny Bonno) explains to Amber, her role in the show's is only as important as it helps promote the business, and integration is bad for business. "Segregation then! Segregation now! Segregation Forever!" are the words that the Von Tussles say on their tv interview, voicing George Wallace's racist inauguration speech<sup>40</sup>. Alvin is equally adamant about this ban. Interpreted by Divine, Alvin is caricatured evil: similar to *Female Trouble*'s Earl. Alvin's larger-than-life anger and eccentric appearance position the performance of masculinity as another version of drag.

Echoing the beginning of the film, where Amber danced on tv and Tracy followed on her living room, the film contrasts the Tilted Acres' broadcast with the Turnblad's living room. Dressed in their home-attire, they are common spectators to

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<sup>40</sup> Wallace was the 45th Governor of Alabama from 1963 to 1967, famous for his opposition to integration and the Civil Rights Movement.

the wealthy Von Tussle. The domesticity of the scene that films Edna and Wilbur as if the camera were positioned on the tv screen produces a clear contrast to the Von Tussles, and their working-class, down to earth nature, clashes against their uprightness. Upon hearing their cries for segregation, Edna matter-of-factly says to her husband: “I watch that tramp and I’m embarrassed to be white”. *Hairspray* has made whiteness a category to be renounced. Blackness, in contrast, is painted as something to aspire to.

#### Renouncing Whiteness: Blackness in *Hairspray*

If Mr Pinky’s Hefty Hideaway was presented as a utopic fat space, Motormouth Mabelle’s record shop in East Baltimore is a privileged site of blackness. In opposition to the carefully choreographed Madison, the dances that appear in this scenery are purely unscripted, unmonitored, uncensored. Decorated with posters memorabilia, the shop represents a black cultural enclave, one that has escaped the norms of social decorum that the show determines. In the record store, black music is celebrated as part of black culture. As there are no tv cameras, the dances are more spontaneous, and their sexuality can be more explicit. In the ‘Dirty Boogie’, a dance so sexual that is banned from the tv show, Tracy and Link’ celebrate their lusty romance. Following Jane Desmond, their dancing embodies and heightens their sexual and romantic connection:

Dancing, perhaps the most highly complex and codified of kinesthetic practices, is one of the most important arenas of public physical enactment. With its linkage to sex, sexiness, and sexuality, dance [...] can help us understand how sexuality is literally inhabited, embodied, and experienced. It can open the way to the new arena of investigations [...]: a kinesthetics of sexuality (2001:7)

Tracy and Link’s sexual attraction to one another is explicitly revealed in the dance. They dance facing each other, separated in two initial frames, but nevertheless signalling and gesturing at one another. She starts by miming a fishing rod to capture



him, and he gets hooked, pulling closer to her body. Within the same frame, he then starts removing his jacket, while getting down with his hips to the point that allows him to face Tracy on the same level. Her movements have to do with her arms, seductively moving behind her hair-sprayed hairdo, and her breasts, that she shakes to the rhythm of the song. Link opens an imaginary window with his hands and puts his tongue out, a gesture that she corresponds by pulling closer and tying her hands behind his neck (Fig. 33). Their ‘dirty’ dance is encompassed by the song ‘Hide & Seek Pt. 1’, by Bunker Hill (1962), which “utilizes offbeat syncopation, a technique present in African polyrhythm tradition as well as early rock and roll music”, as M. Dwyer describes in his analysis of *Hairspray*’s blackness. “The vocals are punctuated by backbeat hand-claps as well as yelps, hoots, and wails in call-and-response patterns, again recalling rock’s roots in African musical traditions” (2015:107). The Afro-American inheritance of the song and dance showcases the film’s depiction of black culture as a utopia, since it is inside the black songs and dances that freedom and ecstasy can be attained. Non-coincidentally, in the record store scene a new burgeoning romance emerges Peggy and Seaweed’s interracial love story.

Utopic musical spectacles aside, the film’s representation of blackness shows the continuous struggle against racism. In parallel editing to the ‘Dirty Boogie’, the film shows Peggy’s racist mother walking through the black neighbourhood. Nervously wandering on the street, she closely holds her purse. Prejudices shape her reality, for she believes to be the victim of a non-existing robbery. When a smiling drunk asks her for a dollar, she directly offers him the entire content of her purse. The humour of the scene consists of the deconstruction of the trope of white fragility. Acting as a damsel in distress to an imaginary threat (Fig. 34), Mrs Pingleton exposes her ignorance. Her whiteness is revealed to be victimising. In response, the film

openly mocks her. As the drunk man effusively thanks her generosity, all the black neighbours sitting outside their porches openly laughing at her. The riotous laugh of the black neighbourhood enforces the point of view of the scene, rearranging the film's alliance to blackness, as the audience is invited to join the laughter *against* the racist white woman. Through the communal laughter, *Hairspray* offers possibilities of resistance.

Using spectacle and humour, *Hairspray* performs disidentification. In the work of Jose Esteban Munoz, disidentification is a "survival strategy" for minority subjects alienated by "the fiction of identity" (1999:5). Disidentification is Muñoz's concept to understand how minority subjects, such as queers of colour, perform identity given that they "must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates". When identity is fragmented, "hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered [...] a representational contract is broken" (1999:6). Disidentification, explains Muñoz, allows for an intersectional analysis of performance, escaping the closeness of essentialism. This theoretical paradigm is a reading strategy or hermeneutic, to use Muñoz's term (1999:25) to discuss queer performances<sup>41</sup> and its politics.

The best example of disidentification in *Hairspray* happens after the white protagonists -Tracy, Link, and Peggy- have decided to join the fight for integration, and they continue by merging into black spaces, absorbing the culture. The scene opens to an auditorium where people are dancing to The Ikettes' 'I'm Blue'. As in all the group dances in the film, the camera is positioned in a high angle, with the wide

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<sup>41</sup> Muñoz reads disidentification in the works of writer James Baldwin, painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, drag queen Vaginal Davis, activist Pedro Zamora. It is a concept that travels across disciplines and that encompasses "a hermeneutic, a process of production and a mode of performance" (1999:25).

shot capturing a multitude of (black) bodies dancing ‘The Dog’ (Fig. 35). The dance, as described by Robert Pruter, consists in “a dancer with his or her partner would move sensually together in a bent-over position and in such proximity so as to resemble two dogs copulating” (1991:198). Erotically charged, the scene continues what the ‘Dirty Boogie’ had already announced: the physical embodiment of the music, in a safe black space, is materialized as a jubilant celebration. It is with similar bliss that Motormouth Mabelle, in a golden sparkly outfit, leads the audience to “fight, fight, fight” against segregation. Unlike the pacifist rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Motormouth’s plea is energetic and chaotic, but she then proceeds to welcome on stage R&B singer Toussaint McCall. His song ‘Nothing Takes the Place of You’ invokes the spiritual negro tradition, produces yearning and acute nostalgia. Whilst McCall sings the two couples -Tracy and Link and Penny and Seaweed- abandon the dance floor to go the back alley to make out.

The moonlight-lit, rat-infested alley functioning as a romantic setting represents the transformation of the early trash aesthetics into *Hairspray*’s likeable softness. With alleys and rats as Waters’ signature signs<sup>42</sup>, the scene overrides their filthiness affiliation with the romantic affect of the song. ‘Nothing Takes the Place of You’ is now sung by a drunk homeless man -also played by Toussaint McCall- that walks by the alley. The double cameo briefly transforms the world of *Hairspray* into a musical, as it breaks realism in favour of the musical fantasy. “This is so romantic”, says Tracy, while kicking a rat with her white heels. A close-up reveals her and Link’s embrace. “I wish I was dark-skinned”, she confesses. Link’s response, “Our souls are black, even though our skins are white”, continues by playing into the racial humour. Next to them, Penny and Seaweed are also making out, and wondering about their

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<sup>42</sup> Aside from *Pink Flamingos*’ infamous alley scene, there is an alley rape scene in *Multiple Maniacs*, and rats feature heavily in *Desperate Living*.

future as an interracial couple. When he says that their love will always be taboo, Penny urges him to go to second base. The couple moans in excitement: their pleasure seems to override racism.

It would be difficult to argue against the use of irony, as the scene arguably does have a ‘winking quality’ (Dwyer 2015:109), mocking the teenagers’ desire to be black. The significance of the statement did not pass unnoticed: much of the reviews commented on the scene, describing it as “extremely embarrassing” (Watson 1988) and “of such outstanding crassness” (Agnew 1988). By focusing on the audiences’ emotional response -cringe, or embarrassment- the reviews seem to forget the reason behind the scene: within the world of *Hairspray*, the desire to be black is announced in all sincerity, a feeling that constitutes much of the film’s popularity. Blackness is portrayed in all earnestly as something to aspire, and because of that, the ‘making-out’ alley scene functions as an emotional core in the story. In bell hooks’ analysis, this statement is read as emancipatory:

In *Hairspray*, the "cool" white people, working-class Traci [sic] and her middle-class boyfriend, transgress class and race boundaries to dance with black folks. [...] Yet their recognition of the particular pleasures and sorrows black folks experience does not lead to cultural appropriation but to an appreciation that extends into the realm of the political. [...] The longing and desire whites express for contact with black culture is coupled with the recognition of the culture's value. One does not transgress boundaries to stay the same, to reassert white domination. [...] when Traci says she wants to be black, blackness becomes a metaphor for freedom, an end to boundaries. Blackness is vital not because it represents "the primitive" but because it invites engagement in a revolutionary ethos that dares to challenge and disrupt the status quo." (1993:36-37)

Reading hooks’ analysis alongside Muñoz’s disidentification helps to contextualize *Hairspray*’s nostalgic utopia. Disidentification here operates by providing a utopic remake of the public sphere where blackness no longer is marginal, but empowering and aspirational. The scene “negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power” (1999:19), where the desire to be black manifest a

disidentificatory refusal to either assimilate and/or be marginalized from the dominant ideology. As an escape to a monolithic understanding of discourse and power, disidentification offers a “working on and against” survival strategy (1999:11). *Hairspray* follows this strategy by making the integration of the Corny Collins show the event that moves the story forward. Likewise, ‘working on and against’ is a metaphor for how the film launched a mainstreaming survival strategy. *Hairspray* is not only the story of Tracy’s conquest of the mainstream, but of Waters as well.

The anti-racist film stance gets compromised, nevertheless, by launching Tracy as a white saviour towards the last part of the movie. In the third act of the film, she ends up becoming a recognizable leader in the fight for integration. After the Tilted Acres riot, she is imprisoned, and the anti-segregation campaign turns to the ‘Free Tracy Turnblad’ campaign. While the crowning of Ms Auto Show takes place, Tracy is imprisoned, and ironing her hair – an aesthetic gesture that represents at the same time the radicalization of her politics and the dawn of a new era, the 60s. Parallel to the crowning, Motormouth Mabelle and Lil’ Inez handcuff themselves to the Major, who agrees to pardon Tracy after being repeatedly kissed by mother and daughter. The direct-action-kissing as a form of political protest represents another form of bodily excess. Unlike Waters’ early movies, this form of bodily excess was not about gross-out. Beyond its comedic use, *Hairspray*’s performative excess and flaunt of flesh indicates that the transgressive aesthetics were not abandoned but rewired.

Tracy’s release from prison is another moment when the film adopts the musical suspension of disbelief. She exits the prison dancing along to ‘The Roach’, a dance that Amber had previously dedicated to her, and miraculously arrives onset before the dance number has finished. Dancing along with Motormouth and Lil’ Inez, Tracy enters the recording set and the show becomes integrated. When her crowning

is celebrated, Benson-Allen argues, the film has “marginalized black characters” (2009:147), by concentrating the Civil Rights’ movement in Tracy’s persona. This criticism gets exacerbated by the fact that the original script included the storyline of a black dancer that tried to audition to the show that ended up being cut.

*Hairspray* is, unequivocally, a white narrative account of integration. White characters are part, sometimes protagonists, in the fight for integration. Yet that does not mean that the film does not simultaneously have an anti-racist stance that proposes disidentification. Benson-Allen and Tinkcom’s work on *Hairspray* focuses on how the film betrays history. The film’s happy ending, I argue, is not constructed over the erasure of NAACP. Instead, it is a celebratory fantasy over the ‘failure’ of history. The Buddy Deane Show was cancelled, after some protests, to avoid integration. There was never a fat dancer on the show, and even the ad campaign for the film used two generic white people’s legs as “they were afraid to put a fat person on the poster, or a drag queen” (Heller 2011:53). All these facts, put together, show that the film’s emancipatory messages re-politicize nostalgia.

When Tracy dances ‘The Bug’, wearing Mr Pinky’s pink celebration gown stamped with roaches, she is giving a resignification to her abjection. The roaches- another expression of filth- are worn with defiance. Black and white dancers move along, shaking the invisible ‘bug’ of their bodies spasmodically. The queering of nostalgia means that we get to recreate the past not as it was, but as we wish we would have lived it. In Roger Ebert’s review of the film for *The Chicago Sun Times*, the critic concluded that “If there is a message in the movie, it is that Waters, who could never in a million years have made the Council, did, after all, *survive* to make the movie” (1988, my emphasis). What the film offers is an alternative popular history that recuperates a folk tradition -dancing- to celebrate marginalized bodies. The celebration

was so applauded that struck a chord in popular culture, in the form of very popular Broadway, Hollywood and tv network adaptations, and secured Waters' filmmaking career for the two following decades.

### **Cry-Baby (1990)**

In many ways, *Cry-Baby* is a product of the aftermath of *Hairspray*. Written, filmed and released within two years<sup>43</sup>, the relative promptness of this production - especially considering the seven-year gap after *Polyester*- can be attributed to *Hairspray*'s popularity. Yet the success was not strictly economic: according to the filmmaker, *Hairspray* was a *hit d'estime*, meaning that "everybody thought it was a bigger hit than it was"<sup>44</sup>. The revenue was overestimated in the eyes of the industry due to the buzz the film created, the raving reviews and the popularity of the feel-good 'nostalgia' genre. All these made *Cry-Baby* a safe bet, one that allegedly attracted several studios offers<sup>45</sup>, until a deal with Imagine Entertainment and Universal Studios was reached, with a budget of twelve million dollars (Waters 2019:49-51). This meant that *Cry-Baby* was six times *Hairspray*'s budget, when until then, in Waters' career, the budget increases had merely doubled from one production to the other. The financial support from the studios meant that for the first time Waters had to join the Writers Guild, and all the actors had to be SAG affiliated. Likewise, all film production workers had to be unionized. The filmmaking process was no longer independent, which meant more production value and external pressure.

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<sup>43</sup> *Cry-Baby* was likely written during 1988, since rehearsals took place in early 1989, the filming took place in spring/summer 1989, and the film was released on April 1990.

<sup>44</sup> In his latest book, Waters recounts that the film did not break even until 2009, according to the reports that he receives (2019:32). However he is likely referring to the studio's profits, given that the Broadway adaptation premiered in 2002, and he received "more money on any one project than in anything else I ever did in my life (2019:40).

<sup>45</sup> Waters repeats this during the director's DVD commentary and the making-of documentary "It happened in Baltimore"

What makes *Cry-Baby* similar to *Hairspray* is their nostalgia. If *Hairspray* depicted the early 1960s, before The Beatles and the Summer of Love, *Cry-Baby* takes place in 1954, showing the early rockabilly scene before the Elvis' explosion<sup>46</sup>. Instead of blacks and whites, society is divided into 'drapes' and 'squares'. Drapes are the cool underdogs, 'hepcats' that listen and dance to rock n' roll, whereas the squares are the upper-class villains, the guardians of good taste. Like in *Hairspray*, the nostalgia materializes in an affective relationship with the music of the era, and the clothes, and hairdos that accompany it. Like in *Hairspray*, history is tweaked, altered or simply betrayed for the utopic nostalgia to flourish.

The opening credits perform the Fifties nostalgia in the form of mass polio vaccinations in the high school gym. A sign, "Congratulations, class of 1954", fixes the diegetic time, whilst the song 'Cry-Baby', a doo-wop number<sup>47</sup>, sets the musical feel, grounding the film into a particular sound and aesthetics. A caricatured nurse and doctor are inserting a needle in the arm of a crying teenager, whom in a cartoonish grimace emits a muted scream. The camera then opens the frame in a backward dolly that reveals the two lines of teenagers waiting to receive their shots. Much as in the opening scene in *Hairspray*, the sartorial system is exuberantly displayed: clothes demarcate character. The two lines of waiting teenagers reinforce the visual dichotomy. The drapes' fashion – black leather jackets, tattoos, pompadour hairdos, heavy red lipstick and eye make-up- embodies the riskiness and rebelliousness associated with rockabilly music. They demonstrate attitude, which is performed as anger towards authorities and the status quo. In opposition to that, the "clean" square fashion –white suede shoes, grey pants, button-down shirts, and crew cuts for the boys,

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<sup>46</sup> Presley recorded his first singles with Sun Records during 1953 and 1954, but it was in late 1955/1956 that his career broke nationally.

<sup>47</sup> The film's version is sung by Rachel Sweet, who also did the opening credits song on *Hairspray*. Her cover is a pretty close imitation to the original, a 1956 hit by The Bonnie Sisters.



ponytails, pink lipstick and crinoline skirts for the girls- represents conformism to the established order. Allison and Baldwin are squares: blonde, blue-eyed, smiling and dressed in khaki tones; they present a wholesome picture of the American Teenager. By contrast, the Cry-Baby gang are threatening: ‘ugly’ pin-up Mona ‘Hatchet Face’ and her weird boyfriend Milton, pregnant Pepper Walker (Ricki Lake), and sexy Wanda Woodward (Traci Lords). The ‘drapes’ represent the underbelly of Eisenhower’s America, a rejection of “the reorganization and normalization of life after the war, with its conformist, settled lifestyle” (Suarez 2001:150). Juvenile delinquency, in the 50s, emerged as a discourse category that became a de facto moral panic<sup>48</sup> about American teenagers and the “unique and pernicious set of social and cultural influences” that was corrupting them, from comic books and rock and roll to “working mothers, geographic mobility, social disintegration” (Goode 2018:582).

The action taking place- the vaccination- serves as a reminder of the theme of adolescence. The characters getting stabbed with a needle reminds us of their transiting status between childhood and adulthood. Their reactions to the shot -erupting in hysterical laughter, or nervous trembling- infantilize the characters despite their tough teenage personas. Against his will and escorted by several ‘squares’, Cry-Baby is dragged to the first spot on the line while Allison is being attended by the other doctor (Fig. 36). The two teenagers stare at each other, maintaining a lustful gaze while they are getting the shot. She looks admiringly to his serious glare, which is accompanied by a single tear. The scene conveys the intimacy of shared pain, and the single tear represents their sexual excitement. As a representative of bodily fluids, the tear motif

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<sup>48</sup> A moral panic is “a scare about a threat or supposed threat posed by deviants or “folk devils”, a category of people who, presumably, engage in evil practices and are responsible for menacing society’s culture, way of life, or central values”. A notable feature of moral panics is that they create a lot of media attention around a relatively minor event or social issue. (Goode 2018:583-584).

reappears throughout the movie, an innocent depiction of sexual awakening: Waters refers to it throughout the director's commentary as the 'cum shot'. The tear is Cry-Baby's sign, a hidden reminder of the characters' sexuality.

Sexual courtship, lustful romance and teenage desires are at the front of *Cry-baby*'s plot. The film recounts the romance between Wade 'Cry-Baby' Walker, leader of a draper gang in Baltimore, and Allison Vernon-William, the blonde ingenue from a good (square) family. He wears greased draped hair, a black leather jacket, and has a motorcycle. She feels tired of being good. They sing to each other. There are make-overs, motorcycles rides and drag races. Their love is threatened by Allison's ex-boyfriend, evil preppy Baldwin; and Cry-baby's admirer, 'cheap' girl Lorna. Adolescence is celebrated in all of its ludicrous glory: the film is extremely salacious without ever being explicitly sexual. Much like in *Hairspray*, the sensual pleasures are rooted in the musical spectacle. Scenes of heavy kissing and petting, while slow dancing, represent the utopian promise of rock and roll: sexual excitement. In *Cry-Baby*, the "direct expression of sexuality" that rock and roll signals meets the exuberant visual excess and fantasy of the musical genre (Grant 1986:197-198), which result in which might be Waters' most salacious film.

*Cry-Baby* is a musical about the Fifties nostalgic utopia, one that represents a powerful American myth, the "rockabilly ideal: rebellion against societal controls, excess, hedonism, a sense of community amongst outsiders" (Mullen 1984:79). The nostalgia that is showcased is not merely a fond remembrance of things past. Instead, this nostalgic endeavour functions as a palimpsest of Americana, an "intermediary space" that reunites memory, tradition and folk culture (Altman 1989:273). *Cry-Baby* references the history and aesthetics of an era, the Fifties before Elvis, whilst also referencing how they were first captured by the media, in the form of the firsts 'rock

and roll’ and ‘juvenile delinquency’ pictures. As a rock musical, it showcases the influences of early rock musicals, like the Elvis movies, as it can be observed in the jukebox musical numbers and romantic scenes. It similarly carries the influence of previous successful enterprises of Fifties nostalgia – *American Graffiti* (1973), *The Outsiders* (1983), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Great Balls of Fire* (1989), and perhaps the most relevant example of nostalgic camp, *Grease* (1978)<sup>49</sup>. In addition to this, the film also reflects on the Fifties as mythicised by underground cinema. In the role of parental figures, the adult is constituted by an array of cult figures: Warhol stars Joe Dallesandro and Susan Tyrell<sup>50</sup>, punk rock icon Iggy Pop, 50s and 60s actors and sex symbols Troy Donahue and Joey Heatherton and surviving Dreamlander<sup>51</sup> Mink Stole. *Cry-Baby* drinks from an extensive archive of Fifties nostalgia, borrowing elements such as the bright deluxe colour of *The Girl Can’t Help It* (1956) the stylized drag races of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), the outlaw rock and roll of *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) the erotic cult of leather bikers in Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963) the cartoonish character stereotyping of *Grease* (1978). Given its engaged intertextuality with other works of Fifties nostalgia, I propose to read *Cry-Baby* as an example of pastiche cinema.

Pastiche is a form of art that relies on imitation. The term originates in the Italian word *pasticcio*, originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to discuss a work of art that had

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<sup>49</sup> “*Grease* provided ways for proto-queer youth to identify (and even celebrate) cultural difference in contexts where queerness itself was not readily available as a personal or social option” writes Michael Borgstrom, describing the film as non-threatening and “acceptable camp” (2011:153). The queer readings of the film are popularly acknowledged by documentarist Jeffrey Schwarz, who summarizes them as: “I think [for] most people who see *Grease*, it would never dawn on them that there’s anything gay about it. And they’re right because there really isn’t [...] But then if you look at it through that lens, I mean, there’s lots of boys in tight pants running around. There’s this homoerotic nature. There’s boys wrestling. There’s Olivia Newton-John. Hot pants. Everything about it [is queer].” (Reynolds 2018)

<sup>50</sup> Tyrell appeared in Andy Warhol’s *Bad* (1977), directed by Jed Johnson.

<sup>51</sup> By 1990, Divine, Edith Massey, David Lochary and Cookie Mueller had passed away. Mary Vivian Pierce was the only other Dreamlanders’ original performer that survived. She has a brief cameo in *Cry-Baby*.

been composed by the integration of different parts. Combination of different textures is a key defining trait of pastiche. In postmodern times, pastiche has been notoriously put down, as a 'blank parody' without a sense of humour (Jameson 1987:114) or as a form of waste recycling (Bruno in Hoesterley 2001:52). Following the work of Ingeborg Hoerderley and Richard Dyer, I would like to pursue a conceptualization that escapes the idea of pastiche as the poor version of what it imitates, acknowledging instead that pastiche is not an imitation of an original work but a copy of a copy.

In reading *Cry-Baby* as pastiche, instead of as parody, I recognise the closeness of the film to what it imitates, that is, a work of Fifties nostalgia. Parody is transformative: it has a greater ironic distance to what it copies. Whereas *Polyester* was a parody of suburban melodramas, *Cry-baby*, in its closeness to *Grease*, the Elvis cinema and the juvenile delinquency exploitation movies, is an example of pastiche. However, I do not wish to reproduce here Jameson's highbrow and lowbrow distinction of parody and pastiche where the former demonstrates critical and political thought, and the latter lacks laughter and incisiveness. I do not read pastiche as degraded historicism nor as a postmodernist sin that pursues the "insensible colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode" (Jameson 1991:19). Instead, I employ pastiche as a deliberate expression of formal mimicry, one that "embraces closeness" because it "accepts the possibility of being seduced, penetrated, dependent or ventriloquised, without seeing this as a significant and anxiety-producing loss of autonomy" (Dyer 2007:179). In invoking the 50s style, *Cry-Baby's* pastiche invites nostalgia to fundamentally infiltrate the film.

The stylization of the era, throughout the bodies of the characters, is so strong that demarcates the essence of the film. Clothes and music fuel the film's nostalgia. If pastiche "reminds us, however, that they don't make films like this anymore" (Dyer

2007:177), *Cry-Baby* similarly reminds us that they don't do music nor clothes like this anymore. The film rescues style from history, allowing the spectator to revive the affective feelings of an era. In other words, *Cry-Baby* justifies its existence as a praxis of nostalgia. The film enforces its closeness by producing a loving resemblance of the Fifties cultural artefacts.

The study of *Cry-Baby* as an example of pastiche will guide my analysis of the film. The first question to consider is gender. The importance of masculinity in the film is highlighted by the facts that *Cry-Baby* is the first Waters' film with a male protagonist, played by Depp, who is also arguably the most famous Hollywood A-list star in Waters' filmography. In contrast to *Cry-Baby*'s masculine worship, I want to read the performance of femininity through an analysis of Wanda Woodward, played by Traci Lords. The second question is genre. How does *Cry-baby* fit the musical genre? What are the generic conventions that the film follows and, where or when does it dissociate itself from the genre? Through an analysis of the musical numbers, I intend to read the hybridity<sup>52</sup> of the film.

### Gender pastiche

Playing the character whose name would title the film, *Cry-Baby* was a vehicle for young Johnny Depp to incarnate the poster figure of Fifties teenage rebelliousness. Reconfigured after Marlon Brando, James Dean, Elvis Presley, the *Athletic Model Guild* and Tom of Finland, *Cry-Baby* is masculine idol and object of desire. The character is constructed on the sensual power of the leather-jacket biker, one of the most reproduced erotic myths of the twentieth century:

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<sup>52</sup> This thesis uses a definition of hybridity that refers to the mixture that produces an state of "in-between", an inscription that produces an interstice between understood dichotomies such as "private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social" (Bhabha 2004:19). The concept comes from postcolonial studies, and it is useful to this discussion of *Cry-Baby* because it brings to the fore issues of genre in relation to racial tensions.

In the late 40s and early 50s the leather-clad biker emerged as the personification of freedom, rebellion and masculinity in Western pop culture. His world was ruled by its own code of honour which rejected all that was considered socially desirable. (Hanson 2011:22).

The sexualization of the juvenile delinquent traces back to rock and roll as a metaphor for sexual energy: music that celebrated the lower body. Cry-Baby's style - dressed in a black leather jacket, with a white t-shirt, denim, and black leather boots - signals his role as the leader of a gang of juvenile delinquents, a type of (now) standardized rebellion that encapsulates the American Fifties' rock and roll fashion. The aesthetic reference that Waters' used in his pitch took portraits from the *Athletic Model Guild*. A referent of 50s gay erotica, the publication featured bodies of "rough-looking, muscular men, many of whom [...] had criminal records" (Suárez 2001:156). The influence of the *Athletic Model Guild* has shaped queer nostalgia, as Padva (2014) and Waugh (1996a) demonstrate<sup>53</sup>. In *Cry-Baby*, that sensual force is hidden in plain sight. The film might be, upon a first look, the most heteronormative of Waters' body of work, however, queerness is at the genesis of *Cry-Baby*, both on its representation of the leather-biker and in the visual pleasure of Johnny Depp's performance.

In 1990, Depp was in the cusp of becoming an A-list Hollywood star. One of the reasons behind the studios supports for *Cry-Baby* was Johnny Depp's emerging stardom. The actor was already a teen idol for his role in the television series *21 Jump Street*. Imagine Entertainment-who represented him- was looking forward to taking

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<sup>53</sup> "However much AMG was to be recycled in the nostalgia of postmodern gay culture, its achievement belonged to the fifties, when its clash between unabashed lustfulness and campy ghetto irony, between innocence and experience, epitomized Eisenhower's America. Mizer brought to physique culture, despite the enforced alibi and paranoia, an unapologetic celebration of flesh, community, and ambiguous masculinity in an age when erotic consumerism had not yet colonized gay desire." (Waugh 1996a:81)

the young actor back to the big screen<sup>54</sup>. In many ways, *Cry-Baby* was the perfect choice for Depp, that looked forward to escaping his teen idol image. The film's tagline -“He’s a doll. He’s a dreamboat. He’s a juvenile delinquent”- capitalized on the actor’s popularity whilst it made fun of the rebel heartthrob figure. To him, being marketed as a teen idol meant being “shoved down the gullets of America” as a “novelty boy, franchise boy”. No longer content to be “plastered, postured, patented, painted, plastic”, Johnny Depp was ready to be “discovered, uncovered, and recovered from the mainstream.” (White 1999:28). Tim Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), which he filmed immediately after *Cry-Baby*, would provide that breakthrough. The two performances could not be more apart: while in Burton’s gothic tale he offers a deadpan delivery, in *Cry-Baby* he offers his own version of the loud and comic Waters’ delivery.

*Cry-Baby*’s masculinity recycles the iconography of the Fifties outsider. Despite the film humour, and Depp’s intend to shake off him the teen idol reputation, the character is a pastiche, rather than a parody, insofar as his heartthrob status is referenced continuously. The film enforces Alison’s point of view, who gazes at him longingly. The ‘cheap girl’, Lorna, throws her underwear at him. There is even a fan service semi-nude scene: when *Cry-Baby* tries to escape prison through the tunnels, being led by rats, he first loses his trousers, and then his shirt, emerging from the tunnel with only his underwear. The character’s sex appeal is his most defining attribute, like a force that emanates from him and extends to those around him. “Kiss me”, he instructs to Alison during a party at the draper’s hangout, “kiss me *hard*”. They are laying on a field, surrounded by many embracing couples. When Allison admits she “has never Frenched-kiss before”, he takes the time to explain how to do it. When the

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<sup>54</sup> Depp first cinematic role was a small role as a jock high school student in New Line Cinema’s *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).

couple kiss, the close-up reveals continuous tongue movement. A kissing montage choreographed to The Jive Bombers' 'Bad Boy', shows the rest of the drape gang kissing, with their tongues prominently out of their mouths (Fig. 37). The song syncopates the tongue action to the 'lalalalalala' doo-wop chorus. The scene is a call back to the cinema of sensations, featuring plenty of saliva, one of the most harmless of bodily fluids. It seems as if *Cry-Baby* is reconfiguring the abject, making it more accessible for its audiences. As a critic noted, "In the Aids era, Waters has made a Fifties film in which most of the cast exchanges bodily fluids" (Travers 1990:37).

If Allison is the square blonde ingenue to *Cry-Baby*'s rebellious sex appeal, much as *Grease*'s Sandy and *The Restless Years*' Melinda<sup>55</sup>, Wanda Woodward offers the feminine version of the juvenile delinquent. Encapsulating much of the film's exciting pleasures, the character, played by Traci Lords, adds cult value to the film. The twenty-five-year-old actress had virtually become the most famous porn actress in the world, after news broke out that she had been underage for almost the totality of her career. Rather than stop her from being illegally employed, police used her case to bring down the porno industry, which resulted in her often being subpoenaed to participate in trials whenever her films were intercepted. Much like Depp, Lords wanted to escape her reputation as the girl that brought down an industry.

Wanda's sexiness is inextricably tied with her anger. Following Waters' instruction, Lords prepared the role with Russ Meyer's *Faster, Faster, Pussycat! Kill, Kill!* in mind. Much as Tura Satana's Varla, Wanda presents an unapologetically ferocious and tantalizing femininity. Both Satana and Lords experienced trauma, sexual violence and sex work in their teenage years, and then move to play indomitable heroines onscreen. "Our bosoms are our weapons", explains Wanda, before using them

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<sup>55</sup> Respectively played by blonde newcomers Olivia Newton-John and Sandra Dee.



to assault a square during a fight physically. Wanda's storyline intersects with Lords' past as she gets asked repeatedly by the town pervert to pose naked. Wanda's response, "Beat it, creep", is one of the quotes of most reverberation, not only from *Cry-Baby*, but from Waters' career. Following the theme of nostalgia as rewriting of the past, Wanda's rebuff of the man that tries to lure her into modelling can be read as a reclaiming of female agency against the exploitative patriarchal order.

In the copy of the film that was released in cinemas, Wanda (like Dawn Davenport) hitchhikes to her parents' house and is given a ride by the creep, Toe-Joe, who refuses to let her off the car. Next time Wanda appears onscreen, she has reunited with the rest of the Drapes' gang. This gap in the diegesis is due to an eliminated scene included in the director's cut. The scene takes place in Toe-Joe's studio, where several men and women are forced to be photographed (some, as Wanda, against their will). The setting, designed by Vince Peranio, reiterates the Tom of Finland and Bob Mizer's *American Athletic Guild* references, directly quoting their queer Santa and postal boy's images. After taking the pictures, Toe-Joe announces that they are ready to film a pornographic movie, and all of the models freak out and escape. The elimination of this storyline reveals the studio's nervousness towards Traci Lords. As a result of that pressure, the scene that most explicitly demonstrated *Cry-Baby's* gay undertones was significantly cut out.

#### Genre pastiche

*Cry-Baby* follows Rick Altman's summary of the genre: "in the musical, the couple is the plot" (1989:35). According to Altman, the American film musical is characterized by dichotomies – upper-class/lower class, femininity/maleness, white/black music, good taste/bad taste- and those dichotomies, situated at the core of the diegesis, are dealt with in the form of the courtship of the heterosexual couple. "By

reconciling terms previously seen as mutually exclusive”, Altman argues, “the musical succeeds in reducing an unsatisfactory paradox to a more workable configuration, a concordance of opposites. [...] the musical fashions a myth out of the American courtship ritual” (1989:27). In *Cry-Baby*, the different dichotomies are organized as a battle between the ‘drapes’ and the ‘squares’. This familiar conflict -a moral confrontation not unlike the war between families in *Pink Flamingos*- provides the dramatic background to Allison and Cry-Baby romance. From the opening scene, where they fall in love, all the narrative developments of the plot are focused on them: getting together, singing together, fighting and separating, and finally reconciling and celebrating.

The sexual differentiation of the couple is early established as the film presents the opposing world of drapes and squares. The initial point of view is Allison’s: a square girl that secretly desires to be a *drapette*. On a close shot, she mutters to herself “I’m so tired of being good-” while staring at the gang. In front of a flamed decorated black Buick, Cry Baby lights a match from his mouth, -mimicking the gesture of the Scorpio in *Scorpio Rising*- and then proceeds to swallow it. His sexual attraction is somehow disguised behind studied indifference, or borderline aggression – which results in a sort of drag race forced against Allison’s grandmother car. In contrast to Cry-Baby’s anarchic driving, Ms Vernon-Williams is introduced as an extremely conservative lady, defender of grammar and good manners. She hosts a talent show where the rules of good taste are rigidly enforced. It is within this upper-class, all white space, that the film presents its first musical number.

The squares perform the whitest music imaginable. Following the jukebox musical tradition, Baldwin and three of his square friends, dressed in matching white smoking suits with twee bow tie, sung the harmonious doo-wop number ‘Sh-boom’.

The significance of the chosen tune resides in the hidden racial conflict it encapsulates. As Doherty explores, “*Sh-Boom* was the first rhythm and blues tune with an undeniable “black” flavor to cross over successfully” (1988:55). When the original song by the black group The Chords was surpassed in popularity by the white cover version, the industry had invented a standard procedure, a profitable ‘white erasing’ practice based in the same logic that would segregate *Hairspray*’s Corny Collins Show. “Capitalizing on hefty advertising budgets, systems of national distribution, and consumer racism, the major were often able to outsell the R&B original with a note-for-note “cover” as was the case with “Sh-boom” (1988:57). With their jazz hands and other show-choir choreographic elements, their rendition of the song is pristinely clean, representing the way Fifties culture profited from black culture whilst completely erasing it. Hence why the musical number establishes the squares as the whitest people imaginable, for whiteness is described for its acts of appropriation. The combination of the new musical arrangement and the glee-club harmonious singing transformed ‘Sh-Boom’ into “a piece of surreal kitsch” (Miller 1999:77). None of the squares’ musical numbers are original songs, but sweetened adaptations: later in the film, they performed a nightgown staged cover of Mr Sandman.

The second musical number in the film, Allison’s performance on the talent show, is also a jukebox number: ‘A Teenage Prayer’, sung by Rachel Sweet, is a cover of the 1956’s hit by Gale Storm. The use of original songs, and in this case, one that is posterior to the era that the film portrays, functions as a tool of nostalgia. Nostalgia, as a betrayal of factual history, re-order times and transform meanings: it thrives on hybridity<sup>56</sup>. During Allison’s musical performance, Baldwin imagines her with a bridal gown. This is represented in a superimposition of a visual thought bubble that includes

her, on a black background, in an oval balloon that is coming out of his head. Similarly, Allison looks to the audience and instead of seeing Baldwin and his friends, she is visualizing the four bodies with Cry-Baby's face superimposed on them (Fig. 38), each of his heads gesturing at her (nodding, winking, or putting out his tongue). The cartoonish use of these primitive special effects is employed for comedic purposes: the laughter arises from the crude adaptation of a language resource which originates in graphic novels, often employed in early cinema. "Superimposition on the screen signals: 'Attention: unreal world, imaginary characters'", warns Bazin, noting that "if a director does want to employ special effects, he can use devices that are much more sophisticated and elaborate than the tricks handed down to us by Méliès" (1946). The unsophisticatedness of the superimposition, an easy resource for narrative exposition, is played for comedy: through it, *Cry-Baby* calls attention to its status as pastiche, a hybrid form of nostalgia. It inevitably adds critical distance to the teenage desire it represents.

In opposition to the talent show musical numbers, the music in the drapes spaces is original and physically celebrated through dancing. In parallel editing, the dialectic to the rigid squares' cotillion ballroom setting, the Turkey Points club is the anarchic space where the drapes hang out. The spontaneity of their dance is somehow compromised by the choreographic movements. Entering the dancefloor, the drapes guys walk diagonally across the room, shaking their hands rhythmically, while couples dance acrobatically on the back.

*Cry-Baby* first original song is 'King Cry-Baby', and it continues the background show musical tradition. The musical number takes place at night at the Jukebox Jamboree, a drape night-club owned by Cry-Baby's grandparents, and it is performed by the gang, who are now wearing their stage clothes. Cry-Baby and Milton are both

wearing zoot suits, high-waisted, wide-legged, pegged trousers with wide lapels and wide padded shoulders' large coats. Popularized fashion in 1940's black urban spaces (such as Harlem), the zoot suit would transform in the Teddy's Boys 'Edwardian Look'. Cry-Baby's black and white suit, with the colours separated by a silver bead rivet, is especially evocative of Elvis Presley's first tv appearance. Elvis' wide-legged, hip-thrusting dancing is mimicked by Cry-Baby, while the song further establishes their kinship as 'kings'. Aside from the obvious Presley influence, the song can be identified as rockabilly: early rock and roll with a southern hillbilly influence, for its identifiable country and rhythm and blues inflexions, energetic vocal delivery, upright bass played in a slapped manner, and use of echo effects. However, as a nostalgic revival piece, the piece betrays authentic/historical rockabilly in its use of female vocal chorus, saxophone presence and "condescendingly juvenile lyrics" (Morrison 1996:1-4). Another element that highlights the southern hillbilly affiliation, whilst also corrupting history, is the use of the Confederate flag as the background curtain (Fig. 39).

The use of the Confederate flag in *Cry-Baby* raises questions of contested American history, white identity, racism and nostalgia. Although the flag was never an official emblem of the Confederate South, during the American Civil War it became an important symbol for the nation that was losing the war. "The blue St. Andrew's cross [...] on the red flag became in effect what it never technically was: the Confederate flag" (Coski 2005:1). After the war, the meaning of the flag was no longer strictly associated to the Confederate South, but it grew to signify multiple things, including "the South as a distinctive region, individual rebelliousness, a self-conscious "redneck" culture, and segregation and racism" (2005:97). Seemingly forgotten for a few decades, the flag reappeared during the early twentieth century associated with the second rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the Jim Crow laws (Palmer and Freed Wessler

2018)<sup>57</sup>. It was during the 50s, however, that the flag acquired its pop culture status: during the years of the ‘flag fad’ it became custom of Fraternities, Boy Scouts and other groups, to be hanged as a prank (2005:110-111). Far from causing public outrage, the symbol associated with slavery became a commodity. Its ubiquity was associated with youth culture. Likewise, the controversial nature of its meaning was played down, depoliticized. Coski’s research on media illustrates this: “A merchant in Birmingham capitalizing on the flag fad declined to pinpoint a cause for the craze: “Don’t ask me why. Sometimes it’s the little green lizards, sometimes it’s birds-on-a-stick. Now it is Confederate Flags” (2005:112). During the Fifties, it is easy to assume that the flag had the ornamental status of the pink flamingos.

The use of the Confederate flag in *Cry-Baby* as the background curtain to the musical spectacle raises questions on the political meaning of nostalgia. The presence of black characters amongst the audience seems to disrupt the racial segregationist sentiment. Although the characters of *Cry-Baby* are mainly all white, the film goes out of its way to reassure that the drapes are not racist. During the director’s commentary, Waters comments on the polemical use of the flag, defending at once that its presence of the film is delinked from the white supremacist rhetoric and its historical authenticity in the drapes subculture. Waters compares the controversial status of the flag to the absence of tobacco in other contemporary nostalgia pieces. The irony is that while defending the historical authenticity behind the choice of using the flag, the director is also acknowledging how unauthentic *Cry-Baby* can be in its portrayal of

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<sup>57</sup> “Historically, the installation of Confederate monuments went hand in hand with the disenfranchisement of black people. The historical record suggests that monument-building peaked during three pivotal periods: from the late 1880s into the 1890s, as Reconstruction was being crushed; from the 1900s through the 1920s, with the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan, the increase in lynching and the codification of Jim Crow; and in the 1950s and 1960s, around the centennial of the war but also in reaction to advances in civil rights” (Palmer and Freed Wessler 2018)

history. In other words, the use of the flag paradoxically encapsulates the nostalgic transformation of the past at the same time that it disrupts the audiences' experience of Fifties utopic nostalgia. By defending its use, Waters seems to overlook his role in rewriting the past, fixing the drapes' racism. This inconsistency offers an interesting glimpse into the ambiguities of nostalgia. *Cry-Baby* uses the Confederate flag to highlight the southern, hillbilly, white trash' affiliations of drape culture<sup>58</sup>. The flag is a visual reminder of the film' treatment of class, and for better or worse, the film associates the loaded symbol to represent lower-class white identity. "I want to sing something hillbilly... something coloured", defends Cry-Baby at some point in the film, to the squares' horrified reaction. The film alters the meaning of the Confederate flag in order to provide a rewriting of history: in this nostalgic utopia, blacks and hillbillies are united in their affront to 'good taste'.

The musical pastiche suffers a transformation towards the second half of the film, where the generic musical mode changes. The transition takes place during the musical number 'Teardrops Are Falling'. A medium close shot showing Cry-Baby playing a cigar box guitar opens the musical number, that immediately gives place to a dolly zoom movement that maintains the composition of the frame -Cry-Baby playing the guitar- while the change of lens distorts the perspective of the background. The effect produces certain dizziness that signals the transformation of the diegetic space, erasing the boundaries between "the real and the ideal" (Altman 1989:63). Using the prison as background, Cry-Baby starts singing the song, a romantic lament for being separated from his love. His fellow inmates, lying on their own bed, start singing along, providing the different voices -high and low- that compose the chorus.

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<sup>58</sup> The association between 'dixie' southern culture and white trash is well documented by Coski's volume, that includes photographic evidence on how the flag was used to advertise trailer sales.

The dolly zoom that opens the scene enacts cinematic ‘magic’, producing “planes of reality lose their distinctness, outlines are blurred, and categories flow into one another” (1989:76). There is no longer a distinction between stage and life. The musical demands suspensions of belief. Following Altman’s work on the genre (1989), this number reveals the change from the show musical, in which a real show mediates the relation between the spectators and the unreal, to the folk musical, in which the audience gets projected “into a mythicized version of the cultural past” (1989:272).

Also making use of the prison settings, ‘Doing Time for Being Young’ is the following musical number that displays the power of the fantasy. The spectacle of the song exists in direct contraposition to the drabness of the mise-en-scène: the prison’s licence plate factory, filmed in dim-lighting and the dark and blue colour overtones. The number commences with Cry-Baby’s primal scream. His anger -caused by hearing rival Baldwin through the radio- fuels the high pitch voice, transforming the scenery into a rock and roll spectacle. The noticeable reference for this number is *Jailhouse Rock*: the choreographies are alike, using the same wide hip-thrusting steps, switching the balance between the two feet, and the songs have similar repeated verse structures<sup>59</sup>. Filmed through a high angle that captures an aerial view of the prison, Cry-Baby is placed at the centre of the frame, while the other inmates are clapping, singing and dancing along. His scream becomes singing, to what the other prisoners respond by producing the percussion to the song. The musical number embodies the criminal affiliations of rock and roll, reaffirming the importance of rebelliousness, and positioning the inmates as the ultimate outlaws. Following the first depiction of rock and roll and juvenile delinquency, *Cry-Baby* “emphasize[s] the music’s anarchic and

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<sup>59</sup> *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) was the first significant film in bringing together rock and roll and juvenile delinquency, argues Douglas Brodes (2006), however, it can be argued that the association was explicit since *Blackboard Jungle* (1955).



disruptive power” (James 2016:80). Prisoners and prison-like spaces have often populated Waters’ films<sup>60</sup>, offering a space of community for the outlaws. Yet, in *Cry-Baby*, the jail scene seems to be less interested in fostering a sense of solidarity between criminals than to showcase how Cry-Baby’s juvenile anger fuels the music. It makes a generational claim of rock and roll, as the lyrics repeat “I was locked in prison of teenage rage”. Hence ‘Doing Time for Being Young’ serves several purposes: the song encapsulates the display of musical spectacle alongside the sensual portrayal of juvenile delinquency and produces a pastiche commentary of *Jailhouse Rock* and. In James’ words,

Cinema's stories about rock 'n' roll elaborate and interpret the music's aesthetic and social meanings, its effects and affects in the lives of individuals and society as a whole. Debating and projecting, attacking and justifying these meanings, cinema makes them sensually present and ideologically resonant. In narrating rock 'n' roll, cinema *theorizes* it. (2016:19)

The theorization of rock and roll that *Cry-Baby* undertakes is inextricably linked, through the musical genre, to the courtship of the heterosexual couple. As the musical number ‘Please, Mr Jailer’ demonstrates, the dual focus guides the musical performance, that is built around the dichotomy male/female, prisoner/citizen. Performed by Cry-Baby and Allison with accompanying choreography, ‘Please, Mr Jailer’ is the film biggest production number, filmed outside and inside a real Baltimore prison. Allison has by this point fully transitioned into a drapette, something that is evident in her costume and singing. Unlike her previous harmonious glee-choir square singing, her pitch is now raspier, sexier – in tune with the emphasis of the song, that claims for the romantic reunion of the two lovers. Their sexual desire articulates the musical number, in a duet where the two characters face each other through the glass separation of the prison’s visiting room. The hyper-sexualization of the female

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<sup>60</sup> The prison in the ending in *Female Trouble*, the alternative prison town of Mortville in *Desperate Living* and the juvenile reformatory of *Hairspray*.

characters – Allison, Wanda, Pepper and the respective grandmothers – to the starving inmates pushes the heterosexual drive to the point of parody. With the couple grinding against the glass, their duet effectively represents how the contained sexual desire that fuelled much of the musical narrative meets the sexual release from rock and roll (Grant 1986: 196-197).

Equally celebratory of unconstrained sexuality, the film closes with the musical number 'High School Hellcats'. The song, which is named after a 1958 B-movie, encapsulates the pastiche construction of the film, as the drag race alludes to the macho competition in *Grease* (1978), *Hot Roads to Hell* (1967) or *American Graffiti* (1973) and particularly, the 'chicken' racing of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). *Cry-Baby* has the two rivalling male characters, Cry-Baby and Baldwin, ride on top of their cars, but instead of jumping over a cliff, the cars run towards each other. Cry-Baby sings while grabbing the roof of the car, and to add more fantasy to the musical's suspension of disbelief, Pepper gives birth inside the car. The chorus motif, "We love being bad 'cause it sure feels good", steadily announces the Drapes' victory. The film closes on the embrace of the couple. Completely converted into a drapette, Alison rides in the back of a motorcycle when her dress gets tangled in the engine, and she loses part of her skirt. A bump in the road propels her into the air, human cannonball, into Cry-Baby's arms. The rest of the cast attests to the musical miracle, and a montage of close-up shows their reactions, each crying a single tear. The last image consists of Allison and Cry-Baby crying two tears. The ending of the film follows Altman's generic formulations in that it sustains a "utopian world like that of the spectator's dreams" and it also builds a sense of community in nostalgia, "project[ing] the audience into a mythicized version of the cultural past"(1989:272). *Cry-Baby's* vision of the past is

colourful, rockabilly, communal and adolescent. Building upon pieces of pop culture, Waters' creates its own Fifties nostalgic utopia.

## **Conclusions**

Waters has admitted that he has made more money from the *Hairspray's* adaptations (first on Broadway, then with the Hollywood remake) than from all of his other films combined (Waters 2019:40). Although the Broadway adaptation of *Cry-Baby* did not pass the initial season, the fact that the two nostalgic films had a posterior life as adaptations seems to confirm that these are Waters' most commercial films.

*Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby's* success produced a certain ambivalence. Amongst the surviving Dreamlanders, the Hollywood affiliation produced certain unease, and some of the crew that have worked with Waters for years, such as producer Robert Maier, editor Charles Roggero, and hairstylist Chris Mason, stopped doing so during or immediately after *Cry-Baby*. With the death of Divine, Mink Stole was the only surviving Dreamlander actor. Some audiences resented the loss of the 'filth politics' and shock value tactics, a feeling that was amplified by the critics. During this era, there is an emerging consensus on the domestication of John Waters, as the critics note "the absence of Divine inspiration", establishing the end of an age of the trash aesthetics. "Even the prison rats are clean cut", maliciously comments Billson (1990:34). That "this is not the John Waters of old" (Sawtell 1990) seems to be the most repeated statement. Still, the positive reviews admire, not without shock, the "harmless, sweet and jolly" (Mantel 1988) crowd-pleasing nature of the films. The positive reviews seem to agree that, with the new trajectory, "John Waters is no longer an acquired taste but almost universally palatable" (Hut Chison 1990).

During this chapter, I have explored the aforementioned palatability and politics of nostalgia, as well as the ways in which the films rewrite the past in order to produce a fantasy where the music and dances of the Fifties and Sixties can be evoked and celebrated. In that celebration, there is some of the visual pleasure of the Carnival: a celebration of fatness, lust and excess, a confrontation with the status quo. Despite all of the filmmaking practices that differentiate *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby* from *Pink Flamingos*, the films share a similar 50s soundtrack and use of colour. As if part of the feeling of utopia that the films are portraying world is best embodied through the music, and its aesthetics.

By producing these nostalgic films, Waters was in sync with the popular culture of the time, which explains their positive reception. As ‘teen movies’, *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby* propelled a process of rejuvenation, allowing Waters to connect with younger audiences, building a second generation of Dreamlanders<sup>61</sup>. Most importantly, these films provided a new cinematic language, in which the bad taste tradition, the grotesquery of the bodies, and the performative excess were not subordinated to shock value, or excess, but were instead invoked to create nostalgic utopias.

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<sup>61</sup> Formed by the actors Ricki Lake, Patty Hearst, Traci Lords and Alan J. Wendel.

## CHAPTER 6: BALTIMORE ARTISTS: AUTHORSHIP AND TASTE IN *PECKER* AND *CECIL B. DEMENTED*

First I made underground movies, and then there were no underground movies. Then it was midnight movies, and they disappeared. Then independent movies, but they were co-opted by Hollywood. Now it's all the same. So I make Hollywood movies" John Waters (Pela 2002:147)

A desire for recognition, an obsession with media popularity, and the pursuit of stardom are running themes through Waters' filmography, often entangled with criminal motifs. Fame that is obtained "through abnormality" (Hileman 2018:19) is one of Waters' most important overarching themes. In the early Trash era, Lady Divine, Babs Johnson and Dawn Davenport were fixated on achieving fame by virtue of their criminal skills, that is, by being truthful to their filthiness and monstrosity. In the suburban films, celebrity is often unsought yet encountered by virtue of its contact with the extraordinary: sexual addiction (for Sylvia in *A Dirty Shame*) and crime (Beverly in *Serial Mom*, Francine's Foot-Stomper son in *Polyester*). In the musical nostalgia films, however, there is a resignification: celebrity is no longer simply associated to scandal and crime, but it is tied with folk musical talent –dancing, for Tracy Turnblad, and singing, for Cry-Baby. To achieve fame means to achieve success, to be celebrated, to overcome barriers of distinction: celebrity has the means to transform.

The two remaining films from Waters' filmography, *Pecker* (1998) and *Cecil B. Demented* (2000), refer to Waters' own celebrity and cult status. In *Pecker*, a young photographer becomes an overnight sensation in the art world when he is discovered by a New York art dealer. In *Cecil B. Demented*, Cecil is the cult leader of guerrilla filmmaking collective that decides to kidnap a Hollywood actress to star in their next film. Parodying the art world, and the film industry, these films represent the praxis of creative work, the ambiguous meaning of 'success' and speculate about what it takes

to have a career in show business. Because of that, both Pecker and Cecil are considered avatars of Waters himself, “two authors-inside-the-text” (Metz 2003:159)<sup>1</sup>. Fame brings recognition, which is integral to ideas of authorship. Both celebrity and authorship are built around the cult of a personality, yet, paradoxically, celebrity culture is often associated with inauthenticity (Turner 2016:3), while claims of authorship are necessarily tied to notions of authenticity and originality. This ambivalence increases if we consider the ongoing debates on authorship and the challenges of applying this debate to Waters.

### **Interrogating Authorship**

Authorship is a continuously contested point of debate in film studies. Upon its original formulation, author theory focused on the original style and personality of the director-genius – a recognizable and unified vision of cinema awarded distinction. Disseminated by André Bazin and the *Cahiers du Cinema* critics, the auteur theory was an approach to cinema that enabled criticism and “allow[ed] films to be treated as art” (Staiger 2003:34). This theory contemplates the director’s personality, or ‘élan of the soul’, as well as its ‘technical competence’ (Sarris 2000:132) as variables that determine *quality* and *value*. This take was shortly confronted when, 1967, Roland Barthes announced the death of the author: a theoretical take against the romantic attachment to the figure of the author as the sole source of meaning of a text. Barthes’ article concludes by celebrating “the birth of the reader” (Barthes in Caughie 1988:210) as a consequence of the demise of the author. In ‘What is an author?’ Michel Foucault continues questioning the power of authorship by describing it as a “function of discourse” (1998:221), a term that effectively displaces the focus from

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<sup>1</sup> Metz’ contribution, ‘John Waters Goes to Hollywood: A Post-Structural Authorship Study’, similarly focused on *Pecker* and *Cecil B. Demented*, brings to the fore the question of authorship in the cinema of John Waters.

the figure that originates the text. ‘Authenticity’ and ‘originality’ are no longer useful variables for the analysis. Instead, Foucault formulates, “what are the modes of existence of this discourse?” (1998:222). Beyond their deaths, authors are subjects that not only construct discourse, but they are simultaneously being constructed by it. Eventually, the author is a fiction formed by the texts themselves, their readers and consumers, and the context in which they are produced.

Proclaiming the death of the author did not end authorship studies, for it has been noted that the claim is “better understood as an ongoing process than as a realizable event” (Silverman in Staiger and Gerstner 2003:21). Although the romantic figure of the author has been unveiled as a historical construction, authorship continues circulating as a strong category for analysis. If authorship constitutes a persuasive discourse, Staiger notes, is because it fulfils “humanist and capitalist ideologies” (2003: 29). Authorship provides useful tools for the analysis: it enables the possibility of studying a body of work, it provides a signature-name for discourse, it embeds a subject with stylistic differentiation. This is what the name ‘John Waters’ has represented throughout the thesis: a unifying category, one that simultaneously also is a ‘projection’ of discourse into an individual, a romantic fiction.

To establish Waters’ authorship is to arise a myriad of contradictions. This is due, fundamentally, because of his controversial position as a cult filmmaker. In spite the alleged death of the author, Waters is a very present director, who enjoys a strong media presence, dedicates effort to promote his work, and has enforced “sophisticated verbal apparatuses” (Silverman 1998:202) in the form of books, articles, tv programs, one-man shows, art exhibitions, cameo appearances and directorial commentary. Metz recounts this difficulty in his article, which acknowledges how he first started to paid

attention to the cinema of John Waters when the University of Montana asked him to introduce Waters' in a lecture. He notes:

I have relied on personal experience to frame this chapter because it not only indicates my by now obsessive interest in Waters's films, but also sets up my concern with his body, his *authorial* body, that is. In an age of the poststructural dismantling of authorship, what does it mean to have been so upset, engaged, and fascinated by meeting the director of these films, to the extent that I have now worked out a system that places him at the center of a plan to save radical cinema from being consumed by the Hollywood blockbuster machine? Clearly at some level, I had formed a "prepoststructural", indeed Romantic, attachment to the author. It mattered to me very much that the real John Waters would be in the audience listening to what I said about him (2003:172).

Metz' words evidence a fascination towards Waters' persona, one that seems to be shared by many researchers, who either recount exemplary anecdotes of Waters' biography, amplifying the myth (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983, Egan 2011, Levy 2015) or position themselves as Waters' peers (Metz 2003, Holmlund 2017)<sup>2</sup>. Admittedly, this thesis can similarly be accused of treating Waters' too fondly and quoting him too often. To recognize the role that Waters' charismatic and outspoken personality plays, as well as the self-made discourses that the author himself has put into place, is therefore essential in a discussion of his authorship. Following Staiger, we can read Waters' authorship as a technique of the self, one that performatively "enacts or produces that which it names" (Gertner and Staiger 2003:49-50). Waters' authorship would thus be a series of repeated citations. Yet, as Butler argued and Staiger notes, citations only function when they "fit within boundaries of the norms they cite" (2003:51). In the case of Waters' authorship, these norms take us to the second point of contradiction.

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<sup>2</sup> Metz writes "Waters's films celebrate the triumph of this utopian reorganization, largely as a way of expressing the author-outside-the-text's escape from suburban Baltimore into an adult world of urban guerrilla filmmaking. As a critic who escaped a *similar* suburban life-style to be able to write about films depicting "rosary jobs" and "chicken fucking", I view that progression as nothing less than a heroic triumph" (2003:173, my emphasis). Holmlund, on her part, says: "I include myself as *another* Marylander politically active in the late 1960s and early 1970s" (2017:10, my emphasis).



The second point of contradiction arises when we consider how ideas of authorship were originated along with notions of directorial competence, artistic prestige and technical skills. Waters' signature style, bad taste, prides itself in the disregard of cinematography conventions, and his most acclaimed movies, the earlier ones, display raw and amateurish filmmaking. His style and authorial reputation represent a challenge to established discourses of authorship yet finds itself completely at home in cult cinema. "Competence is not always a skill demanded for cult celebration", argue Mathijs and Sexton (2011:68). Yet following a celebration of the inversion of rules and taste, cult cinema embraces the fiction of the author.

Celebration of cult auteurs is often underpinned by a romanticist creed: the idea of a lone, heroic figure battling against the odds to create works that are taken heart to heart by outsider audiences. If academic approaches to authorship very much moved away from romantic notions, cult auterism arguably expanded such romanticism.(Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 68)

Paradoxically, by building their own alternative canon of auteurs, the cult cinema scholarship seems to be replicating both the author-function and his aura of highbrow distinction that fuelled French auteurism. "The legitimizing function of the academy in issues of knowledge, taste, and aesthetics works to conceal relations of power and control" warns Sconce in his seminal article on trash and paracinema (1995:378). The danger in discussing cult authorship lies in reproducing the logic of an outdated notion of authorial distinction, continuing "to search for unrecognized talent and long forgotten masterpieces, producing a pantheon that celebrates a certain stylistic unity and/or validates the diverse artistic visions of unheralded 'auteurs'" (1995:382). In other words, to defend Waters' bad taste as the new established good taste is to arrive at an ironic cul-de-sac.

As a cult filmmaker, Waters has built a strong artistic reputation by positioning a discourse of his own filmmaking practice, through books, lectures, stand-up routines; and by signalling in these appearances his own canon of true cinema auteurs: Russ

Meyer, Herschell Gordon Lewis, William Castle. As described by Hoberman and Rosenbaum, he is “the conscious artificer of his own myth” (1983:138). Thanks to his showmanship and savvy media business, Waters has consolidated a career in the industry. The years between *Hairspray* (1988) and *Cecil B Demented* (2000) are arguably Waters’ most productive years. During these years, he produced two films that in different ways signalled to his own career and artistic practice. Far from arriving at a definite conclusion in regards of Waters’ established authorship, I have attempted to outline some of the challenges and apparent contradictions that need to be dealt with in a study of authorial discourse in these two films. Because of the films’ biographical references, and Waters’ integration in the industry, these films raise interesting questions about the success and assimilation of ‘outsider’ art and underground cinema “that negotiate the possibilities if John Waters the queer filmmaker working in a most unqueer Hollywood” (Metz 2003:159). Considering Waters’ ambivalent authorship status, this chapter will be dedicated to studying *Pecker* and *Cecil B. Demented*’s representations of artistic praxis and their portrayal of Baltimore as a utopia of taste, against New York’s privileged sense of distinction and the Hollywood’ greed.

### **Pecker (1998)**

Given that in cinema, “place becomes spectacle, a signifier of the film’s subject, a metaphor for the state of mind of the protagonist” (Aitken and Zonn 1994:17), *Pecker*’s Baltimore is immediately revealed as an artistic enclave for those who are able to see *it*. A late teenager nicknamed Pecker (Edward Furlong) photographs the Mount Vernon’s Washington Monument -from the side, the statue seems to have an erection. From this initial sequence, Pecker’s photography functions as proxy of the film’s camera, indicating what to see, or watch out for: the audience learns to view and appreciate Baltimore through Pecker’s lens. Continuously snapping pictures, he takes

portraits of the city and its people: two teen black girls with outlandish beehives, a scary-looking blonde shaving her legs on the bus, the theft of a bystander's toupee wig. The photographs serve as both portrait and testimony of the city, and what makes it weird and outlandish: its denizens, their costumes, the urban landscape. All of Pecker's photographs are part of the diegesis: what Pecker photographs is what *Pecker* stages in its filmic universe. In other words, photography, in *Pecker*, is not fact, but fiction<sup>3</sup>, a fiction that proposes a new way of looking at things, a utopia of taste.

### Baltimore's Charm

This fiction presents a distinct *look* of the city of Baltimore, one that places its focus on backstreets and alleys, transgressive bodies, and trash. During the opening credits, Pecker documents what he encounters: a pregnant woman that gives the finger to the camera, two rats having intercourse in a rubbish bin (Fig. 40), a graffiti that tells everyone to "Eat One". These images are juxtaposed by a cheerful tune<sup>4</sup>, Paul Evan's 1960's 'Happy-Go-Lucky-Me', a song that inserts the singer's own laughs between the lyrics. Far from portraying a seemingly grim reality, these snapshots of the city are showcased as Pecker's compulsive passion. The photographer continues taking photos during his shift at the Sub Pit, the greasy sandwich shop in which he works, to the dismay of his employer. By organizing his first photographic exhibition in the 'Sub Pit' and taking photographs of the greasy meat while is being cooked, Pecker ignores rules of distinction that determinate the place where art belongs. He does not see any contradiction in inserting modern photography in a fast-food establishment, because

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<sup>3</sup> "It's always seemed to me that photography tends to deal with facts whereas film tends to deal with fiction. The best example I know is when you go to the movies and you see two people in bed, you're willing to put aside the fact that you perfectly well know that there was a director and a cameraman and assorted lightning people all in the same room and that the two people in bed weren't really alone. But when you look at a photograph, you can never put that aside." (Diane Arbus 2011-2012: 6)

<sup>4</sup> Waters describes the song as "redneck novelty tune" in the director's commentary.

he embodies those two worlds, being the artist and the low-level service worker. However, that causes class tensions around him. For Mr Bozak, Pecker's artistic interest are a flaw for his employer and a nuisance to his business. The other customers in the establishment share the same disinterest towards the art exhibition. Paradoxically, that disdain by which Pecker's art is ignored is what allows him to create his art, documenting what surrounds him.

Analogously to Diane Arbus' claims that the subject of the photograph was more important than the picture (2011:15), Pecker's photography is mostly inspired by his friends and family. Embracing what is odd amongst what is familiar, Pecker photographs their obsessions. Shelley (Cristina Ricci), Pecker's girlfriend, is obsessed with the Laundromat that she owns, and all of the ways her customers try to defy her business rules. Pecker photographs her at work, enthralled by her beauty, while she poses teasingly opening up her jumper, but it is immediately distracted by a client that is attempting to dye her clothes. Her 'muse' status is, therefore, compromised, and she warns Pecker: "you see art when there's nothing there", an utterance that foreshadows the conflict of the film: what is the use and place of art? and what happens when art 'invades' buses, supermarkets, laundromats? Chasing his loved ones' obsessions, Pecker photographs his little sister's addiction to sugar, his best friend's shoplifting habit, and most notably, his grandmother's obsession with a speaking figure of the Virgin Mary, who loudly sings 'Full of Grace, Full of Grace' (a miracle that Memama orchestrates as a ventriloquist). In terms of what reflects both Baltimore's character and Waters' authorial transformation, the two most interesting spaces that Pecker visits, and photographs, are two sex work establishments: a pubic hair acclaimed strippers bar and the prison-adjacent gay club.

The Pelt Room is a lesbian-owned stripper bar infamous for selling liquor and showing pubic hair. Sharon Niesp, who also played a lesbian in *Desperate Living*, plays the butch bouncer, and Drag King performer Mo B. Dick (Maureen Fischer) plays the dancer T-Bone, a stripper inspired by the local Baltimore legend Zorro. As Zorro, T-Bone dances frenetically, interacting with the male audience by angrily asking, “What the fuck are you looking at?” Waters wrote about Zorro in his books *Crackpot* (1987) and *Role Models* (2010) in which he explains:

“Z” [...] had a real rage she brought to the stage, which added a demented hostile sex appeal. An angry stripper with a history of physical and sexual abuse with a great body and the face of a man. Now, there’s a lethal combination. (2010: 134)

Casting a Drag King performer to play a lesbian performing nude dancing for straight male customer, the film is arguably playing with the ludicrousness of sex work performativity and closed categories of identity. Furthermore, the scene actualizes the stripper bar scene in *Female Trouble*, in which Divine danced in a white fringed two-piece bikini. Both scenes in some way deny the sexual availability of the female dancers while mocking the lewd old white male crowd. In *Pecker*, the nude reveals shocks by the presence of pubic hair. Although displays of female nudity are but a common currency in contemporary media and advertising, a frontal close-up of a hairy vulva might be still considered shock value. The pubic hair is effectively showcased as a transgression by the diegesis, as Pecker’s father reads aloud on a previous scene the Maryland legislation that forbids the showing of pubic hair in a place that sells liquor; and by the cinematography, that flashes the orange lit close-up of a vulva from the perspective of the frontal row of spectators. Despite being outside the premises, and only looking in from a basement window, Pecker captures a close-up of T-Bone’s vulva, which after being developed in black and white, isolated from context, loses its referentiality and enters the realm of abstract fine art.

If the Pelt Room had lesbian women stripping for heterosexual men, in *The Fudge Palace* heterosexual ex-convicts strip for the gay audience. Tina, Pecker's sister, is the fag-hag MC in a Go-Go male hustler club that, situated next door to Maryland Penitentiary, employs ex-convicts as dancers, selling their masculinity and criminality as 'trade'. The term 'trade', short for 'rough trade', represents a heterosexual-presenting shape of working-class masculinity. Defined as 'subcultural myth' (Richardson 2009:83) that incorporates gay 'iconographical manifestations' (Waugh 1996b:54), 'trade' stands in direct opposition to the stereotype of the swish, effeminate upper-class gay. "The hustler-or "trade"- is butch, laid-back, stripped bare, taciturn, ambivalent, and "straight". The queen looks, the trade is looked at" (Waugh 1996b:54). This dichotomy has been studied as a reflection of the way gay identity has been historically constructed and how this construction has been affected by class divide. Trade men, like the dancers in *The Fudge Palace*, see their place in the gay world as an economic transaction, refusing to identify with the homosexual. The concept, as one of the dancers in *Pecker* explains to his horrified parents, is explained as: 'I am not homosexual! I am trade! The queers blow me!' By de facto explaining what trade is, the film is univocally exposing the ludicrousness of its logic. Further emphasizing the incongruity of the situation is the shot and reverse shot editing of the conversations of the two elderly and conservative parents and their buff son, who is only wearing a thong. Besides implementing criminality as the 'roughest' and masculine of traits – another comic contraposition, since the club is a gay site –the film stresses the parody by introducing 'teabagging'.

Teabagging, which can be defined as "the act of dragging your testicles across your partner's forehead" (Jardin 2009), was not invented by Waters, but arguably he was the first in putting in film and popularize it. In *The Fudge Palace*, the dancers hit

their bulge in the customer's foreheads for tips -despite management's orders. Pecker manages to photograph the teabagging moment – the one where the stripper has already hit the forehead of a smart dressed white old man, but his groin is still close to his face, and the teabagged spectator is captured smiling in ecstasy (Fig. 41).

Showcasing a sexual performance that merges homo and heterosexual identities and desires, *The Pelt Room* and *The Fudge Palace* denaturalize masculinity and femininity (Volcano and Halberstam 1999:112). Inspired by real Baltimore locations, these two establishments ascribe, in some way, the character of the city. The portrayal of sexual attraction/desire is shaped by the city and its offbeat working-class style and sensibility. Indiana describes this portrayal of the film as “hyperbolic”:

Its vast assortment of human wreckage, its libidinal ease (manifested in the country's highest venereal disease rate), the port-town dangerousness of its streets all greatly account for the tweaked, often bleary and depressed atmosphere of Waters's films, which despite their manic content tend to locate their characters in dismally limiting, Dickensian settings. (2004:61)

Whereas Indiana's words classify Baltimore as a bleak, criminally affected and economically depressed site, *Pecker's* bars, I argue, beg for a different reading. These spaces of anarchic sexual freedom are portrayed as utopias where the weird is celebrated and almost everything is possible, a world free of distinction: such is the world that within the diegesis Pecker reproduces in his art and Waters orchestrates extra-diegetically. This is an immediate reading of the author-inside-the-text, a perhaps too literal interpretation. Waters' authorial presence in *Pecker* is not simply that of the working-class Baltimorean artist, particularly considering his upper-class upbringing<sup>5</sup> and that, during the 1990s, Waters started both to collect and produce

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this thesis, I refer to Waters' background as upper-class. Waters' father, John Samuel Waters, financed his son's early films (Waters 2005:233), founded a fire-extinguisher company and was a member of several private clubs (Kelly 2008). His maternal family was also reputedly “ultraconservative” and regularly vacationed in Europe (2005:240). Waters' recently participated on the PBS show *Finding Your Roots*, where it was disclosed that one of his ancestors, on the maternal side, had made a fortune finding gold in Alaska, while his great-great grandfather owned enslaved people (McCauley 2021).

contemporary art. Instead, Pecker questions what happens when New York and Baltimore come together. When Pecker is ‘discovered’ by the New York art scene, his relation to Baltimore is irreparably altered. Beyond geopolitical differences, the conflicting relations between Baltimore bars and New York art galleries says a lot about art, class, consumerism and irony.

### New York’s Distinction

Following Bourdieu, taste classifies, and “it classifies the classifier”. (Bourdieu 2010:6). The classification of the social space, pierced by categories of distinction that are formed by variables of class, gender, race, and age, rules the realm of taste. Thus, “art, and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences” (2010:7). To discuss art is, inevitably, to discuss what the dominant class of a particular society considers worthy of such a name. In *Pecker*, we are shown consecutively how different habitus – “systems of disposition” (2010:2)- interpret and decode Pecker’s photographs. When Pecker’s exhibition at the Sub Pit, self-promoted with hand-made posters, attracts the attention of art-dealer Rorey Wheeler (Lili Taylor), she, fascinated by his talent, organizes a solo show for him in her gallery in New York. In Baltimore, the exhibit takes place in the fast-food establishment, despite Mr Bozak’s reluctance, that he demonstrates by asking every single attendant to consume something from his establishment. He disdains the ‘depressing’ photographs and is only content with the picture that reads ‘Eat One’, since it fulfils a purpose – reading the artwork at face value, the photograph invites the viewers to eat. His working-class distaste is purely pragmatical: the photographs do not fulfil a function. Pecker’s mum, on the other hand, congratulates his son’s efforts but wishes that he would employ his talents to photograph beautiful things, which would bring him success. For her middle-class



views, Pecker would succeed as a photographer if he would adopt a mainstream taste. However, Rorey, a New Yorker gallery-owner, appreciates Pecker's photography and senses a commercial opportunity. As an upper-class agent that shapes and influences the artistic field, she enables Pecker's social climbing. Coincidentally, while accepting Rorey's offer and selling his first photograph, Pecker gets fired from the Sub Pit. This is the first indication that artistic success comes with a price.

In contrast to the disordered Baltimorean exhibition, that included a lot of background action- characters entering and leaving the scene, shoplifting, homophobic insults, and homeless people breaking into the toilets- the New York gallery scene offers a white, orderly background that flattens the space. Maintaining the seamless order, the New Yorkers are predominantly dressed in black, a monochrome that Pecker's green shirt heavily disrupts. The scene, narrating Pecker's rise to fame in the art world, is illustrative of the class fractions that sustain the social order. Shelley's discomfort towards the exhibition – and to the art collectors that paternalistically praise her role as muse- is based on a sense of displacement (Fig. 42). 'These people don't go to laundromats', she explains to Pecker, 'they go to dry-cleaners'. That sense of knowing one's place, Bourdieu defends, 'leads to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded' (2010:471). Shelley feels uncomfortable in the art world because it is a foreign realm to the things she knows. Little Chrissy has a similar visceral distaste reaction when she is presented with a fancy dinner – she convulses in disgust, throwing the food back to the plate. Class differences are manifested in the form of clashing tastes.

Yet not all the Baltimorean characters feel the same sense of class alienation. Pecker's parents are proud to witness his son's economic success, and they move through the exhibition signing autographs and admiring the sales. Their presence,

however, seems to cause certain unease in the art world crowd. When Tina tries to connect with the New York homosexuals, and Memama shows off Mary, the New Yorkers react awkwardly. They love the offbeat, quirky sensibility in Pecker's photographs – a world they can admire from a distance, and from a privileged position as consumers. Yet they do not know how to deal with the real referent. Amidst the two habitus, Pecker stands unpreoccupied. Furlong's laidback performance offers quite a contrast to the Dreamlanders' top-of-the-lungs acting, which singles Pecker out in a world of excess. The character's innocence is repeatedly highlighted throughout the scene: albeit happy for the attention, he never shares Rorey's ambitions, nor does he react to the positive criticism he is receiving. When asked about his art, he shrugs, and admits: "if I knew how to take them any better, they probably wouldn't work". This admittance to his own technical shortcomings demonstrates, however, a theoretical disregard for artistic competence. Instead, Pecker defends the pursuit of a different way of looking: a sort of 'good' bad taste (this alternative set of artistic value reappears at length in *Cecil B. Demented*). Most importantly, throughout the scene, Pecker continues to photograph everything that he looks at – despite Rorey's subtle indications of the inappropriateness of the behaviour. By showing the same curious predisposition for the NY art scene that he did for Baltimore bars and alleys, Pecker is erasing the distinction between those two worlds: innocently, much as he started doing photographs, he disregards the conventions of the social order.

Hierarchies of distinction, however, are still in place. Upon the family's return to Baltimore, everything has changed. The second half of the second act of the film is devoted to the unforeseen consequences that Pecker's instant rise to fame has had. Celebrity is associated with the extraordinary, therefore encountering celebrity means disrupting the ordinary. Consumed and appreciated in New York, Pecker's art has

undergone a process of class transformation: the intellectual respect has brought him social capital, which translates in economic accumulation and social recognition. With his face in the cover of all Baltimore's newspapers, Pecker becomes a mediatic artist, which spoils his opportunity of taking photographs as he used to. His success means that he is no longer a peer to the people he photographed, and many- the pregnant girl, the heroine-addict- resent that their images have been taken away from them, commodified for the profits of others. "Not everyone feels like being art", snaps back an angry shop assistant. Taking the comparisons to Diane Arbus, Pecker's 'freaks', resent him for being "a gold digger, "fraternizing with the freaks" for her own private gain" (Russo in Blyn 2013:152). Authorities, on their part, react by intervening the spaces: little Chrissy is put on Ritalin, the Pelt Room is closed, Tina is fired from The Fudge Palace. Meanwhile, the New York artworld's presence keeps infiltrating Baltimore in the form of Rorey's phone calls. Superimposed in the frame, her cheerfully delivery of good news heavily contrasts with Pecker's conflicted reality. Similarly, in one of the film's most anticlimactic scenes, *Vogue* takes control of the family's thrift-shop. Dressing the homeless in Comme des Garçons fashion, the editorial team intervene the space, seemingly unaware of the unethical treatment of the subjects. Stylizing poverty in order to transform it into a spectacle, the photographer and his team show no respect for the Baltimore denizens, treating them as props for their own private gain. When Little Chrissy chokes, and the photographer keeps taking photographs instead of assisting, Pecker loses his temper. After that, and a love-triangle conflict with Rorey and Shelley, he takes the decision to step back from the spotlight.

#### Utopia of Taste

A spinning magazine against a black background announces, “Let them come to Baltimore!”. The effect, much like the phone call superimposition, imbues the film with cartoonish and comedic value. “The boy who said no to the Whitney” has organized a home exhibition in his own terms. Overcoming her disdain towards contemporary art and previous feelings of inadequacy, Shelley is now producer and collaborator of the show. Pecker’s Place - occupying the space of his father’s bar - is covered in tinsel curtains, operating at once as an art gallery, bar, gay club, and thrift shop, incorporating all of Pecker’s families members and friends. Matt, the thief, runs door security, while his father serves the bar, and Tina, surrounded by semi-nude dancers, has a DJ station. Pecker’s mother has a fashion corner, and Little Chrissy -in sugar recovery- walks around the room offering vegan nibbles. Even Memama has her own altar, where the Virgin Mary figure remains silent<sup>6</sup>. Whereas the Sub Pit exhibition arguably displayed D.I.Y ethos, it did so without ever connecting with the local culture. By contrast, Pecker’s Place is presented as a collaboration between different agents, where the art is contextualized by a community that supports the artist. In the midst of the lively party, the artwork is showcased are huge enlarged portraits of the New Yorkers that attended Pecker’s show, in a series of embarrassing positions. Eating, drinking, adjusting her cleavage on the mirror, taking down credit card payments, and sniffing a woman’s neck – all of these photographs, freezing a moment in time, have the ability to humanize the distinguished art dealers. Switching the focus of his camera, Pecker effectively argues that art is, indeed, everywhere, and no-one is safe from satire. When the ‘Fat & Furious’ woman shows an interest for one of the photographs, Shelley offers her the artwork in exchange for free bakery

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<sup>6</sup> After being showcased in the *Artforum* Magazine cover, Memama receives the visits of two Maryolatry scholars who rebuke Memama’s miracle and call her a fake. After their unpleasant visit, Mary remains silent.

products, creating a circle where the subjects of photography are simultaneously owners of photography, only that they consume the other world they consider exotic. The exotic ‘otherness’ that fascinated the New Yorkers is, therefore, matched and reversed. This sense of egalitarianism is reinforced, visually, when the New York art patron faces the Baltimore homeless woman at the thrift shop, and they are both wearing the exact same outfit. Laughing at the fashion moment, they embrace in a hug – the class divide is temporarily forgotten and the two worlds merge into one (Fig. 43). To interpret the film’s ending, as Walter Metz sums it, “Pecker’s decision to return to obscurity in Baltimore” misunderstands the transformation that takes place in this final scene. Pecker does not retreat to preserve his art from outside influences, but invites the New York merchants and transforms them, in the process. Overcoming their sense of differentiation, and the posterior embarrassment when they discover themselves as protagonists of Pecker’s art, the New Yorkers that have travelled to Baltimore end up embracing the party they encounter.

The electronic banjo beat of the song ‘Swamp Thing’, by The Grid, sets the tone of the scene, bringing all of the characters together in a frenetic dance reminiscent of raves. The banjo, a token symbol of hillbilly culture, is repurposed as a techno beat for the late-nineties context. A moustachioed biker climbs a platform, taking off his moustache, and then his clothes, revealing to be T-Bone. Transforming from drag king to a lesbian stripper, she dances aggressively and seductively with both men and women, erasing dichotomies of gender identity and sexual orientation. She is then joined by the ‘Fudge Palace’ dancers, who ‘teabag’ the public in their white briefs, and an art collector, played by Patricia Hearst, who removes her clothes to dance in a slip. The removal of clothes, as signifiers of class, suggests freedom of constraints, a communal celebration of the moving body. This final party has achieved a utopic

resignification of artistic production, an end of hierarchies. In the midst of sheer happiness, a miracle occurs, and the Virgin Mary -without Memama's intervention this time- begins to proclaim 'Full of Grace! Full of Grace!'. The authenticity of the miracle reinforces the scene's utopic euphoria by breaking up with the real. The sincerity of the scene is then finally sealed with a toast "to the end of irony".

To celebrate the end of irony is somehow ironic in itself, since Waters' bad taste was always an ironic play on the barriers of taste, on what is considered good and bad. Postmodernism eradicated that binary, inviting "the erosion of designation, dissolution of categories, loss of subjective coherence" (Merck 1996:227). In a post-Warhol world, it seems as if those barriers have already been transgressed. If it is true, as Waters says, that "the golden age of trash has long been over because irony ruined it", there is a need to reinvent what trash and bad taste mean. Irony, in this context, is an expression of intellectual privilege that, despite seeming transgressive, only consumes the other from the standpoint of domination. As illustrated by *Pecker*,

At the very moment that an ironic gaze declares value in the devalued, excluded, and discriminated against, it also reinforces the very social hierarchy in opposition to which it understands itself as dissident, making sure that is the ability to find unrecognized value, and not to have it, that defines membership in a contrarian social elite (Katz 2018:71)

To disenfranchise irony, in the film's utopic ending, is the only possible strategy of resistance. If the function of art and culture is, as Bourdieu defends, "to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" (1984:473), what *Pecker* proposes is a carnivalesque celebration of an art world turned upside down. Actively attacking the barriers of taste, and merging the New York art world with blue-collar Baltimore, the film effectively disposes of irony as an exercise of intellectual detachment (Schoentjes in Hutcheon 1994:14-15) and provides, instead, an affective path of emotional connection with a community. Much as the Pecker and his friends and family invite the upper-class artworld to Baltimore to teach them a lesson, but most

importantly, to transform them, Waters does the same with his audience. Beyond the authorial identification of the author-outside-the-text with the author-inside-the-text, the director's presence in the film is in the integration of trash and high art, bars and galleries, humour and politics. By the final scene, there are no villains and all of the characters have come together, making *Pecker*'s ending arguably the happiest of all of Waters films, one that is even more utopic than *Hairspray*. Because of its emotional happy ending, the film has been considered by some "too tame and lame" (Levy 2015:313), a great departure from earlier episodes of transgressions and, eventually, a sign of the Hollywood domestication of Waters. It was the only film in his career post-*Hairspray* to be rejected for the official selection of the Cannes Film Festival, a rejection that Waters accounts "for being 'not offensive enough'" (2019:87). "Waters needs to fix its clock, or quit out of 'twisted' business altogether", critic Bob Davies wrote for Spin magazine at the time. "It's 1998: *The Jerry Springer Show*, *Forgive or Forget*, *Fox Files*, shock media overload. A granny that chats with a plastic, pint-size Virgin Mary isn't going to cut it, unless the Virgin Mary suggests granny molest retarded, paraplegic stepchildren." (1998:81). However, in many ways, the film already poses a response to these criticisms. Pecker's photographs are not interesting because they are "low and dirty", as the New York art buyers seem to think. The film denounces how cynical and unethical it can be to consume and enjoy "the haunting image of financial despair". When one of the characters describes the picture of the pregnant girl giving the finger to the camera as 'scary', Pecker replies, "I don't know, I think she is kinda proud". Despite what the consumers of art might interpret, the core of Pecker's work is the portrayal of hope in the form of pride in abjection. Rather than dwelling on the filth, Pecker's art invites identification, and so does Waters with *Pecker*: renouncing irony, he ends up producing arguably his most sincere work.

Paradoxically, as it will be further explored in the analysis of *Cecil B. Demented*, this anti-cynical stance is perceived as a betrayal of Waters' 'true' cult authorship. Despite, or perhaps due to, their self-referentiality and acknowledgement of the changes in culture, these films continuously face the "they don't make 'em like they used to" criticism (Davies 1998:84).

### **Cecil B. Demented (2000)**

Orchestral arrangements of various scores of cinema music are juxtaposed on the opening track of *Cecil B. Demented*, underscored by a synthetic bass. The bass, and the over-imposed the distorted echo of the film music contaminate the grandeur of the film scores. The song, composed by Moby, announces the hybridity and self-referential status of the film through vinyl scratch sounds, and electronic beats that contaminate the classical theme. The opening images showcase the credits over old and decayed Baltimore movie theatres. Before announcing the names of the cast and crew, the theatrical marquees showcase a wry commentary on issues of cinematic taste and consumption (Fig. 44). The billboards are dominated by sequels (such as *Scream 2*, *Postman 2*, *Lake Placid 2*), continuous blockbusters sagas (*Star Wars* and *Star Trek*) raunchy teen commercial comedies (a Pauly Shore marathon of comedy classics), remakes (*Vertigo The Remake*) and mistreated European art films (a "finally dubbed in English" *Les Enfants du Paradis*). The physical decay of the theatres represents the symbolic decay of cinema itself: the selection of films suggests blockbusters that are unimaginative as well as "clichéd and bankrupt [...] where the A, B, and Z catalogues of Hollywood have been completely exhausted" (Sconce 2007:15). Released in 2000, *Cecil* is both fixated on the past (a century of movies) and the future (is underground cinema even possible anymore?). Following the "blockbuster hegemony" of the 1990s



(Klinger in Williams and Hammonds 2006:372), the opening credits mock openly commercial and formulaic material structure<sup>7</sup>.

*Cecil B. Demented* is an indie film that mocks, parodies and celebrates underground discourse, cinema snobbism, and cult following in relation to the mainstream Hollywood Other. The film somewhat reflects Waters' 'failing upwards' trajectory (Waters 2019:81). After the commercial fiascos of *Serial Mom* and *Pecker*, Waters' Hollywood years were over: New Line Cinema, Waters' long-time business partners, rejected producing *Cecil B. Demented*, which was financed by the French company Canal+. Siting on Waters' odd position on the industry<sup>8</sup>, *Cecil B. Demented* can be interpreted as an action film about cinephilia, cult fandoms and the state of the industry. The film is arguably Waters' most self-referential work and not simply because its title was taken from a film review. Showcasing a film-within-a-film, *Cecil B. Demented* is the story of a group of cinema terrorists that kidnap a Hollywood actress to have her star in their movie: a film of "real visions", with "real people" and "real terror". Their filmmaking style, at the margins of any cinema schools, structures or institutions, D.I.Y, no-budget, no-coverage, outlaw, no-adlibbing; reflects in some ways the early 70s Dreamlanders crew and cast -who coincidentally also lived together in a communal warehouse in Fells Point (Baltimore). While *Pecker* positioned Baltimore against the distinct and upper-class New York, *Cecil B. Demented* opposes

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<sup>7</sup> "Of the number one top grossing films for the years 1990 to 2000, five out of ten were sequels or prequels: *Terminator 2* (most lucrative film of 1991), *Home Alone 2* (ditto 1992), *Batman Forever* (1995), *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Mission Impossible 2* (2000). Add to this list the biggest grossing films of 1993, 1994, 1996, 1997 and 1998 (*Jurassic Park*, *The Lion King*, *Independence Day*, *Men in Black* and *Titanic* respectively), it is no wonder that the image of the decade is that of a Hollywood-dominated spectacle machine, making extravagant formulaic movies that play well in non-English-speaking foreign markets" (Williams and Hammonds 2006:325)

<sup>8</sup> In *Mr. Knows-It-All* (2019) Waters describes his career trajectory from the 1980s with the following chapter titles: Bye-bye, underground (for *Polyester*); Accidentally commercial (*Hairspray*), Going Hollywood (*Cry-Baby*), Clawing my way higher (*Serial Mom*), Tepid applause (*Pecker*), Sliding back down (*Cecil B. Demented*) and Back in the gutter (*A Dirty Shame*).

singular guerrilla filmmaking Baltimore against commercial showbusiness Los Angeles. Beyond Cecil, the outlaw director, being an avatar for Waters, the film itself embodies the mainstream and underground dichotomy, encapsulating the ambiguities and nuances around what these terms really mean. The film is filled with commentary on cinema- its industrial practices, politics, modes of consumption, and most importantly, what these say about the people that create and consume them.

### Mainstream Cinema

The concept of mainstream culture, explains Jancovich, is often imaged as “some amalgam of corporate power, lower-middle-class conformity and prudishness, academic elitism and political conspiracy” (2003:2). Within the film, those elements - corporatism, conformity, consumerism, prudishness, political compliance- are arranged and positioned under the so-called “tyranny of good taste”. Good taste is the realm of signification where the Hollywood industry positions itself, creating an empire of domination on other types of cinema. Throughout *Cecil B. Demented*, different visions of mainstream cinema are showcased to be immediately parodied, attacked or transformed.

Two films that are presented by *Cecil B. Demented* as unequivocal cinematic sins, representatives of mainstream taste, are *Patch Adams* (1998) and *Forrest Gump* (1994). Both are perfect exemplary 1990s blockbusters: fiction films with a message on humanity, “tearjerkers” (Ebert 1998) for familiar consumption. These films, accused of overtly sentimental moral storylines, were widely popular in the box-office (Caro 1999, Weinraub 1995) despite their negative critical reception. In *Cecil*, they are depicted in association with shopping malls, and the conformity of uncritical audiences that consume them as sentimental porn. “You don’t have to like this movie. You are a victim of advertising!”, preach the underground filmmakers to a weeping audience of

*Patch Adams: The Director's Cut*, before throwing Molotov cocktails to the theatre. *Forrest Gump 2: Gump Again*, reflects back on Hollywood' sequel-fuelled greed. Middle-class consumerism is associated to the narrow-minded view of the straight world: in a different sequence, the crew encounters a cinematic marquee that announces: "Family Films Only: No NC17, X or R Ever Shown". (Fig. 45). Censorship and anti-intellectual stances are defended by a crowd of angry traditional spectators - mostly senior women. "Straight to video, that's what you are!" and "We want partial nudity!" are some of the hyper-exaggerated claims of the conservative protesters – a parody much like the mob of racist protesters in *Hairspray*, the anti-pornography and anti-abortion marchers in *Polyester*, and the neuters' banners in *A Dirty Shame*. These group scenes, where a lot of one-liners are screamed across to the other side serve primarily as comedy; a comedy that laughs at the mainstream audience, which in this case are the conservative heterosexual protesters. Using them as the Other, the scene highlights the censorship that accompanies mainstream cinema and makes fun of its repressiveness. In a certain way, this cultivates what studies of paracinema have described as the "oppositional stance" (Barefoot 2017:90). *Cecil B. Demented*'s representation of mainstream cinema, insofar as linked with family films, romantic comedies, and sentimentalism, follows what Hollows has described as gendered dispositions that underpinned cult cinema masculinity (2003:35-37). Instead of the traditional "distracted female television viewer" (2003:37), the film positions the elderly women, defenders of good morals, against violence and nudity, directly against the underground cinema sensibility.

The film positions itself against mainstream cinema and Hollywood institutions (the Motion Picture Association of America, the Director's Guild of America, the SAG) and personalities (Jack Valenti, David Lean, Mel Gibson). Yet there is one thing

that Cecil reclaims from Hollywood, and that is stardom. Although the film takes its name after the unhinged director, the true protagonist of the film is the kidnapped Hollywood star. Honey Whitlock, played by Melanie Griffith, is a B-List star that finds herself in Baltimore to promote her latest film, *Some Kind of Happiness*, a sappy life-affirming romantic comedy. Forming part of the Hollywood machinery, the actress finds herself exiled from the West Coast; a symbolic banishment that reveals her peripheral status. Yet because of the PR nature of her job, she has to continually praise the virtues of the places she visits, and interpret the role of the grateful celebrity, which requires the fiction that she is “a really nice person”. The myth of stardom is comically countered with her authentic mean self, the one that utters to her assistant: “Look at this dump of a town. Get me fuck back to L.A.!” Sweet and feminine in her public persona, yet nasty and venomous in her private life, Honey represents the manufactured artifice of Hollywood stardom. The comedy on those first scenes arises from the contradiction within her star power, one that has to maintain the balance between being laid-back, good-humoured and relatable, while also simultaneously being young, glamorous and distinguished. Another contradiction arises when her stardom is placed against the Baltimore background, where her public persona must endorse and endure crab cakes and white limousines: symbols of the city’s bad taste. The scene that best illustrates this is the opening premiere of *Some Kind of Happiness* at The Senator Theatre – the great event where the kidnapping is set to take place. The premiere serves as a benefit gala for Baltimore Heart Fund. Silvia Mallory (Mink Stole), chair of the charity organization, takes young William to the stage. The child, an intubated wheelchair user, is presented on stage as a symbol of the generosity of the wealthy gala attendees – a role he refuses to fulfil. Sticking his tongue out to the audience, and calling the chairwoman “ugly”, William discloses the manufactured appearance of the

benefit gala and its false charitable spirit. When Honey enters the auditorium, a bouquet of red roses in hand, and kisses William on the cheek, the boy immediately wipes the kiss off. While Honey is insincerely announcing “I love you Baltimore, I really do”, Silvia is shown at the back of the stage tampering with William’s oxygen valve. The city Baltimore and William, an unruly poster sick boy, point out to the falseness behind good-spirited charity work and Hollywood benefit galas.

If Honey Whitlock, in *Cecil B. Demented*, is representative of the sins of Hollywood, it begs the question, what about the actress that embodies her? Melanie Griffith’s own stardom precludes and influences the character, inviting ambivalence. Griffith was, at the time the movie was filmed, model and representative for Revlon cosmetics. Most remembered by her role in *Working Girl* (1988), she seemed to be part of Hollywood decaying female ageing stars. “As [...] Griffith headed toward the age of 40” explains Lucy Bolton, “the films she appeared in ranged from unsuccessful to downright bombs, and she garnered six nominations for Worst Actress ‘Razzies’” (2016:101)<sup>9</sup>. Bolton’s contribution places Griffith’s stardom as a “bewildering array of contradictions” (2016:99) since her persona seems to contain both vulgarity and excess, of her overtly sexual roles in the 1980s, and her garish clothes, make-up and tattoos; and privileged status as part of Hollywood genealogy. Often criticized simultaneously by her ageing and her cosmetic surgery, Griffith seems to fit Waters’ body of work because of her contaminated stardom. Still within the Hollywood system, by playing Honey Griffith is making fun of herself. When Honey is kidnapped by Cecil B. Demented and the Sprocket Holes, she is terrified at first – but starts to change her mind when the newscasts announce that she is a rebel and a traitor, and that her new

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<sup>9</sup> One of those nominations was for her role in *Cecil B. Demented*, the only nomination the film got at the Razzies, which perhaps is significant that Griffith is still part of the system, yet Waters is not. Razzie Awards would be difficult to award to someone that congratulates himself in doing bad cinema.

look makes her look younger. The appreciation of new audiences seems to revive Honey's career – and, in fact, to gain cult status, as the movie marathon and look-a-like contest at the end of the film proves. This is a diegetic example of the reworking of Hollywood stardom in cult cinema. At the end of the film, Honey Whitlock stands not just as a representative of Hollywood, but a symbol of what the radical filmmakers have changed: they have managed to turn Hollywood against itself.

### Underground Cinema

Against the sins of mainstream Hollywood that were explored in the previous section, Cecil and its group of cinematic terrorists represent a true cult of underground cinema culture. Parodying paracinematic sensibilities, the film displaces the radical orthodoxies of counterculture into an obsessive sect of young artists that, somewhat inspired in the Dreamlanders, provide a nostalgic reimagining of underground cinema. *Cecil B. Demented* explicit defends underground cinema, not as a historical practice, but as a powerful myth that embeds many of Waters' paracinematic and countercultural influences.

The kidnapping of Honey Whitlock mirrors, in multiple ways, the kidnapping of Patricia Hearst by the Symbionese Liberation Army, in 1974. The terrorist group captured the young heiress in order to negotiate the release from jail of two of their members, and when this did not work, they kept her as her prisoner until she joined them as "Tania" and help them rob banks, in what came to be one of the first documented cases of Stockholm Syndrome. Hearst, granddaughter to the man that inspired *Citizen Kane*, survived two years in the revolutionary guerrilla group, up until her arrest in 1976. When later in her life, at the Cannes Film Festival, she met John Waters, the two became friends and she started to take small roles in his films -she does small appearances in *Cry-Baby*, *Serial Mom* and *Pecker* – but it is in *Cecil B. Demented*

where she has a larger role, as the mother of the youngest terrorist on the revolutionary filmmaking crew. The story of Patty Hearst and the SLA is the story of a revolutionary political cult in the 1970s that decided to kidnap a wealthy 19-year-old until she eventually joined their captors in their quest for revolution and broke the law doing so. Their revolutionary message, “Death to the fascist insect that preys upon the life of the people!”, echoes back into *Cecil B. Demented*’s “Death to those who support mainstream cinema!”. Using the same incendiary and propagandistic rhetoric, and outlaw criminal ethos, the Sprocket Holes incarnate pre-9/11 terrorism as a political praxis. Cult cinema, therefore, is vindicated by a true ‘cult’ of young revolutionaries that are willing to kill and die for art. *Cecil B. Demented* reflects back on Waters’ early career since it incorporates some of the same anti-hippie rhetoric, anti-love and is inspired by 1970s rage and violence<sup>10</sup>. Where the earlier films paid a form of tribute to the Manson Family murders, in this film the Patty Hearst’s kidnapping uses true crime and the revolutionary politics of counterculture to shape the fiction. Much like the members of the SLA, the Sprocket Holes are a miscellaneous group of diverse “niches in the ecosystem of the counterculture”. While in the SLA, “there was a radical black man [...] and a crazed Vietnam vet [...] a militant lesbian, [...] a scary vixen [...] and an otherworldly poet [...] as well as an empty-headed actress [...] idealistic young boy” (Toobin 2016:14), the Sprocket Holes have an ex-porn star and a junkie as co-protagonists, two black rappers, a femme lesbian producer with facial hair, a self-hating heterosexual hairdresser, a Satanist, a runaway teenager and a gay driver obsessed with Mel Gibson’s “dicks and balls”. Often speaking in slogans, the revolutionary crew practice “celibacy for celluloid”, a promise to abstain from sex in

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<sup>10</sup> “The kidnapping of Patricia Hearst is very much a story of America in the 1970s, not the 1960s [...] The 1960s were hopeful, the 1970s sour; the 1960s were about success, the 1970s about failure; the 1960s were sporadically violent, the 1970s perversely violent” (Toobin 2016:11)

order to complete the shooting of the film disciplinarily. Their cult affiliation refers not only to the cult filmmakers they worship, but also to the religion-like fanaticism that fuels their criminal behaviour (Fig. 46).

First disguised as smoking-suit cinema theatre employees, the group carry out the kidnapping step by step, announcing the coordinated action by walkie-talkie while announcing their revolutionary slogans: “Hey, hey, MPAA, how many movies did you censor today?” “Fuck the Studio System, inch by inch”, “By whatever means necessary, in the name of underground cinema, when word is given, we will seize the cinema”. In their hideout, when they are presenting themselves to Honey, each one of them exhibits a tattoo with the name of a renegade director (Fig. 47). The scene serves for the film to advance its self-reflexive status by visually representing the type of cinema that the renegade underground troupe appreciates. By doing so, Waters produces an alternative canon of filmmakers whose taste, or aesthetics, orbit around his own authorial figure. Some of the names have been publicly acclaimed by Waters and consequently appeared throughout this thesis as Waters’ influences: cult figures like Herschel-Gordon Lewis, Kenneth Anger, William Castle, Sam Peckinpah or Andy Warhol. There are also contemporary filmmakers, some of Waters’ friends and peers – David Lynch, Spike Lee, Pedro Almodóvar and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. And most importantly, there are some controversial Hollywood names, like Sam Fuller and Otto Preminger. The tattooed names, scripted in forearms, stomachs, knuckles, chests and thighs, with very distinct fonts, invoke the aesthetics of counter-cinema at the same time they represent the degree of insanity that intercedes in their cult celebration of underground cinema<sup>11</sup>. Later on the film, this idea gets reinforced when the whole

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<sup>11</sup> Waters retells in the DVD commentary that he took this idea from his experiences on his touring lectures when he encountered fans that have tattooed his signatures on their body on a previous visit.



group gets ‘Cecil B. Demented’ imprinted on their bodies, as they sing “Demented Forever” the group similarly mark their bodies with a hot branding iron. “Pleasure is pain! Slavery is Freedom!” exclaims immediately the frenzied Satanist (interpreted by Maggie Gyllenhaal). Their cinematic dissent is a form of group madness with a touch of brainwashing. Cecil, their leader, is the “ultimate auteur”: the Jim Jones figure that preaches cinematic aphorisms as “there are no rules to outlaw cinema, only edges”.

*Cecil B. Demented* enforces its view of counter-cinema first, throughout the plot-the kidnapping of a Hollywood star to take the lead in an underground film- and secondly, throughout intertextual references. The filmmakers’ tattoos, as we have seen, fix their aesthetics and sensibility. Furthermore, the filmmakers’ canon (all of them males, almost all of them white) demonstrates the masculine disposition of cult cinema as a subculture. Not only Cecil and the Sprocket Holes are shown in opposition to the feminized mainstream (the elderly protestors, Honey’s diva status), they are also helped by two distinct male paracinematic audiences: the spectators of a Martial Arts marathon, and a porno theatre. Positioned as liminal practices outside of the mainstream, the karate fans and the ‘whackers’ are sympathetic to Cecil and the Sprocket Holes. Underground cinema is therefore not understood as a historical praxis but as an umbrella term for an oppositional stance to the mainstream. They establish an alliance of bad taste sensibilities that while it actively challenges official culture, it also functions as a performance of masculinity, in which “the cult movie aficionado becomes the punk of the movie world” (Read 2003:68).

One of the ways in which *Cecil B. Demented* illustrates its underground opposition is through fashion: the costume design, the hair and make-up, and the constructed sets. Announcing the kidnapping, Cecil gets rid of a brunette straight wig to reveal a dishevelled head of platinum blonde. The assault against the mainstream is

equally aesthetic and political. Non-coincidentally, the sartorial choices in the film-within-the-film, 'Raving Beauty', allude to a visual style self-referential of Waters' early films. Honey's hair is dyed peroxide blonde, and the clothes assigned to her colourful, with clashing patterns, and four arms instead of two (designed by Van Smith) resemble the *Desperate Living*'s backward fashion. Within their film, the protagonist trio -interpreted by Honey, Cherish (Alicia Witt) and Lyle (Adam Grenier), they similarly certain resemblance to the *Pink Flamingos*' winning family: Honey's profoundly blue eye-shadow and outlandish eyebrows resemble Divine, while Grenier looks like Cracker and Cherish' role as a young bombshell is similar to Cotton's. In the opening scene of 'Raving Beauty', the three characters, owners of the theatre, are shocked by the fact that they have sold no tickets for their Pasolini festival – audiences, instead, have gone to the multiplex to watch *The Flintstone*'s sequel. "From the empty seats of every good movie theatre in America, we will rise up to take back the screen!" Taking back the screens means effecting a guerrilla-type of attack to mainstream cinema, a form of cinematic terrorism. Under the vision of "ultimate reality", the straitjacket-wearing director announces that the rest of 'Raving Beauty' will be shot "in real life, with real people, and yes, with real terror".

The terrorism that *Cecil B. Demented* discusses is far out from our contemporary, post-9/11, understanding of the term. The kidnapping of Patty Hearst was interpreted as terrorism, and so were other revolutionary movements, such as "the Irish Republican Army, Uruguay's Tupamaros, the Palestinians" (Graebner 2008:32). The 70's understanding of the concept was therefore inextricably linked to politics of independence and post-colonial struggle<sup>12</sup>. Much like the SLA modelled their ideas of

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<sup>12</sup> "By 1974", wrote Jay Cantor, looking back from the early 1980s, [...] terror had become, it seemed, the substance of 'revolutionary' politics. If you wanted to participate you had to be ready to pick up this gun, become a terrorist; ready to sacrifice others, sacrifice yourself" (in Graebner 2008:32).

revolution after revolutionary examples of the Third World<sup>13</sup>, the Sprocket Holes' prayer - "from the valleys of Lebanon, to the jungles of Cuba, film revolutionaries can never be stopped!- takes after the revolutionary politics of the Third World. Potentially, *Cecil B. Demented* translates and repurposes the Third Cinema principles to Waters' Baltimore.

Third Cinema is cinema of and for the revolution (Solanas and Getino 1968, García Espinosa 1979). Associated with decolonization efforts across the globe, and theorized in Latin America, the concept describes a resignification of cinema that attacks the system and aims to subvert the status quo. With the camera as a weapon, this cinema is set up to destroy what came before- the existing material conditions where films are "consumer goods" to be consumed in order to generate "surplus value" for the capitalist hands behind the industry (Solanas and Getino 1969:110). If First cinema is the cinema of Hollywood, and Second cinema is art cinema, then Third Cinema is militant cinema that reclaims subversion in the cinematic praxis – not only questioning the film texts, but the industry behind them and their form of exhibition and consumption. Protesting against a conformist and alienated culture, Third cinema also reimagines and constructs a utopic glimpse of a liberation "for what each one of us has the possibility of becoming" (1969:132) -freedom from the hierarchal, individualistic, colonialist world. In order to do that, it rejects cinematic conventions and techniques, as perfect cinema is "almost always reactionary cinema" (García Espinosa 1979: 24). What García Espinosa proposes, in the article where he questions the problem of the function of art, is an "imperfect cinema":

Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in quality or technique. It can be created equally well with a Mitchell or with an 8mm camera, in a studio or in a *guerrilla* camp in the middle of the jungle. Imperfect cinema is no longer

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<sup>13</sup> "The concept of Third World leadership was very important to them. They believe only black and other oppressed people could lead the struggle for freedom. [...] they were "urban guerrillas" at war with the United States government and all its agencies (Hearst 1988:77).

interested in predetermined taste, and much less in "*good taste*." (1979:29, my emphasis)

Karl Schoonover's contribution 'Divine: Towards an Imperfect Stardom' employs Garcia Espinosa and Solanas and Getino's work to conceptualize Divine's stardom, which is difficult to place in any stable categories since despite its Hollywood citations, the star-body transgresses those categories and "is not a commodity [...] the excesses of her star image are not so easily reconciled to capitalist modernity" (2010:160). Following Garcia Espinosa's model of imperfect cinema, Schoonover explores how Waters' bad taste and trash aesthetics reject cinematic distinctions, push for impurity and hybridity, and condemn bourgeois tastes, and "disallow self-congratulatory liberal sensibility" (172). His take on trash as waste as a point of connection of underground and art cinema points to a direct connection between Waters and Third Cinema, what Stam describes as "the strategic redemption of the low, the despised, the imperfect, and the "trashy" as part of a social overturning" (2003:35). The social overturning of the straight world, in *Cecil B. Demented*, calls to arm in defence of "cinematic unrest".

Under a postcolonial lens, the Hollywood system is the colonizer, and the underground cinema represents the resisting 'Other'. The dialectical battle of *Cecil B. Demented* brings together different types of cinema -gore, horror, dark comedies, martial arts, porno, art cinema- and amalgams their different politics and aesthetics under the banner of 'outlaw cinema'. Outlaw cinema is subtly associated with Third Cinema throughout the film's use of sound. In all of the scenes where the Sprocket Holes are running from police, or angered spectators, the soundtrack merges the sound of the protests with triumphant chanting ululations and wailings, a veiled yet overt reference to *Battle of Algiers* (1966). Screened by the Black Panthers and the Weathermen (Riegler 2008:55) and quintessential example of decolonization and resistance cinema,

*Battle of Algiers* uses ululations to represent the presence of women in the revolution (Jones 2007) as well as proudly exhibiting a defiant vision of Arab culture. Its use in the *Cecil B. Demented*' soundtrack connects the film's imagined, laughable revolution, to larger global politics. The Sprocket Holes' quest for a cinema revolution takes the form of an urban guerrilla, that takes to the street to create ('Raving Beauty') and to destroy (to punish bad cinema "by whatever means necessary"): throwing Molotov cocktails to a multiplex screening, hijacking the business lunch of the Maryland Film Commission, destroying the set of *Gump Again*. Their cinematic praxis, no-budget, DIY, handmade- not only showcases but prides itself on imperfection. Their movie is being filmed impromptu, as events unfold, with handhelds cameras and no coverage. The scratches and marks on the projected celluloid are a calculated part of the aesthetics – the image spills into the sprocket holes of the films (hence the name of the group). It is set out to reject perfectionism: after all, the film defends what the System discards, the low, the bad, what has failed. Cecil's statement "technique is nothing but failed style" is an explicit embodiment of imperfect cinema, one that also helps to understand Waters' filmmaking career. The larger-than-life visual style and the top-of-the-lungs vocal delivery of the dialogue are privileged over cinematographic accomplishments. Neither Cecil nor *Cecil B. Demented* are preoccupied with notions of First Cinema spectacle or Second cinema artistic disposition.

Cecil and the Sprocket Holes honour the Third Cinema rhetorical declaration, "making films that the System cannot assimilate and which are foreign to its needs, or making films that directly and explicitly set out to fight the System" (Solanas and Getino 1969:120). As the film advances, there is a rise in violence, and the guerrilla group fulfils their wishes of dying for celluloid. Killed by the authorities, or members of the Hollywood industry, the group is almost annihilated. In the end, the cinematic

terrorists are confronted with the consequences of their outlaw activity, and most of them are killed by the police by shots in the head while they are having sex on a roof – celebrating the last night of filming. By the end, Cecil immolates himself in front of the crowd, in true cult fashion. Surviving black members Lewis and Chardonnay -who are not, like Cecil, against profit, and emerge as the most pragmatic of the group- escape with the film’s master, while Honey is arrested. In her last scene for ‘Raving Beauty’, she is asked by Cecil to light her hair on fire -evoking the filming of *Pink Flamingos*, where Mink Stole was asked to do the same by Waters. Mink ultimately declined and Waters repurposed the dangerous stunt as the last cinematic transgression that Cecil asks for, and Honey commits- now being fully loyal to the cinematic group. “I’m ready for my close-up, Mr Demented”, she announces, referencing the reworking of her stardom into cult stardom and paraphrasing *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). The scene, however, betrays Cecil’s vision of “ultimate reality” as Griffith’s face is quite obviously digitally imposed on a flaming mannequin (Fig. 48). This last cinematic transgression, the climactic scene of ‘Raving Beauty’ reveals, simultaneously, the proximity and distance between Waters’ early indexical episodes of cinematic transgressions and its mainstream years. The scene is thematically close to Waters’ style, yet the cinematic praxis, in which the actress’ hair is lighted on fire with somewhat awkward special effects, evidences the impossibility to return to the past.

*Cecil B. Demented* resonates in multiple ways with Waters’ career, and not merely because of the shared traits between the 70’s Dreamlanders and the Sprocket Holes. Beyond the self-referentiality of Waters’ past, *Cecil B. Demented* inquiries about underground cinema’s present and its perilous future, what Metz describes as “the tragic martyrdom at the loss of the sensational underground cinema of the 1960s.[...] Demented’s choice to immolate himself on the historical impossibility of

independent cinema in the age of *Titanic*” (2003: 158:159) The mainstream assimilated what was peripheral of the industry: the sex, the violence, the bad taste, the low humour. This reading of the film might conclude that Cecil’s claim in the film “your Hollywood system stole our sex and co-opted our violence, so there is nothing left for our kind of movies” is the logical conclusion of that process of assimilation. In the end, the system managed to make everything fit within their industry. This interpretation is, however, deeply pessimistic, and it can be countered. First, it does not contemplate the last images of the film, in which surviving star Honey Whitlock is escorted by police. As she is approaching the police wagon, she is faced by an emotional mass of fans and angry protesters at once, but the noise is quieted down, and the mood is transformed by the musical theme, Liberace’s ‘Ciao!’. Within the last 30 seconds, the camera shifts to her point of view, throughout a seamless Steadycam shot that reaches the wagon, climbs it, and finally stops behind bars. Honey’s content expression, and the soundtrack music, establish a feeling of triumphalism, an embrace of her status as an outlaw star that echoes Dawn Davenport’s criminal stardom.

Ultimately, *Cecil B. Demented* produces a fantasy of reversed nostalgia. The film explicitly addresses and parodies the myths in underground cinema and their subcultural dispositions, and unequivocally attacks the Hollywood system, while also pushing towards the mainstream. It is profoundly hybrid text, plagued with inter-textual references: it embodies both the Hollywood System and the mythical underground, and it makes fun of both worlds. The fantasy of reversed nostalgia manages to transport the past – the Patty Hearst kidnapping, 70’s radical politics, the Dreamlanders, underground cinema – into the contemporary blockbuster-crammed box office culture. *Cecil B. Demented* uses contemporary criticisms of the state of cinema: “movies should be better. And someone should be held accountable when they’re not”

(Sconce 2007:279) to fuel a fantasy of countercultural cinematic revolution. The fantasy, however, fully represents the impossibility of its plight. The underground scene of the 60s and 70s no longer exists, nor can it be replicated. Commenting on cinephilia after a century of movies, Sconce describes “a sense of loss and failure in cinema” (2007:279). *Cecil B. Demented* is built upon that apathetic sentiment, transforming in it to a satirical celebration of underground cinema. However, critics would inevitably compare the film to Waters’ previous independent titles. The ‘domestication’ argument, Kane-Meddock writes, is based on that failure: “with the residue of ‘trash’ cinema finding its way into mainstream Hollywood, Waters’s industry films have often been characterized as tepid, *unable to effectively recapture the rebellious spirit of the 1970s*” (2012:206, my emphasis). Films often disappoint, Sconce concludes, because audiences understand cinema to be filled with utopic potential, which is in itself a Platonic idea that heavily clashes with the material structure of the industry (2007:280-290). In Waters’ *Cecil B. Demented*, the gaps between present and past, underground and mainstream, are both pointed out at and brought together. If it is true, as Sconce thinks, that “film history becomes a mirror to our own mortality” (2007:290), the bittersweet message that underlines the film is that it represents the impossibility to return to the underground past.

## **Conclusions**

Throughout multiple authorial statements, Waters has addressed what has come to be known as the assimilation or domestication of John Waters. “How edgy can you be today? Do you have to die?” are questions that he posed while promoting *Cecil B. Demented*<sup>14</sup>. Rather than reaching a satisfactory answer, this chapter has read *Pecker* and *Cecil B. Demented* with reference to their discourses on taste, celebrity, stardom,

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<sup>14</sup> Included in *Cecil B. Demented*’s DVD Comedy Central’s special.



art, irony, and the geopolitics of Baltimore while considering the mainstreaming journey of ‘bad taste’ and its place in the 1990s. While *Pecker* ends in an optimistic celebration that actively destroys social distinctions, *Cecil B. Demented* offers a more aggressive ending, critical of contemporary matters<sup>15</sup>. Yet both films respond to Waters’ authorship by tackling questions about the place of trash and bad taste in contemporary culture. Acknowledging that “irony ruined trash through contamination -its sophisticated twinkling buoyancy counteracting trash’s tendency to sink unheralded to the bottom” (Katz 2018:71), the films continue providing Waters’ colourful representations of underground art and outsider subjects in off-beat Baltimore, yet showcasing their diegetic and extra-diegetic limits. These limits have to do with the processes of construction that underpin Waters’ cult authorship.

As I established at the beginning of the chapter, notions of cult authorship are linked to romantic notions of the lone and mistreated true auteur. The reputation of the cult director gives him a sense of distinction that is at the forefront of the masculine subcultural consumption of paracinema. Functioning as a club that prides itself on “a sense of rarity and exclusivity” (Jancovich 2002: 309), it is only logical that there was a backlash following Waters’ more mainstream works. *Pecker* and *Cecil B. Demented* are some of the most dismissed films in Waters’ body of work, accused of being “increasingly conventional” (Kempley 2000) and “watered down” (Hoberman 1998); and with the exception of *Tinkcom* and Metz’s work, they have largely passed unnoticed in academic studies. Their negative reception can be explained by their transitional status: they were neither successful commercial Hollywood titles, nor independent darlings nor were they “unwatchable and/or unobtainable” (Jancovich

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<sup>15</sup> The film’s criticism of the industry fixation with blockbusters, sequels and sagas holds up. At the time of writing this chapter, *Avengers’ Endgame* (2019) the culmination of 22 film blockbuster saga reached box office records worldwide

2002:309) celluloid atrocities plagued with episodes of transgression. Instead, the films take another road, showcasing different visions of their otherness yet inviting a bigger audience to join in. They are “Disney for perverts”<sup>16</sup>. *Pecker* and *Cecil B. Demented* somehow betray the exclusivity of cult cinema by actualizing trash and bad taste, widely dispensing their subcultural capital<sup>17</sup>. The perils of this actualization are that might be interpreted by many as a defeat when compared with earlier episodes of transgression. Caught between Hollywood, independent lack of funding and the loss of cult fanatics’ favour for ‘selling out’, Waters’ would stop making films after the censorship problems and consequent commercial fiasco of *A Dirty Shame* (2004). Paradoxically, despite having abandoned his filmmaking activity in 2004, he remains a famous *auteur*, perhaps more celebrated than ever. Waters’ popularity, with eleven long-feature films as his body of work, seems firmly safeguarded from criticism. Or, as *Cecil B. Demented* would say, “bad reviews can’t hurt you now. We’ve got cinematic immunity”.

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<sup>16</sup> Waters uses this term, allegedly coined by a Japanese review of *Pecker*, in his recorded one-man-show *This Filthy World*.

<sup>17</sup> Studying the dynamics of what is considered ‘cool’ or ‘hip’, Thornton explains that “subcultural capital is defined against the supposed obscene accessibility of mass culture” (1995:121)

## CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND TRANSGRESSION?

The first time I heard someone discussing the work of filmmaker John Waters it was from a position of contempt and disgust, which immediately sparked my interest. The senior editor of the cultural magazine where I was interning wrote a short piece about Waters to introduce his upcoming visit to the Filmoteca Española de Madrid, that had organized a retrospective of all of his works. The man, whom I considered a personal enemy after he once screamed at me that the hip-hop Odd Future collective belonged in jail instead of in our music section, expressed his revulsion towards Divine eating dog shit. Delighted at his outrage, I attended the next screening available with a group of friends, which turned out to be a rooftop screening of *Cry-Baby*. The programme's notes warned that this was not one of Waters' best-received pictures, and that it lacked in underground value, but that did not matter much. I immediately loved that insane parody of 50s nostalgia, and the pleasure of that experience was amplified by the hot summer night, the riotous laughter that erupted from the cool young crowd, and the joy of participating in of all that -the film, the crowd, the laughter- with my friends.

Critically examining that anecdotal first encounter with Waters, I have come to the realization that the story encapsulates some of the themes that run throughout this thesis. It illustrates how Waters' career still benefits, to a certain point, from bad reviews, and that, despite twentieth-first century considerations that everything has already been done and nothing can be truly outrageous, the calculated shock value of *Pink Flamingos* still pays off. It also demonstrates the workings of taste as a system of classification, and how cultural productions align and position their spectators within a certain axis of the processes of power, giving them a sense of place in the social world. Unbeknownst to me, my interest in those films as a form of rejection of the

conservative values of that senior editor mirrored the essential conflict in many of Waters' films, where outsiders -in many shapes and forms- marvel in bad taste as a form of resistance against people at the top of society and their rigid dictates of normality. Within the filmic world of Waters' cinema, the defeat of the good and the serious leaves room for a carnivalesque celebration of a world turned upside down. Such celebration is not, however, limited to the screen, as it also travels to the seats of the theatre. As I could attest as a participant on that night, the audiences that are drawn to those movies see themselves reflected onscreen, and in return, they obtain a sense of recognition and belonging: their distinction is that they are part of a cult. Most importantly, from that first viewing experience, I remember the embodied pleasures of that screening: a communal and freeing laughter. The critical concerns about the film's alleged lack of transgression did not (could not) change the thrilling enjoyment I experienced with Hollywood *Cry-Baby*. I arrived at Waters' cinema because of the outrage, but I stayed because of its pleasures.

By the time I discovered Waters' cinema, *Hairspray* had won eight Tony Awards, Burger King had given out Odorama cards to promote the crossover animation *Rugrats Go Wild* and *Jackass 3D* had grossed 171 million worldwide. Waters' filmmaking years were over, and the context in which his films appeared had also significantly changed. At the same time as gross-out and bad taste were becoming more and more acceptable, there seemed to be an established consensus around Waters' domestication, one that considered his career an archetypical example of an underground filmmaker being assimilated by the mainstream. Arriving at Waters' cinema in the twenty-first-century cultural context, I found this narrative too simple, too focused on linear time. Instead of seeing the evolution of a provocateur

progressively losing edge, what I discovered was an archive of joyous queer utopia. It occurred to me that it might be much more to Waters' cinema than transgression.

### **Summary and Contributions**

This thesis has studied bodies, taste and pleasures in Waters' cinema, the eleven long-feature films that formed this catalogue. In the introduction, the literature review demonstrated how both queer and cult studies have privileged the study of Waters' underground years, their edge and transgression. As I have shown, there is an existing gap in scholarship for his career post-*Hairspray*, which neglects his most prolific and profitable years. This thesis has argued for a study of Waters' cinema that reconciles his earlier and later works and firmly positions his cinema as alongside laughter.

In the first chapter I discussed the theoretical implications of studying bodies, taste, and pleasures interpreting the work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu and Mikhail Bakhtin. Providing a basic understanding of their theories, alongside each other, I set an understanding of bodies as matter shaped by power and knowledge, gender and taste; and the ways in which cinema, as a disciplinary technology, regulates bodies and taste. From this analysis, Waters' bad taste cinema emerges as a new aesthetic of the self in relation to camp, trash, and queer excess.

Chapters 2 and 3 examined Waters' trash era of underground production. In Chapter 2, I studied Waters' *Multiple Maniacs* and *Pink Flamingos* under the concept of 'cheap thrills', a cinema that addresses the sensational bodily by displaying raw indexical episodes of transgression, drawing shock value from grotesque spectacles of the body, its excrements and fluids. Reemphasizing the laughter that accompanies those spectacles, I positioned these films as comedies, challenging the discourse that classifies them akin to horror. Chapter 3 examined the gendered embodiment of bad

taste and its stories of revolting femininity, both disgusting and revolutionary, in *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*. I placed the aesthetics of female unruliness at the centre of the analysis, examining the film's queerness and their consequent treatment of beauty and ugliness.

Chapter 4 continued examining gender and class issues of female discontent in relation to the housewives of suburbia. Using the suburbs as a metaphor for the mainstream, the films in this chapter reflect the queering transformation of the so-called normal American family. I examined the smells of suburbia in *Polyester*, Waters and Divine's parody of a Sirkian melodrama. I argued that *Serial Mom* reinvented *Female Trouble's* 'Crime is Beauty' within the world of suburbia; parodying true crime, B-horror and gore cinema, and reinventing the nuclear family in their close encounter with crime. I examined how *A Dirty Shame* ambiguously oscillates between Russ Meyer's sexploitation and gross-out, and how the censorship problems around sexual deviance trumped Waters' career. The chapter closes articulating how the films changed suburbia and how suburbia also transformed Waters' cinema.

Chapter 5 and 6 revolved around those transformations in the so-called mainstream years. In Chapter 5, I studied the use of nostalgia in *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby*, two films that, through Fifties music and style, reinvent the past to create queer utopias. In *Hairspray's* case study I demonstrated how the film fixes the history of a segregated tv show by launching an integration comedy that celebrates the alliance of black and fat bodies. In *Cry-Baby*, I examined how the Fifties pastiche also fixes the racist past, queering the heterosexual romance with leather imagery. I conclude that the films' nostalgia evokes nostalgic utopias and affective pleasures. In Chapter 6, I questioned Waters' ambivalent cult authorship through the analysis of *Pecker* and *Cecil B. Demented*, two films that depict artistic praxis and operations of taste that

mirror Waters' career. Finally, the chapter closes considering the paradoxical state of these films as reversed nostalgias, and how Waters' cult status was at odds with the Hollywood affiliation.

### **Concluding remarks**

The same month I started my PhD, the British Film Institute celebrated the retrospective 'It Isn't Very Pretty...The Complete Films of John Waters (Every Goddam One of Them)', honouring '50 years of filth'. During these four years of research, *Multiple Maniacs* has been re-released in cinema theatres across the world, and the Criterion Collection has restored three of Waters' early works, which are now available in lush DVD editions with accompanying essays and eliminated footage. 'Camp John Waters', a weekend getaway for fans, has celebrated its third edition. The Baltimore Museum of Art had a retrospective show to Waters' contemporary art that included the screening of his 1960s short-films. And, at the time of writing these conclusions, Waters' latest book, 'Mr. Know-It-All', has just been published in the UK. Which is to say, Waters' career is now arguably more popular and lucrative than it ever was.

That popularity, nevertheless, exists alongside a cultural divide around the ethics of humour and transgression, and where political correctness has resurfaced as a contentious point of debate. The term, first coined in leftist circles, surfaced in the late 1980s as a derogatory term employed by the right to mock the language, theories and sensibilities of the civil right movements and critical theory. Incidentally, to be politically correct meant to be humourless, easily offended, and somehow in rejection of the Enlightenment values. In the aftermath of Me Too, a movement that has often been accused of having gone too far; political correctness has not just resurfaced but evolved into 'political correctness gone mad', an elastic phrase that encompasses a

backlash against social justice. This debate is particularly acute in the world of comedy. Stand-up comedians such as Ricky Gervais, Dave Chapelle or Billy Burr have released, within the last two years, lucrative Netflix specials arguing that “you cannot really say anything in today’s culture” and mocking ‘snowflake’ sensibilities by conveniently positioning themselves as speaking truth to power. Being politically incorrect- racist, sexist, homophobic- is a profitable enterprise in the marketplace of ideas. It certainly succeeded in Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, who ran presenting himself as an outsider, someone that was willing to “tell it like it is”. Trump’s outrageousness worked, and his victory called attention to the emerging importance of the alt-right, a rebranding of fascism that employs an ironic stance to hide in plain sight. Today’s so-called puritanism and political correctness, coexist, nevertheless, with a resurface of fascism across the globe.

Upon this problematic millennial configuration of transgressive humour, Waters claims that his films are politically correct (Abrahams 2016), which is a provocation of sorts, for his popularity and reputation are inextricably connected to the transgressive display of queer bodies, bad taste aesthetics and episodes of shock value. However, as this thesis has argued, transgression is not fixed but relational, as it only works within a given context: transgression is a spiral that involves the cultural borders. Political correctness, on its part, is an oxymoron, since correctness evokes an orthodoxy that is incompatible with the overarching pervasiveness of politics and power (Hughes 2010, Wegel 2016). Waters’ films are hardly politically correct in the sense that they are neither tidy nor respectful – on the contrary, they are often offensive, disruptive and loud. However, this offensiveness has seemingly managed to pass the test of time, as Waters’ current popularity attests. As for the reasons why this happened, this thesis has argued that, in its embrace of the low, his cinema produces a



collective amalgam of bodies, taste and pleasures that signals a queer utopia. The films' queer utopia mocks and parodies fixed categories of identities and assimilationist politics, celebrating, instead, the heteroglossia of the carnival. I have argued that it is laughter, and the rich and merry aesthetics of bad taste, the overarching themes in Waters' cinema, and not simply transgression. Perhaps transgression, today, involves rejecting the very need to be transgressive, as well as toasting to the end of irony. The world-turned-upside down of Waters' cinema erases distinctions between high and low, good and bad, left and right, and doing that, it tends a bridge between the transgressions of the past and blueprints for the future.

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