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Sex, Gore and Provocation: the Influence of Exploitation in John Waters’s Early Films

Elise Pereira Nunes

Introduction

1 Born in Baltimore in 1946, American filmmaker John Waters soaked in movie culture as a child and a teenager, fascinated with Hollywood melodramas and female icons, the “nudie cuties” of exploitation cinema, horror movies and the independent productions of underground filmmakers. His first home-made productions, which he started making when he was sixteen, testify to the influence of these very different approaches to cinema in terms of production, distribution and promotion, as well as genres and themes.

2 Drawn to rival movie cultures—Hollywood productions and major studios theaters on the one hand, and local, independent theaters and drive-ins on the other (Doherty, 2002, 92)—he decided to teach himself how to make his own movies and modeled his films on the exploitation and underground filmmakers he idolized (Waters, 1991, 44). The significance of exploitation and underground cinemas that both exploit Hollywood as a model to either hijack, parody or question is indubitably observable in his work. This article intends to explore the filmmaker’s appropriation and exploitation of characteristics defining exploitation cinema through the study of three exploitation films whose aesthetics and pragmatics Waters revisits. Two exploitation “masters,” sexploitation filmmaker Russ Meyer and gore genre pioneer Herschell Gordon Lewis, appear to be the most influential exploitation filmmakers on Waters’s explorations of sex and violence in his early films, while the sway of the mondo film genre enhanced his works’ shock value—their potential ability to provoke emotions such as fear, disgust or anger. Consequently, Waters’s own early films can be compared to exploitation films and promote transgressive politics through the emergence of a humorous and provocative trash
cinema questioning society’s gender roles. The many uses of the term “trash” all apply to Waters’s cinema, whether discussing the garbage his film crew picked up and used as props and décor, the lowlife characters he gave life to, his sleazy, poor-quality movies, or even the mockery he makes of society’s gender norms conveyed by Hollywood. His hybrid movies should be considered as part of what Jeffrey Sconce defines as “paracinema”:

Paracinema is thus less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus. In short, the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic “trash,” whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture. (Sconce, 1995, 372)

As his first three films were never distributed (Hag in a Black Leather Jacket, 1964; Roman Candles, 1966; Eat Your Makeup, 1968), this article will focus on his first feature-length movies from the late 1960s-early 1970s, which established the basis of his shockingly entertaining cinema: Mondo Trasho (1969), Multiple Maniacs (1970), Pink Flamingos (1972) and Female Trouble (1974).

Modes of Production

When Waters decided to make movies, the first difficulty he was confronted with was his lack of funds. Mondo Trasho was made on a mere $2,000 budget, thanks to his father who lent him the money. However, these budgetary restrictions became an opportunity to develop his creativity and made him turn to techniques used by exploitation and underground cinema to reach his goals. Since it was impossible to pay for professional technicians, he produced, directed, wrote, filmed and edited his films himself. Most of the budget was spent on film rolls and costumes. Pink Flamingos was the first film for which he managed to employ a handful of technicians and an editor to improve the sound and image quality. In the style of many exploitation and underground filmmakers, his early productions were mainly shot in as few takes as possible, with minimal cuts to save time, film roll and money. Most of the scenes were shot outside, on location, using natural light, while basic electric lights were used for indoor scenes, giving his films a raw, unfiltered, sometimes overexposed look.

Another constraint came from the technical limitations of his equipment. Like his underground idols, the Kuchar Brothers’ (Stevenson, 1996), his first untraceable films were shot with an 8mm camera, with which he could not record sound and picture together. Even with the 16mm camera he later used, sound had to be recorded on a separate recorder, and Waters had trouble synching sound as he could not afford synch sound equipment (Waters, 1991, 17). This is the main reason why there is almost no dialogue in Mondo Trasho. Yet this constraint led Waters to emulate another master of underground cinema such as experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger, whose movies generally count no dialogue. Their soundtrack, consisting of cautiously selected tracks added end-to-end, becomes as important as images themselves (Tyler, 1995). The audio track Waters edited for Mondo Trasho is a compilation of songs from his personal record collection. Consequently, Mondo Trasho was never released because he would have had to pay for license fees. The complete soundtrack counts pop songs and love songs that sets the tone and testifies to his diverse musical and filmic inspirations. A recurrent aspect of his use of music comes from the exploitation of songs both linked with the pictures onscreen and the contrast made with the situation displayed, generally creating a humorous tone. The use of the 1956 song “I’m Not a Juvenile Delinquent” by American
doo-wop band Frankie Lymon & the Teenagers in one specific scene from Pink Flamingos appears as particularly relevant and off the wall [17:05]. Indeed, the song begins the moment Babs Johnson, played by Divine, enters a grocery store, asks for steak, then furtively sticks the slice between her legs and leaves the shop without paying for it.

5 Like dialogue, color also required a higher budget. Black-and-white film rolls were cheaper, which explains why both Mondo Trasho and Multiple Maniacs were shot in black and white, like many exploitation films (Schaefer, 53). With a $10,000 budget to shoot Pink Flamingos, Waters could at last purchase color film rolls and take bad taste to another level; its main character’s tacky makeup and huge body squeezed in a coral cocktail dress are some of the many elements that can disturb some viewers.

6 Waters’s low budgets also determined the location where his films were shot. Most scenes were filmed in his parents’ house or later in his own apartment. Being a local also helped him shoot scenes in some local businesses whose owners either did not care or were amused to let him use their store. Others were shot in Baltimore’s public and private spaces, for which the film crew usually had no authorization; they would have had to detail the kind of scenes they intended to shoot and never would have been allowed to openly film nude scenes, for instance. On one occasion, the film crew got arrested for “conspiracy to commit indecent exposure” while attempting to shoot a naked hitchhiker on Johns Hopkins University Campus one Sunday morning during the shooting of Mondo Trasho (Waters, 1991, 56). But the actual ballyhoo that went with the trial only made them more famous locally and aroused people’s curiosity and interest from the press, something Waters could only have dreamed of at the time. Any free publicity was welcome, for Waters did not have sufficient financial resources to attract much attention otherwise and low budgets meant limited promotion and distribution.

Distribution and Exhibition

7 The controversial topics he exploited made his films the targets of local censorship. Before Pink Flamingos, Waters did not even bother submitting his first works to the Maryland State Board of Censorship. Those movies were hardly watchable because of their very poor visual quality, due to a lack of budget and techniques, and displayed far too controversial topics and nudity to be advertised or distributed in local theaters or even given an X rating. Waters nevertheless succeeded in having his films shown in alternative venues. In spite of many profane and nude scenes in Mondo Trasho, he got an open-minded reverend to let the crew schedule shows at a local church (Waters, 53). Additionally, Waters caught the attention of the anti-Hollywood Film-Makers Cooperative created in New York in 1962 by Jonas Mekas among others (Noguez, 1985), and midnight screenings were scheduled on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

8 Even so, Mondo Trasho’s distribution remained limited to underground circles; the film was popular among niche audiences, mainly in Baltimore, New York and San Francisco where local counterculture youth were looking for movies that would challenge established order and mainstream norms promoted by Hollywood. With his next film, Multiple Maniacs, Waters decided to take distribution one step further and started traveling across the country to reach more theaters and audiences, going door-to-door, in the tradition of early mobile exploiters:

I took off for Santa Barbara with another print of Multiple Maniacs in the trunk of my car. [...] [I] went through the movie ads and selected a theater that had weird
enough programming to possibly show the film. Armed with posters and handouts sheets, I talked the owner into giving me several midnight shows and began my relentless one-man promotional campaign. (Waters, 1991, 67)

He also sent Variety-type ads to local newspapers and created promotional items by himself, making posters and imagining catch lines that would attract people’s attention, a practice he perpetuated till he secured bigger budgets: “Posters and handout sheets were designed featuring a shot of Divine [...] with the catch line ‘The Filthiest People Alive!’ [...] Laundromat bulletin boards became our billboards, and street corners and bars took the place of TV talk show personal appearances” (Waters, 21). Waters and his crew progressively gained a form of early celebrity, which was partly due to the fuss they were generating at all their movie premieres, where they appeared excessively dressed, mimicking the attitudes of Hollywood stars, regardless of the number of people attending the showing.

9 Waters’s first confrontation with censorship occurred when the illicit showings of Pink Flamingos became quite popular among students from the University of Baltimore, and the press talked more and more about the local filmmaker who had created his most elaborate film so far. He managed to avoid most censorship by using artificial genitals for some scenes, a widespread practice in the film industry in order to get more flexible ratings and reach wider audiences. He nonetheless obtained an X-rating but was at least able to distribute it in wider spheres. He then signed with the film firm New Line Cinema, recently created in 1967 by Robert Shaye, who had started distributing his films on college campuses and wanted his company to focus on films that were appealing to niche audiences.³ This was the beginning of a creative partnership of funding and distribution that helped Waters turn from a self-taught filmmaker into a counterculture icon who, nowadays, cameos in popular television shows such as The Simpsons (Fox, 1989-), My Name is Earl (Fox, 2005-2009) and Saturday Night Live (NBC, 1975).⁴

10 The “trashiness” which permeates his films can also be found in the actors he was casting and directing, as well as the characters portrayed. Since he lacked Hollywood headline icons to catch people’s attention, he made stars out of friends who played in almost all his films, their gang being known as “the Dreamlanders.” Andy Warhol, one of Waters’s biggest influences, had already parodied Hollywood star system conventions by creating his own “Superstars,” whether nobodies or underground performers such as drag queens.⁵ He also followed the tradition of early exploitation filmmakers who could not hire Hollywood stars but would emphasize the potential appeal of their lead actresses through the use of catch lines.⁶ This is exactly what Waters did when he and Glenn Harris Milstead created the drag queen persona Divine.

Sexploitation and the Outbreak of a “Divinely” Grotesque Female Icon

11 From the beginning, the filmmaker advertised Divine as “the most beautiful woman in the world” while displaying an obese drag queen. Her appropriation of artificial female attributes both cross-references the role models who inspired the creation of Divine’s persona and establishes the artificial construction of femininity, which can be remodeled and taken over. American gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler, one of the founders of constructionist gender theories, uses Divine’s performance of femininity in
order to assert societies’ construction of gender roles. Her approach challenges essentialist theories defending the idea that nature universally defines gender roles:

[Divine's] impersonation of women implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates. Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? [...] Divine notwithstanding, gender practices within gay and lesbian cultures often thematize the “natural” in parodic contexts that bring into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex.

(Butler, 1990, [2006] xxx-xxxi)

Moreover, in the light of constructionist theories, Divine’s impersonations of women tend to stress the dictatorial norms of aesthetics regarding women in Western societies, as her grotesque body, makeup lines, hairdos and clothes parody the mainstream representation of women and femininity. In A Theory of Parody (1985), Linda Hutcheon reminds the reader that parody can only work if the viewer is already familiar with the object that is parodied for him/her to comprehend its exploitation and the new angle it is given: “parody is indeed in the eye of the beholder. But beholders need something to behold; we need signals from the text to guide our interpretation, and the degree of visibility of these signals determines their potential for assisting us” (xvi). Accustomed to Hollywood’s limited representations of femininity, the viewer is capable of reading Waters’s humorous exploitation of Hollywood and sexploitation female icons through Divine’s reenactments and is given new trashy role models. For Hutcheon, parody is “also often a more extended form of transtextual reference today. Parody, then, is related to burlesque, travesty, pastiche, plagiarism, quotation, and allusion, but remains distinct from them. It shares with them a restriction of focus: its repetition is always of another discursive text” (43), “a repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (6). Thus, Divine’s appropriation of female attributes always humorously questions mainstream definitions of womanhood through the distorted representations proposed by a biological, overweight man. Divine’s parodic performance of artificial femininity can be referred to as “camp,” according to the definition established by Susan Sontag in her groundbreaking essay, “Notes on Camp” (1964): “The essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (105). Through her multiple female characters highly indebted to the heroines of American filmmaker Russ Meyer, Divine’s overflowing exploitation of “‘feminine” attributes asserts her position as a constructed persona challenging society’s dictatorial establishments of gender roles and definition(s) of femininity and masculinity.

“Sex” is a biological term: “gender” a psychological and cultural one. [...] Every society believes that its own definitions of gender correspond to the biological duality of sex. [...] If the proper terms for sex are “male” and “female,” the corresponding terms for gender are “masculine” and “feminine”; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex. Gender is the amount of masculinity or femininity found in a person…” (Robert Stoller, quoted in Oakley, 1972, 115-6)

Exploitation cinema has long been defined as a form attempting to “grab an audience by offering something unavailable elsewhere—films that pander to our baser instincts, pique our curiosity, salaciously sell us the seamier side of life, but do so knowingly and for one basic reason—to make money” (Ross, 1995, 63). It is no wonder, then, that sex has been one of the taboo themes exploited by this industry. In the 1950s, following on the growing success of films exploiting sex (including burlesque and hygiene films), Hollywood needed
to lower the restrictions of its Production Code in order to allow major studios to exploit
sex and generate more profit while taking audiences' expectations into account (Benshoff
and Griffin, 232). However, as Hollywood was not ready to use sex and nudity as its
primary appeals yet, an entire independent sexploitation cinema emerged, with several
subgenres including the nudie film. The popularity of sexploitation contributed to
weaken both local and state censorship laws. Among others, Russ Meyer became one of
the most influential and successful soft porn filmmakers from the late 1950s to the late
1970s. In Waters's words,

Russ Meyer is the Einstein of sex films [...] A Russ Meyer film is instantly
recognizable—top-notch production values, split-second editing, low-angle shots
leering up at almost deformed, big-busted, domineering sex-starved heroines [...] Russ Meyer makes films about sex and violence and you can tell he is proud of his
work. He writes, produces, directs, films, and edits his own productions, and they
all make money. (Waters, 192)

A big breast fetishist, Meyer made sexy, heavy-chested women his brand label and
intended to taunt male heterosexual audiences who would pay in order to see films
displaying oversized bosoms. Even though Meyer's heroines are highly objectified and
submitted to the male viewer's gaze, they also transgress traditional gender roles by
appropriating generally “masculine” behaviors, such as fighting, swearing, killing and
especially being promiscuous. Their overall attitude impugns society's patriarchal
authority by refusing to embrace the passive, home-centered life conveyed by
mainstream Hollywood. Meyer's female characters’ excessive bodies and sex drives, as
well as his depiction of untamed youth, deeply affected Waters's representation of sex
and gender roles. The Meyer film that most influenced Waters is undoubtedly Faster,
Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (1965), his “favorite movie of all time”: “I first saw [Faster, Pussycat! Kill!
Kill!] in 1966. [...] Russ's nasty 'pussycats' became a 'role model' for all the characters in
my productions—especially Divine" (Waters, 192).

14 The superimposition of constructed signifiers of beauty and sexualization of women—
high heels, tight clothes, heavy makeup, long hair, thin bodies, big bosoms and rounded
bottoms—is meant to turn the audiences on. Meyer also exploits famous Hollywood
actresses’ tropes such as “the blond bombshell,” “the femme fatale” or “the exotic
foreigner,” and makes their whole body visible to the viewer's eye, their most popular
attributes being exaggeratedly showcased. His exploitation of Hollywood female role
models inspired Waters to invent his own. Hollywood star Elizabeth Taylor largely
influenced Divine's appearance as a brunette femme fatale in Multiple Maniacs, while
American blond bombshell Jayne Mansfield, an icon of glamorous Hollywood and a sex
symbol in sexploitation productions, highly inspired the creation of the blond character
played by Divine in Mondo Trasho.

15 In this film, Divine appears for the first time wearing a blond wig, gold Capri pants and
six-inch shoes as a tribute to Waters's favorite blond actress and Playboy Playmate
[21:50]. She is also driving a red '59 Cadillac Eldorado convertible" (Waters, 56), a mythic
car evoking Mansfield, who used to drive a pink Cadillac Eldorado convertible herself, so
that a parallel is clearly drawn between these two emblematic sexually objectified figures:
“Cadillacs are to cars what Jayne Mansfield was to women: big, flamboyant, brazen, and
extreme. She was a sex symbol; a Cadillac is a sex symbol and more” (Stern, 1990, 62). In
this scene introducing the character of Divine, Waters humorously imitates the filming
technique of generating close-ups of specific female body parts and plays with a process
exploited by both Hollywood and exploitation which satisfies the heterosexual male
viewer’s eye through the fragmenting of the woman’s body. He successively shoots significant parts of Divine’s body as she checks her hairdo and makeup in the rearview mirror, as well as parts of the car, its fender skirts and twin bullet taillights, thus parodying a gendered view of cars as female enforced by advertisement. Another reference to Jayne Mansfield shows through the use of the song “The Girl Can’t Help It,” performed by American musician Little Richard for the eponymous 1956 musical by American filmmaker Frank Tashlin, starring Mansfield in the lead role. However, Divine’s overweight body and her discomfort as she keeps on holding her pair of Capri pants to prevent them from slipping turn her performance into a parodic, trashy version of female glamorous role models [31:04].

Meyer’s female characters’ appearances also emphasize the idea that a whole range of artifices are available in order to propose multiple versions of femininity. The depiction of the three female heroines in the opening scene of Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill! immediately suggests the kind of femininity they will perform. The film opens on a black screen. The voice of an off-screen narrator rises in order to warn the viewer about the different shapes violence can take. In this case, the shape of a sex-craved, indomitable woman:

> Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to violence, the word and the act. While violence cloaks itself in a plethora of disguises, its favorite mantle still remains: sex. [...] Yet violence doesn’t only destroy—it creates and molds as well. Let’s examine closely, then, this dangerously evil creation, this new breed, encased and contained within the supple skin of woman [...]. But a word of caution—handle with care and don’t drop your guard! [...] Who are they? One might be your secretary! Your doctor’s receptionist! Or a dancer in a go-go club! [0:03]

Thus, from the beginning, the primarily male viewer is led to expect a movie that will display wild sexy female characters, as promised on posters promoting the movie. In the next scene, three burlesque dancers performing in a strip club appear on screen. As they are filmed in low angle, with close-ups of their shaking hips and chests, the viewer can identify with the male clients enjoying the show. The close-ups of the audience’s faces reveal their sexual arousal at the sight of these tempting creatures. However, the angle from which the dancers are seen also asserts their enjoyment of their control over their male audience. The lead female character, Varla, played by actress and exotic dancer Tura Satana, embodies the ultimate sexy and deadly “femme fatale” throughout the movie. Fearless, her heavy makeup and plucked eyebrows make her look menacing, while the tight black overalls she wears in the following scenes reveal her impressive cleavage. Her appearance and aggressive behavior suggest new provocative opportunities for female characters that Divine will later exploit to build up her persona.

Like Meyer’s insubordinate heroines, Divine’s evil characters blow up mainstream gender role dictates. As single parents at the head of their family, they take up traditionally male roles such as the figure of the breadwinner and reject the concept of the traditional nuclear family generally promoted as “natural.” Indeed, they have children of their own but also consider any friend that would embrace their lifestyle as a family member. They are also sexually active, a behavior generally considered as inherent to manhood but as a deviance in women:

> Men initiate sexual contact, [...] assume the dominant position in intercourse, [...] ask females to go to bed with them, or marry them, or both: not vice versa. The female sexuality is supposed to lie in her receptiveness; [...] it extends to the whole structure of feminine personality as dependent, passive, unaggressive and submissive. [...] That these stereotypes persist can be seen from any women’s magazine and almost any fiction dealing with sexual relationships. (Oakley, 77-8)
In control of their sex lives, they freely express their cravings and use their sexual attributes in order to manipulate people. The portrayal of sexually active women looking for recreational sex can be seen as provocative as they are not submitted to men’s sex drives. Their sexuality can then be defined as queer as they alternate from having straight, heterosexual sex to pleasurable, non-reproductive sex. Contrary to exploitation movies meant to sexually tantalize the (heterosexual male) viewer, even if some elements such as excessive groaning may appear funny to the viewer, every single sex scene in a John Waters movie proposes a vision of the sex act that is at once comical and transgressive.

In these films, heterosexual sex is desacralized and challenges what poet Adrienne Rich called “compulsory heterosexuality,” a term that evokes the enforcement of sexuality between a man and a woman exclusively, promoted through the media and denying visibility to homosexuality and other forms of sexual practices (Rich, 1980, 23). Many sex scenes between a man and a woman fail to achieve the main goal of heterosexual sex which is reproduction, as they depict sexual practices never leading to a potential pregnancy and focus on the subjects’ atypical access to pleasure instead, such as toesucking in Mondo Trasho and Pink Flamingos. Furthermore, some heterosexual sex acts cannot be performed without the intrusion of a third element, like animals (the chicken in Pink Flamingos) or phallic objects (the hammer in Female Trouble). Pink Flamingos also broaches the taboo of incest, one of the most morally and legally condemned sexual practices among human societies (Levi-Strauss, 1948), in a scene where Babs performs fellatio on her own son, an act that she defines as “the greatest gift a mother can give to her child” [64:30]. This graphic sex scene transgresses legal, moral and religious rules while also appearing as ludicrous. Indeed, the viewer is fully aware that Divine is a male actor underneath his costume, so that the scene can actually be viewed as a gay sex scene.

Finally, the most incongruous heterosexual sex act occurs in Female Trouble when Dawn Davenport has sex with a filthy man on a fouled mattress at a dump. The series of close-ups of the two characters allows the viewer to see that actor Glenn Milstead Harris is playing both parts. The absurd and comical dimension of this extract reaches its climax when pregnant Dawn calls Earl to ask him for money. He simply tells her to “go fuck yourself,” which is exactly what Divine the performer did during the sex scene. Through these perverse, ludicrous and graphic depictions of sexual practices, Waters exploits sex in order to mock society’s inhibited perception of sexuality as a taboo topic. Another behavior often thought of as “masculine” and appropriated by Waters’s female characters is their inclination for violence.

Regardless of mainstream morals, Waters’s female characters live by their own code, including violence and crime, not only as a means to fulfill their ambitions (such as fame or wealth), but also as a lifestyle. The protagonist of Female Trouble is thus a worthy successor to Babs Johnson and an emulation of Varla. Dark-haired, violent, selfish and self-determined, Dawn embraces crime as a career and the ultimate form of beauty. After exploiting sex as a means to tease and make the audience laugh at ludicrous depictions of sex acts, Waters exploits violence and its appropriation by female characters in order to transgress society’s gender roles and turn them into dominant figures not subjected to a male domination that he desacralizes. To enhance his female characters’ potential dangerousness and add shock value to his films, Waters borrows techniques specific to the gore film subgenre and its depiction of graphic violence.
The “King of Gore” and the Exploitation of the Gore Film Genre

21 Part of the trashy dimension of Waters’s movies originates in his appreciation for films that display atrocities in order to unsettle audiences. American gore genre pioneer Herschell Gordon Lewis was a role model for Waters on different levels. In the early 1960s, he invented the gore (or “splatter”) film, a horror subgenre, with Blood Feast (1963). This first opus of the “Blood Trilogy” depicts explicit gore scenes, such as mutilations of the human body emphasized by close-ups of dismantled limbs and fake red blood. Even if the horror movie was already popular in Hollywood thanks to filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock, neither Hollywood gothic horror films nor B movies had ever displayed such realistic violence. In gore films, the exhibition of violent primal instincts within individuals meets the exploitation of the human body as mere meat (Thoret, 2000). Introducing a whole new level of visual transgression, these films mainly attracted teenagers, thus drawing the attention of theater owners willing to exploit this potentially lucrative audience: “That’s exploitation—elements the promoter can grab on to and shake in the face of theater owners to get them to play the picture and in the face of the public to get them to see it” (McCarty, 1995, 39).

22 Lewis’s introduction of new special effects such as fake blood also gave these movies a whole new true-to-life dimension. Lewis was able to shoot Blood Feast in color, which heightened the realism of the murders and gave the viewers what the title promised:

I gave the title Blood Feast and knew some newspapers would reject that title, since the word blood was controversial in those antediluvian times […]. More important than plot or cast was blood. The traditional kind of stage blood we’d used in some of our earlier films looked purple, which didn’t matter in a black and white film but we intended to make Blood Feast in color. [...] we came up with stage blood that as far as I know the laboratory is still selling. (McCarty, 48)

Supernatural elements can be found in both Blood Feast and Two Thousand Maniacs! (1964). The killer in Blood Feast, an Egyptian caterer, murders women in the most gruesome fashion and collects some of their limbs to perform a cannibalistic revival ritual for Egyptian goddess Ishtar whom he worships. In Two Thousand Maniacs!, crazy Southerners lure six “Yankees” into their ghost town to playfully slaughter them. The figure of the “white trash” is often exploited as an image evoking potential craziness and violence against urban citizens (Clover, 1993, 161-63). In Pink Flamingos, Babs Johnson lives outside the city limits in a lousy trailer next to the woods. Her extreme lifestyle reflects mainstream urban people’s fantasies regarding rednecks’ alleged filth and madness, whereas ultimately, the villains of the film happened to be Bab’s enemies, the Marbles. To all appearances they seem to perfectly fit mainstream society’s social standards as a white, well-established, middle-class married couple from the suburbs when they secretly live a criminal lifestyle and are sickly jealous of Bab’s fame and freedom.

23 Lewis’s gory special effects heavily influenced Waters for the making of Multiple Maniacs. The title refers directly to Two Thousand Maniacs! and includes gory scenes that focus on the action of killing rather than on the death of a character itself. Waters uses a great amount of fake blood to increase the horror of Lady Divine’s crimes, especially at the end of the film when she eviscerates her victims and feeds on their guts. Another echo of the Blood Trilogy is the birthday party scene in Pink Flamingos, where the characters partake in cannibalism. First, the scene opens on a regular birthday celebration [54:11]. The
camera frames Babs’s trailer where the party is in full swing. A non-diegetic song, “Pink Champagne” (The Tyrones, 1957), also establishes a party atmosphere. Then an establishing shot presents the guests: some hillbillies, homosexuals and transvestites, and a Nazi. In the next scene, a medium-full shot focuses on Babs opening her birthday presents. The expression of delight on her face at the sight of the hatchet her son has given her provides clues regarding her taste for murder. Indeed, the graphic depiction of killings in the following scene enables the viewer to understand the potential extent of Divine’s revenge and anticipates the movie’s resolution. When four policemen reach the party, all the guests pounce on their preys like bloodthirsty hounds. Babs, the leader of the pack, starts slaughtering them. In a low-angle shot that mimics the victims’ point of view, Babs seems to turn into a laughing hyena, brandishing a bloody bone as a trophy. The “party animals,” literally turned into bloodthirsty predators, tear the policemen’s bright red guts and limbs apart. The constant movement of the camera accentuates their frenzy and the chaos triggered by this cannibalistic feast. As anthropophagy is generally restricted to “primitive” culture or is a means to survive in desperate times, its reenactment within a modern society is considered as one of the highest transgressions and suggests the dehumanization of its perpetrator, whose lower instincts have taken over reason and morality. The theme of cannibalism is regularly exploited in order to reinforce a movie’s outrageous value. In Multiple Maniacs and Pink Flamingos, both characters played by Divine commit acts of cannibalism and turn into flesh-eating animals, incapable of interacting with society without threatening its balance. Divine’s transformations into monsters can either be read as a mainstream punishment for transgressing norms, or on the contrary, as a means to reach higher power by becoming physically strong and threatening. Her fusion of the woman figure subjected to patriarchy and the monster figure challenges their legitimacy, and becomes an act of rebellion and a sign of empowerment. This hybrid creature, half Diva, half Godzilla, has the will and the power to terrorize mainstream society and its abject body appears as a threat to order. In Powers of Horror, Julia Kristeva defines abjection as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982, 4). After showings of his films, Waters and Divine would receive letters from viewers either celebrating Divine’s filthy lifestyle or on the contrary accusing them of being lunatic “freaks,” a term that Waters was glad to see his Dreamlanders likened to (Waters, 33). As a form of abnormal behavior or physical appearance, the figure of the freak is intrinsically found at the margins of mainstream society, which simultaneously rejects “it” for not fitting its norms and needs “it” to exist in order to reinforce those norms:

The norm governs intelligibility, allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social. The question of what it is to be outside the norm poses a paradox for thinking, for if the norm renders the social field intelligible and normalizes that field for us, then being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it. (Butler, 2004, 42)

Highly influenced by Tod Browning’s 1932 controversial horror movie Freaks, Waters himself exploits many different aspects of the figure of the freak in order to play on the viewer’s feeling of rejection and attraction. Lady Divine’s “Cavalcade of Perversions” does not display deformed bodies but deviant behaviors and lifestyle, America’s contemporary freaks, including fetishists, masochists, exhibitionists, homosexuals, a puke-eater and a
drug addict, making the mainstream viewers of the show feel ill at ease and express
disgust while staring at them [03:15]. They eventually get punished for their voyeuristic
curiosity when they get attacked and robbed at the end of the performance. The overall
grotesque dimension of Waters’s gore scenes can’t help but make the viewer smile or
laugh even if s/he might feel uncomfortable or grossed out at the sight of such behavior.
Nevertheless, through these exaggerated representations, Waters gives visibility to those
regarded as second-class citizens and celebrates human “deviance” as an act of freedom.
The association of gory elements with ludicrous displays of “deviant” sexual practices
highlights mainstream society’s outdated feeling of fear inspired by the potential threat
to norm and order represented by the very existence of the Other, being inherently
different or deciding to follow other paths than the ones promoted and encouraged by
society.

25 The filmmaker’s appropriation of processes exploited in the mondo film genre—the fake
journalistic portrayal of primitive living forms and behaviors—endows the disgusting or
inappropriate scenes with a realistic dimension and gives the audiences the opportunity
to intrude in spaces featuring human practices their society regards as backward or even
insufferable.

### Shockumentaries and Mondo Films

26 The mondo film genre was inspired by documentaries from the first half of the twentieth
century, exploiting the exotic practices and habits of primitive societies all over the
world. Later, it became an inspiration for many “mockumentary” films of the 1960s. In
1962, an Italian import entitled *Mondo Cane* by filmmakers Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero
Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi, who intended to unsettle Western viewers by confronting
them with supposedly realistic and immoral human behaviors around the world, led to
the emergence of this subgenre:

*Mondo Cane* became a smash international hit […] In the guise of education
travelogues, the mondo pictures promised to sicken and disgust with the worst the
world had to offer […]. Sometimes real, sometimes faked for the camera, it was yet
another cinematic equivalent of the carnival freak show. (McDonough, 2005, 126)

27 At the very beginning of *Mondo Cane*, a voice-over both asserts and warns the audience
about the authenticity of the shocking images and scenes they are about to see, while
the camera follows a dog on a leash being taken by force to a pound as other dogs behind the
fence nervously bark as they watch it: “All the scenes you will see in this film are true and
are taken only from life. If often they are shocking, it is because there are many shocking
things in this world” [1:19]. The direct address to the audience would probably make
them apprehensive as to what they will be confronted with, the noise of the dogs barking
evoking a feeling of unease. Nevertheless, this opening scene also arouses the audience’s
curiosity, as they are about to witness everyday life scenes they are not used to
experiencing, especially inappropriate behaviors attesting to men’s primitive or
pernicious instincts. Exploiting the worst in human nature, mondo films became an
inspiring genre for many filmmakers who understood their potential shock value but also
the second-degree humor they could infuse their movies with, especially through the use
of a narrator:

The Mondo films encourage viewers to laugh at, or along with, the “voice of
sobriety.” We are drawn into the narrator’s attitude—“let me show you this strange
thing or event.” We agree and accept the contract because it gives us the gratification of naughty transgression in the mocking guise of epistophilic discovery. (McCarty, 1995, 106)

Different filmmakers appropriated the codes of the mondo film genre to sensationalize certain controversial themes. In 1966, Russ Meyer shot Mondo Topless in only five days on a $12,000 budget, in order to make profit out of the exploration of the 1960s decadence of strip clubs in San Francisco (Frasier, 1990). Waters’s Mondo Trasho, whose title is also a direct tribute to Mondo Topless, exploits the mondo film genre’s capacity to depict humanity’s potential real life trashiness and gross out his audience. Mondo Trasho’s opening scene displays real shots of chickens getting their heads chopped, thus emulating mondo films such as Mondo Cane and its ritualistic animal killings perpetrated by primitive tribes. Waters did not shoot this footage himself and used cheap stock footage he had bought instead, on which an executioner with a dark hood and a leathery tunic seizes one chicken after another and beheads them with an axe [0:04]. As the chicken killings are filmed in subsequent shots, the viewer has no choice but to believe that they are real, thus setting the tone for the movie. Besides, it was shot in black and white, as Waters’s own scenes, yet another way of saving time and money without impairing the effect of continuity between the introduction scene and the following ones. Waters also clearly intended to blur the line between his fictional characters and what his actors were capable of in the extradiegetic world. Indeed, these white American citizens seem to commit acts associated with the primitive and considered as abject when enacted within a “civilized” society that finds itself confronted with “those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal” (Kristeva, 12). Thus, Waters’s bad taste is debunking the dichotomy between the civilized and the primitive and asserts the existence of primal drives within modern human societies.

In Multiple Maniacs, he further exploits the newsreel genre in order to scare and repel his audience regarding his characters’ lifestyle. Lady Divine is a thief and a murderer who implies that she killed American actress and model Sharon Tate, married to Polish filmmaker Roman Polanski. Multiple Maniacs was shot just a few days after the killing, which had shocked the American press and people. As no suspect had been found yet, Waters wanted his characters to claim the killings, which would be regarded as profoundly outrageous and offensive. But when the Manson Family members were identified before the end of the shooting, Waters felt that he had to change the ending of the film. He made it clear in the plot that Divine had not really done it but that she was crazy enough to commit such gruesome crimes instead: “We wanted to scare the world, just like the unheard-of Manson Family, but we used a movie camera instead of deadly weapons. [...] As I was completing the film, the Manson Family was caught, so I quickly changed the ending [...] Nobody, not even Divine, could upstage Charles Manson” (Waters, 62).

The lack of a clear distinction between the characters and the actors who play them reaches its climax in the final scene of Pink Flamingos [91:05]. Waters’s voice, parodying mondo film narrators, comments on Divine’s action and directly addresses the audience: “Well, you think you know somebody filthier? Watch as Divine proves that not only is she the filthiest person alive in the world, she is also the filthiest actress in the world. What you are about to see is a real thing.” As Divine, Crackers and Cotton are hitchhiking to get to Boise, Idaho, Divine suddenly stops when she sees a man walking his dog looking for a spot to do its business. Once again, a non-diegetic song, “(How much is) That Doggie in the Window?” (Patti Page, 1952) is used to establish a humorous contrast between
Divine’s actions and the song, as the naïve lyrics are far removed from the disgusting behavior on screen. Divine’s intentions are clear as several medium close-ups of her face and body show her staring at the dog, licking her lips and rubbing her stomach with anticipation. A low-angle shot then shows the dog getting ready to defecate on the pavement. Divine sits next to it, picks up the feces and eats them while looking at the camera, hence breaking the fourth wall. In so doing, she gives both Waters and the audience a “shitty grin” and winks at the camera, while the camera zooms in on her delighted face and dirty teeth. Since there is no discontinuity between the shot of the dog defecating and Divine picking up the feces, the viewer has to believe that the actress really is eating dog feces, which definitely makes her the filthiest person/actress alive. This single scene, arguably Waters’s most famous, built his reputation as the “Pope of Trash” and helped establish his early movies as exploitation cinema: “Divine picked up the dogshit and put it in her mouth. She chewed it and gave a shit-eating grin to the camera. And presto–cinema history! A first and a last in the annals of exploitation and a finale to one of the cheapest feature-length movies ever made” (Waters, 12). When the film was eventually released, The Maryland State Censor Board received complaints, most of them directed toward this last scene, but nothing could be done to have it removed, for neither bad taste nor trash humor were illegal (Waters, 91).

**Conclusion**

The emergence of a cinema which emulates the techniques, aesthetics and politics of a form at the margins of the dominant Hollywood model testifies to a desire for more freedom to deal with taboo topics and make money in the process. It also reflects Waters’s political stance on the American society of his time, which he conveys through the creation of an alternative vision of the world. By rejecting the major studios’ rules and embracing the exploitation of human appeals for lower impulses, Waters humorously celebrates the potential decadence of human beings, gives visibility to those that mainstream society despises, challenges gender roles and exploits bad taste as a device to desacralize norms Hollywood was very seriously trying to preserve. After all, according to him, “bad taste is what entertainment is all about” (Waters, 2). In the 1970s, his derivative use of codes from exploitation cinema drove him to make films that would speak to specific audiences looking for models Hollywood films failed to provide. Today, countless major studio productions lucratively exploit sex, gore, violence and trash humor to target and appeal to male teens and young adult audiences.

It has not been the intention of this article to be exhaustive regarding the influence of exploitation on Waters’s moviemaking. As an unquenchable moviegoer, his productions are full of references to the different films and filmmakers that have influenced him most. His exploitation of exploitation films, along with his access to bigger budgets and evolutions in the movie industry, partly explains how he has become an eccentric Hollywood outsider and a pop culture icon. *Hairspray* (1988), Waters’s least provocative film and a teen movie parody, was highly successful among mainstream audiences. From then on, he benefitted from much bigger budgets and started hiring Hollywood stars such as Kathleen Turner in *Serial Mom* (1994) made on a $13,000,000 budget. From the late 1980s on, his films have hardly displayed such trashy, explicit bad taste compared to his first productions that are somewhere between exploitation and underground cinema. Yet his later films might lead more people to get a taste of Waters’s politics. They continue to
question society’s norms and still display a certain amount of camp and toilet humor, intended to make the viewer laugh rather than feel sick. If these films cannot be defined as exploitation themselves, they constantly pay tribute to his influences, especially Cecil B. Demented (2000), a black comedy that celebrates underground and exploitation cinema through many characters’ obsession with cult filmmakers, including Kenneth Anger, Herschell Gordon Lewis, Rainer Werner Fassbiner and Andy Warhol.

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NOTES

1. The title of the movie refers to plastic pink lawn flamingos that were massively produced from 1957 on in the United States. “Cheap, mass-produced, artificial and unusually neon pink,” they have become an icon of pop culture and a signifier of kitsch and bad taste. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/17/opinion/17price.html?_r=0 (Accessed on January 4 th, 2016)


5. Andy Warhol named his “Superstars” using superlatives in order to exaggerate the artificiality of their stardom (Benshoff and Griffin, 2009, 193).

6. “Lacking recognizable stars, exploitation press books attempted to promote their players as new discoveries with stories like ‘First-Timers in Shock Drama’ […] and ‘Picture Boasts All-Native Cast’.” (Schaefer, 114)

7. In “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema” (1973), Laura Mulvey explores the theory of the male gaze, asserting that the viewer tends to identify with dominant male characters. Her essay
also evokes the fragmentation of women bodies, subjected to men’s voyeuristic desires, the camera itself becoming a tool used to objectify women as each body part is independently fetishized.

8. The nuclear family was highly widespread and promoted in post-World War II America as a traditional and natural model of stability (Haviland, Prins, Walrath, McBride, 2007 [2005], 220-21).

9. A modern usage of the word “queer” intends to define sexuality and sexual identities as much more complex and fluid, thus breaking with their binary categorization as solely heterosexual or homosexual (de Lauretis, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990; Duggan, 1991).

10. Lewis himself told Waters that he has been called the “King of Gore” since Blood Feast (Waters, 204).

11. Shot in 1979-1980 by Italian filmmaker Ruggero Deodato, cult horror movie Cannibal Holocaust itself was influenced by mondo films and tells the story of a documentary film crew looking for primitive, cannibalistic tribes in the Amazon Forrest.

12. On the night of August 9th, 1969, members of the “Manson family” followed the orders of their charismatic leader Charles Manson and slaughtered Sharon Tate who was eight-month pregnant and three of her friends. For further reading, see: Bugliosi, Vincent, Gentry, Curt, Helter Skelter, the True Story of the Manson Family, 1974. Many references to the murder case appear in Waters’s films. In Pink Flamingos, a graffiti on a wall downtown reads “Free Tex Watson,” one of the convicted members of the Manson family.

13. In Theories of Performance, Elizabeth Bell reminds us that this concept, originally linked with theater and the relationship between the audience and the performers, also applies to cinema and television (2008, 203).

14. A musical was even directed by Adam Shankman in 2007, based on Waters’s film and its Broadway adaptation from 2002, featuring Hollywood stars such as John Travolta and Michelle Pfeiffer.

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**ABSTRACTS**

A self-taught filmmaker working with very low budgets, fascinated with Hollywood’s glamor as well as exploitation and underground cinema, John Waters has appropriated techniques and modes of production, distribution and promotion specific to exploitation from the beginning of his career in the late 1960s. The illicit, controversial topics addressed in his early movies, traditionally brought up by exploitation in order to attract audiences whose voyeuristic desires would not be fulfilled by Hollywood’s promotion of moral standards, have predictably put him at the margins of mainstream movie culture. Many exploitation filmmakers have had a strong impact on the filmmaker’s aesthetics and politics—among them, American filmmaker Russ Meyer, a master of exploitation, whose strong female characters inspired the creation of Waters’s lead female heroines embodied by American drag queen Divine. A pioneer of the gore subgenre, Herschell Gordon Lewis and his exploitation of graphic violence and blood in order to take the horror genre one step further has influenced the gruesome aesthetics of Waters’s films. Likewise, Waters’s emulations of the mondo films, pseudo-documentaries depicting sensational topics and supposedly real barbaric human behaviors all around the world, have also contributed to gross out his audiences. This article will focus on the filmmaker’s choice to borrow specific codes and motifs of exploitation cinema, leading to the elaboration of a hybrid, trash cinema.
humorously proposing an alternative vision of the world, giving visibility to social outcasts, questioning society’s norms and debunking gender roles. His first feature-length movies, Mondo Trasho (1969), Multiple Maniacs (1970), Pink Flamingos (1972) and Female Trouble (1974), which account for the influence of exploitation on the filmmaker’s career, can be described as exploitation cinema themselves to a certain extent and assert the emergence of Waters as the “Pope of Trash.”


INDEX

Mots-clés: mauvais goût, monstres, genre, gore, icône, norme, mondo, parodie, sexploitation, transgression, trash
Keywords: bad taste, freaks, gender roles, icon, mainstream, mondo film, parody, shock value

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