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{film, digital media & electronic music}



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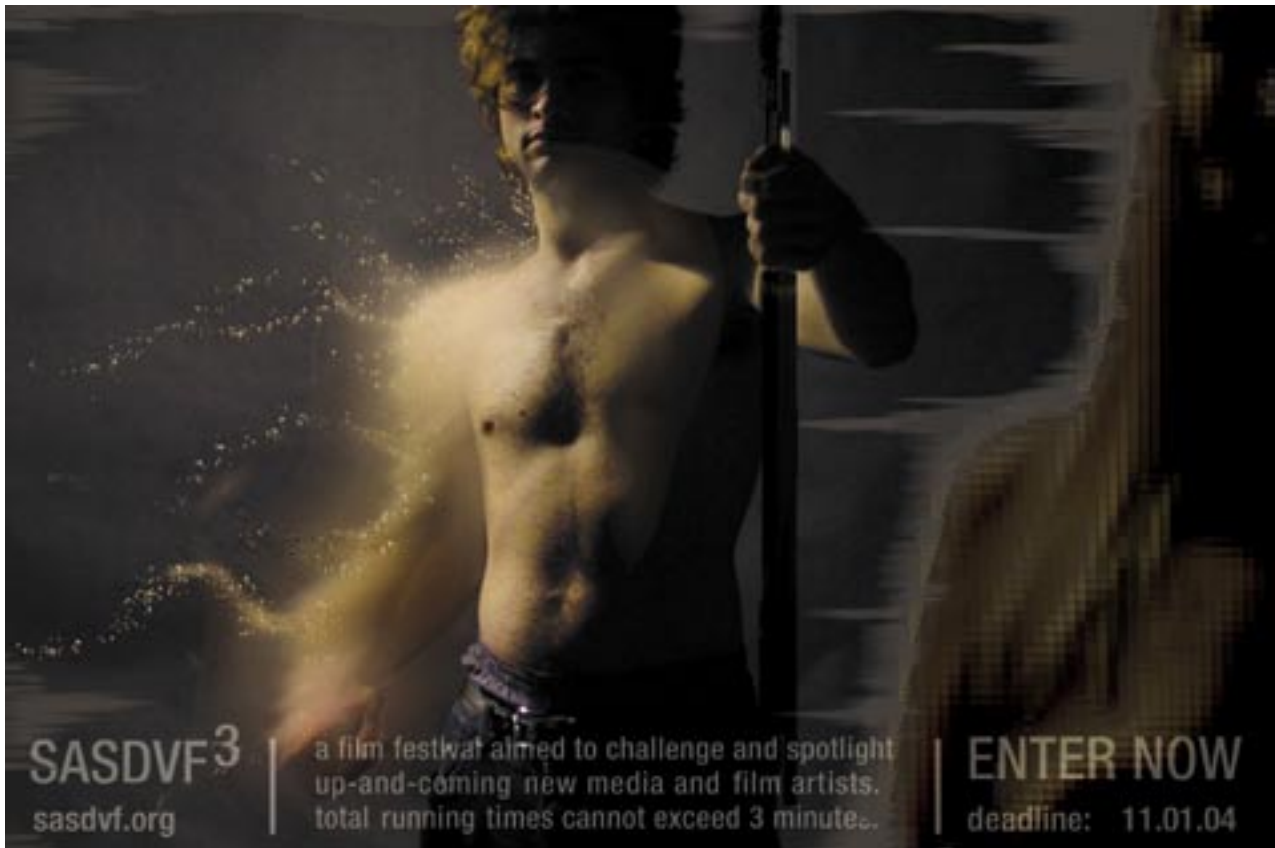
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eyecandy

Film, Digital Media, Electronic Music
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eyecandy is a quarterly, student-run film and digital media journal founded in the fall of 1999. **eyecandy** focuses on analytical, critical, and theoretical issues in film and digital media, as opposed to the more evaluative criticism found in popular press. **eyecandy** examines film and digital media in relation to other significant issues such as art form, social and cultural theory and politics. Above all, **eyecandy** is a forum for writers from all fields to discuss and raise issues about film and digital media as a popular phenomenon and area of critical study.

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John Waters
(photo courtesy of ART21)

ART:21 - ART IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY,
This is an image from Season
Two of John Waters in the Studio
where he opens program 5 with a
monologue.
<http://www.pbs.org/art21/>

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Photograph by Peter Krogh

Theory as an Act of Love

By Lucia Blanchet-Fricke

One of the greatest joys of cinema is the virtually endless multiplicity of it (in our imaginations as well as in reality). There are so many different experiences we could have. It beckons to us. And there are as many reasons to love it as there are people who do. Love is the operative word here. To love something is to try to have a relationship with it, a back and forth, a push and pull. To truly love something does not mean that we will not wrestle and fight with it sometimes, that we will always accept all of it; it just means that we will stay engaged, committed and passionate. Film theory for me is a way of enacting my love affair with the cinema. But not as a jealous lover, because I understand that other people care about it as well. I want to hear other people's thoughts and interpretations as I claim mine, *in my own voice*.

Film and theory are intertwined in an embrace and they feed off of one another. Dorothy Richardson wrote, "Down through the centuries men and some women have pathetically contemplated art as a wonder outside themselves. It is only in recent years that man has known beauty to emanate from himself, to be his gift to what he sees" (Richardson 176). What she says about art (film) can also be said of theory. We create art out of ourselves in response to the world in which we live. Don't we create theory also as a response, as part of an interlocking dialogue, an attempt to understand the world and other people? Theory is our "gift to what we see" on the screen. Because as much as film is a response to our world, it also becomes part of it.

Theoria, from the Greek, "a looking at," *theoreo*, "to see," *theoros*, "an observer." These are dynamic roots, related to vision and engagement. Film theory embodies the active dialogue between film and people; it is an open term for our hopes, prescriptions and questions regarding this medium through which we see our world reflected and refracted on the screen. What does theory do for us? Ideally, it gives us new ways of seeing, of knowing, film. It provokes dialogue. In this essay, I look to the past and the future, considering work written in the early days of cinema as a reminder of a certain unabashed and inquisitive spirit that is often lacking in "theories" that distance themselves from the passion and pleasure in thinking, in speaking about film. Film theory is the production of knowledge about film. Like the film viewing experience, it is always already collective; knowledge is produced and understood in relation to that which came before and that which is yet to come. In this dialogic creation of theory, embodied, passionate scholarship elucidates the points of enunciation in this intertextual web, and it ensures that the study of film is not only erudite but also relevant to the social world in which film is produced and received.

Theory is creative. When we create, we put part of ourselves into the production. Therefore we should not homogenize our output and squeeze our inspiration



Artwork by Tyson Dai

into one uniform mold. When I read the work of H.D. or Dorothy Richardson, I feel a connection to it and in some ways to the authors themselves. They claim the "I" and do not omit themselves from their ideas. Although written over eighty years ago, their writing *lives*. The pieces of themselves they put into these writings have been granted a kind of eternal life within the pages. The passion that they had for cinema is tangible. We can still relate to that even if we are far removed from the films they saw or the conditions of their time. This is not to say that film theory should become a cult of personality or that we should not take our work seriously. We should *make it* seriously, joyfully, ironically, wistfully, fervently, constantly: "we must work self-consciously and at the same time leave vast areas of mind and spirit free, open to idea, to illumination" (H.D. 114). In creating theory, we need to be self-conscious, both of our role in theoretical production and of our theory's relationship to the cinema we discuss.

We have seen many kinds of films emerge from the cinema. Shouldn't there also be many kinds of film theory? We should take the wisdom (learned from film) that there are numerous forms available and "inventable" and apply it to the project of theory. "Inventable" in that we create the *way* in which we theorize as much as we create the *what*. My theory does not have to be identical in shape and size as your theory. Form, content, are they different? Does it matter? There are many things to be said and we can say them in a plenitude of ways. Our own ways.

There are indeed many different kinds of films, but it is also important to think about how there are many different uses for films. For what is the point of a film (or anything) if no one engages with it? A film completes its purpose when an audience views it and that audience integrates it into their lives. What are

the functions of film? "School, salon, brothel, bethel, newspaper, art science, religion, philosophy, commerce, sport, adventure; flashes of beauty of all sorts. The only anything and everything. And here we all are, as never before. What will it do with us?" (Richardson 171) Dorothy Richardson asked what film will do with us; I think it is also important for us to ask what we will do with film. Invariably, we will not always do the same thing with it, but that is not the point. The point is that we will fully engage with it, in complex and multifaceted ways. That's theory.

The cinema is about people. Even when the express focus of an individual film is on birds, it is not *for* the birds. Always are we witnessing the curiosity, obsessions or passing fancies of people, both the producers and the viewers. People make films to be seen and understood by other people. Cinema, as much as it is also a technical and economic process, is made up of the dreams, ideas and perceptions of human beings. It then reflects onto more human beings, catalyzing further thought. When we write film theory, we can never forget about the living people who interact with a film, make it come alive in their minds, for "the onlooker is part of the spectacle" (Richardson 176). There is no "text" in isolation, certainly not the theoretical text...

This thing that we call "theory" touches and merges with film. It cannot be entirely separate as both are constantly bringing something new into the world. We make films to project our ideas, feelings and impressions up onto a screen for others to see and hear and then we make sense of them in our minds and on paper. Both actions affect the world as long as people are watching, listening and reading. Neither the production of a film or the production of theory exists in a vacuum. They interact with one another reciprocally and also with the myriad other methods people have for understanding and experiencing the world: art, literature, poetry, music, science, etc. So it is not a surprise that the poet H.D. used lyrical phrases and plentiful adjectives to express her theory of film, or that the novelist Dorothy Richardson told stories about little boys sitting in the front rows and loud women laughing and chatting in the theater. These things don't need to be separate; "theory" does not need to live isolated in a fortress, looking down.

We do not need to be afraid of theory. And in turn theory should not be frightening. But it can and will be rigorous. Rigorous in that we will throw our hearts and our energies into it willingly (it will not be boring). We will work (play) hard with it.

We will vigilantly interrogate and investigate the dark corners where meaning is unclear. We will thoroughly unpack what we find to be new and always question that which seems suspect, disturbing, or

simply taken for granted. For if the cinema is made by, for and out of human beings, who are part of social and political structures, then we know that the cinema is also complicit, enmeshed in these human formations. In the "movies" we can find clues, patterns, and knowledge about people, how they tick, what they want. Fueled by our passion for the cinema (and for thinking), we can unlock mysteries.

This love affair that we, through theory, are having with cinema is not static or one-sided. It needs us to care about it, to take it apart and put it back together again, to give it new meanings, to give it three-dimensional life – outside of the theater, outside of the television. There are questions, encoded within film, which we raise to the light through our investigations. We respond with more questions, digging deeper. There will never be one answer, and we wouldn't want there to be. This exchange of questions, this flow of ideas and passion running through cinema keeps it constantly up to date, relevant and alive. Theory is how we make sense of the cinema, how we make sense of ourselves, how we make sense of our relationship with the cinema. My theory is my gift to the cinema, an infusion of life, freely given.

H.D. "Restraint" Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism. Eds. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1998. 110-114.

Richardson, Dorothy. "Continuous Performance" Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism. Eds. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1998. 170-171, 174-176.



Caught in the Spider's Webs

By Elizabeth Ambrose



Pumping iron in *Metropolis*.

Spiders are really interesting little creatures. They weave intricate lairs and lie in wait for their dinners to come along. These lairs can be deviously simple or truly complex, from a sticky lure to a multilayered web. People weave webs to survive as well, but to survive socially rather than hunting for food. These people weave their layers of plans around other individuals' plans, creating a vast, complex web of relationships between people. Nowhere are there more of these webs than in an urban space, and nowhere in film do more of these webs of relationships intersect and interact than in the films of Fritz Lang. Lang, one of the most well-known directors of silent films in the 1920's, maintained an interest in these social webs and even made a two part film titled *The Spiders* in 1919. The films of Fritz Lang feature different visions of modern urban life but in many of these films, this space is divided and dissected into individuals and groups manipulating other individuals and groups for good and for ill.

Metropolis is one of the best known of Lang's films. It begins introducing Johan Fredersen, who runs the futuristic city from a high remote view, and the workers who live underground. His son Freder has an encounter with Maria, who is acting as teacher and pacifist prophet to the workers. Freder falls in love with Maria. Fredersen seeks to discredit Maria and hires Rotwang, a mad scientist, to create a robot double of Maria to do his bidding, while the real Maria is held captive. Freder attempts to free Maria while the robot incites the workers to riot and destroy Fredersen's main factory. The destruction of the "Heart Machine" in Fredersen's factory causes the workers' quarters to become flooded and Maria and Freder rush to save the workers' children. Meanwhile the workers realize that they have been duped and go hunting the robot Maria, who they believe tricked them. At the end of their chase they catch the robot and destroy it while Rotwang chases the real Maria and fights with Freder. Rotwang is killed and the film ends with Freder acting as mediator between his father and the workers.

M, Lang's first sound film, is about the hunt for Hans

Beckert, an insane child killer. The criminal organizations mobilize to find Beckert themselves, catch him and put him on trial in front of a kangaroo court. The police arrive in time to save Beckert from the mob. They arrest everyone and the film ends with three women mourning their dead children as Beckert is being sentenced "legitimate" court.

Metropolis and *M* use their settings to draw attention to the machinations of the characters through dialogue, choreography and voiceovers. Both films have individuals and groups thinking up and carrying out schemes for various reasons. For film theorist Thomas Elsaesser, "The difficult delights of [Lang's] work are that, strictly speaking, there never seems to be a 'ground,' a solid world from which the realm of appearances might be confidently asserted to be either true or false" (Elsaesser 153). All of this scheming creates a narrative environment that is constantly changing to adapt to the new set of circumstances with the results of each plan.

In *Metropolis*, Maria's image is often the focal point of mass attention. Maria's possession of her own image becomes blurred with the introduction of the robot. In the beginning, this attention is quiet, reverent and receptive to her pleas. Later the attention is focused in a destructive manner by the robot wearing Maria's image. The mob's attention towards Maria then becomes destructive as a result of the robot's interference. The quality of the attention that the masses give Maria changes with the interference and intersection of two different objectives, making it difficult to determine whose influence counts for more. While the robot and her creator certainly have a noticeable effect upon the city, Maria's preaching acted as a passive, expressive outlet for the city workers and may have prevented prior wholesale rebellions from happening. The difference in Maria's manipulations and the robot's actions for Rotwang is shown in the outward reactions and attentions of the masses. Maria's webs of communication are usurped and twisted by the sudden interference of Fredersen's and Rotwang's networks of surveillance and wrested away from equilibrium and relative peace.

M uses the voiceover to guide the viewer through a montage of people using technology and detective work to track, and catch, a child killer. The voiceover of the police inspector paired with the actions of people carrying out the inspector's instructions gives a visual feeling of progress. In the film's narrative reality, the effort is too late and ineffective, but the viewer is misled by the voiceover and image. The brisk pace of the editing and the bustling activity of the inspectors during the voiceover indicate otherwise. The sequence manipulates the viewer into thinking that the detectives are making progress in their manhunt. Actually, the police's efforts prod the criminal organizations into launching their own hunt for Hans Beckert. It eventually gets the criminal organizations to do the surveillance work for the police and for the overall good of society. The criminals are a mob, albeit a better organized one than the masses in *Metropolis*, but they are still denied the aural authority of playing out an acceptable trial. This convergence and metamorphosis of interests destabilizes the foundations of the social world created on the screen. Lang ensures that neither organization, legal or criminal, is entirely effective by themselves, creating a web of

mutual gain and equilibrium.

Metropolis and *M* both use graphic motifs to illustrate a character's interior state or exhibit a character trait that becomes more pronounced with outside manipulation. *Metropolis* depicts Maria pinned by a spotlight in a dark cavern when she is caught by Rotwang. The camera's point of view mirrors that of the mad scientist and puts the viewer in Rotwang's position of visual power over Maria. He has chased her through the web of tunnels underneath the city and has now overtaken her and her social networks. *M* illustrates the chase and capture of Hans Beckert in the enclosed space of the warehouse with converging lines and parallel editing to place our sympathies with Beckert as he tries to avoid capture by the crime-lords of the city. The viewer watches as criminal agents of the city corner Beckert in a street intersection. Beckert is caught in the middle of his pursuers, very much the fly caught in the spider's web. While Beckert hides in the warehouse, he is shown with linear shadows across his face, further indicating that he is trapped with no escape. Now he is fully caught by a web of opposing forces laid against him.

Similarly, *M* and *Metropolis* have at least one character that is permanently scarred by the manipulation and counter-manipulations of everything around them. In all of these films, this aspect of expressionism is centered on someone or something that has gone out of control and is wreaking havoc. The things that go out of control often inhabit a borderline space where they are manipulated or hunted from both sides of their existence. Another person or event causes the person or thing to go haywire from its originally structured existence and they become a catalyst for everything else in the film. In the case of *M*, it is Hans Beckert who is out of sync with the machinations of both legitimate and illegitimate society. Because Beckert cannot fit in, he must be stopped, caught in the high angle camera shot as the manhunt closes in on him. In *Metropolis*, Rotwang's house is the only two story building in a city of skyscrapers. Rotwang also moves between high places and low places as much as either Freder or Maria. Rotwang's counter-plan goes beyond Fredersen's wishes to ruin Maria through the guise of the robot. These rogue members of society are caught, conspired against and used by society, and strengthen society's webs by the attempts to break those networks.

Authority manipulates its subordinates in *M* and *Metropolis* through various forms of surveillance. The power figures in *Metropolis* and *M* use investigative techniques and technologies in very deliberate ways to serve their own ends. The criminal mob and Fredersen act the part of the detective to figure out what's going on. According to film historian Tom Gunning,

"Simultaneously reflecting a positivist belief in the accessibility of knowledge through close and systematic observation, and new systems of social control through a pan-optic system of surveillance, the detective sketches the ideology of modernity until it breaks into a violent confrontation and the repression upon which order is founded becomes explicit" (Gunning 94). The criminal organization in *M* and Fredersen in *Metropolis* both exercise their control over their domains through surveillance and manipulation of their personnel resources. Fredersen has spies to do his bidding and a network of video phones by which to keep tabs on any potential uprising by the workers.



Peter Lorre in Fritz Lang's *M*.

In *M*, the crime lords mobilize the Beggar's Guild to act as eyes and ears to keep watch for anybody who might be the murderer. This is visually heightened by extreme high angle camera shots and a shot with the camera looking at Beckert through a hedge. In both cases, the systems of surveillance work as a way to manipulate the police in *M* and the workers in *Metropolis*. Lack of sufficient surveillance is blamed for the murders in *M*, both of Hans Beckert and of the children he killed. Surveillance is a means of communication in these films as well as a visual representation of the webs of connections the characters have.

Metropolis and *M* both present a modern city as a collection of manipulations that intersect, interact and edge towards madness. Like a spider casting a gossamer web, groups and individuals participate in a complex network of surveillance to prevent any and all from upsetting and breaking the strands of the web which cocoons them and society at large. We weave our own networks of contacts and observation for our own benefit and interact with the schemes of others on a daily basis. We are caught in these everyday webs and are expected to participate in the process of unraveling and reweaving them to keep in balance with all the other spiders out there.

Elsaesser, Thomas. *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

Gunning, Thomas. *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*. London: British Film Institute, 2000.

Gays on Display

By Ellie Biddle

"Throw out your hands, stick out your tush, go on ahead, give it a push, you'll be surprised you're doing the French mistake, Voila!"

-Buddy's Singers in *Blazing Saddles* (1974)

Representations of non-heteronormative sexuality can be seen in many different types of contemporary films, from dramatic cinematic epics based on the life of a murdered transgender person, to the "stereotypical flamer" as exemplified by the feminine male singers or "ladies" as Buddy (Dom DeLuise) calls them in *Blazing Saddles*. One function of this "gayness" I wish to examine more closely is related to Buddy's aforementioned singers: the gay character as comic relief. From the early cinema to today, regardless how much has changed in terms of visibility, one thing is certain: the use of queer characters as the scapegoat, the fallback, or the butt of the joke has been consistent within mainstream dominant cinema.

I will start by examining early filmic representation of the "sissy" character, looking at how the character type became prevalent in early cinema and has retained its position in mainstream cinema. Two films that specifically exhibit the transformation of this character archetype are *Broadway Melody of 1933* (1933) and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997). This article will then move onto the broader subject (or subjectivity) of the gay character as comic relief and the implications of such characters functioning as a source of laughs simply by virtue of being gay and on display. I will look at the "exhibition" of gay characters in terms of more contemporary films, such as *Saving Silverman* (2000), and other films of the same general time period. For the purposes of this article, I will move away from



Jack Black and Steve Zahn in *Saving Silverman*.

the issue of "positive" or "negative" implications and focus on *how* the characters are depicted as the "comic relief."

The "sissy" character has appeared since the early days of cinema. In general, one can define the sissy character as a secondary or "extra" within a film - someone whose presence is not extremely needed or deeply missed, and mostly there for a good laugh. The sissy of the late 1920's and 1930's appeared primarily in musicals, which were at that time, analogous (in popularity) to the comedies of today. The sissy characters of the musicals were used to alleviate tension from any drama that might be occurring at that moment. Typically, they were middle-aged males with extreme feminine mannerisms, a keen fashion sense, and ambiguous sexuality. Because of the Motion Picture Production Code's (a pre-rating self-censorship system for films) presence during that era, regulations were put on films to cover any elements deemed unacceptable, including "sexual perversion" (the category that included homosexuality). In *The Broadway Melody of 1933*, the *un-named, un-credited* secondary character referred to as the "costume designer" only arrives when there is tension among the characters. Whether the tension comes from being stressed out about a play or the completion of a certain costume, the designer always has a snappy comment ready to deliver to 1) take the tension off the stressed main performers and 2) deliver the comment in a effeminate way, allowing a good laugh for the audience. By not clearly identifying the character's sexuality, *Melody* avoids giving the designer visibility as a queer character. Such "masking" of the sissy was a very prominent characteristic of early cinema because of the Code.

In more recent times, even with more widespread acceptance of the homosexual (or at least acknowledgment of a strong homosexual presence in society), and even with the dissolution of the Production Code, films still have looked to the sissy of yesteryear. However, the sissy has been given some alterations. The 1990's showed the persistent popularity of the sissy, mostly due to high audience numbers attending films in which there was a gay character. A key thing to note is that the sissy and other queer characters in both recent and earlier cinema is that the queer characters are used for the entertainment of a presumed straight spectator, hence the high audience numbers.

My example for the films of today shines brighter than a flame with Rupert Everett's character, George, in *My Best Friend's Wedding*. George seems to have almost all the same qualities as the costume designer from *Melody*, with his over-the-top feminine mannerisms and foppish gestures of the hands and wrists. These behaviors are only shown when his character isn't masquerading as straight. This adds to the comic relief aspect of the sissy by showing a gay man portray

a straight man; it's funny because it calls attention to his other flamboyant characteristics that ultimately stick out like a sore thumb. Other sissy qualities include his keen fashion sense, his impeccable grooming and his propensity to comment on other characters' clothing, fitting the stereotype that only a gay man would do such things. His snappy comments create laughs that take the edge off of the lead character's heartbreak in the film. George's relationship to Julianne (Julia Roberts) shows how a queer character functions to entertain a presumed straight spectator in the way that he is there for Julianne; to console, entertain and serve the straight character (the viewer's proxy). Something worthy of mention here is that the more recent films openly acknowledge the gayness of their sissy characters. In *Melody*, the early sissy character was asexual - that is, he was never deliberately referred to as gay. In the case of Everett's character, the main source of comic relief and entertainment is because of his character's visible gayness.

In the 1990's and 2000's, a new incarnation of the gay comic relief character emerged, though one still open to critique. These films "other" (but do not openly revile) the queer character; they accept this character on the surface, but the character is still marginalized. In films such as *Wayne's World 2* (1993), the main characters are chased into a gay male biker bar, full of middle-aged men clad in tight black leather. Wayne and Garth are looked upon with objectifying eyes, as they walk towards the closest exit, the stage, where they perform a rendition of the Village People's "YMCA" (already a stereotyped gay song). The bar and its patrons are put on display for a predominantly and presumably straight audience. The creation of this awkward situation provides the audience with yet another laugh from the gays on display. Another more recent example of the "gay bar scene" is in *American Wedding* (2003), where the character Steve Stiffler (Seann William Scott) has a "dance off" with a gay man to gain the respect of the people in the bar. This time the gay bar is more contemporary, populated with a range of queer characters but still resorting to hackneyed caricatures of lisping gay men, man-hating butch dykes, and burly middle-aged men. Right off the bat, the gay bar is yet again the object of exploitation, submitting the queer characters to the criticizing and humiliating gaze of a straight spectator. Of course, to maintain his power, the Stiffler character comes out victorious with both his masculinity intact and the respect of the homosexuals at the bar, all while making a laughing stock of the homosexuals present, by "out-gaying" the gay characters.

Another recent representation of gayness on display is in the film *Saving Silverman* with the character JD, played by comedian Jack Black. When JD comes out near the end of the film, his excessively performed gayness creates an awkward interaction with the straight characters. His gayness is displayed as the principle source of laughter because of how he comes out: he says it bluntly, catching the other characters off

guard. Because of the reaction of the others, he is subsequently put on display for the audience. He says he's gay almost every chance he gets, completely out of context, just adding to the discomfort produced by his gayness. The JD character is seen as an excessive individual, one that parades his homosexuality. This puts the straight spectator in a position of judgment over the queer characters, who themselves are confined to stereotypes that flaunt sexuality.

One thing that the representations cited above have in common is the creation and/or use of stereotypes of queer people. This creates the false idea that certain mannerisms (i.e., lisps, etc.) are exhibited by *all* queer people, and that the purpose of homosexuality in cinema is to be on display for the entertainment of the predominantly heterosexual population. From the sissy to the contemporary comic-relief gay character, these characters are presented in ways that reinforce and create stereotypes of the queer community. It is indefensible that Hollywood finds profit in the exploitation of homosexuals and situates queer people as a source of laughter and an object of exploitation for a straight spectator at the expense of real narrative significance .

John Waters: Latterday Warhol or Just a Jackass?

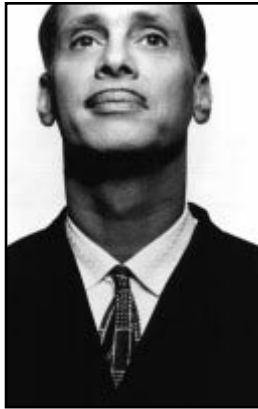
By Summer Sullivan

The climax of John Waters' cult classic, *Pink Flamingos*, reveals a three hundred pound drag queen eating dog shit. Do I have your attention? Are you disgusted, yet interested, in seeing such a spectacle? I know I was oddly compelled to see what my peers described to me as a repulsive must see – and that's exactly what John Waters wants. He wants to be the one to show you the most disgusting thing you've ever seen. He is the king of trashy, campy movies. *Jackass* and *South Park* have nothing on *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*, and these films were made over twenty years earlier. Right about now you may be asking yourself: who cares? Why isn't she writing about quality cinema? Well that's just the thing. John Waters gets me thinking about the boundaries we place on cinema. Waters' early films defy what is considered tasteful and artistic. Many critics thought these films were horrible and a waste of time. However, there were also reviews that praised Waters and referred to his style as avant-garde and comparable to Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali.

There is a fine line between what is avant-garde and what is just crap, and John Waters perpetually teeters back and forth on that line. For example, his outright defiance to conform to traditional notions of how "quality" films are made and what they are about is the ultimate "fuck you" to Hollywood cinema, allowing Waters to be classified as a revolutionary artist. Yet his subject matter and technique also operate on an adolescent level, fulfilling audience desire to see the most extraordinary taboos and disgusting things imaginable. Thus his films at times seem more like a circus freak show than art. I find merit in both of these viewpoints and intend to explore the overlapping space in between the avant-garde and distastefulness that Waters occupies.

John Waters was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, and consequently, that is where all of his films take place. Waters made several shockingly trashy low budget films with the aid of some friends and his star performer: the three-hundred-pound drag queen he christened Divine. His first film to get a distribution deal was *Pink Flamingos* (1972). In the film, Divine and her incestuous, deranged family compete with a couple who sells kidnapped women's babies for the title of the "Filthiest People Alive."

At a time when studios were releasing big blockbusters like *Star Wars* and *The Godfather* and saturation advertising came into full force, *Pink Flamingos* reared its head with a \$10,000 budget, little to no advertising, and an unknown director. The film was a success largely through word of mouth and bad reviews. People wanted to tell their friends that they had seen something shocking and repulsive. As Waters stated in an interview, "I've always tried to please and satisfy an audience who thinks they've seen everything. I try to force them to laugh



at their own ability to be shocked by something." He followed *Pink Flamingos* with a few other equally trashy films but the toned-down ultra campy *Hairspray* (1988) was his crossover into the mainstream. Waters continues to make more mainstream films with bigger stars and budgets, but they don't lack campy, quirky sensibilities; they just won't make you want to vomit.

However, in this article, I am concerned with Waters' early work – specifically, *Pink Flamingos*, because the film not only launched his career, but also exhibits the dichotomy that I am attempting to explore between the avant-garde and crap. Personally, after watching *Pink Flamingos*, I was disgusted and I wasn't sure if I liked the film, but it got me thinking and questioning the standard film aesthetic and the importance of artists who forge radical new ground.

Waters' films definitely offer something new; specifically a low-budget, campy, white-trash aesthetic and a cinematic language of bile, mucus and feces. He does not, however, stay within the borders of Hollywood cinema or "quality" art. Waters' early films are not traditionally beautiful, nor are they meant to be. What Waters brings to mainstream cinema is a challenge to the notion of good taste. He presents an alternate aesthetic: that of raw guerilla filmmaking, complete with non-professional actors and a home-edited print. Quality cinema seems to be largely defined by how much money is spent on the film. With a budget of \$10,000, it seems improbable that *Pink Flamingos* could ever be considered a quality film regardless of its content.

Waters' characters are considered avant-garde because of their "trashy" tendencies. They are often surrounded by actual refuse, live in poor conditions and are considered by many to be actual human waste. As an audience, we are not used to seeing obese drag queens that live in trailer parks and want to be the filthiest people alive. We normally see "pretty" characters that avoid or aspire to leave these conditions. Waters' characters, however, wallow in their filth. They roll around in it like pigs in the mud and they won't stop until they are absolutely dripping and oozing with muck.

Yes, Waters is doing something different, but that does not necessarily qualify it as artistic. What is deemed artistic or not is often decided by those in the high-brow art community. As Waters writes in his book *Shock Value*, "to understand bad taste one must have very good taste." What Waters is referring to is the high-brow sensibility that allows for a distinction between what is really just *bad* non-artistic work and what is *good* bad taste. *Good* bad taste is a work that the art community deems socially relevant and artistic, and that also utilizes a low-brow sentiment. To many, this distinction may seem very arbitrary

and of course, not all critics agree. For example, consider the controversy that surrounded avant-garde artist Damien Hirst's decomposing bullhead with maggots enclosed in glass.

When deciding if an individual's work is avant-garde or not, previous works or artistic influences and educational background are called into question. For example, Marcel Duchamp was already an established artist when he displayed a found urinal in a museum. The urinal, like *Pink Flamingos*, was banned at first and later critically acclaimed as revolutionary. Duchamp's status as a respected and educated artist allowed the urinal to be validated as high art. Because Waters claimed to be influenced by avant-garde film artists and theorists like Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage, the art community is more willing to accept him. Because Waters loves "quality artistic" cinema and not just *bad* B films, his work is more easily accepted as *good* bad taste. Waters also thoroughly enjoys art exhibitions and is currently showing photographs at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York.

Like Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock, Waters is pushing the limits of what can be considered artistic expression. These abstract expressionist painters have led many people to question their legitimacy as artists because their work may not seem to utilize any special skill or talent. A similar claim could be made about Waters' filmmaking. The fact that legitimacy is questioned and a definition of what is "artistic" is debated proves that Waters' films are thought-provoking and interesting enough to challenge viewer assumptions, which is an essential part of being an avant-garde artist.

When watching *Pink Flamingos*, I had to turn away from the screen several times and I felt guilty for laughing at some of the sick jokes. But I kept watching because I wanted to see how the next scene would top the last. It's similar to when I watch the show *Jackass*, which consists of several guys doing dangerous, asinine and disgusting stunts. However, *Jackass* is definitely considered *bad* bad taste. This is primarily because *Jackass* does not claim to be influenced by, or want to be, associated with the avant-garde or art in general. Instead, *Jackass'* culture is that of skateboarding and debauchery. Yet most of the film reviews for *Jackass: the Movie* use John Waters or *Pink Flamingos* as a basis for comparison. Comparing Waters to *Jackass* is as legitimate as comparisons to Rothko and Pollock. *Pink Flamingos* and *Jackass* are both like car wrecks on the side of the road that you can't stop staring at; they are compelling because they are spectacles, not because they are artistic. *Jackass* and *Pink Flamingos* are also both like circus freak shows, playing on our desires to be shocked at the breaking of social taboos, especially those involving bodily excrement.

When New Line Cinema distributed *Pink Flamingos*, they released an unusual trailer: one with no scenes from the film, just audience reactions cut with review quotes on a black screen. It begins with laughter and the black screen, on which appears

the words, "What are these people laughing at?" Immediately the trailer wants us to desire to be in on the joke, to be one of the people who have witnessed such a spectacle. We then see audience members saying how funny and also how disgusting the film was, cut with similar review quotations. This trailer plays on the hip aspect of seeing the film; it makes it seem like a circus freak show; something so outrageous you have to see it to believe it and to brag to all your friends. Waters' characters often seem like the freaks at the circus. Not only do they look odd, but they also do outrageous stunts.

Some reviewers believe *Jackass* has surpassed Waters in gross out shock value, while others claim *Jackass* could never live up to Waters and *Pink Flamingos*. Waters is a self-proclaimed fan of *Jackass* and has said that the show has stolen the mantle from him. In fact, the two worlds will soon collide because Johnny Knoxville (star of *Jackass*) will be starring in Waters' new film, *A Dirty Shame*.

John Waters is so easily compared to both avant-garde artists and low-brow *bad* bad taste that often the distinction is blurred. When deciphering what is *good* bad taste, frequently the context or intention of the work plays a bigger factor than the actual work itself. Questioning how much validity the boundaries of good and bad taste have on the classifications of John Waters work allows us to better see that often there is no clear boundary or distinction between the avant-garde and crap. Whether Waters is a circus master at a freak show or a revolutionary artist, he keeps trying to shock and entertain us, and I for one will always be interested in his ability to do so.



Divine going for the 'natural look' in a scene from *Pink Flamingos*.

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