



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Heteronormative Villains and Queer Heroes

Queer Representation in the Films of John Waters

B.A. Essay

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore the queer representation in the films of director/screenwriter John Waters. His entire feature-length filmography is discussed and elements, such as dialogue, characters, themes, acting styles and references, with queer intent, whether they be overt or subtle, are brought to light. The aim is to show how queer representation was depicted in his films while working as an independent filmmaker, outside the studio system, and how that representation went through a transformation once Waters began working within the studio system. Therefore, the films are split into two groups: the pre-studio films (from 1969's *Mondo Trasho* to 1977's *Desperate Living*) and the in-studio films (from 1981's *Polyester* to 2004's *A Dirty Shame*). The films, being examined both as stand-alone films and in comparison and contrast to other films within Waters' filmography, are placed in chronological order, and the queer representation of each film is examined. It is evident that Waters' films changed when Hollywood studios began funding them, as he had to follow and respect the studio's rules and guidelines. Within the studio system, Waters had to abandon his main-theme of mocking the bourgeois, as the films now had to appeal to a mainstream audience, rather than the queer and hippie audience of his earlier films. By adapting to the mainstream, the queer representation of Waters' films underwent a change, going from an obviously queer visual style to a more coded representation. Having been crass, exaggerated and sometimes vulgar, Waters' queer representation became more subtle and restrained, while still managing to keep some of its edge.

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1. Introduction

This essay looks at the films of John Waters, and their representation of queerness. It first examines his early underground films—*Mondo Trasho* (1969), *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974) and *Desperate Living* (1977)—and explores their visual representation of queer people and queer themes. It then examines Waters' later films—*Polyester* (1981), *Hairspray* (1988), *Cry-Baby* (1990), *Serial Mom* (1994), *Pecker* (1998), *Cecil B. DeMented* (2000) and *A Dirty Shame* (2004)—produced within the studio system for a mainstream audience, to determine how the mode of representing the queer changed within this new environment. Going through these films, one-by-one, in chronological order, shows how Waters' queer representation evolved and changed through the years. While it does change somewhat from film to film, the biggest change comes when Waters integrates into the studio system by becoming a studio director.

John Waters represents heteronormative bourgeois lifestyle as negative and, at times, evil. Conversely, his heroes are freaks and queers, people who oppose traditional sexual and social “normality” and accept their own so-called deviations as beautiful. Having said that, Waters' first two films within the studio-system, *Polyester* and *Hairspray*, may be regarded as forming an interim stage. Evolving from the underground into the studio-system, where many rules have to be obeyed, these two films are more cautious than his previous works, both of them ending with a very middle-class conquest of good over evil. However, as soon as Waters began to find his way in mainstream movie-making, he produced his third studio film *Cry-Baby*, where he returns to depicting the queer and delinquent as heroic and the heteronormative “squares” as the villains of the film. By comparing his early, pre-studio, films to his later films filmed within the studio system, and looking at the differences of queer representation, the essay shows how Waters managed to represent queerness with atmosphere and attitude through the separate ways of underground and studio cinema.

2. John Waters, Queer Theory and the Underground

While directors such as George Cukor and Dorothy Arzner are known for portraying homosexual sensibility through a coded lens on the big screen (Benshoff 19), John Waters has a broader “queer”¹ sensibility, featuring “weirdos, misfits, and rejects of every stripe” such as “warty lesbians” and “psychopathic drag queens” in his films (Waters & Egan 2011, 94). As a child, Waters was especially interested in the works of Tennessee Williams, particularly because they were full of sexual ambiguity. A similar ambiguity can be seen all throughout Waters’ films, thus installing a queer sensibility (Waters 2010, 6-7).

Waters’ celebrity and notoriety both derive from his usage of shock humour and “bad taste,” which have also prompted a number of appellations from the critics, such as the “Pope of Trash” (Varner 2004, 42), “Sultan of Sleaze,” “Baron of Bad Taste,” and the “Prince of Puke” (Ehrhardt 10). Far from shying away from such titles, Waters relishes them and has even fantasised about founding his own cult and filth movement with himself as the leader, preaching to his “saints of sordidness” (Waters 2010, 274). He has also stated that he has “no desire to assimilate” to the middle-class and that neither should his fans; rather than trying to escape it, they should embrace “delicious insanity” (Waters 2010, 164). According to Walter Metz, Waters has a “conscious desire to rescue “abnormals” (or “freaks,” as they often refer to themselves in his films), and to expose the more serious abnormality of typical, bourgeois American life” (Gerstner 163). Hence, his films “produce a queering of the American family that is consistent [...] depicting the perversity of heterosexuality” (ibid.) using the “techniques of the underground cinema to tell coherent and relevant stories about the American nuclear family’s dysfunctionality” (161).

Before delving into the films of John Waters, it is important to distinguish between what he and Nick Salvato have referred to as “good bad taste” and “bad bad taste.” Apparently, while “bad bad taste” uses “crudity, vulgarity, and obscenity” randomly and with a “lack [of] self-consciousness” (Salvato 639), “good bad taste” (in which Waters specialises), “can be creatively nauseating but must, at the same time, appeal to [an] especially twisted sense of humor, which is anything but universal” (Waters 2005, 2). With his understanding of bad taste, Waters uses it in his films to

¹ Definition below.

present a “self-aware meditation on what it means, at our historical moment, to be disgusted or disgusting” (Salvato 639). Ultimately, Waters “makes films about trash, and about people who embrace it because society makes them feel like trash” (Chute 32).

According to Robert Maier (Waters’ long-time friend and associate), Waters “hungered for the edgy elements of the gay community.” He “wanted to be an outsider—a dangerous gay artist” and found “secretive queers who ran hair salons and cooked fondue dinners for gay friends” too normal (Ch. 1²). He longed for the company of queers unafraid to push boundaries, and formed his family of the Dreamlanders (“as they were known for being part of John’s Dreamland Productions”) (Ch. 2). Starting at the bottom, making underground movies with almost no money to his name, Waters used his friends as a reoccurring cast. This group, which originally consisted of Harris Glenn Milstead, a 300-pound drag queen who later took on the name Divine, David Lochary, Mink Stole, Edith Massey, Cookie Mueller and Mary Vivian Pearce, would eventually become known as The Dreamlanders (ibid.).

The foundation of the Gay Liberation movement in the 1960s was partly precipitated by anger over the heterosexual dominance of cultural acceptability. The first gay liberationists opted for challenging “conventional knowledge about such matters as gendered behaviour, monogamy and the sanctity of the law,” instead of merely “representing themselves as being just like heterosexuals except in their sexual object choice,” which had been a popular image used by other gay movements at the time (Jagose 31). This newfound *queer* sensibility can be seen throughout the films of John Waters, where he repeats his hatred of clichés about homosexuality alongside his personal mantra, “gay is not enough” (Waters 2010, 37). Indeed, Waters uses his films as a platform for this mantra, swerving away from the image of the 1970s “gay identity.” Not wanting to participate in the “illusion of cohesive group identity,” he was ahead of his time in acknowledging that “the sense of unity and sameness” of the 1970s gay identity was not a fixed truth, but necessary at the time in “order to advance a [social group’s] political programme” (Burtson & Richardson 38). Wanting to “overthrow the social institutions which marginalised and pathologised homosexuality,”

² An e-book which has been cited in accordance to the mla.org citation handbook (http://www.mla.org/style/handbook_faq/cite_an_ebook).

he, like the gay liberationists, represented homosexuality as more than just being gay, but as a “new unmediated sexuality for all people” (Jagose 37). Instead of representing and identifying “gay” people, Waters embraced all queer sexuality and showed it by contrasting it to the bourgeoisie values of heterosexual living.

Another element of Waters’ queer aesthetic is the use of deliberate camp. According to Jack Babuscio, the term “camp” describes “those elements in a person, situation, or activity which express, or are created by, a gay sensibility” and that such a sensibility is a “creative energy reflecting a consciousness” that differs from the mainstream and is born of social oppression (Benshoff 121-2). Such sensibility can be clearly seen in all of John Waters’ early films, although they also have a twist of “trash” running through them. Unlike camp, “trash” does not rely “on a source text to parody,” and “flouts a community's standards by flaunting whatever that community considers crude, vulgar, or obscene” (Cohan 8). This “trash” aesthetic is a mutation of mass camp, “describing the hip consumption of throwaway commodity culture from the position of self-conscious alienation which disavows a guilty pleasure while indulging in it” (ibid.). Waters thus combines the parody of deliberate camp and the original and stylish aesthetic of “bad taste” and “trash” (Salvato 639-40).

3. The Visual Representation of the Queer in Waters' Pre-Studio Films

In Waters' early, pre-studio, films, almost every scene is queered. With his use of a deliberately camp acting style and his departure from bourgeois norms as well as from perceived homosexual norms, Waters creates his own world through the lens of queer theory. His early films all have the same theme of an “aberrant family being preferable to the seemingly normal bourgeois” families (Gerstner 166). This view of abandoning the accepted standard is reflected in queer theory, which aims to “articulate a radical questioning of a social and cultural norm” (Turcotte 119).

In his first feature film, *Mondo Trasho* (1969), Waters uses a constant stream of pop music as the soundtrack, reminiscent of the experimental *Scorpio Rising* (1964), which was released only five years earlier and set out to introduce queer visibility and “queering iconic masculinity” (Strub 384). Waters has admitted that *Scorpio Rising* “was a huge influence,” and it can be seen in his early short films (as well as in *Mondo Trasho*) that have little or no dialogue and which employ musical fragments as narration (Waters & Egan 2011, 10). *Mondo Trasho* also references the classic *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) which has since been heavily associated with queer culture, due to many separate factors that work together to make the film undoubtedly queer. One such factor is the narrative of “leaving conventional models of domesticity and creating alternate families and alternate homes” (Cohan & Hark 274), which is a narrative often used by Waters. The connection to *The Wizard of Oz* in *Mondo Trasho* can first be seen as the song “We’re off to see the Wizard” is played while the character of Divine is being dragged into an insane asylum. Perhaps this is because Divine’s character belongs there, with the other unaccepted freaks—“her” queer family of misfits.

Then at the end of *Mondo Trasho*, we can see the protagonist, Bombshell, having been “queered” by a doctor who amputated her legs and replaced them with giant bird-like feet. She is then ridiculed by two bourgeois women passing by, who look at her in disdain and then spend the next two minutes berating her with all sorts of abuse. Bombshell opens her arms in desperation, seemingly asking the women what they want from her. However, rather than leave, she listens to the name-calling and stands by, neither defending herself nor attacking the two women. Instead, she looks tired and worn, indicating that she is both entirely familiar with such verbal attacks and desperate for them to stop. The second reference to *The Wizard of Oz* then comes in the form of

rescue. Bombshell has received, with her new queer feet, the power of clicking her heels and being transported to another place. We do not get to see where Bombshell goes, only the stunned faces of the women as they walk away, and the film ends.

After the opening titles of Waters' second feature film, *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), have rolled, we see Mr David (played by David Lochary) inviting us, the audience, to watch the "sleaziest show on earth" that, according to him, will feature "assorted fags" and "actual queers." We see a heterosexual couple where the girl is less than thrilled about her boyfriend trying to induce her to go to a freak show where he is excited to see the "puke eaters, lesbians, [and] mental patients." As the couple begins to walk to the tents Mr David continues to promote the show, telling prospective viewers that they will "see two actual queers kissing each other like lovers on the lips! These are actual queers." The next thing we see are two young men kissing while a heterosexual middle-class audience shouts with disgust at the sight and verbally berates all queer people. With this queer freak-show, Waters has placed homosexuals on the same level as freaks and the mentally ill, making a social commentary on how homosexuality and other queer identities were viewed at the time (Lamberg 497).

Multiple Maniacs has many references to Catholicism and is "perhaps most famous for its blasphemous content" (Ehrhardt 11). Most prominent is a scene in a cathedral where Divine is sexually pleased with rosary beads while "reciting the Stations of the Cross" (ibid.). While the intent of the scene was to be "anti-clerical," and to simply blaspheme for the sake of blasphemy, the reference to the Stations of the Cross can lend the scene a queer meaning (Chute 30). The religious context of reciting the Stations of the Cross is to forgive, but ironically it is Divine forgiving the Catholic Church for their crimes against him as well as other freaks and queers (Ball 326). There is nothing subtle or sophisticated about this since his forgiveness is granted during a sacrilegious sex act inside the very church of the people he is forgiving. In other words, Divine is only willing to forgive the ignorance of an entire religion on his own terms.

In the script of *Multiple Maniacs*, Divine was to confess to the Sharon Tate murders since the real killers had not yet been apprehended. However, the Manson "family" was found guilty during the last days of production, so a newspaper with Charles Manson's picture on the front was added along with a confrontation between Mr David and Divine (Waters 2000, 13). The confession became a "part of his act"

when promoting the film in California (ibid.). Although Waters was deeply inspired by the Manson family, he was shocked when he saw how the Manson family resembled him and his fellow Dreamlanders. Seeing the kids of the Manson family coming “from backgrounds so similar to [his], commit[ing] in real life the awful crimes against peace and love that [he and the Dreamlanders] were acting out for comedy in [their] films” really shook him, but also ignited his interest (Waters 2010, 48).

Inspired by the Manson family and their notoriety (Waters 2010, 49), *Pink Flamingos* (1972) centres on the character of Divine, aka Babs Johnson, who aspires to hold the title as “the filthiest person alive” at all cost. Waters filmed *Pink Flamingos* with the intention of “testing limits” (*This Filthy World*³), and did so with a “number of increasingly revolting scenes that centre on gluttony, vomiting, spitting, sodomy, voyeurism, exhibitionism, masturbation, rape, incest, murder and cannibalism” (Berressem 19). With this goal of testing limits, *Pink Flamingos* has become known as “probably one of the most comprehensive and at the same time one of the most entertaining introductions to the world of abjects and abjection” (ibid.), displaying a world of “an all-pervading presence of filth” (Berressem 32). *Pink Flamingos* can thus be called Waters’ magnum opus of anti-bourgeois mentality, as well as an answer to the “bourgeois audience’s immense demand for shock” (Tinkcom 184). Waters focused on “offending liberals” and making sure that the audience was both outraged and able to “laugh at something [they] feel neurotic about” (*Local Boston TV Broadcast*).

According to Waters the “best audience reaction” was during a scene where a beautiful young lady exposes herself, showing the audience her breasts and then her penis (Waters & Egan 2011, 34). For a person going through “sexual re-assignment” to bare herself like this in a film, was both liberating for her and a big step for queer representation (ibid.). The scene was a big shock for audiences at the time, as “no one had seen anything like that” (Waters, *Director’s Commentary for Pink Flamingos*). She is shown as a beautiful woman (opposed to that of a freak) that retaliates to a flashing pervert who becomes shocked and embarrassed. After viewing *Pink Flamingos*, which became Waters’ most successful underground film, in 1972, Andy Warhol contacted Waters with a proposal to fund his next project (Waters & Hainley 2003, 12). While Warhol was never a main source of inspiration for Waters, he has stated that Warhol

³ A documentary where John Waters talks about his life and films.

“was one of the first artists ever to make homosexuals hip,” and, although honoured, Waters decided to refuse the offer, preferring to make his next film completely on his own terms (11). He did not want any outside influence in his films, even if said influence was from a fellow queer artist that started his career in the underground. Warhol continually showed support to Waters and his star, Divine, by “putting Divine on the cover of Interview magazine and taking Fellini to see *Pink Flamingos*” (12).

Following the success of *Pink Flamingos*, Waters wrote *Female Trouble* (1974) as a “star vehicle for Divine” (Sragow 1). Divine plays the main character Dawn Davenport, as well as the aggressive and macho pervert Earl Peterson. In one scene we witness Dawn and Earl having public intercourse, leading to Dawn’s pregnancy. These two characters promote the “sexual confusion” that Waters enjoys, as he has stated that he usually casts “straight people [to] play gay people and gay people [to] play straight people” (*Director’s Commentary for Female Trouble*). There is a fluidity in the gender and sexual identifications of Waters’ characters as he plays with the queer concept of “genderfuck,” which “deconstructs’ the psychoanalytic concept of difference without subscribing to any heterosexist or anatomical truths about the relations of sex and gender” (Burston & Richardson 41).

Another way Waters attacks heteronormativity is with the character of Ida, played by Edith Massey, who continually inverts the expectations of heterosexuality as being the preferred sexuality. For example, when we first see Ida in *Female Trouble*, she is talking to her nephew, Gator, and speaking in a kind of manner one might expect of a family member advising a younger queer relative, except that here the preferred sexuality is switched. Gator tells her that he is heterosexual, and Ida answers by telling him that he could change, that “queers are just better,” and that she would “be so proud if [he] was a fag and had a nice beautician boyfriend,” that then she would “never have to worry.” At the screenings of the film, Waters confesses that viewing the audience’s response from this scene made him realise that it was the first completely “pro-gay” message in the movie, and that he “could always tell who was gay and who was straight in the audience” at that scene. It became a kind of “market testing,” since “with that one line all the gays would laugh and applaud” (Waters, *Director’s Commentary for Female Trouble*). The controversial Ida installs a positive queer representation, where queer is

the norm from which heterosexual becomes deviant, to such an extent that the word “hetero” becomes a swear word in Ida’s mouth.

In *Female Trouble*, the bourgeois standard of beauty is disposed of as the film shows us that “being beautiful is looking the most unusual or distinctive” (Waters & Egan 2011, 85). Throughout the film, Dawn keeps insisting that she is “the most beautiful woman alive,” and queer people around her agree. Even after she has serious scars as a result of acid being thrown in her face, Dawn stands by her claim to beauty. To Waters, “the greatest beauties always have one imperfection,” some “one thing wrong” about them, and with her extensive facial disfigurement Dawn falls completely within his concept of true beauty (Waters & Hainley 2003, 7).

In Robert Maier’s book *Low Budget Hell: Making Underground Movies with John Waters*, he talks about working with Waters and how *Female Trouble*, partially due to its being “untainted by big money and meddling outsiders from New York and Hollywood,” was “the Dreamlanders’ favorite film” (Ch. 2). Like all his early films, *Female Trouble* “raises, or at least implies, questions about the nature of beauty” (Varner 2004, 42). It was inspired by the juvenile delinquents in Baltimore where Waters grew up, a group of people who subsequently had a great influence on his life (Waters, *Director’s Commentary for Female Trouble*). This influence is blatantly obvious in films such as *Female Trouble*, *Hairspray* (1988) and *Cry-Baby* (1990).

After *Female Trouble*, Divine’s fame had started to eclipse that of John Waters. When speaking about his working with Waters, Robert Maier (who worked in the sound department of *Female Trouble*), would often hear people ask: “Isn’t he that fat transvestite?” (Maier Ch. 5). Divine was being “recognized in the underground and gay entertainment world as a greater talent,” and he tried as best as he could to “make it in the big time as a legitimate male actor” (ibid.). It was during this stage of Divine’s life that John Waters made the film *Desperate Living* (1977), his only pre-studio film without Divine playing the lead.

In *Desperate Living*, Waters dismantles fixed ideas of masculinity and femininity within the world of the film and continues to challenge the accepted gender norms. It begins with a bird’s eye view of a beautifully laid dinner table, which is attended to by gloved hands. This bourgeois image is tainted when the gloved hands place a cooked rat on the fine china and another set of hands begin cutting into said rat,

suggesting that the rat is being eaten off-screen. The arrival of the cooked rat destroys the bourgeoisie normalcy of the scene and sets the tone for the whole film, described by John Waters as a “monstrous lesbian fairy tale about political corruption” (*Director’s Commentary for Desperate Living*) and a “fairy tale about lesbian anguish” (*This Filthy World*). Although Waters wrote the screenplay with Divine in mind for one of the main parts, Divine was, at the time, making “regular personal appearances in gay clubs across the country” and had found an agent who felt he was worth more than the low budget of *Desperate Living* could afford, which proved damaging to the film’s success, as it was Divine who “drew the big gay audience” (Maier Ch. 5). The absence of Divine and a growing controversy surrounding the film (“feminists didn’t like it [and] lesbians thought it was a bad slant on lesbians”) made sure that it would not “make any fame when it first came out” (*The Making of Desperate Living*).

The original idea for *Desperate Living* was to make a town called Mortville built out of garbage “where everyone is mortified by their lives” (Waters, *Director’s Commentary for Desperate Living*). Wanting the inhabitants of Mortville to look “like monsters, basically like homeless people,” Waters rounded up homeless people on to a rented bus with the promise of a lunch if they would populate his fictional town. The set of Mortville was out in the countryside (using the land of a farm owned by one of Waters’ friends), and as the bus would leave Waters was guaranteed a cast of extras for the entire day, as there was nowhere for the “winos” to go (Waters, *Director’s Commentary for Desperate Living*). Lesbianism, being the main theme of *Desperate Living*, is shown as a more certain aspect of the characters than in Waters’ former films. As mentioned above, Waters enjoys “sexual confusion” and displays this view of sexuality in all his early films. In *Female Trouble* Divine’s character, Dawn Davenport, is shown as being heterosexual; however, at the end of the film we see her having a relationship with a woman that is not questioned or explained. A similar development can be seen in *Multiple Maniacs*, where Divine states that she “is no lesbian” but then follows up by saying “at least not until a little while ago.” *Pink Flamingos* also illustrates a similar attitude when a news reporter asks Divine whether she is a lesbian and Divine answers with: “Yes, I have done everything!” Instead of labelling people with a fixed sexuality, such as gay or lesbian, Waters chooses not to make clear-cut

divisions. Thus, being a lesbian is not descriptive of a totalized sexuality but rather an experience within a much wider understanding of sexuality.

This view continues in *Desperate Living*, although it is not quite as apparent there. In the two main lesbian relationships, Muffy and Peggy are both former heterosexual housewives, while their respective partners, Mole and Grizelda, both initiate the lesbian relationship and are less easily defined. When Peggy and Grizelda have sex for the first time, it is Peggy who shouts “it’s so unnatural!” while Grizelda seems to have no objections. In the same vein, Mole is the one that feels like “a man trapped in a woman’s body,” while Muffy is “only queer for [Mole]” and no one else. The lesbian relationships in *Desperate Living* are thus made up of a former middle-class housewife and a queer individual who helps her escape into a lesbian world.

Admitting that he would feel “more comfortable living in Mortville than in suburbia” and that a “gay sensibility has shaped his films” (Chute 30), Waters comments on the dysfunctionality of the middle-class, especially for people like Waters and the Dreamlanders, who do not fit into the bourgeoisie lifestyle. According to Waters, his adolescent years “were not particularly traumatic,” but that for Divine, they were. At one time, when the threat level against him was at its peak in his suburban neighbourhood, Divine had to have “a police escort to and from school” for some time because of his appearance, “so that he wouldn’t be killed” (ibid.).

4. The Coded Representation of the Queer in Waters' Studio Films

In high school Waters learned “how confusing show business could be” regarding queer people, as he witnessed heterosexual frat boys cheer on a drag queen when onstage, and then beat up the very same individual once offstage (Waters 2010, 131). When New Line Cinema offered to fund Waters' next film, *Polyester* (1981), it came at a cost; he would have to “write something that a mainstream audience could identify with,” excluding “gay *Wizard of Oz* salutes,” “clownish cults, or ugly experts.” If Waters wanted a big budget for the film he would have to abide by these rules, as well as getting Divine back (as he was a guarantee to get the gay audience) (Maier Ch. 6). The fact is that Waters' early films were filled to the brim with “gay insider jokes” and “urban irony and satire that poked fun at [the] very lifestyles and core cultural beliefs” of the “white suburban teens” who “bought movie tickets by the millions,” and to New Line Cinema, such a film could never be considered a good investment (ibid.).

Polyester, being Waters' first film within the studio system, shows the transformation from visual representation of the queer to the coded queer representation so well known within the studios. Moving from his desire of not wanting any outsider influence to working with a studio, it marked the end of Waters' underground era. In fact, a year before its release, Waters' autobiographical book *Shock Value* was published, and when the book was reissued in 2005, Waters commented in the updated introduction that it had been his “final position paper on the shock/underground period of [his] career” (Waters 2005, viii). To help their investment of *Polyester*, New Line Cinema urged Waters to get more “names” (famous people that would draw an audience) involved with the film. After much stress regarding the low budget, Waters was able to secure Tab Hunter for the role of Todd Tomorrow, and Debbie Harry (known for her band Blondie) to help write the film's soundtrack. When Harry suggested her friend, Bill Murray, to sing the title song, New Line Cinema cheered. John Waters did not. He insisted that his humour was “not doofusy like Bill Murray's,” but “angry, gay, and shocking, and he did not want it diluted” (Maier Ch. 8). In the end New Line Cinema “prevailed, because the brass ring in movie sales is big names” and Waters became continually annoyed with the studio “meddling with his work in New York, while he was in Baltimore” (ibid.).

The casting of Tab Hunter in *Polyester* has great significance to the queer representation of the film, as well as to its connection with the coded queer representation of the Hollywood system. As a movie star in the 1950s, Hunter had been hiding his homosexuality, but made an exception for Waters who “advised [Hunter] to come out” (Ehrhardt 13). He was the first “*real* Hollywood movie star” Waters had ever worked with, and at the time of filming *Polyester*, Hunter had not yet “come out” as a homosexual (*This Filthy World*). In the film Hunter plays Divine’s love-interest, Todd Tomorrow, who shares a kiss as well as a few scenes in bed with Divine’s character, Francine Fishpaw. Waters described Hunter’s accepting the role as “much braver than just coming out at that time,” and that “making out with Divine in [*Polyester*] caused way more of a sensation than anything he could have done by saying ‘I’m gay’” (ibid.).

Polyester ended up quickly forgotten and financially “in the hole,” since, while being studio-funded, it was still “a niche film,” with “foot fetishes and fat transvestites” not being the “preferred entertainment” of the mainstream movie-going public (Maier Ch. 11). New Line Cinema was thus not eager to fund Waters’ next film, and five years would pass before *Hairspray* would be made. In the meantime, Waters worked on the script for *Flamingos Forever*, the sequel to *Pink Flamingos*, but New Line Cinema “couldn’t justify [six hundred thousand dollars] on another ‘stupid’ John Waters film” (Maier, Ch. 11). The script for *Flamingos Forever* has been published in the book *Trash Trio*, which also includes the scripts of *Pink Flamingos* and *Desperate Living*. In the introduction of the book, Waters talks about his trial with getting *Flamingos Forever* funded and how “the subject matter (male rape, necrophilia, child kidnapping, communism) didn’t exactly make for a safe Hollywood pitch either” (Waters 1988, xii). In the end Waters “quit pursuing *Flamingos Forever*, convinced after five years that he had to go more mainstream,” and started writing “a new script, *Hairspray*, which was an upbeat teen comedy” (Maier Ch. 12).

Wanting to get rid of Waters’ “unprofitable underground ethos,” New Line Cinema started getting “concerned that John’s quirks were getting in the way of the film’s box office potential with the mainstream” (Maier Ch. 12). Despite New Line Cinema’s wishes to hire a “young, cute,” “sexy,” and most importantly “thin” actress for the main role of Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray*, Waters remained persistent to hire a “plump beauty.” This tenacity to hire a “fat ingénue” could be seen as Waters queering

the mainstream female lead-role, before even beginning filming (ibid.). In a collaborative study on gay men and straight women, Moon and Sedgewick comment that the fat female is often lumped in with the queer, as she is denied by bourgeois society and is seen as a “member of groups considered excessive to the social body,” aka the queer (Evans 42). They also look at the body of Divine, noting that his “breasts and hips” are culturally coded as “feminine” and argue that Divine’s cross-dressing merely “responded to an effeminacy already written on his 300-pound body.” So as a fat man, Divine becomes feminine, and as a fat woman the lead of *Hairspray*, Ricki Lake, becomes connected to the queer (ibid.).

The script for *Hairspray* “decidedly mark[ed] his exit from the underground,” as there were no “no penis shots or nudity of any kind, no gay sex or gay references, no shoe fetishes, no dead animals, no blood, shit, needles, puke, drugs, drunks, or outrageous dirty gowns for Divine” (Maier Ch. 12). It became Waters’ first ever film to receive a PG rating, and introduced many middle-class families to Waters’ works. One such family in Florida decided to rent his early, pre-studio film *Pink Flamingos* based on their liking of *Hairspray*. This led the family to call up a religious group and ended with them suing the video rental store for renting out obscene material. This resulted in *Pink Flamingos* being “judged obscene in the State of Florida” which meant it had to be put in the adult section “with a warning label on it” in all video stores (Waters & Egan 2011, 16).

In four of his five pre-studio films, Waters had cast Divine as the lead as a troubled woman. Divine would also have played a similar role in *Desperate Living*, if it had not been for money issues and the fact that he was already committed to another project (Maier Ch. 5). However, in the two in-studio films Waters directed while Divine was still alive, his lead role became very tame compared to those of the pre-studio films. In *Polyester* Divine had still been in the role of a troubled woman, but ends up as a happy middle-class mother, while in *Multiple Maniacs*, Divine’s troubled woman ends up as “a Godzilla-like monster celebrating her anti-bourgeois depravity” (Gerstner 160). For *Hairspray*, Waters had originally wanted Divine to play both the mother and daughter (the lead), but Robert Shaye “who ran New Line [Cinema], the distributor, talked him out of it” (Waters & Egan 2011, xiii). Divine, thus being integrated by the studio system, now plays merely the mother of the lead in *Hairspray*. There is also “no

outrageousness” in Divine’s *Hairspray* mother-role, as he has become a “moral, hard-working housewife and dedicated mother” in the studio system (Maier Ch. 12). This clear split between the character development in his pre- and in-studio films could be, and has been, called by some as his “selling out” his vision for Hollywood. Waters has opposed the view by stating that “making a movie in Odorama⁴ with Tab Hunter and a three-hundred-pound drag queen” would not qualify as “selling out” (Waters & Egan 2011, 111).

The title sequence of *Hairspray* shows a deep connection to the musical genre, with its dancing and backstage visuals. The whole film has a strong connection to the musical as it focuses on music and dancing, and it is this connection that shows the strongest queer representation of the film through the fantasy of the world and its excessiveness. As the cinematic form of the musical “invite[s] audiences to glory in the chaotic extravagance that occurs when the rigid social conventions of normality are overturned;” in this way, even though the musical has “had a heterosexist bias since its codification,” the artificiality and exaggerated fantastical world of it is heavily viewed as queer (Benshoff 61). Although Divine did not get the lead role in *Hairspray* as originally planned, he did get to play two separate characters—the mother Edna Turnblad, and Arvin Hodgepile, the president of the TV studio in the film. Divine’s playing two separate characters of separate genders harkens back his characters in *Female Trouble*, and again the characters are quite different from each other. The character of Mr Hodgepile could be understood as Waters’ coded critique on the studio system. As Hodgepile is very much against integration, he denies coloured people a role in his TV show, thus minimalizing their representation (Curry 168). This character could be mirrored as a studio-head trying to deny queer representation at the time of the Hays Code, when coded, or stereotypically humorous representations were the only representations for queer people (Lugowski 7). After the release of *Hairspray*, Divine became the inspiration for Disney’s animators when creating Ursula, the villain for their latest animated feature *The Little Mermaid* (1989). The inspiration is quite visible, thanks to the many gay artists working on *The Little Mermaid*, who brought Divine’s image to the height of mainstream: a Walt Disney animated film (Musker & Clements).

⁴ A screen gimmick using scratch and sniff technology.

Cry-Baby, being Waters' first "major studio" film, is filled with coded queer scenes and characters. Like *Hairspray*, there is the queer connection of the musical, except here it is even more present, as *Cry-Baby* is a full-fledged musical, whereas *Hairspray*'s themes were simply connected to the genre. Its characters are split into two groups: the heteronormative and socially acceptable "squares," and the delinquent greaser gang of the "drapes." What is important to note here is that while the "squares" are the socially acceptable and bourgeois, they are not the heroes of the film, but the villains. It is the delinquents, with their freakish attitudes and bad manners, who are the heroes, one of their victories being the transformation of "square" Allison into one of themselves. So although *Cry-Baby* has a classical Hollywood narrative form (boy meets girl, boy and girl end up together, heterosexuality winning over everything that was thrown in their way) Waters puts in his own queer twist by queering the girl. Allison starts out as bourgeoisie and heteronormative, but ends as a teenage rebel, choosing the side of the "freaks" and "weirdoes" over that of the social norm. Her choosing this "queerer" side of life is the happy ending of the film.

While films such as *Grease* (1978) could be argued to have a similar ending, it does not have the emphasis on queer people, as "the T-birds" (the gang of boys in *Grease*) is a heteronormative group of guys, and the gang in *Cry-Baby* is that of misfits. With *Cry-Baby*, Waters is not necessarily showing the "freaks" as having better lives than the "squares," but rather wants to show people that have come to terms with themselves and their way of life, and living that way happily even though it is not deemed socially acceptable (Waters & Egan 2011, 18). The "drapes" are thus a group of people that are "happy with their neuroses," while the "squares" hide their neuroses and pretend to be superior to the "drapes." Waters has said that he likes to make movies showing this thinking and showing that people who are unhappy with themselves and their faults, always lose (ibid.).

As mentioned above, the role of a troubled mother can frequently be seen in John Waters' films. This role has most often been played by Divine, who has been a mother in all of his roles in Waters' films (with the exception of *Mondo Trasho*). In *Serial Mom* (1994), Waters focuses on this "troubled mother" aspect of the main character and makes a film based around the homicidal housewife and mother, Beverly, played by Kathleen Turner. Divine's mother-character in *Polyester* and Turner's in

Serial Mom show how Waters “extracts melodrama’s affective structures and deploys them to confront viewers with the contradictory status of femininity as women’s work,” “spectacularize[ing] domestic femininity” instead of concealing, or mystifying it (Tinkcom 159).

In *Serial Mom* Waters uses the stereotype of the perfect 50’s housewife for the main character Beverly R. Sutphin, who becomes queer with her subversion from the “Stepford calm” of the stereotype, “driven to violence by violations of perfection and order—an order that, the movie suggests, is itself sick and sterile” (March 38). In the horror genre the queer is seen as “the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny” and as a serial killer and monster, Mrs Sutphin embodies the definition of a queer character within her film’s genre (Case 69). She is presented as a “Martha Stewart on anabolic steroids,” someone who has broken from the cleanness and normalcy of suburban life, and become queer with her actions (Ehrhardt 12). When Mrs Sutphin is confirmed to be the notorious “Serial Mom,” people connected with the labels of misfits and freaks begin to cheer for her everywhere she goes. She is always dressed as, and carries herself as, a Stepfordian housewife, but with the suggestion of her queerness, the misfits look at her as an equal and try to help her any way they can. From hiding her, to even helping her kill off one of her victims, Mrs Sutphin has found her queer equals in punks, teenagers, and the grunge band “Camel Lips.”

After making four films within the studio system, Waters had gone from being underground and obscure, to being a full-fledged personality on arguably the most mainstream show on earth, *The Simpsons* (1989-ongoing). The episode, titled “Homer’s Phobia,” was the show’s first episode dealing with homosexuality and homophobia. In the episode, Waters’ character “John” is presented as not being a gay stereotype, or what could be called the “homosexual norm”—this of course mirrors Waters’ real life personality. Being chosen by such a hugely popular mainstream series as a means for queer representation indicates how fully integrated he was into the mainstream. Waters’ response to his own integration was to make films that focus on people who reject the mainstream and even go so far as to die for the cause of being independent and underground.

Pecker (1998) follows a young Baltimorean photographer that is ‘discovered’ by a New York gallery owner, who takes him to the city to find his fame. Pecker, however,

by the end of the movie, refuses the fame and fortune of New York and chooses to “return to obscurity in Baltimore” (Gerstner 159). In the film Waters used a real male strip club called The Atlantis (named “the Fudge Palace” in the film) as one of the film’s main locations (Waters 2010, 146). It was in this club that Waters was introduced to the sexual act known as “teabagging” which was a popular move used by the club’s go-go boys as an incentive for tips (Jardin 1). He decided to keep this act a part of the club, as it was in real-life, and thus, with his film *Pecker*, Waters brought the sexual act of “teabagging” into the limelight and, because of its inclusion, it entered popular American culture and American slang (ibid.). The term became such a sensation that Waters began to receive newspaper clippings, where frat boys had sexually assaulted sleeping frat mates with the act and even used it for hazing, admitting that they got the idea “from a scene involving a male stripper in the movie by cult director John Waters” (Waters 2010, 235).

In *Cecil B. DeMented* (2000) Waters revisits his roots, as the film follows a group of freakish underground filmmakers. The film has been described as a “comedic spoof of both Hollywood and independent filmmaking” (Waters & Egan 2011, 139), and “a revenge action flick about young indie film zeal-ots attacking the Hollywood status quo” (147). The film centres on this “terrorist film group” and the message that mainstream cinema is an ultimate sin, and that the only true cinema is underground cinema (Tinkcom 183). This plot is somewhat ironic, since the film was made with the help of a studio and is a clear reference to his earlier films. For one, the character of Rodney, “who feels oppressed by his uncool heterosexuality,” echoes Edith Massey’s character Ida in *Female Trouble* (Harvey 35). Rodney constantly laments his heterosexuality, spouting his hate for heterosexuality while people around him try to calm him down with lines such as: “no one chooses to be heterosexual.” The director of the group, Cecil B. DeMented, mirrors aspects of Waters himself during his underground career and Waters has said that DeMented is a hypothetical version of himself, if he had been “completely crazy” and his “parents hadn’t loved [him]” (*Interview*).

Even though Waters tried to evade mainstream in his films, in 2002 he gave his blessing when *Hairspray* was turned into a Broadway musical. It starred Harvey Fierstein who took over the role of Tracy Turnblad’s mother, as Divine had sadly passed away

shortly after the release of *Hairspray* in 1988. The musical was a success, receiving eight Tony awards, and would later be made into the musical film *Hairspray* (2007) (Brock 1). The big-budget film version polished the gruffness of the musical by changing song tempos and replacing Fierstein with the more vocally pleasing, Hollywood superstar John Travolta (Ehrhardt 12). *Hairspray*, thus moved from being a stepping stone for Waters into the mainstream, to the Broadway musical (being at the same time both mainstream and queer), to a big budget Hollywood musical film where most queer representations and connections (except of course that of the musical genre) is cut or coded.

Being a big modern art enthusiast, Waters became inspired by Sarah Lucas' pictures of trees, where "she manages to make a tree look pornographic" (Waters & Hainley 2003, 51). He took the idea of being able to "look at anything, and suddenly it becomes stupidly, blatantly sexual" (ibid.) and used it for his latest film *A Dirty Shame* (2004), a sex comedy about "blue-collar sex addicts in Baltimore" (Waters & Egan 2011, 145). The movie starts with a "frigid, middle-aged," middle-class woman called Sylvia Stickle who hits her head and is "transformed into a raging sex addict" (Waters & Egan 2011, 157). The film becomes a battle between the sex addicts and the middle-class suburbanites that live in the same neighbourhood. The queer sex addicts are clearly the protagonists of the film, while the heteronormative "neuters" as they call themselves are the antagonists. The "neuters" pride themselves on being "normal" and attack the queer people of the neighbourhood (including gays and lesbians not part of the sex addicts group) because of how "not normal" they are. By now Waters is very familiar with this theme and it comes as no surprise when the film ends happily with Sylvia staying a sex addict and accepting the lifestyle wholeheartedly.

Ray Ray, the leader of the sex addicts, played by Johnny Knoxville of *Jackass* (2000-2002) fame, says to Sylvia that, with them, she will "learn to accept anything sexual as long as it's safe, consensual and doesn't harm others." This is an important message that helps the mainstream viewer see the queer characters as possible protagonists. In fact, Waters made sure that the film would not have any "unsafe sex in it" and made the premiere of *A Dirty Shame* into "an AIDS benefit" (Varner 2005, 38). The film received an NC-17 rating and Waters, in accordance to his contract with the producers, had to try to get the rating lowered to an R rating. When asking the Motion Picture Association of America what he could cut from the film to get an R rating, he

received the answer that they had simply “stopped taking notes” (*This Filthy World*). Waters had thus gone through an obvious change, as he started out making underground shock value films, opposing the censors and desiring the worst rating possible, to becoming a mainstream director, shocked by the R rating and wanting to censor his own film to appease the MPAA and remain in the mainstream.

When asked what his next project might be, Waters has answered that he constantly works on screenplays and tries to “get them produced”, but that because of the economy, no one is “getting five- to seven-million dollars to get an independent film made” (Ehrhardt 13). He has thus come full circle, thinking of himself again as an independent filmmaker, outside the studio system, unable to get the funding for his next project, rather than the mainstream director he seemed to have become. He has even stated that there are “a lot of movies [he would] like to make but [that he] know[s] that they won’t let [him],” “they” being the producers and studio-heads of the mainstream (*This Filthy World*). Even so, he now happily spends his days writing non-fiction books about his life, giving lectures at universities, and making appearances in various films and TV series, spreading out the gospel of “trash” and shock value.

5. Conclusion

After making five underground films, and seven films within the studio system, Waters is still very much connected to the aesthetic of bad taste and shock humour. Having been unhappy with the representation of homosexuals at the time, Waters took it upon himself to cause sexual and gender-based confusion with his films. Inspired by Tennessee Williams and the sexual ambiguity of his work, Waters injected all his early films with a queer sensibility and took a stand against the values of bourgeoisie suburbanites. Instead of placing homosexuality on a pedestal, Waters chose to represent all queer sexualities and personalities, placing all queer people on an even ground. Waters made freaks, misfits, lesbians, gays and transsexuals band together to expose the dysfunctionality of the heteronormative middle-class, showing in his films that those willing to accept their own flaws will ultimately always win.

The essay has examined how queer representation is shown in the films of John Waters, and by exposing said representation in all of his films, a change can be seen through comparison and contrast. The queer representation has evolved from the pure shock value Waters used to grab the audience's attention, to a more refined commentary on queer people and their heteronormative antagonists. He has made an impact on American culture, from introducing queer sex acts, to becoming the first openly gay character in the mainstream cartoon series *The Simpsons*, and continually making films with the message that the socially accepted are not always the most deserved. Although he has remained inactive as a director since 2004, Waters continues educating people, through humour, about the queer and his own queer way of life, constantly reminding the masses that "gay is not enough" (Waters 2010, 37).

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Filmography

Produced outside the studio system:

Mondo Trasho (1969)

Multiple Maniacs (1970)

Pink Flamingos (1972)

Female Trouble (1974)

Desperate Living (1977)

Produced within the studio system:

Polyester (1981)

Hairspray (1988)

Cry-Baby (1990)

Serial Mom (1994)

Pecker (1998)

Cecil B. DeMented (2000)

A Dirty Shame (2004)