

Underground Exploiteer:
John Waters and the Development of a Directorial Brand, 1964–1981

By
Matt Connolly

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
(Communication Arts)

at the
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
2018

Date of final oral examination: 7/20/2018

This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

J.J. Murphy, Professor, Communication Arts, Film
Kelley Conway, Professor, Communication Arts, Film
Jeff Smith, Professor, Communication Arts, Film
Chris Holmlund, Professor Emeritus, Cinema Studies, Women's Studies & French, The
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iii
 Introduction	
Defining the Waters's Brand	1
Literature Review	6
Methodology	11
Chapter Outline	19
 Chapter One	
Drive-Ins, Cinematheques, and Churches: Creating the Waters's Brand.....	26
Seat Buzzers and Other Ballyhoo – Exploitation Cinema's Marketing and Exhibition.....	28
Framing Transgression in the New York Underground	41
Marketing and Exhibiting Early Shorts – <i>Hag in a Black Leather Jacket</i> , <i>Roman Candles</i> , and <i>Eat Your Makeup</i>	52
Conclusion.....	71
 Chapter Two	
From Baltimore to the Bay Area: Expanding the Waters's Brand.....	79
Baltimore's "Old Man of Experimental Movies" – Waters and Regional Film Culture	80
Spreading Sleaze – Two Approaches to Distribution Beyond Baltimore.....	102
Conclusion.....	119
 Chapter Three	
Midnight Special: Building the <i>Pink Flamingos</i>'s Phenomenon	127
Waters, New Line Cinema, and the Creation of <i>Pink Flamingos</i>	128
The Skinny, Long Haired Director and All His Followers: Shaping Directorial Branding in the Press Coverage of <i>Pink Flamingos</i>	156

Conclusion: Exercising Poor Taste at the TLA Cinema	174
 Chapter Four	
Midnight Movies in the Daytime:	
Waters and Ambivalent Brand Reconfiguration	186
“‘How do you top it? You don’t’”: <i>Female Trouble</i> , <i>Desperate Living</i> , and the Ambiguities of Brand Reconfiguration.....	188
Daring to Take John Waters Seriously: Shifts in Critical and Cultural Discourse	203
Extending the Waters’s Brand in the Mid-to-Late 1970s	213
Conclusion.....	228
 Chapter Five	
The Smell of Change in the Air:	
Negotiating Brand Reconfiguration in the Early 1980s.....	237
A Gimmick by Any Other Name Wouldn’t Smell as Sweet – <i>Polyester</i> and Odorama.....	239
<i>Shock Value</i> and the Narrating of Sleazy Memories	264
Conclusion.....	276
 Conclusion	
Waters and Directorial Branding in the 21st Century	284
 Bibliography.....	291
 Filmography	306

Acknowledgments

This dissertation is first and foremost a reflection of all the knowledge and support that I've received throughout my seven years as a graduate student in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I first thank J.J. Murphy. This dissertation came out of a conversation that we had roughly five years ago, and I am deeply grateful for the guidance, patience, and good humor that you have provided every step of the way. Kelley Conway and Jeff Smith offered incisive commentary as members of my dissertation committee and have been sources of wisdom and encouragement throughout my time in graduate school. I had the privilege to take courses with faculty members who permanently changed my thinking: Lea Jacobs, Vance Kepley, Ben Singer, Kait Fyfe, Lori Lopez, Ramzi Fawaz, Julie D'Acci, Michele Hilmes, and David Bordwell. I also had the pleasure of TA-ing for Maria Belodubrovskaya and Eric Hoyt, as well as working with Jim Healy, Mike King, and Ben Reiser. Finally, this dissertation could not have been accomplished without the help and support of the Communication Arts staff, including Linda Lucey, Beth Horstmeier, Jean Siewert, and Janis Richard.

Several individuals and institutions facilitated the research for this dissertation. The Communication Arts Department provided me with a fellowship during my first year of dissertating, which made important research trips possible in the early stages of writing. In Baltimore, the library staffs at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and the University of Baltimore gave helpful assistance in locating research materials. Siobhan Hagan generously shared her knowledge of Baltimore film history. In New York, MM Serra at the Film-Makers' Cooperative offered both time and guidance as I looked through the organization's archival materials. I had fruitful conversations on the history of New Line with Daniel Herbert, who also

shared some very helpful documents from his own research. Nan Cinnater at the Provincetown Public Library sent me several articles from local publications that helped to flesh out the dissertation's sections on Waters in Provincetown. It was a pleasure to return to my alma mater of Wesleyan University and explore the John Waters Collection at the Wesleyan Cinema Archives. I had outstanding mentorship from Jeanine Basinger, Scott Higgins, and Lisa Dombrowski as an undergraduate, and their continued support of my work means the world to me. Marc Longenecker and Lea Carlson warmly welcomed me back to campus. Joan Miller provided superlative guidance through the Waters papers. Logan Ludwig generously put me up several times and made my trips to Connecticut very enjoyable. Last and certainly not least, Chris Holmlund gave me so much support and advice throughout this process—first as a friend and fellow Waters-enthusiast, and then as a dissertation committee member.

So many friends near and far provided me with encouragement, advice, and good humor throughout this process. Space does not permit the personal thank-you that each and every one of them deserve, but I'll attempt to name but a few. Beyond Madison, thank you to longtime friends Bryan Char, Joe Coburn, Doug Hutchings, Kayleigh Tompkins-Lipsitz, Sophia Barberio, Delia Paunescu, Gabe Fries, Michael Koresky, Sara Beth Hoffman, and Laurenellen McCann. Thank you also to academic friends and colleagues across the country, including Kyle Stevens, Bridget Kies, TJ West, Katie Russell, and Bryan Wuest. Within Madison, Sebastian Renfield, Derrick Austin, and Aaron Fai all offered much appreciated support and enthusiasm at various points throughout the process, and Anders Zanichkowsky did all that and hosted many a soul-salving Friday night dinner. So many of my fellow graduate students in Communication Arts became respected colleagues and close friends over my time in the department. They are all dear to me, and I especially want to thank Amanda McQueen, Eric Dienstfrey, Leo Rubinkowski, Jenny

Oyallon-Koloski, Derek Long, Booth Wilson, Kait Fyfe, Maureen Rogers, Brandon Colvin, Casey Long, Megan Boyd, Hamidreza Nassiri, Matt St. John, JJ Bersch, Erica Moulton, Zach Zahos, Caroline Leader, Alyx Vesey, Nick Benson, Tom Welch, Austin Morris, Kyra Hunting, KC Councilor (and Katie Berry!), and Nora Stone, my cohort-mate for seven years. Besides being close friends and colleagues, Chelsea McCracken and Whitney Gent were two of the best roommates a person could ask for. A special thank you to Chris Hanson, David Beckman, and especially Ken Lythgoe, who have been cherished friends and confidantes. I will always remember nights at the Sham talking politics, pop music, Drag Race, and everything in between.

Finally, my family provided unwavering support and love from the moment I decided to apply to grad school to the end of that journey this summer. My four-legged family members offered boundless affection and comfort: family dog Ginger (who passed away in the summer of 2016) and Henry, my little buddy at home. Words cannot express my gratitude to my grandma Ann, my aunts Julie and Susan, my grandma Ronnie (who passed away in the fall of 2017), my stepdad Jeff, my sister Elizabeth, my dad James, and my mom Nancy. I love you all. Thank you.

Introduction Defining the Waters's Brand

“Well, I’ve always said my father sells fire extinguishers and I sell shock value. That’s my business.” – John Waters¹

In a career spanning more than fifty years, John Waters has crafted a body of films that critics and scholars have praised for their aggressive humor, unapologetic sexual transgression, and barbed satiric takes on fame, criminality, and the media. Temporal distance and shifts in cultural permissiveness have done little to blunt the impact of Waters's outré provocations, with the enduring image of Divine consuming freshly produced dog feces at the conclusion of *Pink Flamingos* (1972) only the most commonly discussed example. Indeed, *Pink Flamingos* and Waters's other 70s-era features have been held up as the prime examples of the director as taboo-busting subversive—an identity that many argue began to dissipate in the 1980s as his films became perceived as increasingly commercial.

Emanuel Levy offers but the most recent iteration of this view. He praises Waters's “trash trilogy” of *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Desperate Living* (1977) as works that “contest the boundaries of conventional morality while challenging both American censorship and viewers' expectations.”² *Polyester* (1981), on the other hand, began a run of “accessible satires” that were not only “less controversial and less risqué” but perhaps illustrated that “deep down [Waters] shares many of the bourgeois values he had satirized.”³

While acknowledging the aesthetic and tonal shifts that Levy and others have rightly noted within his films, this dissertation takes a different view of Waters during this initial period of his career. It foregrounds the fact that, far from ignoring or denigrating the commercial aspects of American filmmaking, Waters has long evinced a fascination with its industrial operations and extratextual elements.⁴ He has written about his childhood obsession with movie

advertisements in *Variety* and has offered effusive and only semi-ironic praise for such masters of exploitation cinema as William Castle, Russ Meyer, and Herschell Gordon Lewis. The ability of these and other B-movie maestros to attract audiences with often-exaggerated promises of lurid material engaged Waters as much as the films themselves. The same might be said for his favorite movie-going experiences, which emphasized the role of unorthodox exhibition venues, drug-enhanced cinema-going in Baltimore and New York City, and blatant marketing ploys. “The one film that influenced me more than any other is the ‘Visit Our Concession Stand’ ad that drive-ins invariably show between features,” he wrote in his autobiography.⁵ Beneath the characteristically winking wit of that quote, there is an important kernel of truth.

Highlighting Waters’s deep interest in what Jonathan Gray has called the “paratextual”—the “hype, promotion, promos, synergy, and peripherals...[that] construct, live in, and can affect the running of a text”—does more than add colorful detail to the history and cultural meaning of the director’s films.⁶ It encourages us to move beyond the textual confines of Waters’s work and explore how his investments in marketing, publicity, and exhibition became central tenets of his career. These include the crafting of homemade posters, flyers, and other marketing paraphernalia; circulating of promotional materials; producing in-theater giveaways, gimmicks, and stage shows; cultivating both his own public persona and those of his lead actors; and, eventually, expanding into extra-cinematic endeavors such as lecturing and writing. Collectively, these activities comprise a body of work that reflects Waters’s wit and invention. They also mark his shrewd understanding of how to position himself and his collective creative output to get the attention, popularity, and financing that he would need to succeed as a Baltimore-based independent filmmaker in the 1960s and 1970s. In short, they constitute the makings of a directorial brand.

Drawing from Marguerite H. Rippy and Kyle D. Edwards, I define a directorial brand as a set of textual and extra-textual signifiers linked to a filmmaker that collectively express a public identity—one whose relative coherence and portability allows it to circulate within various media and to sell a variety of cultural products.⁷ I use this term with the knowledge that it evokes an air of corporatized impersonality. As James Russell notes when analyzing the directorial brand of Steven Spielberg, “it is easy to think of branding as a base, commercial process.”⁸ Furthermore, directorial branding has been critiqued (with some justification) by scholars as a marketing gimmick, one that downplays engagement with the textual specificities of a given work and debases the notion of an “auteur” filmmaker as anyone bequeathed the title by studio publicists looking to sell cinematic product.⁹ Why, one might ask, not use a term like “directorial reputation” that more directly defines Waters as an artist and figure of sub-cultural import?¹⁰ While Waters is undeniably both of those things, he is also an economic actor with a highly-attuned sense of industrial forces and their impact upon the creation, circulation, and reception of his own work. Additionally, he cultivated a distinct public persona that became recognizable on its own terms, allowing him to circulate between different media and markets in a fashion legible to an ever-growing audience. Directorial branding foregrounds these dynamics and underscores their interplay with Waters’s sometimes competing, sometimes harmonious goals of cultural disreputability.

Even more than pointing to this matrix of economic and artistic concerns, however, defining Waters’s project as such illuminates how industrial identity formed the very heart of his directorial brand. Waters did not engage the extra-textual elements of his films just out of necessity, though his admiration for exploitation gimmicks and the unorthodox pleasures of drive-ins or midnight screenings came partly from how successful they could be at luring

viewers to the theater. Waters gleefully appropriated marketing techniques from mainstream or exploitation publicity campaigns only to tweak them in ways that satirized their flimsiness or insincerity. Screenings of his films, similarly, took up various traditions of cinematic exhibition—gala premieres, live entertainment, celebrity appearances—only to undercut their standard appeals through camp humor and the creation of subcultural bacchanal.

His brand identity became not only tied to the scandalizing imagery within his films but to the simultaneously shameless and self-conscious ways in which he sold it to his viewing public. He became what I will refer to as an “underground exploiter,” a public figure who was able to combine the subcultural cool of the Underground and the giddy shamelessness of exploitation in one appealing, marketable package. His films might have appalled audiences, but his deepest, most lucrative insight came from how he framed these works as both shocking and funny—a pleasurable jolt to the system.

Cultivating his brand as underground exploiter held key advantages for Waters throughout the 1960s and 1970s. First, this positioning of himself as not just filmmaker but marketer, promoter, and general ballyhoo artist placed him in the public eye. If filmgoers in the late 1960s or early 1970s saw Waters handing out flyers or holding court at a midnight showing, it allowed them to connect to the director as an eccentric but intriguing figure. Such personal notoriety would prove important for a Baltimore-based artist who did not reside in a center of underground filmmaking or culture. At the same time, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the movies screened within large countercultural hubs like New York and Los Angeles begin to spread to smaller cities and college campuses across the country. Waters employed the basic skill sets of classic exploiters in response to these shifts, taking his films on the road and convincing local theaters to screen his works on an ad hoc basis. Having a public personality that existed

apart from any particular title helped sell his films in a variety of markets. In this way, Waters's directorial brand offered an accessibility and portability across media markets that was advantageous in the historical moment in which he first established himself as a filmmaker.

Second, the underground exploiter brand reflected a kind of triangulated relationship that Waters pursued between himself, his films, and his viewership. Waters's titles trafficked heavily in shocking imagery, outrageously grotesque plot twists, and characters who pushed the normative boundaries of gender, taste, and social mores. While filmgoers came to delve head first into such cinematic excess, even the most hardcore moviegoers might find the boundaries that Waters pushed past to be too extreme. Positioning himself as the orchestrator of winking promotional materials and wild screenings, Waters cultivated himself as a figure who couched his warped filmic objects in knowingly campy contexts. In her analysis of the connections between the extra-cinematic gimmickry of Waters and that of mid-century exploitation director William Castle, Kate J. Russell notes that "the cinematic experience for Castle and Waters' crowds speaks to their conception of the theatre as a space for socializing as well as watching movies...a socialization [that] was naturally unruly and boisterous."¹¹ Waters cultivated this instinct, turning the exhibition space from a potentially off-putting freakshow to a playful bacchanal. And by establishing his role as the ringleader of the circus surrounding his own films, Waters broadened a public profile that embraced the scandalous qualities of his cinematic work while also standing a bit apart from them. As he would often note, he created his films but he wasn't a character in them. This would serve him well not only in the selling of his work but in later forays into essayistic writing, public address, and other instances in which the stability of his distinct identity established a coherent framework through which to understand his variety of cross-media practices.

These dynamics would prove crucial to Waters's popularity throughout the 1970s and would lay the groundwork for his continued notoriety as a filmmaker, author, performer, cultural commentator, and public personality from the 1980s to the present day. In assessing the importance of Waters's extra-cinematic practices as they developed into a directorial brand, we can return to the radicality seen by many critics and scholars within his "trash trio" from the 1970s. The singularly jaw-dropping content and grimy aesthetics of *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, and *Desperate Living*—not to mention his two other features of the period, *Mondo Trasho* (1969) and *Multiple Maniacs* (1970)—deeply imbedded themselves in the directorial brand of Waters, as seen in such public nicknames as "the Pope of Trash" and "the Prince of Puke." To view those works without any of the contextual labor surrounding them, though, is to privilege the second half of those monikers (trash, puke) and ignore the mischievous respect implicit in "pope" and "prince." Those winking honorifics speak to the level of goodwill, charm, and naughty-yet-accessible wit that Waters conveyed to the public. Understanding the various mechanisms through which Waters conceived, crafted, and developed this singular directorial brand sheds new light on the filmmaker's initial years in the public eye and helps to explain his remarkable cultural longevity.

Literature Review

Scholarly writing on Waters can be placed into three broad categories: career overviews, auteurist analyses and readings of individual films, and work on the career and performances of Divine. Though they tend to utilize the text-based analysis that this dissertation moves away from, all three of these categories offer valuable information and context. After surveying and evaluating their various approaches, I will turn to recent scholarly writing that more aligns with my own perspective on Waters's career.

Setting aside books that either Waters himself has written or that are comprised of interviews with the filmmaker, several authors have surveyed Waters's career and made large-scale claims about his auteurist patterns and predilections.¹² J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum's chapter on Waters in their book *Midnight Movies* covers the director's titles from his earliest shorts to the release of *Polyester*.¹³ Given their interest in the historical and intellectual contexts for the midnight movie phenomenon of the 1970s, their chapter productively situates Waters's work within transgressive exhibition scenarios. They also provide fine-grained detail on screenings and reception, including the names of theaters that films played in, the length of their runs, and contemporaneous articles and reviews on Waters's major works. More than many career overviews, their chapter explicitly links the importance of Waters's impact to his ability to circulate and screen his films within non-traditional distribution channels and exhibition contexts.

Two other works survey Waters's career in a more comprehensive vein. Emanuel Levy's aforementioned chapter on Waters in his study of queer male auteurs, *Gay Directors, Gay Films?*, covers all of the director's titles and contextualizes them within the New York Underground cinema of the late 1950s and 1960s, as well as broader conceptions of camp and cult cinema. The only book-length study of Waters's career not written by the director himself, *Filthy: The Weird World of John Waters*, by Robrt L. Pela, offers details on the filmmaker's biography, the production and reception of his films, and some of the larger cultural and artistic influences that shaped Waters's work.¹⁴ Aimed at a popular audience, it includes both a helpful filmography and a compendium of common themes and tropes across Waters's movies, as well as entertaining interviews with Waters's enthusiasts in Baltimore that position the filmmaker within his regional context.¹⁵

Other scholars have analyzed titles within Waters's career in an attempt to theorize his relationship with genre conventions, gender norms, and the subversion of social mores. Matthew Tinkcom argues that Waters's cinema (particularly *Female Trouble*, *Polyester*, and *Serial Mom* (1994)) fuses transgressive notions of gender and perversity with the melodramatic forms of classical Hollywood. Even as Waters's films increasingly circulated within mainstream Hollywood, they maintained a certain critical edge regarding the upending of cultural, sexual, and social values.¹⁶ Building on Kaja Silverman's notion of "the authorial fantasmatic," Walter Metz uses Freud's "Family Romances" as the touchstone around which to understand Waters's continual fascination with aberrant familial relationships and queered heterosexual intimacies.¹⁷ Finally, Derek Kane-Meddock pushes against the prevailing notion that Waters's career reflects a trajectory from underground subversion to mainstream assimilation, charting an alternative path from the exploded gender binaries of *Pink Flamingos* to the scrambled generic boundaries in *Polyester* and *Serial Mom*.¹⁸ Indeed, all three scholars offer productive criticisms of the transgressor-turned-compromiser narrative often attached to Waters's film career, which I hope to similarly challenge through a closer examination of how the director employed the extra-cinematic within his early work.

Analyses of individual films similarly take a text-based approach, though they range in their methodological orientation and conclusions. The most written-about individual film in Waters's oeuvre is *Hairspray* (1988), which falls outside of the temporal parameters of my study.¹⁹ Two analyses of *Pink Flamingos*, however, illustrate some of the differing trends in textual analysis that can be found in studies of individual films by Waters. Anna Breckon and Erik van Ooijen present divergent understandings of the film's graphic and often un-simulated content. Breckon argues that the film links up with contemporary trends in queer theory to

embody a kind of radical negativity—one that denies the possibility of empathetic connection between viewer and protagonist and instead valorizes the ideological potential of disgust and refusal.²⁰

Within a larger argument on how viewers respond to non-simulated acts of violence within film, meanwhile, van Ooijen discusses the unique discomfort felt by viewers when confronted with the blurring between a screen actor as a physical human body and as the embodiment of a fictional character. He examines in particular the scene in which Babs Johnson (Divine) performs oral sex on her son Crackers (Danny Mills). A scandalous image of incest within the fictional universe of the film, it arguably becomes overshadowed by the fact that the viewer is seeing an actual sex act between two men, one of whom is dressed as a woman.²¹ While insightful, pairing these analyses with considerations of how unorthodox midnight-movie advertising and exhibition practices shaped viewer response allows for greater understanding of the particular historical conditions within which these scenes were received.

The figure of Divine also looms large within scholarship on Waters.²² As a performer, persona, and embodiment of transgressive ideas surrounding gender and sexuality, he has proven a particularly rich subject for queer theorists.²³ Judith Butler referenced him within the introduction of her seminal work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, while Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick considered (along with Michael Moon) issues of embodiment, gender identity, and excess within Divine's performances across Waters's filmography in their chapter, "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little Understood Emotion."²⁴ This is not to say that Divine has escaped criticism within the academy. While scholars like Dan M. Harries largely praise Divine's ability to parody gender roles, Hollywood stardom, and even his own persona, Gaylyn Studlar finds a far more ambivalent mixture of transgression and regression in

Divine's performances.²⁵ Karl Schoonover attempts to negotiate these complexities by considering how Divine's star image moved fluidly between different registers of celebrity and cultural status, cultivating what he refers to as "a non-monogamous relationship to mainstream, low-brow, and marginal star systems."²⁶ These readings attest to the complexity of Divine's persona and the invaluable status that he had in the popularity of Waters's work. In turn, I will track how Divine's image and presence became utilized in the promotion, circulation, and exhibition of Waters's films.

Recently, there has been a turn in Waters's scholarship toward a greater emphasis on historical accounts of the filmmaker's production practices and extra-cinematic activities. Chris Holmlund's *Female Trouble* offers a remarkably detailed account of the titular work, with particular attention paid to the cultural, political, and regional contexts that shaped its creation and reception.²⁷ Two recent essays, meanwhile, look at the relationship between Waters's 1970s-era work and the influence of various exploitation traditions of the 1950s and 1960s. Focusing on sexploitation, gore films, and mondo films and their relationship to Waters's 1970s-era output, Elise Pereira Nunes notes various production, distribution, and exhibition practices that the filmmaker adopted from exploitation.²⁸ These include his screenings in non-traditional exhibition spaces, self-distribution of films, handmade advertisements, and run-ins with censors. Kate J. Russell compares the use of paratextual materials in the films of William Castle and John Waters.²⁹ Her work not only establishes Castle's influence on Waters's cinema, but illuminates how both filmmakers used promotional ballyhoo, exhibition gimmickry, and cinematic shock to create an atmosphere of carnivalesque freedom within the movie theater. Though Russell does not address other components of Waters's directorial brand, her superlative analysis offers perhaps the closest methodological match to this dissertation.

Methodology

This dissertation draws upon various studies of directorial branding and auteur development to construct a typology of terms that address two key concerns. First, I will outline the constituent parts of a directorial brand. Then, I will consider the ways in which a directorial brand develops over time.

Eight Elements of Directorial Branding

Though it will be discussed in the least detail, it is important to begin by noting one of the most crucial methods through which a directorial brand is created—the cinematic work of the filmmaker. The formal, stylistic, and thematic material seen within and across a director's body of work both constitutes their primary means of gaining public prominence and provides the material by which critics, scholars, and fans make arguments regarding a director's status as an auteur. While a filmmaker at the center of a directorial brand would likely have made films possessing notable and consistent aesthetic dimensions, not every auteur filmmaker necessarily constitutes a brand. To analyze the creation and development of a directorial brand requires placing the filmmaker's cinematic output within a broader context of extra-textual elements that can alternately bolster, counteract, or complicate the films themselves.³⁰ Waters's cinematic texts profoundly shaped elements of his brand—provocation, extremity of sex and violence, camp humor, roughhewn aesthetics—but these interacted with and were in turn shaped by a bevy of extra-cinematic components that sculpted the contours of his public persona.

The second method comes from the physical presence of the director themselves. How a filmmaker presents their own body, voice, appearance, mannerisms, and affect in public frames the viewer's understanding of a director's overall project and provides fodder for the creation of a public persona that transcends any given title. These baseline traits can then be further

highlighted and shaped through the circumstances in which filmmakers present themselves, from planned appearances at screenings and publicity events to everyday encounters with the public. While all directors engage in this act of self-management to a point, some will go to greater lengths to shape perception through the curation of appearance. Thomas Leitch notes the “signature traits” of Alfred Hitchcock as including “his cameo appearances [in his films and] his cherubically corpulent figure tricked out in a series of outrageous costumes for the prologues and epilogues to *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.”³¹ Gian Maria Annovi’s defines this as “authorial performance” in his work on the cross-medial and highly self-aware public persona of Pier Paolo Pasolini.³² Waters certainly fits this model. In appearances at screenings and press events, Waters developed physical trademarks that became emblems of his larger public identity: thin pencil moustache; knowingly flamboyant sartorial choices; ever present cigarette; Baltimore-accented voice ripe with winking innuendo.

One way in which filmmakers actively attempt to shape understanding of their work, intentions, and personality comes through the third method of directorial branding: public statements. These can take the form of written documents like essays, director’s notes, or press releases. More often, they come through verbal exchanges expressed in interviews. Timothy Corrigan describe these as “one of the few, documentable extratextual spaces where the auteur, in addressing cults of fans and critical viewers, can engage and disperse his or her own organizing agency as auteur.”³³ While shifting away from the language of auteurism, this dissertation views interviews in this way too, as well as opportunities for filmmakers to actively perform a directorial persona linked to but ultimately separate from their cinematic work.

Though written pieces would become increasingly central to his career over time, Waters viewed interviews as prime opportunities to not only sell his films, but to promote a version of

himself. If his characters were extravagantly perverse, Waters framed himself in interviews as an eccentric but self-aware and highly disciplined crafter of cracked cinematic worlds. John Rodden divides literary interview subjects into three categories: the traditionalist, who downplays personality and foregrounds their own work; the raconteur, who treats the interview as a kind of performance and makes themselves into a character; and the advertiser, who is not just a self-displayer (like the raconteur) but a self-promoter who uses interviews to promote a public persona that is perhaps even more important than their own work.³⁴ The categories of the raconteur and the advertiser provide particularly helpful lenses through which to view Waters's interviews, as they highlight how the filmmaker used the forum to engage the public with his singular humor and promote himself as a figure in command of but separate from his filmic creations.

Fourth, filmmakers craft their directorial brands through relationships with important creative interlocutors. Actors, writers, producers, and other collaborators shape the impact and meaning of a director's work and can become public emissaries for their creative vision. Within the world of 1960s underground cinema, for instance, Warhol superstars like Edie Sedgwick or Mario Montez developed their performances and personas in collaboration with the filmmaker while becoming public embodiments of the Andy Warhol brand even when working on other creative endeavors. Waters performed a similar feat of subcultural star creation in his early films with the casting of local friends and acquaintances from Baltimore. He worked with these largely non-professional performers to craft on and off-screen personalities, encouraging them to embrace their pre-existing, unorthodox physical characteristics or personality traits that, to Waters, made them compelling to watch. Divine proved the ultimate embodiment of such partnerships. His startling appearance and indelibly abrasive performances helped establish the

Waters's brand of shock comedy and camp transgression, elements that Divine could carry with him as he embarked on stage and music work later in his career.

Fifth are the extra-cinematic elements of marketing and publicity. Analyzing the role of theatrical trailers in the cultivation of David Mamet as a recognized auteur, Yannis Tzioumakis notes "an increasingly large number of marketing strategies that also include film posters, television and radio spots, publicity stills, press kits, cast and crew interviews, behind-the-scenes documentaries, 'making-of' featurettes, and, more recently web pages devoted to individual films."³⁵ All of these situate both the director's works and the director themselves within the public eye. Tzioumakis points out, however, that the industrial players behind these efforts may end up revealing "a different auteur" than the figure the director themselves wants presented, "an author whose presence is assigned institutionally, which often makes sense only in light of distributors' attempts to market a specific product to a particular audience."³⁶

Waters's intimate relationship to his films' marketing and publicity (as well as exhibition-centered events and performances, which I include within this category) challenges the potential conflict of image that Tzioumakis discusses. With posters crafted and distributed by the filmmaker himself, for instance, Waters controls the message conveyed about his works and himself to a remarkable degree. Their creation, circulation, and impact upon potential viewers forms a core element of the Waters's brand both for their ability to attract audience attention and for their role in cultivating Waters's underground exploiteer persona. As he began working with New Line Cinema in the early 1970s, however, Waters's control over marketing, publicity, and exhibition situations became somewhat attenuated, prompting a reconsideration of how to use the extra-cinematic to bolster and shift his directorial brand.

Indeed, Waters's long-standing connection with New Line leads to the sixth element: relationships with studios, distributors, and other industrial or institutional entities. Affiliation with a distributor offers clear short and long-term advantages for a filmmaker's brand, providing circulation and financial backing for their work and aligning themselves with the company's own reputation. In turn, a director's brand can potentially alter a company's public identity through producing or distributing the filmmaker's work. Marguerite Rippey, for instance, notes in her study of Orson Welles's unfinished projects at RKO how the director's pre-existing brand from his radio and theater work shaped the studio's decision to hire him, while his pattern of grandiose and incomplete projects while at the studio ultimately reshaped Welles's public persona.³⁷ Waters's affiliation with smaller independent distributors and particularly New Line exemplified these dynamics. The filmmaker signed with New Line for its burgeoning reputation of releasing alternative films to youth audiences and in turn helped the company firmly establish its brand as a purveyor of "'arty and freak' films."³⁸ At the same time, it is equally important to note Waters's partnerships with regional cinematic organizations like the Baltimore International Film Festival as well as connections to individual theaters and non-traditional exhibition spaces.

The seventh element intersects with earlier dynamics of self-presentation and representation. Reviews, profiles, and media written, filmed, recorded, and otherwise produced about the filmmaker and their work establishes a crucial context within which a directorial brand becomes established, maintained, and potentially damaged. Two major factors prove notable. First, reviews and other critical commentary on a director's work influences the public perception of how a given filmmaker relates to larger trends in contemporary cinema and culture.³⁹ While Waters would frequently delight in the appalled reactions that many reviewers

had to his films, he maintained an active interest in published response to his work and frequently grappled with his reputational standing in the film-critical community.

Second, representation of a director in the media not only provides a platform for the filmmaker to achieve visibility and notoriety but reflects broader cultural assumptions about a director's identity and its relationship to their work. This can prove particularly fraught for queer filmmakers, female filmmakers, filmmakers of color, or any other director who falls outside the confines of "normative" gender, sexuality, race, and class. Judith Mayne, for instance, illuminates how Dorothy Arzner, a lesbian filmmaker working in classical Hollywood, both shaped and was shaped by the images and publicity writing that circulated around her.⁴⁰ Reporters described Waters's body, voice, and overall manner in a variety of ways throughout his career, drawing larger and not always flattering conclusions about his character, sincerity, and even morality. Waters, meanwhile, attempted to both maintain and augment this outsider-freak aspect of his directorial brand as he gained increasing notoriety throughout the 1970s.

Finally, audiences form a key element of directorial branding for two reasons. They are first and foremost the ultimate arbiter of a brand's success. If the viewing public does not recognize the associations that theoretically allow a filmmaker to put their "stamp" on any given work, then that director's public persona has not achieved the sort of coherence-making status that would allow them to move within and across various media. Of course, any notion of "audience" must inevitably consider the always-fractured nature of cinematic viewership and the likelihood of certain fan communities appreciating brand signifiers that the general public might not. This leads to the second role of audiences, which is to act as participants within the brand identity itself. The type of viewership that becomes associated with a directorial brand and the nature of their spectatorship and fandom can decidedly impact how a director's career develops

and how they are perceived by the broader public. Waters experienced this with particular intensity after *Pink Flamingos*, where media attention on the midnight-movie audiences flocking to the film partly shaped general perceptions about Waters as a filmmaker and public figure.

The listing of these elements is not meant to ascribe a definitive order or importance to any individual item. They all work together in various interlocking and context-specific ways to constitute a given filmmaker's brand and will be discussed in varying configurations in relation to Waters's career from the mid-1960s to the early-1980s. Taken together, they form the basis through which the public can ascertain the fundamental components of a directorial brand.

Development and Change within a Directorial Brand

How a director's public reputation shifts over time similarly depends upon individual circumstance and context, but this dissertation identifies four major categories of directorial brand development. I refrain from identifying these as "steps" or "stages" due to those terms' implication of linear progression. With the exception of the first, these categories need not occur in the order I lay out, nor do they always occur in isolation. Furthermore, any of the aforementioned elements of directorial brand development can be seen within each of the following four categories.

The first category is brand creation. Here, a director takes the initial steps to define the signifiers and mark the contours of their public persona. This will likely center on the production and circulation of films but will also involve considerations of persona cultivation—physical appearance, framing of intentions and work, and strategies for media exposure. While all filmmakers inevitably contemplate these questions, the creation of a directorial brand demands an active appraisal of how cinematic work will relate to the molding of a public identity that exists apart from any given title.

Brand expansion is the second category. While a directorial brand remains in a state of semi-permanent flux, this category implies that a relative stability of meaning has accrued around a filmmaker in the public eye. Once this has occurred, expansion describes the process of circulating the various signifiers tied to a director's brand to an ever-larger array of venues, media markets, and cultural spheres. This process will likely produce some internal shifts in meaning, but these do not reflect a fundamental change in character so much as result from interactions between a director's brand identity and various new contexts.

Differing from brand expansion is the third category, brand extension. Both involve the increased circulation of a reasonably established public identity, but the distinction comes in the spaces in which it travels. Brand expansion assumes that the dissemination is occurring broadly within a director's chosen field of cinema. Brand extension occurs when a director is able to translate their brand associations and connotations into other media. The essential characteristics remain legible even as they leave their "home" venue and are positioned in theater, radio, television, literature, cultural commentary, fine art, politics, or any other realm that the brand is extended into. This process proves essential, as it solidifies the coherence of the directorial brand through the act of adaptation across media or cultural spheres, as well as potentially helping to define the individual as more than "just" a filmmaker.

Finally, brand reconfiguration refers to a conscious altering of the fundamental characteristics and connotations embedded within a directorial brand. This can take many forms, including fresh aesthetic directions within their films, exploration of different media, or invocation of heretofore unheard opinions within public appearances and statements. Whether inspired by personal changes, industrial pressures, or large-scale cultural shifts, reconfiguration seeks to alter perception not through a full-on redefinition of the brand but rather a notable

modification in what it connotes and represents within the public eye. While overlaps exist between reconfiguration and the inevitable, smaller shifts in identity that occur when a brand is expanded into different markets or extended into a new medium, the key difference comes in the relative scale and intentionality of the change. Furthermore, the intention to reconfigure a brand does not guarantee its success. The solidification of signifiers that occurs within a successful directorial brand can prove difficult to unsettle, and new connotations can layer atop the old in unexpected ways.

Applying these concepts to Waters provides new vantage points on both the filmmaker himself and larger understandings of directorial identity and labor. Viewing Waters's early years through this lens illuminates the subtle and frequent shifts that occurred within what many consider to be a stable period of his career. More broadly, it offers a model of how directorial branding as a conceptual framework can be utilized to uncover continuity and change across a filmmaker's professional life, revealing the underlying dynamics that lead to the enduring careers and cultural impacts of some of our most notable filmmakers.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One charts Waters's early efforts at brand creation. Specifically, this involved a merging of three separate influences: the exploitation cinema of the 1950s and 1960s; the New York City-based Underground cinema of the same period; and the regional connections Waters had formed in Baltimore, Maryland. Taking as much inspiration from the extra-cinematic elements of exploitation and Underground as their on-screen aesthetics, Waters sought to merge these practices and import them to his hometown. The first two sections of the chapter outline the exploitation and the Underground's relationships to marketing, publicity, distribution, and exhibition and reveal how they impacted Waters's early conceptions of film production,

circulation, and reception. Then, I consider how Waters transferred these methods into the particular regional context of Baltimore by analyzing the marketing, publicity, exhibition, and reception of Waters's early shorts: *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* (1964); *Roman Candles* (1967); and *Eat Your Makeup* (1968). In doing so, this chapter illustrates how Waters began to conceptualize his directorial brand as not only a filmmaker but as an orchestrator of knowingly sensationalistic cinematic events aimed squarely at his own milieu of the Baltimore subculture.

In Chapter Two, I turn to Waters's brand expansion. Having established textual and contextual signifiers within his work that constituted a public signature, Waters expanded into feature filmmaking with *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*. At the same time, he sought to both bolster his brand within Baltimore and broaden it into the larger and expanding national market for Underground-influenced films in American cities and college campuses. Doing so meant adopting a two-pronged approach of cultivating relationships within Baltimore's network of film and arts-related organizations and finding ways to move his films and himself around the country. Part one of the chapter examines his regional efforts, with particular attention paid to how Waters both partnered with local filmic institutions and sought to retain singular extra-cinematic processes that would allow his burgeoning brand to stand out within the cultural marketplace. Part two follows Waters as he forges relationships with both independent distributors and local exhibition venues on the West Coast. These allowed Waters to further hone the underground exploiter persona established in Baltimore and adapt it to other regional contexts—developments that set the stage for his breakthrough onto the national film scene.

Chapter Three focuses on that breakout film, *Pink Flamingos*. Textual analyses of the film reveal the transgressive imagery and jaw-dropping shock humor that solidified major elements of Waters's directorial brand. This chapter, however, considers how Waters's identity

as underground exploiteer allowed for audiences to experience that shock with a context of bacchanalian fun. It details the highly fruitful collaboration between Waters and *Flamingos*'s distributor New Line Cinema and explores the shrewd linking of the film with the burgeoning midnight-movie market in the United States. The chapter then looks at two significant elements of media coverage surrounding the film. It notes both how critics conceived of the film as an occasion for broader considerations of aesthetic standards and cultural evaluation and how reporters discussed the film's midnight-movie audiences in consistently anthropologic and occasionally pathological terms. Both strains of discourse further drove the film's cultural impact and helps to explain its enduring place within 70s-era cinema culture. Ultimately, the chapter analyses how Waters's by-now crystallized directorial brand expanded once again through his own talents, and how collaborations with New Line and various exhibition spaces encouraged the sort of raucous midnight screenings that led *Pink Flamingos* to financial success and cult status.

Chapter Four focuses on the aftermath of *Pink Flamingos*'s sensational run, which resulted in a desired but not entirely successful brand reconfiguration for Waters. Responding to the question of how he could top the scatological extremes of his previous film, Waters used interviews and public appearances to frame his follow-up features *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* as retaining the outrageousness of *Flamingos* but manifesting it in a less obvious fashion. New Line seemed in a prime position to assist in this transition, releasing both films in regular release patterns that took them out of the midnight context. Their middling performance and eventual return to the midnight circuit reveals the importance of *Pink Flamingos*'s extra-textual framing in the midnight-movie theater and expresses the limits of directorial efforts to reconfigure public perception of their work. At the same time, shifts in

critical and cultural reception surrounding Waters's films and his own by-now established public persona allowed for the beginnings of a brand extension into essayistic writing, lecturing, and other new ventures. While shifts in the framing of his films largely failed to signal a brand reconfiguration, smaller acts of brand extension laid the groundwork for Waters's eventual emergence as a public personality distinct from his cinematic work.

Finally, Chapter Five explores the successful if complex brand reconfiguration of Waters in the early 1980s. The release of *Polyester* marked a decided turn in Waters's filmmaking to a more mainstream register, which was accompanied by a wider theatrical release and higher production budget. He complicated this seemingly straightforward move toward quasi-acceptability, however, through the incorporation of *Odorama*, an exploitation-influenced gimmick that directly linked the film to his earliest days as an underground exploiteer. I analyze the development, usage, and reception of *Odorama* as a means of illuminating the negotiations inherent within brand reconfiguration, showing how differing elements contained within the same brand can express ambivalences about new directions within a filmmaker's public identity. The chapter then examines Waters's most significant act of brand extension up to that point—the release of his first book, the autobiographical *Shock Value* (1981). Like *Polyester*, an examination of its production and reception reveals the oscillating nature of Waters's brand identity, simultaneously reveling in Waters's pre-existing connotations of eccentricity and bolstering his status as an author, storyteller, and social satirist. Ultimately, their release within three months of one another signaled a shift within Waters's directorial brand away from the identity of underground exploiteer and towards that of cultural commentator and public personality that would develop throughout the rest of his career.

This dissertation concludes with some reflections on the importance of directorial branding in the evaluation of Waters's career more broadly, looking ahead to the varied and voluminous amount of cross-media work he has made since the early 1980s. It then considers how the framework of directorial branding might be applied to other contemporary American independent filmmakers. In doing so, it underscores how this methodology complicates the art/commerce binary that can structure analyses of independent directors' careers.

Indeed, these ideas ultimately illustrate the twin goals of this dissertation. On one level, it seeks to focus tightly on the decisions and tactics utilized by Waters as he created, expanded, extended, and reconfigured his directorial brand from the mid 1960s through the early 1980s. This process reveals key elements of the filmmaker's personality, contextualizes his films' reception, and provides insight into how Waters worked both within and around the industrial and cultural structures of his time. On another level, this process exemplifies a larger understanding of directorial brand development as a site of rich, sometimes compromised, but often creative negotiation for filmmakers seeking to balance aesthetic innovation, economic ambitions, and social realities. Waters undertook this process from the earliest moments of his career, to which we will now turn.

¹ Waters quoted in Sally A. Lodge, "John Waters," *Publishers Weekly*, July 17, 1981, 7.

² Emanuel Levy, *Gay Directors, Gay Films?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 282.

³ Ibid. 301.

⁴ To be clear, Levy and others note Waters's extra-cinematic practices within their overviews of the filmmaker's career, but they rarely consider in detail their role in shaping either how Waters's films were received or his persona and career in the long term.

⁵ John Waters, *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005), 192.

⁶ Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 6.

⁷ Writing on the unfinished RKO projects of Orson Welles, Rippy observes that "it is helpful to think of Welles's work as a brand rather than a text—a constellation of materials that results in various 'texts,' whether these are performed, photographed, or merely generated through surrounding letters, photographs, or newspaper clippings." Marguerite H. Rippy, *Orson Welles and the Unfinished RKO Works: A Postmodern Perspective* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 14–15. Edwards draws from the work of Rik Riezebos when he writes that "a brand is not the company nor product name nor is it the product itself. Rather, it exists in the collection of signs that express and distinguish a product or its maker, or both." Kyle Dawson Edwards, "Brand-Name Literature: Film

Adaptation and Selznick International Pictures' *Rebecca* (1940)," *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 51, n. 12.

⁸ James Russell, "Producing the Spielberg 'Brand,'" in *A Companion to Steven Spielberg*, ed. Nigel Morris, (Malden, MA, Oxford, and Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 46.

⁹ For examples of such criticism, see Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 101–108; and Barrett Hodsdon, *The Elusive Auteur: The Question of Film Authorship Throughout the Age of Cinema* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017), 279–284.

¹⁰ Howard Becker offers an overview of how artists' reputations are created, managed, and altered. Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, rev. ed. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008), 351–371.

¹¹ Kate J. Russell, "The Cinematic Pandemonium of William Castle and John Waters," forthcoming in *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

¹² The most notable books written by Waters are Waters, *Shock Value*; John Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 2003); John Waters, *Role Models* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010); and John Waters, *Carsick: John Waters Hitchhikes Across America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). Notable books comprised entirely or primarily of interviews with Waters include John G. Ives, *John Waters* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992); Jack Stevenson, *Desperate Visions: Camp America: John Waters, George & Mike Kuchar* (London and San Francisco: Creation Books, 1996); and James Egan, ed., *John Waters: Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

¹³ J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 136–173.

¹⁴ Robrt L. Pela, *Filthy: The Weird World of John Waters* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2002).

¹⁵ Other books that offer smaller scale career overviews include Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 161–163; Stefan Brecht, *Queer Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 137–156; Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 170; Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 74–82; and Mike Quarles, *Down and Dirty: Hollywood's Exploitation Filmmakers and Their Movies* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1993), 57–66.

¹⁶ Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 155–188.

¹⁷ Walter Metz, "John Waters Goes to Hollywood: A Poststructural Authorship Study," in *Authorship and Film*, eds. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (New York: Routledge, 2003), 157–174.

¹⁸ Derek Kane-Meddock, "Trash Comes Home: Gender/Genre Subversion in the Films of John Waters," in *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, ed. Christine Gledhill (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 205–218.

¹⁹ Nevertheless, the volume of work dedicated to it deserves mentioning: Renee R. Curry, "To Star is To Mean: The Casting of John Waters's *Hairspray*," in *Cultural Power, Cultural Literacy: Selected Papers from the 14th Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film*, ed. Bonnie Braendlin (Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University Press, 1991), 167–178; Renee R. Curry, "*Hairspray*: The Revolutionary Way to Restructure and Hold Your History," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1996): 165–168; Caetlin Benson-Allott, "Camp Integration: The Use and Misuse of Nostalgia in John Waters' *Hairspray*," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 26, no. 2 (2009): 143–154; Dana Heller, *Hairspray* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); and Suzanne Woodward, "Taming Transgression: Gender-Bending in *Hairspray* (John Waters, 1988) and its Remake," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 10, nos. 2–3 (2012): 115–126.

²⁰ Anna Breckon, "The Erotic Politics of Disgust: *Pink Flamingos* as Queer Political Cinema," *Screen* 54, no. 4 (2013): 514–533.

²¹ Erik van Ooijen, "Cinematic Shots and Cuts: On the Ethics and Semiotics of Real Violence in Film Fiction," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 3 (2011): 1–15.

²² Two books on Divine that adopt a more biographical or memoir-like approach are Bernard Jay, *Not Simply Divine* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); and Frances Milstead with Kevin Heffernan and Steve Yeager, *My Son Divine* (New York: Alyson Books, 2001).

²³ My understanding of Divine's gender identity was that he identified as male. That being said, Divine's on-screen roles and persona depended heavily upon drag and gender fluidity. Generally, when I am discussing Divine as an off-screen figure, I will use masculine pronouns. When I am referring to Divine as an on-screen presence, I will use female pronouns. Slippage occurs when discussing Divine's publicity appearances, in which Divine is technically not on-screen but is seemingly enacting the Divine persona.

-
- ²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2007), xxx; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion (written with Michael Moon)," in Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 215–251.
- ²⁵ Dan M. Harries, "Camping with Lady Divine: Star Persona and Parody," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 12, nos. 1–2 (1990): 13–22; Gaylyn Studlar, "Midnight S/Excess: Cult Configurations of 'Femininity' and the Perverse," in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, ed. J.P. Telotte (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991), 138–155.
- ²⁶ Karl Schoonover, "Divine: Toward an 'Imperfect Stardom,'" in *Hollywood Reborn: Movie Stars of the 1970s*, ed. James Morrison (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 158–181.
- ²⁷ Chris Holmlund, *Female Trouble* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017).
- ²⁸ Elise Pereira Nunes, "Sex, Gore and Provocation: The Influence of Exploitation in John Waters's Early Films," *Transatlantica* 2 (2015): 1–18.
- ²⁹ Russell, "The Cinematic Pandemonium."
- ³⁰ This contention echoes Robert E. Kapsis, who argues in his study of Alfred Hitchcock's reputational development that the auteur's now-canonical status rests as much on how Hitchcock was repositioned in relation to shifting discourses on cinematic authorship, style, and genre as it does the intrinsic quality of his films. Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1–15.
- ³¹ Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 237.
- ³² Gian Maria Annovi, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Performing Authorship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 8.
- ³³ Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls*, 108.
- ³⁴ John Rodden, *Performing the Literary Interview: How Writers Craft Their Public Selves* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 6–15.
- ³⁵ Yannis Tzioumakis, "Marketing David Mamet: Institutionally Assigned Film Authorship in Contemporary American Cinema," *The Velvet Light Trap* 57 (Spring 2006): 60.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Rippey, *Orson Welles*, 14–45.
- ³⁸ Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 76.
- ³⁹ Colin Burnett, for instance, argues that Robert Bresson is best understood through a cultural-market perspective in which Bresson's contact with French film culture—institutions, individuals, ideas—shaped both his approach to film and his conception of himself as a cinematic artist. Colin Burnett, *The Invention of Robert Bresson: The Auteur and His Market* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017).
- ⁴⁰ Judith Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 151–174.

Chapter One

Drive-Ins, Cinematheques, and Churches: Creating the Waters's Brand

"The world premiere was much better than the movie." – John Waters, on the debut screening of *Roman Candles*¹

Discussing the impact of New York City's Underground film scene of the early-to-mid 1960s on his aesthetic and practical approaches to cinema, John Waters was asked whether immersing himself in the Underground included meeting other filmmakers. Waters demurred: "No. I went and watched the movies with my friends and came back [to Baltimore] and tried to make them. At the same time, we'd go to the drive-in every night here, which was a completely different influence. But [going to New York] gave me the idea of what I wanted to do as a career; I realized that it was possible."²

Within this response, Waters identifies the spaces that stand in for the three major components of his burgeoning directorial brand in the mid-1960s. First, Waters traveled to New York City throughout his teenage years, seeking out works by Underground luminaries like George and Mike Kuchar, Andy Warhol, and Kenneth Anger and religiously reading the writings of critic Jonas Mekas in the *Village Voice* and *Film Culture*. These experiences molded his ideas about what a film could look like, who could be in it, and how it could be made. Second, Waters's noting of the "drive-in" acts as shorthand for the exploitation cinema of the mid-to-late 1950s and 1960s. If the Kuchars, Warhol, and Anger formed a sort of Underground Holy Trinity, then Russ Meyer, Herschell Gordon Lewis, and William Castle acted as an equivalent triad within the world of cheap sexploitation and grubby horror films. Their reliance on sensationalist marketing and promotion tactics and their screenings in Baltimore drive-ins and grindhouses shaped Waters's notions of cinematic pleasure and showmanship as much as the Underground taught him about do-it-yourself production techniques and transgressive form. Finally, while he

traveled to New York to gain inspiration, Waters always returned to Baltimore, where he cultivated a network of artists, beatniks, and subcultural eccentrics in the downtown bars and hangouts of his home city.³ Ideally, the urbane chic of the Underground screening venue and the shameless sleaze of the exploitation drive-in could be combined and situated amongst the personalities and peccadillos of his own community.

This chapter considers how Waters created his directorial brand out of what Jack Stevenson deemed “a mutant hybrid of two markedly different film genres: Exploitation and Underground.”⁴ Both traditions will be surveyed for how they approached marketing, publicity, and exhibition practices. Waters adopted specific techniques and large-scale ideas about extra-cinematic spectacle and salesmanship from each and found within both a figure whose impresario-like persona would impact the contours of his own directorial brand. How Waters synthesized these influences and utilized them within the context of the Baltimore subculture will then be explored through an analysis of the marketing, promotion, exhibition, and reception of his first three short films: *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* (1964), *Roman Candles* (1967), and *Eat Your Makeup* (1968).⁵

In doing so, this chapter argues that Waters tied his self-conception as a filmmaker to extra-cinematic practice and brand creation from the earliest days of his career. This chapter’s opening quotation can only be partly read as self-deprecation. Waters’s elaborate and thoughtful orchestration of the marketing, promotion, and exhibition particularly for *Roman Candles* and *Eat Your Makeup* reveals the nascent construction of a public identity built around Waters not just as director but as underground exploiteer. Additionally, exploring how Waters drew on practices from exploitation film, Underground cinema, and the local Baltimore subculture underscores how the building of a public self relies upon the amalgamation of various other

brands, reputations, and traditions. The art of directorial brand creation, then, lies less in claims of absolute originality and more in the ability to cannily take pre-existing elements and augment them to fit a filmmaker's internal passions and external circumstances.

Seat Buzzers and Other Ballyhoo – Exploitation Cinema's Marketing and Exhibition

Exploitation cinema has always had a uniquely foregrounded relationship to advertising, marketing, and promotional activity. Frequently lacking the budget, shooting schedule, or production talent to make films that approach the technical or artistic quality of mainstream releases, exploitation movies have to draw viewers through the promise of arousal, shock, or controversy. This occurs through wildly exaggerated promises splashed out across posters and billboards that lure audiences to the theater. Regardless of where and how they are deployed, marketing and publicity become central not only to the financial success of exploitation cinema, but arguably form a key element of what makes it pleasurable in the first place.

These practices go back to the roots of exploitation film in the United States. As Eric Schaefer details in his history of exploitation's "classical" period from 1919 to 1959, exploitation marketing relied upon a range of appeals to draw in viewers. All of them fed into the same, essential desire for titillation and education. He identifies six chief themes that weave throughout exploitation advertising of this period: "(1) the aftereffects of heterosexual bonding; (2) blatant sex and nudity; (3) the unusual, aberrant, or forbidden; (4) timeliness or expose; (5) veracity; and (6) pedagogic appeal."⁶ These tactics resulted in a range of visual and linguistic configurations on posters, window cards, trailers, and other forms of advertising that would then be disseminated throughout a given town or city.

Part of the reasoning behind such tactics was obvious—to attract enough attention to get people to purchase a ticket. One could argue, however, that these strategies did not merely

provide a means to an economic end, but constituted part of the fun of exploitation cinema itself. Schaefer frames its appeals within the notion of “ballyhoo, that noisy, vulgar spiel that drew audiences to circuses and sideshows...a hyperbolic excess of words and images that sparked the imagination.”⁷ Many potential audience members undoubtedly knew that the hyperventilating tone and wild promises of classical exploitation marketing could not possibly be fulfilled within the cheaply made productions they advertised. Going back to the days of P.T. Barnum, however, “American audiences had willingly participated in extravagant claims, hoaxes, and humbugs—as long as these stimulated their curiosity.”⁸

Certainly, the exploitation films that dominated the American cinematic marketplace in the mid-1950s and 1960s differed from the classical exploitation films, primarily in their industrial circumstances and imagined audience.⁹ Most notably for this study, the loosening of state and local censorship boards and the liberalization of content standards that occurred throughout the 1950s and 1960s helped pave the way for both increasingly grotesque horror films and the sexploitation titles beginning in the late 1950s.¹⁰ Waters’s favorite films include titles from both of these genres.

These changes, however, did not significantly augment the marketing strategies utilized by exploiteers in the promotion of their films. Indeed, some of the most notable exploitation filmmakers and distributors of the era laid out their strategies in remarkably blunt terms. Samuel Z. Arkoff and James Nicholson, co-founders of major exploitation distributor American International Pictures (AIP), would first think of a provocative or catchy film title, which would then be turned into a poster, which would then be showed to exhibitors to gauge their reaction. If enough exhibitors expressed interest in booking the imagined title, only then would it actually be made.¹¹ Citing Wheeler Winston Dixon’s “defense” of exploitation producer Roger Corman,

Yannis Tzioumakis quotes the “Corman formula,” whose tenets include “play up the basest, most sensationalistic angle” of your film and “exaggerate wildly in the advertising.”¹²

Sexploitation films also utilized appeals based on excitement, adventure, curiosity, and experimentation to draw viewers to the theater, continuing the exploitation lineage of eye-catching visuals, bold taglines, and breathless promises of titillation and shock.¹³

Waters has written about the influence of exploitation marketing and advertising of this period on his filmmaking and worldview. In particular, he has been drawn to those advertisements and promotion strategies that emphasize hyperbolic depictions of violence and gore. Waters recalls the formative experience of first seeing ads for lurid exploitation titles like *Poor White Trash* (Harold Daniels, 1957) and *The Mole People* (Virgil Vogel, 1956) in the pages of *Variety*, and thereafter poring “over the local entertainment pages, clipping and collecting the most violent movie ads.”¹⁴ Still too young to get into some of these films, he found an entrée into the world of exploitation sleaze via the enticingly nasty imagery of the films’ newspapers advertisements. Marketing that foregrounded an overwrought sense of villainy or malevolence would remain appealing to Waters into his teen years, as when he first went to see Russ Meyer’s *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) “after being attracted to the radio ad blaring, ‘It will leave a taste of evil in your mouth!’”¹⁵

Rather than act as just an intermediary step toward the ultimate goal of seeing such films, however, marketing and promotional materials themselves provided imaginative fodder for Waters. “I’d pretend I owned a movie theater and book the most notorious films,” Waters recalls of his youth, “redesigning ad campaigns in a much more sensational manner and imagining the outrage it would cause in the religious community.”¹⁶ For Waters, then, the goals of upbraiding standards of local taste, religious restriction, and cultural mores began not just through the desire

to create his own films, but through the fanciful processes of film booking, theater management, and the coordinating of marketing and publicity campaigns. In this way, Waters took the exaggeration of exploitation advertising as both a creative act in and of itself and an opportunity to interject his own brand of garish hyperbole. It also allowed him to project himself into a professional role—not one of film director, but one of exploitation exhibitor, a distinction that would prove key to his burgeoning directorial brand in the mid-1960s.

If advertising and promotion constituted a cornerstone of exploitation cinema's identity, its sites of exhibition also proved key in establishing the type of filmgoing experience that patrons expected. Exploitation films played in a wide variety of theaters, depending upon the specific circumstances of the town or city that the film was booked.¹⁷ Nevertheless, two types of venues tended to dominate the public imagination. First were grindhouses, broadly defined as decaying theaters, frequently located on the outskirts of urban centers, where a clientele of primarily male transients pay a cheap ticket price and watch a string of exploitation titles. As the description implies, these theaters proved more fluid than most in terms of when customers entered, how long they stayed, and what occurred within them besides movie-viewing.

Second and more specific to the era of mid-1950s and 1960s exploitation was the drive-in. Though in existence as an institution since the early-to-mid 1930s, the drive-in became a veritable national phenomenon in the postwar era. Kerry Segrave has chronicled the history of the drive-in, pointing to how the shifts toward suburbanization, increases in automobile ownership, the relative affordability of land, and the need for inexpensive group entertainment led to a massive increase in their number and popularity throughout this period.¹⁸ They held specific appeal for suburban teenagers, in that they provided a public space to congregate as a group and engage in activities not sanctioned by their parents or other adult authority figures.

The reputation for teenage sexual activity at drive-ins, for instance, led them to be nicknamed “passion pits.”¹⁹ For all viewers, however, going to a drive-in implied a looser form of filmgoing than at a traditional theater—one that might include increased mobility during the film itself, as well as a higher degree of showmanship and gimmickry by the drive-in management.²⁰ Both grindhouses and drive-ins not only became linked to exploitation cinema, then, but also to a type of exhibition experience marked by laxer rules and more fluid forms of spectatorship.

Waters points to both grindhouses and drive-ins as key sites of filmgoing experiences throughout his life, shaping both the kinds of films that he saw at pivotal moments and the types of filmgoing behavior that he would promote at his own screenings. Grindhouses formed a major component of his Manhattan film education. Longtime friend and casting director Pat Moran recalled of Waters’s brief stint at New York University: “He had no intention of looking at Eisenstein films; he was down on Forty-second Street watching the Grind-o-rama and hideous films by every lunatic in the world.”²¹

If New York grindhouses offered Waters another opportunity to expand his personal repertoire of exploitation titles, Baltimore grindhouses embodied the city’s defiantly coarse spirit and ribald humor. Waters describes a range of toe-curling sights within Baltimore grindhouses, including one theater where “someone had scrawled on the entrance door, ‘IF YOU COME THROUGH THIS DOOR, YOU BE KILLED,’ and the management had never seen fit to wash it off.”²² Not that such screenings always implied danger. Waters also recalls attending a film in a downtown Baltimore theater where audience members suddenly began screaming as they felt rats scurrying under their feet. He writes that “an old black woman blurted out, ‘They don’t bite, but they sure can jump,’ and the audience laughed for ten straight minutes. No one left.”²³

Waters goes on: “The audience continued watching the film and just propped up their feet on the

seats in front of them to ward off all possible rat attacks. I immediately gave up on the film and watched the audience instead and was reminded of that famous Weegee photograph of an audience engrossed in a film, wearing 3-D glasses.”²⁴

The theater’s shabbiness surely appeals to Waters’s penchant for the grubbiness of certain Baltimore institutions, but what’s more striking is his delighted recollection of the old woman’s shrugging acceptance—one that spreads to the crowd and shifts the tone from horror to a kind of communal appreciation. Waters’s attention drifting from the screen to his fellow patrons proves similarly telling. The collective shock, humor, and unexpected camaraderie felt when watching a film in a theater—particularly one whose less-than-ideal state can lead to sudden surprises—proves central to Waters’s understanding of the theatrical experience writ large.

Drive-ins provided an even-more powerful influence on Waters, who tends to describe his experiences within them as providing three overlapping advantages: access to formative exploitation titles; freedom from parental and adult supervision; and ideas about filmgoing as the overlap between entertainment and commerce.

Even before Waters was old enough to enter traditional theaters or even grindhouses, the open-air set-up of the drive-in allowed him his first glimpse of exploitation cinema. “I’d sneak to a hill near our home where I could see the distant drive-in screen,” Waters recalls, “and watch all the ‘adults only’ gore and horror films through binoculars.”²⁵ Once old enough, Waters became a devotee of the drive-in, as it offered a consistent and accessible venue to see as many exploitation titles as he could. “Yeah, I used to live in the drive-ins. That’s where I saw all of those films that I like,” Waters told an interviewer.²⁶ In particular, the drive-in provided the venue for Waters to first view the work of two influential filmmakers in his own career: Russ Meyer, whose *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* Waters first saw in a drive-in in 1966; and the films

of Herschell Gordon Lewis. The sheer amount of access to the films and filmmakers he loved made the drive-in an ideal space. As Waters remarked when thinking back to his own obsessive repeat trips, “I always respected people I saw alone in the drive-in for their unabashed devotion to films.”²⁷

At the same time, the drive-in offered a venue for youthful socialization and rule breaking. “The drive-in was my temple,” Waters said. “I literally went to the drive-in every night, because it was the only place where you could go unsupervised. And we would drink beer and smoke pot and do other stuff.”²⁸ Like other members of his generational cohort, Waters saw the drive-in as not just an unorthodox space to view his films of choice, but to do so while simultaneously taking advantage of the drive-in’s combination of relative suburban respectability and opportunities for illicit activity. One of Waters’s brushes with the law also occurred there: “I got arrested in Carlin’s Drive-In for underage drinking with a mixed group of black and white teens, and the cop said in court that the girls were urinating outside the car.”²⁹ He recalls a range of boundary-skirting behaviors here: public urination; teenage drinking; and interracial friendships, the last of which likely inspired social suspicion amongst many white Baltimoreans in the 1960s. All underscore Waters’s framing of the drive-in as a disruptive space. Social restrictions could be loosened and otherwise suspect behavior, while clearly not out of the eye of the law, might be tolerated to a greater extent than otherwise seen.

Finally, Waters found within the drive-in one of the most potent emblems of how the financial imperatives of the film industry could serve as sources of ironic humor, camp appreciation, and unwitting insight into the inevitable encroachment of commercial forces within the filmgoing experience. The subject is a certain commercial played at the local drive-in, and it’s worth quoting Waters’s tribute at length:

The one film that influenced me more than any other is the ‘Visit Our Concession Stand’ ad that drive-ins invariably show between features. The production values on this standard short featuring the all-American family happily munching monstrous meatball sandwiches, overpriced tubs of popcorn, and disgusting warmed-up hamburgers varies from city to city, but you can always count on a certain ridiculous cheapness in the look of the film, no matter where you are. All my life I’ve tried to capture this magnificent sleaziness in my own productions but always feel I’ve come up short when I compare my work with other ‘Eat Your Meatball Sub’ ads.³⁰

As in much of his writing, Waters’s irony is quite thickly applied here, but that does not preclude the insights being discussed. Indeed, Waters’s adoration for the commercial comes from the disjuncture between its seemingly narrow intention and the excess of sleazy style that appears to overtake its intended meaning. The ad serves the simple purpose of directing viewers to the concession stands, which were key sources of drive-ins’ profitability.³¹ His critique is not necessarily with the ad’s insistence upon further spending.

Rather, what he takes such delight in is the tacky and overblown manner in which it seems to celebrate the act of consumption, in both a monetary and bodily sense. Waters notably separates this “ridiculous cheapness” from the actual production values of individual iterations of the concession-stand advertisements. Their cheapness resides not so much in budgetary constraint as it does in aesthetic vision—one whose wide-eyed glorification of “overpriced,” “disgusting,” and even “monstrous” snacks reveals the abject trashiness at the heart of a commercial ritual dutifully, even delightedly, performed by “the all-American family.” In an important sense, Waters is not joking when he claims to try and capture that “magnificent sleaziness” in his own work and career. Finding a core of emotional resonance or communal appeal in gimmicks steeped in chintzy commercialist logic would prove critical to how Waters approached and reworked the conventions of exploitation advertising, promotion, and exhibition.

Indeed, Waters's most elaborated thoughts on the extra-cinematic elements of exploitation film revolve around those instances in which the hype seen in posters, street marketing, and other ballyhoo extend into the space of exhibition itself. In these instances, the very act of cinema going becomes altered through gimmickry, theatricality, and playful disruption of the traditional interplay between audience and screen. Schaefer discusses many of these techniques from exploitation's classical period, including screenings restricted to patrons over eighteen or segregated showings for male and female audiences; showings of films at unusual times, including some of the first midnight screenings; and the inclusion of lectures, slideshows, and the selling of pamphlets that would frequently halt the film itself.³² Such techniques, argues Schaefer, not only served the economic purposes of exploiteers through their creation of unique theatrical experiences. They challenged "the system of orderly presentation of material to well-mannered spectators that was encouraged by Hollywood...carnivalizing the presentation process through the techniques just outlined."³³

Waters demonstrated his own love of the carnivalesque extending all the way back to his childhood. His youth abounds with examples that point to a fascination with the sort of circus-like bacchanalia that characterizes these in-theater gimmicks. Amusement parks and freak shows proved two of his favorite destinations as a child and young teenager. Waters impishly wrote that his ideal way of dying "would be on a roller coaster that jumps the tracks and careens into a packed crowd at a cotton candy stand at a state fair."³⁴

This extended into childhood projects and jobs. Waters recounts designing a horror house in his family garage in which patrons would pay a nickel to grope their way through the darkened area covered with fake spider webs, only to encounter Waters at the exit as he sprayed them with a fire extinguisher.³⁵ He also made money as a young teenager giving puppet shows for young

children. His repertoire consisted of *Cinderella* and a gory version of *Punch and Judy* in which the titular duo ends up eaten by a dragon. Adding to the show's sense of aggressive viewer participation, Waters writes that he would "come out from behind the stage and let the dragon puppet bite the children's hands for 'good luck.' Sometimes I'd chase the few terrified children who had refused until they finally gave up and let the dragon have his way."³⁶ Both his knowledge of older exploitation gimmicks and his personal history with sensationalistic and visceral forms of entertainment influenced the value Waters places upon unorthodox forms of film exhibition.

All of these fascinations connect to a key figure in exploitation cinema: the exploiteer. The exploiteer organizes the promotions, circulates the marketing materials, projects the ballyhoo, and generally acts as the ringleader of the three-ring circus that the exhibition space becomes. Unsurprisingly, Waters has spoken of these impresario-esque figures with great fondness and respect.

For example, he has discussed the tactics used by infamous producer Kroger Babb, whose *Mom and Dad* (1944) became a blockbuster on the exploitation circuit through Babb's aggressive and creative promotional tactics. Waters recalls Babb's use of more-established gimmicks—including gender-segregated showings and sex-education pamphlets hawked by fake nurses—before recounting the jaw-dropping anecdote of Babb purportedly releasing noxious gas into the theater during the screening. When a patron would pass out, Babb would call both an ambulance and the local press, so that he could have publicity photos of "shocked" patrons being carted out of the theater on a stretcher.³⁷ Recalling the story, Waters framed his appreciation for both Babb's shameless gimmickry and business savvy: "I don't think you could do any better than that...and they 'four-walled' the theatres in these places, so they didn't have to wait to get paid."³⁸

In this respect, perhaps no figure has offered a stronger template for Waters than William Castle. A director whose career spanned from the late 1930s to the mid 1970s, Castle is best known for a series of low-budget horror films made in the late 1950s and early-to-mid 1960s that relied upon increasingly extravagant in-theater gimmicks that wildly augmented the typical filmgoing experience.³⁹ His impact on Waters's career and conceptions of cinematic spectacle have been analyzed in detail by Kate J. Russell. She describes the "Castle-Waters mode of cinema" as one that calls for "a radical integration of the spectacular into a cinematic experience that is predicated on outrageous publicity, nail-biting anticipation, extraordinary theatrical gimmicks, audience delirium, shouts, screams, gags, laughs, and retches: a cinema of pandemonium."⁴⁰ Waters praised Castle's brand of extravagant exhibition stunts in a 1983 essay entitled "Whatever Happened to Showmanship?" It offers perhaps the most elaborate defense of the exploiter as directorial brand that Waters ever articulated.⁴¹

He begins the essay by bemoaning the lack of exploitation gimmickry in the contemporary film industry, observing that filmgoers would more easily forgive mediocre Hollywood product if the promotional campaigns offered some originality or pizzazz. After praising past exploiters such as Babb, Arkoff, and producer Joseph E. Levine, he turns to the career of Castle, "King of the Gimmicks." The bulk of the essay then recounts and comments upon the various in-theater promotional tricks and ballyhoo that Castle used within his work. *House on Haunted Hill* (1959) had "Emergo," in which a twelve-foot-tall, glow-in-the-dark skeleton would fly out over the audience at designated moments in the film. *The Tingler* (1959) employed "Percepto," where electric buzzers were installed in theater seats and would go off when the film's monster "escaped" into the screening space. *Homicidal* (1960) paused before its climax and any filmgoer too frightened to finish watching the movie would be invited to receive their money back, so long

as they withstood the public humiliation of standing in the designated “Cowards’ Corner” set up in the theater.

Having worked his way through all of Castle’s major film-related gimmicks, Waters then returns to the issue of contemporary film marketing and publicity. He ponders a range of promotional possibilities for recent Hollywood films, combining Castle’s go-for-broke spirit and his own deeply irreverent sense of humor. Observing that male sex comedies like *Porky’s* (Bob Clark, 1982) ultimately appeal to “dirty, filthy twelve-year-old lechers,” Waters calls upon their producers to “be honest and sponsor a circle-jerk for Cub Scout troops with the winner receiving a call girl for the night.”⁴² Even Oscar contenders become targets for his themed stunts, like bringing members of the audience for *Reds* (Warren Beatty, 1981) before “mock Senate hearings in the lobby” or closing the concession stand for viewers of *Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough, 1982) so the audience could suffer along with the titular fasting leader.⁴³ He concludes with a plea to Hollywood to acknowledge the dimming of the theatrical experience in the home video age: “Can’t you just come up with something? Will everyone just sit at home with their video machines? William Castle, where are you when we really need you?”⁴⁴

Three dominant ideas can be felt throughout this essay, all of which echo the observations that Waters has made regarding the status and value of exploitation techniques. First, Waters offers genuine affection for the scrappiness and ingenuity of Castle and other exploitation producers and distributors. Faced with the prospect of selling aesthetically questionable films, their utilization of stunts and ballyhoo strikes him as a sort of con job done honestly—especially when compared to what Waters sees as Hollywood’s more impersonal attempts to cover up its artistic failings. “Did the audiences care?” Waters asks of the “ludicrous but innovative marketing

techniques” of the 1950s and 1960s. “Hell, no. They may have hated the picture, but they loved the gimmick, and that’s all they ended up remembering anyway.”⁴⁵

Expanding on this idea, Waters’s second strand of exploitation appreciation comes from how its bald-faced appeals to showmanship and spectacle can reveal the blatant commercial underpinnings of all cinematic work, especially those that seek to transcend such labels through artistic or cultural pretensions. He notes, for instance, how Castle would sometimes arrive at premieres for his film *Macabre* (1958) in a hearse and would make his entrance by rising out from a coffin. “Would Jean-Luc Godard have gone this far?” Waters inquires. “Would he have arrived in a wrecked car to promote *Weekend* [1967]? Would Sergei Eisenstein have arrived in a battleship?”⁴⁶ While tongue-in-cheek, these comments foreground how Castle’s gaudy linking of his own persona—indeed, his physical presence—to the spooky aura of his directorial work is but an extreme amplification of the cultivation of auteurist identity performed by more respected cinematic artists. For a director that sought to create a directorial brand, it framed Castle as a legible personality known to his viewers as an orchestrator of theatrical spectacles as much as a creator of cinema.

Finally, Castle’s in-theater gimmicks provide viewers with an opportunity to interact with the film and one another in ways that disrupt expected viewing patterns and encourage a more free-flowing and unruly relationship to the screen, the space, and fellow patrons. “The kids went wild,” Waters writes of the reaction to the plastic skeleton launched across the theater during *House on Haunted Hill*. “They screamed. They hugged their girlfriends. They threw popcorn boxes at the skeleton.”⁴⁷ Recalling Castle’s sending out star Joan Crawford to theaters showing his film *Straight-Jacket* (1964), Waters writes that “Joan got so carried away by being a live, in-

person gimmick that she once invited the entire audience to join her for hamburgers in the restaurant next door to the theater, ensuring a riot and front-page coverage.”⁴⁸

And then there were the seemingly endless, unruly delights of the seat buzzers installed for *The Tingler*. A Philadelphia truck driver grew so enraged at the sensation that he ripped his seat out of the floor. Another theater installed the buzzers the night before the opening of *The Tingler* but began setting them off during a screening of the Audrey Hepburn vehicle *The Nun’s Story* (Fred Zinnemann, 1959). Their very presence in the theater seemed to inspire unpredictability and mischief. Waters’s own description of seeing *The Tingler* multiple times as an adolescent reveals how the film turned the theater into a site of play. With only ten seats wired with the buzzer, Waters remembers running through the theater during the film, attempting to find those select seats. “Looking back,” he writes, “*The Tingler* is the fondest moviegoing memory of my youth.”⁴⁹

It’s not hard to see why so many of Castle’s gimmicks appeal to Waters. As these and other examples illustrate, they transform the theater from a space of passive spectatorship into one that is active, spirited, and irreverent. Be it unexpected physical sensations, unorthodox breakdowns between star and viewer, or increased interaction between fellow spectators, Castle’s stunts brought the boisterous amusements of less-reputable entertainments into the movie theater and helped to turn a profit for the filmmaker to boot. Perhaps most importantly, he blurred the lines between what occurred on screen and in the theater, not to mention the roles of director and exploiter. Waters would take up this model of directorial branding within his own career, placing it into conversation with another seemingly divergent yet surprisingly related cinematic tradition.

Framing Transgression in the New York Underground

Perhaps because its history and critical reputation are not as intimately linked to marketing and exhibition tactics as exploitation, the New York Underground cinema of the 1960s gets discussed less directly by Waters as an inspiration for his own extra-cinematic practices.⁵⁰ In his own writing and interviews, Waters notes two elements about Underground films and the larger cultural scene that he experienced in his youth. He first emphasizes the aesthetic influence of certain Underground filmmakers, particularly George and Mike Kuchar. Citing their embrace of lurid color and their reimagining of Douglas Sirk's 1950s melodramas, he said that "they were the biggest influence on me, of the underground filmmakers" and that "they made me want to make films, *they* are the reason."⁵¹ Second, Waters cites the production practices of Underground filmmakers as key to realizing that he, too, could make films on ultra-low budgets, with a notable lack of technical polish and primarily featuring his own friend group. He imported both these aesthetic influences and production strategies of the Underground back to Baltimore.

Nevertheless, Waters also drew a certain amount of inspiration from the Underground's marketing, promotion, and exhibition techniques. While some of these linkages will become more concrete in the next and final section analyzing the marketing, promotion, and exhibition of *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, *Roman Candles*, and *Eat Your Makeup*, this section outlines the influential elements within the Underground that Waters then put into action for his own films.

Marketing and promotional materials for Underground screenings tended to take one of two forms. First, there were posters, flyers, and other somewhat ephemeral advertising materials. They were hung up in locations that would attract the eyes of young, artistic, and bohemian individuals that formed a core of Underground film viewership. As Juan A. Suárez notes, "the marketing for underground films was modest, and their publicity consisted mainly of sheets and posters in black and white, often designed by the filmmakers and programmers themselves."⁵²

One cannot make many generalizations regarding the design and address of these marketing materials, in part because so few have been preserved.

Still, it's worth briefly considering the artwork for two Underground films, which Suarez reprints in his book.⁵³ The first advertises a midnight screening of Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) at the Tivoli Theatre, where rushes from Smith's never-completed follow-up, *Normal Love* (1963) were also to be screened. A spindly, somewhat sinister-looking creature dominates the poster. It gazes out with blank, white eyes, flashes large teeth, and stretches out a hand whose fingers hold onto the "C" in the film's title. The poster does not represent the titular creations in a literal sense, but rather evokes the film's unique tonal combination of bacchanalian freedom and unsettling chaos.

Similarly, the hand drawn poster for Mike Kuchar's *Born of the Wind* (1964) recalls horror tropes in the exaggerated bubble font that spells out the title and the use of nighttime imagery like the moon and bats. Most strikingly, the figure of a female mummy dominates the frame, her body wrapped in gauze but her head revealed as a black void save for a pair of small, sharp eyes gazing out at the viewer. Her hair appears blown straight to the left by the wind, cutting horizontally across the image. Below this and above the title, one more line of text reads: "A Kuchar Film." The imagery of these posters proved as eye-catching as many Hollywood designs—an important factor, as these most likely were hung up in cafes, performance spaces, and street corners. At the same time, they emphasized an alternative and counterculture ethos through their hand-drawn aesthetic, somewhat enigmatic imagery, and emphasis upon the films' creators as selling points.

Underground films also advertised within alternative newspapers and periodicals, such as the *Village Voice*, the *East Village Other*, and the *Soho Weekly News*. *Film Culture*, the influential

journal run by Jonas Mekas, provided much publicity for Underground cinema at the time through critical commentary, as opposed to advertising and marketing. While films were sometimes advertised individually, most works were marketed within larger advertisements for exhibition spaces that specialized in Underground cinema.

Given that Waters spent his most concentrated amount of time in New York City in the fall of 1965, examining theater advertisements that ran in the pages of the *Village Voice* during this period offers some insights into how he saw Underground films sold to the public. Two major Underground venues—the Filmmakers’ Cinematheque and The Bridge—advertised on a more-or-less weekly basis in the *Voice*. Advertisements for the Cinematheque, which was also run by Mekas, often appeared near or even alongside Mekas’s “Movie Journal” column in the *Voice*, in which he would frequently promote forthcoming screenings or discuss past showings at the Cinematheque.⁵⁴ At both venues, films were frequently sold based upon three factors: critical praise, name recognition of key players, or evocative descriptions.

Ads for both venues in the September 30, 1965 issue of the *Voice* exemplify these strategies. That week, the Bridge’s screenings included Bruce Conner’s *Cosmic Ray* (1962), which the ad defined explicitly as a Conner film and described as “a ‘pop art’ masterpiece [that] turns the female nude into animated protoplasm.” It also promoted a screening of Stan Brakhage’s *Wedlock House: An Intercourse* (1959), where the only description was of Brakhage as a “foremost ‘underground’ filmmaker.”⁵⁵ The Cinematheque, meanwhile, screened an “Edie Sedgwick Double Bill,” showing two of the Warhol superstar’s features, *Beauty #2* (1965) and *Vinyl* (1965). Besides foregrounding both Sedgwick and Warhol’s names, the ad also described both films as “pseudoclinical explorations in pop art style.”⁵⁶ While posters and flyers designed by filmmakers and programmers made explicitly visual appeals, these ads focused intently on

text, emphasizing the films' artistic importance, subcultural cache, and place within a growing corpus of Underground titles and figures.

Waters adopted many of these strategies in the marketing and promotion of his own films. As much as he would integrate the outrageousness of exploitation cinema, Waters recognized the importance of targeting Baltimore's subcultural youth as his primary viewership. He placed his marketing materials at local events and institutions that he knew were popular within the Baltimore counterculture. The Underground seemingly provided this model. Asked about the difference between publicizing an independent film in the 1960s and the 1990s, Waters commented that "in the underground movie scene, you just put one little ad in the *Village Voice*, and everybody knew about it and went wild."⁵⁷

Additionally, three tactics seen in Underground advertisements would be replicated within Waters's own marketing. First, Waters utilized striking, hand-drawn imagery in the posters and flyers designed to promote his early shorts. These simple and humorous illustrations encapsulated key elements of the movies while exuding the low-fi aesthetic associated with the Underground. Second, Waters advertised the names of all of his actors on his early posters. This can be read partly as a parody of Hollywood one-sheets, framing local performers with little-to-no notoriety in the same manner as movie stars. By the same token, their reputations within the world of the Baltimore subculture would potentially entice local viewers to come and see their friends and acquaintances on the big screen. Finally, Waters never failed to mark his own status as filmmaker on every poster. If authorship possessed an undeniable prestige within the Underground, Waters was simultaneously aware of how it operated as a branding mechanism, raising awareness of individual titles and building a cultural reputation amongst a hopefully growing audience.

Exhibition venues themselves tended to be quite fluid within Underground cinema, both in terms of how frequently they shared space with other types of performing arts and how often they were shut down due to legal censure or financial difficulty. Frequently without distribution and often containing content or aesthetic strategies off-putting to mainstream audiences, Underground films needed to screen at whatever venue would take them. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum chronicle the various sites where both individual Underground films and more-sustained programs played over the course of the early-to-mid 1960s. These included dilapidated downtown movie houses, alternative theaters, gallery and performing arts spaces, churches, cafes, and even private lofts and apartments.⁵⁸ As a result, Underground cinema shared space with a range of other cinematic, artistic, and cultural practices—overlaps that sometimes led to crossovers in production talent and audiences. The often controversial and financially insolvent nature of these screenings also led them to shift around the city.

Mekas's screening series (which would officially be deemed the Filmmakers' Cinematheque in 1964) provides an emblematic case of how transitory exhibition spaces for Underground films could be. Over a nine-year span, Mekas recalls running showcases in seventeen different locations around New York City, including pre-existing movie theaters, legitimate theaters, art galleries, and churches.⁵⁹ Reasons for moving included theaters owners worrying about their reputations, changes in programming and management, attempted raises in rent or other charges, and the closing down of venues after the confiscating of films deemed obscene by the police. This included the now-infamous seizing of *Flaming Creatures* and the arrest of Mekas, filmmaker Ken Jacobs, and two others at the New Bowery Theater in New York in March 1964—an expensive and time-consuming ordeal that nevertheless provided both the

film and the Underground generally with a certain amount of sympathetic press coverage and commentary.⁶⁰

Underground screenings themselves were marked by a sense of openness and spontaneity, both in terms of the work being screened and the populace that attended. From the earliest days of his screening series, Mekas advocated an open-door policy for films and filmmakers. Such a set-up not only encouraged the public showing of a wide range of new work but established a tight connection between what was on screen and who was in the audience. As the sixties progressed, Mekas also proved open to the integration of non-traditional cinematic experiences, leading to the array of multimedia performances and presentations that made up the Cinematheque's New Cinema Festival I in the fall of 1965.⁶¹

If the films and other multimedia events proved fluid, the viewers' relationship to the screen, the theater, and one another also evidenced a familiarity and looseness usually not seen in traditional exhibition contexts. Hoberman and Rosenbaum survey several news reports from the early-to-mid 1960s, which reported on Underground audiences who freely ate, drank, smoked marijuana, engaged in intense discussions between titles, and reacted vociferously to the films on-screen.⁶² Regular midnight screenings also contributed to the highly social atmosphere, which was further helped by the immediate investment that some of the patrons had in the screenings as platforms for their work.

As scholars have argued, however, Underground film exhibition spaces also served the larger purpose of offering a meeting place for countercultural individuals seeking community. Janet Staiger notes that the preponderance of queer sexual imagery and themes within Underground cinema turned the screenings of such works as *Flaming Creatures* and Andy Warhol's *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) into venues for gay men, in particular, to forge the sort of

social, cultural, and political ties that would be intensified during the gay liberation movement of the 1970s.⁶³ On a broader scale, David E. James has conceptualized the aspirations of Underground filmmakers as seeking to reframe cinema as a social process rather than the production of a commodity.⁶⁴ One can extend this line of thinking to many of the Underground exhibition spaces, in which filmgoing became not a passive viewing of pre-constituted product but an actively social and spontaneous experience.

The flexibility of exhibition space and the cultivation of subcultural community in Underground screenings left an impact upon how, when, and where Waters exhibited his early shorts. Waters's experiences seeing Underground films would have allowed him to view the range of spaces in which such films were screened. Recollecting where he saw formative Underground films, he names such venues as St. Mark's Church, the Filmmakers' Cinematheque, The Bridge, and the Gate.⁶⁵ This list proves notable not only for the storied histories of all four institutions, but for how film screenings formed but one piece of their larger mission. St. Mark's Church acted as a house of worship, though it has a long tradition of supporting the downtown arts scene. The Bridge and the Gate were primarily sites for alternative stage productions. And as described above, the Cinematheque moved between a variety of venues, including during the period where Waters would have been enrolled in NYU in the fall of 1965.⁶⁶ Attending these and other venues offered Waters models for the flexibility that he would need for his own screening spaces. Looking ahead, his comfort with incorporating theatrical performance within certain screenings of his films also seems linked to this period, both in the overlap between cinematic and theatrical exhibition spaces and the amount of alternative theater that Waters saw while in New York City.⁶⁷

As for how the audiences for Underground cinema affected Waters's own conception of his viewership, it remains somewhat difficult to say. Such screenings were inevitably ephemeral, and Waters does not explicitly discuss his experiences within many of the theaters and exhibition venues he attended. That being said, his subsequent descriptions of his own screenings—replete with young countercultural types dressed in wild costumes, frequently consuming illicit substances, and reacting audibly to his films—linked up with the descriptions of Underground viewership at this time.

Finally, the Underground provided Waters with examples of directorial branding as readily as the realm of exploitation cinema. These figures' status as critical favorites and connections to the worlds of publishing, theater, and fine art seem to place them above commercial concerns. Even a cursory look at their careers, however, reveals clear examples of brand curation and extension.

Kenneth Anger offers one such example. The creator of such landmarks in queer and avant-garde cinema as *Fireworks* (1947) and *Scorpio Rising* (1963), Anger himself cultivated a raconteur reputation, actively shaping public perception of his career and personality through such publicity stunts as taking out a full page "in memoriam" advertisement for his own film career in the *Village Voice* in 1967.⁶⁸ He also experimented early in his career with brand extension through the publication of *Hollywood Babylon*, a scabrous account of film-business scandals and controversies.⁶⁹ While shifting into a new medium, Anger maintains the ambivalent and highly-charged relationship to Hollywood cinema that informed his film work, what Matthew Tinkcom deems "a simultaneous delight in the gossip in which Anger traffics and use of gossip-driven fan accounts to rethink the status of Hollywood as a purveyor of purportedly 'wholesome' entertainment."⁷⁰ Anger not only left his mark on the Underground through cinematic work, then,

but also through his directorial brand of queerly-tinged provocation cultivated through media outlets and extended in his own writing.

If William Castle proved Waters's most important exploitation influence, Andy Warhol might be his most critical Underground touchstone. Warhol's career as a director, of course, can itself be seen as a major act of brand reconfiguration and extension. A successful New York-based commercial illustrator in the 1950s who achieved enormous fame and success as a visual artist in the 1960s, Warhol began making films in 1963. The austerity and formal experimentation of early titles as *Sleep* (1963) and *Empire* (1964) differed from his then-best known visual works, which utilized screen printing to replicate and visually transform icons of American popular and consumer culture. Nevertheless, his status as a director became a key component of his overall brand, both for the unique qualities of the films themselves and the coterie of socialites, drag queens, and countercultural denizens who Warhol cast in his films and turned into his "superstars."

Waters credits Warhol most directly for providing a production template for his own work. "Warhol's influence on me was giving me the confidence that I could [make films] with my friends, for no money," Waters said, adding that Warhol "was a new kind of cool in the sixties—hip, gay, people on drugs. No one had done that before him. No one had said the word 'fag hag' in a movie before. He broke a lot of barriers in a very hip, New York way that was certainly an influence on me."⁷¹ Waters was clear-eyed about the differing milieus within which he and Warhol worked: "The difference was Andy was in New York where it was always chic, no matter what...I lived in Baltimore where the rich people were Republic horse people, you know what I mean—they hated my movies."⁷² Still, Warhol provided a model of cinematic production that Waters could bring into his own regional milieu and adapt for his own purposes.

Other, more extra-cinematic Warhol tactics also impacted Waters. Most notably, Waters adopted Warhol's ideas of underground celebrity creation in his own work. Warhol's superstars became selling points in and of themselves, as seen in the aforementioned "Edie Sedgwick Double Bill" at the Cinematheque. Waters, too, sensed the opportunity to not only utilize local personalities within his films, but to cultivate their personas in such a way that they could act as draws for audiences beyond their immediate milieu.

Warhol and Waters differed on the nature of subcultural stardom. As J.J. Murphy has noted, "Warhol's notion of the 'superstar,' of course, was someone who simply plays herself or himself...in other words, his superstars perform their own personalities for the camera."⁷³ At least in the case of his most famous star, Waters saw more of a distinction between on and off screen: "Divine was a real character [but he] was not like that in real life, whereas I think many of the Warhol stars were...So that character that we created for those movies was anything but what he was like in real life and that is probably the big difference."⁷⁴ Still, the influence of Warhol and the notion of subcultural celebrity could be felt in Divine's creation. Though the name itself drew most directly from Waters's Catholic upbringing, the filmmaker observed "people had those kind of names in all of those underground films."⁷⁵

Finally, Warhol embodied the notion that the Underground itself, for all its artistic legitimacy, was a marketable idea. Reflecting on the Herculean task of watching all of Warhol's *Sleep* and *Empire*—whose combined running times exceed thirteen hours—Waters observed that Warhol "used that for publicity; that was terrorism, and people responded to it like that."⁷⁶ The extremity of the films' lengths became a means of publicizing the work and Warhol as a cine-provocateur. Warhol's most-explicit branding efforts also left an impression on Waters. "Remember the Andy Warhol Garrett Theater?" he asked an interviewer. "He's the only director

that I know who's had a whole theater named after him for a while..."⁷⁷ The notion that a filmmaker could imbue an entire exhibition space with an aura of countercultural cache simply by emblazoning their name on it held obvious sway for someone who, lest we forget, spent his childhood fantasizing about a career as a controversial, publicity-seeking theater manager.

Waters's conceptualization of the Underground as both an artistic movement and a sellable idea ultimately aligns with Warhol's own project. As David E. James notes, Warhol as filmmaker "called into question the rhetoric of romantic authorship," adding that "his genius was to arrange it so that the 'creative visionary' and the 'shrewd businessman' in their joint operations consistently ratified the other's activity."⁷⁸ In this way, Waters's melding of Underground techniques with exploitation tactics further underscored the internal connections between art and commerce within the more "creative" side of his major influences. Whether they could be successfully merged into a single, sellable directorial brand in his home city would be Waters's first challenge.

Marketing and Exhibiting Early Shorts – *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*, *Roman Candles*, and *Eat Your Makeup*

Guided by the twin influences of Castle-inspired gimmickry and Warholian subcultural cool, Waters crafted the beginnings of his directorial persona in the production, marketing, and exhibition of his first three short films. Close analyses of how he promoted and screened these films within Baltimore illuminates Waters's efforts to combine exploitation and the Underground in the various elements of directorial branding that he utilized. These included the films themselves, his self-presentation, the promotion and cultivation of his actors, the creation of marketing materials and gimmicks, and his relationships to local Baltimore institutions.

Hag in a Black Leather Jacket

Though its one-time screening at a downtown Baltimore coffeehouse makes its role within the history of Waters's career somewhat limited, *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* warrants consideration for how it showcased some of the earliest iterations of Waters's branding strategies. Influenced by the surreal and provocative imagery of the Underground, the fifteen-minute short chronicles the wedding ceremony of a white woman and a black man, which takes place on the roof of Waters's parents' house and is presided over by a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Waters shot the film on an 8mm Brownie camera given to him as a seventeenth birthday present by his grandmother and with film stock stolen by Waters's then-girlfriend Mona Montgomery. The director largely dismisses *Hag* for its technical deficiencies and pacing, noting that "the only good part is the ending: Bonnie, a.k.a. Mary Vivian Pearce, dons one of my mother's cocktail dresses, applies sluttish eye makeup, teases her hair in a ridiculous French roll, and does a wild rendition of the 'bodie green,' the lewd dance that got us kicked out of our local chapter of the Catholic Youth Organization."⁷⁹ Even in his downplaying of the film's quality, Waters cannot help but note the elements that tied *Hag* to the regional milieu in which it played—a key factor in the subsequent success of his work within Baltimore.

Waters's strategies for exhibiting the film showcase a combination of Underground and exploitation influences. The film had its sole public screening in a downtown coffeehouse on Howard Street after Waters convinced the manager to let him use the space as the short's "world premiere" venue.⁸⁰ Though many of the teenagers cast in the film did not attend the screening because their "parents refused to let their kids even come to downtown Baltimore, much less to a beatnik coffeehouse," Waters brought many of his own "beatnik" friends and the screening earned Waters thirty dollars.⁸¹ His decision to target a downtown coffeehouse which had enough

of an edgy reputation to attract like-minded youth speaks to Waters's early instincts for drawing upon subcultural connections to promote his work.⁸²

His plans for subsequent screenings, meanwhile, reflect the influence of exploitation. "With 'showmanship' throbbing in my veins," Waters recalls, "I sent ridiculous *Variety*-type ads ('*Hag in a Black Leather Jacket! Sold Out! Book It Today!*') to the local theaters and drive-ins, not realizing the impossibility of any such booking."⁸³ Waters remains self-deprecating about these early attempts, chalking them up to lack of practical knowledge: "I didn't know anything. I actually thought there was a possibility, because it sold out once in a coffee shop with thirty people who just said, 'Huh?'"⁸⁴ Still, these attempts to graft the hyperbole and salesmanship of exploitation-style promotion onto a film whose primary audience seemed more comfortable in the café than the grindhouse offers an early premonition of how Waters positioned his directorial brand between these two modes of marketing and exhibition.

While *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket* would rarely screen after that single coffeehouse showing, it did eventually lead to Waters's first true piece of local publicity. In October 1965, *Baltimore Sun* columnist Mr. Peep ran a short piece on Waters after the young filmmaker participated in a Vietnam protest in New York City. The article briefly discussed the year-old film, but it also gave Waters two valuable pieces of promotion going forward. First, it allowed him to advertise his plans to produce a second film, the never-completed *Dorothy, the Kansas City Pothead*. Second, Mr. Peep bequeathed Waters a title that both underscored his cinematic credentials and marked him as the purveyor of a singular commodity in Baltimore: "the writer, producer, director, cameraman, and sound engineer of Baltimore's first 'underground' movie."⁸⁵

Roman Candles

Having been kicked out of NYU at the end of 1965 for marijuana possession, Waters returned to Baltimore and soon began work on a new short.⁸⁶ *Roman Candles* is, in many respects, Waters's most overt nod to Warhol within his films, as well as reflective of trends in Underground cinema more generally. The film is a collection of silent vignettes starring Waters's cadre of friends and acquaintances within the Baltimore subculture. Intermixed with occasional images from news footage and horror films and scored to a mélange of popular music, these various scenes are triple-projected onto the screen, recalling most explicitly Warhol's dual-projected *The Chelsea Girls*, which had become a major crossover hit throughout the latter half of 1966 and into 1967.

The premiere screenings of *Roman Candles* relied heavily upon working with two local institutions. *Roman Candles* was shown in the Great Hall of Emmanuel Church, a Protestant Episcopal house of worship located at the corner of Cathedral and Reade Streets in the Mount Vernon neighborhood of Baltimore. Certainly, the irony of "the pope of trash" debuting some of his earliest work in a church would not be lost on anyone in years to come. Nevertheless, it's worth considering both why Waters sought out Emmanuel and why the church agreed.

Waters attributes the agreement to his own local connections and the quirkiness of the church's leadership: "A liberal friend had introduced me to a slightly eccentric reverend at the Emmanuel Church, and I talked him into letting me use the hall for the opening."⁸⁷ Such a deal obviously benefited Waters, as it provided him a venue to screen a film whose unorthodox content and form would have proven to be a complicated arrangement anywhere. Screening the film at a church also linked up with what Waters had been seeing in New York, where Underground films with varying levels of controversial subject matter showed at venues like St. Mark's Church. As Waters recalls, the arrangement also benefited a church that was eager for

more community participation. “In Baltimore we used to open them in churches,” Waters said, “and they had no idea what was going to happen, ‘cause they hadn’t seen the films yet, but they figured, ‘Oh, anything to get people into a church,’ and then they’d see the people who’d come, but it would be too late.”⁸⁸ Waters threads a reputational needle here that will become ever more important as he developed his directorial brand—forming unlikely alliances with organizations and then playing up the irony of aligning his highly idiosyncratic persona with that organization.

While one can imagine some surprised reactions from clergy and church staff upon first seeing Waters’s work, it’s worth noting the Great Hall of Emmanuel Church’s history of supporting local arts and participating in left-leaning political causes. Many of the cultural events held at Emmanuel Church directly tied to the congregation itself, including concerts performed by the church choir, instrumental recitals, and exhibitions by local artists.⁸⁹ The church became involved in somewhat more countercultural work in 1967, however, when it temporarily housed the Corner Theater Projects, a Baltimore theater company known for producing somewhat edgier and more experimental work.⁹⁰ The church’s offer of space to the company speaks to an interest in local art and culture that contextualizes their willingness to screen *Roman Candles*.

The liberal leanings of Emmanuel’s community engagement and leadership also point toward a greater amount of tolerance for unorthodox titles to be screened within the church confines. Emmanuel Church sponsored talks on nuclear disarmament, held interracial “services of thanksgiving,” and hosted meetings for anti-capital punishment activist groups.⁹¹ While it is somewhat unclear who Waters is referring to as the “slightly eccentric reverend” that he negotiated the screening with, the inclusion of a quote from “Father Hanna” on one of *Roman Candles*’s poster leads one to believe that he might be referencing Reverend Frederick J. Hanna, minister of social services at Emmanuel Church.

Described in a 1967 *Baltimore Sun* article as “a balding, 43-year-old former factory worker and interior decorator,” Hanna devoted much of his time to helping homeless or transient youth in Baltimore find housing, food, and other basic services.⁹² As a book reviewer for the *Baltimore Sun*, he praised work that sought to make the church more appealing to young people.⁹³ And he joined the Reverend Arthur B. Starratt, rector at Emmanuel Church, in advocating for social justice issues like inner-city living conditions for African Americans and the liberalization of abortion laws.⁹⁴ Liberal political positions do not necessarily entail the acceptance of transgressive, low-budget filmmaking. Nevertheless, Hanna’s specific concern with the relationship of youth to the church seems to have offered a particularly beneficial set of circumstances for Waters.

In addition to screening at Emmanuel Church, *Roman Candles* also showed on Flower Mart Day. Held in Mount Vernon annually since 1911, Flower Mart Day was organized by the Home Garden Committee of the Women’s Civic League to showcase the horticultural talents of primarily Baltimore women.⁹⁵ By the early 1960s, it had grown into a major city event, with over 50 vendor booths and roughly 1,000 volunteers.⁹⁶ Waters recognized within Flower Mart a highly popular event located near the Emmanuel Church. Even more importantly, by the mid-1960s, Flower Mart had also begun attracting members of the Baltimore youth counterculture. Flower Mart “was heavily covered by the media and always attracted a weirdo-arty crowd,” he wrote, with many of his friends often vying for who could “upstage each other by causing a scandal and getting written up in the newspapers.”⁹⁷

Waters’s description aligns with news reports of the period. Coverage of the 1966 Flower Mart, for instance, noted the presence of “boys...so shaggy that their heads looked like brown cotton candy” and “one girl, whom everyone tried to walk past at least twice, [who] wore a blouse

made of oversize silver disks wired together in a pattern that included more space than disks.”⁹⁸ A strong ethos of youth counterculture can also be seen in reports the following year, with descriptions of “‘high mod’ fashions” and a vignette involving a blonde young man who, when asked why he wore “a limp dandelion and a purple paper daisy on his shirt,” responded, “I’m a flower.”⁹⁹ Waters knew from experience that Flower Mart would attract a large gathering of young, alternative Baltimoreans with time on their hands, and used this local knowledge as a means to reach his target demographic. His creation of a directorial brand rested as much upon canny alignment with sympathetic spaces and events as it did cultivating the films and extra-cinematic materials that he would present within them.

Waters’s poster design for *Roman Candles* trades heavily on both the marketing techniques and reputation of the Underground.¹⁰⁰ The word “Underground” in capitalized, bubbled letters descends vertically down almost the entire left side of the poster, with “films” in smaller capital letters written at a diagonal near the bottom. The entire screening experience, then, becomes literally framed within the phrase’s sub-cultural cache. Along the top quarter of the poster, the “world premiere” of the film is announced, followed by Waters’s name and the film’s title, the latter written in bubbled letters that are then shaded. As important as emphasizing his own name would be to establishing public recognition, placing it in close range to the signifiers of Underground cinema would be just as crucial in defining what type of director Waters was and what sort of cinematic efforts a viewer should associate with him.

Below this, Waters lists six cast members: Maelcum Soul, Bob Skidmore, David Lochary, Judy Boutin, Mink Stole, and Bonnie Pearce. Such a decision seems to at once rely upon knowledge of the local talent and build upon said knowledge to elevate certain Waters’s players to greater prominence. On the one hand, local Baltimoreans—particularly those within the sort of

countercultural scenes that Waters and his friends ran in—might very well recognize some of these names, prompting them to see the film for the chance to glimpse a friend or acquaintance onscreen. Such specialized knowledge may have justified the use of a frankly-inexplicable parenthetical next to Mink Stole’s name, “The Precious Jew-el,” that might be explained as an inside joke amongst locals. On the other hand, the very fact that these names appear on a movie poster elevates their notoriety. It attaches them to Waters, forming a subcultural web of performers and director with echoes of Warhol’s superstars.

Waters also tied his own work to the aesthetic and representational provocations of the Underground by pairing *Roman Candles* with *Eaux d’Artifice*, Kenneth Anger’s 1953 avant-garde short chronicling a young woman wandering through a garden. The selection of *Eaux d’Artifice* proved strategic in a couple of ways. It connected the subcultural documentation of *Roman Candles* with the aforementioned aura of Anger, whose films frequently displayed intensely homoerotic and unsettling imagery and whose reputation as a boundary-pushing filmmaker was bolstered by the obscenity charges filed against his *Scorpio Rising* during its initial Los Angeles run. Waters underscored this connection by literally inserting the film’s title into the director’s name, advertising the short as the product of “Kenneth ‘Scorpio Rising’ Anger.” Waters was acutely aware of how linking his own work to Anger not only suggested an aesthetic or cultural affinity, but also provided a known name to attach to an unknown film. The inclusion of a positive quote about Anger’s film from Jonas Mekas further underscored the connection to the center of Underground filmmaking and cultural activity.

It also proved strategically important to both the exhibition space and the reception of Waters’s own film to show *Eaux d’Artifice*, a comparatively mild work in Anger’s oeuvre. As Waters recalls, “We showed *Roman Candles* and Kenneth Anger’s *Eaux d’Artifice* because we

wanted to use his name but we didn't want to show anything too rude in a church, then, because ours was rude—we didn't want to be out-ruded. And, we used his name to lure people in.”¹⁰¹ In this way, the choice to pair *Roman Candles* with Anger's film at once recognizes the limitations of screening Underground-influenced titles in even a liberal-minded local church and sets up Waters's work as displaying provocations unseen in the film from the more-established Underground director. The choice highlights Waters's understanding of the Underground as simultaneously an artistic practice to be emulated and a marketable commodity to be leveraged in the service of his own reputation. Not for nothing does Stevenson remark that Waters's double feature followed “in the best tradition of exploitation...” to which Waters responded simply, “Yeah.”¹⁰²

One final element of the *Roman Candles* poster reflects a more negotiated relationship to Underground influences, self-consciously incorporating elements of exploitation sensationalism as a means of differentiating the film. Waters includes a tagline underneath the film's title that reads, “The Baltimore Underground comes to light in a triple-projected trash epic.” The sentence makes two interrelated claims. First, it promises to lift the veil on provocative happenings occurring right within the city limits. This is a somewhat curious selling point, given that so much of the promotional activities for *Roman Candles* seemed directly aimed at the very locals who would consider themselves to be a part of whatever “underground” might exist in Baltimore. Such a gesture does, however, recall the hyperbolic promises of the exploiteer, whose advertisements and promotions assures the viewer access to exotic and forbidden sights. Of course, Waters could make legitimate claims toward actually showing his audience glimpses of the Baltimore Underground, given his involvement in the city's subcultural milieus. In this way, the phrase

seems to upend the logic of exploitation advertising—winkingly employing its inflated rhetoric of enlightenment as a means to sell a reasonably authentic subcultural portrait.

The second piece of the tagline cuts in the opposite direction. With its strikingly combined connotations of refuse and grandiosity, the phrase “trash epic” evokes a kind of monument to the disposable, tawdry, and disreputable. If the constant evocations of the Underground draw upon the artistic and cultural mystique of its New York nexus, then this phrasing underscores that a journey through the Baltimore Underground would be one marked by a reveling in regional sleaze. The tagline draws from both the unsavory appeals of exploitation and Waters’s own loving relationship to his hometown’s more debased qualities to bracket off the distinct Underground pleasures that Waters’s work would have to offer.

Promotion for *Roman Candles* occurred the day of the film’s three consecutive screenings—Wednesday, May 10, 1967, at 1:00 p.m., 3:00 p.m., and 5:00 p.m.—and linked the basics of exploitation promotion with the idiosyncratic celebrations already occurring during Flower Mart Day. Waters printed up flyers, posters, and press releases to hand out the day of Flower Mart. The “stars went to the Flower Mart dressed in their most outlandish fashions and handed out flyers to the crowds,” with Waters himself wearing “a white suit that my parents bought me for the occasion.”¹⁰³ Individuals associated with a movie dressing in outrageous costumes and canvassing the city streets with promotional materials comes right out of exploitation promotion. Those handing out flyers, however, weren’t temporary hires by a distributor, but Baltimore residents with local connections. Furthermore, their extravagant outfits served the purpose of attracting public attention while simultaneously keeping within the spirit of Flower Mart Day’s over-the-top fashions and displays of youthful eccentricity.

Waters himself embodied both of these ideas within his own self-presentation on the day of the screening. *Baltimore Evening Sun* reporter Carl Schoettler described Waters as a “mixed-media era Josef von Sternberg” who was “surrounded by his underground starlets” and sported the extravagant outfit of “a double breasted white linen suit, a checked shirt, an ear-splitting red and yellow tie and sideburns that caressed his throat.”¹⁰⁴ The kooky-yet-commanding air; the cadre of unconventional stars; the eye-searing fashion choices—all of these began to cultivate an aura around Waters as a filmmaker intent on mixing and matching the conventions of the exploitation ballyhoo artist, the underground provocateur, and the local-boy-makes-good into a singular and memorable public image.

These efforts largely succeeded, both in terms of the screenings themselves and the subsequent press they generated. All three showings sold out. The crowds skewed young and responded positively to *Roman Candles*’s mélange of humorous and provocative imagery. The screening received coverage in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, which noted their popularity, the eccentricity of the director, and the motley crew that comprised the audience, described as “a yeasty confection of mods, aging beatniks, teeny-boppers, and hippies.”¹⁰⁵ Waters also recalls that “many people seemed horrified that a group of suburban kids were laughing about homosexuality, drugs, and religion.”¹⁰⁶ This combination of youthful appreciation and wider disapproval delighted Waters, who sought to cultivate it as a badge of transgressive honor. Highlighting enraged or bewildered reactions to his work allowed Waters to further define it as a pleasurable-yet-transgressive alternative within the regional market for countercultural entertainment.

Waters designed another poster that promoted the film to other local venues and further established key elements of his brand identity.¹⁰⁷ Aiming to build upon the popularity of the Emmanuel Church screenings, the top of the poster proclaimed: “The Roman Candles has

exploded!” Director, title, and a more limited cast list appear below on the righthand side of the page, along with information for “special rates” for such venues and screening scenarios as “midnite shows, film series, schools,” as well as offers of “daily and weekly rentals.” This list itself proves telling in terms of how Waters conceptualized his screening options. Indeed, both schools and film series would prove important to the distribution and exhibition of his later works, as would the use of midnight screenings.

The poster also offers contact information for Dreamland Studios, Waters’s production company that he created during the making of *Roman Candles*. Like so much else in Waters’s career, the creation of Dreamland seemed to link practical considerations with winking self-awareness. Framing such a low-budget local production as springing from a “studio” simultaneously solidifies his local reputation through memorable branding and pokes fun at the disjuncture between Dreamland’s evocation of utopian Hollywood fantasy and the purposefully grungy aesthetic and outré content of the films themselves. More than anything, though, it provided a name with which Waters could begin to attach all of the ideas and affects that he wanted associated with his directorial brand. Not for nothing did Waters’s troupe of actors become known as “Dreamlanders.” Like Warhol’s superstars, they were marked with an identity that tied them to cinematic and cultural meanings created by Waters, and their contributions in turn fed back into the brand.

Finally, Waters repackaged the newspaper write-ups from the Emmanuel Church screening to frame *Roman Candles* as an adventurous and disreputable piece of filmmaking. Three pull quotes dominate the left side of the poster. The first comes from Schoettler of the *Sun*, whose description of *Roman Candles* nicely evokes the topsy-turvy experience of watching the film: “The film jerked, jiggled, and bugaloosed, it freaked out like the ‘Mother of Invention,’ it

shimmied, it shook, it rocked ‘n’ rolled... The underground has surfaced not with a whimper, but with a bang!”¹⁰⁸ If Schoettler’s rhythmic summary framed the film as an unorthodox but pleasurably madcap experience, the second quote from Frederick Hanna of the Emmanuel Church offered a bit of cheeky humor. “‘High Camp’ – Father Hanna, Emmanuel Church,” it read simply. The combination of the quote’s terse evocation of queerly tinged aestheticism and the speaker’s religious affiliation played off movie-marketing conventions to create an eyebrow-raising juxtaposition.

This proved even more true of the poster’s final quote—an excerpt from film critic Lou Cedrone’s review in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* that simply read “junk.” A self-proclaimed skeptic of Underground film, Cedrone deemed the film “middle-lower junk” in the full text of his review.¹⁰⁹ While he noted the occasional burst of effective humor, Cedrone ultimately dismissed the film as insular and tiring, noting that “your appreciation of Waters’ work depends on how well you know the participants and how high your patience.”¹¹⁰ Of course, such in-group knowingness is part of the film’s intrinsic appeal, and Waters quickly saw the potential in making Cedrone’s dismissals of his work a point of pride. For Waters, foregrounding the reviewer’s categorical disapproval added to the hip-vs.-square dichotomy that defined his directorial brand. That Waters himself categorizes his film as a “trash epic” makes Cedrone’s labeling the film “junk” appear all the more clueless, given how knowingly Waters luxuriates in the debased and lowdown.

Highlighting the horrified responses of critics to his cinematic provocations would prove a reliable marketing tactic throughout Waters’s career. It provided another means through which Waters could manipulate extra-cinematic elements to express his own idiosyncratic sensibility and reframe the terms of engagement around his work. Waters and Cedrone, in particular, would here begin a long-standing local relationship. The reviewer would heap vitriol upon movie after

movie, and the filmmaker would reframe the critiques as high praise when coming from such a reactionary source. As Waters put it, Cedrone's coverage of *Roman Candles* gave "us the first of his many really good bad reviews."¹¹¹

Eat Your Makeup

Though produced in Baltimore, the inspiration for Waters's next film came from elsewhere. Waters and an increasingly large number of his friends traveled up to Provincetown, Massachusetts beginning in the mid-1960s.¹¹² Provincetown had become a popular LGBT vacation destination over the course of the mid-20th century, as well as a haven for artists.¹¹³ In Waters's case, he had heard of the town's reputation as a "weird place." Upon arrival, he recalled thinking that "this must be the coolest place I've ever been," and would return to Provincetown in the summers to work and live regularly for years after.¹¹⁴ Two specific events in the town helped to prompt the creation of his next short, *Eat Your Makeup*. The very idea for the movie came from a sign in a local candy store, the Penny Patch, which sold candy lipsticks and promoted them with the slogan, "Eat Your Make Up."¹¹⁵ In addition, Waters met Marina Melin in Provincetown. Described by the filmmaker as "a beautifully voluptuous ex-painter from Sweden who loved to wear the scantiest outfits," Melin and Waters became friends in the summer of 1967.¹¹⁶ Waters invited Melin back to Baltimore to appear in his next short, and she agreed. These and other Provincetown connections not only helped create Waters's film but would prove crucial to the first screenings of his work beyond Baltimore.

Eat Your Makeup has a somewhat more discernible plot than Waters's previous two shorts while maintaining formal ties to Underground satire and transgression. Maelcum Soul and David Lochary play a deranged governess and her boyfriend, respectively, who kidnap fashion models and force them to "model" themselves to death before an audience of their wild friends. The

models' sole nutrition comes from the titular cosmetics. Melin, Mary Vivian Pearce, and Mona Montgomery all play the kidnapping victims, while Divine enacts a curious double role. While his main part comes as one of the crazed guests who cheer on the models, his character at one point fantasizes about the JFK assassination while reading a magazine. This leads into a fantasy recreation of the killing, in which Divine plays Jackie Kennedy and Provincetown restaurateur Howard Gruber enacts John F. Kennedy. The role was the first to significantly feature Divine, setting him up for his leading part in Waters's first feature. The film concludes on a surreal note of fairy-tale magic, where Melin's dead model comes back to life after being kissed by a mysterious cavalryman. Shooting on 16mm for the first time in his career, the black-and-white film also had a separate tape soundtrack that Waters attempted fastidiously to sync up with the image in post-production, to ultimately mixed results.¹¹⁷

When planning the Baltimore premiere of *Eat Your Makeup*, Waters encountered both the positive and negative aspects of continuing to work with local institutions to exhibit his work. The Great Hall of Emmanuel Church agreed to host the premiere screenings on February 23 and 24, 1968, with shows at 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. both nights.¹¹⁸ While they would not have the added publicity provided by *Roman Candles*'s showings on Flower Mart Day, the screenings at Emmanuel Church point to a continued relationship between Waters and the house of worship.

Waters's efforts to tap resources explicitly designed to benefit local filmmakers proved less successful. The director recalls entering *Eat Your Makeup* in what he initially refers to as "a student competition at a local art college" and later as a "film festival."¹¹⁹ The judges demanded that the film be stopped halfway through the judges' screening and called the Emmanuel Church to insist that the film's showings be cancelled. When the church refused, they called the IRS, who prohibited Waters from selling tickets to the Emmanuel Church screening. Waters does not refer

to the organization more specifically, but it is worth noting that the Maryland Film Festival was presented by the Maryland Institute College of Art, Goucher College, and Johns Hopkins University, along with local TV and radio stations.¹²⁰ Then in its second year, it ran from March 7–10, 1968, two weeks after *Eat Your Makeup*'s screening, and would have been preparing its submissions at roughly the same time that Waters would have been looking for publicity and further screening opportunities. While he would eventually have a long-standing relationship with what came to be the dominant film festival in Baltimore, this early interaction proved that not all regional organizations would support his provocative filmmaking efforts.

Hobbled by an inability to officially charge admission, Waters set out to promote *Eat Your Makeup* through an intensification of the strategies utilized in his marketing for *Roman Candles*.¹²¹ The main poster that Waters created once again highlights the film's connection to broader countercultural ethos by having "Underground Film Premiere" appear in capital letters across the top of the image.¹²² A row of black stars underlines the text. Information on the film runs down the right side of the poster, though the order of credits proves telling. The work is framed as "Dreamland Presents" and "John Waters' New Film" before finally getting to the title of the movie. Foregrounding his production company and name underscores Waters's burgeoning reputation as a known filmmaker within Baltimore, while "new film" encourages potential viewers to think of Waters's earlier work as a selling point in and of itself.

A cast list follows below, expanded to include both new names like Marina Melin and *Roman Candles*'s cast members with more prominent roles in the film including Divine. Then, a brief description of the film's plot appears: "The story of a deranged governess and her lover who kidnap models and force them to eat their makeup and model themselves to death." The list of cast members on the poster continues to both foster local recognition and build star persona, while

the inclusion of the film's plot (not really feasible for the more shapeless *Roman Candles*) highlights the film's combination of the lurid and the satiric.

Finally, Waters continued to draw upon his cinema's larger aesthetic and tonal connections to the Underground scene by pairing the film once again with another, more-well known work. This time, he chose *Short Circuit* (1963), a collection of experimental shorts by "the 8-year-old filmmaker David Wise." Highlighting Wise's young age can be read as humorous on Waters's part, though it is also worth noting that Wise's films had previously screened in programs alongside such avant-gardists as Stan VanDerBeek and Jordan Belson and gained the praise of Jonas Mekas, whose quote Waters also includes on the poster.¹²³

Two other elements, however, offered evidence of Waters's continued experimentation and self-conscious reworking of marketing techniques from the Underground, exploitation, and even mainstream Hollywood. The poster's left side features a striking, hand-drawn image of a woman holding an open tube of lipstick upright in her hand and leaning over its tip with her lips spread apart. The entire drawing is further framed within a large star. Lest one presume otherwise, Waters describes the flyers for *Eat Your Makeup* as featuring "a drawing of Bonnie [Mary Vivian Pearce] about ready to go down on a lipstick tube."¹²⁴ The cartoon offers a cheekily provocative encapsulation of the film's hyperbolic connections between female glamour, sexuality, and consumer products. The simple and eye-catching nature of the illustration also recalls the earlier posters for *Flaming Creatures* and *Born of the Wind*, with their boldly designed and somewhat enigmatic drawings.

At the same time that Waters was more explicitly utilizing the Underground's advertising techniques, he also mined humor from mocking basic conventions of film marketing. While the aforementioned cast list largely served to highlight the film's players, it also listed amongst the

performers “Extreme Unction,” who is not an actor at all but a reference to the Catholic sacrament of the anointing of the sick that is mentioned in the film. Furthermore, the list ends as follows:

“And the child star Lizzy Temple Black.” Far from a notable performer, Waters renamed the first-time child actor for the film.¹²⁵ The moniker switch both riffs on the name’s resemblance to the actual child star Shirley Temple Black and plays up the comic mismatch between the presence of a “child star” within *Eat Your Makeup*’s outrageous plot. These small jokes might go unnoticed by many, but their presence encouraged potential viewers to linger on the posters and recognize them as sources of humor tied to yet separate from the films they advertised.

As with *Roman Candles*, the screenings for *Eat Your Makeup* had high attendance. Given that Waters could only solicit ninety-nine cent donations, however, the film’s profitability became severely compromised. Waters’s recollections of the crowds’ responses also paled in comparison to the raucous audiences for *Roman Candles*: “We were allowed to collect donations at the end of all three full-house shows, but since the film offended so many people, our box office was nowhere near as high as it should have been.”¹²⁶ Local press similarly did not match that of the previous film, though Waters somewhat confusingly claims that no local reviewer wrote about the film, even as a subsequent poster for *Eat Your Makeup* quotes a review by Cedrone.¹²⁷ The Maryland Film Festival’s complaints, middling response from local audiences, and a small amount of local press underscores how the creation of directorial brands rely upon the continued support of interested parties. Extra-cinematic practices can only compensate so much for public indifference or hostility towards the work itself.

If the Baltimore screenings proved disappointing in terms of box office and viewership, Waters’s increasing ties to Provincetown opened up a second front to employ the tactics and strategies he had honed within his hometown. Waters and several of his friends returned to

Provincetown in the summer of 1968. He approached the reverend of a church on Shank Painter Road and asked if he, sight unseen, would let Waters screen the film. The minister agreed. Waters chalked it up to similar reasoning as to why Hanna agreed at the Emmanuel Church: “In the 1960s, many churches were almost political. They would do almost anything to attract hippies.”¹²⁸ Still, he also expressed reservations about whether the reverend would follow through on his promise. “He probably thought it was a hippie-flower film,” Waters wrote, “and I was afraid he’d react negatively to scenes of kids sniffing glue, eating makeup, and torturing models.”¹²⁹

With the venue at least provisionally secured, he turned to publicity. Waters had begun working at the Provincetown Bookshop.¹³⁰ Store owners Elloyd Hanson and Joel Newman let Waters use the shop’s front window for publicity purposes, and Waters turned it into a billboard for *Eat Your Makeup*. Waters also drew upon his initial Provincetown inspiration for an act of street promotion at once comic, aggressive, and theatrical. He employed the assistance of Mary Vivian Pearce who, with the “white, Jean Harlow hair and...outrageous 1930s outfits” that she wore daily, proved a highly visible publicity compatriot.¹³¹ As Waters describes it, “We would walk up and down Commercial Street, I would hand people a flyer from the movie, she would hand them candy lipstick and say, ‘Eat it, read it, and come.’”¹³²

Perhaps more than handing out flyers during Flower Mart Day, this gambit embodies a Waters-esque approach to street ballyhoo. On the one hand, combining the candy lipstick with the flyer makes for an appealing and effective combination—free merchandise connected explicitly to the true product being sold. On the other hand, the leering double entendre of the tagline and Pearce’s over-the-top aesthetic seemed to jar at least some potential viewers. “Most of the tourists seemed frightened rather than amused,” Waters recalls, “and many threw back the candy and

screamed: ‘No! No! I know it has acid in it!’”¹³³ While undoubtedly eager to fill as many seats as possible, Waters also viewed publicity as a kind of performance of his film’s spiky and alternative attitude.

His strategies proved more successful in Provincetown than they did in Baltimore. The screening sold out. Waters’s description of the event confirms both that he had attracted a more satisfying crowd than in Baltimore and that the venue itself would not be in jeopardy: “The reverend seemed to get over the initial shock of seeing hundreds of lunatics dressed in movie-star outfits stagger into his church, stoned out of their minds. I watched his expression throughout the film, and he only looked faint once or twice.”¹³⁴ The audience’s extravagant attire, altered state, and raucous attitude seemed a particular encapsulation of the theatrical experience that Waters was beginning to cultivate through both his films and the means by which he marketed, promoted, and exhibited them. It also showed that his aesthetic and his extra-cinematic practices could find a receptive viewership in other locales beyond Baltimore.

Conclusion

By the end of 1968, Waters had established himself with a trio of short films that lurched wildly between high and low—pointed satire and grotesque bodily humor; taboo-busting representations and jaw-dropping slayings of sacred cows. His approach to the extra-cinematic represents this, combining the wild-eyed, unapologetic shamelessness of exploitation and the Underground’s appeals to artistic edginess and subcultural cool. In doing so, he had begun to craft the directorial brand of an “underground exploiteer.” This persona allowed Waters to contextualize his often-shocking and even offensive cinematic works in the winking ballyhoo of eccentric promotion and the playful bacchanal encouraged at his film screenings. The originality

and mischievous goodwill created by the overall packaging of his films helped to ensure his continual presence within the Baltimore counterculture.

This combination of Underground and exploitation influences also cast new light upon each source individually. For Underground film, it leavened some of its heightened artistic seriousness, foregrounding both the commercial aspects inherent within even a small and alternative mode of filmmaking and highlighting the lurid appeals within Underground works that overlap with those in exploitation. For exploitation cinema, meanwhile, the association with Underground techniques elevated it, reframing the crass gimmickry as transgressive bucking of conventional tastes, mores, and ways of being. At the same time, it underscored the hollowness of so many exploitation films' promises of forbidden subject matter by using it to advertise films that largely delivered on taboo material. What Waters encourages through these overlaps is a playful flattening of the cultural playing field, revealing the shared pleasures between seemingly opposed modes of cinema and using that revelation as a means of attracting people to see his films.

This, in turn, reveals directorial brand creation to be as much a process of aesthetic synthesis and on-the-ground adaptation as it is an act of singular creativity. Waters offered something undeniably unique in the mid-to-late 1960s, but he did it through a combination of various disparate influences and sources. Furthermore, this formation occurred in relation to the possibilities and limitations of various other players in the region he worked in: the churches in which he screened his films, the newspapers that covered his premieres, the audiences he targeted and who, in turn, responded in various ways to his work. Though a successful directorial brand ultimately circulates across a multitude of media and markets, its genesis inevitably occurs within

highly-specific circumstances that can leave a lasting impression on what it means and how it travels.

The success of this brand as it moved from Baltimore to Provincetown gave Waters hope that it might ultimately reach the then-heart of Underground cinema: New York City. He managed a slight toehold into the Underground world with *Eat Your Makeup*—not a screening, but a mention in Howard Smith’s “Scenes” column in the *Village Voice*.¹³⁵ Printed almost two months before *Eat Your Makeup*’s premiere, the article seems to rely entirely upon whatever press release Waters presumably sent to Smith. Nevertheless, the noting of Dreamland Studios as “Baltimore’s exponent of underground film” and the mention of Waters having made “three films since he was 16” within the pages of a newspaper that also printed the words of Jonas Mekas bolstered Waters as he progressed with his film career.

Such hope would be needed. As he recalled of *Eat Your Makeup*’s sole opportunity to be played in New York City: “The closest it got to a New York showing was Elsa Tambellini at the Gate Theater agreeing to look at it. She hardly glanced at the screen and talked on the phone throughout the showing and rudely stated at the end, ‘We’ll call you if we want it.’ She seemed to think it was ridiculous that I was from Baltimore.”¹³⁶ In the next chapter, we will examine the steps Waters took to counteract that very sentiment and expand his directorial brand both in and beyond Baltimore.

¹ John Waters, *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005), 49.

² Waters quoted in John G. Ives, *John Waters* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1992), 27.

³ In response to Ives’ assertion that Waters “discovered this new world and underground films and all those strange people” when he first went to New York City, Waters replied that he “had already discovered the world I was looking for in downtown Baltimore in a bar called Martick’s where Maelcum Soul worked. It was a very mixed crowd—bohemians, beatniks, drag queens, and people that I had read about in [William S.] Burroughs and John Rechy and Tennessee Williams. So when I first went to New York, I had already been hanging out downtown; I didn’t ever hang around the people I went to high school with by then.” Waters quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 24.

⁴ Jack Stevenson, *Desperate Visions: Camp America: John Waters, George & Mike Kuchar* (London and San Francisco: Creation Books, 1996), 11.

⁵ While many sources list the release date of *Roman Candles* as 1966, my research has shown that the film's first public screening occurred in Baltimore on May 10, 1967.

⁶ Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 105.

⁷ Ibid. 103.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Overview of post-classical exploitation include: Randall Clark, *At a Theater or Drive-In Near You: The History, Culture, and Politics of the American Exploitation Film* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 31–48; Schaefer, *Bold!*, 325–342; and Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 135–166.

¹⁰ For an account of how horror films operated within the exploitation and mainstream American film industry, see Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). Schaefer defines sexploitation as "exploitation movies that focused on nudity, sexual situations, and simulated (i.e., nonexplicit) sex acts, designed for titillation and entertainment...[and that] no longer required explicit educational justification for presenting sexual spectacle on the screen." Schaefer, *Bold!*, 338.

¹¹ This oft-told piece of AIP lore is summarized in Clark, *At a Theater*, 40.

¹² Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema*, 157.

¹³ Eric Schaefer, "Pandering to the 'Goon Trade': Framing the Sexploitation Audience Through Advertising," in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 27–35.

¹⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 34.

¹⁵ Ibid. 192.

¹⁶ Ibid. 34.

¹⁷ Commenting on the perception that exploitation films only screened in dilapidated urban grindhouses, Schaefer notes "that exploitation films could not have survived with only a handful of houses as outlets for their product." Schaefer, *Bold!*, 119.

¹⁸ Kerry Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1992), 64–77.

¹⁹ For a history of this term and drive-ins' negotiations with this reputation, see Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters*, 148–152.

²⁰ Ibid. 78–88.

²¹ Pat Moran quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 153.

²² Waters, *Shock Value*, 80.

²³ Ibid. 82.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. 34.

²⁶ Waters quoted in Bill George and Martin Falck, "The Late Shows Presents the Divine World of John Waters," in *John Waters Interviews*, ed. James Egan (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 44.

²⁷ Waters, *Shock Value*, 192.

²⁸ Waters quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 81, 83.

²⁹ Waters quoted in James Egan, "Where Will John Waters Be Buried," in Egan, *John Waters*, 219. In addition to Carlin's, Waters also mentions the Timonium Drive-In and the Bengies Drive-In as the sites that he frequented most. For information on these sites within the popular press, see: Ted Shelsby, "Drive-in Theaters Fade as Habits Change; Land is Wanted for Other Uses," *Baltimore Sun*, January 31, 1982, K7; and John H. Gormley, Jr., "Dedication Keeps Drive-Ins Alive," *Baltimore Sun*, July 27, 1988, 1C. The Bengies is also discussed in relation to the regional architecture of drive-ins in Shannon Bell, "From Ticket Booth to Screen Tower: An Architectural Study of Drive-In Theaters in the Baltimore–Washington D.C.–Richmond Corridor," in *Constructing Image, Identity, and Place: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IX*, eds. Alison K. Hoagland and Kenneth A. Breisch (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 215–227.

³⁰ Waters, *Shock Value*, 192.

³¹ For more on drive-ins' reliance on concessions during this period, see Segrave, *Drive-In Theaters*, 89–98.

³² Schaefer, *Bold!*, 119–135.

³³ Ibid. 134–135.

³⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 25.

³⁵ Ibid. 30.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ John Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner, 2003), 13–14. It's worth noting that Schaefer provides a detailed history of *Mom and Dad's* promotion and exhibition, and this particular story never comes up. Its veracity is perhaps less important than the ideas about exploitation that it represents. For more information on the promotion and exhibition of *Mom and Dad*, see Schaefer, *Bold!*, 114–116 and 132–134.

³⁸ Waters quoted in Stevenson, *Desperate Visions*, 28.

³⁹ Information on Castle's career can be found in the director's autobiography (whose second edition Waters wrote the introduction to): William Castle, *Step Right Up! I'm Gonna Scare the Pants Off America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pharos Books, 1992). Studies of Castle's gimmicks and their relationship to exhibition and spectatorship include Murray Leeder, "Collective Screams: William Castle and the Gimmick Film," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 4 (August 2011): 773–795; and Catherine Clepper, "'Death by Fright': Risk, Consent, and Evidentiary Objects in William Castle's Rigged Houses," *Film History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 54–84.

⁴⁰ Kate J. Russell, "The Cinematic Pandemonium of William Castle and John Waters," *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). (Forthcoming)

⁴¹ The essay was originally published as John Waters, "Whatever Happened to Showmanship?" *American Film*, December 1983, 55–58. It was re-published in Waters, *Crackpot*, 13–23.

⁴² Waters, *Crackpot*, 22.

⁴³ Ibid. 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 15.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 17.

⁵⁰ For an overview of the Underground's major aesthetic trends and notable titles, see David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 85–165.

⁵¹ Waters quoted in Stevenson, *Desperate Visions*, 72.

⁵² Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 69.

⁵³ Ibid. 70–71.

⁵⁴ Many of these columns are collected in Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959–1971* (New York: Collier Books, 1972).

⁵⁵ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, September 30, 1965, 18.

⁵⁶ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, September 30, 1965, 20.

⁵⁷ Waters quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 29.

⁵⁸ J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 39–76.

⁵⁹ Jonas Mekas, "Showcases I Ran in the Sixties," in *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas & the New York Underground*, ed. David E. James (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 323–324.

⁶⁰ For more on the *Flaming Creatures* arrests and subsequent controversy, see Hoberman and Rosenbaum 60–61; Janet Staiger, "Finding Community in the Early 1960s: Underground Cinema and Sexual Politics," in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, eds. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 55–58; and Suárez, *Bike Boys*, 181–187.

⁶¹ An original announcement, description, and line-up for the festival was published in the *Village Voice*: Advertisement, *Village Voice*, October 28, 1965, 28. Descriptions of the festival can be found in columns from October through December 1965 in *Movie Journal*, as well as in Richard Foreman's writings on what he refers to as the "Expanded Cinema Festival." See Richard Foreman, "During the Second Half of the Sixties," in James, *To Free the Cinema*, 138–144.

⁶² Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, 43.

⁶³ Staiger, "Finding Community," 39–74.

⁶⁴ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 119–120.

⁶⁵ Ives, *John Waters*, 26.

- ⁶⁶ An announcement in late November 1965 stated that the Cinematheque would be moving from its home at the Astor Place Playhouse to the 41st Street Theater – two venues, it should noted, that also acted primarily as sites for legitimate theater. Advertisement, *Village Voice*, November 25, 1965, 20.
- ⁶⁷ “The Theater of the Ridiculous was really popular then,” Waters recalls. “That was an influence on me, too. And Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and LeRoi Jones’s plays, and Jack Gelber...all that stuff. We used to go to theater all the time. I was obsessed by all that stuff.” Waters quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 27. The history and works of the Theater of the Ridiculous, as well as their influence on Waters, are discussed in Stefan Brecht, *Queer Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1986).
- ⁶⁸ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, October 26, 1967, 30.
- ⁶⁹ Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (Phoenix, AZ: Associated Professional Services, 1965). The book was first published in France in 1959 and was banned within days of its 1965 publication in the United States. It did not achieve widespread circulation in the U.S. until its republication in 1975. Anger wrote a sequel, *Hollywood Babylon II*, which was published in 1984.
- ⁷⁰ Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 141.
- ⁷¹ Waters quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 28, 84.
- ⁷² Waters quoted in Daniel Mudie Cunningham, “A Star Thing,” in *Andy Warhol* (South Bank, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2007), 86.
- ⁷³ J.J. Murphy, *The Black Hole of the Camera: The Films of Andy Warhol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 254.
- ⁷⁴ Waters quoted in Cunningham, “A Star Thing,” 87.
- ⁷⁵ Waters quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 80.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid. 85.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid. 109. Waters somewhat misremembers the theater’s name, which was the New Andy Warhol Garrick Theater.
- ⁷⁸ James, *Allegories of Cinema*, 84.
- ⁷⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 41.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid.; “Mr. Peep’s Diary,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, October 20, 1965, reprinted in Egan, *John Waters*, 4.
- ⁸¹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 41.
- ⁸² Waters apparently tried to get the film shown in “another local refreshment stand in the vanguard of hip culture, but the place suddenly went out of business.” “Mr. Peep’s Diary” 4.
- ⁸³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 41.
- ⁸⁴ Waters quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 111.
- ⁸⁵ “Mr. Peep’s Diary” 3.
- ⁸⁶ In another sign of his ability to generate media attention, Waters also managed during this time to get local coverage for *Dorothy, the Kansas City Pothead*, a film he never completed. “‘Wizard of Oz’ Goes to ‘Pot,’ Is Now ‘Wizard of Odd,’” *Baltimore Sun*, March 10, 1966, C20.
- ⁸⁷ Waters, *Shock Value*, 49.
- ⁸⁸ Waters quoted in Danny Fields and Fran Lebowitz, “Pink Flamingos and the Filthiest People Alive?” *Interview*, May 1973, 14–15, 40–41, reprinted in Egan, *John Waters*, 28.
- ⁸⁹ “Church Concert,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 10, 1966, D10; “Music Notes Organ Recital,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 21, 1965, D16; “Artist to Display 150 Works,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 24, 1968, D6.
- ⁹⁰ “Corner Theater Moves Downtown,” *Baltimore Sun*, July 16, 1967, FD11.
- ⁹¹ “Canon Collins to Give Nuclear Weapon Talk,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 22, 1963, 29; “Service of Thanksgiving,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 25, 1964, 11; “Capital Punishment Council to Assemble,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 19, 1966, A9.
- ⁹² Paul Wilkes, “Baltimore’s Disconnecteds,” *Baltimore Sun*, December 17, 1967, 10.
- ⁹³ Frederick J. Hanna, “A Teen-Age Reply to ‘God is Dead,’” *Baltimore Sun*, May 26, 1966, D5.
- ⁹⁴ “Clergymen Back Open Housing,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 7, 1966, C28; Weldon Wallace, “7 Clergyman Ask Assembly to Liberalize Abortion Laws,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 7, 1968, C8.
- ⁹⁵ Descriptions of early Flower Marts can be found in: Mary Kilpatrick, “I Remember When...The Flower Mart was Something New,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 8, 1949, M2.
- ⁹⁶ Muriel Dobbin, “Flower Mart – Work of a Year,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 7, 1961, FA1.
- ⁹⁷ Waters, *Shock Value*, 49.
- ⁹⁸ Richard H. Levine, “Flower Mart (Hardy Perennial) Blooms Again,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 12, 1966, C24.

⁹⁹ Linda Dunn, "George on His Maypole Enjoys 55th Mart," *Baltimore Sun*, May 11, 1967, C24, C8.

¹⁰⁰ *Roman Candles* Poster 1, Folder 8, Box 5, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, Wesleyan University Cinema Archives (WCU).

¹⁰¹ Waters quoted in Stevenson, *Desperate Visions*, 74–75. Lest Waters seem overly cynical in his use of Anger's reputation to sell his own work, he adds that he "loved" *Eaux d'Artifice* and that Anger "was the very first person—and I don't think anybody ever did this before him—that used pop music the way every movie does now. I copied him—everybody copied him." Waters quoted in Stevenson, *Desperate Visions*, 75.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 75.

¹⁰³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 50.

¹⁰⁴ Carl Schoettler, "Underground Film Shown," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, May 11, 1967, C11.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 50.

¹⁰⁷ *Roman Candles* Poster 2, Folder 8, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹⁰⁸ The reference here is presumably to the Mothers of Invention, the 60s-era rock band with whom Waters's target audience would likely have had great familiarity.

¹⁰⁹ Lou Cedrone, "'Devil's Angels in Neighborhood," review of *Roman Candles*, *Baltimore Evening Sun*, May 16, 1967, A12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 50.

¹¹² Different sources give slightly different dates as to when these trips began. Waters writes in *Shock Value* that he and Mona Montgomery hitchhiked to Provincetown in the summer of 1966. A 1997 interview with Gerard Peary, however, quotes Waters as saying that he and Montgomery first traveled there in 1965. 1966 appears to be the more cited year, but the discrepancy is worth noting. See Waters, *Shock Value*, 50; and Gerald Peary, "John Waters in Provincetown," *Provincetown Arts Magazine*, 1997, 22–26, reprinted in Egan, *John Waters*, 61.

¹¹³ For a detailed history of Provincetown and especially its relationship to the LGBT community, see Karen Christel Krahulik, *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

¹¹⁴ Waters quoted in Peary, "John Waters," 62. For a more detailed account of Waters's time in Provincetown—including his jobs, living situations, and social life—see Peary, "John Waters," 59–70 and Waters, *Shock Value*, 48, 50.

¹¹⁵ Peary, "John Waters," 63.

¹¹⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 50.

¹¹⁷ Waters describes this maddening process in *ibid.* 52–53.

¹¹⁸ This information comes from *Eat Your Makeup* Poster, Folder 8, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹¹⁹ This information and the account of the tensions between the local contest and the Emmanuel Church screening come from Waters, *Shock Value*, 53.

¹²⁰ "Festival of Films," *Baltimore Sun*, March 3, 1968, D21.

¹²¹ Besides Waters's usual marketing tactics, the film's forthcoming screening received brief coverage in the *Baltimore Sun*, calling it "a local filmed and produced underground film" and noting that it was "the third effort by 21-year-old John Waters, and his first 16-mm film." "Children's Show in Columbia," *Baltimore Sun*, February 16, 1968, B4.

¹²² *Eat Your Makeup* Poster.

¹²³ For references to Wise, see "8-Year Old Director," *Variety*, October 21, 1964, 8; and Mekas, *Movie Journal*, 84.

¹²⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 54.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 131

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 53.

¹²⁷ Waters makes the claim in *ibid.* 53. The poster can be found in Folder 8, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹²⁸ Waters quoted in Peary, "John Waters," 63.

¹²⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 54.

¹³⁰ Peary, "John Waters," 63.

¹³¹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 54

¹³² Waters quoted in Peary, "John Waters," 63.

¹³³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 54

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Howard Smith, "Scenes," *Village Voice*, December 28, 1967, 19.

¹³⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 54.

Chapter Two

From Baltimore to the Bay Area: Expanding the Waters's Brand

By mid-1968, John Waters had created the basic components of his directorial brand. The filmmaker as underground exploiter, Waters crafted low-budget, Baltimore-set narratives with a penchant for shocking imagery and provocative humor that he then promoted and screened with self-consciously campy marketing and exhibition tactics. His ambitions, however, went beyond shooting shorts and showing them primarily in his hometown. Beginning in 1968, he wrote longer scripts, pursued (relatively) bigger budgets, pushed his provocative content, and fashioned juicier roles for his core Dreamland actors, particularly Divine. As a promoter and exhibitor looking for greater financial solvency and cultural recognition, he sought to both entrench himself in the Baltimore film scene and circulate his titles across the country. In other words, he wanted to shift his directorial brand from a period of creation to one of expansion.

This chapter examines the strategies by which Waters did just that in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Focusing primarily on Waters's handling of his features *Mondo Trasho* (1969) and *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), I analyze the brand-expansion tactics Waters utilized within Baltimore and those employed when distributing the films around the country. The first section details the burgeoning filmmaking institutions and support structures available in Baltimore during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and how Waters both worked within and stood apart from them to further solidify his reputation as the city's major independent filmmaker. Then, I follow Waters as he moved beyond Baltimore and attempted to find audiences in other parts of the country. He used two main strategies to do so. First, Waters partnered with new national distribution companies specializing in underground film: the Film-makers Distribution Center and Underground Cinema 12. Second, he fully embraced the identity of itinerant exploiter by traveling the country and forging relationships with theater owners and local artists. While the geographic logic of the

chapter's structure emphasizes the role of circulation in Waters's brand expansion, both sections track how his distribution efforts shaped the marketing, publicity, and exhibition strategies that had become central to his reputation.

Indeed, Waters's work both within and beyond Baltimore underscores larger paradoxes about his developing public persona. Within Baltimore, Waters at once needed to work within the developing institutions for regional filmmakers and to exist somewhat beyond them, maintaining the unique cinematic and extra-cinematic elements that made him stand out from other directors. Expanding beyond Baltimore, meanwhile, meant striking a balance between an ever-increasing circulation of his work around the country and the importance of Waters as a physical presence within any given exhibition space, crafting the terms through which audiences would view his work.

These complications, in turn, raise larger questions about the nature of directorial brand expansion—how spreading one's work and public identity to new audiences affects the fundamental brand “stability” needed to expand in the first place. As this chapter illuminates, expansion outward can lead to unexpected intensification and development of a directorial brand. A particularly rich example of this can be seen in the screenings and stage shows that Waters and Divine put on with the radical San Francisco drag troupe, the Cockettes. In moving his films, his star, and himself across the country, Waters found collaborators that brought his own ideas about the carnivalization of the exhibition space to a new level of force and creativity, setting the stage for the raucous midnight screenings that would define his breakout hit, *Pink Flamingos* (1972).

Baltimore's “Old Man of Experimental Movies” – Waters and Regional Film Culture¹

To understand the circumstances within which Waters produced, marketed, and exhibited his early work, one must consider the state of Baltimore's independent filmmaking scene in the

mid-to-late 1960s. While beginning to shift by the end of the decade, a general dearth of infrastructure surrounding production, distribution, and exhibition hindered local filmmaking generally and shaped Waters's opportunities specifically.

Production of regional cinema had some vocal proponents but largely lived in the shadow of larger filmmaking centers along the East Coast. While students at Baltimore area schools such as Johns Hopkins University, Goucher College, and the Maryland Institute College of Art expressed enthusiasm for filmmaking courses, the lack of consistent access to production funds, cameras, and post-production technology limited the amount and type of work that could be produced.² Even those working within professional television advertising during this period remarked that, while quality production personnel could be found locally, both the wider pool of actors to be found in nearby Washington, D.C. and New York City and the lack of advanced photographic laboratories within Baltimore meant that significant portions of the pre and post-production processes needed to be outsourced.³ These difficulties in producing locally made films led, in turn, to a lack of both local distributors and, perhaps most critically, exhibition spaces. "The real problem," said William Bray, a psychologist at the University of Baltimore who taught film production, "is that the students feel a little dispirited about not having an outlet, a place to show their films."⁴

To be clear, local venues for film enthusiasts to see independent, avant-garde, international art house, and repertory fare did exist. The long-standing screenings offered by the Enoch Pratt Free Library continued into the late 1960s, specializing in documentaries and educational films aimed at children and teenagers.⁵ Other educational institutions that took an interest in film included the private Park School, which ran the Park School Film Society in 1966 and 1967.⁶ College campuses in and around Baltimore also offered film series, either by opening

up class screenings to the public or through the efforts of student-run campus film societies.⁷

Finally, Baltimore arts institutions like the regional theatre Center Stage and the Baltimore Museum of Art scheduled semi-regular series of classic or contemporary films otherwise not seen in the city's commercial venues.⁸

Even underground and experimental work received some attention. A series at the Baltimore Museum of Art screened titles by Ron Rice, Robert Frank, Jonas Mekas, and Bruce Conner.⁹ More consistently, the "Personal Cinema Group" at the Maryland Institute ran films by such avant-gardists as Kenneth Anger, Michael Snow, and Hollis Frampton, while experimental films were sporadically advertised as being shown at the Reel World Cinema at Park Plaza.¹⁰

While by no means an exhaustive account of non-commercial screening venues in Baltimore at this time, this summary offers evidence that an audience for adventurous filmgoing existed within the city. What was also true, however, was the general lack of locally produced titles within most of these series. Thus, a kind of chicken-and-egg scenario developed in which local directors had difficulty making films which led to local non-commercial exhibitors not screening them which then made it more difficult for filmmakers to find venues when they did manage to produce work. This offers some explanation for Waters's decision to pursue screenings in churches—not just as a provocation, but due to a lack of established venues in which to show Baltimore-based film.

An attempt to counteract this cycle began in 1967 with the formation of the Maryland Film Festival. Bill Hancock, an alum of the Maryland Institute College of Art, created the festival, which was co-sponsored by the Institute and local television station WBAL-TV.¹¹ Festival committee members accepted 8mm and 16mm entries, screening them over eight days at the Institute's auditorium at the Mount Royal Station in late February and early March 1967. By

1969, the festival received around 115 submissions from across the country, which were culled to 30–40 accepted titles chosen by a panel of judges.¹² This same judging panel—which included such luminaries of the underground and avant-garde world as Stan VanDerBeek, Jonas Mekas, and P. Adams Sitney—awarded first, second, and third place prizes to both 8mm and 16mm films, with top cash prizes ranging from \$500 to \$750.¹³

While the festival accepted films from all over the U.S., it specifically sought to encourage the production of independent and experimental work within Baltimore. Festival organizer Jaromir Stephany noted the high cost of film production for students and independent directors and hoped that the cash prizes awarded by the festival would help ease some of this financial burden.¹⁴ It also raised awareness amongst local media that such work even existed within the city. As *Baltimore Sun* reporter James Dilts put it in his coverage of local underground cinema after the first Maryland Film Festival, “Baltimore has no one in the front rank of underground films but there is a surprising amount of activity in the area and some of the results are surprisingly good.”¹⁵

Waters never screened his work at the Maryland Film Festival, in part because the judging committee may have rejected one of his films due to its objectionable content.¹⁶ If this was the case, it meant that Waters was shut out of one of the city’s only viable showcases for low-budget independent work. This would prove particularly troublesome, as he had ambitions to expand his filmmaking in length, budget, extremity of content, and focus upon his potential underground star.

Descriptions of Waters’s features from this era illustrate these growing aspirations. With a running time of 95 minutes and a budget of around \$2,000, *Mondo Trasho*’s gleefully convoluted plot tracks the bizarre misadventures of an unnamed blonde bombshell (Mary Vivian

Pearce) and the woman who hits her with her car (Divine).¹⁷ Divine travels around with her unconscious auto victim, experiencing such wild detours as an encounter with the Virgin Mary and a trip to an insane asylum. Divine would feature even more prominently in Waters's follow-up feature, *Multiple Maniacs*. The film follows the exploits of a carnival of criminal degenerates and the increasingly crazed attempts by its leader (Divine) to exact revenge against her cheating lover (David Lochary). These include an erotically-charged trip to a local cathedral, a rape by a fifteen-foot lobster, and Divine's climactic murderous rampage that concludes with her being gunned down by the National Guard. *Multiple Maniacs* cost \$5,000, which Waters again borrowed from his family. In between these features, Waters also shot *The Diane Linkletter Story* (1970), a short satirizing the suicide of the daughter of TV personality Art Linkletter. The film primarily acted as a means to test the sound equipment for *Multiple Maniacs*. These works proved that any expansion of his directorial brand would only amplify the provocations at the heart of Waters's earlier shorts.

To remain financially solvent, of course, Waters had to screen these films within Baltimore, where he had established his strongest base of support. If institutions like the Maryland Film Festival offered little help, Waters pursued or continued to cultivate relationships with other local organizations that proved more amenable to his brand of cinematic shock and subcultural bacchanal.

Local Institutions

For the premiere screenings of both *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*, Waters continued to rely upon his unique affiliations with local religious institutions. Waters's relationship with the Great Hall of Emmanuel Church paved the way for *Mondo Trasho*'s debut

showings. The premiere screenings ran at the church from Friday, March 14 to Sunday, March 16, 1969 playing each night at 8:00 p.m., 10:00 p.m., and midnight.

The screenings themselves will be discussed later on, but one shift from earlier showings at Emmanuel reflects a growing support structure for locally based filmmakers that also proved open to supporting Waters's films. The *Mondo Trasho* screenings were presented by the Baltimore Experimental Film Society, a local organization formed by William Bray, the aforementioned University of Baltimore film production instructor.¹⁸ Bray began the organization in 1968 as a means to give young Baltimore filmmakers an opportunity to both have their work exhibited locally and to receive some financial compensation for their films.¹⁹ The organization charged a five-dollar membership fee—a fact which explains why one advertisement for the Emmanuel screenings stipulated that “special dues will be assessed,” with charges of \$1.25 for members and \$1.50 for guests.²⁰ Sponsored screenings at various venues included not only work by local filmmakers, but showings of more widely-known underground and avant-garde films by Andy Warhol and Kenneth Anger.²¹ That Waters partnered with the organization speaks to his need to tap into the city's growing network of cinematic support structures, as well as acknowledging the brand-accentuating impact of connecting his own work to a group screening films by Underground luminaries.

For his next film, Waters would need a new venue. He writes that when he approached Emmanuel about screening *Multiple Maniacs* one year later, the church “decided they had risked their necks enough for ‘art’” and told Waters no.²² Emmanuel recommended another house of worship that might be interested: the First Unitarian Church at the corner of Charles and Franklin Street. Waters called the reverend at First Unitarian and received confirmation that his film could

screen there.²³ He connects the reverend's acceptance to the church's general need to attract a more-youthful crowd: "Anything to get young people into a church."²⁴

This may have been true, but a closer look at First Unitarian Church's sponsored events and public reputation reveals a similar blend of left-leaning politics and openness to artistic endeavors that led Emmanuel to show Waters's work. Advertised topics for Sunday sermons at the church could hew toward the apolitical, but also included such titles as "The Challenges Liberal Religion Faces," "The Ten Commandments Brought Up to Date," "Housing Exploitation in Baltimore City," and "Existentialism."²⁵ The church hosted a group of local "liberals and radicals" as they organized a protest march against the city police's treatment of the Black Panther Party. Antiwar-movement leader David T. Dellinger gave a talk hosted by First Unitarian. A minister at the church, Howard A. Waterhouse, moderated a panel discussion at Baltimore Hebrew College on reconsidering concepts of diversity.²⁶ The church also provided space for artists to exhibit their work, and was a screening venue for Peter Watkins's noted pacifist documentary *The War Game* (1965).²⁷ Perhaps even more so than Emmanuel, First Unitarian projected an identity of political progressivism and inclusion that would have made the screening of a local underground film a permissible option. Waters took full advantage of the opportunity, screening *Multiple Maniacs* from Friday, April 10, through Sunday, April 12, 1970, with showings once again at 8:00 p.m., 10:00 p.m., and midnight.

The second local institution in which Waters screened his films drew even more explicitly upon the energies of the Underground and the alternative artistic communities within Baltimore. Founded in the mid-1960s as the radical theater boom that began in New York City reverberated throughout the country, The Corner Theater was Baltimore's major experimental theater in the latter half of the 1960s and into the 1970s. (In a further example of the imbrication

between religious institutions and experimental art in Baltimore, the theater found a temporary performance space in the summer of 1967 at none other than the Great Hall of Emmanuel Church.) In 1967, the organization began a formal partnership with La MaMa, the famed off-off-Broadway theater in New York City whose founder, Ellen Stewart, trailblazed many of the experimental techniques that were then disseminated throughout the rest of the theatrical world in the 1960s. The group produced plays from La MaMa and by local Baltimore playwrights such as Gordon Porterfield, put on acting workshops, and staged experiential theatrical happenings that were covered by the mainstream and underground press.²⁸ By mid-1970, however, financial pressures forced the theater to temporarily close and relocate down the street to 891 North Howard.²⁹

It was around this time that the Corner Theater began to incorporate film screenings into their repertoire. Many of these focused on older titles.³⁰ The University of Baltimore frequently co-sponsored these Sunday screenings, with proceeds going to support both the theater's stage productions and the Film-Maker's Workshop, a program designed to assist the university's student filmmakers.³¹ Perhaps due to this partnership, the Corner Theater also became a venue within which experimental films could be shown, and particularly those by local filmmakers.

It is within these programs that Waters gained some of his first consistent screening slots in Baltimore. The theater scheduled a showing of *Mondo Trasho* as part of a summer film festival that also included evenings of films by a group called the Baltimore Filmmakers Society.³² It is unclear whether this particular screening—scheduled for July 3 and 4, 1970—came to fruition before the theater temporarily shut its doors in mid-summer 1970. Subsequent screenings, however, strengthened the relationship between Waters's films and the Corner Theater. *Multiple Maniacs* had its second round of Baltimore showings at the theater from

October 1–4, 1970, which were co-sponsored by the Baltimore Filmmakers Association.³³ The following year, the Corner Theater screened *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs* on a rotation on July 22–24 and July 29–31, along with *The Diane Linkletter Story*.³⁴

While not a large number of showings, these playdates established a second local outpost for Waters's work to be screened, and one whose target audience of experimental theater and repertory cinema fans provided a perhaps more-consistent base of viewers than the church screenings. This also aligned with Waters's own professed love of experimental theater and his comfort in screening his films in non-traditional spaces—putting into practice the lessons he learned attending New York's mixed-media venues in the 1960s. Additionally, both the inclusion of his work in a larger festival promoting Baltimore filmmakers and co-sponsorship of his screenings by a local filmmakers association reflected the strategic connections that Waters was forming within the larger Baltimore film scene. Indeed, Waters's growing notoriety may have been seen by association leaders as a means of attracting people to support other local work.

The third institution that Waters tapped into during this period would begin a long and fruitful partnership. By the early 1970s, the Maryland Film Festival had been effectively replaced by the Baltimore Film Festival as the major yearly cinematic event within the city.³⁵ Harvey Alexander, an English professor at the University of Baltimore and an organizer of film-related events around Baltimore, founded the festival in 1970.³⁶

In some respects, the festival continued practices begun by the Maryland Film Festival. It sought to “celebrate the work of the independent film-maker and to promote the concept of the film as art,” with submissions accepted from all over the country.³⁷ A jury composed of mainly critics, scholars, broadcasters, and filmmakers selected the works to be screened, and cash prizes of up to \$150 were awarded to individual films.³⁸ The co-sponsorship of the festival by the

University of Baltimore and the American Film Institute also allowed for a series of perks and financial benefits: an AFI-sponsored “Best Film by a Baltimorean” Award of \$100; the opportunity for award-winning films to screen at the AFI Theater in Washington, D.C.; and a payment to every director within the festival of one-dollar-per-minute of film.³⁹ The policy reflected a concerted effort to use the festival as a means of supporting independent filmmakers, and especially local ones.⁴⁰

Waters participated in the festival in two different capacities within its first three years of existence. According to a reporter for the University of Baltimore’s *Student Press*, Waters screened *The Diane Linkletter Story* on the festival’s first day of screenings, April 4, 1970, and also offered a sneak preview of *Multiple Maniacs* before its official premiere at the First Unitarian Church.⁴¹ Furthermore, in 1972, Waters participated as a judge on the prize jury.⁴² The festival not only provided another venue within which Waters could screen his films, but offered a further opportunity to enmesh himself within the growing support networks being built for local filmmaking in Baltimore.

Finally, Waters relied upon the ever-growing number of local student-run film societies and campus screening series.⁴³ *Multiple Maniacs* and *The Diane Linkletter Story* both screened on the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) campus on November 6, 1971, with Waters attending the screening along with Divine and speaking to a reporter from the student newspaper, *The Retriever*, afterward.⁴⁴ Divine also attended a fall 1971 screening of *Multiple Maniacs* in the BPA Auditorium at UMBC.⁴⁵ Like the screenings at the Corner Theater, college engagements offered Waters a more adventurous youth audience, as well as providing a multitude of potential options for showings as word of mouth spread across various local campuses.

By 1971, then, Waters had fostered the kind of local connections that would ensure his films were screened and circulated within the region. If brand expansion relied upon access and cooperation, however, it also meant standing out within a cultural marketplace becoming more hospitable to competing local filmmakers. Waters had already established many of the ways in which he provided a singular theatrical experience to local filmgoers—shocking comedies on screen, of course, but also witty marketing materials, hyperbolic promotional strategies, and the creation of a subcultural-circus milieu with himself cast as ringmaster. To entrench and develop his reputation as a confrontational-yet-gregarious cine-provocateur, Waters experimented further with three major threads of promotion and publicity: poster design; relationship to local media via press releases and interviews; and irony-tinged exploitation gimmicks at the site of exhibition.

Poster Design

While it's unclear to what extent he himself drew them, Waters took the design of his poster art very seriously. Concrete evidence of this exists within the production notebooks for *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*, which each contain detailed sketches of what would eventually become the posters for both films.⁴⁶ These drafts reveal Waters working through the specific appeals of each film's advertisement. *Multiple Maniacs'* poster mock-up contains the "win a date with Divine" gimmick that would ultimately be used in San Francisco and elsewhere. *Mondo Trasho*, meanwhile, once had the tagline "A shriek from the gutter"—a more startling word choice than the sly play on film-marketing cliché that he eventually settled on and will be discussed shortly. Such details underscore the importance that Waters placed upon how advertising and promotional materials shaped the expectations of his viewership.

The previously discussed posters for *Roman Candles* and *Eat Your Makeup* threaded together aspects of exploitation and underground cinema. Waters took a similar tack in the posters for *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*. If anything, these posters fuse together the appeals of both cinemas even more tightly, refracting the gleeful sensationalism of exploitation through the hand-drawn artistry and knowing irony of underground cinema. At the same time, they reflected new attempts by Waters to infuse different types of genre parody into his designs and to balance his aforementioned use of negative critics' quotes with highlights from positive reviews of his features.

A *Mondo Trasho* poster used to advertise the film's previous play dates, for instance, combined the bombastic and the self-conscious in equal measure.⁴⁷ Its tagline reads simply, "At Last...A 'Gutter Film.'" In a brief phrase, Waters sets up the movie-advertisement cliché of stoking audience expectations only to winkingly deflate it by positioning this "long-awaited" film as a cinematic work emanating from the grimy conduits of the street.

To the right of this tagline, a hand-drawn image of Divine and Mary Vivian Pearce's characters shows Divine lifting up an unconscious Pearce. On the one hand, the pose recalls many a film poster or paperback romance cover of a man cradling a lifeless woman in his arms. This connection to stereotypical imagery becomes stronger since Divine stands "on top of" the film's title, which is written in large, capital letters with notable back shadowing. Overall, the design brings to mind that of an epic romance. Details of the imagery, however, playfully undercut these connotations: the flab bulging over Divine's shorts; the homoerotic tinge of the drawing's use of two women, further tweaked by the fact that one is played by a man; the disjuncture between the lettering's monumental visual presence and the title's cheekily low-rent

associations. The poster proves memorable for the ways in which it both elevates and lampoons its main characters.

While *Mondo Trasho*'s poster riffs on the epic romance, *Multiple Maniacs* performs a similar tonal balancing act through a parody of horror iconography.⁴⁸ Waters uses two taglines to underscore the film's aura of audacious repugnance. The first—"A Celluloid Atrocity"—foregrounds *Multiple Maniacs*'s boundary-pushing displays of bad taste, acknowledging the film's self-consciously objectionable qualities and using them as a key selling point. The second pushes this idea even further, evoking a carnival barker's sensational claims while also drawing upon the memories that viewers may have of past Waters's films: "You won't believe this one!" The central image itself finds a screaming Divine being overtaken by a fifteen-foot lobster. The lurid, monster-movie style content of the photograph becomes undercut by the absurdity of the decontextualized situation and the obvious fakery of the lobster itself.

The same holds for the design of another poster that Waters used for a screening in Provincetown, Massachusetts.⁴⁹ An image of a crazy-eyed Divine lying on the floor and staring off into the distance gets paired with the text: "This is Lady Divine..." Below, a second line of text claims, "And these are her victims..." which is placed above a trio of photos of other cast members. To the right of these images, a hand-drawn Lady Divine with blackened eyes, dark bouffant hair, and large breasts wields a blood-dipped knife. Once again, horror-movie clichés like the murderous woman and her unwilling victims become taken up and satirized through the loony excesses of the film's images.⁵⁰ The viewer appeal rests upon a simultaneous desire to be genuinely shocked and the ability to be in on the campy joke—a visual manifestation of the balance Waters sought in his overall persona as underground exploiter.⁵¹

Another notable shift that occurred from Waters's earlier posters to his creations for *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs* can be seen in its use of critics' quotes. As discussed in the last chapter, Waters had to contend with some harsh local reviews. He did so by ironizing the entire system of critical reception, highlighting the worst reviewer complaints as poster blurbs. Certainly, Waters continued to receive some very negative notices for his work. He took particular delight in quoting from the fulminating write-ups put out by *Baltimore Evening Sun* critic Lou Cedrone. A cheekily-decontextualized Cedrone line quoted on a poster for *Multiple Maniacs* reads in part: "Not only uglier and more revolting than his 'Mondo Trasho,' it is even more repugnant than 'The Conqueror Worm'..." Still, Waters also found himself with an increasing number of positive notices for his films. As will be discussed later, critics would still react with amazement and revulsion, yet they also wrote of their appreciation for Waters's audaciousness and satiric wit. Particularly on posters for *Multiple Maniacs*, Waters found himself in the somewhat new position of attracting viewership in part through the excerpting of astonished but essentially laudatory reviewer reactions.

Local Media

Beginning with *Mondo Trasho*, Waters also began to increasingly court local media. Most notably, he produced more elaborate press releases for his films, which he would send around to all of the local Baltimore newspapers. Like his posters, the humor within these documents comes primarily from the sly mismatching of publicity boilerplate and Waters's own cock-eyed descriptors. A typical Hollywood press release, for instance, might extol the film's exotic or lush shooting locations. Waters describes how *Mondo Trasho* "was filmed in alleys, gutters, laundramats [sic], dumps, and deserted areas around Baltimore."⁵² Similarly, the release for *Multiple Maniacs* deemed the performance of David Lochary as "one of his most frantic,"

notes Mink Stole's acting as "her most flagrant performance to date," and describes the film's cast of characters as including "Sharon Tate, Jesus Christ, and the Infant of Prague."⁵³ Both documents also let Waters unspool the convoluted narratives of his features, allowing their outrageous content to be comically juxtaposed with the canned, this-follows-that format of the usual press release plot synopsis.

His own statements on the intentions behind each film undercut Hollywood bromides while simultaneously bolstering Waters's own subversive directorial persona. "Mr. Waters has commented that his film 'is a combination of cheap theatrics, obsessional fantasies, and a true love for all that is trashy in filmmaking today,'" reads the *Mondo Trasho* release. *Multiple Maniacs*' press notes claim the film was made "primarily for the filmmaker's own fanatical enjoyment and secondly, to please the so-called 'freak element' of movie-goers who laugh when realizing they enjoy movies that appall them..." These quotes would provide the basis for his ideas about cinematic quality and the relationship between the filmic object and the viewer that he would elaborate on in later interviews and personal writings.

These releases do not exist solely as a send-up of the form. Both contain all the relevant information on the film's casting, budget, and release dates, as well as noting the growing success of Waters's previous works. This proves especially true of the *Multiple Maniacs* release, which takes pains to note that "unlike many underground films, little dialogue was improvised—a tight script was followed throughout and, as in previous Dreamland films, Mr. Waters is responsible for the producing, writing, directing, filming, editing, and sound work." The sentence not only highlights the continued use of the "Dreamland" moniker in connection with Waters's larger brand identity but underscores an element of the director's reputation that he would consistently emphasize throughout his career. For all his films' roughhewn visual qualities and

hair-raising content, Waters routinely underlined his own organization and professionalism as a filmmaker—a seemingly incongruous characteristic that actually assisted in separating Waters the public personality from the fictional universe of his films.

Local Baltimore reporters responded well to Waters's press releases, admiring their playful irreverence. Anne Childress, motion picture editor for *The News American*, praised "the deadpan style" of Waters's *Mondo Trasho* announcement and wrote of the *Multiple Maniacs* notice, "If John Waters ever decides to give up making films, he can always earn a living writing press releases."⁵⁴ Don Walls of *The Daily Record* similarly felt that "if Mr. Waters's sense of humor, which he applies to his promotional materials, is in any way evident in the film, then 'Mondo Trasho' should be a masterpiece of wit."⁵⁵ Even Waters critic Lou Cedrone mused that "Waters' movies should be as clever as his press releases. They are fun."⁵⁶ These comments provide some of the most explicit framing yet of Waters's brand as creatively and consciously enmeshed in the extra-cinematic. That all three writers note his press releases at all speak to their baseline effectiveness as promotional materials. That all three explicitly link them to Waters's comic ingenuity reveals the importance that the director continued to place on the crafting of extratextual material as both a way of framing his cinematic work and as sites of pleasure in their own right.

Waters himself dabbled within the world of alternative film criticism during this time as well. He contributed reviews of *Paranoia* (a.k.a. *Orgasmo*, Umberto Lenzi, 1969) and *Spirits of the Dead* (Federico Fellini, Louis Malle, and Roger Vadim, 1968) to *The Red Brick*, the radical student journal out of University of Maryland Baltimore County.⁵⁷ Criticism provided another venue in which to promulgate his ideas about the virtues of filmic bad taste, as when he concluded of *Paranoia*: "It is blatantly trashy, un-original and poorly done. It is also one of the

most amusing and funniest pictures I have seen in months.”⁵⁸ These reviews also marked perhaps Waters’s first true act of brand extension, previewing the arch, witty essays on cinema that he would produce later in his career.

Once he began to spark interest through his various marketing and publicity gambits, Waters also made himself available to local press. He granted interviews to writers from established periodicals as well as alternative and college newspapers. He developed a particularly strong advocate in P.J. O’Rourke, the local underground journalist and future famed political satirist who conducted an admiring interview with Waters in *The Chesapeake Weekly* and who would even use a Waters’s quote (“If you want *Cinema Verite*, open your eyes”) to begin a review of *Let It Be* (Michael Lindsay-Hogg, 1970) in *Harry*, one of Baltimore’s main alternative newspapers in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁵⁹

Within these interviews, Waters underscored ideas about his relationship to his own films and to cinema more broadly that formed core elements of his public persona. As in his press releases, Waters stressed to reporters his relatively conventional approach to film production, describing his shoots as “very traditional” and noting that “unlike most underground films, there’s very little improvisation.”⁶⁰ If these appeals to tradition put some space between Waters the filmmaker and the chaotic worlds he created, his response to questions about his films’ social significance revealed Waters’s allergy towards perceived pretension. He insisted that *Multiple Maniacs* “has a very complicated plot, but it doesn’t mean anything,” adding to O’Rourke that he would “much rather see *Blood Thirsty Butchers* [Andy Milligan, 1970] than crap like *The Graduate* [Mike Nichols, 1967].”⁶¹ In his filmmaking and viewing, then, Waters valued wild narrative contortions and shameless shocks over leaden appeals to cultural relevance. This insistent lack of pretense regarding his own work and taste positioned him as a more accessible

and even charming figure to the press than his physical appearance at the time—long, greasy hair; pencil moustache—might have otherwise implied.⁶²

Promotional materials and press appearances also became opportunities for Waters to cultivate the public persona of his Dreamland players. Behind the scenes, the director continued to tweak his actors' identities. A production notebook for *Mondo Trasho*, for instance, reveals Waters writing out alternate monikers for Mary Vivian Pearce, including "Mary Vivian Myer" and "Mary Victoria Ferguson."⁶³

Mostly, however, Waters recognized the public's fascination with his features' de facto star, Divine. Press appearances allowed Divine to fully inhabit the deviant diva persona that would blur the boundaries between his on and off-screen self. Speaking to a reporter for University of Maryland College Park's *Dimension*, for example, Divine embraced winking gender fluidity and flippant humor. "I am not a man, not a woman, I am just Divine," he tells the writer, adding when asked about his involvement in what the reporter deems Waters's "stag films," "I don't know. I would be embarrassed to be in some of those Hollywood things, like *Love Story* [Arthur Hiller, 1970]."⁶⁴ Like his director, Divine responds to accusations of his films' low quality through the upbraiding of so-called "respectable" mainstream product, placing Divine within the Waters's brand of playful inversions of cultural taste.

Reporters naturally sought out individuals as colorful and readily available as Waters and his stars, even if the actual writing could be ambivalent in tone. Interviewing Waters, for instance, the *Baltimore Sun*'s Carl Schoettler took a guarded and bemused view in his reportage, noting that Waters "looked vaguely like a camp version of John Carradine in a midnight rerun of *Grapes of Wrath* [John Ford, 1940]."⁶⁵ Larry Blonder, the writer of the aforementioned Divine profile in *Dimension*, foregrounded his unease even more explicitly, claiming that his first

reaction upon seeing Divine was “disgust” and then “as she came closer, it moved towards pity.”⁶⁶ Such descriptors arguably bolstered the Waters’s brand in the same way that a negative review did, underscoring the effectiveness of his countercultural provocations. Still, the smirking hostility underlining at least some of the coverage of *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs* reveal the limits of any filmmaker’s ability to fully control their self-image as they move more explicitly into the public eye.

Several local media outlets seemed keen to acknowledge the impact of Waters’s films on Baltimore’s arts scene. A two-page spread in the *Sunday News American* offered a colorful, on-the-ground look at the shooting of the *Multiple Maniacs* finale, as well as a peek into the interior of Waters’s Dreamland Studios space.⁶⁷ Schoettler noted that *Mondo Trasho* was “probably the only feature length film ever made entirely in Baltimore.”⁶⁸ Perhaps the most telling example of this, though, comes from the tossed-off manner in which a writer at *Harry* embraced Waters and his films as integrally apart of the city’s identity and cultural fabric. Writing on the premiere of *Multiple Maniacs*, C. Catharsis notes simply, “*Multiple Maniacs* was filmed exclusively in town. It’s a Baltimore thing.”⁶⁹

Exhibition Gimmickry

Finally, Waters continued to elaborate on the exploitation-influenced theatrical gimmicks that he had used to attract patrons to his earlier shorts. A telling shift, however, occurred in where Waters chose to locate these attention-grabbing strategies. While he used costumed cast members to draw patrons into the theater for *Roman Candles* and *Eat Your Makeup*, he now brought his stunts more notably into the space of the screening itself.

He advertised a special door prize at the premiere screening of *Multiple Maniacs*: “Dinner for two at The Little Tavern,” a restaurant that Waters elsewhere described (and

presumably Baltimoreans recognized) as “one of the sleaziest hamburger shops in town.”⁷⁰ This burger-centric reward became reduced to its absurdist extreme when Waters gave away a pound of ground beef at the midnight screenings of *Multiple Maniacs* at the First Unitarian Church.⁷¹ One contemporary observer wrote that an audience member won both the beef and a book on Sharon Tate, whose murder was both one of Waters’s obsessions and a key plot point within *Multiple Maniacs* itself.⁷² He gave away these prizes not because he felt people wanted them per se, but because these low-rent rewards allowed audiences to share in Waters’s overturning of middlebrow conventions in order to celebrate the grimy side of life in the city. Publicly accepting an invitation to dine at a sleazy hamburger restaurant or clutching a pound of uncooked meat connected the spectators to the delight that Waters and company took in the scuzzy, vulgar, and debased.

Two other elements of Waters’s screenings helped to further this goal. First, he continued appearing at many of his showings, often with cast members. This particularly allowed Divine to hone the public persona that would blur into his on-screen performances and prove a source of fascination for journalists and spectators alike.

Second, Waters began to have more midnight screenings of his films. Given how much Waters became associated with the midnight movie phenomenon of the 1970s, it’s striking to note that *Multiple Maniacs*’s premiere at the Great Hall of Emmanuel Church in March 1969 would be the first time that a John Waters film was screened at midnight in Baltimore. The air of disreputability that surrounds midnight screenings—the “inappropriate” screening time, the intertwining with other nighttime activities like drinking and drug-taking, the gathering-of-the-faithful devotion of those who attend—would become central to the appeal and longevity of Waters’s cinema.⁷³ That he began to appreciate this dynamic perhaps accounts for why he only

gave out door prizes at the midnight screenings of *Multiple Maniacs*. He seemed to intuit that the same type of audience member who would come to a church in the middle of the night to see his movies would be the same type of audience member that would understand why “winning” a hunk of raw meat would be better than any “legitimate” door prize.

Local responses to Waters’s intensified directorial branding fell along somewhat predictable lines, albeit with some new developments. Critical reaction to both features was decidedly mixed. Cedrone remained highly skeptical of both *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*, taking pains within both reviews to indicate how Waters’s comic talents became squandered by grotesquerie.⁷⁴ Others offered more measured criticisms. Len Bradford of *Harry* admired many of *Multiple Maniacs*’ comic set-pieces but found Lady Divine’s climactic descent into madness “predictable, and seemingly endless.”⁷⁵ Still others applauded Waters’s vision. Starla Perzov of the University of Baltimore *Student Press* found *Multiple Maniacs* “very funny,” while *The Daily Record*’s Don Walls said *Mondo Trasho* was “never really dirty and (to me) was highly hilarious.”⁷⁶

This mix of critical reactions from mainstream newspapers, student publications, and underground periodicals underscores a key complexity in Waters’s directorial brand. While Waters touted his worst reviews as perverse badges of honor, these notices tended to come from relatively conventional sources and therefore amplified the disjuncture between the director’s provocations and the reviewers’ stodgy conceptions of cinematic quality. Reviews from smaller, more subcultural publications, on the other hand, carried more weight as these were the periodicals that Waters’s target audience would see as more-accurate reflections of their own tastes. To say, then, that Waters reveled in bad reviews does not consider how the opinions of

more seemingly sympathetic writers might either drive or dissuade viewers generally aligned with Waters's aesthetic.

As for the popular reception of Waters's films in Baltimore, they attracted the sort of energized, unorthodox, and occasionally revolted viewership that their director hoped for. Waters notes that all nine premiere-weekend showings of both *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs* sold out.⁷⁷ That they went on to screen in several other venues throughout the city would seem to support their initial popularity. Meanwhile, Waters described viewer reactions as largely positive, with some notable dissent. "The audiences either hated the film or loved it," Waters recalls of the *Multiple Maniacs* screening, "but the ones who loved it seemed more enthusiastic than ever."⁷⁸

In his reviews, Cedrone also noted a positive crowd response to both films, with *Mondo Trasho*'s audience of "mostly young people" laughing at the film's "sado-psychotic" sequences.⁷⁹ The similarly youthful *Multiple Maniacs* crowd was "most appreciative when blood is being spilled and when knives are being plunged into bodies," leading Cedrone to wonder if such appreciation of gleeful gore was "part of the 'new world' they have in mind?"⁸⁰ Regardless of whether one saw within such crowd responses transgressive delight or shocking callousness, it's clear that Waters's brand of cinematic atrocity intrigued local viewers. Indeed, Cedrone's pearl-clutching reactions only underscored the effectiveness of the director's inflammatory films and the raucous atmosphere he cultivated around them.

By both engaging with local institutions and amplifying those extra-cinematic tactics that made him stand apart from other regional filmmakers, Waters's place within the Baltimore cinematic ecosystem seemed fairly certain. As early as 1970, one reporter referenced a description of the filmmaker as "Baltimore's 'old man of experimental movies' at the age of

22.”⁸¹ To more widely circulate his work, however, would require not only a geographic expansion, but a test of how his singular cinematic universe and idiosyncratic approaches to marketing and exhibition could be successfully transposed beyond the city limits.

Spreading Sleaze – Two Approaches to Distribution Beyond Baltimore

The distribution of *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs* represented the first major attempt by Waters to circulate his films outside of Baltimore, although there were precedents for his work moving beyond the city. Waters’s shorts had previously traveled to Provincetown, proving that the appeals of his directorial brand could be appreciated beyond their original context. Additionally, he and his fellow Dreamlanders had somewhat inadvertently placed themselves on the national stage as early as November 1968.⁸²

While Waters filmed a scene on the Johns Hopkins University campus for *Mondo Trasho* in which Divine fantasizes about a nude hitchhiker (Mark Isherwood), students informed security of the naked man running around on campus. The city police soon arrested Isherwood for indecent exposure and charged Waters, Mink Stole, David Lochary, and Mary Vivian Pearce with participation in the crime. Ever publicity-minded, Waters hired Fred Weisgal (a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union) to defend the quintet against the charges, which were ultimately dropped by Judge Solomon Liss of the Baltimore City Supreme Bench.⁸³ While local papers ran coverage of the arrests and trial, the legal travails of Waters and company also attracted national media attention.⁸⁴ *Variety* ran a front-page article on the arrests.⁸⁵ *Playboy* also picked up the story, championing the film as artistic expression under assault by overzealous law enforcement.⁸⁶ Before completing his first feature, then, Waters had managed through a combination of circumstance and savvy to get himself in the national spotlight.

It's one thing to use a temporary controversy to draw the public eye to a film. It's quite another to find ways to circulate that film on a national scale. Waters addressed this problem with a two-pronged approach: connecting with burgeoning national distributors of underground films; and forming small-scale partnerships with independent exhibitors, primarily on the West Coast. More than just a showcase for his business savvy and marketing ingenuity, these geographic expansions reveal how Waters deepened and intensified his directorial brand as he both introduced himself to new audiences and had his work screened in circumstances where his physical presence could not dictate the terms of reception as readily as in Baltimore.

National Independent Distributors – Film-Makers' Distribution Center and Underground Cinema 12

Waters's first deal with a national distributor came in 1969. Established in 1966, the Film-Makers' Distribution Center (FDC) existed as a sister organization to the Film-makers' Cooperative, the New York-based distributor of underground films founded in 1962 by filmmaker, critic, and independent cinema organizer Jonas Mekas. From its inception, the Cooperative had a radically open policy regarding submissions: any person could deposit any film, and it would be treated in largely the same manner as any other regarding promotion and pricing. As the growth of college film societies and coverage of the New York film scene led to increased national interest in independent and underground cinema, some within the organization wished to form a separate entity that could get independent film into venues beyond the not-for-profit screening spaces that most often rented from the Cooperative.

The FDC formed to allow underground and independent filmmakers to gain increased access to commercial cinemas for exhibition of their films, more specialized publicity campaigns to support these commercial runs, and better financial terms from exhibitors.⁸⁷ In providing an

alternative set of terms and conditions, the FDC hoped to provide independent directors with access and financial solvency that would help continue their filmmaking practice. The organization received an economic coup when it gained initial distribution rights to Andy Warhol's crossover underground hit, *The Chelsea Girls* (1966). Once Warhol rescinded those distribution rights, however, the FDC had an increasingly difficult time maintaining profitability.

It's unclear what precipitated Waters and the FDC striking a distribution deal for *Mondo Trasho*. The film's aforementioned national notoriety may have put it on the center's radar. Regardless, the FDC picked up *Mondo Trasho* for distribution sometime in mid-1969. The precise terms of the deal between Waters and the FDC remain unknown. This is further complicated by the fact that Waters discussed his relationship with the center in ways that sometimes blurred the boundaries between the FDC and the Cooperative, which Waters also had an agreement with during this time.⁸⁸

An archival copy of what appears to be the standard FDC contract offers some guidance as to what Waters may have agreed to.⁸⁹ Producers who signed with the FDC granted the center "the exclusive license to distribute, exhibit, cause the exhibition of, advertise, sublicense, and otherwise market" the film in question for a period of three years. The FDC and the producer in question split the "gross fees actually received" 50/50, with no distributor's fee deducted from the producer's share and a payment to the producer every three-to-four months. Publicity materials and methods would be "determined by the Distributor in consultation with the Producer," with the FDC assuming all costs of publicity materials and distribution activities.

Without a copy of Waters's contract, of course, it is impossible to determine whether these terms structured his deal with the FDC. Certainly, the idea that the FDC had the sole right to distribute *Mondo Trasho* throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s would be complicated by

what appears to be Waters's concomitant self-distribution efforts. Judging by the general contract, however, the FDC's generous 50/50 terms on gross fees and collaborative understanding of publicity and advertising would certainly have been appealing to a filmmaker who valued a specific type of marketing strategy while also seeking to expand the reach and profitability of his films. Furthermore, the opportunity to align his own directorial brand with an organization connected to Jonas Mekas and best known as the initial distributor of a Warhol hit helped to legitimate Waters's claims to a similar underground audience who might not otherwise know his work.

Mondo Trasho can be found in the FDC's 1969 catalogue, where it is sold as a "well-knit, tight satire in a form [Waters] chooses to call 'gutter' films that turns out to be one of the most genuinely funny films seen in a long time."⁹⁰ The logic of this description—highlighting the film's seemingly off-putting grotesqueries before assuring viewers of its wit—aligns well with Waters's own oscillation between shock and satire. The guide also excerpts quotes from various Baltimore critics and warns potential viewers that the film is not a part of the series of lurid "mondo" films that trafficked in pseudo-documentary shock footage, though Waters did consciously gesture to them with the title.⁹¹

Signing with the FDC gave Waters access to theaters in larger metropolitan areas with which the center had pre-established relationships. It can be difficult to determine which of *Mondo Trasho*'s screenings were booked by the FDC and which may have been Waters's own doing.⁹² Looking at two bookings that Waters himself claims were the work of the FDC, however, offer insight into how Waters's collaborated with the center and to what extent this helped bolster his reputation nationally.

The most notable of these bookings occurred in early 1970, when the center had *Mondo Trasho* included as part of the 1st Los Angeles Underground Film Festival. Running from January 29–February 12, 1970, the festival took place at Cinematheque 16. This non-theatrical venue was founded in 1966 to showcase underground, independent, and avant-garde film in Los Angeles, and FDC had a consistent if somewhat rocky relationship with them.⁹³ Films in the series included Andy Warhol's *Imitation of Christ* (1967–1969), Jonas Mekas's *Diaries, Notes and Sketches* (1969), Storm de Hirsch's *The Tattooed Man* (1969), and Ed Emshwiller's *Image, Flesh and Voice* (1970).⁹⁴ Where he once used the experimental cache of Kenneth Anger to get people to see *Roman Candles* in Baltimore, Waters now found his own film featured within a festival highlighting new movies from some of the most prestigious names in underground and avant-garde cinema.⁹⁵

The screening also allowed Waters's work to be reviewed in a wider array of publications reaching both national readership and individuals within the influential Los Angeles film world. The reviews themselves were somewhat mixed. Critics from *Variety* and *Show* both struck bewildered but positive notes, with the *Variety* critic deeming it an uneven but "very amusing satire" and *Show*'s Lita Eliscu calling the film "an insane, overlong *fabulosa* adventure story," adding that Divine appeared to be "playing an inflated Jayne Mansfield float in a very special parade."⁹⁶ The *Los Angeles Free Press*, on the other hand, unfavorably compared Waters's work to that of his beloved Kuchar Brothers, though the reviewer did also note that Divine was "undoubtedly some sort of discovery."⁹⁷ Finally, while it is somewhat ambiguous where she saw the film, critic Pauline Kael mentioned *Mondo Trasho* in her March 1970 review of *Fellini Satyricon* (Federico Fellini, 1969) in *The New Yorker*, roughly a month after the film played its second-of-two screenings at Cinematheque 16.⁹⁸

A smaller-stakes screening occurred on June 27 and 28, 1969 at the Cinema Kenmore Square in Boston, which Waters recalls the FDC scheduled.⁹⁹ Kenmore Square had moved away from its initial focus on international cinema when it opened in 1963, increasingly emphasizing American films aimed at hip young audiences.¹⁰⁰ This meant screening underground movies at midnight on Friday and Saturday beginning in early 1968, and the theater maintained a working relationship with FDC throughout the late 1960s.¹⁰¹

While it lacked the cache of the Los Angeles showings, the Kenmore screenings offers a brief case study in how Waters worked with the FDC to both spread his film to new theaters while attempting to maintain his own imprint on the advertising and exhibition scenario. Waters recalls racing from Provincetown to Boston with an unspecified number of cast members for the Kenmore Square screening.¹⁰² This implies that they attended the screening and presumably had interactions with the audience, adding a more pronounced extra-cinematic dimension to the showing.

The advertisement placed in the *Boston Globe* on June 27, 1969, meanwhile, recalls the countercultural cache and cheeky tone that defines Waters's posters and flyers.¹⁰³ Deemed "a spoof by John Waters," the ad positions the work as "the 'Naked Lunch' of films," linking Waters's vision to the writings of famed writer William S. Burroughs. The advertisement also published a laudatory pull quote: "'A masterpiece of wit' – Don Walls." This is followed by a bracketed question: "Who's he?" Those in Boston would indeed not know whom Walls (film critic for Baltimore's *Daily Record*) was, underscoring the film's geographic distance from its original context and therefore playfully undercutting the very quote praising the film's quality. The FDC may very well have had a hand in this, but such a move seems in line with Waters's

penchant for simultaneously utilizing and satirizing film marketing conventions to create humor and countercultural distinction.

Waters's relationship with the FDC ultimately proved short-lived, in that the center shut down in June 1, 1970.¹⁰⁴ The Film-makers' Cooperative, however, remained a non-theatrical distributor for *Mondo Trasho*, *Multiple Maniacs*, and *The Diane Linkletter Story* throughout the 1970s. Records from the Cooperative's archives show the organization rented these titles over the course of the decade, largely to colleges and universities.¹⁰⁵ Even after the FDC's shuttering, Waters's connection to the Cooperative provided a source of income and new markets for his early works to circulate.

If the FDC helped Waters enter into new markets, Underground Cinema 12 allowed the filmmaker's work to travel within a well-defined set of art houses in key regions of the country. Considered by James Kreul to be the "most successful non-theatrical circuit for underground films," Underground Cinema 12 was created and operated by Mike Getz, the manager of the Cinema Theater in Los Angeles.¹⁰⁶ Beginning in late 1966, Getz began to build Underground Cinema 12 as a traveling series, using venues within the Art Theater Guild—a chain of alternative movie theaters owned by Getz's uncle, Louis K. Sher—as regular stops.¹⁰⁷ By the end of the decade, the locations of theaters on the Underground Cinema 12 circuit ranged from California and Ohio to Colorado and Louisiana.

Waters signed with Getz sometime in 1970. The inclusion of *Multiple Maniacs* in the series proved advantageous on several fronts. It rapidly expanded the number of theaters that the film was shown in. Over the course of 1970 and early-to-mid 1971, *Multiple Maniacs* played in such Getz-affiliated venues as the Cinema Theater in Los Angeles (October 31, 1970); the Academy Theater in San Diego (January 23, 1971); the Plaza Theater in New Orleans (February

6, 1971); the Art Theater in Dayton, Ohio (May 15, 1971); and the Westwood Theater in Cleveland, Ohio (June 12, 1971).¹⁰⁸ Besides exposure, this also led to a consistent source of income for Waters: “I gave [Getz] a print for forty weeks, and I got a dollar a minute every time they played. It was great; I got ninety dollars a week. Ninety dollars then was maybe like five hundred today.”¹⁰⁹

Finally, Waters’s film fit well within a series that had historically favored the exhibition and promotion of work by queer underground directors. The Cinema Theatre was itself known for its exhibition of both underground features with gay content and more-straightforward gay male erotica and pornography.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the success of the Underground Cinema 12 led Les Natali (manager of the Presidio Theater in Los Angeles who came up with the title for Underground Cinema 12) to start a companion, queer-themed series at the Presidio called the Lavender Cinema 12.¹¹¹ At the time, Waters did not often frame his films within the context of gay cinema. Nevertheless, the often taboo-smashing depictions of sexuality and gender in *Multiple Maniacs* aligned with a series known for its exhibition of queer content.

The Underground Cinema 12 circuit placed *Multiple Maniacs* in theaters that Waters himself would never travel to, particularly within the Midwest. He does not recount attending any showings in Ohio, where *Multiple Maniacs* had six screenings in theaters affiliated with Underground Cinema 12 in the first half of 1971. This meant that some of the localized control that Waters had in Baltimore loosened considerably. Trading-off some personal involvement in individual shows in exchange for the money and increased exposure provided by the Underground Cinema 12 series proved one of the first real tests of Waters as a brand—which is to say, a collection of signifiers promising a type of cinematic experience that included the film or even the presence of Waters himself but ultimately went beyond them. Ensuring the long-term

viability of his career required building enough of these associations into his directorial reputation so that his name alone could attract viewers and encourage a specific type of reception.

Still, it's notable that when Waters could add a personal touch to an Underground-affiliated screening, he did. An example of this can be seen in *Multiple Maniacs*'s February 6, 1971 screening at the Art Theater in New Orleans. The theater had been associated with Underground Cinema 12 since at least mid-1969, when it ran advertisements in the local alternative weekly for two sets of midnight programs. A July 5, 1969 lineup not so subtly intimated its homoerotic themes, promising "Bareback Rides at Midnight: Stimulating or Uncomfortable...Depending on How Relaxed You Are." The July 12 screening highlighted the Underground more directly, with titles by such luminaries as Kenneth Anger, Willard Maas, and Marie Menken.¹¹² The Art Theater also maintained an affiliation with the aforementioned Lavender Cinema 12.¹¹³ The theater's midnight audience, then, would seem primed for a film like *Multiple Maniacs*.

Nevertheless, Waters sought to add something more to the screening. A notice in *NOLA Express* ran the week of the showing.¹¹⁴ Though he had himself lived briefly in New Orleans, Waters could not attend the screening that evening. He did, however, promise the audience two things. First, "at least one actor will be present," offering the chance to interact with one or more of Waters's highly colorful cast. Second, the notice states that "in the event of a small audience (five or less), complimentary hamburgers will be sent to them from the director." Both the promise of a by-now staple food at Waters's screenings and the self-deflating joke implicit within setting the bar so low for attendance very much resonated with Waters's brand of winking humor.

The agreement with Underground Cinema 12 proved successful. By mid-1971 alone, *Multiple Maniacs* had logged over twenty bookings, most of which in Underground Cinema 12 affiliates.¹¹⁵ In both this and his partnership with FDC, Waters attempted to imbue his screenings with his own idiosyncratic approach to the extra-cinematic, even as his films circulated in ways that went far beyond his immediate control. Sometimes, this meant replicating his Baltimore-based approach of in-person appearances. For many, however, it meant signaling his trademark satiric wit and encouragement of in-theater revelry through more attenuated cues. Expansion of his films, then, did not imply simply circulating a completed brand identity, but adapting that identity to fit the specific needs of various markets.

Self-Distribution, or Meet the Cockettes!

Despite his participation within these larger circuits of independent distribution, Waters also maintained a robust practice of self-distribution throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. He describes the period as one of constant travel, including his annual summer sojourns to Provincetown, Massachusetts; cross-country trips to California; and stays in San Francisco, San Diego, and other West Coast cities.¹¹⁶ Throughout, he sought to either bolster existing relationships with local exhibitors or foster new opportunities for exhibition and publicity. One can ascribe fairly typical reasons for why Waters did this—financial needs, desire for more screenings—while also noting how this approach replicated the strategies of itinerant exploiters who would travel from town to town to hawk their cinematic wares.

On the East Coast, Provincetown continued to yield a reliable exhibition location and an audience that had become increasingly accustomed to his outré cinematic world. Waters convinced Bill Shafir, co-owner of the Art Cinema in Provincetown, to allow him to four-wall the space for midnight screenings of both *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*.¹¹⁷ Waters

recalls, “I was financially responsible for every seat in the house, but we always sold out.”¹¹⁸ He accomplished this as he had previously, with cast members handing out Waters-designed flyers on the streets of Provincetown.¹¹⁹

As Waters’s reputation as both a cinematic provocateur and consistent town presence solidified, his films also received increasing press coverage within the local paper, *The Provincetown Advocate*. A notice in the *Advocate* for *Mondo Trasho*’s premiere screening notes that Waters was “a summer resident of Provincetown for the last four years.”¹²⁰ Another for the showings of *Multiple Maniacs* informs readers that Waters will “turn loose his latest production” whose “cast is living up here,” while a subsequent blurb reports that the screenings “drew enthusiastic crowds” and referred to Waters as a “Provincetown movie mogul.”¹²¹ The films also received coverage when they played in back-to-back screenings at the Art Cinema on August 16 and 17, 1971, in an article titled “Local Filmmaker’s Junk Coming.”¹²² The association of Waters with Provincetown, the taking-up of Waters’s own garbage-laden terminology to describe his work, and the playful-yet-telling identification of him as a “movie mogul” speak to Waters’s success in maintaining key elements of his directorial brand while aligning himself with the town’s specific culture.

On the West Coast, Waters’s personal connections and exploitation-style ingenuity secured screenings in Santa Barbara. Waters writes of an old friend who had married the curator of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.¹²³ He does not frame it in these terms, but it is perhaps not a coincidence that *Mondo Trasho* had three screenings at the museum on June 13 and 14, 1969.¹²⁴ While selling *Multiple Maniacs*, Waters recalls staying with his friend and her husband in Santa Barbara while he sought out venues for the film in the city. Having found a theater whose programming seemed idiosyncratic enough to fit the film, Waters describes himself,

“armed with posters and handout sheets, [talking] the owner into giving me several midnight shows.”¹²⁵ Waters does not name the venue, but the location and dates align with *Multiple Maniacs* showings at the Student Film Center in Santa Barbara from November 11–16, 1970.¹²⁶ Besides highlighting Waters’s skill at convincing local exhibitors to screen his work, these choices of venues also illustrate his canniness when it came to where his films might be well-received. He may utilize exploitation-esque appeals, but Waters rarely attempted to place his films within, say, grindhouses. He recognizes that a museumgoer or college student would more readily respond to his mixture of sleaze and underground subversion.

The most significant of these gambits, however, occurred at the Palace Theater in San Francisco. The screenings of *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs* that occurred within the theater are not merely data points to bolster Waters’s savvy salesmanship. These showings provided Waters with a set of collaborators that would allow him to expand both his creative network and his conception of the exhibition space as one of unruly play as he never had before.

By the late 1960s, the Palace Theatre (located at the corner of Columbus and Powell Streets in North Beach) had shifted from a studio-era picture palace aimed at the masses to one that still played mainstream fare but also targeted the city’s Chinese population through the showing of Chinese-language films.¹²⁷ The theater combined vintage décor with the accoutrement of the Chinese operas that were sometimes performed there, all while possessing “an underlying funkiness that gave the Palace its unique flavor.”¹²⁸ Local filmmaker Steven Arnold had convinced the Palace’s owner to let him rent the theater for a one-night screening of a short film he had made. Considering the opportunity to make further profits, the owner agreed to let Arnold program a midnight movie show on Fridays and Saturdays at the theater.¹²⁹

These screenings became known as the Nocturnal Dream Shows. Begun officially in May 1969, the programming—initially by Arnold and later taken over by local arts impresario Sebastian—was defined by a playful eclecticism that interwove contemporary underground work, international art-house cinema, classic Hollywood, vintage cartoons, adventure serials, and unclassifiable moving-image ephemera. For example, a “Super Voodoo Program” that ran on July 4 and 5, 1969 showcased the pre-Code horror film *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932); *Witch Doctor*, the 1951 document of an exorcism-inspired dance ritual featuring famed Haitian choreographer Jean Léon Destiné; the rhythmic experimental animation of Patricia Marx’s *Obmaru* (1953); and the Betty Boop cartoon “Is My Palm Read?” (1933)¹³⁰ Most screenings did not have so explicit a theme, but all maintained a level of idiosyncratic yet thoughtful programming that attracted a steady audience throughout 1969. The loose, playful atmosphere of the screenings were further augmented by live performances and special events, including the pairing of sitar music with a Will Rogers short and a Halloween costume contest.¹³¹

The addition of the Cockettes to the Nocturnal Dream Shows’ repertoire truly put the Palace Theater on the countercultural map. Much has been said about the Cockettes, the San Francisco drag troupe whose performances blended campy Hollywood glamour with the drug-infused ethos of the Bay Area counterculture. Scholars like Benjamin Shepard and Julia Bryan-Winston have analyzed how the troupe’s semi-structured performances and blurring of gender signifiers offered the radical potential for communal and self-transformation.¹³² Members of both the Cockettes and the spin-off group the Angels of Light have also written reminiscences on the troupe and their role in the San Francisco countercultural ecosystem.¹³³

For the purposes of this history, I will focus exclusively on the live performances that the Cockettes’ constructed and enacted as part of the Nocturnal Dream Shows beginning on the New

Year's Eve straddling 1969 and 1970. As Pam Tent, a Cockette member, describes it, Sebastian invited the newly formed group onstage during the evening's show.¹³⁴ This soon led to the semi-regular incorporation of Cockettes' performances into the Nocturnal Dream screenings. With titles like *Pearls Over Shanghai*, *Hollywood Babylon*, and *Tinsel Tarts in a Hot Coma*, their stage productions offered gleefully debauched takes on Tinseltown conventions and highlighted the theatricality and artifice of Cockette members themselves. These shows frequently ran alongside movie screenings, and sometimes incorporated the on-screen imagery into the act.

The audience itself fed off of and intensified the freewheeling burlesque on-stage. As one contemporary reporter wrote, "In the audience, a mob scene, always. Groupies fill the first few rows. Nearly everyone is stoned on grass or hash or simply grocery-store wine. Many people are in drag, competing with the Cockettes onstage."¹³⁵ What resulted was a free-floating vision of shifting signifiers—sexual, aesthetic, cinematic—that frequently led to the sort of blurred boundaries described in this recounting of a performance of *Hollywood Babylon*:

The acts are concocted of burlesque, majesty, insanity and sexuality. Everyone got a chance to caricature or personify some famous celluloid heroine, from a pathetic Judy Garland to a very worldly if long-unshaven Mae West. There is a perfect mime of Laurel and Hardy jerking through a flickering stroboscope until that combative fellowship is inverted and illuminated by Laurel's nude beauty. Couples woo with classic strategems until the man is revealed to be a woman, without deterring the lovers. And there is one knee-slapping short from some old Oscar presentation involving Mickey Rooney, Jayne Mansfield, and Ronald Reagan.¹³⁶

The creativity and self-conscious wit of the Nocturnal Dream Shows extended to the advertising for the events, which occurred on two fronts. Whether they were featuring solely films or a live performance by the Cockettes, Nocturnal Dream Show advertisements described the works to be presented using pithy summaries. A November 1970 ad announced the premiere

of the Cockettes' *Pearls over Shanghai* as "a shattering drama of oriental passion and intrigue" featuring "completely original music and lyrics" and "a substantial amount of dialogue."¹³⁷ Describing *The Laurel and Hardy Murder Case* (1930), the ad opines simply, "Need we say more?"¹³⁸ This knowing informality both effectively gestures toward the screening's breezy eclecticism and signals the type of playful atmosphere a potential viewer could expect.

The other mode of advertisement went in a very different direction. Sebastian hired local San Francisco artist Todd Trexler to design posters for the Nocturnal Dream Shows. Trexler employed the visual language of Art Nouveau to promote the showings. The posters proved unexpectedly elegant and almost ethereal, even as they reproduced much of the same descriptive language as the newspaper advertisements and sometimes used delicate form in the service of explicit sexual imagery. One poster featured a finely drawn image of a long-haired man staring wistfully into the sky, completely nude and legs spread to reveal his flaccid penis. Trexler recalls the Cockettes sometimes complaining that these posters did not reflect the outrageous quality of the Nocturnal Dream Shows.¹³⁹ Regardless, they offer memorable evidence as to how important advertising and marketing was not only to getting the word out but to attracting viewers who could appreciate the finery of a Trexler poster and participate in various levels of late-night revelry at the Palace.

Waters first encountered the Nocturnal Dream Shows after temporarily moving to San Francisco in early 1971. "There was this incredible movie scene," Waters recalled. "Besides the Cockettes, the Palace had a first-rate underground movie series. That's what really attracted me to it in the beginning, then I saw the Cockettes."¹⁴⁰ He recalls screening *Multiple Maniacs* for Sebastian and receiving a positive enough response to have the film booked within a Nocturnal Dream Show.¹⁴¹

Multiple Maniacs ran as part of the January 22–23, 1971 midnight shows, advertised as “the San Francisco premiere of John Waters’ side show of depravities starring Divine [sic]” and (appropriately enough) sharing the bill with George Kuchar’s *Pagan Rhapsody* (1970).¹⁴² Waters recalls that the Palace Theater’s audiences, which he felt were “as much a part of the attraction as the show itself,” “responded well to my overly violent melodrama.”¹⁴³ This positive reaction resulted in return engagements for *Multiple Maniacs*, as well as screenings of *Mondo Trasho*. The latter had its San Francisco premiere on April 30 and May 1, 1971 at the Palace (along with *The Diane Linkletter Story*), while *Multiple Maniacs* played March 11–14, 1971 at the Secret Cinema, a loft-space screening room also run by Sebastian.¹⁴⁴ The Palace seemed particularly in sync with Waters’s vision: witty, idiosyncratic advertising; a shared cinematic eclecticism; and a crowd that expected and valued a raucous screening space.

At the screenings, Waters continued to elaborate on the winking door prizes that he had begun in Baltimore. Divine flew out to San Francisco for the premiere of *Mondo Trasho*, which was advertised in by-now typical Waters fashion. He created another striking poster that featured a drawing of Divine with mouth agape and the promise that viewers could win “a dinner date to the doggie diner with the glamorous star of *Multiple Maniacs* & *Mondo Trasho*.”¹⁴⁵

Both the popularity of Divine and access to a troupe of wildly enthusiastic drag queens, however, inspired Waters to go further.¹⁴⁶ He wrote a stage show that was performed before the *Mondo Trasho* screening. In it, Divine threw dead mackerels out of a shopping cart that she wheeled onstage; became overcome by “exhibitionist poses and temper tantrums” that Waters deemed “glamour fits;” and strangled a fake policeman who ran up on stage to arrest her.¹⁴⁷ This not only extended his directorial brand into the realm of countercultural theater, but provided an

opportunity to link stage and screen through Divine's outrageous antics. The space of the Palace became thoroughly imbued with Waters's brand of wild-eyed debauchery.

This led to further theatrical events, some of which were attached to screenings of Waters's films while other simply showcased Divine live without Waters's direct involvement. An ad for one described "muscle men in rhinestone bikinis" that Cockette Sahara recalled were groped by Divine on-stage, who then decided which one she would cook in a large cauldron onstage. This climaxed in Divine pulling raw meat and sausages out of said cauldron and hurling them at the audience.¹⁴⁸ Another, entitled *Divine Saves the World*, found the titular heroine hijacking a blimp, settling conflicts in the Middle East, and belting out standards like "Hey, Big Spender" and "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," in what a local reporter described as a "marvelous mix of the six-thirty news and the 40s road shows we see again and again on the late night reruns of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby."¹⁴⁹

Taking place on March 17–18, 1972, *Divine Saves the World* proved a particularly good example of the increasingly collaborative nature of Divine's Palace shows. The performance accompanied yet-another screening of *Multiple Maniacs*, while the stage production itself was written by Peter Dyer and directed by Donnie Noel, two Cockettes affiliates.¹⁵⁰ The night also featured a striking poster designed by Trexler that very much hewed to Waters's own advertising aesthetic: a large, black-and-white image of Divine staring directly out at the viewer, eyes narrowed and lipstick-smeared mouth agape.¹⁵¹

Besides attracting large crowds and helping to ensure return engagements for the films, these stage shows help further develop two major strands of Waters's directorial brand. First, it solidified the gleeful monstrosity and taboo-breaking excess that became a core component of Divine's persona. Local interviews with Divine only added to the sense of fascination

surrounding where the line between the “real” person ended and the constructed persona began.¹⁵² “It was the first time Divine became Divine in his other life,” Waters notes of the Palace shows, adding that Divine’s “whole life changed. He realized he wanted to do this for a living.”¹⁵³

Second and connected to this, these shows pushed to a new extreme the construction of a filmgoing experience that blurred the boundaries between the cinematic and the extra-cinematic, not to mention between performers and spectators. The crowds at the Palace already found themselves in an intimate relationship with the performers onstage. They took many of the same drugs, donned similarly extravagant clothes and make-up, and interacted with the Cockettes and even the films on-screen in familiar ways.

Waters and Divine played off the porousness between audience and entertainers and injected further volatility. To watch Divine eat her victims’ hearts in *Multiple Maniacs* and then see her strangle a policeman onstage either right before or after (depending on the ordering of the program) fused together screen character and live person in a manner both intriguing and startling. That Divine would frequently proceed to actively accost the audience only enhanced the feeling of a situation exuberantly out of control and ever so dangerous. These shows both encouraged a high level of communal engagement and delighted in tweaking that very feeling of audience rapport. In short, Waters had found a kind of sweet spot: he managed to make his audience eminently comfortable with being made highly uncomfortable.

Conclusion

Indeed, the Palace screenings provide but the most piquant example of how the expansion of Waters’s directorial brand throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s provided space for new collaboration and creativity. Within the city limits of Baltimore, Waters bolstered his presence

within the regional film market through a canny mixture of cooperation with burgeoning film-centered organizations and intensification of his own extra-cinematic tricks as a means to stand out within the city. Expansion in this situation meant a careful balancing act of aligning himself with his hometown and cultivating brand elements that could be transported beyond it.

When he began to circulate his features across the country, Waters affiliated himself with national distribution channels while maintaining influence over the circumstances within which viewers experienced his work. His films played mainly in major cities, though the Palace shows could not be replicated in many places. Still, they offered a model for how the transplanting of a specific directorial identity to a new location could produce not only a geographic expansion but a deepening of the ideas and associations at the brand's center.

The humor, irreverence, and communal excitement of the Palace screenings—as well as Divine's centrality to its creation—would stay with Waters. Just as crucially, the Palace shows solidified how ideal Waters's films were for a midnight-screening format. The self-selecting crowds and charged air of this timeslot provided a viewing situation that not only seemed primed for the outré content of Waters's films, but that contributed to the air of communal raucousness and disreputability that Waters fostered around his work via marketing and exhibition gimmicks.

This period of Waters's brand expansion proved that audiences would willingly flock to films that offered shocking, extreme, and even offensive imagery and situations if doing so constituted not just a screening, but an event. If viewers were primed in the right way through textual and especially extra-textual cues, the presence of Waters or Divine at a given screening wouldn't even be necessary for the creation of the rambunctious atmosphere that the director had built his brand upon. His next film, *Pink Flamingos*, would prove just how far Waters could develop these strategies.

-
- ¹ Joann Harris, "Baltimore Film Fete Planned for Saturday," *Baltimore Sun*, April 12, 1970, D14
- ² John Dempsey, "College Film Course Lack Only Money," *Baltimore Sun*, May 18, 1969, SD1, 3.
- ³ William Hyder, "A Baltimorean's Commercial Pays Off: A Film Festival 'Cleo,'" *Baltimore Sun*, June 30, 1968, TV2. A brief overview of Baltimore film companies involved in the production of educational, industrial training, and governmental films (that also briefly mentions Waters and avant-garde filmmaker and University of Maryland Baltimore County instructor Stan VanDerBeek) can be found in Stephen J. Gordon, "Filmmaking in Baltimore: 1956–1979," in *Baltimore: A Living Renaissance*, eds. Lenora Heilig Nast, Laurence N. Krause, and R.C. Monk (Baltimore: Historic Baltimore Society, Inc., 1982), 174–175.
- ⁴ Bray quoted in Dempsey, "College Film Course," 1.
- ⁵ "Enoch Pratt Library Film Programs," *Baltimore Sun*, June 20, 1968, B2; "Enoch Pratt Library Film Programs," *Baltimore Sun*, August 5, 1968, B5.
- ⁶ "Film Fete at Park School," *Baltimore Sun*, October 16, 1966, FE25; "School Lists Film," *Baltimore Sun*, March 12, 1967, D5. A brief history of The Park School can be found in James F. Waesche, "Park School's First 50 Years," *Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 1963, A3.
- ⁷ Dempsey, "College Film Course," 3.
- ⁸ "Theater Notes," *Baltimore Sun*, July 26, 1967, B4; R.H. Gardner, "Film Fest Opens Wednesday," *Baltimore Sun*, May 18, 1969, SD10; "Film Series at Museum," *Baltimore Sun*, October 6, 1968, D8. Succinct histories of both Center Stage and the Baltimore Museum of Art can be found in Ron Israel, "Center Stage," in Nast, Krause, and Monk 168–170; and Bernadette Trattner, "Visual Arts," in Nast, Krause, and Monk 189–191.
- ⁹ Anne Childress, "Institute Hosts Film Festival," *The News American*, February 27, 1967, 6A.
- ¹⁰ On the Personal Cinema Group screenings, see Len Bradford, "Film: Showing at Md. Institute Includes Films of Anger & Bresson," *Harry*, December 16, 1969, 15. I have not been able to locate information on the nature of the "experimental screenings" at the Reel World Cinema, but they were advertised in *Harry*. See, for instance, "Nothing Ever Happens in Baltimore," *Harry*, December 16, 1969, 16.
- ¹¹ Information on the festival's first year comes from the following sources: James Dilts, "Baltimore's Underground Movie Producers," *Baltimore Sun*, July 9, 1967, SM6–8; R.H. Gardner, "Film Festival Awards Program," *Baltimore Sun*, March 10, 1967, B4; "Institute Lecture," *Baltimore Sun*, February 10, 1967, B5; and Earl Arnett, "Maryland Film Festival: Another Art Form," *Baltimore Sun*, February 26, 1968, B3.
- ¹² "Festival of Films," *Baltimore Sun*, March 3, 1968, D21; Arnett, "Maryland Film Festival," B3; R.H. Gardner, "Maryland Film Festival," *Baltimore Sun*, March 2, 1969, D9.
- ¹³ "March Film Festival," *Baltimore Sun*, February 4, 1968, D10; "'The Blood Knot' at Hopkins," *Baltimore Sun*, January 20, 1969, B6.
- ¹⁴ Arnett, "Maryland Film Festival," B3.
- ¹⁵ Dilts, "Baltimore's Underground," 7.
- ¹⁶ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Waters describes entering *Eat Your Makeup* into "a student competition at a local art college" in early 1968, though he does not identify the school or the competition by name.
- ¹⁷ Waters writes in *Shock Value* that he borrowed \$2,000 from his parents to make the film, but contemporaneous documents and interviews have the budget at \$2,100. A budget document found within Waters's papers puts the film's cost at \$1,500, but Waters has never publicly discussed this. *Mondo Trasho* Budget in *Mondo Trasho* Production Notebook, Folder 11, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, Wesleyan University Cinema Archives (WCU).
- ¹⁸ Anne Childress, "The Screen: A 'Gala World Premiere,'" *The News American*, March 10, 1969, 4B; Dempsey, "College Film Course," 1.
- ¹⁹ Dempsey, "College Film Course," 1.
- ²⁰ Ibid.; Advertisement for *Mondo Trasho*, Folder 1, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.
- ²¹ "Theater Notes," *Baltimore Sun*, January 31, 1969, B6; "Film Society," *Baltimore Sun*, March 7, 1969, B4; and "Arena Players," *Baltimore Sun*, February 7, 1969, B4.
- ²² John Waters, *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005), 65.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Religious Notices,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 2, 1968, A10; “Religious Notices,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 11, 1969, A10; “Religious Notices,” *Baltimore Sun*, July 5, 1969, A16; and “Religious Notices,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 30, 1969, A12.

²⁶ Stephen J. Lynton, “Rally Held to Support Panthers,” *Baltimore Sun*, December 21, 1969, 22; “Dellinger Plans Peace Rallies,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 22, 1969, B12; and “Brandeis Panel Talk Scheduled,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 30, 1969, B2.

²⁷ “Museum Director to Speak,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 18, 1968, B6; “Sculptures on Display,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 4, 1969, D8; and “Film on War to Be Shown,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 11, 1969, A11.

²⁸ For coverage of the theater’s more-experiential works, see R.H. Gardner, “‘Changes’ A New Thing at Corner Theater Café Club,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 11, 1968, B4; and Len Bradford, “Radical Theater Experiment,” *Harry*, June 1, 1970, 15.

²⁹ “Corner Theatre Temp. Closed,” *Harry*, July 3, 1970, 16.

³⁰ An advertisement in *Harry*, for instance, promoted two Sunday night screenings: a double feature of *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) on November 15, 1970; and *Destry Rides Again* (George Marshall, 1939), with Jimmy Stewart and Marlene Dietrich, on November 22, 1970. Advertisement, *Harry*, November 12, 1970, 19.

³¹ “Horror Movie to Be Shown at Theater,” *Baltimore Sun*, December 10, 1970, B4.

³² “Corner Theater Film Festival,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 21, 1970, SD17.

³³ It is difficult to determine whether organizations like the Baltimore Filmmakers Association, the Baltimore Filmmakers Society, and the Baltimore Film-maker’s Workshop constituted different entities, or simply altered names for the same group. “‘Multiple Maniacs’ Billed,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 27, 1970, D15.

³⁴ “Repertory Company to Present Coward’s ‘Blithe Spirit,’” *Baltimore Sun*, July 14, 1971, B4.

³⁵ It remains unclear why this occurred. Siobhan Hagan, “Baltimore Film Fêtes,” *Mid-Atlantic Regional Moving Image Archive*, May 7, 2014, accessed September 18, 2016: <https://marmia.org/2014/05/07/baltimore-film-fetes/>.

³⁶ For instance, Alexander organized screenings and lectures around classic films on the University of Baltimore campus. “Fair Display to Show Life at Hopkins,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 23, 1970, B5.

³⁷ “Baltimore Film Festival,” *Harry*, February 21, 1970, 18.

³⁸ “Baltimore Film Festival II Announces Award-Winners,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1971, B4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*; “Film Competition Planned,” *Baltimore Sun*, December 10, 1970, B4.

⁴⁰ Coverage of individual titles in the 1970 and 1971 festivals can be found in Harris, “Baltimore Film Fete,” D14; and David Graham, “Fab Film Fete,” *Harry*, April 10–23, 1971, 9.

⁴¹ I have not come across mentions of this preview screening elsewhere, and the clipping unfortunately is not dated. The author’s reactions to both works, however, make it fairly clear that he saw them. Paul Cohen, “Current Baltimore Film Festival’s Quality on High Level Surpassing Earlier Efforts,” *Student Press*, Folder 2, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁴² “University of Baltimore Plans Film Festival,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 31, 1972, B4.

⁴³ Scanning the events calendar in *Harry* in 1971, for instance, reveals multiple screenings on the campuses of University of Baltimore, University of Maryland Baltimore County, Morgan State College, and Essex Community College. “Nothing Ever Happens,” *Harry*, January 8, 1971, 19; “Nothing Ever Happens,” *Harry*, May 20–June 4, 1971, 22; “Engagements,” *Harry*, October 12, 1971, 18–19.

⁴⁴ Advertisement, *The Retriever*, November 2, 1971, 7; “An Interview: Underground Movie Director Revolts to Entertain,” *The Retriever*, November 9, 1971, 3.

⁴⁵ Larry Blonder, “Sweet, Sweet Divine,” *Dimensions*, November 5, 1971, Box 81A, Series VI, Publications and Clippings, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁴⁶ *Mondo Trasho* Production Notebook, Folder 11, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.; *Multiple Maniacs* Production Notebook, Folder 18, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁴⁷ *Mondo Trasho* Poster, Folder 2, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁴⁸ *Multiple Maniacs* Poster, Folder 20, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁴⁹ *Multiple Maniacs* Provincetown Poster, Folder 19, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁵⁰ Waters also includes a bit of the comic incongruity he utilized in his earlier posters when, amidst the images of murder and mayhem, he includes within the cast list the credit, “And George Figgs as Jesus Christ.”

⁵¹ The poster for *The Diane Linkletter Story* relies more directly upon brash, almost punkish humor. It features a large image of a bewigged Divine looking down with a wide sneer, accompanied by the flippant tagline, “The

girl...the tragedy...the gap.” *The Diane Linkletter Story* Poster, Folder 14, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁵² *Mondo Trasho* Press Release, Folder 12, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁵³ *Multiple Maniacs* Press Release, Folder 19, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁵⁴ Childress, “A ‘Gala World Premiere...’, 4B; Anne Childress, “The Screen: ‘Multiple Maniacs’ Premiere,” *The News American*, Folder 2, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁵⁵ Don Walls, Article in *The Daily Record*, review of *Mondo Trasho*, March 14, 1969, Folder 1, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁵⁶ Lou Cedrone, “Waters and His ‘Maniacs,’” review of *Multiple Maniacs*, *Baltimore Evening Sun*, April 14, 1970, A10.

⁵⁷ The reviews are contained in the second issue of *The Red Brick*, which was released in October 1969 but is confusingly labeled as the first volume and issue. John Waters, “Water’s,” review of *Paranoia*, *The Red Brick* 1, no. 1 (October 1969): 11; John Waters, “Silver Screen,” review of *Spirits of the Dead*, *The Red Brick* 1, no. 1 (October 1969): 12, 15.

⁵⁸ Waters, “Water’s,” 11.

⁵⁹ P.J. O’Rourke, “Going to Water’s,” *The Chesapeake Weekly Review*, June 5, 1970, 5, Box 81A, Series VI, Publications and Clippings, John Waters Collection, WCU.; P.J. O’Rourke, “Film: Let It Be/Leave It Alone,” review of *Let It Be, Harry*, June 1, 1970, 18.

⁶⁰ Waters quoted in O’Rourke, “Going to Water’s,” 5.

⁶¹ Corinne F. Hammett, “‘Scout Around For Some Ketchup’: Underground Movie Group Surfaces,” *The News American*, April 19, 1970, 8E; O’Rourke, “Going to Water’s,” 5.

⁶² Photographic evidence of this look can be found, for instance, in “An Interview: Underground Movie Director...” 3.

⁶³ *Mondo Trasho* Production Notebook.

⁶⁴ Divine quoted in Blonder, “Sweet, Sweet Divine,” 3.

⁶⁵ Carl Schoettler, “‘Mondo Trasho’: It’s Junky But Not Dirty,” review of *Mondo Trasho*, *Baltimore Evening Sun*, March 11, 1969, C24, C4.

⁶⁶ Blonder, “Sweet, Sweet Divine,” 3.

⁶⁷ Hammett, “Scout Around,” 8E–9E. Additional coverage of the film’s shoot can be found in “Multiple Maniacs Filming Here,” Folder 1, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁶⁸ Schoettler, “Mondo Trasho,” C24.

⁶⁹ C. Catharsis, “Multiple Maniacs – A Celluloid Atrocity,” *Harry*, April 3, 1970, 14.

⁷⁰ *Multiple Maniacs* Poster, Folder 13, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU; Waters, *Shock Value*, 59. Waters gave away a similar prize before screenings of *Mondo Trasho*. One night, the prize was won by Cookie Mueller, who would go on to act in several of Waters’s subsequent films. Waters, *Shock Value*, 59, 61. For more on Mueller, see Chloé Griffin, *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller* (New York: B-Books, 2014).

⁷¹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 65; Catharsis, “Multiple Maniacs,” 14.

⁷² Len Bradford, “Film: Have You Ever Killed Anybody Before? No, But It Would be Something New...” review of *Multiple Maniacs*, *Harry*, April 17, 1970, 17.

⁷³ These ideas and their connection to Waters’s cinema, particularly *Pink Flamingos*, are discussed in J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: De Capo Press, 1991).

⁷⁴ Lou Cedrone, “From ‘Riot’ to ‘Trasho,’” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, review of *Mondo Trasho*, March 20, 1969, C10; Cedrone, “Waters and His ‘Maniacs,’” A10.

⁷⁵ Bradford, “Film: Have You Ever,” 17.

⁷⁶ Starla Perzov, “Multiple Maniacs’ Freaky!” *Student Press*, Folder 2, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU; Walls.

⁷⁷ Waters, *Shock Value*, 59, 65.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 65.

⁷⁹ Cedrone, “From ‘Riot’ to ‘Trasho,’” C10.

⁸⁰ Cedrone, “Waters and His ‘Maniacs,’” A10.

⁸¹ Harris, “Baltimore Film Fete,” D14.

⁸² Both Waters and those writing about his career have told various iterations of this story. The most detailed can be found in Waters, *Shock Value*, 56–59. Details for the above version come from Waters and “Judge Reluctantly Removes Indecent Exposure Case,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 13, 1968, C13.

⁸³ Liss wrote a poem to commemorate the occasion, which was noted in press coverage and is reprinted in Waters, *Shock Value*, 59. For more on the colorful career of Judge Liss, see Henry Scarupa, "Judge Liss: Actor, Singer, Emcee, etc., etc.," *Baltimore Sun*, April 2, 1978, SM12, 16, 18.

⁸⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 58; "Charges are Dropped in Nude Film Making," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, February 7, 1969, C4; and George J. Hiltner, "Liss Indites Poetic Screed; Mondo Malef-Actors Freed," *Baltimore Sun*, February 8, 1969, B20, B8.

⁸⁵ "Balto 'Mondo Trasho' in Campus Pincho of Its Figleafed Hero," *Variety*, November 13, 1968, 1, 158.

⁸⁶ Fred Weisgal, "Jingling Judge," *Playboy*, Folder 1, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁸⁷ James Kreul, "New York, New Cinema: The Independent Film Community and the Underground Crossover, 1950–1970," (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004), 384–385. Other accounts of the center's origins and development include Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–71*, 2nd ed. (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 131–142; and Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1967), 209–225.

⁸⁸ In a June 1970 interview, Waters describes his films as being national distributed by the Cooperative, saying that he did not have "to sign a contract or make pre-payments" and that he sent out promotional material himself. These align with the policies of the Cooperative. Waters quoted in O'Rourke, "Going to Water's," 5.

⁸⁹ The following information comes from "Film-Makers' Distribution Center Contract," The Film-Makers' Distribution Center, FMC History, Film-Makers' Cooperative.

⁹⁰ "1969 Checklist Number 4 of Independent Feature (and Some Short) Films Available from the Film-Makers' Distribution Center," "FDC/Puzzles, etc." Film-Makers' Cooperative.

⁹¹ For a description of the mondo genre, see Eric Schaefer, "*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*": A History of *Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 284–285.

⁹² For instance, the screenings at both U-P Screen in New York City (September 5 and 6, 1969) and Bard College (September 30, 1969) may have been connected to the FDC, but there is no confirmation either way. The screenings are listed on the *Mondo Trasho* poster analyzed above.

⁹³ "Underground Film Fest Set," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1970, D10; Kreul, "New York, New Cinema," 367–368, 433.

⁹⁴ "Underground Film Fest," D10.

⁹⁵ See also, "Underground Film Fest on Commercial Industry Doorstep," *Variety*, February 4, 1970, 6.

⁹⁶ Murf., "Mondo Trasho," review of *Mondo Trasho*, *Variety*, February 11, 1970, 16; Lita Eliscu, "Hand-Held: Underground and College Films: Over and Under," review of *Mondo Trasho*, *Show: The Magazine of Film and the Arts*, 27–28, Box 81A, Series VI, Publications and Clippings, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁹⁷ Richard Whitehall, "A Smorgasbord of Films," review of *Mondo Trasho*, *Los Angeles Free Press*, January 30, 1970, 44.

⁹⁸ Her reference, it should be noted, is not a terribly favorable one: "It's [*Fellini Satyricon*] is full of people making faces, the way people do in home movies, and full of people staring at the camera and laughing and prancing around, the way they often do in sixteen-millimeter parodies of sex epics, like 'Mondo Trasho.'" Pauline Kael, "Fellini's *Mondo Trasho*," review of *Fellini Satyricon*, *The New Yorker*, March 14, 1970, 134, 137–140.

⁹⁹ He refers to the distributor as the "Film-Makers Cooperative," but the timing of the screening and the commercial theater the film was booked in must have made it the FDC. Waters, *Shock Value*, 61.

¹⁰⁰ "First Newly-Built Stand in 30 Years; Boston's Kenmore's O'Neill Start," *Variety*, May 1, 1963, 13.

¹⁰¹ "Boston," *Boxoffice*, March 25, 1968, NE-2; Kreul 433.

¹⁰² Waters, *Shock Value*, 61.

¹⁰³ Advertisement for Cinema Kenmore Square, *Boston Globe*, June 27, 1969, in Folder 1, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹⁰⁴ A letter to this effect can be found in "FDC/Puzzles, etc." Film-Makers' Cooperative.

¹⁰⁵ In the two years after the FDC went out of business, for instance, the Cooperative rented these titles to the University of Maryland at College Park (*Mondo Trasho*, March 26, 1971), the University of Georgia (*Mondo Trasho*, February 9, 1972), and Hobart and William Smith College (*The Diane Linkletter Story*, March 10, 1972). "Filmmakers Income—Expense Balance Sheet: S-Z," Filmmakers Archives, Film-Makers' Cooperative.

¹⁰⁶ Kreul, "New York, New Cinema," 363.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 373–374.

¹⁰⁸ All dates are from *Multiple Maniacs* Poster. All theater affiliations are from ibid. 374.

¹⁰⁹ Waters quoted in John G. Ives, *John Waters* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), 34.

-
- ¹¹⁰ Thomas Waugh, "Cockteaser," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, eds. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 71.
- ¹¹¹ Kreul, "New York, New Cinema," 495.
- ¹¹² Advertisement, *NOLA Express*, July 4–17, 1969, 10.
- ¹¹³ An August 1970 advertisement, for instance, showcases the August 21 screening of the Lavender Cinema 12-affiliated *Black Cap Drag* ("Liberal Adults Only!"), followed by both a six-film midnight underground series called "Lovin' and Laughin'" on August 22 and another nine-film series entitled "Rising Above the Doom and the Gloom" on August 29. Advertisement, *NOLA Express*, August 21–September 3, 1970, 20.
- ¹¹⁴ "Community Bulletin Board," *NOLA Express*, February 5–18, 1971, 23.
- ¹¹⁵ *Multiple Maniacs* Poster.
- ¹¹⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 65–68.
- ¹¹⁷ *Mondo Trasho* screened at the Art Cinema on August 19, 1969, while *Mondo Trasho* premiered from August 18–20, 1970 at the same venue. *Mondo Trasho* Poster, Folder 2, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU; and *Multiple Maniacs* Poster.
- ¹¹⁸ Waters quoted in Gerald Peary, "John Waters in Provincetown," *Provincetown Arts Magazine*, 1997, 22–26, reprinted in *John Waters: Interviews*, ed. James Egan (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 68.
- ¹¹⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 61.
- ¹²⁰ Notice, *The Provincetown Advocate*, Folder 1, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.
- ¹²¹ Notice and Photo, *The Provincetown Advocate*, Folder 2, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.
- ¹²² "Local Filmmaker's Junk Coming," *The Provincetown Advocate*, Folder 3, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.
- ¹²³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 67.
- ¹²⁴ *Mondo Trasho* Poster, Folder 2, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.
- ¹²⁵ Waters, *Shock Value*, 68.
- ¹²⁶ *Multiple Maniacs* Poster.
- ¹²⁷ Buckwheat, "The Passion According to the Cockettes," *Berkeley Tribe*, June 19–26, 1971, 16; James McColley Eiliers, "Sebastian's Nocturnal Dream Shows," *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 15, no. 3 (May/June 2008): 30–31.
- ¹²⁸ Pam Tent, *Midnight at the Palace: My Life as a Fabulous Cockette* (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2004), 28.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid. 28–29.
- ¹³⁰ Advertisement, *Berkeley Barb*, July 4–10, 1969, 23.
- ¹³¹ Eiliers, "Sebastian's Nocturnal Dream Shows," 30; "Trips," *San Francisco Good Times*, October 30, 1969, 20.
- ¹³² Benjamin Shepard, "Play as World-making: From the Cockettes to the Germs, Gay Liberation to DIY Community Building," in *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, ed. Dan Berger (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 177–194; and Julia Bryan-Wilson, "Handmade Genders: Queer Costuming in San Francisco Circa 1970," in *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965–1977*, eds. Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 76–93.
- ¹³³ Memoirs and essays reflecting on the Cockettes and their place within the counterculture milieu of early-1970s San Francisco include Tent, *Midnight*; Eiliers, "Sebastian's Nocturnal Dream Shows;" and Rumi Missabu, "Fopping it Up: Former Cockette Rumi's Story" in *Smash the Church, Smash the State! The Early Years of Gay Liberation*, ed. Tommi Avicelli Mecca (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009), 150–155. Other books and articles discussing the Cockettes as part of the history of The Angels of Light or Sylvester (the famed disco singer and original Cockettes member) include Adrian Brooks, "A Tale of Two Subcultures," *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 30–33; Adrian Brooks, *Flights of Angels: My Life with the Angels of Light* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2008); and Joshua Gamson, *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco* (New York: Picador, 2005).
- ¹³⁴ Tent, *Midnight*, 33–35.
- ¹³⁵ Clay Geerdes, "The Cockettes," *Door*, September 29–October 13, 1971, 23.
- ¹³⁶ Mike Henry, "Cock-ettes," *San Francisco Good Times*, August 21, 1970, 13.
- ¹³⁷ Advertisement, *Berkeley Tribe*, November 20–27, 1970, 23.
- ¹³⁸ Advertisement, *San Francisco Good Times*, April 23, 1970, 20.

¹³⁹ Many of Trexler's posters are available for viewing and sale on Trexler's website, www.toddtrexlerposters.com, which is where I viewed the posters I reference above. For information on Trexler and the creation of the website, see "Midnight Specials," *American Theatre*, February 2013, 14–15.

¹⁴⁰ Waters quoted in Tent, *Midnight*, 116.

¹⁴¹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 72.

¹⁴² Advertisement, *San Francisco Good Times*, January 22, 1971, 17.

¹⁴³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 72.

¹⁴⁴ Advertisement, *San Francisco Good Times*, April 30, 1971, 15; Advertisement, *Berkeley Barb*, March 12–18, 1971, 19.

¹⁴⁵ *Mondo Trasho* Poster 2, Folder 13, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹⁴⁶ Waters describes Divine's arriving in San Francisco and being greeted by a raucous welcoming committee of Cockettes, "in drag, waving 'We Love You, Divine,' banners." Waters, *Shock Value*, 72.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 72–73.

¹⁴⁸ "Scene-Drome," *Berkeley Barb*, February 4–10, 1972, 20; Tent, *Midnight*, 136.

¹⁴⁹ Gregg Redfern, "Witching Hour Has Laughter," Folder 3, Box 4, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ This poster can be found at <http://www.toddtrexlerposters.com/posters.shtml>.

¹⁵² This proved especially true when Waters adapted some of Divine's on-stage monologues for the screen, as seen in the overlaps between her Palace rantings and the violent climactic performance of Divine's Dawn Davenport in *Female Trouble* (1974). For an example of local coverage of Divine in San Francisco, see Edward Rasen, "Just Divine: The Inside Story of the 400-Pound Drag Queen Who Got to Play Jackie Kennedy," *The Organ*, July 1971, 15, 34.

¹⁵³ Waters quoted in Scott MacDonald, "John Waters' Divine Comedy," *Artforum*, January 1982, 52–60, reprinted in Egan 80.

Chapter Three

Midnight Special: Building the *Pink Flamingos*'s Phenomenon

In both critical and scholarly discussions of John Waters, there is before *Pink Flamingos* and there is after *Pink Flamingos* (1972). The film's astonishing longevity on the midnight-movie circuit and continuing cult status constitute a defining turning point in the history of his career.¹ As we have seen thus far, however, this did not occur in a vacuum. Waters had been working towards this for almost three years, circulating his features across the country and further honing the extra-cinematic practices that defined his directorial brand as much as the films themselves. To understand the sensation of *Pink Flamingos* is to understand how Waters addressed lingering questions and intensified key practices within his own process of brand expansion.

One quandary lay in the balance Waters attempted to strike between nationally circulating his films and maintaining a level of control over the extra-cinematic elements that closely aligned with his public persona. In its first section, this chapter analyzes how Waters's relationship with New Line Cinema (*Pink Flamingos*'s distributor) worked to resolve this tension. It outlines Waters's continued reliance on Baltimore as a laboratory for his work, examines the industrial practices of New Line, and charts how the collaboration between director and distributor tapped into a new kind of midnight-moviegoing. In doing so, it argues that the specific configuration of *Pink Flamingos*'s midnight showings encouraged audiences to reproduce the exhibition practices of Waters's more-localized screenings and therefore allowed the film to circulate broadly while retaining the atmosphere that Waters aligned with his directorial brand.

Pink Flamingos became a national phenomenon not only for its remarkable longevity in theaters but also for the way the film, its author, and the audiences associated with both sparked

coverage and conversation within the media. The second part of this chapter examines two major iterations of the kind of press coverage that kept the film in the public eye. Waters had a direct hand in the first category of media discourse, using an increasing number of public interviews to simultaneously indulge in and challenge press assumptions about him largely based upon his own films. In doing so, he further defined the contours of his public persona for his largest audience yet.

Beyond coverage of Waters's himself, however, reviews of *Pink Flamingos* and reporting on the film's screenings proved notable for the anxieties the film and its fans inspired regarding standards of cinematic evaluation and the social status of midnight-movie audiences. These conversations became as associated with Waters as his own interviews, enmeshing themselves into his directorial brand in ways beyond his immediate control but also marking his work as a source of continual cultural conversation and debate. All of these dynamics can be seen in the film's extended run at the TLA Cinema in Philadelphia, which will be examined as a brief case study.

The distribution, marketing, and exhibition of *Pink Flamingos* exemplified directorial branding as a kind of audience primer, signaling to the viewer what range of cinematic and extra-cinematic practices they should expect when hearing Waters's name. Press coverage and reviews, on the other hand, reveal how directorial brands can also act as vessels for larger questions about taste and culture. Taken together, they explain *Pink Flamingos*'s game-changing status by contextualizing the film within the broader array of creative choices, industrial opportunities, and cultural circumstances that allowed it to become the (in)famous classic it's considered today.

Waters, New Line Cinema, and the Creation of *Pink Flamingos*

Pink Flamingos in Baltimore

As always, Waters viewed Baltimore as both creative laboratory and launching pad for his cinematic work. In the previous chapter, we saw how he embedded himself within the city's cinematic culture while retaining a strong streak of independence. This provided a safety net for Waters to further develop the extra-cinematic practices that he would then use when *Pink Flamingos* expanded beyond Baltimore—a necessity, given the city's limitations as an independent film market.

Before detailing this, however, it's important to note how *Pink Flamingos* represented both continuations and evolutions within Waters's cinema that in turn connected with audiences in a new way. The film chronicles the battle for the title of “Filthiest Person Alive” waged between two groups. The first is a cracked familial clan led by Divine, who has moved to Baltimore and assumed the alias Babs Johnson. She lives in a trailer with her egg-obsessed mother (Edith Massey), chicken-loving son Crackers (Danny Mills), and blonde companion Cotton (Mary Vivian Pearce). Babs holds the press-anointed title of “the filthiest person alive” as the film begins. That moniker is soon challenged by Connie and Raymond Marble (Mink Stole and David Lochary), a devious middle-class couple whose various criminal enterprises include kidnapping young women, having them impregnated by their servant Channing (Channing Wilroy), and then selling the babies to local lesbian couples. The Marbles attempt to dethrone Babs through various means—sending her feces in the mail; calling the police on her birthday party; torching her trailer—before Babs and company settle the matter once and for all by kidnapping and publicly executing the couple before a gaggle of tabloid media.

Waters retained many of the elements that had been successful in *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs*. These included a digressive narrative structure, self-consciously gaudy mise-

en-scene captured in long takes, montage sequences ironically utilizing 50s and 60s-era pop music, and highly profane dialogue delivered in an alternately over-the-top and somewhat-stilted manner by his actors. For Divine, Lochary, Stole, Massey, and Pearce, their roles in *Pink Flamingos* solidified their onscreen personalities.

Three distinct additions and amplifications made *Pink Flamingos* stand out from the director's earlier works. The film marked Waters's first-ever use of 16mm color film stock, made possible by the \$10,000–12,000 budget that Waters was able to secure.² This showcased the eye-searing hues of Vincent Peranio's set decoration and Van Smith's costumes and makeup. Waters also increased the sheer amount of set pieces, creating a cascading series of blatantly shocking scenes showcasing violence, sexuality, and scatology.

Finally, while many of his earlier gasp-inducing images combined taboo-smashing imagery with low-budget fakery, *Pink Flamingos* contained several moments whose impact came from their clearly non-simulated nature. Describing the scene of oral sex performed by Babs on her son Crackers, for instance, Erik van Ooijen notes the head-spinning sensation of witnessing one scandalous scenario (the diegetic representation of incest) become usurped by another (the filming of un-simulated fellatio) within the same moment. The scene "succeeded in manifesting a kind of joyous and queerly carnivalesque activism where one representational taboo is transgressed under the guise of another."³

Perhaps no moment embodies this blurring of the real and the fictive in service of viewer shock than the film-ending scene of Divine scooping up freshly-produced dog feces and shoveling it into her mouth in a single take. Gaylyn Studlar describes the scene as "the midnight movies' most notorious example of spatio-temporal integrity."⁴ In true Waters's fashion, the filmmaker conceived of it primarily in terms of exploitation-influenced shock: "It was the

ultimate hype. And it was the most commercial thing I ever did.”⁵ In all of these ways, both the continuity and development of Waters’s increasingly signature style worked to create a film that would please his preexisting fan base while enticing newcomers with the promise of evermore jaw-dropping camp extremity.

Waters shot *Pink Flamingos* in and around Baltimore beginning on October 1, 1971 and concluding on January 12, 1972. Editing and sound work took roughly another six weeks to complete.⁶ Waters then sought to screen and publicize the film in Baltimore by both returning to and augmenting strategies that had worked for him previously: partnering with friendly exhibition spaces; self-marketing through eye-catching posters, colorful press releases, and publicity gimmicks; and cultivating local media attention.

For the film’s world premiere, Waters approached two overlapping institutions with which he had developed relationships: the University of Baltimore and the Baltimore Film Festival. As discussed in the previous chapter, the University of Baltimore was a major sponsor and screening venue for the burgeoning film festival, where Waters had screened *The Diane Linkletter Story* and previewed *Multiple Maniacs* in 1970. *Pink Flamingos* did not play within the Baltimore Film Festival, whose third edition ran April 21–22 and 28–29 of 1972.⁷ The festival did act as a presenting sponsor for the film’s premiere, however, which occurred at the Langsdale Auditorium at the University of Baltimore from Friday, March 17 to Sunday, March 19, 1972, with showings at 9:00 p.m. and midnight on Friday and Saturday and at 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. on Sunday.⁸

The screenings allowed Waters to debut the film amongst a crowd familiar with and likely sympathetic to his unique cinematic worldview. He later described the “packed” show, with the audience “shaking their heads in disbelief [and giving] the film a standing ovation when

the final credits appeared.”⁹ It also deepened his relationship to the film festival as an institution. This bond would be further solidified one month later, when Waters appeared as one of four jury members who handed out cash prizes to select films screened in the festival.¹⁰

Another previously discussed local institution provided *Pink Flamingos* with further exhibition space after its premiere. The Corner Theater initially screened the film from Thursday, March 31 to Saturday, April 2, 1972, with showings at 9:00 p.m. each night and an extra midnight screening on Saturday.¹¹ The film then returned as the headliner for “a series of underground experimental films” at the theater from Thursday, September 14 to Sunday, September 17, 1972, with nightly screenings at 8:30 p.m. and special 11:30 p.m. showings on Friday and Saturday.¹² Both the theater’s choice to anchor a series of experimental works around Waters’s new film and the festival’s aforementioned decision to place him on the awards jury exemplify his role as an unorthodox but undeniable figure within regional film culture.

The brazen publicity tactics, festive exhibition gimmicks, and eye-catching marketing of *Pink Flamingos* similarly continued tactics utilized by Waters for previous works. He recalls self-distributing posters and flyers across the city, transforming Laundromat bulletin boards into advertising displays and utilizing “the plate job,” a technique innovated by Pat Moran “which consisted of thrusting a handout bill at patrons in restaurants as they ate their meals.”¹³ As with previous screenings, Waters also resurrected the lure of midnight door prizes, though contemporaneous coverage did not say what these were.¹⁴ Such continuity speaks to Waters’s brand maintenance for a local viewing public who had been privy to his evolving extra-cinematic practices for almost five years.

The film’s posters sustained the use of archly bombastic language and eye-catching imagery, even as their framing of *Divine* reflects his ever-increasing centrality to Waters’s

directorial brand.¹⁵ The one-sheet for the film's world premiere screening was riddled with exploitation-esque come-ons to potential viewers: "Get ready for a vile evening!!!" "Don't miss this one!" "An exercise in poor taste." (This last quote would become the de-facto tagline for the film's national marketing campaign.) The most elaborate of these doubled as a fairly accurate description of the film's plot and a hyperbolic parody of breathless movie-marketing cliché: "The story of...the filthiest people alive....their loves....their hates and their unquenchable thirst for notoriety."¹⁶ Dominating the poster visually, meanwhile, was an image of Divine from the film's climactic execution scene. Dressed in a red fishtail dress, she stares menacingly outside the frame of the poster, her left hand resting on her hip and her right hand pointing a pistol. The photo's overlapping qualities of grotesquerie, glamour, and camp grandiosity made it not only a striking image for the local media. It would eventually become the primary visual for the film's national advertisements.

Waters featured his cast members' names in the manner of traditional Hollywood marketing. While earlier uses of this tactic played up the ironic juxtaposition between the presumed star power of names on a movie poster with the largely unknown "stars" of his early films, it was wholly plausible by 1972 that many locals would actually recognize their names from previous films. Waters particularly played up the presence of Divine. Not only was her image featured on the poster, but her name appeared in large font, appended to a "starring" designation and with a literal star placed behind the "D" in her name. Waters similarly foregrounded his own name and "Dreamland Productions" within the poster—the latter again beginning as a kind of winking play on Tinseltown cliché but now understood as the producer of increasingly popular films.¹⁷ Amidst these playful touches, however, Waters does not forget the

practicalities. He features his sponsor, the Baltimore Film Festival, with information about the festival's forthcoming third edition displayed in the bottom left-hand corner of the poster.

Pink Flamingos's press release contained many of the hallmarks that local media had come to expect from the director.¹⁸ Descriptions of the cast combined factual information with notes of winking grandeur. Divine is described as "the 300 pound actor goddess" whose commitment to the film's cracked vision is embodied in how he "shaved his head to the crown and dyed the remaining hair yellow, leaving two-inch black roots for character." The release goes on to praise Mink Stole's turn as Connie Marble, "the jealous bitch who plots Divine's destruction," with a simple promise: "A gutsier performance is hard to find."

Waters always conceived of promotional materials as conveying more than basic production data. To that end, he wrote a striking note outlining the larger intent behind *Pink Flamingos*, which he placed under the sub-category of "The Director." He writes: "Like all of Mr. Waters's previous films, 'PINK FLAMINGOS' is a comedy; a 'shock comedy' that hopes to amuse its audience by carrying depravity to ridiculous lengths. Subtitled 'an exercise in poor taste,' [*Pink Flamingos*] is the director's tribute to warped entertainment." Given that Waters would use variations on its logic when asked in interviews about the meaning behind the film's extreme grotesqueries and gleeful taboo smashing, it's worth lingering on the full ramifications of this brief statement.

Waters begins by linking *Pink Flamingos* to his larger cinematic project. This project is to make a certain kind of comedy, a "shock comedy." What constitutes a shock comedy lies in its ability to "amuse" its viewers through a stretching of "depravity" to such comedic extremes, or "ridiculous lengths," that it ultimately makes degeneracy laughable. Waters is not saying that this defangs the impact of debauched imagery or perverse narrative situations. Rather, what occurs is

a kind of alchemy in which said images and situations retain their basic galling qualities but are exaggerated to such an extent that the viewer laughs both at them and their own repulsion.

As noted above, “an exercise in poor taste” would become the de facto tagline of the film’s marketing and publicity campaign, and it once again proves telling in how Waters wanted to frame his work. “An exercise” emphasizes a sense of the provisional and unfinished, unattached to standards of conventional cinematic construction and diegetic wholeness. “Poor taste,” meanwhile, implies not so much an unawareness of social mores as a willful rejection of their importance. The film celebrates the knowing embrace of debased ideas and aesthetics. Waters’s implied connoisseurship and celebration of degraded cultural objects becomes solidified when he identifies the films as “the director’s tribute to warped entertainment.”

Indeed, the importance of this idea can be gleaned by comparing the final version of the press release to an earlier draft.¹⁹ The one significant alteration between the two comes in this final line, in which Waters scratched out part of the original text and wrote over it “the director’s tribute to warped entertainment.” Through the pen markings, one can see that the original text read: “...it is an outrageous film made for an outrageous audience.” In changing the language, Waters conceives of *Pink Flamingos* as in direct conversation with both a lineage of sleazy cinema and a viewing public willing to both be appalled and laugh at their own disgusted reactions. That this is all delivered in fairly terse language only adds to its impact. As Waters commented when recalling the use of “an exercise in poor taste” as the film’s primary marketing descriptor, “I liked the understatement.”²⁰

Finally, the film’s premiere generated the kind of local media attention that underscored Waters’s reputation as a notable denizen of Baltimore culture. While some of this coverage will

be later discussed in relation to larger discourses surrounding Waters, they are worth mentioning now for their explicit engagement with the director as a specific product of the city.

Anne Childress, motion picture editor for *The News American*, once again marked the premiere of Waters's latest film by more-or-less reprinting the film's press release, adding that she had "long admired his turn of phrase."²¹ While allowing "the world has gotten a somewhat bizarre view of Baltimore from Mr. Waters's films," *Baltimore Evening Sun* reporter Carl Schoettler notes the filmmaker's commitment to the city in quite familiar terms: "John has got to be the only moviemaker in the world who vacations in Hollywood in the summer and returns to Baltimore in the winter to make pictures."²²

The film's premiere inspired odes not just to Waters as a subversive scion of Charm City, but to the collection of extravagant oddballs that his films managed to collect in one place. "The few 'straights'—in conservative suits, dresses and pantsuits—who came to enjoy the show-before-the-show of Baltimore's underground hipdom trying to out avant-garde each other found themselves stared at as they had stared at the youths," reported Joann Harris in the *Baltimore Sun*, highlighting the city's robust countercultural community.²³ *Harry*, the city's underground newspaper, was full-throated in its praise of the premiere. In a preview of later reporting on *Pink Flamingos*'s midnight-movie audiences, they described "the largest gathering of dazzling freaks, old-time hippies, queens, flea-dreams, witches, part-time women, and tramps Baltimore has seen in SOME time," and approvingly noted those "aspects of the film only a Baltimorean could understand."²⁴

They concluded their coverage by bestowing upon Waters their "1972 HARRY Man of the Year Award for his distinguished achievement in the creation of attitudes, actions, and concrete accomplishments that most accurately reflect the aspirations, aversions, and alienations

of the Dixie Peach Publishing Company [the newspaper's publisher.]”²⁵ *Harry*'s staff even put Waters on the cover of the issue, using a photo from the premiere in which the director later described himself as looking “like a terminally ill junkie in the leopard shirt Divine had made for me to wear to the opening.”²⁶ For all of his on-screen provocations, the ties that Waters cultivated with his hometown continued to produce consistent and increasingly affectionate (if still somewhat bewildered) press coverage.

As crucial as this local support was, *Pink Flamingos* still needed to travel beyond Baltimore to achieve financial success and cultural impact. Throughout 1972, the film rarely screened outside of the area. Those screenings it did have relied on Waters's earlier efforts at national networking and the remnants of former distribution deals. Amongst the only documented screenings one finds in this period occurred in San Francisco, when *Pink Flamingos* had showings at the Canyon Cinematheque and the Art Institute in January 1973.²⁷ These screenings likely resulted from Waters's being “holed up in our friend David Spencer's apartment in San Francisco, waiting for the film to become a success.”²⁸ Meanwhile, records from the Film-Makers' Cooperative show that *Mondo Trasho* and *The Diane Linkletter Story* had been rented out to both the University of Georgia and Hobart and William Smith College in 1972; and that *Multiple Maniacs* and *The Diane Linkletter Story* had midnight screenings at the Moviehouse in Provincetown in August 1972.²⁹ These likely offered insufficient funds, particularly given the money Waters recently expended on the production of *Pink Flamingos*.

The problem was that Waters had entered into a deal with a distributor who had yet to figure out how to handle his film. “New Line kept [*Pink Flamingos*] for a year, so I was penniless,” Waters recalled.³⁰ Why Waters would sign with a distributor that initially struggled

to effectively circulate his work speaks to both New Line's strengths and blind spots in the early 1970s, to which we will now turn.

New Line Cinema and Midnight Movie Culture

Robert Shaye founded New Line Cinema in September 1967 with the goal of entering the robust non-theatrical distribution market on college campuses.³¹ This market would prove a lucrative one to enter in the mid-to-late 1960s for three reasons. First, the increasing incorporation of film into academic courses and the diverse and often-adventurous tastes of the student population helped to fuel demand for movies of various kinds on college campuses.³² Second, appearance fees for musical acts and comedians had ballooned in the late 1960s to counteract the overall decrease in ticket sales due to their own television appearances.³³ Booking films provided both a cheaper and more flexible means of utilizing college programming budgets.

Finally, New Line's entrance came at a moment when other distributors were beginning to mine the non-theatrical market with innovative distribution strategies. Amongst the most notable were Janus Films' "New Cinema" packages, which sold groups of similarly-themed art house titles to colleges for a flat fee; and Contemporary, which packaged several films by Jean-Luc Godard and assisted with advertising costs for either a sliding flat fee or a percentage, should profits exceed rental costs.³⁴ For all of these reasons, New Line entered the non-theatrical market with hopes of making a profit almost solely through bookings at colleges and universities.³⁵

Early offerings speak to New Line's burgeoning, anything-goes brand identity that conveyed a broad commitment to films with topics outré or idiosyncratic enough to appeal to a college audience with more adventurous tastes. Acquisitions included music-focused

documentaries such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil* (1969), underground or psychedelia-influenced works like Paul Morrissey's *Women in Revolt* (1971) and Steven Arnold's *Luminous Procureess* (1971), older films with contemporary camp resonances such as Louis J. Gasnier's *Reefer Madness* (1936), and even curated selections from the New York Erotic Film Festival.³⁶ The company typically booked either individual films or packages of shorts on a variety of percentage-based deals. Such eclecticism resulted in financial success. By 1973, the studio's yearly grosses had "gone up at least 10 times" since its founding six years earlier.³⁷

Despite its success in the college market, it was clear almost from New Line's inception that Shaye and company had plans to move into theatrical distribution. As early as December 1968, New Line titles were being described in *Variety* as ultimately destined for a theatrical booking, after a film had worked its way through the college circuit.³⁸ Such an ambition reflected the optimistic situation for independent distributors in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when conglomerate-owned major studios reduced their overall output and provided the opportunity for small companies to fill now-empty screens with low-budget product.³⁹ In some cases, the college circuit offered a proving ground for Shaye to convince exhibitors that certain titles that might seem risky on paper could actually be profitable, given the proper distribution and marketing.

The clearest example of the parameters and possibilities of New Line's experimentation with limited theatrical distribution can be seen in its handling of *Sympathy for the Devil*. Shaye bought the North American distribution rights to Godard's Rolling Stones documentary (originally entitled *One Plus One* but changed to match the title of the hit single on the Stones' best-selling album, *Beggar's Banquet* (1968)) from Ian Quarrier of Cupid Productions in England.⁴⁰ According to *Variety*, New Line bet that the film would have particular appeal to younger viewers "on the basis of the Stones recent American tour, their California concert [at the

Altamont Speedway] which ended in tragedy, and their album selling track record (not to mention the Godard moniker for film buffs).⁴¹ Shaye sold the film to college campuses on a rental plus percentage basis, supplying campus exhibitors with “stills, advertising, posters, and publicity material, as well as their own trailers...[and] a one hour documentary about the shooting of the pic which is played off a week before the ‘Sympathy’ bookings.”⁴² The showings on various college campuses in late 1969 and early 1970 were financially impressive enough to move the film into commercial bookings.⁴³ Subsequent theatrical showings for the film also proved successful, including playdates in New York, Chicago, and Detroit.⁴⁴ By the middle of 1970, the film had played roughly 75 campuses and grossed over \$200,000, and had doubled that amount by the end of the year.⁴⁵ While it seems that most of the film’s money came from college screenings, the fact that New Line felt they could expand the film to theatrical release showed that the company was searching for ways to capitalize upon campus buzz to increase their acquisitions’ visibility (and profitability) beyond that market.

New Line’s burgeoning success in the late 1960s and early 1970s also relied upon a growing phenomenon: the midnight movie. Certainly, the practice of screening marginal, esoteric, or disreputable films after the customary hours of theater operation existed prior to the historical moment in question. As discussed in the previous chapter, Waters himself participated in the Palace Theater’s Nocturnal Dream Shows, where the attraction lay less in any specific title and more in the sheer range of kitsch, low-brow, and camp objects that the programmers juxtaposed against one another into the wee hours of the morning. Such exhibition practices remained viable throughout the 1970s. Two shifts, however, mark the period beginning in 1970 and continuing throughout the decade as distinct from the late-night viewings of earlier years.

First, the 1970s saw a transition from midnight screenings defined primarily by curatorial eclecticism to those built around the regular screening of a single cult favorite. The popularity of individual titles was nurtured by a theater's willingness to program them every week for months on end. A pioneer in this practice was Ben Barenholtz, the owner of the Elgin theater in New York. Barenholtz saw the midnight movie strategy as a means to maximize the use of the theatrical space. More importantly, it offered a way to get audiences to more specialized films "that could not be exposed to the public through the normal channels simply through the expense of advertising and opening costs and also because certain kinds of film critics wouldn't take to [them]."⁴⁶

What connects these films varies. Looking back on a decade of midnight movies in 1980, *Variety*'s Lawrence Cohn noted the presence of "music, violence, sex, comedy, animation, and an offbeat point-of-view."⁴⁷ Waters himself concurred, claiming that "at midnight to appeal to the audience you've got to have sex and violence, but it's got to be funny and it's got to be original."⁴⁸ While no single formula emerged, the idea of nurturing a title to cult status through placement in a consistent late-night slot steered the concept of midnight screenings in new directions.

After seeing a preview screening of Alejandro Jodorowsky's psychedelic Western *El Topo* (1970) at the Museum of Modern Art, Barenholtz booked the film for continuous midnight screenings at the Elgin.⁴⁹ The screenings soon attracted an intensely loyal following.⁵⁰ J. Hoberman notes the exceptional nature of *El Topo*'s Elgin run, writing that "it's significant that when it first opened, it ran at midnight seven nights a week [from December 1970 to June 1971]. No other midnight movie has ever done this."⁵¹ *Pink Flamingos* would in fact become another title that would briefly run seven nights a week at midnight. Still, Hoberman's comment points to

the distinct nature of *El Topo*'s success. It reflects the unique way in which a consistent midnight screening of a single film can both inspire devotion from certain audience members and more broadly train viewers to think of midnight screenings as special "events" in which certain reception practices become more acceptable.

Second, the spaces that housed midnight showings began to move beyond the most populous urban centers and into smaller cities and even the suburbs. Besides the influence of college campuses across the country hosting late-night screenings, Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum point to Mike Getz's previously-discussed Underground Cinema 12 as providing "the spadework for the midnight-movie explosion of the 1970s" by "introducing underground movies to the American heartland" in cities as geographically diverse as Denver, Colorado; Akron, Ohio; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Memphis, Tennessee.⁵² Notably, Waters's films participated in the pre-history of the 1970s midnight movie craze through showings in Getz's series.

This led to an expansion of the types of places where midnight movies could play, as well as the ability of various exhibition spaces to foster the kind of freewheeling atmosphere that marked the midnight-movie experience as much as the films themselves. J.P. Telotte gestures towards the capacity of various theatrical venues to be altered by the presence of a midnight movie: "And while we often view [midnight movies] at conventional theaters, even at the ubiquitous suburban shoebox multiplexes, they also mark a point of magical change or transformation for their venues...from a model of industrialized and efficient exhibition practices to a kind of 'underground' cinema, an urban (or suburban) site of ritualistic activity..."⁵³ The "suburban shoebox multiplexes" had not yet become so "ubiquitous" in the early 1970s. Still, the increasing popularity of both alternative cinema and midnight screenings beyond the largest

urban centers offered distributors the opportunity to build buzz for a midnight-movie title in major cities and then expand out for shorter runs in smaller cities, college towns, and adventurous suburbs.

New Line had familiarity with both the types of films that could play well in such scenarios and the kind of exhibition venues that could effectively house them. Midnight screenings of *Reefer Madness* on college campuses had provided New Line with one of its most consistent moneymakers during this period.⁵⁴ Besides offering an important reminder that the liberal use of illicit substances would be a crucial carryover from earlier late-night screenings to the midnight movies of the 1970s, such a success points to why New Line seemed uniquely positioned to shepherd a midnight movie.⁵⁵ The company's experience catering to rowdy, drug-fueled college crowds gave them an eye for films that would play well in the realm of midnight-movie screenings—nothing if not a translation of raucous campus energy into the realm of the commercial cinema. Fostering a midnight movie drew upon the skills and experiences of the college circuit while allowing for more lucrative and potentially long-running screenings in major urban centers. Should they find such a title, their ability to position and promote it within the marketplace would be formidable.

New Line, Waters, and the National Distribution of Pink Flamingos

Before *Pink Flamingos*, Waters had approached New Line about distributing some of his earlier films but was told “to come back when I had something ‘more polished.’”⁵⁶ Ever the industry watcher, Waters recalls following New Line within *Variety* and approached them again when he was looking for a distributor for *Pink Flamingos*. While it's a bit unclear when exactly the deal occurred, New Line president Bob Shaye liked the film and agreed to purchase it.⁵⁷

On paper, Waters and New Line seemed well suited to work with one another. For New Line, securing the rights to distribute *Pink Flamingos* held the potential to develop the film into the kind of midnight-movie hit that had been seen in the success of *El Topo*. It would prove a natural development for a distributor whose roots lay in college campus screenings but who would be making efforts throughout the early 1970s to move more definitively into commercial theatrical distribution. For Waters, New Line's interest in handling films with unconventional content for niche audiences fit his own work well. It would also provide him access to the college campuses and (increasingly) commercial theaters in major urban and suburban areas that New Line had connections to.

Once New Line acquired the film, however, they seemed unsure where and how to place it. Sara Risher, who later became head of New Line's production division, recalled that Shaye "has always liked *Pink Flamingos*—he followed John's sense of humor and appreciated his talent from the beginning—but he just wasn't sure what to do with it."⁵⁸ The only commercial screening of the film that is noted before the film opened in New York in February 1973 was a single showing at the South Station Cinema, a gay porn theater in Boston. The film's connections to queer subculture—its scene of un-simulated oral sex, male nudity, drag queen star, and generalized tone of self-conscious camp—might have justified such a screening venue. The reports by all parties concerned, however, reveals the miscalculation regarding what a gay porn theater audience expected and what *Pink Flamingos* delivered. Waters notes that news of the screening "made all the cast furious," and they weren't alone.⁵⁹ George Mansour, who booked films for several Boston theaters in the 1970s, recalls receiving the film from New Line and playing it in the South Station Cinema: "John Waters was never very happy with that, and I can't blame him."⁶⁰

The mismatch between film, venue, and audience cannot be directly attached to New Line. Still, the fact that a booker would mistake *Pink Flamingos* for a title that could play successfully in a pornographic theater both speaks to the challenge of finding an appreciative audience for such a singular title and signals that, for all of his efforts, Waters had not yet achieved the kind of effective connotative shorthand that comes with a fully formed and circulated directorial brand. And while this indecision occurred within the company, Waters became increasingly destitute. He recalls moving with Danny Mills and Mary Vivian Pearce to New Orleans, where they all lived in “the worst dump I’ve ever seen” and Waters wallowed, “broke and depressed.”⁶¹ Pearce recalls Waters leaving New Orleans ahead of herself and Mills: “John left because he was worried about what was happening to [*Pink Flamingos*]. The distributor had it but it wasn’t playing anywhere.”⁶²

Waters wanted *Pink Flamingos* shown at the Elgin in New York, which he described as “the most popular film-buff hangout in Manhattan.”⁶³ The Elgin screened *El Topo* during its initial six-month midnight run, and had become a go-to theater for adventurous and eclectic late-night showings.⁶⁴ He expressed this to New Line in what he describes as “many frantic fraudulent credit-card phone calls” and Risher similarly recalls that Waters “was the one who got it in the midnight shows at the Elgin Theater.”⁶⁵ Shaye relented and sent the film to Elgin owners’ Steve Gould and Chuck Zlatkin. In perhaps a further sign on Shaye’s grasping attempts to frame the film for exhibitors, Gould remembers him describing *Pink Flamingos* as “this cockamamie film, it’s a guy in drag and at the end he eats poodle shit.”⁶⁶ Gould and Zlatkin screened the film privately and decided to show it in one of their late-night slots. As Zlatkin put it, “I don’t know what I just saw, but it’s definitely the midnight show.”⁶⁷

Before opening at the Elgin, New Line booked the film at the Orpheum, a newly reopened theater on the Lower East Side, for two midnight showings on February 2 and 3, 1973. The brief run demonstrated both the advantages and drawbacks of Waters's early partnership with the distributor. On the one hand, the company seemed to have a pre-existing relationship with the theater, as the Orpheum screened two New Line titles the same evening as *Pink Flamingos*'s New York debut: *Reefer Madness* and *Sympathy for the Devil*.⁶⁸ This familiarity surely helped the booking occur in the first place. On the other hand, the advertisement for the screenings deemed *Pink Flamingos* "a decadent spectacle," which seemingly played on the film's queer elements via the coded language of "decadence" but did not hit upon the film's more unique and outré content.⁶⁹ The film did not get rebooked at the Orpheum following those two showings. After a two-week absence, the film then returned to New York screens at the Elgin, with its first show on Friday, February 16, 1973, at midnight.

The film's mildly successful opening night at the Elgin relied upon both the theater's reputation and Waters's own wrangling of local connections. Waters recalls the film's first midnight screening at the Elgin as having "no advertising."⁷⁰ The film actually did receive mention in the theater's weekly ad in the *Village Voice*, albeit slightly misspelled as "Pink Flamingo."⁷¹ A tagline accompanying the film promised "a trip thru decadence"—again, a seeming combination of countercultural and queer signifiers that touches upon aspects of the film's appeal without quite honing in on the camp extremity that would become its chief selling point. Certainly, the Elgin had measured expectations for the film. As Zlatkin remembered, "We didn't say, 'Oh, this is definitely going to make it.'"⁷²

Still, the film's very inclusion within the Elgin's overall weekly ad would signal to audiences that *Pink Flamingos* received the theater's imprimatur to be screened at midnight. Just

as screening his films at the Palace Theater linked Waters to the larger countercultural aura of the Nocturnal Dream Shows and the Cockettes, playing the Elgin aligned Waters's brand with a burgeoning hub of midnight-movie activity. Furthermore, the Elgin programmed a range of films in their late-night screening slots, meaning that a variety of viewers would be scanning the weekly ad. For instance, the theater's "midnight til dawn" marathons from the previous month spanned the gamut from youth-culture hits like *El Topo* and *Gimme Shelter* (Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin, 1970) to Akira Kurosawa triple features to Howard Hawks's classics.⁷³

The fact that *Pink Flamingos* played in such an increasingly storied midnight-screening space, then, gave the film a boost in publicity and awareness amongst the city's cine-literate. Additionally, Waters recalls driving to New York himself and "calling every person we knew in New York and begging them to attend."⁷⁴ The theater was half-full but "the reaction was great," and the theater agreed to screen the film again two weeks later.⁷⁵

Once the film returned on March 2, its steady build of box-office success and cultural cache began in earnest.⁷⁶ One can see this occurring through the ever-growing number of showings that the film had at the Elgin, the increased presence of advertising, and the role that Waters himself played in attracting crowds through personal appearances. The film continued to play Fridays at midnight throughout March 1973. The Elgin first expanded the midnight showings to three nights a week (Wednesday through Friday) the week of March 22.⁷⁷ As word-of-mouth and press coverage grew, *Pink Flamingos* went from three to five midnight screenings a week (Monday through Friday) beginning the week of April 5; expanded to six midnight showings during the week of April 26; and finally began playing seven nights a week at midnight beginning the week of June 14.⁷⁸

Acting as both proof of *Pink Flamingos*'s growing success and further impetus for potential viewers to see it, the film also received its own separate advertisement in the film section of the *Village Voice* beginning in late March.⁷⁹ Just as notably, this new advertisement directly drew upon two elements from Waters's local advertising strategies in Baltimore. It featured the same image from the Baltimore world premiere screening of *Divine* in her red fishtail dress and pointing her handgun at an unseen victim. It replaced the aforementioned "A trip thru decadence" with Waters's earlier tagline, "An exercise in poor taste." It also singled out *Divine* as the film's star, though it incorrectly labeled her as "Devine."

Such a move more directly reflected Waters's vision of the film's advertising, and it spoke to how those within New Line took the director's notable skills as a marketer and publicist into account. New Line certainly had a hand in crafting the promotion of the film. As the ads made clear, the distributor released *Pink Flamingos* through Saliva Films, a division of the company specializing in the handling of exploitation product. This allowed the film to be handled by employees attuned to its offbeat sensibility.

Still, New Line often seemed to be at least consulting Waters's earlier methods. As Sara Risher notes, "He is a hands-on person when it comes to publicity; he is a master at it. And he understands what sells. He was involved in the trailer, the ad campaigns, the pitches, how to get word-of-mouth going—all of the marketing. We have always felt that he knows best how to sell the films and who his audience is."⁸⁰ For instance, the film's individual advertisements at the Elgin began to be accompanied by a critic's quote beginning the week of May 17, 1973. At first, the ad quoted Fran Lebowitz's review in *Interview* magazine, selecting a quote that highlighted the film's extreme content but also its humor: "...the sickest movie ever made (and one of the funniest)."⁸¹ Three weeks later, that quote had been replaced by a straightforwardly scolding pull

quote—“A very nasty film”—from *Women’s Wear Daily*.⁸² This move recalled Waters’s Baltimore-bred habit of using lines from unambiguously appalled critics to sell his films, banking on his presumed audience to see the disapproval of certain critics as a sign of the movie’s countercultural edge.

Finally, Waters contributed to the film’s successful run at the Elgin by making appearances at the theater. A May 10, 1973 ad announced that “the fabulous Divine and John Waters” would be present during the film’s Thursday and Sunday midnight screenings.⁸³ Lest one imagine that the appearances of the director and his most notorious star would be tamer than at screening venues like the Palace Theater in San Francisco, Gould and Zlatkin recall the raucous nature of the pair’s in-person events at the Elgin. “The best was when Divine was throwing dead mackerels from his brassiere,” Gould noted, before being corrected by Zlatkin, “Between his legs.”⁸⁴

These appearances by Waters and cast members continued throughout the run, as Gould and Zlatkin remembered, attracting crowds and giving the screenings an air of bacchanalian fun. “He’s a very honorable man,” Gould said of the director, “and always fun, because he’d bring the tribe down. Edie the Egg Lady showed up all the time.”⁸⁵ By continuing the kind of festive and rowdy in-person events that he had done since his early Baltimore days and honed at venues like the Palace, Waters both attracted larger and more enthusiastic crowds to the Elgin and fostered a warm relationship with the owner of what Waters, by his own words, deemed “the most popular film-buff hangout in Manhattan.”

Pink Flamingos’s popularity at the Elgin peaked in the summer of 1973 but it continued to play in New York. By the fall of the year, the film was still at the Elgin but the showings were reduced back to one Friday night screening per week.⁸⁶ After concluding its run in January 1974,

the film began what would become a forty-five week stay at the New Yorker screening Friday and Saturdays at midnight.⁸⁷ A run at the Quad followed the New Yorker engagement. All told, the film played almost continuously in New York for two years.⁸⁸

These extended stays at single theaters in New York resolved a tension that had been at the heart of Waters's brand expansion since he first began circulating his films nationally. On the one hand, Waters needed his films to be able to travel the country so as to reach appreciative audiences and heighten his own public exposure. On the other, he had constructed both the appeal of his cinema and the core of his own public identity by placing his work within a larger context of extra-cinematic gimmickry and site-specific revelry that was difficult to replicate without the physical presence of himself or others within his Dreamland team. While his shows at the Palace Theater offered proof that these dynamics could be replicated and even deepened when moved beyond Baltimore, they did not occur frequently enough for Waters to rely upon them for sustainable income.

Pink Flamingos's engagement at the Elgin reconciled this dilemma by combining the singular energy of a one-off special screening with the consistent sales of a commercial run. The film's midnight showtime, the scandalous content of the film itself, and Waters's priming of his audience through marketing cues and personal appearances laid the groundwork for viewers to conceive of the Elgin show as an "event" in which looser rules of theatrical decorum and viewer engagement applied. As word of mouth spread regarding not just the movie at the screening's center but the carnivalesque atmosphere surrounding it, the Elgin's pre-existing policy of midnight showings allowed *Pink Flamingos* to remain at the theater and take advantage of its growing popularity. What ultimately occurred was a kind of perpetual-motion machine. The film's countercultural buzz drove more people to the screenings, which in turn led to robust box

office receipts and a continued midnight slot, which allowed more bacchanalian shows to occur, more buzz to build, and more fans to attend or return. Waters would occasionally appear at the Elgin, but his presence was soon not needed for the showings to retain the circus-like atmosphere associated with his underground exploiter persona. As we shall see, these riotous and loyal fans would become an even more important component of his directorial brand as *Pink Flamingos* began to circulate across the country.

The Elgin run essentially became the model that New Line followed in distributing *Pink Flamingos* across the country. They would find a theater in an urban center known for midnight screenings; build word-of-mouth through advertising and, increasingly, the buzz produced by coverage in major newspapers and magazines; and occasionally stoke further media interest and fan enthusiasm by having Waters, Divine, or other cast members appear for a midnight screening. The success of this model can be seen in the lengths of the film's playdates at the same theaters in large American cities.

The Biograph Theater in Washington, D.C. began playing the film in mid-1973. When critic Kenneth Turan reported on the film and its audiences in February 1974, it had been running continuously for over forty weeks, and the theater had held a six-month anniversary celebration for the film in the fall of 1973.⁸⁹ Though it didn't premiere in Los Angeles until December 1974, Waters recalls that the film ran at the Nuart Theater for "almost ten years."⁹⁰ As will be described below, the film's run at the TLA Theater in Philadelphia lasted two years. These long runs established a momentum all of their own, inspiring return customers and lingering long enough for curious-if-skittish filmgoers to finally take the plunge on a weekend night.

Even if the film did not play for such extended periods of time in all venues, New Line also booked *Pink Flamingos* in a wide range of theaters. Amongst others, *Pink Flamingos* played the 400 and the Devon theaters in Chicago, the Charles in Baltimore, the Pyramid Theatre in Albuquerque, and the Vagabond Theater in Austin, as well as theaters in New Orleans; Portland, Oregon; and Brookline, Massachusetts.⁹¹ If it did not receive a sustained run in a single venue, the film returned to the same city (and even the same theater) multiple times within a calendar year. From January 1974 through February 1975, for instance, *Pink Flamingos* had five separate screenings at New World Film Co-Op in Ann Arbor, Michigan, as well as a separate run at the Cabaret Cinema in the same city.⁹² Waters and company could not travel to all of these venues (although they traveled to many), but the tone of *Pink Flamingos*'s marketing materials and the coverage of its screenings elsewhere primed viewers to engage with the film in the rowdy, raucous way that made the screenings countercultural events not to be missed.

The fact that New Line could coordinate with so many venues across the country reflected the company's more aggressive push to take the lessons learned from these initial forays into non-campus exhibition and turn them into a more sustained presence within the theatrical market. Beginning in mid-1973, Shaye began laying the groundwork within the company itself by hiring Norman Smith, a former salesman at Paramount Pictures, to spearhead theatrical distribution. New Line also increased its sub-distributors around the country from 8 to 23.⁹³

This structural expansion was complimented by an increased number of acquisitions with an eye toward release within the theatrical market. The acquired titles kept within New Line's established tradition of mixing art-house fare with more youth-oriented, campy, or titillating titles. These included previously unreleased works by Claude Chabrol and Pier Paolo Pasolini's

Pig Pen a.k.a. *Porcile* (1969); *Cocaine Madness* a.k.a. *Cocaine Fiends* (William O'Connor, 1935), a tongue-in-cheek companion piece to *Reefer Madness*; *Jimi Plays Berkeley* (Peter Pilafian, 1971), a concert documentary reminiscent of the distributor's earlier success with *Sympathy for the Devil*; and a new package of pornographic shorts entitled *The Best of the N.Y. Erotic Film Festival*.⁹⁴ Internal expansions and restructurings continued into 1974. New Line hired Stanley Dudelson, formerly executive vice president at the Cannon Group, as vice president of worldwide distribution.⁹⁵ The creation of a separate exploitation division, Gross National Pictures, complimented its pre-existing exploitation division Saliva Films.⁹⁶ Finally, more-sustained attempts were made to open films simultaneously in theatrical and non-theatrical markets.⁹⁷

Taken together, these changes in distribution strategy, shifts in internal structure, and expansion of acquisitions formed a sustained effort by New Line to retain the idiosyncratic appeal of their campus-released films and to use said appeal as a selling point to audiences beyond colleges and universities. *Pink Flamingos* fit into this strategy. The film's ability to be placed successfully into major urban markets for lengthy runs can be tied partly to the distributor's expanded staff. For instance, the hiring of S. David Levy (a partner in the Biograph Theatre Group) as a sub-distributor for the company likely influenced *Pink Flamingos*'s extended engagement at the Biograph at around the same time.⁹⁸

Waters and company also continued their promotional appearances throughout the film's national distribution, bringing the unruly energy of the film's early New York and Baltimore screenings to as many locations as possible. Waters recalls Divine arriving to the film's Los Angeles premiere riding the back of a garbage truck.⁹⁹ Divine also appeared at the Capitol Theatre in Passaic, New Jersey as part of "An Evening of Halloween Decadence," where *Pink*

Flamingos was shown and Divine performed on stage along with the Harlots of 42nd Street, “New York’s kinkiest rock group.”¹⁰⁰ Ever mindful of the importance of publicity, Waters himself remarked upon the sheer number of opening-night appearances that he and others from the film had been to over the past year. “There have been so many,” he told the *Baltimore Sun* upon his return to the city in December 1973.¹⁰¹

Finally, both New Line and various exhibitors continued to take inspiration from the tactics laid down by Waters, while tweaking and expanding upon them. As previously mentioned, New Line utilized Waters’s tactic of reframing negative critical attention within advertising for the film, but they also made sure to sample some of the more positive attention given to the film by critics. The aforementioned Lebowitz quote—offering genuine praise while noting the film’s jaw-dropping outrageousness—ended up in several advertisements. Another quote that tied the film to both the depths of low culture and the prestige of the art house came from *New York Magazine*, which New Line quoted in their ads as follows: “Beyond pornography...the nearest American film to Bunuel’s *Andalusian Dog*.”¹⁰² A local advertisement for a screening in Ann Arbor, meanwhile, quotes a circulated exchange between Andy Warhol and famed art cinema director Federico Fellini: “Warhol tells Fellini – ‘You must see *Pink Flamingos*.’”¹⁰³ There’s a movement, then, from out-and-out negative critical blurbs to those that signal the film’s outré spirit while praising its provocations and linking it to acceptable avant-garde and high-art sources.

At the other end of the respectability spectrum, exhibitors innovated one of the film’s most enduring gimmicks: the “Pink Phlegm-ingo Barf Bag,” illustrated with a jaunty looking flamingo and handed out at screenings throughout the country.¹⁰⁴ Surprisingly, Waters himself claims to have had nothing to do with its dissemination at screenings. “It wasn’t my idea and not

a very original idea, because it was stolen from *Mark of the Devil* [Michael Armstrong, 1970],” Waters says when asked about the barf bag’s origins. “But what the hell, it still worked.”¹⁰⁵

No example better encapsulates the collaboration between Waters and New Line than the trailer that the distributor made for *Pink Flamingos*. Rather than lure audience members by showing any of the film’s content, the preview assembles a string of viewer reactions as they are approached by a camera crew presumably after a midnight screening and asked for their in-the-moment responses to the film.¹⁰⁶ Their comments span the gamut from genuine shock to bemused appreciation to shoulder-shrugging (if studied) nonchalance.

While noting that the chorus of voices sharing their opinions in the trailer was “obviously selected to promote the film,” Anna Breckon argues that it does “tell us something, however, about the unique kind of collectivity that takes shape around *Pink Flamingos* as a cinematic object.”¹⁰⁷ New Line’s trailer is as concerned with selling a particular type of cinematic experience—raucous, startling, countercultural—as it is with promoting the film at its center. The trailer models for viewers across the country the types of reactions they’d likely have at such a screening, further encouraging the Waters-esque atmosphere of subcultural revelry regardless of where *Pink Flamingos* played. The director heartily approved of the tactic. New Line “made a great coming attraction for the film,” he wrote, “wisely eliminating any shocking footage and concentrating on the reactions of a stunned audience leaving a screening.”¹⁰⁸

Waters’s response to the *Pink Flamingos*’s trailer reflects how he and New Line’s partnership shaped their respective brand identities at a crucial moment for both director and company. The presence of Waters’s film and his involvement in the marketing and exhibition practices surrounding his work bolstered New Line’s status as a provocative and canny independent distributor.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, the distributor’s circulation and promotion of *Pink*

Flamingos within the burgeoning market for midnight movies helped Waters's directorial brand not only expand geographically but crystallize in the public eye. Whether an audience member saw a midnight screening of *Pink Flamingos* in New York, Baltimore, Chicago, or Albuquerque, they were beginning to fully understand what the name "John Waters" meant—not only for what they were about to see onscreen, but for how it changed the rules of filmgoing itself.

The Skinny, Long Haired Director and All His Followers: Shaping Directorial Branding in the Press Coverage of *Pink Flamingos*

As the film's astonishing longevity and countercultural popularity continued to grow throughout 1973, Waters became both a person of interest and a subject of debate within the press. In both situations, the nature of the media coverage inspired the sort of ambiguities and controversies that allowed *Pink Flamingos* to remain in the public conversation. For Waters, the film's success led to increased coverage and an amplified opportunity to shape his directorial persona in interviews. Waters walks the line in these exchanges between conforming to reporters' expectations of the "long-haired freak" persona that many assumed based upon his cinematic output and complicating these assumptions by emphasizing his thoughts on contemporary cinema, his authorial intentions, and his relationship to his regional roots. This oscillation between personifying and flouting media presumptions not only allowed Waters to deepen his public image but enhanced the press's fascination with him.

At the same time, Waters's directorial brand became increasingly attached to conversations surrounding both his film and its presumed target audience. Reviews of *Pink Flamingos* spanned the usual gamut between unambiguous disgust and astonished praise. Now, though, several critics turned the public conversation surrounding *Pink Flamingos* towards larger questions of critical evaluation and aesthetic standards, particularly in the face of the director's

own reluctance to discuss the film's "deeper" meanings. Similarly, press coverage highlighted the throngs of audience members who flocked to *Pink Flamingos*'s midnight screenings. These articles built upon a pre-existing association between Waters and the often-colorful viewership for his films dating back to his early screenings in Baltimore. What became intensified was the focus on the crowd's self-presentation and their reactions to *Pink Flamingos*, which in turn raised anxieties surrounding the character and morality of the 70s-era counterculture. Waters may not have had as direct control over how these conversations became attached to his directorial brand, but their persistence and range spoke to how indelibly *Pink Flamingos* had burrowed into public debate and discussion.

Waters on Waters

In his analysis of the literary interview as a form, John Rodden makes a distinction between two types of subjects. One is the raconteur, an interview subject who treats the event as a kind of performance and makes themselves into a character. The other is the advertiser, who is also interested in self-display but uses interviews to promote a public persona in an explicitly self-promotional way. Waters's interviews and public statements surrounding the release of *Pink Flamingos* finds him personifying a bit of the raconteur as he recollects some of the more outrageous stories from the film's production and his life more generally. Whether regaling reporters with the process by which they finally induced the dog to defecate for the film's conclusion or recounting tales of his misspent youth, Waters could embody the kind of disreputable persona that connected easily to his films and characters.

Still, closely examining his public comments during this time also reveals his role as advertiser, putting forth elements of his personality and interests that seem designed to counteract or complicate the presumptions of the media. This self-promotion seemed to come

from a desire to create some distance between himself and the world he created on-screen. Just as his directorial brand encompassed both cinematic and extra-cinematic elements, his public persona floated between confirming and resisting perceptions of himself based upon his films.

This vacillation can be seen partly in response to how the press framed him at this time. Profilers and interviewers of Waters would often note their anxiety about meeting the director, sometimes beginning their articles by chronicling the initial ascent into his apartment to interview him. These preludes provide enough bizarre detail to frame their meeting as a kind of descent into a freaky realm. Carl Schoettler of the *Baltimore Evening Sun* starts his profile of Waters by describing the director opening the door to his apartment and warning him that the sofa cushions in his domicile might flip over unannounced like they do in *Pink Flamingos*.¹¹⁰ Dennis Clark and Alan Reese, reporters for the *Towerlight* at Maryland's Towson State College, chart their journey from the foyer of Waters's building to the filmmaker's apartment. This voyage includes an encounter with a dog with a chunk of its nose missing and a "half dozen old ladies, all four feet high and with purple hair," before finally ending in Waters's apartment hallway, "littered with large empty and half film canisters of film."¹¹¹

This reportage is coupled with descriptions of Waters that cast him as a quirky and even strange figure upon first glance. M. Rex Klahr of *Performance* describes him as "a tall, rather emaciated twenty-something year-old with a medium-sized dark ponytail and large, frog-green sunglasses."¹¹² Schoettler compares the filmmaker to "an usher remembered from a 3 A.M. awakening in some all-night movie of the 1950s."¹¹³ Such descriptions of both Waters himself and his living quarters play off of the assumptions that writers have of the director based upon his films—a bizarre man living in bizarre circumstances producing bizarre works. These expectations are not necessarily overturned as the articles progress, but they are at least

complicated by the authors' interactions with Waters himself, who proves to be a lively if eccentric conversationalist. At least one writer expressed an opinion that would eventually become more common as Waters remained in the public eye. "And what's more, the world's biggest fag-smut king is a good guy," Robert Ward of *Gallery* insists in his profile of Waters. "A genuinely good guy."¹¹⁴

To be clear, Waters did not dissuade reporters from writing about him in this fashion, as a key part of his directorial persona lay in his oddities. Still, Waters sought to expand public perceptions of himself through engagement with three particular topics: his idiosyncratic cinematic tastes; his own films' relationship to humor and society; and his connections to his actors, who double as his personal friend group. The consistency with which he discusses these subjects reveals a filmmaker who is consciously attempting to project an image of himself as simultaneously a cultural iconoclast, a cagey provocateur, and an affectionate translator of his own regional subculture.

Waters defines himself partly in relation to his heterodox cinematic tastes. In describing his own cinephilia, he navigates between exploitation, underground, international art house, and the campier or disreputable titles of Hollywood without comment, juxtaposing influences irrespective of their placement on traditional cultural hierarchies. Russ Meyer, Luis Buñuel, and the Andy Warhol-Paul Morrissey collaborations are referenced as his "acknowledged influences" and he names his three favorite films as *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (Russ Meyer, 1965), *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), and *Baby Doll* (Elia Kazan, 1956).¹¹⁵ Nor does he discuss his filmic lodestars exclusively in the language of cinephilic hyperbole, preferring to emphasize their more prosaic and even business-minded acumen alongside their artistic accomplishments. Of Meyer, for instance, Waters says that the director made his "all-time favorite movie," but also

added that Meyer sometimes “makes three movies at the same time, with the same set, only different plots.”¹¹⁶ One can see Waters’s own low-budget ingenuity echoed in this admiring statement.

He makes similar rhetorical moves discussing non-filmic favorites, combining praise for their work with an affectionately cock-eyed attention to their less prestigious yet humanizing aspects. One sees this, for instance, in his positive thoughts on author Joyce Carol Oates: “Her eyes are so big, and she works so hard and her books are sooo horrible! I mean goooood horrible, you know...I mean they really scare you...Didn’t you just love her on the cover of *Newsweek*...she looked so happy.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, he reserves his ire only for targets that can be broadly defined as the contemporary cinematic middlebrow. After noting the low budgets of his own work, he added “they couldn’t even make the credits to a hacko piece of work like *2001* [Stanley Kubrick, 1968] for twenty thousand, baby.”¹¹⁸ Similarly, when asked to name something “too gross even for him,” Waters replied simply, “Ali MacGraw.”¹¹⁹ While flip and humorous in their own right, these comments also establish Waters as not just a filmmaker but an idiosyncratic social commentator, scrambling taste categories and standards of cultural respectability.

When discussing his own work, meanwhile, Waters adopts a series of positions and poses that often prove revealing even when they seem intent on obfuscation. First, he continues to stress the relatively traditional means by which he makes his films, including a full written screenplay and copious rehearsal time with actors. “My picture is totally unconventional in what it says,” Waters notes of *Pink Flamingos*, “but it is totally conventional in the way it’s made.”¹²⁰ This emphasis on professionalism reveals a traditionalist side of Waters, one that he presumably emphasized in part to inspire confidence in potential backers of his work.¹²¹

Second, he maintains a stance on the “meaning” of his films that almost militantly deemphasizes social and political import and accentuates the goal of revivifying the film-going experience. He warns that “people who are looking for a message ought to stay home,” and insists in another profile that “I’m not trying to say anything esthetically” in any of his films.¹²² Certainly, one does not have to take Waters’s word as the final say on the matter. Most recently, for instance, Anna Breckon has read Waters’s insistence on his work having “no socially redeeming value” as less an abnegation of ideology than “a critical attempt by Waters to dissociate his films from the progressive values of the gay liberation movement” and align himself with a more radical, less assimilationist brand of queer politics.¹²³

While this may be true, I find it equally instructive to focus on the value that Waters does see within his work: as a jolting yet humorous experience crafted particularly for an audience of active filmgoers. “These are films for people who go to the movies a lot,” Waters insisted, “a strange audience, a jaded audience. I’m just trying to give them a good time—an outrageous good time.”¹²⁴ This description aligns with midnight-movie audiences generally: young, counterculturally-aligned in some respect, and looking for new aesthetic and social experiences. This simultaneous love of and familiarity with film-going undergirds Waters’s ultimate goals for his own cinema: “It’s either the kind of movie you’re going to like or hate, I don’t think there’s too much in between. As long as people just enjoy. I try to make something that I don’t think people have seen, but to ridiculous lengths.”¹²⁵ This is the fundamental logic analyzed earlier in the press release for *Pink Flamingos* and Waters is remarkably consistent about it in contemporaneous interviews. Far from lacking a purpose, the film ideally serves as a catalyst for rediscovering cinematic shock—a shock that has the power to genuinely offend but that is both

combined with a robust sense of the absurd and experienced communally amongst fellow film lovers.

Finally, Waters defines himself as much by the places and people with whom he makes his films as he does by any overarching artistic philosophy. This is certainly true of his relationship to Baltimore, which he discusses in a manner that combines pragmatism and cock-eyed affection. “Because I’ve done them all there,” he says when asked why he continues to make films in Baltimore, “and I sort of know how I can do it cheaply there. I can get all of the equipment there cheaply, and I like it there, I like to work there. It’s sleazy, it’s the right kind of atmosphere.”¹²⁶ He’s explicit about his desire to celebrate what he sees as the city’s unique combination of regional idiosyncrasy and working-class ethos: “My movies are made in Baltimore alleys, mobile trailers and tents. There are no rich people in my movies. In my latest film, I glorify the ultimate Baltimore accent; the narrator uses it. I’m bringing Baltimore to the world.”¹²⁷

He’s even more protective of his cast members. Admittedly, Waters’s constant discussion of the actors in *Pink Flamingos* comes partly from the interest of interviewers. Take, for instance, the following questions asked by Steven Yeager in *Performance*: “How did Divine become Divine?” “Where did you find Edie?” “What’s Mink doing now?” “How has the movie affected David?”¹²⁸ Waters not only answers these questions, but spends most of the interview detailing his relationship to individual actors, recalling humorous anecdotes about shooting scenes with them, and attesting to his continued involvement in their lives. Such a move speaks to how Waters conceives of his own directorial persona as a translator of his social circles’ singular talents and personalities to the screen.

It's for this reason, perhaps, that Waters immediately dismissed one reporter's comparison between himself and Federico Fellini, another filmmaker known for his "romantic rendering of the city of his heart and because of the continual use of freaks."¹²⁹ Waters recoiled at the suggestion: "Fellini just fills up his films with freaks...In my movies freaks don't just take up space; they are the main actors. I still live with the people who have been in my movies. I don't just gather them up when I'm ready to film."¹³⁰ Waters's continued connection to the city and to his core group of artistic collaborators and long-time friends imbues his directorial brand with an authenticity that seems to anticipate potential accusations of condescension or exploitation.

Waters's relationship to Divine most captivated the press—a fact illustrated by the duo's frequent appearances together at screenings and their occasional joint interviews. Certainly, Divine brought his own singular persona to all of these meetings, which scholars have analyzed for its radical political potential, satiric approach to sexuality and celebrity, and ambivalent relationship to gender norms and stereotypes.¹³¹ In discussing their appearances together, I will primarily emphasize two elements as they relate to Waters.

First, Waters and Divine's physical qualities allowed them to contrast one another in self-consciously humorous ways, highlighting both their differences and their mutual deviance and charm. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes how this manifested itself in the director and actor's many appearances together:

Waters's and Divine's respective body types play themselves out in the representational world of their films, writings, performances, and interviews. Like his mock-sleazy moustache, Waters's body is pencil-thin, what some would call 'hipless.' Divine's by contrast, was that of a three-hundred-pound man not trapped in but scandalously and luxuriously corporeally cohabiting with the voluptuous body of a fantasy Mae West or Jayne Mansfield.¹³²

Adding to this dynamic, both actor and director had long toyed with the blurring of Divine as diegetic character and “real-life” figure, as seen in the hazy boundary between Divine’s on-screen and onstage personas at the Palace Theater shows. *Pink Flamingos* further amplifies this ambiguity, such as Divine’s adopting of the “alias” of Babs Johnson and the emphatically non-simulated final scene of feces consumption. In interviews, this lent Divine an impishly ambiguous quality that playfully contrasted with Waters.

Second, their joint interviews embody the notion of Waters and his performers as deeply embedded in one another’s lives, seen in the ribald banter that they would exchange. Waters often augmented and gently poked fun at Divine’s more overtly outrageous statements. A representative sample of this comes in a joint interview that they gave to gay magazine *Michael’s Thing*.¹³³ Divine occupies much of the piece, telling anecdotes of his brushes with the law and occasionally smudging the boundaries between his real-life and on-screen persona (as when he “recalls” being raped by the giant lobster in *Multiple Maniacs*, noting that the oversize crustacean “was pretty hot, he cooled down after awhile, the bastard cut me up a little, too”). When Waters does interject, it’s to complement a story told by Divine that underscores their history together. Divine notes, for instance, that teachers didn’t care for him much in school. “That’s because you use to steal out of lockers,” Waters quips. At other moments, Waters will riff on Divine’s stories, as when Divine recalls getting out of gym class “with a headache” and Waters interjects, “or your period!” He’ll also match Divine’s stories with his own tales of adolescent criminality and debauchery.

Certainly, their patter contained tales and one-liners that would be repeated across interviews, signaling a rehearsed quality to some of their back-and-forth exchanges. In general, though, this and other joint appearances underscored Waters’s larger construction of himself as

an artist devoted to those he worked with and invested in the overlap between personal friendships and professional collaborations. Such moves did not “soften” his image so much as help him to embody the balance he sought in *Pink Flamingos* itself—a combination of jolting shock and mischievous humor, distressing and charming in equal measure.

Hang-Ups and Politics in Pink Flamingos’s Critical Reception

As much as Waters shaped his persona through press appearances, reactions to *Pink Flamingos* itself spawned discussions that allowed it to linger within public conversation and consciousness. As usual, reactions to the film split somewhat along mainstream and countercultural lines, with Waters recalling that “the underground papers praised the film” in Baltimore while “the big critics had to wait in line to put it down” once it got a national release.¹³⁴ This is true to a point, but it’s worth noting how the film’s reception also scrambled this dichotomy between underground enthusiasm and mainstream revulsion in ways seen in relation to previous Waters’s works. And unlike earlier films, *Pink Flamingos*’s combination of taboo-pushing moxie and irredeemable grotesquerie inspired larger questioning of taste categories and personal standards of evaluation amongst several critics who reviewed it.

Unambiguous condemnation of the film largely came from fairly mainstream sources that justified their pans through either moral disgust or criticism of the underground film milieu more generally. Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* deemed *Pink Flamingos* “the last word in repellent cinema” and hoped that it represented “the end of [the] tunnel” of evermore-extreme filmic shock and gore.¹³⁵ *Variety* also dismissed the film as “vile, stupid, and repulsive,” couching their criticism partly in a larger rejection of the cinematic lineage undergirding *Pink Flamingos*: “The Dada ‘experimental’ film, vide Warhol’s filmic inanities, have closed the circle.”¹³⁶ Conversely, critics writing in countercultural publications tended to praise the film’s

anarchic debauchery, or at least celebrate Waters's impulse to shake up his audience. Wayne Robins of *Creem* found it "one of the few bits of life or art that can truly be considered sick. It's great."¹³⁷ "It is revolting, yet is a hilarious celluloid event," praised Dimples McFunn in *The Berkeley Barb*.¹³⁸

Yet these reactions by no means broke down cleanly along lines of mainstream dismissal and underground praise. Kevin Thomas's review in the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, conceded that the film was "strictly for the very open-minded" but found something redeemable in *Pink Flamingos*'s avalanche of sleaze: "And as we're being liberated by our laughter we're made aware how much more easily we can be offended by actually quite harmless scatological excesses than by the realistic depictions of bloodshed and brutality which are routine—and which are markedly absent from this movie."¹³⁹ In this way, Thomas reverses Siskel's critique, framing *Pink Flamingos* as an unorthodox antidote to the violence in contemporary cinema rather than its logical endpoint.

Similarly, an alignment with a countercultural publication did not always guarantee admiration for Waters's work. Jeff Thomas of the *Los Angeles Free Press* adopted a tone of ironic bemusement that barely masks a contempt for the film's project and performers: "You mean I stayed up until three in the morning to see some bloated, cock-sucking, fat-assed, harlequin-faced, high-drag queen eat dog shit, among other goodies??!!"¹⁴⁰ On the level of reception, then, *Pink Flamingos* received what John Ives deemed reviews that "were respectfully ravaging, expressing admiration and disgust in equal doses."¹⁴¹

Beyond reviewers' reactions to the film itself, however, *Pink Flamingos* led some critics to question the hierarchies of taste and morality underlying their own work, the work of other critics, and even American society more generally. Particularly for critics writing in non-

mainstream venues, *Pink Flamingos* prompted moments of highly self-conscious soul searching, as they tried to balance visceral distaste for the film's explicit imagery with a desire to remain open to its boundary-busting humor and therefore not be seen as prudish or old-fashioned.

Writing for the Baltimore-based *The Paper*, Michal Makarovitch's roller-coaster reaction sums up this dynamic well:

After it was over, my first reaction was that I disapproved of people appealing to our cheap tastes for sex and violence. But then I thought, "cheap" is a value judgment. Because of my puritanical, Catholic upbringing, I have hangups. I should appreciate the opportunity to be exposed to filth without being tightass. I still thought, though, that the movie was poorly filmed and had little or nothing to say.¹⁴²

So common had this anxiety become amongst certain subcultural film critics and, presumably, audiences that a cartoon was published (originally in *Georgia Straight* and reprinted in *The Rag*) that featured three figures commenting on a fourth as he walks by. "Poor fellow...admitted he didn't like 'Pinkest Flamingos,'" says the first. The second responds in horror, "My god...he must be a closet-straight!" The third concludes, "For that breach of decadence, he should turn in his feather earring."¹⁴³ Though humorously exaggerated, this comic speaks to the underlying insecurity that the film engendered within certain reviewers about how to respond to a film that seemed to so thoroughly bring into conflict their higher countercultural aspirations and gut reactions.

In an intriguing parallel to Waters's own scrambling of aesthetic hierarchies, *Pink Flamingos* similarly allowed a destabilization of certain critical standards amongst reviewers. They used the film as a kind of cudgel against works and individuals normally held up for their perceived quality. Never one to miss an opportunity for contrarianism, Jonas Mekas mentioned the film in his "Movie Journal" column in the *Village Voice*, deeming *Pink Flamingos* "10 times

more interesting” than such lauded international art-house releases as *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1973) and *Andrei Rublev* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1966).¹⁴⁴ In the pages of the same newspaper, underground legend Jack Smith took *Pink Flamingos*’s release as occasion to excoriate the critical faculties of *Village Voice* critics Andrew Sarris and Mekas. Smith notes how Waters smartly built in a “nausea factor” to his own work that prevented Sarris and especially Mekas from writing about the film in a way that would defang its queer humor and turn it into “a sex issue of the Cocktail World”—a fate that Smith felt befell his own subversive *Flaming Creatures* (1963) due to how Mekas discussed it.¹⁴⁵

This impulse to use *Pink Flamingos*’s extremity as a means of throwing standard cultural values into question even extended to the political and social realms. Often, this took the form of a somewhat-flippant but pointed juxtaposition between the presumed disgust that viewers would feel at witnessing the film’s grotesque set-pieces and the indifference they had developed toward real-world atrocities. P.J. O’Rourke summed up this line of critique most vividly: “There’s something in John that delights in try[ing], in a spirit of fun, to nauseate a society willing to napalm Asians overseas and ignore the welfare of another whole race at home just by playing around with some raw meat, the odd transvestite with a little mammalian waste product—there’s no accounting for taste.”¹⁴⁶

These varying responses collectively point to *Pink Flamingos* as not simply a gross-out curiosity rejected by stuffy mainstream critics and embraced by underground scribes, but rather a film that invoked a range of complicated and often-conflicted responses across the cultural spectrum. While Waters himself would likely question and even reject the arguments made for and against his films, *Pink Flamingos*’s ability to inspire such conversation itself served to keep the film within newspapers and magazines, further helping to bolster its success and notoriety.

This quality in turn became linked to Waters's overall directorial brand, framing him as a creator of bewildering yet undeniably conversation-provoking work.

A Strange Audience, A Jaded Audience – Midnight Movie Viewership and Waters's Directorial Brand

Coverage of the people who saw *Pink Flamingos* would also prove crucial to the shaping of Waters's directorial brand during this time. These were the midnight movie audiences, the "crowds of perverse thrill-seekers who in another day and age would have been piling into the circus freakshow tent," to quote Jack Stevenson.¹⁴⁷ Without a doubt, those attending the film sought out and received "perverse thrills," heightened by the hedonistic air of the late-night screenings and the increasingly ritualistic quality of watching and re-watching the film as it unspooled over weeks or months in major urban theaters.

Still, the contemporaneous coverage of these screenings highlighted two other aspects of *Pink Flamingos*'s audiences that would prove crucial to shaping Waters's public reputation. First, it revealed that there was no monolithic "crowd of perverse thrill-seekers." While gays and hippies initially constituted the film's audience, *Pink Flamingos* ultimately attracted a shifting and occasionally fractious coalition of viewers—drag queens and college kids, art-scene sophisticates and rubbernecking suburbanites. This helped to explain *Pink Flamingos*'s popularity, as well as cast Waters as a filmmaker whose bizarre visions had both hyper-niche loyalty and crossover appeal.

Second, it often framed the enjoyment that these audiences got from the film in ambivalent and at-times downright hostile terms. While no means uniform in their reception, the viewers seen at these screenings took clear delight in the "exercise in poor taste" unspooling across the screen. For some writers, such pleasure spoke to larger cultural defects—

desensitization, groupthink, desire to be “hip” above all else—and cast Waters as a kind of lewd piper fostering the worst instincts of his youthful viewership.

The people written about at screenings of *Pink Flamingos* can be broken down into two categories: the underground true believers and the curious masses. The former category constituted those who saw showings of the film as an opportunity to luxuriate in the loosening of gender presentation and social propriety. They donned extravagant costumes, engaged in street-level performance, and made themselves as much a part of the spectacle as the screening itself. “They came to outrage—or at least to be seen,” concluded a *Baltimore Sun* reporter.¹⁴⁸ As described in the press via various types of coded language, it’s also clear that many of these viewers read (and likely identified) as gay, lesbian, trans, gender nonconforming, or what would later be broadly labeled queer. The Los Angeles opening in December 1974, for instance, had in attendance “various personages from the gay and leather crowd” such as a “slave, a gentle blonde, [who] was joined to his master by a long whip knotted at the neck.”¹⁴⁹

From the beginning of its run, however, the film also attracted those whose dress and demeanor read as far more conventional but whose curiosity brought them to the late-night showings. These individuals dressed “in conservative suits, dresses, and pantsuits” at the Baltimore premiere and they “came to enjoy the show-before-the-show of Baltimore’s underground hipdom.”¹⁵⁰ Even those whose clothes did not label them as “straight-edged,” however, still often had the aura of young thrill-chasers who were not devoted members of the era’s gay and hippie subcultures but were intrigued by their output. Kenneth Turan reports that the vast majority of those attending the screenings at the Biograph in Washington, D.C. “seems to be a collegian of the hip type who would probably consider straight sexual pornography hopelessly déclassé.”¹⁵¹ Such coverage underscored the extent to which *Pink Flamingos* tapped

into a specifically countercultural ethos that simultaneously attracted youthful, culturally adjacent filmgoers eager to see if the movie lived up to its vomit-in-the-aisles reputation.

This anecdotal evidence was accompanied by reports from theater owners, who repeatedly stressed the film's appeal across a range of demographics. A representative quote comes from Donald Wright, manager of the Janus theater in Washington, D.C.: "It's a cross-section, predominantly younger but with many middle-aged couples and a lot of blacks, gays, freaks. The movie has been around so long most people have heard of it and go to see if it's as bad, as gross, as they say it is. It's a cult kind of thing."¹⁵² While others note a progression of different audiences, this description points to the possibility that these varying viewer groups overlapped throughout the film's run. This could lead to some self-conscious exchanges, as when more outré members of the Baltimore counterculture wanted to take pictures with those dressed in neckties and suit jackets, reversing the quasi-anthropological gawking that many "straight-edged" audience members seemed engaged in. More generally, it reflected the range of individuals that *Pink Flamingos* drew to the theater, casting Waters's vision as singularly cracked yet alluring to more than the typical cadre of underground cinemagoers.

How all of these various people reacted to the film in theaters became a much commented upon topic. Some reported on muted or mixed responses to the film, as when James Seymore of the *Washingtonian* observed "one-third of the audience gave up after the first half hour [and] those who remained didn't seem to be having the time of their lives."¹⁵³ Most, though, noted the positive responses of viewers and attempted to decode the larger significance of audiences enjoying so seemingly assaultive a work.

Some thought *Pink Flamingos*'s value lay partly in how its sheer extremity broke through the normal reserve of jaded urban viewers. Describing the film as a "charmingly naïve exercise

in self-conscious naughtiness,” Howard Smith and Tracy Young of the *Village Voice* noted that “this odd combination manages to provoke a weird response from a motley and sophisticated audience—when a woman says ‘shit!’ they guffaw like they’ve never heard the word before.”¹⁵⁴ This would seem to align with Waters’s own goals for *Pink Flamingos* in that it illustrates how the film’s playfully obscene content disarms a normally weary viewership.

These same audience responses exposed for others not a revivification of viewer experience but a hollow desire to seem “in” on the latest cultural joke. Kenneth Turan noted the former dynamic at the Biograph screening, observing a group of people whom he felt were attempting to prove their mettle as seen-it-all hipsters. “As scenes of bestiality, masturbation, rape, cannibalism and other horrors came on the screen,” Turan reported, “the audience whooped it up, clapping its hands, bent over double with ‘please, I can take it’ grins plastered on their faces, delighted at its own revulsion.”¹⁵⁵

The figure of the young cynic, looking for the latest cinematic thrills and determined to remain knowingly unshaken, even received a quasi-profile in the *New York Times*. Film critic Vincent Canby wrote a column in which he recounts a conversation with Stanley, Jr., a “son of my film industry friend,” who recently became disillusioned with the ideals of countercultural revolution and believed the only way to effect meaningful social change was to join the Republican Party.¹⁵⁶ It’s unclear whether “Stanley Jr.” is an actual person or a winking amalgam of youthful self-seriousness constructed by Canby himself. Either way, Stanley expresses the sorts of reservations about *Pink Flamingos* that seem to reveal something fraudulent at the heart of the audience’s relationship to the film: “Sitting in a theater that was far from full, with an audience that was attending to the action with a certain crazy gravity, I suddenly realized that pop art, with which I’ve always identified and which I’ve always thought to be a style of dissent,

had finally expired.”¹⁵⁷ Canby adopts a smirking stance towards Stanley’s “revelation,” and by extension paints all those viewers “attending to the action with a certain crazy gravity” as seeking countercultural cache in a fundamentally empty enterprise.

For other critics, though, such viewer delight in *Pink Flamingos* pointed to a deeper cultural malady. No piece reflects this mindset more than Douglas Sarff’s coverage of the film’s Los Angeles premiere for the *Advocate*. While initially mocking in tone, Sarff segues into a seething condemnation of Waters and “the monkey-see, monkey-do generation” of audience members who came to his film. “In *Pink Flamingos*,” he writes, “[Waters] has made a romper-room for grown-up little boys who have just learned nasty words like ‘shit.’ There are millions of them in the suburbs. In elementary school, they learned it was terribly funny if someone missed his chair.”¹⁵⁸ While Smith and Young found audience members guffawing at the word “shit” to be a kind of perverse return to innocence, Sarff sees only an infantilized viewership trapped in an adolescent state of cruelty.¹⁵⁹ He concludes his piece with an unexpected turn to social commentary, noting the impoverished and desperate hustlers who wander the streets of Los Angeles and asking Waters’s audience if such a scene could also be the subject of cinematic shock and shrieking laughter. “No, there shouldn’t be a law,” Sarff concludes, “but wouldn’t it be nice if a generation could be taught that it isn’t very funny when people cheapen and demean themselves?”¹⁶⁰

The sheer range of responses to *Pink Flamingos*’s screenings ensured that Waters became deeply associated with a certain kind of audience. This connected to the persona that he had been building throughout his career—that of the provocateur showman, drawing people with promises of taboo-busting grotesqueries and ribald humor best enjoyed in the raucous confines of the movie theater. That these linkages between his directorial brand and midnight-movie audiences

came with the aforementioned anxieties and accusations attests to how successfully Waters's cinematic project had not just outraged some critics. It struck a collective cultural nerve about what *Pink Flamingos*'s success revealed about the tastes and mindset of its largely youthful viewership.

Conclusion: Exercising Poor Taste at the TLA Cinema

All of the elements analyzed in this chapter—industrial strategy, marketing coordination, adventurous exhibitors, persona cultivation via interviews, and coverage of midnight-movie viewership—can be seen working together in *Pink Flamingos*'s two-year stay at the TLA Cinema in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As a way of illustrating how these varying factors combined to produce lengthy, lucrative, and highly-publicized runs across the country, this chapter will conclude with a brief analysis of the film's run at the TLA.

The Theatre of the Living Arts (TLA) began as a regional theater in Philadelphia, originally started in 1964 by amateur theater producers Jean Goldman and Celia Silverman and officially opened in 1967 under the leadership of director Andre Gregory.¹⁶¹ In-fighting and declining popularity forced the theater to cease operations in the late 1960s, and film entrepreneur Al Malmfelt took over the venue in 1970. The TLA Cinema (as it was rechristened) was known as what former TLA projectionist Raymond Murray called “a hippie movie theater.”¹⁶² By the mid-1970s, the theater screened a mixture of classic Hollywood films, works by European art-house directors, and contemporary cult titles.¹⁶³ TLA also partnered with local institutions tied to the city's youthful subculture. This included an agreement with *The Drummer*, “a weekly with a large following among the college students” of Philadelphia, to include two free film passes with the purchase of a 30-week newspaper subscription.¹⁶⁴ In short, the theater's identity as a haven for adventurous filmgoing and attempted links to the city's college-age

viewership marked it as the kind of theater that would be interested in screening and nurturing a midnight movie.

TLA booked *Pink Flamingos* in mid-1973 and had its first sneak preview screening on September 27, 1973. The Philadelphia premiere proved a textbook-example of both the types of audiences *Pink Flamingos* attracted and the mixture of anthropological curiosity and unease with which they were written about. TLA proactively courted the city's counterculture for the screening, sending out 250 invitations to what were deemed "the finest specimens of Philadelphia freakdom."¹⁶⁵ These invites proved effective, with reportedly more than 250 attending the sneak preview. Some local specificities augmented the screening. Most notably, one of the film's actresses, Elizabeth Coffey, lived in Philadelphia and attended the show. Coffey appeared briefly in the film, initially flashing her breasts at David Lochary's Raymond and then lifting up her skirt to wave her penis at him. (Coffey was in mid-transition when the film was shot.¹⁶⁶) At the premiere, she was greeted with applause and was given a "large bouquet of roses."¹⁶⁷

The reporting on this audience proved typical in three ways: identifying the crowds by sartorial and sexual flair; noting the mixture of people in attendance; and tying the crowd's unruly and unusual nature to Waters himself. Reporters observed a group all wearing false noses, eyeglasses, and top hats, as well as a general array of gender-bending, glitter-and-feather festooned ensembles. Charles H. Brown of *Welcomat* described "the scenes outside TLA before and after the showing [as] almost surrealistic, as members of the audience attempted to outdo one another in decadence."¹⁶⁸ Irywyn Applebaum of *34th Street Magazine* noted similar tableaux, but more explicitly framed them as a symbol of the era's rapidly changing sexual norms. He saw "a mélange of all types, take your pick: trans-uni-bi-homo-hypersexuals, a heady assortment of

gays, dykes, flashers, clowns and, from appearances, some really mixed-up questionables.”¹⁶⁹

For all the implicit anxiety felt in Applebaum’s reportage, it also proved true that the crowds for the sneak preview seemed to reflect a mixture of people, albeit largely from the same countercultural circles. “Everyone, gay and straight and in between, seemed to know one another,” Brown observed.¹⁷⁰

How much these reporters tied the decadence and extravagance of the crowd to Waters varied a bit, though they both eventually made the connection. For Brown, the “footage taken of the crowd by TV cameramen from 40th street’s WPCP, a community group, far surpassed what was shown at TLA Thursday night.”¹⁷¹ Applebaum drew a direct link between the impish deviance of Waters and those who flocked to his work: “Another guy summed it up much better. He opened his coat and exposed himself. Then, obsessed like creator Waters with his own perversity, he did it again.”¹⁷²

The local reviews combined aghast condemnation, shrugging amazement, and attempts at unpacking cultural import. Bill Curry at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* deemed the film as “an underground classic for unknown reasons,” while critic Joe Baltake of the *Philadelphia Daily News* fumed that “what disturbs me are these underground concoctions—like ‘Pink Flamingos’—which gleefully play up the ugly and the grotesque while pandering to the cult tastelessness of potheads, sexual perverts, and other assorted freaks.”¹⁷³ This mainstream dismissal became counteracted by later, friendlier readings in underground venues. A pair of reviews in the *Pennsylvania Voice* alternately praised *Pink Flamingos*’s for its “bizarre but enjoyable world” as compared to the gloom of the recently released *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and saw within the film’s clash-of-families plot an ideological parable about class struggle and social liberation.¹⁷⁴ As in other urban centers, such press attracted both the

type of subcultural viewer featured in coverage of the sneak preview and socially adjacent individuals curious about both the film and the experience of seeing it.

The apex of the film's Philadelphia stay came roughly five months into its run. By then, *Pink Flamingos* had played midnight shows at the TLA on Friday and Saturday nights every weekend since its opening, with some in the press claiming that the film was the longest-running title currently in the city. Al Malmfelt estimated that 6,000 people had paid to see the film and another 6,000 had lingered after regular screenings concluded to watch the film.¹⁷⁵ To celebrate this success, TLA organized an event that built upon the pre-existing press reports and healthy crowds but added in the sort of self-conscious ballyhoo that Waters was known for. The theater collaborated with a nearby bar, the Lickety-Split, to host a Valentine's Day press conference with Divine and Waters, followed by the evening's screening with the director and star in attendance.

The date and location both had significance. Clearly, timing a celebration of *Pink Flamingos* to coincide with the most earnest and saccharine of holidays carries its own pungent irony. "Valentine's Day is traditionally romantic," Joe Di Vincenzo of Rutgers University's *The Gleaner* noted, "but this year on South St. in Philadelphia... TLA Cinema threw a party for the trash set's number one heart, DIVINE."¹⁷⁶ The Lickety-Split, meanwhile, was not only conveniently located near TLA, but was the employer of Elizabeth Coffey, who worked there as a bartender and acted as a go-between for reporters.¹⁷⁷ Coffey's presence also added to the playful blurring of the lines between on and off-screen persona previously seen in some of Divine's public appearances. This was further aided by the presence of a pig's head "covered in red, heart-shaped candies" that evoked the porcine cranium Divine receives as a birthday present in *Pink Flamingos*.¹⁷⁸

Waters and Divine's joint appearance at both the raucous Lickey-Split press conference and the midnight screening further solidified their dynamic as an alarming-yet-endearing oddball couple. Evoking Sedgwick's earlier notes on their incongruous visual pairing, reporters from *Bryn Mawr-Haverford College News* described the filmmaker and star as they entered as "the scrawny, doughy-faced director and his modestly attired transvestite star who outweighed him by a good 150 pounds."¹⁷⁹ Waters and Divine recounted the by-now standard anecdotes about preparing for the feces-eating sequence and discussed working with other cast members. (They also answered some lesser-asked questions about gay liberation, with Waters noting that "I'm all for gay lib, but I make films not only to appeal to gay people, and not only for gay lib."¹⁸⁰) They riffed off one another's answers with familiar bits of business, as in the following answers to a question regarding their youth in Baltimore: "Divine: I read 'Little Lulu' comic books. Waters: (puffs on cigarette and smiles sinisterly)."¹⁸¹ Before the screening itself, the duo shot off quips and one-liners that delighted the enthusiastic audience, who was described by local media as "the dates-and-dungarees crowd...joined by the exhibitionists of unknown sex."¹⁸² Dan Sherbo of *The Gay Alternative* summarized the energy of the night, which could seemingly describe many similar *Pink Flamingos* screenings of the era:

Everyone there came out a little more, in one way or another. To see the film. To see Divine. To be a part of the mood that both created, loosening up inhibitions, letting sexual distinctions slide away, locking them outside the theater doors. They followed the film's dialogue word for word. And they applauded wildly when Divine ran out on the stage saying, "I feel right at home. Philadelphia's almost as sleazy as hometown Baltimore."¹⁸³

Such enthusiasm persisted for another 18 months. *Pink Flamingos* played its final midnight show at TLA on September 27, 1975, exactly two years after its sneak preview in 1973.¹⁸⁴ Its success exemplifies both of the major dynamics of brand expansion analyzed

throughout this chapter. Its popularity at the TLA, while certainly buoyed by canny marketing and strategic public appearances by Waters and Divine, was primarily driven by the ability of a range of local filmgoers to foster an atmosphere of subcultural revelry within the theater across its extended run. At the same time, its longevity and local prominence were produced by both the conscious efforts of Waters and New Line to shape public perception and the larger conversations that formed around the film's viewership. Taken together, these factors made TLA's *Pink Flamingos* screenings an indelible part of the Philadelphia cultural scene in the mid-1970s and solidified Waters's directorial brand as a creator of subcultural events on a national scale.

Of course, no sooner had *Pink Flamingos* reached its zenith than the inevitable question arose. "Can you top the ending of *Pink Flamingos*?" Waters and Divine were asked during the Valentine's Day press conference. "I don't know," said Divine. Waters answered: "The only way is to actually kill someone and film it, but they won't let us."¹⁸⁵ Waters's flippancy aligned with his typically cheeky responses, but it underscored a tension that would hang over his work for the rest of the decade. After one has seemingly pushed the boundaries to their limit; after one has found wild financial success through a novel strategy of exhibition and marketing; after one has linked their identity to a viewership that clamors for new variations on the theatrical experience—what next?

¹ J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum write that *Pink Flamingos* (made on a budget between \$10,000–12,000) grossed over one million dollars by the end of 1974, almost exclusively playing midnight showings. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 157. In 2015, Emanuel Levy claimed that the film had grossed over 10 million dollars worldwide since its commercial release in February 1973. Emanuel Levy, *Gay Directors, Gay Films?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 284.

² In more recent writings and interviews, Waters states that the film cost \$10,000 to produce. This number is seen, for instance, in John Waters, *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia and London: Running Press, 2005), 5. At the time of the film's release, however, Waters stated that the film cost \$12,000 to make. Amongst other places, this figure appears in the press release that Waters wrote for the film's world premiere screening. See "Dreamland Pink Flamingos Press Release," Folder 13, Box 5, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, Wesleyan University Cinema Archives (WCU).

³ Erik van Ooijen, "Cinematic Shots and Cuts: On the Ethics and Semiotics of Real Violence in Film Fiction," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 3 (2011): 8.

⁴ Gaylyn Studlar, "Midnight S/Excess: Cult Configurations of 'Femininity' and the Perverse," in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, ed. J.P. Telotte (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991), 143.

⁵ Waters quoted in John G. Ives, *John Waters* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), 42.

⁶ These dates come from the "Dreamland Pink Flamingos Press Release." For more details on the production of the film, see Waters, *Shock Value*, 2–19.

⁷ "University of Baltimore Plans Film Festival," *Baltimore Sun*, March 31, 1972, B4.

⁸ "Walter's [sic] Film to Premiere," *Baltimore Sun*, March 12, 1972, D11.

⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 20.

¹⁰ "University of Baltimore Plans" B4.

¹¹ "Moody Blues to Appear at Civic Center," *Baltimore Sun*, March 27, 1972, B10.

¹² "Center Stage Season to Open October 24," *Baltimore Sun*, September 10, 1972, D10.

¹³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 20.

¹⁴ The promise of "door prizes at midnight" is seen on the Pink Flamingos Premiere Poster, Folder 12, Box 5, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹⁵ All quotes and descriptions are from Pink Flamingos Premiere Poster.

¹⁶ The ellipses are found in the original text.

¹⁷ Waters made another poster for *Pink Flamingos* that is much simpler in design: the film's title, a drawing of a flamingo standing on one leg next to a lawn ornament, and a photograph from the film of Divine's trailer in flames. Within this relatively sparse design, however, one sees "A Dreamland Production" prominently in the lower right-hand corner, while the upper left-hand corner announces: "From the studio that gave you 'Mondo Trasho' and 'Multiple Maniacs,' now comes..." See Pink Flamingos Poster, Folder 13, Box 5, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹⁸ The following quotes come from the "Dreamland Pink Flamingos Press Release."

¹⁹ "Dreamland Pink Flamingos Press Release Draft," Folder 13, Box 5, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

²⁰ Waters, *Shock Value*, 2.

²¹ Anne Childress, "Waters Strikes Again," *The News American*, March 16, 1972, 9C.

²² Carl Schoettler, "Baltimore's Junk Film King," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, March 16, 1972, D1.

²³ Joann Harris, "'You're a Star,' Said the Man in Pigtails to the Girl in Spurs," *Baltimore Sun*, March 26, 1972, C1.

²⁴ Thomas V. D'Antoni, "Pink Flamingos," *Harry*, April 1972, 6, 7. Unlike most other issues of *Harry*, the issue containing coverage of the *Pink Flamingos* premiere has neither a publication date nor a volume or issue number printed within it. I am estimating the month of the issue's publication based upon the dates for forthcoming events in the issue's calendar section, which begins with notices for events on April 21.

²⁵ Ibid. 14.

²⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 20.

²⁷ "Films," *The Daily Review*, January 12, 1973, 49; "Scene Drome," *Berkeley Barb*, January 12–18, 1973, 12.

²⁸ Waters, *Shock Value*, 20.

²⁹ Information on the Film-Makers' Cooperative rentals comes from "Filmmakers Income-Expense Balance Sheet," Filmmakers Archives: S-Z, Film-Makers' Cooperative. Information on the Provincetown screening comes from "To Fellows and Friends Afar & Abroad," *The Provincetown Advocate*, August 24, 1972, NP.

³⁰ Waters quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 32.

³¹ Justin Wyatt, "The Formation of the Major Independent: Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 76; "New Line Cinema Corp.," *Variety*, September 13, 1967, 24.

³² "Rock Groups' Stratospheric Prices Spur College Interest in Film Fare," *Variety*, December 24, 1969, 37.

³³ Marty Bennett, "College Pix's 'Block Booking,'" *Variety*, August 20, 1969, 51, 54.

³⁴ Aubrey Tarbox, "More Art Distribs Entering Campus Market for 'Series'; Sell Theme, Not Each Film," *Variety*, December 25, 1968, 7, 17.

³⁵ Disadvantages to the college market did exist, of course, including the navigation of various campus policies and local censorship laws concerning filmic content, as well as the occasional loss of revenue due to late-60s campus protests and unrest.

³⁶ Unlike many other films they distributed, New Line received only the non-theatrical distribution for *Women in Revolt*. "Warhol 'Women' Self-Deal at 90-10, But Seeks Distrib," *Variety*, March 1, 1972, 5; "Arnold's 'Procureess'"

Prints at \$11,000," *Variety*, March 1, 1972, 18; Phil Gelormine, "Are Movies Better Than Ever? Or Are There Just More of Them? The Answer is Yes to Both Questions," *Billboard*, March 31, 1973, 88; "New Line Will Handle Gaul-Sichel Program of Erotic Fest Items," *Variety*, January 26, 1972, 7.

³⁷ Gelormine, "Are Movies Better Than Ever?," 88. Profits from the distributor's film rentals were further bolstered by money from New Line Presentations, a lecture-circuit booking agency that, by mid-1974, counted among its clients Andrew Sarris, Molly Haskell, Norman Mailer, Lindsay Anderson, and Donald Segritti. Addison Verrill, "Butchery and Lechery Tide Ebbing?" *Variety*, June 26, 1974, 29.

³⁸ Tarbox, "More Art Distribs," 17.

³⁹ For an overview of these industrial dynamics, see Yannis Tzioumakis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 195–200.

⁴⁰ "New Line Shayes" 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.* 28.

⁴³ The film grossed \$7,100 at four showings at the University of Chicago, and \$9,800 when screened at the University of California at Berkeley. *Ibid.* 4.

⁴⁴ "'Brotherly Love' Fair 13G, N.Y.; Slow-Starters in Nice Weather: 'Devil,'" Riverrun, 'Zig,' 'Hi, Mom,'" *Variety*, April 29, 1970, 9, 12; "Chi Spotty; 'Junie Moon' Fair \$14,000, 'Marriage' Dull \$2,500, 'Townners' Neat \$33,000, 'Dolly' Shapely 72G, Both 2d," *Variety*, August 5, 1970, 8, 10; "'Frenzy' Big 175G, Det., 'Devil' \$11,000," *Variety*, June 28, 1972, 12, 16.

⁴⁵ "Film Distrib Urges" 40; "New Line Will Handle" 7.

⁴⁶ Barenholtz quoted in J. Wynn Rousuck, "Midnight Movies," *Baltimore Sun*, January 25, 1981, D3.

⁴⁷ Lawrence Cohn, "10 Years of U.S. Offbeat 'Midnight Movies' Phenom," *Variety*, November 5, 1980, 6, 36.

⁴⁸ Waters quoted in Rousuck, "Midnight Movies," D1.

⁴⁹ For more on the history of *El Topo* as a midnight movie, see Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, 77–109.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 93.

⁵¹ Hoberman in *ibid.* 302.

⁵² Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, 73.

⁵³ J.P. Telotte, "Part III: The Midnight Movie," in *The Cult Film Experience* 103.

⁵⁴ For more on *Reefer Madness*'s status in the midnight-movie canon, see Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, 261–262.

⁵⁵ Nor were the substances partaken in limited to alcohol and marijuana. As Stuart Samuels notes: "Downers were common—Tuinals, Seconals, Quaaludes. The occasional snap in the air signaled the extensive use of poppers. In college audiences, the then-familiar sound of whippets being inhaled through conspicuous balloons could be heard." Stuart Samuels, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Collier Books, 1983), 121.

⁵⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Risher quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 148.

⁵⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 20.

⁶⁰ Mansour quoted in Stephen Brophy, "How Film Exhibition Has Changed in the Past 50 Years: An Interview with George Mansour," *Cineaction* 51 (February 2000): 57.

⁶¹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 21.

⁶² Pearce quoted in "An Interview with Mary Vivian Pearce" in Jack Stevenson, *Desperate Visions: Camp America: John Waters, George & Mike Kuchar* (London and San Francisco: Creation Books, 1996), 135.

⁶³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 21.

⁶⁴ For more on the history of the Elgin, see Ben Davis, "Children of the Sixties: An Interview with the Owners of the Elgin," *Film Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 2–15.

⁶⁵ Waters, *Shock Value*, 21; Risher quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 148.

⁶⁶ Gould quoted in Davis, "Children of the Sixties," 6.

⁶⁷ Zlatkin quoted in Davis, "Children of the Sixties," 6.

⁶⁸ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, 153–154.

⁶⁹ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, February 1, 1973, 78.

⁷⁰ Waters, *Shock Value*, 21.

⁷¹ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, February 15, 1973, 85.

⁷² Zlatkin quoted in Davis, "Children of the Sixties," 6. Both Gould and Zlatkin describe the film's "trial" at the Elgin as occurring on a Tuesday night, though there is no record of such a screening in the theater's advertising at the time.

⁷³ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, January 18, 1973, 70; Advertisement, *Village Voice*, February 8, 1973, 70; Advertisement, *Village Voice*, February 15, 1973, 85.

⁷⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 21.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, March 1, 1973, 62.

⁷⁷ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, March 22, 1973, 81.

⁷⁸ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, April 5, 1973, 70; Advertisement, *Village Voice*, April 26, 1973, 76;

Advertisement, *Village Voice*, June 14, 1973, 81.

⁷⁹ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, March 22, 1973, 82.

⁸⁰ Risher quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 149.

⁸¹ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, May 17, 1973, 91.

⁸² Advertisement, *Village Voice*, June 7, 1973, 83.

⁸³ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, May 10, 1973, 82.

⁸⁴ Gould and Zlatkin quoted in Davis, "Children of the Sixties," 6. This is not to say that these live appearances did not wreck a bit of havoc on the theater itself. As Gould remembers, "And then poppers from [Divine's] brassiere. And that was the worst. Because when the amyl nitrate was caught on the floor, people stepped on it. And the smell was just like old socks. And scrubbing the floor. That was pretty rank." Gould quoted in Davis, "Children of the Sixties," 7.

⁸⁵ Gould quoted in Davis, "Children of the Sixties," 6.

⁸⁶ Advertisement, *Village Voice*, October 4, 1973, 62.

⁸⁷ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, 157.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Kenneth Turan, "Where You Are When the Lights Go Out," *Washington Post/Potomac*, February 24, 1974, 14. The flyer for the six-month celebration can be found in Box 81B, Series VI, Publications and Clippings, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁹⁰ Waters quoted in Ives 34. The date for the film's opening in Los Angeles comes from Kevin Thomas, "'Pink Flamingos' Strictly for the Very Open-Minded," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1974, H21.

⁹¹ Advertisement, *Chicago Tribune*, November 16, 1973, B6; Advertisement, *Chicago Tribune*, November 30, 1973, B5; "'Sleeper' Hot 36G, Balto; '7-Ups' 18G," *Variety*, December 26, 1973, 8; Advertisement, *The Albuquerque Tribune*, August 28, 1974, E-18; Jerry M., "The Movies," *The Rag*, July 15, 1974, 10; "Midnight Rides of 'Pink Flamingos,'" *Variety*, April 3, 1974, 24.

⁹² Advertisement, *Ann Arbor Sun*, January 11–25, 1974, 21; Advertisement, *Ann Arbor Sun*, July 26–August 9, 1974, 27; Advertisement, *Ann Arbor Sun*, November 1–8, 1974, 19; Advertisement, *Ann Arbor Sun*, December 6–13, 1974, 19; Advertisement, *Ann Arbor Sun*, January 31–February 14, 1975, 23; Advertisement, *Ann Arbor Sun*, September 20–27, 1974, 22.

⁹³ "Arty and 'Freak' Films Packaged to Theatre Trade by New Line; Sex, Too," *Variety*, July 4, 1973, 6.

⁹⁴ Ibid.; "New Line Acquisitions," *The Independent Film Journal*, August 20, 1973, 18.

⁹⁵ Addison Verrill, "Dudelson: Cannon To New Line; Plan Calls for Four 'Class' Pix," *Variety*, March 20, 1974, 7.

⁹⁶ "The New Liners: GNP, Saliva Films," *Variety*, May 8, 1974, 222.

⁹⁷ "Theatrical, Non-Theatrical Markets Sold At Same Time by New Line," *Variety*, October 23, 1974, 7.

⁹⁸ "Washington," *Boxoffice*, July 16, 1973, E-8.

⁹⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 142, 145. A reporter also wrote that "the cast arrive[d] in a garbage truck." Douglas Sarff, "Flamingos Not the Only Shame," *The Advocate*, January 15, 1975, 23.

¹⁰⁰ "Broadway," *Boxoffice*, October 21, 1974, E-2.

¹⁰¹ James D. Dilts, "Competing for Title of 'Filthiest People Alive' in Movie," *Baltimore Sun*, December 11, 1973, B1.

¹⁰² It's worth noting that New Line massages this quote a bit. In its original context, writer James Brady is drawing a distinction between how two different types of New York moviegoers are reacting to *Pink Flamingos* and is not espousing the opinion himself: "Cinema freaks are calling *Pink Flamingo* [sic] the nearest American film to Buñuel's *Andalusian Dog*, while just plain moviegoers are calling it nauseating." James Brady, "New York Intelligencer," *New York Magazine*, April 16, 1973, 78.

¹⁰³ Advertisement, *Ann Arbor Sun*, January 11–25, 1974, 21.

¹⁰⁴ A photo of the bag can be found in Ives, *John Waters*, 131. Critic Gene Siskel writes about receiving such a bag upon entrance to a screening of *Pink Flamingos* at the Biograph. Gene Siskel, "Lighting Up a Setting of Darkness," *Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1973, E6.

¹⁰⁵ Waters quoted in Bill George and Martin Flack, "The Late Show Presents the Divine World of John Waters," in *John Waters: Interviews*, ed. James Egan (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 40.

¹⁰⁶ "Theatrical Trailer," Special Features, *Pink Flamingos*, directed by John Waters (1972; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004), DVD.

¹⁰⁷ Anna Breckon, "The Erotic Politics of Disgust: *Pink Flamingos* as Queer Political Cinema," *Screen* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 531.

¹⁰⁸ Waters, *Shock Value*, 22.

¹⁰⁹ It's perhaps not surprising to find Bob Shaye writing a column in *Variety* roughly two years after *Pink Flamingos*'s release that extolls the virtues of film salesmanship in language that strongly echoes that of Waters: "As consumers, what really turns on? A bizarre, unusual title, eye-catching powerful art that makes the product stand-out, appeal (without misrepresenting) to our strongest contemporaneous concerns, e.g., humor, sex, action, special interest. That's what got us to the movies. Heathens that we are." Robert Shaye, "Showmanship A La Mode – 1975," *Variety*, January 15, 1975, 6.

¹¹⁰ Schoettler, "Baltimore's Junk Film King," D1.

¹¹¹ Dennis Clark and Alan Reese, "A Conversation with the 'Pink Flamingos,' King of Sleaze," *Towerlight*, May 3, 1974, 15.

¹¹² M. Rex Klahr, "John Waters: 'I Show Them What They Don't Want to See,'" *Performance*, April 19, 1973, NP.

¹¹³ Schoettler, "Baltimore's Junk Film King," D1.

¹¹⁴ Robert Ward, "Meet John Waters, the Underground Director of the Most Repulsive Movie Ever Made," *Gallery*, June 1974, 127.

¹¹⁵ Dilts, "Competing for Title," B1; Klahr, "John Waters"; Clark and Reese, "A Conversation," 15. His love of *Baby Doll* comes as much from its infamous designation by the Catholic Legion of Decency as a "condemned" work as it does from the film itself. Waters, *Shock Value*, 34.

¹¹⁶ Waters quoted in Danny Fields and Fran Lebowitz, "Pink Flamingos & the Filthiest People Alive?" *Interview*, May 1973, 14.

¹¹⁷ Waters quoted in Ward, "Meet John Waters," 127.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 75, 127.

¹¹⁹ Waters quoted in Tom Shales, "The Good, the Bad, and the Tasteless," *Washington Post*, March 4, 1974, B7.

¹²⁰ Waters quoted in Schoettler, "Baltimore's Junk Film King," D1.

¹²¹ Waters's relationship to professionalism can be linked to larger tensions within Underground and American independent film of the 1960s between those who wanted to professionalize production and those who wanted to intentionally maintain a more artisanal and roughhewn practice. For more, see James Kreul, "New York, New Cinema: The Independent Film Community and the Underground Crossover, 1950–1970," (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004).

¹²² *Ibid.*; Waters quoted in Dilts, "Competing for Title," B1.

¹²³ Breckon, "The Erotic Politics of Disgust," 514.

¹²⁴ Waters quoted in Dilts, "Competing for Title," B1.

¹²⁵ Waters quoted in Fields and Lebowitz, "Pink Flamingos," 15.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 14.

¹²⁷ Waters quoted in Klahr, "John Waters."

¹²⁸ Waters quoted in Steven Yeager, "John Waters: 'I Show Them What They Don't Want to See,'" *Performance*, April 19, 1973, NP.

¹²⁹ Klahr, "John Waters."

¹³⁰ Waters quoted in *ibid.*

¹³¹ For representative (but by no means exhaustive) examples of these three lines of argument, see Karl Schoonover, "Divine: Toward an 'Imperfect' Stardom," in *Hollywood Reborn: Movie Stars of the 1970s*, ed. James Morrison (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 158–181; Dan Harries, "Camping with Lady Divine: Star Persona and Parody," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 12, nos. 1–2 (1990), 13–22; and Studlar, "Midnight S/Excess," 138–155.

¹³² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion (written with Michael Moon)," in Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 218.

¹³³ All quotes come from Lin Kory, "Essence of Divine," *Michael's Thing*, August 27, 1973, 24–28.

-
- ¹³⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 20, 21.
- ¹³⁵ Siskel, "Lighting Up a Setting of Darkness," E6.
- ¹³⁶ Rino, "Pink Flamingos," *Variety*, December 11, 1974, 18.
- ¹³⁷ Wayne Robins, "Pink Flamingos," *Creem*, November 1973, 57.
- ¹³⁸ Dimples McFunn, "Divine Filth on Film," *Berkeley Barb*, August 9–15, 1974, 25.
- ¹³⁹ Thomas, "'Pink Flamingos' Strictly for the Very Open-Minded," H21.
- ¹⁴⁰ Jeff Thomas, "Pink Flamingos Dive," *Los Angeles Free Press*, January 10, 1975, NP (Pull-Out Classified Section).
- ¹⁴¹ Ives, *John Waters*, 16.
- ¹⁴² Michal Makarovich, "Color It Pink: Flamingos and Feces – A Review of John Waters," *The Paper*, April 6–13, 1972, 12.
- ¹⁴³ Craig, Untitled Comic Strip, *The Rag*, June 18, 1975, 13.
- ¹⁴⁴ Jonas Mekas, "Movie Journal," *Village Voice*, September 27, 1973, 61.
- ¹⁴⁵ Jack Smith, "'Pink Flamingo' Formulas in Focus," *Village Voice*, July 19, 1973, 69.
- ¹⁴⁶ P.J. O'Rourke, "Pink Flamingos," *The Herald*, March 31, 1972, NP.
- ¹⁴⁷ Stevenson, *Desperate Visions*, 14.
- ¹⁴⁸ Harris, "You're a Star," C1.
- ¹⁴⁹ Sarff, "Flamingos Not the Only Shame," 24. Of course, such patrons had attended Waters's earlier films as well—a phenomenon that continued as his earlier works screened while *Pink Flamingos* wound its way through theaters. See, for instance, the coverage of a 1973 Baltimore showing of *Multiple Maniacs*: M. Rex Klahr, "A Different Kind of Coming Out Party," *Performance*, May 31, 1973, 6–7.
- ¹⁵⁰ Harris, "You're a Star," C1.
- ¹⁵¹ Turan, "Where You Are," 14.
- ¹⁵² Wright quoted in James W. Seymore, "Pink Midnight: A Divine Time at the Late Show," *The Washingtonian*, September 1974, 19.
- ¹⁵³ Seymore, "Pink Midnight," 19.
- ¹⁵⁴ Howard Smith and Tracy Young, "Scenes," *Village Voice*, March 15, 1973, 26.
- ¹⁵⁵ Turan, "Where You Are," 14.
- ¹⁵⁶ Vincent Canby, "Where Does 'Flamingo' Road Lead?" *New York Times*, May 6, 1973, sec. 2, 1.
- ¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 10.
- ¹⁵⁸ Sarff, "Flamingos Not the Only Shame," 23.
- ¹⁵⁹ Sarff's charges of infantilism echo similar critiques leveled against Underground cinema by critic Parker Tyler. Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History* (New York: Grove Press, 1969).
- ¹⁶⁰ Sarff, "Flamingos Not the Only Shame," 24.
- ¹⁶¹ For more on the history of TLA as a regional theater, see *An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions for a New American Art*, ed. Todd London (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 355–360.
- ¹⁶² Murray quoted in Mattias Frey, *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 75.
- ¹⁶³ An announcement in July 1974, for instance, noted that the theater had just completed a thirty-week run of Philippe de Broca's much-beloved cult film *King of Hearts* (1966), and would soon begin a 14-week, 96 film program "that will emphasize Woody Allen, Marlon Brando, François Truffaut, and Shakespeare." See "Philadelphia," *Boxoffice*, July 29, 1974, E4.
- ¹⁶⁴ "Philadelphia," *Boxoffice*, March 3, 1975, E6.
- ¹⁶⁵ Bill Curry, "The 'Pink Flamingos' Preview: If You're Lucky You Won't Be Invited," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 21, 1973, 1C.
- ¹⁶⁶ For more information on Coffey, see Waters, *Shock Value*, 129.
- ¹⁶⁷ Charles H. Brown, "Freaks at a Far-Out Flick," *Welcomat*, October 3, 1973, NP.
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁹ Irwyn Applebaum, "Freakin' at the Freakers' Ball," 34th *Street Magazine*, October 4, 1973, 4.
- ¹⁷⁰ Brown, "Freaks at a Far-Out Flick."
- ¹⁷¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁷² Applebaum, "Freakin' at the Freakers' Ball," 4.
- ¹⁷³ Curry, "The 'Pink Flamingos' Preview," 1C; Joe Baltake, "Is This Grotesque Enough for You?" *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 1973, NP, Box 81A, Series VI, Publications and Clippings, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹⁷⁴ Dan Sipe, "The Known Unknown vs. Ecstatic Exploration," *Pennsylvania Voice*, February 13, 1974, 6; Bob Sloan, "The Politics of 'Pink Flamingos,'" *Pennsylvania Voice*, February 13, 1974, 6–7. A year later, Waters was seemingly referencing Sloan's piece as he amusedly commented on how critics interpreted *Pink Flamingos*: "There was this reviewer's piece that was really incredible. I mean, it went for about six pages of analyzing *Pink Flamingos* in a political vein. These were the Marxists and these were that. I don't sit down and think about that when I was writing it. It was a funny review, I liked it." Waters quoted in Michael L. Bever, "Waters Gravely Discussed Disgust - The Other X," *Oshkosh Advance-Titan*, October 16, 1975, 20.

¹⁷⁵ Ronald Goldwyn, "'Pink Flamingos' Jams TLA Every Weekend," *The Sunday Bulletin*, February 24, 1974, sec. 5, 7.

¹⁷⁶ Joe Di Vincenzo, "Valentine's Day is Setting for Divine Conversation," *The Gleaner*, February 20, 1974, 9.

¹⁷⁷ One local reporter noted in his coverage that "I owe my entire interview with Divine to Elizabeth Coffey, who, with her nails anchored in the arm of my Saks Fifth Avenue sweater, led me to the star herself." Chuc Gaver, "Ooh-La-La-Divine!" *The Drummer*, February 19, 1974, 3.

¹⁷⁸ Goldwyn, "'Pink Flamingos' Jams TLA," 7.

¹⁷⁹ Greg Foote, Michelle McGlade, and Suzanne Walsh, "A Tribute to Trashiness," *Bryn Mawr-Haverford College News*, March 1, 1974, 13.

¹⁸⁰ Waters quoted in Dan Sherbo, "Flamingo for a Day," *The Gay Alternative*, Summer 1974, 23.

¹⁸¹ Divine and Waters quoted in Foote, McGlade, and Walsh, "A Tribute to Trashiness," 13.

¹⁸² Goldwyn, "'Pink Flamingos' Jams TLA," 7.

¹⁸³ Sherbo, "Flamingo for a Day," 23.

¹⁸⁴ "Philadelphia," *Boxoffice*, September 15, 1975, E5.

¹⁸⁵ Divine and Waters quoted in Di Vincenzo, "Valentine's Day is Setting," 9.

Chapter Four

Midnight Movies in the Daytime: Waters and Ambivalent Brand Reconfiguration

*“I don't want to be eighty years old making films about people falling in love with enema bags...I wanted to make this one just a little different.” – John Waters, discussing *Female Trouble**¹

When fans and scholars of John Waters discuss the two features made by the filmmaker after *Pink Flamingos* (1972), they tend to group all three works together as a “trash trilogy.”² The aesthetic, tonal, and thematic similarities between *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Desperate Living* (1977) certainly justify linking them within the broader arc of Waters’s career, given how markedly his filmmaking would shift beginning with his next feature, *Polyester* (1981). As the above quote implies, however, Waters did not necessarily view these later two works as a seamless extension of his midnight-movie hit. Cognizant of being industrially pigeon-holed and invested in further developing his comedic vision beyond extreme gross-out set pieces, the filmmaker described his post-*Pink Flamingos* films as attempts to reframe the public’s understanding of his cinematic shock and humor. In short, he was attempting a subtle but intentional act of directorial brand reconfiguration.

This effort led to two career developments in the mid-to-late 1970s. First, this chapter analyzes the distribution, marketing, and exhibition of *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* through the overlapping-yet-distinct goals of Waters and New Line. The company hoped to repeat the success of *Pink Flamingos* but also build upon it by taking both films out of the midnight-movie market and placing them within conventional exhibition scenarios—a move that also aligned with New Line’s continuing ambitions to expand into theatrical distribution more broadly. Placing these works within more orthodox screening spaces did not lead either to the same financial success as *Pink Flamingos*, a title that New Line and various exhibitors would eventually pair with both *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* in an effort to boost audience

interest. The general public had seemingly grown to expect specific things from a John Waters film experience and were less interested in the variations he sought to inject into his more recent work.

More specific cultural constituencies, however, noted shifts in Waters's filmmaking and viewed his overall public persona in a different light as the decade progressed. While by no means a critical darling, Waters saw his reputation amongst reviewers change—one that celebrated or at least recognized the robust satiric impulses roiling within his extreme imagery and camp grotesquerie. Reporters and interviewers similarly began highlighting personal elements that Waters himself had foregrounded previously, including his intelligence, charm, and eccentric-yet-astute commentary on contemporary cinema. And while *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*'s overall box-office prospects proved mixed, their commercial afterlife as part of a growing number of Waters-centric repertory screenings implied that the director had developed a cadre of fans interested specifically in his public persona and filmic stamp. Smaller in scale, these developments constituted a more targeted brand reconfiguration.

This, in turn, positioned the filmmaker to embark on his first sustained attempts at brand extension, or transferring the essential elements and connotations of his directorial persona into a new medium or professional realm. Waters experimented in regional film programming, lecturing, and essayistic writing during this period. He also saw two of his major stars embark on journeys into adjacent media that, by extension, circulated components of his own brand into the worlds of experimental theater and the burgeoning punk scene. Many of these activities would be further developed as Waters's career progressed, but their beginnings here attest to how certain reconfigurations of Waters's reputation allowed him to extend his reach beyond cinema—moves

that raise further questions about whether the act of brand extension itself necessarily constitutes an act of reconfiguration.

Indeed, this chapter not only argues that a period marked by many as one of aesthetic and thematic coherence for Waters also proved a time of career recalibration and internal churn. In analyzing this stage of Waters's professional life through the lens of brand development, it highlights how shifts within directorial identity often occur unevenly and haltingly across multiple industrial and cultural realms. This process illustrates the ambiguities and overlaps within the very terms of brand development itself, revealing how a filmmaker's control over public perception requires acts of creative agency as well as negotiations with figures and institutions who may have quite different opinions about the arc of a director's career.

“How do you top it? You don’t”: *Female Trouble*, *Desperate Living*, and the Ambiguities of Brand Reconfiguration³

While the focus throughout this chapter will be on how Waters sought to distinguish his films and larger directorial brand from his earlier works, it's important to note several consistencies within and across the two features Waters made following *Pink Flamingos*. These begin with their similarly outlandish narratives. *Female Trouble* tells the decades-spanning story of Dawn Davenport (Divine). Beginning with her troubled adolescence as a Baltimore high-schooler, the film charts Dawn's cantankerous relationship with daughter Taffy (Mink Stole) and husband Gater (Michael Potter) and her eventual descent into criminal insanity at the hands of sinister beauticians Donald and Donna Dasher (David Lochary and Mary Vivian Pearce).

Familiar themes of scandal, notoriety, beauty, and madness could be seen again three years later when Waters released *Desperate Living*. A “monstrous fairy-tale comedy,” it initially follows deranged middle-class housewife Peggy Gravel (Mink Stole) and her maid Grizelda

(Jean Hill).⁴ After killing Peggy's husband, they flee to Mortville, a town made up entirely of delinquents and lawbreakers. There, they rent a room from lesbian couple Mole McHenry (Susan Lowe) and Muffy St. Jacques (Liz Renay), who eventually lead a revolt against the town's tyrannical leader, Queen Carlotta (Edith Massey).

Both films retain the outrageous content, rough-hewn aesthetic, and subversive shock value seen in *Pink Flamingos*, as well as most of the core cast members.⁵ These formal linkages are matched by similar practices in production and marketing. Waters shot both films in and around Baltimore on growing but still relatively modest budgets.⁶ Waters also contributed many of the same extra-cinematic elements he had for previous works, which are all seen in the films' by-now standard Baltimore premieres.

For instance, he wrote the press releases for both films, which as always combined basic plot and cast information with what Chris Holmlund describes (in the case of *Female Trouble*'s press release) as "catchy, tongue-in-cheek lines."⁷ Divine is described in the *Female Trouble* release as "weighing in at a svelte 325 pounds" and "looks forward to returning to her home in Los Angeles where she spends most of her time swimming and eating." *Desperate Living*'s press packet, meanwhile, gleefully notes that "Miss [Susan] Lowe had to drastically change her physical appearance [for the film], so much so that her own children ran from her in fear when they saw her on the set." These releases continued to delight local Baltimore reporters.⁸

Female Trouble had its debut screenings at the Langsdale Auditorium at the University of Baltimore from October 11–13, 1974, with shows at 8:00 p.m., 10:00 p.m., and midnight; while *Desperate Living* also premiered at Langsdale from May 27–29, 1977, again with shows at 8:00 p.m., 10:00 p.m., and midnight.⁹ Waters and his cast personally publicized these showings, circulating homemade marketing materials around the city. In a telling sign of how Waters's

success both did and did not change his regional practices, a *Baltimore Sun* reporter shadowing the director noted how Waters and his crew continued to post flyers for the *Desperate Living* premiere under cover of nightfall but rode from spot to spot sitting on “the overstuffed cushions of a Cadillac coupe de ville.”¹⁰ Waters and much of the cast attended both premieres, each marked by the usual array of wildly dressed and audibly excited local fans.¹¹ These Baltimore-based and personally authored aspects of *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* underscore the extent to which Waters still saw his extra-cinematic practices as important to his public identity and to successfully launching his post-*Pink Flamingos* work.

For all these continuities, however, Waters conceived of *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* as distinct from *Pink Flamingos* in terms of how he was presenting shocking humor to his viewership. It’s not that he couldn’t think of other scenes that would jolt audiences in the same manner as *Flamingos*’s climactic coprophagia. Rather, he wanted to use his filmmaking to explore less obvious but still incendiary forms of provocation. He described his ambitions as such: “I try and make each film funnier and a little less disgusting, getting the ideas filthier instead of the action.”¹² Waters viewed his trajectory as a filmmaker, then, as one marked by narrative and thematic transgression more than a mere cavalcade of grotesque imagery. This ambition grew out of Waters’s earlier comments about *Pink Flamingos*. That film stressed disgust but ideally prompted a double move on the audiences’ part—a gut-level recoiling from the film’s obscene visuals coupled with a pleasurable appreciation of its self-aware extremity. Waters doubled down on this formulation when discussing his newer films, noting that “it’s simple to make an offensive movie—you can just have an hour and a half of people getting their arms and legs cut off. But I’m trying to make people sort of recoil from and laugh at it at the same time.”¹³

These comments certainly reflect Waters's unease about how *Pink Flamingos* would shape viewer's expectations of him as a filmmaker. The sheer outrageousness of *Flamingos* would inevitably lead viewers to expect that the subsequent films would push the envelope even further. Waters addressed this in interviews publicizing *Female Trouble*. "People who only like *Pink* because it's gross won't like [*Female Trouble*] nearly as much," he told the *Baltimore Sun*, and later noted to the *Village Voice* that *Female Trouble* "doesn't have as much of the 'ha ha' variety of sex as my earlier films but I think it's funnier...I love filth, but this time I wanted to do something different."¹⁴

Ultimately, his desire to find new ways to communicate sleazy ideas without obviously shocking imagery reflected a more-sustained aesthetic aspiration to burrow into the depths of depravity. "I'd like to make an X-rated movie with no sex or violence," Waters told a reporter in 1976. "If I can do that, I'd have a pretty good formula."¹⁵ While containing some of his trademark tongue-in-cheek provocation, this reflected many of Waters's comments throughout the period. Through them, he sought to reframe how people viewed his ambitions more broadly, positioning himself as a filmmaker who actively experimented with the nature and form of cinematic shock and not simply a purveyor of easy onscreen gross-outs.

If Waters expressed the moderate but clear goal of reconfiguring his public reputation, New Line's ambitions for *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* aligned more with a continued expansion of the Waters's brand that came out of *Pink Flamingos*. This did not lead to major conflicts between the two parties, who would continue to work together throughout Waters's career. Examining New Line's industrial position in the mid-1970s, however, clarifies the small, telling ways in which this difference between director and distributor manifested within the films' distribution and marketing.

From its inception, New Line had hoped to move beyond its initial market of college campuses and break into mainstream theatrical distribution. They had begun to do so over the course of the early 1970s, with a midnight movie like *Pink Flamingos* acting as a valuable interstitial product. Its popular midnight screenings maintained the specialized quality that marked many of the company's college-set bookings and moved said screenings beyond the campus and into a wider and more lucrative market. Still, the limits to such a distribution pattern are obvious, with a financial ceiling placed upon even a highly successful midnight feature due to its at best once a day showings.

As the decade progressed, the company pursued strategies that would make New Line a more entrenched player within the theatrical marketplace. Their acquisitions continued to emphasize genre eclecticism and a privileging of either art house or exploitation titles. Within the realm of "artier" fare, New Line continued its relationship with French New Wave icon Claude Chabrol, acquiring both Chabrol's *Nada* a.k.a. *The Nada Gang* (1974) and *La Rupture* (1970).¹⁶ The company found particular success with Lina Wertmüller's *The Seduction of Mimi*, an art-house hit that grossed close to \$1 million by the end of 1974 with a dubbed English language version released in February of 1975.¹⁷ On the exploitation side, New Line also received strong box-office returns from the Sonny Chiba martial-arts vehicle *The Street Fighter* (Shigehiro Ozawa, 1974), which opened in October 1974. Publicized in part due to its graphic violence, the film was successful enough for New Line to distribute two sequels within eighteen months of the original film's release.¹⁸ In 1976, Shaye would note that Wertmüller's films and the *Streetfighter* franchise were the studio's most financially lucrative ventures to date.¹⁹

Internal hires and shifts in corporate strategies further bolstered New Line's ability to distribute and market films within the mainstream theatrical marketplace. In December 1975, an

entirely new company, New Line Distribution Corporation, was created to serve as New Line's designated theatrical distribution arm.²⁰ By the middle of 1976, New Line president Robert Shaye told *Variety* that the addition of financial consultant Mark Fleischman (a hotel and restaurant financier and original stockholder in the company) had brought "significant investment capital" into New Line, which would allow them to bid more competitively for new acquisitions.²¹

This increased financial capacity went hand in hand with New Line's plans to not just acquire completed films, but to begin investing pre-production funds in "broad based exploitation fare."²² The decision to begin producing their own films occurred at around the same time, in what Shaye saw as an attempt to gain further control over what the company distributed theatrically: "We can do the best we can to deliver entertainment value to an audience but until we actually start making pictures ourselves we're always beholden to the producer."²³ These in-house productions would be financed through a combination of external funding and "subdistributor partnership relationships" that Shaye hoped would incentivize local distributors by giving them a "full piece of the pie."²⁴

The first of these was *Stunts*, a low-budget action caper directed by Mark L. Lester and starring Robert Forster and Fiona Lewis that began shooting in January 1977.²⁵ Released in June of 1977, it fit within a New Line summer slate that mixed high and lowbrow titles, from the original cut of Luchino Visconti's *Conversation Piece* (1974) to the latest in the Streetfighter series, *Revenge of the Streetfighter* a.k.a. *The Street Fighter's Last Revenge* (Shigehiro Ozawa, 1974).²⁶ More broadly, this shift to production only solidified the company's focus on theatrical distribution as the primary means of releasing films, with the college and specialty exhibition markets, constituting an increasingly decentralized part of their overall corporate strategy.

How did Waters's work fit into these shifts? The company picked up *Female Trouble* in January 1975, while *Desperate Living* was acquired by New Line in July 1977.²⁷ Broadly speaking, these films both fit into New Line's brand identity and presented somewhat of a challenge to its increasing emphasis on more-traditional modes of theatrical distribution. On the one hand, *Pink Flamingos*'s box-office success alone would justify a continued partnership with Waters. Both of his subsequent films promised the shocking humor, roughhewn visual style, and outrageous cast members that made *Pink Flamingos* such a midnight movie smash. On a broader level, the cultural impact of *Pink Flamingos* helped to establish New Line's reputation as a provocative and edgy independent distributor. Continuing to release Waters's films would only further entrench that corporate brand at a moment when the company was trying to retain exploitation and cult fare as key pillars of their acquisition strategy.

On the other hand, part of what drove *Pink Flamingos*'s success was its unique midnight-movie distribution strategy. As discussed in the previous chapter, these screenings helped to build up *Pink Flamingos* as not just a bizarre filmic attraction, but a cinematic event marked by raucous audience behavior and an atmosphere of carnivalesque revelry. New Line's focus on establishing itself as a significant theatrical distributor, however, meant that both *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* would circulate through a more conventional release pattern, with multiple daily screenings in urban theaters.

Though Waters would maintain a commitment to extra-cinematic practice and exhibition-specific gimmickry beyond *Pink Flamingos*, he never publicly noted any discomfort with this shift. Indeed, playing his films in more mainstream settings might not only increase box-office revenues but provide the type of setting in which audiences might better appreciate the "filthy ideas" that Waters sought to emphasize in his new films. Depriving his work of the consistent

bacchanalian aura that marked *Pink Flamingos*'s midnight showings, however, posed the risk of viewers feeling as if they were lacking the "real" experience of seeing a Waters's film.

As with *Pink Flamingos*, New Line collaborated with Waters on the marketing for *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*, using several elements of Waters's original publicity materials. The aforementioned press releases seemed to go out to critics and film journalists as written, given that several reviews and articles either directly quote from or rely heavily upon Waters's descriptions of his own films. Posters also retained some key aspects of Waters's earlier designs.

In particular, *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*'s original taglines remained on national advertisements for both films. Both taglines describe the provocations and taboo-busting nature of each film by gesturing towards them with studied restraint. A poster designed by Waters for *Female Trouble*, for instance, features a picture of Divine in full glam-monster get up (mohawk, garish eye-makeup) staring out at the viewer with mouth agape. The title itself is in handwritten scrawl, while the tagline sits underneath it in more conventional font. Referencing Divine's visage, it reads simply: "She had a lot of problems."²⁸ Similarly, a poster for *Desperate Living* highlighted the grotesque opening image of the film—a tastefully decorated dining room table with a cooked rat delicately arrayed on a plate. The elaborate cursive font of the title further juxtaposes the ornate and the grotesque, but again the tagline's winking understatement provides the full humor: "It isn't very pretty..."²⁹

Still, there are moments within New Line's marketing that point to a discrepancy between Waters's ideas about *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* reflecting an edgy yet less overtly sensationalistic approach to shock humor and New Line's desire to tap into *Pink Flamingos*'s popularity as directly as possible. Three instances particularly stand out. First, the company hired

John Springer Associates (the press agent at the time for the New York Film Festival and Elizabeth Taylor, amongst others) to handle publicity for *Female Trouble*.³⁰ Their most notable intervention in the film's campaign was planting a rumor in *Variety* that Waters was reportedly offering \$50,000 for someone to commit suicide on camera.³¹ Waters obviously denied this within the press. Like the vomit bags that certain exhibitors began handing out during *Pink Flamingos*'s screenings, it marked a moment in which an external agent created an idea that seemed like it would spring from Waters, but that actually came from someone's interpretation of his brand. Waters seemed mostly amused by the gimmick, however, and later praised the Springer press agent behind the scheme as "my favorite movie publicist in New York."³²

Second, New Line did not always pair advertising elements together in the way that Waters displayed them. What they would add frequently juxtaposed the specific appeals of the director's original design with text that explicitly tied the film to the popularity of *Pink Flamingos*. A February 28, 1975 advertisement in the *New York Times*, for instance, retains the tagline of "She had a lot of problems." More prominently displayed text, however, promises "Divine and the whole 'Pink Flamingos' gang" for those who bought a ticket, primarily emphasizing the film's connection to Waters's previous hit.³³ Ever conscious of film-marketing appeals, Waters likely did not object to this, but it underscores the extent to which New Line saw the film as an expansion of a pre-established directorial brand and not anything distinctly different.

The final instance, however, speaks more directly to a disconnect between Waters and New Line regarding his films' basic appeals and how to package them. Several of the newspaper ads for *Female Trouble* had the following disclaimer affixed to them: "While designated X, preview audiences have also indicated that 'Female Trouble' includes scenes of extraordinary

perversity and may be seen as morally and sexually offensive.”³⁴ The X-rating and especially the lurid description implied a link between the film and some outré genre of pornography that recalled the mismatch between *Pink Flamingos* and the Boston gay porn theater it screened in early in its run. Waters expressed ambivalence about this advertising choice: “They probably just wanted to lure in the raincoat brigade.”³⁵ The “they” in that comment notes that the disclaimer was New Line’s decision, while the “raincoat brigade” implies that the advertising gambit tonally misrepresented the film. (In contrast, Waters wrote in the *Female Trouble* press notes that “if the film were to be rated, it would possibly receive an R minus”—a more playful reference to how the film’s singularly warped mentality would result in an entirely new designation.³⁶) Such a discrepancy had the potential to create disgruntled customers. One reporter noted that “theater cashiers report that about 20 minutes into the picture, there is always an exodus of disgruntled men carrying raincoats,” implying the expectation of a more conventionally salacious film than what was delivered.³⁷ The disclaimer was eventually removed from the film’s advertisements.

To be clear, Waters never expressed disapproval with any of the company’s marketing tactics during this time. “New Line did an incredible job,” Waters remarked when asked about his distributor in 1976.³⁸ In subsequent writings, he praised New Line’s Sara Risher for her handling of both *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*’s publicity.³⁹ Furthermore, access to the increasing funds offered by New Line for advertising and publicity allowed Waters to interact with more journalists and critics than ever before.⁴⁰ Rather, these subtle disconnects between Waters and New Line reflect the dynamics of a filmmaker beginning to think of their persona in new ways and a distributor who understandably wants to accentuate those qualities that made the director’s previous work financially successful. Such shifts of expectation speak to the ever-

churning nature of directorial brand development and the negotiations that occur amongst the multiple parties constructing, maintaining, and altering it.

If New Line's ultimate goal with *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* was to transcend the logistical limitations of the midnight-movie circuit and bring Waters's brand of sleaze to regular movie going hours, the results implied that such a transition ran afoul of why his films proved popular to begin with. *Female Trouble* opened on February 12, 1975 at the East 59th Street Twin 1 in New York City. In a continued effort to tap into the popularity of the *Pink Flamingos*'s phenomenon, the opening day advertisement promoted the presence of Divine, Waters, and "the entire cast" at the film's scheduled midnight screening.⁴¹ The first fifty patrons at each of the film's eight opening-day showings would also be given a "free autographed photo of Divine."

The film grossed roughly \$14,000 in its first week.⁴² This was followed by a second week drop to \$9,000, a decrease *Variety* summarized (with tongue in cheek) as *Female Trouble* "showing pains."⁴³ These weekly decreases continued for another four weeks, until the film left the theater after a month and a half, having made roughly \$2,500 in its final week and a bit under \$41,000 in its overall run.⁴⁴ Given *Pink Flamingos*'s legendary staying power in Manhattan, the relative speed with which *Female Trouble* left the East 59th Street Twin I underscored all the more the difference in reaction to Waters's follow-up film.

A similar dynamic occurred in Los Angeles, a large city where *Pink Flamingos* had begun what would be a lengthy run the previous year. Box-office numbers are not available for the film's Los Angeles run, and the length of its stay proves somewhat difficult to confirm. The film opened at the Las Palmas on July 30, 1975 as the theater's sole attraction.⁴⁵ Two weeks later, it remained in the Las Palmas but alternated with *A Very Natural Thing* (Christopher

Larkin, 1974), another New Line release about a gay couple in New York City.⁴⁶ According to the *Los Angeles Times*, both films were replaced the following week by *The Four Musketeers* (Richard Lester, 1974) and *The Outer Space Connection* (Fred Warshofsky, 1975).⁴⁷ According to listings in the *L.A. Free Press*, however, *Female Trouble* remained the sole attraction in the theater at least through mid-September.⁴⁸ So, the film either played for roughly the same length of time as its New York run or left after three weeks, sharing one of those weeks with another New Line release.

Other commercial runs lasted similarly short amounts of time: roughly two weeks at the Rialto 4 in Rialto, California in September 1975; a week-long engagement at the Pyramid Exotic Theatre in Albuquerque, New Mexico in October 1975; and at least two weeks at the TLA Cinema (home of a lengthy *Pink Flamingos*'s engagement) in Philadelphia in November 1975.⁴⁹ While hardly systematic, these runs reflected the film's seeming difficulty in sustaining audience interest within a traditional distribution situation for more than a couple of weeks.

Indeed, it becomes increasingly difficult to find listings for the film as 1975 progresses unless one begins to take into account either midnight showings of *Female Trouble* or its pairing with *Pink Flamingos* as a double feature. By October 1975, the film begins appearing in ads for the New Yorker Theatre as a midnight screening—the same theater and time slot occupied by *Pink Flamingos* for months in 1974.⁵⁰ The film was also screened at midnight at the Charles West in Boston; the Matrix Theater in Ann Arbor, Michigan; and the Circle Drive-in in Lubbock, Texas.⁵¹

The other major shift was the increasingly common pairing of *Female Trouble* with *Pink Flamingos* beginning in 1976. As the film continued to appear sporadically throughout 1976 and 1977, it played in double bills with Waters's earlier film at the Presidio Theatre in San Francisco

(at midnight); the Sunset in Berkeley; the Scotia Cinema in Scotia, New York; the Varsity in Austin, Texas; and the Fine Arts II in Portland, Maine, amongst others.⁵² The pairing of these films seemed designed to allow the continuing buzz surrounding *Pink Flamingos* to convince people to see *Female Trouble*, providing the film with new theatrical life and allowing audiences (in the case of the late-night showings) to interact with it in the same charged midnight-movie atmosphere that they had with Waters's earlier work.

Perhaps the most telling example of this came in Cleveland, Ohio, where the two films were paired together at the Heights theater in January 1976. The initial week's grosses came to \$5,800, which is a notable amount for films that, combined, had been in circulation for four years.⁵³ The pairing lasted three weeks at the Heights, with the third and final week's gross amounting to \$2,300.⁵⁴ When *Female Trouble* moved over to the Westwood and was paired with *Naked Came the Stranger* (Radley Metzger, 1975), the films' combined gross totaled only \$1,000.⁵⁵ One must account for several factors here, including the relative popularity of *Naked Came the Stranger* and the previous three weeks that *Female Trouble* ran in Cleveland. Nevertheless, it is striking to note how markedly *Female Trouble*'s box-office dipped when no longer paired with *Pink Flamingos*. The increasing reliance on playing the films together and placing one or both of them in midnight-show contexts speaks to the difficulties faced by *Female Trouble* in finding a large audience when screened within a more-conventional distribution context. It proved the logical endpoint to an advertising campaign that had leaned evermore upon *Female Trouble*'s proximity to *Pink Flamingos* to stoke viewer interest.

A similar distribution pattern can be seen for *Desperate Living*, with even starker results. New Line's insistence upon conventional bookings here proves all the more striking for occurring at roughly the same moment when *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman,

1975) was illustrating the continued robustness of midnight-movie audiences with its highly successful run at the Waverly in New York.⁵⁶ New Line opened *Desperate Living* in three New York-area theaters on October 14, 1977: the D.W. Griffith Cinema and the Quad Cinema in Manhattan, and the Mini Cinema in Uniondale on Long Island.⁵⁷ Waters appeared at two screenings on opening night at the Griffith, the latest of which began at 11:25 p.m.⁵⁸ Box office information is unfortunately not available for the Mini and the Quad, though an unflattering anecdote from an October 30, 1977 article on the Quad noted a “recent, rainy weekday afternoon [where] *Desperate Living* was playing to an audience of one.”⁵⁹

Grosses for the D.W. Griffith, however, show the film earning \$5,000 in its first week and \$3,500 in its second (“living up to its title,” in the pithy words of *Variety*).⁶⁰ While the film seemingly left the Mini Cinema after two weeks, it remained one more week at both the Griffith and the Quad, but with *Pink Flamingos* now running alongside it and in alternating showtimes. An October 28, 1977 advertisement in the *New York Times* prominently noted the change, as well as reminded readers of the presence of Divine in *Pink Flamingos*.⁶¹ The films left both venues one week later. *Desperate Living*’s diminished box office grosses at the Griffith can be partly explained by the film’s availability at multiple locations within the area. Still, it’s clear that it had performed poorly even when compared to *Female Trouble*, and that New Line’s increasing solution was to prop up Waters’s struggling titles in regular theatrical distribution with the presence of his earlier midnight-movie hit.

The film’s subsequent circulation followed a similar trajectory as *Female Trouble*. Commercial runs at the Majestic Theater in Madison, Wisconsin; and the Sherman Theater in Sherman Oaks, California (where the film played in a double bill with *Female Trouble*) lasted a week.⁶² Others lasted for briefer spans of time, such as the film’s two-day run at the 4-Star in San

Francisco, though Waters notes the venue was one of two theaters where the film “did the best business.”⁶³ By the middle of 1978, *Desperate Living* primarily played as either a midnight movie—as seen at the 8th Street Playhouse in New York in May 1978—or as a one-off screening paired with another Waters’s film or another underground-inflected title.⁶⁴ Even in this context, anecdotal evidence points to the film’s relative unpopularity. The Philadelphia-based *Gay News*, for instance, chastised its readership in July 1979 for the “very scanty” attendance at *Desperate Living*’s three-day run at the Gay Community Center.⁶⁵ Adding insult to injury: the Center was located “right behind TLA, smack dab in the middle of our mini-Greenwich Village” and the site of *Pink Flamingos*’s runaway success earlier in the decade.⁶⁶

Final box office figures for *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* are difficult to locate, so it’s hard to definitively claim the films were financial successes or failures. Given both films’ relatively low budgets, it is likely they made back their production costs over time. As Waters rightly notes, his films often remain in circulation for years after their initial runs: “You can never tell how my films are doing for at least a year. *Desperate Living* played three weeks at three theaters in New York, first run. My films never tear up the boxoffice first run, but unlike other films, continue to play for years very steadily.”⁶⁷ It’s safe to say, however, that neither film achieved the financial heights of *Pink Flamingos*. Waters noted in February 1976 that he thought *Female Trouble* was “doing about as well as *Pink Flamingos*” (itself a perhaps questionable assertion) but added “that the expenses of this release are much greater.”⁶⁸ Writing years later on *Desperate Living*, Waters admits it “was the least successful of my films at the box office.”⁶⁹

Certainly, more targeted explanations can help to explain why *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* did not match the success and longevity of *Pink Flamingos*. For *Female Trouble*, the proximity to *Pink Flamingos*’s release might have deterred a certain subset of

filmgoers who felt that they could see the extremities of Waters's cinema and Divine's on-screen persona in their more buzzed about form in the earlier film. For *Desperate Living*, the absence of Divine surely impacted the film's popularity, given how central he had become to Waters's cinematic and cultural notoriety. And, of course, there is the possibility that many viewers simply did not care for the quotient of filthy ideas to visceral gross-outs that Waters himself saw as a newfound virtue in his filmmaking.

Still, the shift in circulation and exhibition almost certainly impacted potential viewers' perceptions of both works. That the films began to be paired with *Pink Flamingos* and returned to midnight screenings as they progressed through their theatrical runs speaks to New Line's acknowledgement that Waters's cinema might not be as portable as they had hoped, particularly at a moment when New Line sought to definitively position itself within mainstream theatrical distribution. Their continued investment in Waters's work, then, would seemingly rely upon a shift in either the films themselves or how they could be positioned within the broader cinematic ecosystem.

For Waters, meanwhile, the diminishing financial returns of *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* reflected a mismatch between how he saw his directorial brand reconfiguring through his films and how the general filmgoing public perceived him and his work. If one primarily knew Waters's cinema through the midnight screenings that defined *Pink Flamingos*'s theatrical life, divorcing his filmmaking from the raucous atmosphere and anything-goes mentality of those specialized viewing experiences takes away a perhaps essential component of the director's appeal. How to address this dynamic would remain an open question for Waters and New Line.

Daring to Take John Waters Seriously: Shifts in Critical and Cultural Discourse

The failure of Waters's attempt at directorial brand reconfiguration to elicit a positive response within the general public, however, does not mean that select cultural constituencies did not take notice. The more traditional theatrical roll-outs for *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* led to an increase in the number of both reviews written about the films and coverage of their creator. Furthermore, the continued repertory circulation of these titles (often paired with one another or earlier Waters's works) helped to foster a more specific yet intense subset of fans for whom the director's brand proved appealing beyond any individual title. Taken together, these dynamics led to writing about Waters that did, in fact, shift public perception surrounding the filmmaker.

Reviews of Waters's films at this time naturally focused upon his relative merits as a filmmaker. Critical response to *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* certainly reflected a continued bewilderment and even hostility. This became increasingly mixed, however, with another line of criticism that saw a strain of astringent and unique social satire within Waters's excesses.

While this mode of critical engagement existed in the reception of *Pink Flamingos*, it became more regularly articulated within reviews for *Female Trouble*. Critics writing for underground and alternative publications tended to express these ideas with more full-throated enthusiasm. Stu Horn of the Philadelphia-based *The Drummer*, for instance, described *Female Trouble* as "a film whose existential skepticism and eclectic morality sidestep sociology to present a true picture of our times with an accuracy that makes the humor of [Robert] Altman, Mike Nichols, or Woody Allen seem polite and theatrical."⁷⁰ *Bright Lights Film Journal's* George Morris concurred in a review published later in the decade. He noted that "the film joins Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* [1964], Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* [1967] and the

GTO's record *Permanent Damage* [1969] as one of the foremost examples of subversive American Americana."⁷¹ These references and comparisons place Waters's film within a larger cultural conversation about aesthetic worth and thematic resonance, reframing the filmmaker's cultural reputation from underground prankster to biting cinematic commentator.

One even finds more-mainstream critics like Todd McCarthy at *The Hollywood Reporter* praising the film's satiric vision, albeit in measured terms: "Waters is at his best when presenting his askew versions of archetypically tacky American-life scenes..."⁷² And while Waters's eye for scatologically-tinged social parody caught the eye of several critics, others noted the increased sophistication of his filmmaking. "*Pink Flamingos* is the more shocking film; *Female Trouble* the more developed," wrote Larry Grobel in the *Los Angeles Free Press*, adding that "there is a finer sense of camera composition; art movements from Dada and surreal to pop and performance are satirized..."⁷³ Far from a critical darling, Waters had nevertheless begun to be discussed within the terms of social parody and subversion, and not just as a shock artist or exploiter.

To be clear, *Female Trouble* received a fair amount of mixed-to-negative reviews, and some of those fell squarely into the categories of disgust and moral opprobrium. "Sick, nauseating junk with no redeeming value even as entertaining pornography is no less objectionable in first-run houses in broad daylight than it is on lower Eighth Ave. at midnight," proclaimed Rex Reed in the *New York Daily News*, tying his displeasure to the film's shifted exhibition context.⁷⁴ Of course, this is the kind of aghast notice that Waters long delighted in pull-quoting on his posters—stodgy critical disapproval only highlighting his own taste-demolishing trash aesthetic. "If actually something like the *Daily News* gave me a good review," Waters said, "I'd figure I did something wrong. I'd be scared."⁷⁵

More germane to shifts in Waters's directorial brand were ambivalent reviews that took the notion of the filmmaker as a skilled and provocative humorist seriously, but found the on-screen results somehow failing to live up to his potential. "It's as amateurish, inept, gross, vulgar, and low camp as the raunch genre can get—and yet, damnit, it can't be dismissed," writes Judith Crist in *New York Magazine*, adding that "there is a very funny man mucked down in the outrageousness of his social angers and mired in the self-serving oddities of his performers."⁷⁶ *Cue*'s William Wolf observed that "conventional values are turned inside out, and every character is a mockery of something. But the early level of humor is dissipated until the film also makes a mockery of satire."⁷⁷ Whatever problems these and other critics had with the film, the baseline assumption remained that Waters possessed an undeniable comedic flair, albeit one diluted by various cinematic and scatological excesses.

Even a critic as skeptical of Waters as Vincent Canby at *New York Times* couched his critiques of *Female Trouble* not in the language of moral or aesthetic horror. Across two separate pieces, he expressed disappointment that Waters had not honed his approach to bad taste with enough freshness or nuance. "Mr. Waters makes the fatal mistake of attempting to explain his mini-minded drag show on the grounds that it's really where America is at," Canby wrote in a larger column on bad taste in contemporary cinema.⁷⁸ He expressed similar reservations in his review of the film, which critiqued *Female Trouble* as "a movie that celebrates tackiness in a way that was revolutionary and sometimes very funny in the sixties when Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey did it."⁷⁹ That Canby's chief complaint rested with Waters's approach to bad taste—and not that this was the subject of his film—spoke to how many of Waters's critics were engaging him on his own terms, as opposed to dismissing his entire approach out of hand.

Reactions to Waters's follow-up continued these critical trends, even as *Desperate Living* received a somewhat cooler reception than *Female Trouble* overall. Archer Winsten reflects the contingent of reviewers who continued to see no value in Waters's work, though even he acknowledged the director's elevated status within critical discourse: "Call it savage satire, original or American humor, as some have done, but leave this reviewer out of it."⁸⁰ Those let down by the film once again expressed their disappointment by noting the ways in which Waters betrayed his own talents with misguided tonal choices and targets of humor. A booster of *Pink Flamingos* and (to a lesser extent) *Female Trouble*, Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* lamented of *Desperate Living* that "along the way there's a nastiness to the monstrous shenanigans that's a turnoff; Waters' acute sense of the absurd ends up being a vicious attack on lesbians."⁸¹

For all the misgivings expressed about *Desperate Living*, however, it also inspired some of the most robust raves of Waters's career up to this point, drawing self-conscious yet sincere comparisons to major art-house auteurs. "I dare anyone not to take John Waters seriously after *Desperate Living*," wrote the *Village Voice*'s Tom Allen, adding that "beneath the sleaze and the uniformly hysterical pitch of the acting, Waters is an austere economical director who is figuratively comparable to Bresson."⁸² Linking Waters's cinematic approach to that of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, David Chute of the *Boston Phoenix* writes that Waters "goes further than we dare to hope, undertaking what others only hint at, inspiring sympathies we never thought ourselves capable of. It's an exhilarating experience."⁸³ Even Waters himself had begun to register the shift in critical consensus surrounding his work by the end of the decade. "I suppose we personify what's known as the mixed review," he observed. "We've gotten everything from saying our work is a visionary fable and a masterpiece to, if you see my name on the marquee,

walk on the other side of the street and hold your nose.”⁸⁴ The aghast pans would always be key to Waters’s countercultural credibility, but critics were increasingly accepting the baseline legitimacy of the filmmaker’s project, regardless of their opinion of an individual film.

At the same time that Waters’s films were undergoing a shift in how they were evaluated, reporters were profiling Waters with increasing regularity and sympathy. These pieces never shied away from underscoring Waters’s more idiosyncratic qualities, and occasionally approached him with the smirking suspicion seen in earlier writing on the filmmaker. Overall, though, they are marked by growing understanding of Waters as an eccentric yet fundamentally engaging and intelligent public figure. One can see this, for instance, in the eclectic range of references used to encompass their impressions of him and his work. “Waters surfaces from the underground as a cross between the best of Andy Warhol, the worst of David Hockney, the most outrageous of Ken Russell and the most violent of Roman Polanski,” observes *The Advocate*’s Donald Von Wiedenman, while Larry Grobel of the *Los Angeles Free Press* contends that “Joyce had Dublin, Utrillo had Paris, Grosz had Berlin, and Waters has Baltimore.”⁸⁵

More than anything else, the profiles and interviews of Waters during this period established one fact with remarkable consistency—that there was a marked difference between one’s perception of Waters based upon his films and the reality of meeting Waters in person. Neal McGarity writes in the *Retriever* (the student newspaper for the University of Maryland Baltimore County): “After seeing his films, one might easily visualize Waters as a raving maniac who foams at the mouth. In actuality, Waters is cool and calm, quite amiable, and in complete control of his wits.”⁸⁶ “How wrong I was,” commented *The Advocate*’s Von Wiedenman. “At 29, Waters is very tall, very thin, almost sinister and disarmingly

enchanting.”⁸⁷ Michael Musto of the *Soho Weekly News* notes that “contrary to expectation, Waters himself is not a slimy amputee in a strait jacket and a floppy hat. He’s an amiable guy, tall and lanky, with a moustache...”⁸⁸ Brandon Judell pushes the discrepancy to the point of parodic paranoia: “Was this gentle person in front of me the real Dorian Gray? Was there somewhere lying in some locked attic on a dusty floor a canvas with John Waters’s decaying likeness upon it?”⁸⁹ The number of examples here underscores how practically *de rigueur* it became to begin an article on the director by approvingly noting this disjuncture.

Without question, Waters encouraged these reactions in a couple of ways. As discussed in the previous two chapters, Waters used interviews to flesh out and clarify the contours of his directorial brand. This remained true throughout the latter half of the 1970s as well, with Waters returning to and expanding upon several central topics—his cheekily cagey relationship to “meaning” within his work; humorous anecdotes about individual productions and tales of his misspent youth; opinions on various contemporary films; and his relationship to his hometown of Baltimore and the people therein.⁹⁰ Even more so than earlier in his career, Waters acknowledged the discrepancy between people’s assumptions about him based on his work and his actual personality. When being photographed for a profile, he winkingly gestured towards this when he thanked a photographer, saying that “it’s refreshing to get a street scene. Usually they want to pose me next to trash cans.”⁹¹ More directly, he observed that “people expect me to be some drooling madman, or like a character in one of my films, or a drug addict. Then when they meet me, they say I’m not what they expected.”⁹²

A second and connected move came in how Waters presented himself to the press. While he unabashedly discussed his youthful indiscretions, Waters made clear the gap between those wilder days and his present life. He told a reporter that “there was a period in my life when I was

involved in drugs and shoplifting and all that. But now, I don't even smoke pot, so I think that's behind me; I'm not at all sorry I went through it."⁹³ He also underwent a change in style during this time, keeping his idiosyncratic fashion sense but dialing back some of his more commented-upon extremes in appearance. For instance, profilers throughout the 1970s inevitably remarked upon Waters's long hair, referring to it as stringy and greasy.

By 1978, however, Billy Altman in *Creem* was describing Waters's "neatly cropped short hair and suave pencil-thin moustache" in a profile.⁹⁴ Waters himself described an evolution in his self-presentation, saying that "I used to dress like real sleazy. But then that's what everyone expected, so I tried to change it a little. Just got bored with it. I got tired of going into thrift shops."⁹⁵ No one would accuse Waters of foregoing distinctive fashion choices for the sake of respectability, yet it seems clear that these were conscious decisions of self-presentation that would further bolster the distinction between the public's would-be perceptions of him and the reality (or at least the presented reality) of his appearance and personality. He performed such modulations privately as well, as a means of convincing would-be financial backers of his reliability as a filmmaker.⁹⁶

The combination of Waters's efforts and the growing repetition of this new, more open coverage of the filmmaker began to solidify the idea that there was indeed a difference between the worlds Waters created within his films and the erudition, wit, and cock-eyed charisma that he displayed in person. This division became significant enough that publications approached Waters for his commentary on (admittedly specialized) matters unrelated to his films.⁹⁷ During the same period in which his filmmaking practice gained increased critical cache, Waters began to be viewed as a public figure intimately connected to yet also distinct from the images he put on screen.

Finally, it's worth returning to the circulation of Waters's films during this time—not to linger on their middling success as conventionally distributed works, but to consider how their ultimate exhibition circumstances may have further intensified the fan base that had been forming around the filmmaker since the early 1970s. As noted, both *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* did not have robust longevity when exhibited as stand-alone features playing multiple times a day. Within months of their initial releases, they began to be paired with *Pink Flamingos* in theaters. While this was presumably meant to bolster box office by tying the more recent films to a bona fide hit, it also began a pattern of screening two or more Waters's films together that continued throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s.⁹⁸

Besides the double bills already mentioned, other theaters that paired *Female Trouble* or *Desperate Living* with another Waters's feature included Don Pachó's in Albuquerque; the Roxie in San Francisco; the Homewood in Homewood, Illinois; and the Nuart in Los Angeles.⁹⁹ Anecdotal reporting speaks to the popularity of these pairings, particularly *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*. The Three Penny Cinema reported “good business” when they showed the two titles together in May 1977, while the Granada in Dallas, Texas “had to turn away 250 people due to lack of seating capacity” when they paired the films in April 1978.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, the combinations moved beyond double bills of the most recent Waters's features. For instance, the Capitol Theatre in Passaic, New Jersey (a popular venue for *Pink Flamingos* screenings) programmed *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs* every Friday and Saturday during the summer of 1975.¹⁰¹ Beginning in 1976, miniature festivals featuring somewhere between three and five of the director's works appeared on college campuses or repertory houses in Baltimore, Houston, Cleveland, and Provincetown.¹⁰² By May 1980, the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London was “devoting its film programmes to the work of

John Waters.”¹⁰³ And, of course, Waters’s work continued to exhibit regularly in his hometown film festival. Renamed the Baltimore International Film Festival in 1977, it annually screened at least one of his features as a midnight special beginning in the same year.¹⁰⁴

Besides the obvious financial benefit of having multiple films in semi-constant rotation on the repertory circuit, these types of screenings suggested something more fundamental about Waters’s fandom. Placing two or more Waters’s titles together within a single screening or series shifts the focus away from any individual film and onto the larger reputation of Waters’s work more broadly. Viewers coming to a double feature of *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*—much less a festival of three, four, or five titles—reflects an enthusiasm for the filmmaker’s oeuvre as a collection of works, and therefore underscores the extent to which certain viewers understood and sought out Waters’s directorial brand beyond any one film.

Waters himself commented on this selective but passionate viewership in contemporaneous interviews, as when he recalled attending a Philadelphia screening of *Pink Flamingos* and “people in the first four rows were all hardcore fans. They sat there repeating every line in synch with the mouths on the screen in the accent of the voices. The manager told me one guy had seen the movie 37 times.”¹⁰⁵ Surely, these practices were partly engendered by the wider context of 70s-era midnight moviegoing, with audiences primed to return to the same films due to their repeated weekly screenings in major urban centers. The success of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* particularly normalized the kind of fan practices described by Waters, including the memorization of favorite lines and talking back to the screen during the show. Still, the director’s films inspired this obsessive devotion on their own merits through their highly quotable dialogue, singular shock imagery, and the subcultural fandom that arose around such Dreamland stars as Divine and Edith Massey.¹⁰⁶ The middling success of *Female Trouble*

and *Desperate Living* proved that many viewers saw Waters's films as discrete objects to be seen or ignored on an individual basis. For this smaller group, however, the appeal of these specialized screenings lay in the opportunity they provided to dive further into the cinematic ethos that Waters created across his films.

Perhaps the first major sign that these collective dynamics were having an effect on Waters's directorial brand occurred in December 1976, when *Pink Flamingos* screened as part of the Museum of Modern Art's "Bicentennial Salute to American Film Comedy." The series (which ran from May 13, 1976 to January 4, 1977) encompassed essentially all major American film comedy to that point, including works from such icons as Ernst Lubitsch, Preston Sturges, Frank Capra, and Billy Wilder.¹⁰⁷ Within this context, the placement of a work far beyond the confines of canonical Hollywood cinema likely raised some eyebrows. Programmers Larry Kardish and Adrienne Mancina may have had provocation partly in mind, but their program notes make apparent that they considered the film an eminently defensible aesthetic and cultural object: "[*Pink Flamingos*] is as calculated and intelligent as the best of military maneuvers. Indeed, its appearance, bedraggled and shoddy, belies its power. Its shaggy air is camouflage. It wants to disarm us, to catch us off guard...But, careful, this is no mere joke from the underground: *Pink Flamingos* is truly subversive."¹⁰⁸

Its inclusion indicates that Waters's filmmaking was being viewed as more than underground pranks by the middle of the decade, and this would only continue as the 1970s progressed. His directorial brand had indeed gone through a reconfiguration, albeit in relation to more targeted cultural constituencies. This, in turn, opened up new opportunities for Waters to move into heretofore unexplored areas beyond the world of filmmaking.

Extending the Waters's Brand in the Mid-to-Late 1970s

Increased critical consideration, amplified media coverage, and the further development of a cult following for his work meant that Waters was gaining more notice than ever before. His films obviously remained a central component of his notoriety but press coverage and audience attention also began to frame Waters as a public figure beyond any individual title. This furnished the circumstances for Waters to not just expand within his primary realm of filmmaking, but to extend his directorial brand into connected-yet-distinct venues of aesthetic and cultural practice.

These activities can be divided into four categories. The first considers affiliated projects by his central performers. This category does not directly relate to Waters's own work at the time but is nevertheless notable as some of his key players circulated the personas created within the director's films into the realms of countercultural theater and punk rock. The remaining three directly tie to actions Waters undertook in the mid-to-late 1970s: film programming, lecturing, and essayistic writing. What connects them all is how each built off of elements in Waters's directorial brand that he had established within his films and interviews throughout the first half of the decade.

At the same time, placing these brand associations within new contexts and Waters himself adopting new roles—curator, essayist, lecturer—raises the larger conceptual question of whether these acts of brand extension also constituted brand reconfiguration. When someone, say, reads an essay by John Waters, do they conceive of him as the same cock-eyed provocateur simply shifting into a new medium, or does the very position of published author change how Waters is seen on a more intrinsic level? This section will conclude with a brief consideration of this issue.

The most attenuated category of Waters's mid-to-late 1970s brand extension can be broadly referred to as his actors' affiliated projects. Waters did not act as a manager to his actors beyond their work in his films, nor was he directly involved in their other work. Nevertheless, two of Waters's most notable performers—Divine and Edith Massey—both pursued endeavors in this period that more-or-less directly drew upon the onscreen personas they developed within Waters's films. In doing so, they transferred the singular sensibility of Waters's cinematic work into other creative fields.

For Divine, this meant pursuing theatrical roles that drew heavily upon the image developed both within Waters's films and through the raucous stage shows that Waters wrote and Divine performed in at the Palace Theater with the Cockettes. It's only fitting, then, that Divine's first stage performance independent of Waters occurred in *The Heartbreak of Psoriasis*, an irreverent comedy staged in San Francisco in July 1975 that included several former members of the Cockettes.¹⁰⁹ The following year, he starred in the Washington, D.C. production of Tom Eyen's *Women Behind Bars*, a send-up of "female prisoner" melodramas from the 1950s. Divine played domineering prison matron Pauline, a character described as "nasty and just a touch crazed, which is what Divine acts best."¹¹⁰ He also performed in the show's New York revival later in 1976.

Critics noted the relationship between the parodic gender play of Divine's current stage role and the persona he created over the previous half-decade within Waters's cinema. *Newsworks* critic Bruce Pennington described "the sensational Divine, whose comedy flair is considerably toned down here from shis (the contraction for his and hers) cinematic ventures."¹¹¹ Michael Feingold of the *Village Voice*, meanwhile, complained that "Divine, as a vicious matron, performs with a loud monotony I would not have thought possible even in a cult-film

star.”¹¹² That critics with otherwise divergent takes both linked Divine’s stage performance to his onscreen identity frames his theatrical work as partially an extension of Waters’s brand into the space of off-Broadway and regional theater—a development that itself echoes back to the 60s-era queer theater that Waters saw in his youth.

The transplanting of a Waters-based public persona into another cultural realm occurred even more explicitly in the brief and singular punk-rock career of Edith Massey. Waters had consciously augmented Massey’s characters within *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* to contrast humorously with both the daffy Egg Lady she memorably portrayed in *Pink Flamingos* and the endearingly quirky public persona she had developed in the press. “I wanted to pull an image switch and have Edith play a mean role,” Waters wrote of Massey’s controlling, leather-clad Aunt Ida in *Female Trouble*, a role she followed with her tyrannical, oversexed Queen Carlotta in *Desperate Living*.¹¹³

This disjuncture between Massey’s outrageously cruel onscreen antics and her sweetly unaffected disposition led Waters to offer a further recommendation to Massey, who by the mid-1970s had begun performing as a singer in various venues. “When punk came out,” Waters recalled, “I suggested to Edith she adopt this look for novelty reasons. Edith is about as far from punk as you can get, but she realized it was a good gimmick and would make good copy for journalists who were always searching for a new angle to write about her.”¹¹⁴ Massey took up the suggestion, teaming with rock promoter and entertainment lawyer Rod Crossland and hiring local punk band the *Enfant Terribles* as her musicians.¹¹⁵ While the group was indeed largely seen as a gimmick, they nevertheless performed in notable venues, including the storied CBGB in New York.¹¹⁶

Her performances explicitly referenced the affectedly nasty persona that she had developed in the previous two Waters's films, as well as her earlier role in *Pink Flamingos*. On stage, she wore the same skin-tight S&M leather costume that she donned in *Female Trouble*. The band was soon renamed Edie and the Incredible Edible Eggs, a winking reference to her ovum-obsessed *Pink Flamingos* character.¹¹⁷ She even performed in connection with Waters's films. One of her first gigs accompanied a screening of *Female Trouble* in Fells Point, Maryland.¹¹⁸ A Los Angeles performance supplemented a showing of *Desperate Living* and occurred at the Nuart, a theater that by late 1978 had been playing continuous midnight showings of *Pink Flamingos* for roughly four years.¹¹⁹ Descriptions of that evening spoke to how her music performance relied upon a knowledge and appreciation of Massey's screen work and public persona. "The crowd required nothing more than the rude, debauched dowager they know from the films," Richard Cromelin of the *Los Angeles Times* observed, "and when she paraded down the aisle in queenly robes over a tight-laced leather outfit (with pantyhose underneath), they cheered wildly, in tribute to her Waters-work and to the fact that a character like this actually exists."¹²⁰

While short-lived, Edith's punk career further cemented her reputation as a cult figure popular with entertainment and culture reporters.¹²¹ And while Waters did not directly guide or work with Massey on her musical act, the explicit incorporation and subversion of her Waters-based persona (and the additional media attention it drew to her) further placed Waters's iconography within the underground culture of the late 1970s broadly and the burgeoning punk scene specifically. If he wasn't as invested in the direct cultivation of his actors' careers as, say, Andy Warhol was with his superstars, Waters certainly encouraged the broadening of their talents and public personalities into new fields of art and culture.

Waters himself chose three overlapping strategies in the extension of his own directorial brand beyond the cinematic titles and extra-cinematic materials that previously defined him in the public eye. The first of these was film programming, which he pursued within his hometown of Baltimore in the late 1970s. Waters's programming work rested in part on his continual presence within the Baltimore film scene more generally. In addition to his films being screened as midnight showings during the Baltimore International Film Festival, Waters once again served as a judge for the 1977 festival alongside such notables as avant-garde filmmaker Stan Vanderbeek and film historian Thomas Cripps.¹²² He performed similar duties in 1975 at the nearby Washington National Student film festival at the Kennedy Center, judging alongside documentary filmmaker Willard Van Dyke.¹²³

More centrally, programming films reflected an extension of a voracious and idiosyncratic cinephilia that Waters had cultivated within his press appearances throughout the 1970s. As in earlier interviews for *Pink Flamingos*, Waters would frequently comment on the state of contemporary cinema throughout the publicity tours for *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living*. Noting favorite directors and titles cemented a highly eclectic cinematic taste that gravitated towards the extremes of filmic style and form. "I go to the movies almost every day," he said. "I love Chabrol and Buñuel and *Lacombe Lucien* [Louis Malle, 1974] is my favorite recent film. But what I really love is low-budget exploitation movies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [Tobe Hooper, 1974]."¹²⁴ Put more succinctly, "I like the very arty stuff or the real trash."¹²⁵

Furthermore, Waters's movie going predilections allow him to elevate and recontextualize titles beyond their typical taste categories. He notes that "I love exploitation films of all kinds. But then *Barry Lyndon* is an exploitation film. They all are."¹²⁶ And if

prestigious auteur films could be revealed as commercial products, exploitation shlock can be praised for its gnarly extremities: “*Ilsa the She-Wolf of the SS* [Don Edmonds, 1975] is the only movie that’s shocked me... There is no way to defend it. That’s what I liked about it.”¹²⁷

Discussing films within his interviews became a means to push back against conventional standards of critical evaluation and elevate favored filmmakers and titles—opinions that positioned Waters as a commentator on contemporary cinema as well as a practitioner.

Waters carried these principles into his initial forays into local programming, guiding his choices and bolstering his claims for expanding critical ideas around film quality and taste. His programming debut came in late 1978, when Waters would “conduct a series exploring the relationship between the films of current German director [Rainer Werner] Fassbinder... and those of Douglas Sirk, an American director of the Fifties.”¹²⁸ The series was one of several put on by the Baltimore Film Forum, an outgrowth of the Baltimore International Film Festival that screened repertory programming at various city locations throughout the year.¹²⁹ Films screened as part of the series included Sirk’s *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *There’s Always Tomorrow* (1956), and *Imitation of Life* (1959); and Fassbinder’s *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), *Satan’s Brew* (1976), and *Chinese Roulette* (1976). Waters hosted the screenings and introduced the films.¹³⁰

The Fassbinder/Sirk series did not constitute a breakthrough in auteurist connections across cinematic history. Fassbinder had discussed Sirk’s influence on his work throughout the 1970s.¹³¹ Rather, the series allowed Waters to both bolster his cinephile credentials and frame these films (particularly Fassbinder’s works) through his own specific lens of cinematic taste. Waters had praised Fassbinder’s prodigious 1970s oeuvre consistently in interviews. “I like everything by Fassbinder that I see now, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* [1972], *Fox and His*

Friends [1975]. I like those films very much,” he said in November 1977, and included Fassbinder on a list of “favorite directors” in 1978.¹³² While he discussed Sirk less often, Waters included the director’s *Written on the Wind* (1956) amongst his personal “classics,” a list which also included “all of Fassbinder.”¹³³ Partly, then, programming a series highlighting and juxtaposing the two filmmakers’ work became a way to boost favorite titles and attach his own name to the cinephilic prestige of two divergent-yet-connected directors.

The way he discussed Fassbinder in the press, however, leads one to assume that Waters may have framed the films in ways that went beyond the standard praise given to the German director. For Waters, Fassbinder’s work excelled not only because it drew upon the would-be disreputable genre of 50s-era melodrama, but because it embraced both ends of the taste spectrum. He said, “I like Fassbinder’s movies a whole lot because I think he manages to make an art film and a trash film at the same time.”¹³⁴ While it is unclear to what extent Waters used that particular lens in discussing Fassbinder at the screenings, one can imagine Waters being drawn to this series’ idea for the way it allowed viewers to appreciate both the art-cinema challenge and genre-based excesses of Fassbinder’s celebrated filmography. In this way, it highlights how Waters could use his extension into programming as a means of defining himself by both his idiosyncratic cinephilia and his desire to share it with an appreciative audience.¹³⁵

Lecturing became the second major way in which Waters expanded his public purview in the mid-to-late 1970s, though it’s important to note both the continuity and change present within the filmmaker’s public appearances across the decade. Since the late 1960s, Waters made frequent appearances with his own films (often with cast members in tow) at regional premieres and midnight screenings, introducing the showings and answering audience questions. These public appearances had been orchestrated by Waters himself since the beginning of his career.

He also benefited from his involvement in New Line Presentations, a lecture-circuit booking division of the distributor that, by mid-1974, counted amongst its clients Andrew Sarris, Molly Haskell, Norman Mailer, Lindsay Anderson, and Donald Segritti.¹³⁶ The New Line Presentations catalogue for Fall/Winter 1975–1976 says of Waters that “anyone who can conceive *Pink Flamingos* in Baltimore has got to be a heavy,” adding that “John Waters, the brain which conceived this vision, the articulate and entertaining director of *Pink Flamingos* and six other underground epics, is available for campus appearances with films and friends.”¹³⁷ New Line simultaneously framed Waters as a cock-eyed cinematic eccentric and a thoughtful commentator whose presence would be particularly appreciated by the collegiate set.

Indeed, Waters appeared with new films like *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* on college campuses across the country, taking questions from audiences after screenings and speaking with local media throughout the mid-1970s.¹³⁸ In a shift from the earlier appearances at midnight screenings, however, Waters often came without cast members, telling anecdotes and answering questions alone. Audiences described within the press coverage generally enjoyed Waters’s appearances, with one Austin-based reporter noting that “everything Waters said prompted laughter and applause.”¹³⁹ Waters himself also seemed to enjoy the experience, noting that college lectures are “really fun because I get to go to places I’d never go to, like Oshkosh, Wisconsin. I’d never go there otherwise. And Austin, Texas: I’d always wanted to go there. That’s a great town.”¹⁴⁰

Beyond personal enjoyment, of course, these often-solo appearances provided Waters with another platform to engage in the kind of authorial performance he would enact in interviews. Telling stories and answering audience questions on stage promoted the films he

traveled with. They also established him (to return to language of the New Line Presentations catalogue) as an “articulate and entertaining” stage presence in his own right.

Two New York engagements proved particularly notable. One was a lecture given at New York University. Waters took delight in mentioning both the location and the speaking fee to reporters, given his own checkered history with the university. Recalling his expulsion for marijuana possession, Waters said that the bust “was a big scandal in 1965...Anyway, I got the last laugh. NYU just gave me \$1,000 to lecture there.”¹⁴¹ Beyond the puckish humor of the comment, it underscored the extent to which Waters had gone from troublesome student to well-compensated speaker in the space of roughly a decade—a key point, given that speaking engagements proved a steady source of income in the late 1970s as Waters worked to raise money for his next feature.¹⁴²

He gave another lecture at the School of Visual Arts in New York in November 1977.¹⁴³ This talk seemed focused on Waters as a speaker, as he recalls that he “pontificated over trash movies to a class of art students.”¹⁴⁴ The day would prove most memorable for the fact that after the presentation a student (later identified as a member of New York punk band Steel Tips) bit Waters “in lieu of a handshake.”¹⁴⁵ Waters took the moment in stride, writing that he ended up seeing the student’s show later that night.¹⁴⁶ For the purpose of this analysis, however, it’s perhaps more notable that Waters does not describe his “pontifications” as a supplementary event to a screening, implying that the school saw his presentation as the main event.¹⁴⁷

Certainly, opportunities for Waters to position himself as a stand-alone speaker can be partly traced to the continued success of New Line Presentations. By September 1975, the company had tripled its size in five years of operation and had added such clients as Ellen Burstyn, Martin Scorsese, and Robert Altman.¹⁴⁸ Still, the slow shift in Waters’s public speaking

from an added bonus within a film screening to an event in and of itself speaks to the increased prominence of the director as a public figure of interest for his oratory skills and compelling in-person presence.

Finally, Waters turned to essayistic writing in the late 1970s. As a filmmaker, of course, Waters had privileged the process of writing when discussing his working methods. He described to interviewers the notebooks in which he constantly wrote down ideas—a process through which he worked out the basic narrative material of his films.¹⁴⁹ These eventually produced his screenplays, which Waters thought of as so central to his artistic identity that he began making plans to publish them as early as 1977.¹⁵⁰ Writing also seemed to satisfy the self-professed control freak impulses in Waters's personality, as well as his insistence on not having his work unduly influenced by others: "I'd rather write for myself. It's much more rewarding to write your own thing. That way, you make sure it's the way you want it."¹⁵¹ Observers and friends concurred. Enid Sefcovic, a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, noted that "Waters' press releases show the versatility of his writing," and quotes actor and friend David Lochary as saying that, "Of all John's strengths...[writing] is his strongest."¹⁵²

It's perhaps not surprising, then, that Waters thought of essays as another creative avenue in addition to filmmaking. While he would eventually write for numerous publications, he sold his first three pieces to *Oui*. Described as a magazine "for the man of the world," *Oui* originated as a French pornographic publication before being bought by *Playboy* in the early 1970s. It featured a combination of nude images and journalistic pieces, and published one of the first lengthy profiles of Waters in December 1975.¹⁵³ Beginning in May 1978, the magazine featured three of Waters's essays within fifteen months: "All My Trials," an account of Waters's pastime

as an observer of criminal trials; “Casting for the Heavies,” describing his philosophy for finding actors; and “Troubled Waters,” chronicling his life-long obsession with violence and gore.¹⁵⁴

Two broad traits connect these pieces together. First, all three are explicitly autobiographical. Waters draws directly from his experiences as a child, as an independent filmmaker, and as a lifelong devotee to various idiosyncratic pursuits. Waters, of course, had been forthcoming with quirky and at times downright shocking details about his personal history and interests throughout his career, placing them in films and expressing them in interviews. What these pieces allowed for was a means of drawing together various stories and observations that Waters had publicly made over the previous decade, synthesizing stray musings into organized reflections. Second, all three are written in an authorial voice that is purposefully provocative, humorous, and audience-focused. His writing not only draws upon the brand of comedy seen within his films but frequently addresses the reader in ways akin to his spectator-centric approach to filmmaking.

“All My Trials” provides a good example of these qualities in Waters’s early writing. He constructs the essay as a series of anecdotes about various criminal trials he has attended over the years as a gleeful spectator. Notable hearings include Patty Hearst, the Manson family, and Watergate; as well as less-famous but spectacularly ghastly proceedings like that of child murderer Freddie Goode. He frames his presence at these trials as one of baroque obsession, and charts with anthropological detail the spectacular events, mundane proceedings, and interpersonal connections he had formed over the years.

While there are genuinely new stories and reflections within “All My Trials,” the essay links back explicitly to Waters’s own filmmaking and public statements. *Pink Flamingos* contains a climactic judgment and sentencing of sorts, with Divine presiding over a media-

saturated kangaroo court that quickly leads to the murder of Connie and Raymond Marble. His long-standing fascination with the overlaps between criminality, publicity, and glamour are explored throughout *Female Trouble*, which concludes with the trial and execution of Dawn Davenport. Indeed, the “crime is beauty” mantra espoused by *Female Trouble*’s Donna and Donald Dasher seems taken up by Waters here as well, who comments extensively on the wardrobe choices and fashion sense of various criminals, particularly the Manson women. Waters had also discussed his journeys to attend trials across multiple interviews.¹⁵⁵ How these sojourns relate to his work also becomes explicit: “The trials give me a lot of ideas...Crime is always in my movies.”¹⁵⁶ In broad strokes, one can see “All My Trials” focusing on a long-standing preoccupation in Waters’s work and public persona and bringing it to the foreground in a new medium.

Even still, it’s worth lingering briefly on just how much Waters viewed his writing as an extension of his previous public statements and remarks. A few examples will illustrate this. Here is the third line of “All My Trials”: “A new criminal is the hottest of all media stars; it’s the only kind of celebrity that can literally happen overnight.”¹⁵⁷ Here is a remark to John Calendo in the pages of *Oui*: “I couldn’t stay away...I had to see how the murderers would handle the sudden publicity...Murder is the quickest way to become famous overnight.”¹⁵⁸ Waters writes in “All My Trials” about the disdain of court reporters: “A reporter covering the Manson trial commented, ‘These spectators are sick moths drawn to the glare of publicity.’ How right he was!”¹⁵⁹ A very similar sentiment was shared with Bubbles Thompson: “Somebody said they were like drunken moths drawn to the glare of publicity, and that’s kind of true.”¹⁶⁰ And on the quality of trials, Waters writes that “for our purposes, the best defendant is one who is guilty and unrepentant, but who denies his guilt.”¹⁶¹ “I prefer trials where the people are guilty and say they

aren't," Waters told Thompson. "Because it makes it more interesting."¹⁶² Reading "All My Trials" side-by-side with his interviews, one finds a constant synthesis, refinement, and expansion of his own anecdotes and ideas. For Waters, writing essays became a way of taking the stories that he had been crafting piece by piece within the public eye and turning them into a narrative that he could definitively shape and control through his own writerly talents.

It also meant that he could experiment with audience identification, revulsion, and address in a manner akin to his films. As he did during the press surrounding *Pink Flamingos*, Waters in the mid-1970s consistently conceived of his films as prodding the audience to respond to his films' provocations in a visceral manner and to self-consciously laugh at their own reactions. "Yeah, I like to shock too," he said, "just to prove that people can either laugh at their ability to be shocked by something, or just to be shocked."¹⁶³ Waters's essays rarely conjure the extremes of gut-level disgust that his films do, but they utilize a kind of direct address that prompts the reader into evermore extreme behavior while framing those demands in knowing hyperbole. In "All My Trials," Waters implores the reader to "pick a character in the [courtroom] drama and become obsessed with him or her," "go on pilgrimages" to crime locations, and "keep scrapbooks on your favorite criminals and collect every book and articles that comes out on your favorite trial."¹⁶⁴ These directly call upon readers to share in Waters's queasy fascinations while simultaneously inviting them to laugh at his hysteria.

These direct invitations to join Waters in his intense fascination with criminal trials also point to the persona that he adopts within "All My Trials"—that of the wild-eyed obsessive, burrowing deeper into his own warped fixations. In this way, Waters once again plays with the distinction between his audience's perception of who he is and what he claims to be his true self. For instance, Waters makes sure to not push his fascination with the Manson family too far in

interviews. When pressed to explain why he thought the Mansons were “cool,” Waters clarified to a reporter, “I didn't think [the Mansons] were cool. I said that if you're going to be bad, do it well, and they did. If you're going to be rotten you couldn't have been rottener than that. They intrigue me.”¹⁶⁵ When another writer compared him to Charles Manson in that they were both “cult” figures, Waters tersely replied, “I make movies; I don't kill actresses.”¹⁶⁶

If Waters attempts to retain a semblance of distance in the press, he provocatively plays up his Manson enthrallment in the essay. The Manson women were “starlets” in the courtroom who “were out to grab headlines and no press agent was necessary.”¹⁶⁷ He described Manson himself as “always entering last [to the courtroom], as a true star should [and] would flash his *Life* magazine eyes and strut to his seat.”¹⁶⁸ The hyperbolic use of celebrity descriptors for criminals is, of course, the point, but Waters uses this caricatured authorial version of himself to push these jokes to provocative and at times uncomfortable places. This is particularly true of his descriptions of Freddie Goode, a child rapist and murderer: “Even though he had a lot of pimples, there were some of us who thought Freddie quite dashing.”¹⁶⁹

It's the sort of knife's-edge joke that viewers expected from his films, and he continued that balancing act in his writing. In this way, Waters's essay transposes elements of his cinematic world into a format that would seemingly be used to express the “true” feelings of the author. Waters had spent a fair amount of time convincing the public that he was not, in fact, the “drooling madman” that people assumed based on his films.¹⁷⁰ Establishing himself as a public figure apart from his films partially enabled him to secure speaking, programming, and writing jobs in the first place. Within the essay itself, however, Waters crafts yet another version of himself—intimately connected to the wit, intelligence, and idiosyncrasies displayed in his public appearances, but amplified and exaggerated in ways akin to his film scripts. Not for nothing does

the byline for “All My Trials” read: “John Waters, the inspiration behind such greats as *Pink Flamingos* and *Desperate Living*, really is as weird as his movies.”¹⁷¹

This, in turn, raises the larger question of whether Waters’s essays (or his programming or lecturing) constituted an act of brand reconfiguration as well as extension. On the one hand, Waters’s burrowing into well-known obsessions and self-consciously embodying taste-skirting mania might lead some readers to see “All My Trials” as another iteration of the same essential brand identity. On the other hand, his cogent prose, journalistic eye for detail, and observant wit seems to not just place the essay in a different medium but define it as a different class of cultural object. Waters could be seen, then, through the lens of essayistic humor and not just as a cine-provocateur. This ambiguity itself reflects a long-standing element of Waters’s public persona—a play between irony and sincerity, extremity and accessibility, activating revulsion and courting enthusiasm. He would further obscure these boundaries by inhabiting increasingly respectable cultural roles while retaining his interest in debased subjects. How he would ultimately be viewed within these roles remained debatable, but he had succeeded in circulating himself across adjacent media and therefore taking one step further towards the development of a mature directorial brand.

Conclusion

In applying the rubric of directorial branding to Waters’s career in the mid-to-late 1970s, one can see that while his cinematic output of the period retained broad thematic, stylistic, and tonal linkages to his earlier midnight-movie hit, his industrial and cultural positions shifted considerably from the apex of the *Pink Flamingos*’s phenomenon in 1973 to the end of the decade. The decision by New Line to circulate *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* within conventional patterns of distribution and exhibition misaligned the films with the general

public's seeming understanding of what it meant to see a John Waters's film. This led to ever-diminishing financial returns, raising the larger question of what Waters's directorial brand meant when detached from the specific exhibition practices of the midnight-movie venue.

At the same time that general audience interest seemed to be waning, however, more specific cultural constituencies were finding increasing interest in Waters's stated desire to reconfigure his cinematic output along less scatological and more satiric lines. Critical consensus began shifting to a baseline recognition of Waters's cinematic project, as well as more full-throated praise from those who connected with it. Press coverage highlighted more consistently Waters's cultural commentary, approachability, and humor; while increased repertory pairings of his features fostered the potential for smaller but more intense fan communities. These more modest signs of brand reconfiguration (along with the pressures to keep working throughout the late 1970s) provided the context for Waters to extend his brand, placing his trademark interests, obsessions, and perspectives into cultural arenas heretofore unexplored by the filmmaker. The Waters's brand circulated into more spaces than ever before and did so in a way that could prompt further reconsideration of his talents and public persona.

This analysis not only helps to clarify these internal changes within Waters's brand, exploring the churn of influences and conditions that prompted him to rethink the breadth of his career and contextualizing the major brand reconfiguration that he would perform in the early 1980s. It also underscores fundamental dynamics about directorial brand development as a process. It highlights yet again the essentially collaborative nature of directorial branding. While Waters had clearly articulated ideas about his films and how he wanted to be understood, these were filtered, confirmed, and altered by his interactions with his distributor, exhibitors, critics, reporters, editors, college administrators, arts organizers, and viewers.

These relationships, in turn, reveal why the major categories of directorial brand development rarely occur in any kind of sequential order, but overlap with one another in context-specific and sometimes conflicting ways. Within the relationship between Waters and New Line during this time, for instance, one sees a subtle but notable misalignment over whether *Female Trouble* and *Desperate Living* represented a revised iteration of Waters's cinematic vision (reconfiguration) or a repackaged version of the same successful elements from his previous work (expansion). Different cultural constituencies can react to brand reconfiguration differently, with more attuned viewers identifying developments that will only later become salient to the wider public. And when a director extends into other media, successful circulation of their identity within a new cultural venue can simultaneously solidify the essential elements of their reputation and reveal heretofore unexpected sides of their brand. While these dynamics play out across a filmmaker's career, they become particularly salient during moments of internal realignment and circumstantial change.

Such transformations would become at once more explicit and more complex as Waters pursued two projects in the early 1980s. One seemingly declared an aesthetic and tonal reconfiguration within his filmic work, and yet would simultaneously reach back to his earliest extra-cinematic practices. The other would announce Waters as definitively occupying a place within a new medium even as his contribution to that medium reflected the tensions between various iterations of his public selves.

¹ Waters quoted in Michael L. Bever, "Waters Gravely Discussed Disgust - The Other X," *Oshkosh Advance-Titan*, October 16, 1975, 20.

² Emanuel Levy, for instance, uses the designation in his overview of Waters's career. Emanuel Levy, *Gay Directors, Gay Films?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 282. Waters himself used a variation of this when he released three published screenplays under the title of "trash trio," though it did not include *Female Trouble*. John Waters, *Trash Trio: Three Screenplay* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

³ Waters quoted in Steve Hogner, "John Waters' Movies: Trash with Class," *Austin American-Statesman*, February 2, 1976, NP.

⁴ John Waters, *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia and London: Running Press, 2005), 158.

⁵ The major exceptions were *Desperate Living*'s absence of both Divine (who could not participate due to scheduling conflicts) and David Lochary (who passed away in 1977); and the inclusion of "outsider" Renay in a major role.

⁶ *Female Trouble* was budgeted at \$25,000, while *Desperate Living* cost \$65,000. A highly detailed production history of *Female Trouble* can be found in Chris Holmlund, *Female Trouble* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017), 49–89. Production history of *Desperate Living* can be found in Waters, *Shock Value*, 158–173.

⁷ Holmlund 172. All quotes below are taken from *Female Trouble* Press Release, Folder 13, Box 6, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, Wesleyan University Cinema Archives (WCU); and *Desperate Living* New Line Press Packet, Folder 14, Box 8, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU. The *Female Trouble* press release is also reprinted in Holmlund, *Female Trouble*, 174–175.

⁸ A Baltimore culture writer even referenced the legacy of Waters's press releases, noting that they "were the only releases ever quoted by *News American* film critic Anne Childress during her twelve years at reviewing." Enid Sefcovic, "John Waters, the King of Baltimore Film Makers," *The News American*, October 10, 1974, 19.

⁹ Sefcovic, "John Waters," 19; Corinne F. Hammett, "Waters Does It His 'Lavish' Way," *The News American*, May 27, 1977, 6D. Ever one to keep an eye on the bottom line, Waters told Holmlund that he rented Langsdale because "I got all the money" from box-office sales." Holmlund, *Female Trouble*, 179.

¹⁰ "Focus: Poster Detail Now Travels in Style," *Baltimore Sun*, June 5, 1977, D3.

¹¹ Holmlund, *Female Trouble*, 179; Hammett, "Waters Does It," 6D; Lou Cedrone, "Waters Premieres New Film, and the Audience Loves It," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, review of *Desperate Living*, June 1, 1977, B7.

¹² Waters quoted in Kenneth Turan, "Baltimore's King of Repulsion," *Potomac (Washington Post)*, April 20, 1975, 14.

¹³ Waters quoted in Michael Musto, "Desperate Living: Not a Pretty Picture," *Soho Weekly News*, October 20, 1977, 12.

¹⁴ Waters quoted in Sefcovic, "John Waters," 19; Waters quoted in Howard Smith and Brian van der Horst, "Scenes," *Village Voice*, January 27, 1975, 21.

¹⁵ Waters quoted in Chico Coleman, "John Waters: 'I Try To Make the Trashiest Pictures I Can,'" *The Daily Texan*, February 4, 1976, 13.

¹⁶ "New Line's Got 'Nada,'" *Variety*, October 2, 1974, 74; "Distribs & Exhibs: New Line Gets Chabrol's 'La Rupture,'" *The International Film Journal*, December 11, 1974, 20.

¹⁷ Robert Shaye, "Showmanship A La Mode – 1975," *Variety*, January 15, 1975, 6.

¹⁸ "Think MPAA Moving to Regard Violence and Not Only Erotica," *Variety*, November 20, 1974, 4; "New York Sound Track," *Variety*, December 3, 1975, 24.

¹⁹ "New Line's Pres. Gratified by Exhib Response; Indie Company Launching Own Productions," *The Independent Film Journal*, June 25, 1976, 9.

²⁰ "Dudelson to Top New Line Cinema Distribution Wing," *The Independent Film Journal*, December 24, 1975, 69.

²¹ "New Line's Shaye to Cannes Fest; Has New Capital," *Variety*, May 19, 1976, 63.

²² "Negative Pickups a New Policy for N.Y.'s New Line Cinema," *Variety*, August 11, 1976, 26.

²³ "New Line's Pres." 9.

²⁴ "New Line Cinema Planning its First Film Production for 1977 Release," *Boxoffice*, November 15, 1976, 4.

²⁵ "New Line Making Maiden Feature," *Variety*, January 26, 1977, 4.

²⁶ "New Line Joins New Pic Throng at Cannes Fest," *Variety*, May 11, 1977, 53.

²⁷ "Distribits: New Line Gets 'Female Trouble,'" *The Independent Film Journal*, January 22, 1975, 24; "Distribits: 'Desperate Living' at New Line," *The Independent Film Journal*, July 22, 1977, 19.

²⁸ *Female Trouble* Sneak World Premiere Poster, Folder 13, Box 6, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

²⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 175.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

³¹ The *Variety* piece was "'Outrage' Has Limits," *Variety*, February 12, 1975, 32.

³² Waters, *Shock Value*, 109.

³³ Advertisement, *New York Times*, February 28, 1975, 17. Outside circumstances could also alter an advertisement's appearance, as when the *New York Times* refused to run the aforementioned *Desperate Living* poster due to the presence of the dead rat in the image. Ever mindful of hypocrisy surrounding taste and censorship, Waters wrote of the replacement ad, "When *The New York Times* accepted the hastily redone ad campaign featuring Liz

Renay, half nude, screaming in revulsion, I gathered the advertising editors assumed their readers would *not* be offended by tits.” Waters, *Shock Value*, 174.

³⁴ For instance, this text was included on the film’s opening day advertisement in the *Los Angeles Times* (which was placed in the paper’s “Adult Movies/Entertainment” section). Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1975, Part IV, 12.

³⁵ Waters quoted in Paul Hendrickson, “At Home with the Sleaze King,” *The National Observer*, July 17, 1976, 16.

³⁶ *Female Trouble* Press Release.

³⁷ John Calendo, “Meet John Waters, King of Sleaze,” *Oui*, December 1975, 102.

³⁸ Waters quoted in Bob Campbell, “‘Disney of Film Underground,’ Director Waters Here Tonight,” *Arizona Daily Wildcat*, February 6, 1976, 14.

³⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 109–110, 174.

⁴⁰ His publicity schedule for *Female Trouble*’s Los Angeles premiere, for instance, has him scheduled to be interviewed by eight different publications over three days, including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Village Voice*, and *The Advocate*. See Los Angeles Schedule, Folder 13, Box 6, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁴¹ Advertisement, *New York Times*, February 12, 1975, 46.

⁴² “Snow & Holiday in N.Y.; \$60,767 for ‘Shampoo’; ‘Janis’ at \$26,000; Ultra-Mayhem Films Weakish,” *Variety*, February 19, 1975, 13, 26.

⁴³ “Oscar Value? ‘Lenny,’ ‘Inferno’ Up, N.Y.; ‘Vacation,’ 2d \$23,761; ‘Commissioner,’ In 3, \$54,000,” *Variety*, February 26, 1975, 10, 24.

⁴⁴ “‘Tommy’ A \$105,000 Volcano; ‘Yakuza,’ in 2, 66G, N.Y. Perks; ‘And Now My Love,’ \$23,000,” *Variety*, March 26, 1975, 8, 16.

⁴⁵ Kevin Thomas, “‘Female Trouble’: To Err is Divine,” review of *Female Trouble*, *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1975, E10.

⁴⁶ “Independent Theatre Guide,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1975, E9.

⁴⁷ “Independent Theatre Guide,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1975, F20.

⁴⁸ The Las Palmas was not listed for at least three weeks after the September 5–11, 1975 issue. “X-Rated,” *Los Angeles Free Press*, September 5–11, 1975, A.

⁴⁹ “Today at the Theatres,” *Oakland Tribune*, September 18, 1975, 21; “Today at the Theatres,” *The Oakland Tribune*, September 30, 1975, E23; Advertisement, *Albuquerque Journal*, October 12, 1975, D7; Advertisement, *Albuquerque Journal*, October 17, 1975, C7; “Guide: Film,” *Daily Pennsylvanian*, November 6, 1975, 8; “Guide: Film,” *Daily Pennsylvanian*, November 13, 1975, 8.

⁵⁰ Advertisement, *New York Times*, October 24, 1975, 28.

⁵¹ “‘Lies’ Dullish \$6,000, Hub; ‘West’ Hot \$11,000, ‘Flash’ 3G, Both 2d,” *Variety*, November 19, 1975, 10; “Calendar,” *Ann Arbor Sun*, November 19, 1975, 19; Advertisement, *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, March 19, 1976, C-13.

⁵² “Listings – Midnight Movies,” *The Argus*, February 20, 1976, 25; “Today at the Theatres,” *Oakland Tribune*, April 7, 1976, 31; “Movie Timetable,” *The Times Record*, November 13, 1976, 11; “Short Takes,” *Daily Texan*, June 20, 1977, 21; “At the Movies...” *Journal Tribune*, July 20, 1977, 18.

⁵³ “‘Boob Tube’ Strong 31G, Cleve.; ‘Flamingo’ Stout 6G, Lady 25G,” *Variety*, January 21, 1976, 24.

⁵⁴ “‘Story of O’ Tall \$28,800, Cleve.; ‘Hester’ Hefty 11G, ‘Ghost’ 58G,” *Variety*, February 4, 1976, 10.

⁵⁵ “‘Monsters’ Sock \$13,000, Cleve.; ‘Hester’ Great 9G, 2d, ‘Nest’ 28G,” *Variety*, February 11, 1976, 17.

⁵⁶ J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum detail the growth of the cult phenomenon surrounding *Rocky Horror* in J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 174–213.

⁵⁷ “Weekend Movie Clock,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1977, 64.

⁵⁸ Advertisement, *New York Times*, October 14, 1977, C11.

⁵⁹ Matthew L. Wald, “Cinemas, Like Cells, Survive in a Harsh World by Multiplying,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1977, sec. 8, 6.

⁶⁰ “‘Equus’ Record Whinny, \$8,852; ‘Roseland,’ First Day, \$5,852, N.Y.; ‘Julia’s Inaugural Weeks Boffo,” *Variety*, October 19, 1977, 9; “‘Goodbar,’ ‘Julia’ Big in N.Y.; ‘Man Who Loved Women’, 35G ‘Special Day,’ Virile 5th, \$30,000,” *Variety*, October 26, 1977, 8.

⁶¹ Advertisement, *New York Times*, October 28, 1977, C11.

⁶² Advertisement, *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 21, 1977, sec. 2, 7; Advertisement, *Wisconsin State Journal*, November 30, 1977, sec. 4, 3; “Calendar: Movies: Openings,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 1977, O40; Gregg Kilday, “Dick Tracy to Make Movie Debut,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1977, B7.

- ⁶³ "Scenedrome," *Berkeley Barb*, March 24–30, 1978, 11; Waters, *Shock Value*, 177. The other theater he mentions is the Orson Welles Cinema in Boston.
- ⁶⁴ Advertisement, *New York Times*, May 15, 1978, C15. The film played with *Pink Flamingos* at the York in San Francisco in September 1978 and screened alongside *Andy Warhol's Bad* (Jed Johnson, 1977) at the Rialto Theater in South Pasadena, California in June 1978. "Scenedrome," *Berkeley Barb*, September 1–7, 1978, 15; "Calendar: Movie Revivals," *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1978, Q37.
- ⁶⁵ Henri David, "Read On..." *Gay News*, July 13, 1979, 31.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ Waters quoted in George Morris, "Interview: John Waters," *Take One*, March 1978, 23.
- ⁶⁸ Waters quoted in Campbell, "Disney of Film Underground," 14.
- ⁶⁹ Waters, *Trash Trio*, x.
- ⁷⁰ Stu Horn, "Are You Ready for 'Female Trouble'?" review of *Female Trouble*, *The Drummer*, October 22, 1974, 16.
- ⁷¹ George Morris, "Female Trouble," review of *Female Trouble*, *Bright Lights Film Journal* 7 (1978): 33.
- ⁷² Todd McCarthy, "Female Trouble," review of *Female Trouble*, *Hollywood Reporter*, August 1, 1975, NP.
- ⁷³ Larry Grobel, "Female Trouble," review of *Female Trouble*, *Los Angeles Free Press*, August 1–7, 1975, 26.
- ⁷⁴ Rex Reed, "State of Stupor," review of *Female Trouble*, *Daily News*, February 21, 1975, 58.
- ⁷⁵ Waters quoted in Brandon Judell, "I'd Like to be a Dog Catcher, Or: Will John Waters Ever Make the Great American Comedy," *GaysWeek*, March 6, 1978, 15.
- ⁷⁶ Judith Crist, "Smutty Waters," review of *Female Trouble*, *New York Magazine*, February 24, 1975, 66.
- ⁷⁷ William Wolf, "Comic Obscenity," review of *Female Trouble*, *Cue*, February 17, 1975, 18.
- ⁷⁸ Vincent Canby, "What's So Good About Bad Taste?" *New York Times*, February 23, 1975, D17.
- ⁷⁹ Vincent Canby, "Female Trouble," review of *Female Trouble*, *New York Times*, February 13, 1975, 35.
- ⁸⁰ Archer Winsten, "'Desperate' is Not for the Living," review of *Desperate Living*, *New York Post*, October 15, 1977, 33.
- ⁸¹ Kevin Thomas, "Waters: Taking a Nasty Turn," review of *Desperate Living*, *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1977, J29. Thomas wasn't the only reviewer to critique the film's representation of its lesbian characters. Steve Blevins of *Gay Community News*, for instance, noted that "if Waters had been more articulate about his work, perhaps the release of such a violently misogynistic film could be defended on the basis of theory, or at least the presence of a satiric wit." Steve Blevins, "Desperate Living: Fishing in Shallow Waters," review of *Desperate Living*, *Gay Community News*, September 3, 1977, 8.
- ⁸² Tom Allen, "Adventures on the Sleaze Patrol," review of *Desperate Living*, *Village Voice*, October 24, 1977, 83.
- ⁸³ David Chute, "Apostle of Sleaze," review of *Desperate Living*, *Boston Phoenix*, April 24, 1979, 4, 12.
- ⁸⁴ Randi Henderson, "Beyond Bad Taste," review of *Desperate Living*, *Baltimore Sun*, May 16, 1978, B5.
- ⁸⁵ Donald Von Wiedenman, "Interview: John Waters," *The Advocate*, June 16, 1976, 41; Larry Grobel, "John Waters: 'I Don't Want to Go to Jail For Making a Movie,'" *Los Angeles Free Press*, August 22–28, 1975, 22.
- ⁸⁶ Neal McGarity, "Waters, Cool and Amiable, Comments on Latest Flick," *The Retriever*, October 28, 1974, 5.
- ⁸⁷ Von Wiedenman, "Interview," 41.
- ⁸⁸ Musto, "Desperate Living," 12.
- ⁸⁹ Judell, "I'd Like to be a Dog Catcher," 15.
- ⁹⁰ Waters gave a particularly detailed interview with Baltimore Film Festival creator Harvey Alexander about his connections to Baltimore, the reasons he remained rooted there, and his interactions with various individuals within the city's art scene. Harvey Alexander, "A Talk with John Waters About John Waters, About Maelcum, and About Baltimore," *Up to Speed*, Winter-Spring 1976, 6–8.
- ⁹¹ Waters quoted in Turan, "Baltimore's King of Repulsion," 14.
- ⁹² Waters quoted in Maralyn Lois Polak, "Interview: John Waters: Is He Brilliant or Truly 'The Filthiest Filmmaker Alive'?" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 23, 1976, 8.
- ⁹³ Waters quoted in Bubbles Thompson, "Blueboy Interviews John Waters," *Blueboy*, November 1977, 90.
- ⁹⁴ Billy Altman, "He Who Laughs Most Laughs Best," *Creem*, February 1978, 52.
- ⁹⁵ Judell, "I'd Like to be a Dog Catcher," 15.
- ⁹⁶ An example of this is a dossier that Waters put together for potential backers of *Desperate Living*. In it, he outlines in detail the financial success of his previous works and concludes by writing (in the third person) that "Mr. Waters feels that after eleven years in the film business, he can be counted on to produce, write, direct, and sell a film to the financial benefit of all concerned." See "John Waters' Dreamland Films," Folder 6, Box 7, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁹⁷ Waters was, for instance, one of six celebrities (including Andy Warhol and Al Goldstein) asked by *High Times* to discuss what Christmas meant to them. "Six Great American Tell 'What Xmas Means to Me,'" *High Times*, November 1977, NP.

⁹⁸ Double features of Waters's films had occurred in the past, but the mid-to-late 1970s saw a shift in both the number of available features to program and the frequency of the screenings themselves.

⁹⁹ "Diversions," *Albuquerque Tribune*, August 11, 1977, C-3; "What's On? Film," *Berkeley Barb*, August 23–September 5, 1979, 10; Advertisement, *The Star*, July 20, 1980, 19; "Calendar: Movies," *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 1980, S34.

¹⁰⁰ "Chicago," *Boxoffice*, May 23, 1977, C-3; "Dallas," *Boxoffice*, May 1, 1978, SW-2.

¹⁰¹ "Broadway," *Boxoffice*, June 23, 1975, E-2.

¹⁰² Advertisement, *The Retriever*, March 1, 1976, 9; Advertisement, *Daily Cougar*, February 3, 1977, 9; "Cleveland," *Boxoffice*, April 10, 1978, ME-1; "Waters Films: Tasteless, Vulgar, Campy," *Provincetown Advocate*, August 9, 1979, 5, 25.

¹⁰³ David Robinson, "Cynical Redemptions of Cinematic True Love," *The Times*, May 9, 1980, 11.

¹⁰⁴ The Baltimore International Film Festival had midnight screenings of *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* in 1977, *Desperate Living* in 1978, *Multiple Maniacs* in 1979, and *Mondo Trasho* in 1980. "Baltimore International Film Festival May 13–21," *Boxoffice*, May 9, 1977, E-8; "Baltimore's 9th International Film Festival Schedules Varied Program," *Boxoffice*, May 1, 1978, E-8; J. Wynn Rousuck, "Film Festival Turns 10," *Baltimore Sun*, April 15, 1979, D1; John Dorsey, "Film Festival Grows More Exotic," *Baltimore Sun*, April 13, 1980, D1.

¹⁰⁵ Henry Scarupa, "He Cultivates 'Sleaze' Like a Rare Orchid," *Baltimore Sun*, March 27, 1977, M25.

¹⁰⁶ Emanuel Levy further argues that *Pink Flamingos* became a cult favorite due to its "rawness" and "disjointedness," which allowed viewers to detach particular moments, lines, and performances from the larger diegetic context and find communal pleasures in sharing them with other fans. Levy, *Gay Directors*, 291–292.

¹⁰⁷ An overview of the series' goals and early screenings can be found in the initial press release. "Bicentennial Salute to American Film Comedy," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/5379/releases/MOMA_1976_0039_31.pdf.

¹⁰⁸ Larry Kardish and Adrienne Mancina, Program Notes for *Pink Flamingos*, American Film Comedy, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, December 9, 1976, "Pink Flamingos Publicity, 1972, 1976," Box 5, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

¹⁰⁹ Donald McLean, "San Francisco," *The Advocate*, July 16, 1975, 39.

¹¹⁰ David Richards, "Freaking People Out is Divine's Talent, But He Feels He's No Freak," *The Washington Star*, February 25, 1976, D-1.

¹¹¹ Bruce Pennington, "Through the Looking Glass: Two Opinions on *Women Behind Bars*," review of *Women Behind Bars*, *Washington Newsworks*, March 4–10, 1976, 15.

¹¹² Michael Feingold, "Theatre: Isn't It Antiromantic?" review of *Women Behind Bars*, *Village Voice*, May 24, 1976, 109.

¹¹³ Waters, *Shock Value*, 182.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 184.

¹¹⁵ Henry Scarupa, "Queen of Punk Rock," *Baltimore Sun*, April 16, 1978, SM23.

¹¹⁶ Michael Musto, "Edith Massey: The Egg Lady Goes Punk," *Soho Weekly News*, October 12, 1978, 24.

¹¹⁷ Jonathan Takiff, "Edie the Egg Lady is Set to Deliver," *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 1, 1978, 43.

¹¹⁸ "Edie Rocks at Cluster's 1st Live Show," *Baltimore Sun*, April 28, 1978, B7.

¹¹⁹ Richard Cromelin, "Pop News," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1978, 86.

¹²⁰ Richard Cromelin, "Edith Massey Stays in Character," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1978, F12.

¹²¹ In addition to the pieces already cited, profiles of Massey written in 1978 and 1979 include: Jack Severson, "'The Egg Lady' is Back, and Is She Clucking!" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 31, 1978, C1; Joseph Carruba, "Her Majesty, Queen Edie," *Parlee* 4, no. 6 (1978): 28–31; and Robert Kanigel, "The Bizarre World of Edith Massey," *Baltimore Jewish Times*, April 6, 1979, 56–58.

¹²² Earl Arnett, "Despite Everything, Film Festival Quality Seems to be Improved," *Baltimore Sun*, May 7, 1977, A8.

¹²³ George Wallach, "NYU, UCLA Best at Student Fest," *Back Stage*, November 28, 1975, 32. Van Dyke was also the director of the Department of Film at the Museum of Modern Art from 1965–1974, which may have helped connect Waters to the museum that would screen *Pink Flamingos* roughly a year after this event. The dates for Van Dyke's tenure as director come from "Willard Van Dyke," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, January 1986,

https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6278/releases/MOMA_1986_0012_12.pdf?2010.

-
- ¹²⁴ Waters quoted in Campbell, "Disney of Film Underground," 14.
- ¹²⁵ Waters quoted in Henderson, "Beyond Bad Taste," B5.
- ¹²⁶ Waters quoted in Coleman, "John Waters," 13.
- ¹²⁷ Ibid.
- ¹²⁸ John Dorsey, "Film Forum Takes Baltimore to the Movies," *Baltimore Sun*, September 10, 1978, D1.
- ¹²⁹ For more on the state of the Baltimore Film Forum in the late 1970s, see Dorsey, "Film Forum," D1.
- ¹³⁰ "Calendar: Films," *Baltimore Sun*, December 1, 1978, B2; "Calendar: Films," *Baltimore Sun*, December 8, 1978, B2; "Spanish Film at Center Stage," *Baltimore Sun*, December 17, 1978, D7; "Film Forum Sets Schedule," *Baltimore Sun*, January 14, 1979, D8; "Film Forum Bills Movies by Sirk and De Sica," *Baltimore Sun*, January 21, 1979, N5.
- ¹³¹ See, for instance, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, "Fassbinder on Sirk," *Film Comment*, November/December 1975, 22–24.
- ¹³² Waters quoted in Thompson, "Blueboy Interviews," 95; Waters quoted in "A Conversation with John Waters!" *The Magic Theater*, Summer 1978, 45. Amongst the other names on that 1978 list were Russ Meyer, Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, and George Cukor.
- ¹³³ Waters quoted in "A Conversation with John Waters!" 20.
- ¹³⁴ Waters quoted in Louis Postel, "'A Lot of People Were Upset That We Put the Baby in the Refrigerator...' An Interview with John Waters," *Provincetown Magazine* 1, no. 2 (1977): 12.
- ¹³⁵ Waters continued his relationship with the Baltimore Film Forum in 1979, when he introduced a screening of *The Honeymoon Killers* (Leonard Kastle, 1970). While Waters does not appear to have programmed the film, its themes of love, crime, and celebrity intertwined with Waters's own work and public obsessions. "Film Forum Bills American, French Movies," *Baltimore Sun*, December 16, 1969, D9.
- ¹³⁶ Addison Verrill, "Butchery and Lechery Tide Ebbing?" *Variety*, June 26, 1974, 29.
- ¹³⁷ "New Line Presentations: The Second Annual Catalogue," Special Events Division of New Line Cinema, Fall/Winter 1975–1976, from the private collection of Leonard Maltin. Thank you to Daniel Herbert for sharing this material with me.
- ¹³⁸ Over the course of 1975–1977, Waters visited (amongst others) the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Arizona, as well as local Baltimore universities. Bevar, "Waters Gravely Discussed Disgust," 20; Hogner, "John Waters' Movies," Campbell, "Disney of Film Underground," 12; Slaton White, "Ugh! Master of Bad Taste Cinema Returns with New Film," *The Diamondback*, September 9, 1977, 10.
- ¹³⁹ Coleman, "John Waters," 13.
- ¹⁴⁰ Waters quoted in Postel, "A Lot of People," 16.
- ¹⁴¹ Waters quoted in Gary Mullinax, "Waters Film Tests Public Tastes Again," *Sunday News Journal*, March 26, 1978, D7.
- ¹⁴² *Boxoffice* noted in 1978 that "[Waters's] considerable impact is indicated in going lectures fees of \$1,000 at colleges and universities." "Cape Cod," *Boxoffice*, October 2, 1978, NE-4.
- ¹⁴³ A contemporaneous article says the lecture occurred at the New School in New York, while Waters himself says it took place at the School of Visual Arts. See "Talent Talk," *Billboard*, November 19, 1977, 59.
- ¹⁴⁴ Waters, *Shock Value*, 219.
- ¹⁴⁵ "Talent Talk" 59.
- ¹⁴⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 219.
- ¹⁴⁷ Waters also continued to be active in the Baltimore cultural scene, as when Goucher College invited Waters to speak on a panel entitled "Censorship and the Visual Arts." "Talks," *Baltimore Sun*, November 10, 1978, B2.
- ¹⁴⁸ "Ellen Burstyn Lectures," *Variety*, September 3, 1975, 28.
- ¹⁴⁹ Sefcovic, "John Waters," 19.
- ¹⁵⁰ Waters told Louis Postel in 1977 that he was trying to "get a book out of the screenplays." See Postel, "A Lot of People," 17.
- ¹⁵¹ Waters quoted in *ibid.* 13.
- ¹⁵² Waters quoted in Sefcovic, "John Waters," 19.
- ¹⁵³ Calendo, "Meet John Waters," 98–103.
- ¹⁵⁴ John Waters, "All My Trials," *Oui*, May 1978, 56–58, 127–128, 130; John Waters, "Casting for the Heavies," *Oui*, November 1978, 37; John Waters, "Troubled Waters," *Oui*, August 1979, NP.
- ¹⁵⁵ See, for instance, Alan Cameron, "Not Just Another Pretty Picture," *New Haven Advocate*, May 17, 1978, 30.
- ¹⁵⁶ Waters quoted in Scarupa, "He Cultivates Sleaze," M23.
- ¹⁵⁷ Waters, "All My Trials," 57.

-
- ¹⁵⁸ Waters quoted in Calendo, "Meet John Waters," 102.
- ¹⁵⁹ Waters, "All My Trials," 58.
- ¹⁶⁰ Waters quoted in Thompson, "Blueboy Interviews," 94.
- ¹⁶¹ Waters, "All My Trials," 58.
- ¹⁶² Waters quoted in Thompson, "Blueboy Interviews," 94.
- ¹⁶³ Waters quoted in Hammett, "Waters Does It," 6D.
- ¹⁶⁴ Waters, "All My Trials," 130.
- ¹⁶⁵ Waters quoted in Postel, "A Lot of People," 14.
- ¹⁶⁶ Waters quoted in Thompson, "Blueboy Interviews," 93.
- ¹⁶⁷ Waters, "All My Trials," 127.
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁷⁰ Waters quoted in Turan, "Baltimore's King of Repulsion," 14.
- ¹⁷¹ "All My Trials" 58.

Chapter Five

The Smell of Change in the Air: Negotiating Brand Reconfiguration in the Early 1980s

At the world premiere of his latest feature *Polyester* (1981), John Waters was asked by a reporter what would become a common question: have you finally gone mainstream? “I’ve always tried to sell out,” Waters replied, before adding, “I hardly think that making a movie with a 300-pound drag queen, Tab Hunter, and a device which lets you smell [certain unpleasant bodily odors] is selling out.”¹ His response summarizes the complexities of Waters’s directorial brand in the early 1980s. With *Polyester* and the release of his first book, *Shock Value*, later that year, Waters clearly positioned himself to have wider commercial and cultural reach than ever before (or “sell out,” in the winkingly commercial terminology that he both exploited and parodied for years). In the next breath, however, he pushes back against his own statement, stressing that the provocative humor and mischievous spirit so central to his previous work would remain a part of *Polyester* and presumably anything else he did. While his efforts at brand reconfiguration would prove more direct and robust than the more provisional steps discussed in the last chapter, he would self-consciously work to retain those elements that had defined him in the public eye since his career began.

This chapter analyzes both *Polyester* and *Shock Value* as examples of how a director’s ability to reconfigure their brand rests upon a complex negotiation between the building of new associations and the sustaining of elements central to their public identity. *Polyester* was indeed a departure for Waters: a \$300,000 budget, shot on 35mm film, co-starring a famous (albeit faded) Hollywood actor, and an R-rating that reflects a reduction in the kind of extreme comic grotesquerie that marked his earlier work. For all the ways Waters sought to convey the “dirty ideas” discussed in the last chapter through *Polyester*’s increased technical polish and relative

scatological restraint, he also included an element that directly connected back to the disreputable exploitation gimmickry he'd been working with his entire career.

This was Odorama, a scratch-and-sniff card that viewers received with the purchase of their ticket to *Polyester*. The rectangular cardboard card included 10 circles, each marked with a number. As audience members watched *Polyester*, a number occasionally flashed at the bottom-right corner of the screen that corresponded to one of the circles on the card. This tells viewers to scratch the surface of that particular circle, which will then emit an odor that is meant to replicate what the film's protagonist is smelling. An extravagant marketing gimmick bridging the diegesis of the film and the exhibition space of the theater, Odorama acted as a countervailing force of playful viewer disruption within a film marked by a more restrained relationship to lurid shock. Through an analysis of Odorama's creation, diegetic usage, positioning within *Polyester*'s marketing campaign, and relationship to other, more "restrained" types of referential humor within the film, I argue that Waters utilized Odorama as a means of negotiating his shifting brand identity by balancing *Polyester*'s more mainstream aesthetics with the wild-card of an ironically tacky exhibition gimmick.

Polyester would be followed three months later by the publication of *Shock Value*, an autobiographical book that covered his film career, cultural obsessions, and key artistic and interpersonal relationships.² *Shock Value* solidified the brand extension that had been occurring since the late 1970s, positioning him within the literary world and establishing his writing in a more substantial manner than his earlier magazine pieces. It also represented another act of brand reconfiguration, albeit one once again marked by an oscillation between the preservation of pre-existing connotations and the fostering of new aspects of his public persona. In *Shock Value*, Waters recounts the outrageous production histories and personal anecdotes that he had been

sharing in interviews and shorter essayistic pieces since the early 1970s. At the same time, narrativizing these piecemeal tidbits into a cohesive published volume allowed Waters to fashion himself as a storyteller and commentator—an inevitable by-product of extending into a new medium, but also a shift in the public perception of Waters's talents and identity.

Analyzing the production, structure, and reception of *Shock Value* allows one to mark a key moment in Waters's movement from someone primarily defined by their broadly-conceived cinematic work to a public figure whose reflections and observations could be enjoyed without ever having seen his films. While the underground exploiter persona would always remain a key part of Waters's identity, this chapter ultimately argues that *Polyester* and especially *Shock Value* mark a career turning point where his status as a cultural satirist and public personality began to move towards the center of Waters's directorial brand. That this occurred not through an unambiguous switch from one role to another but rather through a negotiation of various roles speaks to the complex processes through which individuals adapt their art and identities in an ever-shifting industrial and cultural landscape.

A Gimmick by Any Other Name Wouldn't Smell as Sweet – *Polyester* and Odorama

The significance of Odorama for Waters's career more broadly relies upon both an understanding of the director's ambitions for *Polyester* overall and the other strategies he used within the film that (while lacking the knowing ostentatiousness of Odorama) allowed Waters to inject referential humor into the film without the logistical complications of his olfactory gimmick. As such, this section will first consider *Polyester* as a product of Waters's shifting directorial goals, as well as distributor New Line Cinema's evolving relationship to film production. Then, it will analyze Odorama's conception, manufacture, usage, and reception, all with an eye towards evaluating its role as a counterbalance of ironic exploitation gimmickry

within the relatively more subdued *Polyester*. Finally, it will briefly consider the role of cinema-focused humor and stunt casting as self-reflexive strategies that Waters also employed within the film, comparing their role within *Polyester* to that of *Odorama*.

Defining the R-rated Waters's Movie

Waters undoubtedly considered *Polyester* to be an opportunity for the type of brand reconfiguration that he had discussed in the previous chapter, but one in which the film itself would offer a clearer distinction from his earlier work. Waters's first described the project that would become *Polyester* while promoting *Desperate Living* in 1977. "My next movie is going to have an R rating," he said. "It's going to be a love story, and I hope to do it in Smell-O-Vision...I'd love to do a movie with Annette Funicello...but I read that she won the Catholic Mother of the Year award, so you just know she'd never do a movie with me."³ This answer touches upon many of the elements that would define *Polyester*—the incorporation of the olfactory gimmick; the arch casting of a 50s-era teen star based partly on their squeaky-clean former image—but what stands out for the moment is Waters's insistence that the film will have an R rating. Noting such a hoped-for rating implies that Waters was both aiming for a wider audience than what his typical X-ratings would allow and that this goal would be shaping his upcoming project.

For Waters, reaching a larger audience through a toned-down version of his own provocative filmmaking came from a combination of commercial necessity and artistic experimentation. "The reason I'm trying to reach more people is because I want to keep making movies, and I want them to look better," he said, noting higher technical quality as a goal in and of itself and one that would likely attract an expanded viewership.⁴ More flippantly, he would also express a more extended version of the response quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

“I’ve always tried to sell out,” he said. “Since 1966, just nobody bought me.”⁵ Repeated in various forms across many interviews for *Polyester*, the line underscores the extent to which Waters’s winking appreciation of (and need to account for) the commercial logic of industrial film production remained a part of how he framed his movies and himself within the public eye.

More frequently, however, he admitted to fearing creative stagnation. As discussed in the previous chapter, Waters had expressed a desire to retain a core of shock within his films but to make said shock less reliant on blatant scatology and violence and more tied to matters of social commentary and taste. The problem for *Female Trouble* (1974) and *Desperate Living* (1977) became that those films largely retained the aesthetic and tone of *Pink Flamingos* (1972) while somewhat ratcheting back the extremity of the humor and screening (at least initially) away from the earlier film’s midnight movie context—a combination that led to decreased viewer interest overall. Waters continued to express a desire to explore provocative material while expanding his comedic and stylistic repertoire, noting that his previous film in particular perhaps suffered from not shifting his established aesthetic far enough. “I had done the shock value thing, and it was becoming boring,” he admitted. “After *Desperate Living*, especially, which I felt was a little too much like the other films, I wanted to try something different. I had this nightmare of myself at 80, making movies about people eating colostomy bags.”⁶ The quip underscored the continued tension within Waters’s career between maintaining a provocateur reputation while rejecting the fool’s errand of working to exceed previous extremes in cinematic scandal and scatology.

With *Polyester*, Waters continued to discuss the possibilities of keeping a core of thematic disrepute while framing these ideas in ways that would make them accessible to a larger viewership than his 70s-era fanbase. He noted, “I wanted to make a film that would appeal to a wider audience, and that would reach those who would be frightened to see my other films. I

wanted to infect a larger group of people...make the cancer grow.”⁷ This language of infection and metastasis occurred frequently when Waters described his intentions behind making his first R-rated film. Though admitting to adopting a softer touch, he frames the decision as one of smuggling sleazy subversion into the most unlikely of places. This is underscored by his always acute sense of how exhibition spaces shape a film’s audience, message, and cultural impact: “My dream is for my movie to play in shopping malls across America.”⁸

That shopping malls were even an exhibition option for a Waters’s film spoke not only to the filmmaker’s planned shifts in his work, but also the reach and ambitions of Waters’s longtime distributor, New Line Cinema. While the company had continued to achieve modest success in the late 1970s with the acquisition of foreign-language art-house films and exploitation titles, it remained resolute in its pursuit of an ever-expanding presence in the theatrical market.⁹ This particularly meant investing in the production of films. As Justin Wyatt notes, three factors encouraged the company to more aggressively pursue financing in-house projects: an intensifying market for art-house and independent acquisitions; new production funds from Chemical Bank and private investors; and increased potential for ancillary revenue from television, syndication, international markets, and other subsidiaries.¹⁰

Organizationally, the company responded to these circumstances by setting up two new entities: New Line Financial Corp., which would help arrange financing for independent productions; and New Line International Corp., designed to distribute product overseas.¹¹ Despite these expansions, however, the company’s plans to pursue aggressively in-house production had slowed since the release of their first film, *Stunts* (Mark Lester, 1977). This push resumed in earnest by 1980, following another infusion of financing from sources in England and the Netherlands.¹² For Waters, the company’s focus on strengthening their own productions

and the lengthy working relationship between Waters and New Line would seem to make his next feature a candidate for New Line financing.

Completed by the end of 1978, Waters described the script for *Polyester* as Sirk-inspired but distinctly his own, “a ludicrous melodrama, like *Father Knows Best* gone totally berserk. It’s all the stuff we didn’t see on television, when Robert Young’s fucking his secretary and Betty’s hooked on smack.”¹³ It follows the travails of Francine Fishpaw (Divine), a middle-class Christian housewife with a severely dysfunctional family. Loutish husband Elmer (David Samson) owns a local porn house and is having an affair with secretary Sandra (Mink Stole). Daughter Lu-Lu (Mary Garlington) is flunking her high-school classes and dating punkish bad-boy Bo-Bo (Stiv Bators), while son Dexter (Ken King) sniffs angel dust and pathologically stomps on women’s feet in public. Francine’s only friend is Cuddles (Edith Massey), her former maid who became suddenly wealthy when another employer died and left her their fortune. The already put-upon Francine descends into alcoholic despair once Elmer leaves her for Sandra, Lu-Lu becomes pregnant, and Dexter is arrested. She achieves brief happiness in the arms of the mysterious Todd Tomorrow (Tab Hunter), who is eventually revealed to be in league with Francine’s cruel, greedy mother La Rue (Joni Ruth White).

Though Waters spent three years raising money for the film, two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars of the film’s \$300,000 budget came from two sources. First, New Line Productions agreed to fund much of the film as part of a string of productions that it was either financing or co-financing in the summer of 1980.¹⁴ Though not explicitly broken down in the film’s financing memo, the \$250,000 was shared between New Line and Michael White, Ltd. Prominent in the world of London theater, White was a producer on both the original UK stage production of *The Rocky Horror Show* and the subsequent American film adaptation, as well as a

producer on *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, 1975).¹⁵ White expanded his reach as a film producer after the runaway success of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), which by the summer of 1980 was playing at roughly 120 U.S. venues on any given week and had grossed approximately \$15,000,000 globally.¹⁶ Most notably, this meant producing a sequel to *Rocky Horror*, *Shock Treatment* (Jim Sharman, 1981), but it also meant becoming involved in titles whose adjacency to midnight movies reflected White's success within that specialized arena.¹⁷ With the additional \$50,000 secured through (as per the financing memo) selling "five units of \$10,000 per unit" to individual investors, *Polyester* went into production in late-September 1980. The combination of shifting directorial goals and fortuitous industrial circumstances allowed Waters's ambitions to begin translating his low-budget trash aesthetic onto a more expensive canvas.

Odorama – Object, Experience, Gimmick

The idea of connecting some type of olfactory gimmick to *Polyester* had been a central part of Waters's conception of the project since the beginning. Besides repeating variations of the "Annette Funicello in Smell-o-Vision" quip in interviews throughout 1977 and 1978, Waters's archival materials show that initial drafts of the script both featured Odorama within the title. One draft dated 1978 is titled "*Polyester* (Working Title) A Film in ODOR-AMA," while another centers scent even more prominently: "'*Nervous Nostrils*' (Working Title) A Film in ODOR-AMA."¹⁸

As to why Waters fixated on this particular idea, he cites several reasons—all of which relating back strongly to a pre-determined element of his directorial brand. First, Waters saw Odorama in practical terms. "It was an idea that helped finance the film," Waters said. "I don't think this will revolutionize the film business. I mean, I don't think Coppola's next movie will be

in Odorama.”¹⁹ The quote underscores Waters’s acute understanding of the realities of fundraising. At the same time, it highlights how his reputation as a winking purveyor of exploitation-tinged gimmicks allowed Odorama to appeal to potential financiers, whereas it might raise eyebrows were it to be proposed by a more conventional filmmaker. Waters thought of Odorama strategically, targeting a different audience than his earlier films but following the same logic: “Odorama is the same gimmick to get people, as eating shit was to get midnight people. People remember it; they take the card with them.”²⁰

Second, Waters viewed Odorama as “my homage to William Castle, my favorite director.”²¹ As discussed earlier, Waters has had a long-time affection for the exploiter’s outrageous exhibition gimmicks. While Castle never attempted to activate his audiences’ nostrils, the notion of tying a film’s identity to a highly participatory theatrical stunt comes out of the Castle playbook. It provided a way for Waters—who used low-budget variations of Castle-like gimmicks throughout his career—to use the increased financial and logistical resources at his disposal to work in the footsteps of a personal idol.

Waters also seemed amused by the dysfunctional history of injecting odors into theaters more generally. “I knew it from the two Smell-o-vision movies, *The Scent of Mystery* (1960) and another one [*Behind the Great Wall*, 1959],” he told Scott McDonald. “It never worked: they had to send these big machines around to the theaters, and they couldn’t get the smells out of the air conditioning. But I liked the idea.”²² These technical mishaps speak to a more fundamental failure of importing olfactory sensations into the cinema. As Vivian Sobchack notes, odors pumped into theaters are divorced from both the object they’re supposed to smell like and the objects on screen that the viewer is purportedly sniffing along with the characters, leading to a strangely disembodied and unsatisfying experience.²³ Whether Odorama solved this elemental

issue is debatable, but the very flimsiness of the concept seemed, on some level, to link up with Waters's love of brazenly cheap exploitation gimmickry.

Finally, Waters linked his inspiration for *Odorama* with his own disreputable critical reputation. He told multiple interviewers that the idea came from a particularly harsh review given to one of his films.²⁴ Waters recalled, "One critic said that if you see my name on the marquee, you should walk on the other side of the street and hold your nose. You can't get a much meaner review than that, so I decided I might as well make one that really smelled and that's how I thought of using *Odorama* in *Polyester*."²⁵ Faced with dismissive criticism of his work's inherent worth, Waters doubled down, amplifying the very elements of his films that a given critic abhorred. Waters had been using a version of this tactic since the mid-1960s, when he would take the most critical portions of local reviews and place them as pull quotes on his homemade posters. As then, Waters knew that underscoring the qualities of his cinema that his most vociferous critics despised would not only mock their aesthetic standards but would be a signal to his knowing fanbase that his filmmaking delighted in the very qualities that horrified stodgy cultural gatekeepers.²⁶

Of course, as discussed in the previous chapter, Waters had a robust contingent of critics by the late 1970s who either fully supported his work or were critical of it arguably on its own aesthetic terms. To frame the most pearl-clutching response as impetus for *Odorama*'s celebration of all things literally and figuratively rank did not necessarily imply Waters was fighting against an overwhelming critical backlash by making the film. Instead, it imbued *Odorama* with the kind of nose-thumbing impishness that had long defined his directorial brand and would become ever more complicated as *Polyester* received positive notices even from reviewers who usually disliked his work.

The practicalities of achieving Odorama, meanwhile, revealed how a gimmick that was meant to tie *Polyester* to Waters's exploitation-influenced irreverence nevertheless relied upon resources and industrial players whose cooperation seemed predicated on the film's presumed mainstream commercial prospects. Of the roughly \$300,000 budget, \$35,000 went towards Odorama, illustrating the extent to which Waters's ability to realize this stunt relied upon financing that went far beyond what he had previously raised independently.²⁷ Waters thought strategically in this regard, wanting something that was less laborious than mid-century systems. "When they made the first smell picture, *Scent of Mystery*, they needed fans and things," he said. "Odorama was much easier. Scratch-and-sniff cards are the most logical thing. I wanted something you could send to colleges."²⁸ At the same time, his personal predilections demanded smells that differed from those previously used in scent-enhanced cinema: "They only used nice smells, which is boring."²⁹ Achieving those particular odors illustrated how Waters's reputation for the extravagantly repellent made Odorama's very production replicate its overall status within the film—an object whose outlandishness playfully complicated the more-mainstream environs within which it existed.

It fell to New Line's Sara Risher to investigate how to develop and manufacture the cards themselves. She approached 3M (Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Co.), which had developed the process of micro-encapsulation, a.k.a. scratch-and-sniff, in 1970.³⁰ The company agreed, though Risher recalls telling 3M executives that the film was a "wholesome, family movie" in order for them to work on the project, revealing the relative nature of *Polyester*'s "mainstream" credentials.³¹ Many of the fragrances used within *Polyester* came directly from 3M's "Microfragrance Library List." Documents from Waters's archive include a semi-finalized list of "Odorama Smells" with the name of a given scent and a letter-number combination next to

it which corresponded to the odor code on 3M's library list.³² Seven of the twelve scents on this initial Odorama document came directly from 3M's library, though the final number of smells within the film would eventually be winnowed down to ten. This allowed Risher, Waters, and others working on the film to take advantage of 3M's pre-existing supplies.

Some desired smells, however, had no clear match within 3M's list—and, not surprisingly, these scents tended to be those whose pungency or eyebrow-raising nature meant Risher and Waters had to be creative in utilizing the company's resources. For instance, among the scents on the Odorama Smells list that are marked as “develop” (as opposed to corresponding to a coded smell from the library list) are “Fart,” “Poppers,” and “Dirty Feet.”³³ Notes written next to these smells offered adjacent odors that could be developed without explicitly asking 3M—which Waters described as “a very conservative company”—to put their resources behind recreating scents attached to disreputable sources.³⁴ So, “Fart” could be framed as “rotten egg,” “Poppers” as “ammonia,” and “Dirty Feet” as “Lindberger cheese” or “real dirty socks.”³⁵ “I couldn't tell them I wanted fart smells; I had to say I needed rotten eggs or something,” Risher recalls.³⁶ 3M made the cards, but their manufacture reveals the occasionally-humorous but tangible complications that arose when placing Waters's idiosyncratic demands within the confines of mainstream industrial production.

Of course, Odorama needed not only to draw viewers in through its cheeky spectacle, but to function as a textual element within *Polyester* itself. All Odorama cards contained ten scents: rose, flatulence, poppers, pizza, gasoline, skunk, gas, new car smell, dirty shoes, and air freshener. How would they be distributed across the film? What would be the relationship between the smell cues and the larger narrative? How would Waters maximize the grotesque

humor of the gimmick by manipulating the relationship between the viewer, the odor, and the visual cues on screen?

Memos to Waters from Risher outlining Robert Shaye's notes on Odorama's use within the *Polyester* script offer insights into how these questions were collectively addressed.³⁷ Shaye's suggestions spanned the gamut, which Risher herself admits in the introduction of one of the memos: "Some are good and some are atrocious, so read with an open mind—maybe some will work."³⁸ What's most notable here are those notes that seemed to have had a tangible impact on the film's deployment of the gimmick. Shaye first encouraged an overall reduction in the number of smells, which numbered eighteen in Waters's initial script.³⁹ Development and manufacturing costs likely encouraged Shaye to suggest cutting some scents, but his notes also pointed to moments where the number of smells and their relative proximity to one another had the potential to create confusion for the viewer. Commenting on the use of an airplane glue scent, Risher writes that "Bob really feels that this and poppers are too close together and that they smell too much alike to be really funny or effective and therefore he strongly suggests dropping this—since we need to drop two anyway."⁴⁰ The number of odors eventually fell to ten, with the airplane glue scent being amongst those excised.

Shaye's comments on the utilization of a skunk smell similarly consider how the audience will be impacted by the timing and presentation of the scent: "Because we will see [the skunk] first and then groan and not want to sniff it, maybe we could do something with the numbers at this point, like flashing them more intensely or bigger or with a shot of the doctor [who introduces the gimmick at film's beginning] in the corner saying, 'Come on, now, scratch it!'"⁴¹ Waters did not fully incorporate Shaye's suggestion of intensifying the use of the flashing number along with the skunk's appearance. Still, these discussions about the relationship

between the appearance of the number on-screen and the visual revelation of a given odor's providence illuminates larger considerations about tone, timing, and relative narrative integration that needed to be addressed for Odorama to satisfy as a cinematic experience as well as a tool of directorial brand maintenance.⁴²

Ultimately, Odorama's use within *Polyester* once again seemed to mirror its role within Waters's reconfiguration of his directorial brand more broadly. The presence of Odorama fully interrupts the film's diegesis only once, and otherwise resides on a flexible continuum between diegetic disruption and integration. While largely tied to the film's more traditional narrative, it tweaks the film's characters and playfully unsettles the standard moviegoing experience for audiences.

The most flagrantly disruptive appearance of Odorama occurs at the very start of *Polyester*. The film begins with a prologue, in which the viewer is introduced to Dr. Arnold Quackenshaw (Rick Breitenfeld), a "prominent ear, nose and throat specialist" who does not reappear once the narrative proper begins. Standing in a laboratory, wearing a lab coat, and speaking in a cartoonish German accent, Quackenshaw directly addresses the camera as he explains the basic mechanics of Odorama and how it was developed. More than just providing context, Quackenshaw's monologue establishes the playfully satiric stance that *Polyester* encourages the viewer to take towards the gimmick. "The producers of this film have unselfishly spent untold millions of dollars to develop this startling process," Quackenshaw declares, "and I have been locked away for many years in the laboratory experimenting with this mind-boggling project." The disjuncture between the effective-if-unspectacular Odorama card and the puffery of Quackenshaw's descriptions recalls the inflated promises of mid-century exploitation gimmickry. The film also connects back to earlier iterations of exhibition trickery at the

conclusion of the prologue, when a literal expansion of the image's aspect ratio accompanies Quackenshaw's melodramatic proclamation: "This is Odorama!"

The prologue not only establishes the mechanics of Odorama but sets up a baseline connection between the on-screen visual signifier, the flashing number on screen, and the scent that emits from the card once the viewer scratches and sniffs. Quackenshaw stands next to a rose, Odorama card in hand. The number "1" flashes on the bottom right of the screen. Quackenshaw scratches and sniffs the card, and then sniffs the flower. The formula is clear—a visual anchor for the smell, a numerical cue to scratch the card, and a smell that mimics the established visual anchor. While the audience will rarely again experience so seamless a connection between these three elements, it offers guidelines for how to interact with the film.

Once *Polyester*'s narrative begins in earnest, the appearance of Odorama becomes tied to two overlapping diegetic factors that integrate its presence into the plot and themes of the film overall. First, a narrative conceit motivates a close connection between Francine and the odors. As established early on through other character's comments and her own ostentatious sniffing, Francine possesses a highly-attuned sense of smell. She herself is never the source of the various odors until the very end of the film, so the viewer becomes cued to look for Francine's upturned nose as a potential warning that a scratch-and-sniff signal is coming. Second, just about all of the odors that the viewer smells connect to Francine's seemingly endless travails. To take a small example, the fart tied to the second scent comes from Francine's husband, Elmer, who ignores her advances in bed and whose loud flatulence seems to only underline his boorish indifference toward her. It would be ignoring the film's highly-satiric tone to argue that the relationship between Francine and the viewer's olfactory experiences somehow invite greater empathetic

connection. Nevertheless, this pattern sets up a series of constants that trains the viewers and narrows the odors' employment to certain narrative scenarios.

Specific examples of Odorama's use within *Polyester* reveal how Waters toys with audience expectations, linking the smells to the film's characters and narrative situations while encouraging the extra-textual pleasures of interacting with the various odors themselves. Sometimes, the viewer sees the rank source of a smell right before they're cued via the onscreen number to scratch their card, setting up a playful dread as they prepare to sniff an odor they know will be unappealing. Building off of Shaye's aforementioned script notes, for example, one scene finds Francine and Cuddles having a picnic in a local park. Francine begins to smell something but cannot identify the offscreen source. Waters then cuts away from Francine and to the cause of her olfactory distress: a skunk. Within a second of this revelation, the number "6" flashes on the screen, cueing the viewer to scratch-and-sniff their card with the full knowledge that they will be inhaling the odious stench of the animal's spray.

Other times, the gap between Francine's ability to identify an odor's source and the viewer's capacity to do so leads to a similar mixture of laughter and unease. Odor number eight is "new car smell," which the viewer eventually recognizes. The scent actually constitutes a shift in the film's overall patterning, as it marks the first time that a smell that Francine and the viewer share links to a positive development in Francine's life (here, her official introduction to the dreamy Todd Tomorrow). Before this scent is visually identified as emanating from a freshly-purchased automobile, however, the camera lingers on Francine and Todd as he lasciviously tells Francine that he wants to show her an out-of-sight object that's "long" and "sleek" and "powerful." The viewer is cued to begin scratching and sniffing before the car is revealed as its

source, leading to some queasily comic confusion about exactly what kind of object the scent is anchored to.

If odor number eight impishly withholds a visual anchor, odor number nine upends audience expectations by taking advantage of the literal time delay between the numeral's on-screen flash and the viewer's reaction. Scent nine initially seems to offer some olfactory relief, when La Rue places a bouquet of flowers in front of Francine's nose. This visual is then accompanied by a flashing "9." In the time that it would take most viewers to scratch the card and bring it to their nose, however, La Rue switches out the floral arrangement for a pair of dirty tennis shoes, which is then revealed to be the smell from the card.

Such permutations of knowledge, anticipation, and surprise continue across *Polyester*. The viewer will broadly expect unpleasant or jolting odors based on Waters's reputation as a purveyor of cinematic gross-outs. The specifics of how and when these smells appear become their own form of pleasure, however, due to Waters's consistent tweaks in how the smells are cued and their relationship to the onscreen image. It recalls Waters's oft-discussed ideas about audience pleasure within his films, relying upon the viewer's desire to simultaneously experience disgust and laugh about it. These variations also reflect Odorama's position in relation to the film more broadly—a seemingly superfluous gimmick that proves quite essential in injecting *Polyester* with the kind of raucous energy that might have been brought to earlier Waters's films via a midnight-screening venue or in-person promotional stunt.

As befitting so blatant an exploitation ploy, Odorama featured prominently in the advertising campaign for *Polyester*. Early poster designs by Waters initially framed Odorama as both a vehicle to satirize contemporary trends in blockbuster moviemaking and a means to differentiate *Polyester* from such big-budget titles. One sketch shows a giant nose with airplane

wings jutting out from either side as it glides through a fluffy white cloud. The tagline reads, “More laughs than any film since *Airplane!* Odorama is a great gimmick.”⁴³ This references the highly successful *Airplane!* (David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, Jerry Zucker, 1980), with the cartoon nose both pointing to and parodying the earlier film’s setting and poster design. This tactic is seen in another mock-up, where a similarly-drawn nose sticks up out of the ocean like a shark’s fin. “Just when you thought it was safe to breathe again...” warns the tagline, an even more overt skewering of an even bigger box-office sensation, *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975).⁴⁴

These posters seem like the visual embodiment of a sentiment that Waters expressed about the relationship between his own films and mainstream cinematic fare dating back to *Pink Flamingos*. “When you’ve got a real low budget...you’ve got to do something that the regular people won’t give you,” he said. “We had \$10,000 to make [*Pink Flamingos*]. There were no underground movies left—you had to compete with *Shampoo* [Hal Ashby, 1975].”⁴⁵ Waters mistakes the dates a bit here—*Pink Flamingos* opened in New York two years before *Shampoo*, though *Female Trouble* was released the same day as Ashby’s film in New York City—but this perceived flattening of the exhibition market meant low-budget filmmakers needed to conceptualize themselves as being in competition with major Hollywood releases for viewers. These mock-ups succinctly illustrate this tension within Waters’s brand reconfiguration more broadly, positioning *Polyester* within the same visual mode as these box-office hits even as they’re parodying their form.

The final main poster for *Polyester*, meanwhile, would center Odorama while jettisoning these would-be film parodies, foregrounding it as a unique exhibition stunt and connecting the gimmick directly to Waters’s established directorial brand of campy repugnance. The poster’s main image is an illustration of Francine craning her head over the impossibly large amount of

objects she's carrying in her arms. Some of these relate to a particular smell on the Odorama card—rose, skunk, tennis shoes, gasoline—while others seem to connote a more general air of disgust, most notably a fish jumping out of a porcelain toilet.⁴⁶ Text connects this imagery to the film's central gimmick: "Filmed in Odorama."

Taken from the aforementioned mock-up poster, the design of the Odorama logo itself is illustrated in bold, curvilinear lettering that recalls the Cinemascope logo, even as squiggly lines emanating from the tops of the letters humorously underscore the fundamentally olfactory nature of the process. This combination of visual signifiers at once recalls the heights of mid-century exhibition technology and parodically ties it to the fetid sensory experience that a Waters-branded version of smell-o-vision would imply. Almost all of the posters paired this logo with a tagline whose mock-sobriety further underlines Odorama's links to and lampooning of exploitation's puffed-up promises of cinematic enlightenment: "Smelling is believing." (Some posters added the second, winkingly hyperbolic: "It's Scentsational!")⁴⁷

Still, for all of the ways in which the poster sold Odorama as a clear manifestation of Waters's playfully sleazy reputation, its design also speaks to the very tensions between this version of Waters's directorial brand and the seemingly acceptable iteration aimed for by *Polyester*. Featured among the various odorous items held by Francine is a can of aerosol spray. It emits a cartoon cloud that takes up much of the poster and creates a frame within which is featured glowing critics' quotes from such mainstream publications as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times*. The image's juxtaposition of the gimmick meant to retain Waters's underground exploiter persona and the critical praise signaling his transition into a new, more culturally sanctioned role as social satirist provides the entrée into reviewers' reactions to

Polyester generally, and how they felt *Odorama* related to the more “restrained” aesthetic the film seemed to otherwise embody.

Polyester received the most consistently positive reviews of Waters’s career up to that point, and from the widest range of critics.⁴⁸ Besides the aforementioned publications quoted in the film’s advertisement, reviewers that had in the past either outright dismissed Waters or treated his films with a good deal of condescension expressed their surprised enthusiasm for the director’s latest work. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* noted his admiration for *Polyester* on three different occasions, most notably in a June 7, 1981 column: “Mr. Waters still celebrates the seedy, the tacky and the second-rate, but this time with a coherence and a wit that sharpen the point of view.”⁴⁹ Even longtime local foil Lou Cedrone of the *Baltimore Evening Sun* admitted that, “it is apparent that Waters has cleaned up much of his act, and I must say I enjoyed the film, the first time I have ever said that about a Waters movie.”⁵⁰

The film certainly attracted a robust contingent of naysayers, including the very critic whose earlier insult to Waters’s work partly prompted *Odorama*’s creation. “It takes a remarkably perverse taste to find much fun in this kind of movie, a kind of cinematic graffiti which, happily, is unique,” Archer Winsten of the *New York Post* declared.⁵¹ Several reviewers also criticized the film from the opposing angle, as fans of Waters’s more explicitly-outré titles that found his current offering defanged by comparison. “It’s as if the Cockettes were doing a Stephen Sondheim musical, or as if the Theater of the Ridiculous were putting on a Congreve play,” observed Carlos Clarens of the *Soho Weekly News*. “We know they are perfectly capable, but there is no need to prove it.”⁵² Still, the overall critical response proved positively glowing even when compared to the approving reviews that Waters had begun receiving in the mid-to-late 1970s.

As Cedrone and Canby's responses imply, critics who admired *Polyester* saw the film as a transition from a style of filmmaking marked by aesthetic sloppiness and obvious grotesquerie to one defined by clearer satiric focus and formal rigor. "This time, the comic vision is so controlled and steady that Mr. Waters need not rely so heavily on the grotesque touches that make his other films such perennial favorites on the weekend Midnight Movie circuit," noted Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*.⁵³ That this "comic vision" zeroes in on a recognizable and (in the eyes of many critics) justified target only elevates the film further. David Ansen of *Newsweek* notes that *Polyester* "is free of the excremental excess that distinguished Waters's early work, and its garish portrait of Middle America run amuck is sure to strike sparks of recognition in all reasonably addled families."⁵⁴ By aiming for the pieties of the suburban middle class and doing so in a way that is recognizably garish without incorporating the overtly scatological, Waters is, to quote Bruce King of *Mom...Guess What!*, "showing signs of moving away from farce and toward satire."⁵⁵ This distinction, in turn, implies an elevation in Waters's brand of comedy—a turn away from the shambolic shocks aimed at pleasing midnight movie fanatics and towards a more subtle form of comedic attack seemingly aligned with the "dirty ideas over gross images" formulation that Waters himself outlined years earlier.

One might assume that Odorama's flagrant gimmickry would collide with Waters's newfound status as a cockeyed satirist of *petit bourgeois* mores. And, indeed, critics both noted its presence in almost every review of the film and offered "warnings" to their readership that Waters's established reputation as a purveyor of gross-outs should prepare them for some less than appetizing scents. Beyond this common framing, however, reviewers tended to view Odorama largely in relation to their response to the film overall. Critics who admired *Polyester* for its restrained outrageousness and satiric bite saw Odorama as a kind of winking throwback,

less a mark of garishness than a knowing commentary on said garishness. Canby said it was “the last word on a gimmick-prone industry,” while Jay Scott of the *Globe and Mail* wryly defended it as “much more than just a gratuitous gimmick: it’s a great gratuitous gimmick.”⁵⁶

Others, however, saw its presence as skittishly catering to Waters’s pre-established fanbase. *Variety* observed that “with nudity and explicit sex and violence absent, *Polyester* strains for a marketing gimmick by introducing *Odorama*.”⁵⁷ Clarens concurs, directly tying the film’s otherwise upmarket production values to *Odorama*’s presence: “Waters’ first professionally made film—35mm, good color and a Hollywood name actor—is so tame by comparison with his earlier work that he had to seek out other venues of offense, such as a scratch ’n’ sniff gimmick called *Odorama*.”⁵⁸ If one viewed *Polyester* as successful satire, then, *Odorama* became self-conscious ribaldry. If one saw the film as reflective of a domesticated but otherwise undeveloped directorial vision, it came off as desperate pandering.

Polyester’s mixed financial success further called into question whether the balance that Waters attempted to strike between his older and newer forms of humor resonated with his viewership. The film’s first few weeks of release proved extremely promising. Like his previous films, *Polyester* premiered in Baltimore. Yet unlike the previous one-night-only sneak previews commonly held on the University of Baltimore campus, *Polyester*’s May 16, 1981 screening occurred at a dedicated Baltimore movie theater, the Charles, and its opening night showing began a commercial run at the venue.⁵⁹ The film played at the Charles (including midnight showings on Fridays and Saturdays) for two weeks, doubling the previous house record by grossing \$18,484 in its first week and nearly as much in its second.⁶⁰

Such success seemed to justify New Line’s expansive plans for the film’s New York premiere in late-May 1981, to which they dedicated \$200,000 in advertising and publicity,

reportedly “one of the company’s biggest advertising outlays.”⁶¹ *Polyester* opened in fifty-two theaters in the greater New York metro area, including five venues in Manhattan: the Eastside Cinema, the Festival, the National, the New Yorker I, and the Waverly.⁶² The film grossed \$450,000 in its first week of release—a rather stunning departure from *Desperate Living*, Waters’s last film to open in New York that premiered in three theaters and likely grossed one-twentieth of that amount in its first week of release.⁶³ By the beginning of July, the film had grossed somewhere between \$906,344 and \$1,058,422, which *Pink Flamingos* took roughly six months to earn.⁶⁴

Despite these initial successes in New York and Baltimore and smaller runs in Boston and Washington, D.C., *Polyester*’s box office performance soon began to underwhelm New Line executives.⁶⁵ A July 19, 1981 article in the *Baltimore Sun* quotes Michael Harpster, vice president of marketing at New Line, as noting that while the film exceeded New Line’s initial expectations of appealing primarily to a midnight-movie audience, “our thinking lately has been that the film definitely has an audience but it’s a limited audience and it’s not going to be a wide-breaking picture. In New York it fell rather drastically each week.”⁶⁶ The company slowed the film’s summer distribution so as to not compete directly with such special effects-driven blockbusters as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) and *Superman II* (Richard Lester, 1981)—the same types of films from which Waters presciently predicted his own work would have to differentiate itself. *Polyester* appeared in more major cities again beginning in late-August and continued to open in large or mid-size markets into spring 1982.⁶⁷ Final box office numbers are somewhat difficult to determine, but *Variety* published the last record of the film’s total earnings on November 18, 1981, when it had made \$1,368,100.⁶⁸

This number, of course, handily exceeds the film's production budget of \$300,000, and does not include international grosses. And despite the initial avoidance of this market, *Polyester* would screen in midnight showings in major American cities within a year-and-a-half of its release, although perhaps not with the frequency of those earlier Waters's titles with a more established midnight-movie fanbase.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, *Polyester* did not significantly rise above the earnings of Waters's most successful previous film, *Pink Flamingos*. Fairly or not, it is regarded today as having achieved middling financial success.⁷⁰ Notably more successful than his previous two titles, *Polyester* still exemplified the issues Waters would continue to negotiate as he reconfigured his overall directorial brand into one that retained subcultural eccentricity and provocation while aiming for wider and more mainstream audiences.

Alternative Strategies for Referential Humor

If Odorama proved the most striking insertion of the extra-cinematic into the film, other textual elements within *Polyester* also acknowledged aspects of Waters's directorial brand. These drew upon extra-diegetic knowledge of cinephile culture, tabloid gossip, and Hollywood minutiae—all of them linking to the director's obsessions for anyone familiar with his increasingly recognizable public persona. These strategies are worth briefly considering, as they would ultimately recur in Waters's filmmaking in a way that a more ostentatious gambit such as Odorama would not.

First, *Polyester* contained jokes and plot points that relied on a general knowledge of film exhibition and perhaps a more particular familiarity with Waters's own relationship to unorthodox theatrical spaces. Two examples stand out. First, Elmer Fishpaw's professional role as a pornography exhibitor proves key to the film's narrative, as one of the many ways that Francine receives public scorn from her neighbors. Elmer's venue is named the Charles Art

Theatre. This is both a regional reference to the Charles Theater where *Polyester* would have its premiere run and a larger joke on exhibitors' historic use of the language of "art" as barely-coded means of attracting viewers of erotica. Far from a guffaw-inducing joke, it instead activates a more specific appreciation for the idiosyncrasies of American moviegoing of a certain era.

Waters mirrors this comic logic later in the film, when Francine's new beau Todd Tomorrow is also revealed to be in the film exhibition business. He owns the Edmonson Drive-In Cinema, which specializes in international art titles. The drive-in's sign advertises "Dusk to Dawn, 3 Marguerite Duras Hits: *The Truck* [1977], *India Song* [1975], *Destroy, She Said* [1969]." An ad for the concession stand features animated versions of the drive-in's featured refreshments: oysters, caviar, and champagne. The jokes contained within these brief shots multiply the more one knows about filmgoing generally and Waters's history specifically: the category error of a drive-in as a haven for highbrow art cinema; the specifically difficult and esoteric work of Waters's favorite Duras placed within such a context; the use of the Edmondson Drive-In itself, a real-life Baltimore venue; and the focus on the concession-stand commercial, which recalls the meatball sub advertisement that ran at the drive-ins of Waters's youth and that the director would reference for years afterward in interviews and personal writings.

Polyester wasn't the first time that Waters included references to Baltimore landmarks or his own personal biography and obsessions. Given his increasingly frequent interviews and published essays, however, the idea of a viewership that would both know elements of Waters's interests and take pleasure in spotting them within the diegesis of his films would become ever more salient. More generally, these jokes gesture towards a particular kind of cinephile who can appreciate Waters's impish inversion of filmic taste categories.

Second, *Polyester* allowed Waters to engage in a major act of stunt casting. In his analysis of Waters's casting practices and their relationship to the ever-fluctuating nature of contemporary media stardom, Matthew Tinkcom notes that the director will employ "famous has-beens," "stars from other media," and "people made stars by the media" and then "cast [these] performers/stars against their type; in the language of commodity culture, he deliberately rebrands them in ways that might endanger the value of their celebrity signature."⁷¹ In other words, Waters knowingly draws upon the tarnished or cultish reputation of a given figure from film or media, uses said reputation as a means of attracting publicity for his own film, and then provides them with a filmic role whose humor is partly based on how it toys with (if not outright contradicts) their established persona. Waters had previously done so in *Desperate Living* with the casting of Liz Renay, explicitly riffing on her off-screen reputation as a mafia moll and fifty-something striptease artist whose tabloid exploits had long delighted the filmmaker.⁷² In *Polyester*, Waters drew upon the hard-edged persona of Stiv Bators—the lead singer of the seminal punk band The Dead Boys—in casting him as Lu-Lu's juvenile delinquent boyfriend, Bo Bo.

The most notable iteration of this strategy came in the casting of Tab Hunter, a 50s-era movie star whose golden-boy image led to a brief span of Hollywood stardom followed by two decades of international film work, stage performances, and dinner theater.⁷³ Waters's choice to cast Hunter rested on a genuine love for Hunter's embodiment of late-classical Hollywood glamour. Waters told Scott McDonald, "Oh, I always liked [Hunter]. He was my idea of the perfect movie star."⁷⁴ At the same time, the suave-yet-shady Todd Tomorrow both recalls Hunter's blonde dreamboat persona from twenty-five years prior and unearths the perversion and sleaze lurking beneath its surface. Amongst other things, Tomorrow snorts lines of cocaine, has

an affair with Francine's mother, and attempts to sell Francine's children into prostitution. The notion of placing a figure like Hunter within Waters's universe of gender confusion and taboo transgression became a gimmick onto itself, one that reflects Waters's increasingly restrained approach to cinematic shock.⁷⁵ "I don't think you expect to see a star from that era doing love scenes with Divine!" Waters noted. "So that's shock value, too, in a sense. I think you can shock people in ways that aren't quite so obvious. You can be a little more subtle about it."⁷⁶

Stunt casting enable Waters to employ actors and other celebrities that would bolster and develop his directorial brand. Their very presence within his films speaks to a growing cultural and industrial cache, signaling his ability to reach beyond his 70s-era acting troupe in order to attract name-brand talent and the media attention their involvement generated. Furthermore, the particular types of famous individuals he approached and the types of roles he wrote for them framed Waters as a knowing curator and satirist of contemporary celebrity. Hence, he can have the marketing thrill of a known name while using them in a way that comments on their particular persona and on larger notions of fame and infamy.

Both the use of cinephilic and autobiographical in-jokes and the employment of stunt casting would become increasingly notable strategies for Waters when he once again began making features in the late 1980s. More extravagant exhibition gimmicks like Odorama would not be utilized in any of his future films for a couple of likely reasons. Diegetic strategies like referential jokes and stunt casting could knowingly gesture towards the larger extra-diegetic universe without the logistical and funding issues that go into any large-scale extra-cinematic stunt. Furthermore, as his films gained more exposure and circulation, his relationship with exhibition sites became more attenuated at roughly the same time that his work as a lecturer and, later, stand-up comedian increased in prominence. As Waters's directorial brand shifted further

away from that of the underground exploiteer and more towards that of the cultural satirist and public personality, the usage of something like Odorama—nothing if not a way of mass-circulating the mischievous exhibition atmosphere created in a midnight-movie setting or underground screening—became less central.

Given how Odorama operated within Waters's larger brand reconfiguration, perhaps its one-time usage was inevitable. Still, its role within both the diegesis of and the exhibition spaces tied to *Polyester* should not be dismissed. Amongst other things, it allowed Waters to inject into the staid confines of the suburban multiplex some of the unruly, carnivalesque attitude that he long associated with Castle-esque stunts and that he himself revived for underground and midnight-movie audiences throughout the 1970s. "The first time I saw an audience of five hundred people doing it, I couldn't believe it," he said of Odorama. "I was like the doctor in the movie: 'It works! It actually works!'"⁷⁷ This knowledge of and enthusiasm for the cinematic gimmick would remain a key component of Waters's directorial brand throughout his career, if for no other reason than he took such obvious pleasure in the comic anarchy it could unleash within everyday moviegoing experience. "A friend of mine scratched too hard at a screening and got the smell up her nose," he recalled of one *Polyester* screening. "It was so funny. She couldn't get it out."⁷⁸

***Shock Value* and the Narrating of Sleazy Memories**

At the same time that Waters was developing *Polyester*, he began writing what would become *Shock Value*. The book's playful subtitle—*A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste*—underscores the broader role that it would play within his shifting brand identity. In being "about bad taste," *Shock Value* promises the reader all the details of Waters's life, thoughts, and filmmaking that broadly align with the director's established interest in sleaze and provocation.

At the same time, the manner in which it will be conveyed reflected the wit and intelligence of an author who has enough insight and cultural knowledge to frame “bad taste” in a “tasteful” manner. If *Polyester*’s use of Odorama illustrated the negotiation between Waters’s desire to broaden his filmmaking’s market appeal and remain connected to the excesses of subcultural exploitation, *Shock Value* highlighted the raw (in both sense of the word) material of Waters’s life and career but delivered it through his wry, observational prose style. Examining Waters’s decision to write the book, the structure and organization of the book itself, and its critical reception allows for a deeper consideration of how *Shock Value* not only extended the Waters’s brand into the literary world but helped to further reconfigure that brand as one that balanced the shocking extremes of the exploiter with the perceptive insights of the social satirist.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Waters had already moved into the realm of essayistic writing in the late 1970s with three pieces published in *Oui* magazine. The decision to expand his writing into a full-length book occurred due to a combination of professional circumstances and personal desires. “I needed a project to work on between the writing and filming of *Polyester*,” Waters recalled. “It took me about three years to raise the money to make the film; I’d have the money lined up, and then something would fall through.”⁷⁹ As with his other brand extensions of the period, then, Waters partly entered a new medium to remain financially solvent as he pursued his first passion. The specifics of the project’s origin also tie back to Waters’s long-time relationship with New Line. Just as his growing prominence as a lecturer on the college-campus circuit can be traced to his partnership with New Line Presentations, Waters notes that “my film distributor had a literary agent at the time who knew I was interested in writing a book.”⁸⁰ This led to a meeting with Sandy Choron, an editor at Dell Publishing who, as Waters recalls, “had seen my films and thought maybe I could do a book.”⁸¹

Partly, then, *Shock Value* can be seen as the product of logistical delays and professional opportunities secondary to Waters's main focus as a filmmaker.

By the same token, Waters expressed a clear and specific enthusiasm for writing itself when discussing *Shock Value* and framed the book's production as a continuation of his pre-existing work habits. He described both his identity as an artist and his cultural tastes as tied to the written word: "I consider myself a writer. The thing I most enjoy about making films is writing them. And I've always been a book lover. I worked in a bookstore for eight years, and books are the only things I spend money on. So, for a long time, I wanted to try to write one."⁸² Indeed, producing a book allowed him to discuss more openly an aspect of filmmaking close to his heart. "I think it's refreshing to talk about something other than the casting, filmmaking and distribution of my movies," he said, adding, "to me the writing is by far the most exciting part...to get the germ of an idea."⁸³ Once Waters agreed to the project, he produced it in nine months, "writing every day from seven in the morning until two in the afternoon."⁸⁴ As when he notes the disjuncture between the outrageous content of his films and the organization of their making, Waters describes the writing of *Shock Value* as a highly-orderly process that produced a decidedly irreverent product.⁸⁵

The question of audience also arose when Waters discussed *Shock Value*. Was this a book primarily for pre-existing fans of his work, or would it allow him to reach new and appreciative readers? On the one hand, Waters conceptualized *Shock Value* as being of a piece with his films in terms of sensibility and humor, with information that would directly appeal to fans of his movies: "All of my films have the humor of shock value in them, and I think the book does too."⁸⁶ At the same time, Waters argued that *Shock Value*'s comedic perspective would allow for a readership beyond his cinematic fan base. "I think [fans of his films] would be the

first audience,” he said, “but I think that if people share my sense of humor, they could have seen none of my films and read the book and it might make them want to see the films—if they ‘get’ my sense of humor.”⁸⁷

Connecting the overlapping nature of his projects in 1981, Waters wondered how the release of *Polyester* and its concomitant impact on his public perception might shape readers’ response to *Shock Value*. “All my new-found respectability may come tumbling down when my new book comes out,” he mused.⁸⁸ By the same token, Waters also doubted that potential readers could be taken aback given the book’s most obvious visual elements: “I don’t think that most people will pick up a book with a leopard cover, titled *Shock Value*, skim through it and see some of the pictures from my movies and think they’re reading *Heidi*. Anyone who buys a book called *Shock Value* wants to be shocked in some way. And I hope they’ll laugh when they read it. I think they will.”⁸⁹ In this way, he framed his readership in a similar fashion as he did the viewers of his films—thrill-seekers looking to simultaneously be shocked and laugh at their own reactions.

Waters justifiably focused on how *Shock Value*’s more outrageous anecdotes and observations would be received by both longtime aficionados and curious newcomers. The book is filled with tidbits that underscore Waters’s reputation as a cine-provocateur: descriptions of Divine consuming feces, musings about the glamour of violent crime, photos of some of Waters’s most grotesque creations. Just as he made a distinction in interviews between his own version of knowingly campy on-screen extremity and more crass depictions of “endless scenes of victims getting their arms ripped off,” though, *Shock Value* collects these hair-raising elements and frames them in a way that highlights their humor and bolsters Waters’s status as a cock-eyed yet perceptive storyteller.⁹⁰ On the level of individual sentences, chapters, and overall

organization, *Shock Value* provides continuity in its focus on Waters's pre-existing history and preoccupations while implicitly putting forth a reconfigured version of Waters as author.

Many chapters in *Shock Value* begin with a cheeky-yet-astute observation that sets the theme and tone for what's to come. As Jack Veasey of *Philadelphia Gay News* noted, "Waters has a wicked but zany sense of humor, and his book abounds with aphorisms such as 'All people look better under arrest' and 'To me, beauty is looks you can never forget.'"⁹¹ Their presence at the beginning of individual sections of *Shock Value* fulfills two roles. First, the book becomes a repository for the various maxims that Waters had honed during interviews and public appearances over the course of the 1970s, consolidating one-liners into a single tome. To offer a sense of how *Shock Value* engages in this project of collection and curation, below are excerpts from the first two paragraphs of the book:

To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about. If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation. But one must remember that there is such a thing as good bad taste and bad bad taste. It's easy to disgust someone; I could make a ninety-minute film of people getting their limbs hacked off, but this would only be bad bad taste and not very stylish or original...I've always tried to please and satisfy an audience that thinks they've seen everything. I try to force them to laugh at their own ability to still be shocked by *something*. This reaction has always been the reason I make movies. I hate message movies and pride myself on the fact that my work has no socially redeeming value. I like to think I make American comedies.⁹²

Compare this to the following collection of quotes from various Waters's interviews and profiles from the mid-to-late 1970s:

"Bad taste is what entertainment is all about, like *Mandingo*."⁹³
 "If you threw up after the movie, I would consider it a standing ovation."⁹⁴ "But there's good bad taste and bad bad taste."⁹⁵ "But, if I really wanted to shock, I could make a film that was 90 minutes of people hacking up other people. But I don't want to do that kind of thing."⁹⁶ "It's for people who go to the movies a lot, who think they've seen everything."⁹⁷ "What I'm trying to do is

make them laugh at their ability to still be shocked.”⁹⁸ “I have no message or anything like that. I’m really against it when you see a movie and can say, ‘Oh, that’s what he was trying to say.’”⁹⁹ “My films have no social or political messages whatsoever.”¹⁰⁰ “All I’m trying to do is make an American Comedy.”¹⁰¹

Echoing the previous chapter, such comparisons reveal the striking extent to which many of the arch adages that Waters peppers throughout the text come through curating pre-existing series of observations into a coherent whole.

Second, these maxims provide a frame through which the reader can understand the more reportorial sections of *Shock Value*. For instance, having the aforementioned observation that “beauty is looks you can never forget” open a chapter allows the subsequent stories that Waters tells about casting various eccentric performers seem less like a collection of anecdotes and more emblematic of an idiosyncratic philosophy about the arbitrary social standards tied to physical beauty.¹⁰² Such truisms position Waters as someone who has extrapolated original ideas from his oddball experiences. At the same time, the presentation of said ideas through pithy truisms allows him to avoid the middlebrow intellectual pretensions that he is on record as despising in the work of others.

That particular observation about the true value of stereotypically hideous physical appearance comes from one of the essays published in *Oui*, and it’s similarly worth noting how Waters also utilized his previous essays as raw material to be recombined and reframed in *Shock Value*. Some of this work appears more or less unchanged. The aforementioned “All My Trials,” for instance, contains small tweaks to language and more recent examples of Waters’s trial obsessions but remains otherwise similar to its original published form.¹⁰³

Two other essays get either significantly expanded or cut up and repurposed across the book. “Casting for the Heavies,” originally published in November 1978, reflects upon Waters’s

philosophy for hiring actors in his films, provides some tongue-in-cheek advice for would-be performers, and recalls the casting processes for the actor with the “singing asshole” in *Pink Flamingos* and *Desperate Living*’s Jean Hill.¹⁰⁴ Waters uses these reflections as a jumping off point in *Shock Value*. Retitling the piece “Casting,” he adds numerous anecdotes about selecting other supporting players, as well as the work that makeup artist and costume designer Van Smith did to create the singularly grotesque look of his films’ characters.¹⁰⁵ Waters concludes the chapter with advice to young directors about the benefits of including violence within their films—pearls of wisdom originally published in Waters’s third *Oui* piece, “Troubled Waters.”¹⁰⁶

The essay detailed the filmmaker’s violent childhood obsessions, such as car crashes and movie villains, before segueing into how these early-in-life interests shaped his cinematic work. Significant sections of this essay get republished within the book’s second chapter, “Why I Love Violence.” Waters then detaches other sections of the original piece and places them elsewhere in the book, including the aforementioned advice to beginning directors and a section on feces-focused *Pink Flamingos*’s fanatics that became part of a chapter detailing Waters’s relationship to his “sort-of-famous” cultural status.¹⁰⁷ As with his gathering and rearranging of individual interview quotes, Waters viewed his previously-published essays as basic materials to be reprinted, augmented, and recombined to best construct the autobiographical narrative that *Shock Value* builds from various established facts about his life and work.

And what narrative, ultimately, does *Shock Value* put forth? Two major elements stand out in terms of how Waters constructs the personal history told within the book. First, he does not recount his life in strictly chronological order. *Shock Value* begins with the production of *Pink Flamingos*, before doubling back to Waters’s childhood and then proceeding more or less chronologically within those chapters focusing on his life (more on this momentarily). Opening

with *Pink Flamingos* begins *Shock Value* on the note of taboo-pushing grotesquerie that many readers will associate with the film and, by extension, Waters himself. Indeed, the book's original opening line was reportedly going to be as follows: "Divine scooped up the dogshit and popped it into his mouth."¹⁰⁸

The book's final chapter, however, goes back in time again to focus on Waters's relationship with his family. Called "'Do You Have Parents?'" the chapter's title refers to a question that Waters said he was once asked by a college student. It humorously addresses the underlying assumption that the creator of such twisted cinematic works could not possibly come from a conventional background. The remainder of the chapter proves just the opposite, with Waters describing his relationship with his family—which he gets along with "astonishingly well"—going back to his childhood and continuing to the present day.¹⁰⁹ Photos include Waters sitting on Santa's lap as a toddler, and the adult director posing with his grandmother and his parents.¹¹⁰ He does not downplay the friction and fights that he's had with his family, yet both the generous tone of the writing and the placement of the chapter at the very end of the book seem designed to conclude *Shock Value* on a note of knowing warmth. In doing so, it leaves the reader with a view of Waters that's more focused on his idiosyncratic but relatable personal life than his status as an underground cinema provocateur.

Second, *Shock Value*'s thirteen chapters can actually be divided into three large-scale categories: production histories of films; autobiographical stories; and what might be called Waters's observations of and interactions with other people. The first and second categories offer a wealth of wild details that fit with Waters's pre-established directorial brand of crazed youth antics and production anecdotes. The third category, on the other hand, focuses more on Waters's profiles of individuals around him. Two of these chapters are primarily interviews, with

one featuring Waters talking with Divine and another focusing on his conversations with two of his cinematic idols: Russ Meyer and Herschell Gordon Lewis.¹¹¹ Another profiles Edith Massey.¹¹² And while it does not concentrate on any one individual, “Baltimore, Maryland—Hairdo Capital of the World” chronicles Waters’s hometown and several of its denizens, most memorably a former registered nurse named Mrs. Mac who goes around killing rats in the poor neighborhoods of Baltimore.¹¹³

Roughly a third of the book’s chapters, in other words, focus on other people, and this does not include the smaller-scale biographical sketches Waters places within chapters primarily devoted to his own life and career. This proves significant both for the way it frames Waters as a sharp-eyed observer of the world around him and the drolly affectionate tone with which Waters describes and interacts with his subjects. *Shock Value* certainly luxuriates in some of the craziest personal details of his life, but it also builds a portrait of Waters as a peculiar sort of humanist, always looking for the delightfully odd details in everyday life. The book allows Waters to both project a particular version of himself through his writing and adopt a new, more culturally-sanctioned role of author.

Dell Publishing sold *Shock Value* in a way that attempted to balance these different sides of Waters’s shifting directorial brand. This dichotomy found its way into the book’s physical presentation. The front cover of the first edition of *Shock Value* plays up both Waters’s specific films and his association with winkingly garish aesthetics. The book is framed as “by the creator of *Pink Flamingos* and *Polyester*,” and a single pink flamingo stands on one leg and gazes serenely leftward in the bottom center of the cover. A pink leopard-spotted pattern which would not look out of place in Babs Johnson’s trailer surrounds the bird and visually dominates the cover. When you turn to the book over, it is festooned with blurbs and critics’ quotes from

notable publications (*Film Comment*, *Los Angeles Times*) and major figures in film and literature (Fran Lebowitz, William S. Burroughs, Kenneth Anger, Roger Ebert). Waters's author photo further connotes a certain degree of respectability: a black and white head shot with him dressed in a dark suit and tie, a small smirk on his lips. The covers offer a Janus-like embodiment of Waters's directorial brand at the time, with the prankish shock artist represented on one side and the knowing satirist on the other.

Advertisements and publicity for the book mixed these elements of Waters's changing persona. One ad read: "Simply Divine!...by the Creator of *Pink Flamingos* and *Polyester*....Finally all the classic characters you've come to know and loathe on the screen—the outrageous Divine, Edie the Egg Lady, the infamous Dreamlanders—are immortalized between the covers of Waters's unabashedly entertaining autobiography."¹¹⁴ The focus splits between Waters as author, promoting his writerly skills through the promise of an "unabashedly entertaining" read that chronicles "classic characters;" and Waters's on-screen creations themselves, tying the book's appeal directly to an earlier era of his career through specific references to 70s-era figures (Edie the Egg Lady) and imagery (a still of Divine in *Pink Flamingos*). Similarly, a September 17, 1981 signing of the book at a B. Dalton's bookstore in New York City had Waters following such notable critics and authors as Vito Russo, John Simon, and Robert Christgau, but also included a scheduled appearance by Divine at the signing itself.¹¹⁵ An October 1981 event at the University of Maryland-College Park featured a book signing, a screening of *Multiple Maniacs*, a question-and-answer with students, and a door-prize giveaway of *Polyester* posters, freely mixing the roles of author, director, and exploiter.¹¹⁶

Given the mixture of meanings contained within *Shock Value*, critics unsurprisingly saw within the book either a manifestation of Waters's older persona or the revelation of previously

hidden sides of the director. Those who did not detect a discernible difference between Waters the author and Waters the filmmaker naturally viewed *Shock Value* as a recapitulation of his midnight-movie bacchanalia in another medium. “If you have seen this director’s *Pink Flamingos*, *Female Trouble*, or *Polyester*, you have an idea what you’re in for,” wrote the critic for *Numbers* magazine, while Jay Scott opined that Waters had “created in his autobiography *Shock Value* a book at least as funny as any of his movies.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, at least one critic questioned whether anyone besides Waters’s loyalists could truly enjoy *Shock Value*: “Readers unfamiliar with Waters’s films will be unprepared for his intentionally warped humor and for the detailed recounting of his movies’ offbeat, at times repellent, sets, characters and antics...[but] fans will undoubtedly be delighted to have a dose of Waters in another medium.”¹¹⁸ Whether approving or tentative, these critics viewed *Shock Value* as an extension of a pre-existing brand, with pleasure largely contingent upon familiarity with Waters’s cinematic work.

Others found within *Shock Value* a newfound intelligence and insight that built on his earlier films but could stand apart from it. While admitting that “subtlety is not his strong suit,” Will James of *Gay Community News* noted that Waters “has an acute understanding of how media and fame work in this country. His book is, in fact, much funnier and more perceptive” than he expected it to be.¹¹⁹ John E. Parnum goes a step further, observing that *Shock Value*’s writing actually reshapes the reader’s assumptions about the people within Waters’ films. Comparing the book to one by Waters’s icon Kenneth Anger, Parnum writes that “the main difference between *Shock Value* and *Hollywood Babylon* [1965] is that Anger’s book pulls down cherished idols from pedestals while the unpleasant characters we have come to know in Waters’s films are described by the author as refreshingly real and lovable people.”¹²⁰

Perhaps the most robust and consequential review, however, came from Jonathan Rosenbaum, who thought *Shock Value* decidedly recalibrated Waters's public reputation. "The not-so-surprising thing about *Shock Value*...is that it proves him to be literary—at least in a minor, Mark Twain vein," Rosenbaum writes.¹²¹ These compliments give way to a larger statement on what *Shock Value* says about Waters as a writer—namely, that his eccentricities and obsessions only partly obscure a streak of empathetic humanism:

The anarchist delirium of *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*—more relevant to life, I would think, than to art—is as wide as Waters's aesthetic range as a filmmaker is narrow. As a writer, though, he belongs strictly to the mainstream. The truth of the matter is that Waters is a fellow who picks up the same sort of maladjusted strays that a Reaganite would quickly consign to the incinerator—a moralist with some wit who not only protects and nurtures these strays but also organizes them (see *Desperate Living*), respects them, and trains them, allows them to grow teeth, and enables them to fight back. John Waters not political? Give me a break.¹²²

Rosenbaum not only argues for the ideological stakes in Waters's films that the director himself typically sidesteps but draws both obvious connections and clear distinctions between Waters the filmmaker and Waters the author. It speaks to the importance of *Shock Value* as a document within Waters's career. The book's publication enabled critics to consider his directorial brand in the context of a different medium and find elements within his persona that were perhaps always there but remained obscured. And while Rosenbaum's review was but a single critical voice, his perspective would become amplified when he and J. Hoberman would write one of the first significant analyses of Waters's career in *Midnight Movies*, published just two years after *Shock Value*.

Of course, *Shock Value* represented the most notable of Waters's brand expansions and extensions in the early 1980s, with other developments that continued trends discussed in the

previous chapter. Dreamlanders Divine and Edith Massey both advanced their careers beyond Waters's films. Divine sung background vocals on the Madison Square Garden stop of Elton John's farewell tour, released his own single "Born to Be Cheap," and spoke of actively pursuing male roles in film and television.¹²³ Massey continued her singing career—switching from punk back to more traditional songs—and sold merchandise out of her second-hand store in Baltimore, including softcore Christmas cards featuring herself.¹²⁴

Waters himself had his films featured at the Outlaw Cinema Festival in Los Angeles (screened alongside work by idols Kenneth Anger, Herschell Gordon Lewis, and Russ Meyer), as well as a two-film retrospective and conversation hosted by the Baltimore Film Forum at the Charles Theater.¹²⁵ He began to make appearances as a guest on *Late Night with David Letterman* (NBC, 1982–1993) beginning in August 1982.¹²⁶ And he continued to publish new work in magazines, including a lengthy interview with Fran Lebowitz in *Interview* (in whose pages Lebowitz herself gave *Pink Flamingos* one of its first notable raves almost ten years earlier) and an essay in *American Film* discussing his ten essential video tapes.¹²⁷

These worked to bolster Waters's status as a public figure increasingly sought out for his sharp-eyed observations, ready wit, and appealing eccentricities. Still, *Shock Value* holds prime importance in this shift in his directorial brand. As much as the book balances various components of Waters's pre-existing public persona and reputation, its packaging of Waters's life, films, and identity into a single, quotable tome both solidified his personal narrative and recast him in the role of author and commentator. This would arguably prove as valuable to Waters's career longevity as any film he directed before or after.

Conclusion

When compared to even a couple of years earlier, Waters's directorial brand went through a decisive reconfiguration in the early 1980s. *Polyester* and *Shock Value* pointed to new directions in his career—the former, exemplifying a more polished and accessible approach to filmmaking; the latter, allowing him to embody the roles of writer and social satirist. As we have seen, however, these shifts did not (and likely could not) occur unidirectionally. Both works represent a complex negotiation with elements associated with Waters's brand going back to the mid-1960s. For *Polyester*, the general movement towards higher budgets and a more controlled aesthetic became purposefully countervailed by the unruly presence of Odorama, placing disreputable extra-cinematic gimmickry at the heart of Waters's most-mainstream work to date. *Shock Value* showcased Waters's heretofore-unheralded skills as a humorist, humanist, and narrator of his own life and interests, while consistently revealing that life and those interests to be full of eyebrow raising details. How Waters and the various industrial and cultural players around him wed together these dynamics does not represent a temporary aberration but reflects the very nature of brand development—an array of references, connotations, and ambitions synthesized in a sometimes elegant, sometimes unruly fashion.

Still, Waters's decisions about how to combine these elements and which to emphasize had clear consequences for his own sense of self-identity and how he was perceived within the public eye. If *Polyester* offered one of the most extravagant iterations of Waters's career-long obsession with gimmickry, ballyhoo, and the enhancement of the extra-cinematic, its presence also marked something of a swan song for the centrality of the underground exploiteer persona as he had performed it publicly for roughly fifteen years. Marketing, publicity, and exhibition stunts had always provided an expanded means for Waters to not only circulate his work but to communicate something essential about himself as a filmmaker. Now, a number of creative

venues provided him the ability to express himself directly to the public. While this identity would always remain a key component of his directorial brand, its centrality and importance in propelling his career forward began to recede, with 1981 marking a decisive turning point.

He was becoming someone for whom the title of film director was still central, but which was shared by an ever-growing constellation of roles—author, commentator, lecturer, and all-around public personality. It was Waters himself who bound all of these roles together. Ultimately, this would prove a crucial marker of how Waters’s directorial brand had matured over the course of his career. What is a brand if not constructing a clearly articulated set of ideas, images, and affects around oneself so that their very presence conjures up immediate associations that help shape whatever space or medium they’re currently occupying?

A small example helps to illustrate how far along in this process Waters was by the early 1980s. As a way to promote the work featured in the 1982 Baltimore International Film Festival, the Maryland Center for Public Broadcasting prepared a program of seven award-winning festival shorts aired on local Baltimore television. *Baltimore Sun* film critic Stephen Hunter reviewed the program and the individual works within it, but he saved the final section of his article to comment on the show’s emcee:

[John] Waters, as host, makes an effective talking head. Blandly attractive, in his own quiet way he seems like a parody of all those expensive hairdos that read somebody else’s words at \$75,000 a year or whatever; but it begins to dawn on you shortly how subtly different the guy is. He’s got that odd little mustache that seems tattooed to the upper line of his lip which gives his whole face a peculiar look. And Waters smokes as beautifully as any Thirties’ movie star, and director John Alan Spoler lets him camp up the smoking to the hilt, including one spot where he poses with a dwindling butt pinched delicately between the tips of his fingers, a cylinder of ash dangling dangerously at the end of it. This is one show where it looks like the host had as much fun as the viewers.¹²⁸

The poker-faced affect that seems to both mock and embody television clichés; the idiosyncratic physical traits; the campy use of the cigarette as comic prop—what Hunter is describing is a full-on performance of the directorial self. Hunter knows Waters as a filmmaker. Indeed, his question prompted the quote from Waters that opens this very chapter. Still, he feels no need to contextualize Waters in relation to his films or his writings. By the airing of this program in September 1982, Waters's directorial brand had developed to the point where he could enact these various performative quirks and trust that the viewership knew him well enough through his films, his marketing stunts, his writings, his interviews, and his public appearances to understand them. The host can indeed “ha[ve] as much fun as the viewers.” If there's one thing to know after surveying his life and career up to this point—holding court in Baltimore churches, championing sleaze to college students, emceeing midnight screenings—it's that John Waters knows how to preside over a good time.

¹ Waters quoted in Stephen Hunter, “As a Spectacle, ‘Polyester’ Premiere is Just Divine,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 16, 1981, B1. Parenthetical in original.

² While I have been referencing a more recent version of *Shock Value* throughout much of this dissertation, I will be referring to the original edition of the book within this chapter, as a means of getting as close as possible to the book's content and aesthetic at the time of its publication. John Waters, *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book About Bad Taste* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1981).

³ Waters quoted in George Meyer, “John Waters’ Films Are an Exercise in Bad, Bad Taste,” *Currents (Tampa Tribune)*, November 11, 1977, 3.

⁴ Waters quoted in Scott MacDonald, “John Waters’ Divine Comedy,” *Artforum*, January 1982, 52–60, reprinted in *John Waters: Interviews*, ed. James Egan (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 91.

⁵ Waters quoted in Claude Thomas Brooks, “Waters: ‘...I’ve Always Tried to Sell Out,’” *Motion Film and Video Production Magazine*, 1982, 20–23, reprinted in Egan, *John Waters*, 111.

⁶ Waters quoted in David Chute, “Still Waters,” *Film Comment*, May/June 1981, 28.

⁷ Waters quoted in Sally A. Lodge, “John Waters,” *Publishers Weekly*, July 17, 1981, 7.

⁸ Waters quoted in Jay Scott, “Cult Film King Searching for Sweet Smell of Success,” *The Globe and Mail*, May 25, 1981, P23.

⁹ The company found particular success with Bertrand Blier's *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs* (1978), a notable box office success within the art-house market that also won the 1978 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. Advertisement, *Variety*, April 18, 1979, 49; Frank Segers, “Foreign Pix Pick Up More Biz in U.S.,” *Variety*, May 9, 1979, 1, 104, 260.

¹⁰ Justin Wyatt, “The Formation of the Major Independent: Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 76–77.

¹¹ “New Line's New Ones,” *Variety*, August 9, 1978, 3, 29.

¹² Alexander Auerbach, “Wheels Deal at Cannes, but Some Sit and Wait,” *Boxoffice*, June 9, 1980, 1, 5, 10.

- ¹³ John G. Ives, *John Waters* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), 83; Waters quoted in Chute, "Still Waters," 27.
- ¹⁴ Details about *Polyester*'s funding comes from Polyester Financing Memo, Folder 3, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, Wesleyan University Cinema Archives (WCU); Jim Robbins, "New Line Plans Four New Films," *Boxoffice*, August 18, 1980, 3.
- ¹⁵ Todd McCarthy, "\$2-Mil 'Strangers Kiss,' Using Deferments, Wraps at \$120,000," *Variety*, November 10, 1982, 46, 50; J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 4.
- ¹⁶ "Mike White in U.S.; Nervous about Long Strike by Actors," *Variety*, August 20, 1980, 6, 36.
- ¹⁷ In addition to *Shock Treatment* and *Polyester*, White also produced the music documentary *Urgh! A Music War* (Derek Burbidge, 1981). In a different vein, he was also a producer on *My Dinner with Andre* (Louis Malle, 1981). Roger Watkins, "Legit's White into Films 80% Brit. Banks Unhappily Have One Word Only for Pix—'Collateral,'" *Variety*, June 10, 1981, 5–6.
- ¹⁸ "Polyester (Working Title) A Film in ODOR-AMA," Folder 9, Box 9, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU; "Nervous Nostrils' (Working Title) A Film in ODOR-AMA," Folder 11, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.
- ¹⁹ Waters quoted in Dann Gire, "'Polyester's' John Waters: The 'Baron of Bad Taste,'" *The Daily Herald*, September 11, 1981, sec. 2, 3.
- ²⁰ Waters quoted in MacDonald, "John Waters," 91.
- ²¹ Waters quoted in Scott, "Cult Film King," P23.
- ²² Waters quoted in MacDonald, "John Waters," 91.
- ²³ Vivian Sobchack, "The Dream Olfactory: On Making Scents of Cinema," in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, eds. Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 129. Sobchack also provides information on the specific technical failings of the mid-century olfactory technologies and delivery devices used within the theaters. Sobchack 126–128.
- ²⁴ Waters does not specify the reviewer, but Hoberman and Rosenbaum identify him as Archer Winsten of the *New York Post*. Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, 170.
- ²⁵ Waters quoted in Scott Cohen, "Checking In," *Playboy*, April 1982, 23.
- ²⁶ Carl Plantinga makes a related point about *Polyester*'s viewership, describing how "*Polyester* will attract an audience that is informed about the 'rules' for spectatorship that a John Waters film demands. The savvy spectator of *Polyester* will recognize the film as a parody, not only of the melodrama, but also of the very conditions for the elicitation of disgust found in conventional melodrama and perhaps also in middle-class culture." Carl Plantinga, "Disgusted at the Movies," *Film Studies* 8 (Summer 2006): 91.
- ²⁷ "Polyester Budget, September 20, 1980," Folder 6, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.
- ²⁸ Waters quoted in Guy Trebay, "Talking Heads: John Waters Smells Success," *Village Voice*, May 20–26, 1981, 59.
- ²⁹ Waters quoted in Gire, "'Polyester's' John Waters," 3.
- ³⁰ Ives, *John Waters*, 149. Micro-encapsulation involves "large numbers of microscopic capsules containing a fragrance [that] are coated on to paper, so that their odour is released when they are broken, e.g. by scratching with a fingernail." It was originally used to advertise perfume. Nigel Groom, *The Perfume Handbook* (Edmunds, Suffolk: Springer-Science+Business Media, 1992), 146.
- ³¹ "When we finished with the movie, [3M executives] came to New York to see it, and we never heard from them again," Risher said. "I'm sure they were mortified." Risher quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 149.
- ³² "3M Brand Microfragrance Library List," Folder 14, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU; "Odorama Smells," Folder 14, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.
- ³³ "Odorama Smells."
- ³⁴ Waters quoted in Scott, "Cult Film King," P23.
- ³⁵ "Odorama Smells."
- ³⁶ Risher quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 149.
- ³⁷ *Polyester* Production Memo, Folder 11, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU; *Polyester* Production Odorama Memo, Folder 14, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.
- ³⁸ *Polyester* Production Odorama Memo.
- ³⁹ See Odorama Script and Smells, Folder 14, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁴⁰ *Polyester* Production Memo.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Matthew Tinkcom notes not just the gimmick's presence and historical debt to mid-century exploitation practice, but also Waters's "use of off-screen space" in relation to when and how the audience interacts with various smells. Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 213–214, n. 11.

⁴³ *Polyester* Airplane Poster, Folder 15, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁴⁴ *Polyester* Jaws Poster, Folder 15, Box 10, Series II, Professional Activities, John Waters Collection, WCU.

⁴⁵ Waters quoted in Owen Gleiberman, "John Waters Runs Deep," *The Boston Phoenix*, June 23, 1981, sec. 3, 3.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, Waters rejected an advertising campaign that seems to be quite similar to this final product. Risher recalls: "We never had an argument with [Waters] over how to sell a film until *Polyester*. We had gone to a very expensive ad agency, and they came up with a one-sheet that had a big toilet and a picture of Divine; all of the scratch-and-sniff smells—pizza, shoes, and all that—were coming out of the toilet. John hated that ad, and he was right." Risher quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 149.

⁴⁷ Advertisement, *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 1981, H11. Another version of the film's advertisement featured a production still of Todd and Francine melodramatically embracing, though this was only occasionally used in newspapers. Whether New Line (and Waters) felt that so prominently displaying imagery of an aging Hollywood star caressing an obese drag queen would harm the film's box-office potential is an open question. Examples of this design can be found here: Advertisement, *Variety*, November 19, 1980, 15; and Advertisement, *Baltimore Evening Sun*, May 14, 1981, 16.

⁴⁸ Before even considering individual reviews, it's worth noting that an image of Edith Massey graced the cover of *Film Comment*'s May/June 1981 issue accompanying a seven-page feature on Waters's career—further evidence of the filmmaker's shifting status with the film-critical establishment. Chute, "Still Waters," 26–32.

⁴⁹ Vincent Canby, "When Movies Take Pride in Being Second-Rate," *New York Times*, June 7, 1981, D19. The other, briefer mentions of the film come in Vincent Canby, "Plain Folks are Plain Tough," *New York Times*, June 14, 1981, D17–D18; and Vincent Canby, "Where Are the 'New Women'?" *New York Times*, June 28, 1981, D15–D16.

⁵⁰ Lou Cedrone, "With 'Polyester,' Waters has Cleaned Up His Act, Sort Of," review of *Polyester*, *Baltimore Evening Sun*, May 19, 1981, B5.

⁵¹ Archer Winsten, "Divine Well-Suited in 'Polyester' Material," review of *Polyester*, *New York Post*, May 29, 1981, 39.

⁵² Carlos Clarens, "Polyester," review of *Polyester*, *The Soho Weekly News*, June 3, 1981, 38.

⁵³ Janet Maslin, "The Screen: 'Polyester,' An Offbeat Comedy," review of *Polyester*, *New York Times*, May 29, 1981, C6.

⁵⁴ David Ansen, "Dirty Soap," review of *Polyester*, *Newsweek*, June 1, 1981, 91.

⁵⁵ Bruce King, "Polyester," review of *Polyester*, *Mom...Guess What!* December 1981, 16.

⁵⁶ Canby, "When Movies Take Pride," D19; Jay Scott, "Polyester: Silly Smell of Success," review of *Polyester*, *The Globe and Mail*, September 17, 1981, E7.

⁵⁷ Lor., "Polyester," review of *Polyester*, *Variety*, April 22, 1981, 22.

⁵⁸ Clarens, "Polyester," 38.

⁵⁹ It surely helped that Waters's longtime production manager, Pat Moran, was also the theatre director at the Charles. Randi Henderson, "'Polyester' Takes a World Bow Tonight," *Baltimore Sun*, May 15, 1981, B4. For details of the premiere, see Hunter, "As a Spectacle," B1, B5.

⁶⁰ "Native son John Waters' 'Polyester' Sets Baltimore Situation's New Mark," *Variety*, June 3, 1981, 34.

⁶¹ "New Line's 'Polyester' Bows May 29, Wide," *Variety*, May 13, 1981, 41.

⁶² Lawrence Cohn, "Slow B.O. Overtakes B'way; 'Polyester' Aromatic \$450,000; 'Bustin' 700G; 'Outland' 290G," *Variety*, June 3, 1981, 8, 34; Maslin, "The Screen: Polyester," C6.

⁶³ Cohn, "Slow B.O.," 8.

⁶⁴ The discrepancy comes from conflicting financial accounts from *Variety* and New Line. In the July 8, 1981 issue of *Variety*, the "50 Top-Grossing Films" records *Polyester*'s earnings at the lower number, while a New Line advertisement for the film in the same issue places its earnings at the higher number. "50 Top-Grossing Films," *Variety*, July 8, 1981, 11; Advertisement, *Variety*, July 8, 1981, 27.

⁶⁵ The film's Boston run began in mid-June 1981 on six screens, while the Washington, D.C. run began in late-June 1981 with a single booking at the Key theater. Guy Livingston, "'Raiders' Torrid 340G in Boston; 'History' \$60,000, 'Polyester' 47G," *Variety*, June 17, 1981, 11; "'Eyes' Warm 53G, D.C., 'II' 150G, 2d," *Variety*, July 1, 1981, 13, 32.

⁶⁶ Harpster quoted in J. Wynn Rousuck, "'Polyester' Doing So-So Business," *Baltimore Sun*, July 19, 1981, N2.

⁶⁷ The film opened in Kansas City, Missouri and St. Louis, Missouri in late-August 1981. The last significant U.S. market it appeared to open in was Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in April 1982. John W. Quinn, "'Eye For' Big 60G, K.C.; 'Monday' 50G," *Variety*, August 26, 1981, 16; Joe Pollack, "'Comin' Corpulent \$57,500, St. L.; 'Monday' 501/2G, 'Werewolf' 31G," *Variety*, August 26, 1981, 16; and Lenny Litman, "'See' Farsighted at 20G, Pitt., 'Stranger' 10G, 'Quest' 15G, 3d," *Variety*, April 28, 1982, 12.

⁶⁸ "50 Top-Grossing Films," *Variety*, November 18, 1981, 9.

⁶⁹ Excluding midnight screenings that accompanied regular daytime showings during its initial commercial run, the earliest midnight screening of *Polyester* I have found was in September 1982 at the Classic Film Theater in Lansing, Michigan. "The Calendar," *Lansing Star*, September 23–October 6, 1982, 5.

⁷⁰ Emanuel Levy, for instance, deems the film "a commercial failure." Emanuel Levy, *Gay Directors, Gay Films?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 303.

⁷¹ Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual*, 178–179, 181.

⁷² Renay's life and career are discussed in Liz Renay, *My Face for the World to See* (New York: L. Stuart, 1971).

⁷³ For contemporaneous coverage of Hunter, see Gerald Peary, "The Second Coming of Tab Hunter," *The Globe and Mail*, July 1982, E1; and Herman Wong, "Actor Tab Hunter Plays Lead in Dinner Theatre," *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1982, D1, D17. Hunter's life and career are covered in great detail in Tab Hunter with Eddie Muller, *Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006); and *Tab Hunter Confidential* (Jeffrey Schwarz, 2015).

⁷⁴ Waters quoted in MacDonald, "John Waters," 92.

⁷⁵ This also plays off Hunter's own status as a gay man who spent the height of his career in the closet, although Hunter would not come out publicly until 2007.

⁷⁶ Waters quoted in Chute, "Still Waters," 27. Divine and Hunter would reteam four years later in *Lust in the Dust* (Paul Bartel, 1985).

⁷⁷ Waters quoted in MacDonald, "John Waters," 91.

⁷⁸ Waters quoted in Trebay, "Talking Heads," 59.

⁷⁹ Waters quoted in Lodge, "John Waters," 6.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid. 7.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 6.

⁸⁵ Though Waters describes the process as having occurred "between the writing and filming of *Polyester*," it seems likely that the writing of *Shock Value* bled a bit into film production. Charles Roggero, the editor for *Polyester* and other Waters's films, told a reporter that *Polyester* was "the first time he worked on his own, because Mr. Waters was busy writing *Shock Value*." J. Wynn Rousuck, "Workaday Makers of Sick Flicks," *Baltimore Sun*, October 18, 1981, E8.

⁸⁶ Waters quoted in Lodge, "John Waters," 6.

⁸⁷ Waters quoted in Michael Mills, "John Waters," *The Wallpaper Journal*, December 9, 1981, NP.

⁸⁸ Waters quoted in Rousuck, "'Polyester' Doing So-So Business," N2.

⁸⁹ Waters quoted in Lodge, "John Waters," 6.

⁹⁰ Waters quoted in Henry Scarupa, "He Cultivates 'Sleaze' Like a Rare Orchid," *Baltimore Sun*, March 27, 1977, M27.

⁹¹ Jack Veasey, "John Waters: A Successful Black Sheep is Tickled Pink Over Bad Taste," *Philadelphia Gay News*, August 21–September 3, 1981, 25.

⁹² Waters, *Shock Value*, 2.

⁹³ Waters quoted in Steve Hogner, "John Waters' Movies: Trash with Class," *The Austin American-Statesman*, February 2, 1976, NP.

⁹⁴ Neal McGarity, "Waters, Cool and Amiable, Comments on Latest Flick," *The Retriever*, October 28, 1974, 5. Interestingly, Waters qualified this oft-quoted line in a later interview: "There are certain lines in that book that I'll never live down—or up to. Like saying if someone vomits during my film it's like a standing ovation. I said that tongue-in-cheek, because people did vomit in my film but it was because they were drunk. They would have puked if it was *The Sound of Music*." Waters quoted in Ives, *John Waters*, 72–73.

⁹⁵ Waters quoted in Gary Mullinax, "Waters Film Tests Public Tastes Again," *Sunday News Journal*, March 26, 1978, D7.

⁹⁶ Waters quoted in Corinne F. Hammett, "Waters Does It His 'Lavish' Way," *The News American*, May 27, 1977, 6D.

-
- ⁹⁷ Waters quoted in Kenneth Turan, "Baltimore's King of Repulsion," *Potomac* (*The Washington Post*), April 20, 1975, 48.
- ⁹⁸ Waters quoted in Scarupa, "He Cultivates 'Sleaze,'" M26.
- ⁹⁹ Waters quoted in Richard Scheirman, "'Sleaze King' Discusses Latest Film," *The Daily Texan*, November 16, 1977, 15.
- ¹⁰⁰ Waters quoted in Gene Siskel, "'Troubles' and Trash Float Past the Fans of Polluted Waters," *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 1975, NP.
- ¹⁰¹ Waters quoted in Brandon Judell, "I'd Like to be a Dog Catcher, Or: Will John Waters Ever Make the Great American Comedy," *GaysWeek*, March 6, 1978, 15.
- ¹⁰² Waters, *Shock Value*, 128.
- ¹⁰³ John Waters, "All My Trials," *Oui*, May 1978, 56–58, 127–128, 130.
- ¹⁰⁴ John Waters, "Casting for the Heavies," *Oui*, November 1978, 37.
- ¹⁰⁵ Waters, *Shock Value*, 128–140.
- ¹⁰⁶ Waters, *Shock Value*, 138; John Waters, "Troubled Waters," *Oui*, August 1979, NP.
- ¹⁰⁷ Waters, *Shock Value*, 23–34, 216.
- ¹⁰⁸ Chute, "Still Waters," 27.
- ¹⁰⁹ Waters, *Shock Value*, 228.
- ¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* 229, 239, 241.
- ¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 141–156; 191–212.
- ¹¹² *Ibid.* 179–189.
- ¹¹³ *Ibid.* 75–91.
- ¹¹⁴ Advertisement, *After Dark* 14, no. 10 (1982): 16.
- ¹¹⁵ Advertisement, *New York Times*, September 13, 1981, 76.
- ¹¹⁶ Advertisement, *The Diamondback*, October 1, 1981, 8. Underscoring the book's various potential constituencies, excerpts appeared within the LGBT newspaper the *New York Native* (as a cover story), a newly launched Baltimore publication *This Magazine*, and the marijuana-centric magazine *High Times*. John Waters, "The Filthiest People Alive!" *New York Native*, September 21–October 4, 1981, 1, 22–23, 30; David Simon, "Students Find Profits on Campus," *Baltimore Sun*, October 3, 1982, K7; John Waters, "Waters Interviews the Divinity," *High Times*, January 1983, 36.
- ¹¹⁷ "Potent Waters," review of *Shock Value, Numbers*, January 1982, 9; Jay Scott, "Documenting and Satirizing Prejudice Against Gay Sensibility, Which Could Become a Historical Curiosity," review of *Shock Value, The Globe and Mail*, October 3, 1981, E18.
- ¹¹⁸ "Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste," review of *Shock Value, Publishers Weekly*, June 12, 1981, 52.
- ¹¹⁹ Will James, "No Dummy," review of *Shock Value, Gay Community News*, November 14, 1981, 5.
- ¹²⁰ John E. Parnum, "Shock Value," review of *Shock Value, Cinemacabre*, Fall 1982, 35.
- ¹²¹ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Excremental Visionary," review of *Shock Value, Soho Weekly News*, September 16–22, 1981, 18.
- ¹²² *Ibid.*
- ¹²³ Randi Henderson, "The Thrills and Challenges of Being Divine," *Baltimore Sun*, May 24, 1981, D1; Peter Stack, "Divine: Born to Be Cheap," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Date Unknown, 63; Raven Eagleblade, "STARZ Brings Divine to Long Island," *L.I. Connection*, November 4, 1981, 4.
- ¹²⁴ "Edie's Career Continues to Flourish," *Baltimore Sun*, December 7, 1980, SM70; Frank Broderick, "Trash," *Philadelphia Gay News*, February 5–18, 1982, 5; Craig Lee, "Eccentric Edith Massey at Lingerie," *Los Angeles Times*, August 17, 1982, G6; Bill Thomas, "Hallmark, Beware! Edie Cards are Here," *Baltimore Sun*, December 16, 1982, C1.
- ¹²⁵ "'Outlaw Cinema Festival' Begins July 30 at Nuart," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1981, G3; Sheridan Lyons, "Movie-maker Likes to Hear Laughs," *Baltimore Sun*, November 15, 1981, B6.
- ¹²⁶ "Television," *New York Times*, August 24, 1982, C19; "Television," *New York Times*, December 14, 1982, C23.
- ¹²⁷ John Waters, "Fran Lebowitz," *Interview*, September 1981, 30–34; John Waters, "Mondo Video," *American Film*, June 1982, 17–20, 64.
- ¹²⁸ Stephen Hunter, "Short Films: Big Play on Small Screen," *Baltimore Sun*, September 10, 1982, B1.

Conclusion **Waters and Directorial Branding in the 21st Century**

This dissertation has argued that John Waters fashioned a directorial brand from the very beginning of his filmmaking career. Through a combination of practicality, insight, personal predilection, and industrial circumstance, he crafted the public persona of not just a filmmaker, but an underground exploiteer who placed equal emphasis upon the creation of the cinematic and the extra-cinematic within his work. His embrace of marketing, publicity, and exhibition as key markers of his own identity allowed him to produce filmic experiences that playfully unsettled the boundaries between subcultural subversion and exploitation gimmickry. In the process, he made an ever-increasing name for himself, first on the regional and then on the national stage. This growing public prominence led to shifts in both his films and his public persona. Throughout, though, Waters always employed the extra-textual materials of film circulation, publicity, and exhibition as strategic tools in the shaping of his own image and unorthodox materials for satire, creativity, and the upending of cinematic and social mores.

Utilizing the theoretical frame of directorial branding in relation to Waters's early career has allowed fresh insights into the sources of his inspiration, the shape of his professional life, and the breadth of his filmic and cultural accomplishments. Through the deployment of brand creation, we see how Waters used the publicity stunts, homemade advertisements, and raucous regional screenings surrounding his early shorts as laboratories for fusing the lurid appeals of exploitation cinema and the formal adventurousness of the Underground. Brand expansion underscores how the popularity of Waters's early features rested as much upon his shrewd distribution strategies and commitment to the carnivalization of the exhibition space as it did the qualities of the films themselves. When Waters branched out into other media as the decade progressed, brand extension provides a lens through which to understand how these experiments

interacted with central components of his films and began to alter key elements of his public identity. And when Waters moved more explicitly towards the mainstream in the early 1980s, brand reconfiguration allows for a more fine-grained understanding of how this process constituted a complicated negotiation between various elements of his public persona and previous work. Taken together, they offer a portrait of a director who crafted a brand identity around the canny usage and arch satirizing of those cinematic elements seen by many as secondary to the “text” of the movie itself. In doing so, he found ways to revivify the moviegoing experience for many within his generation.

This approach provides insights beyond the specific case of Waters from 1964 to 1981. For one, it lays out a helpful roadmap for the continued analysis of the director’s career from the early 1980s to the present day. In that time, he wrote and directed six more features: *Hairspray* (1988), *Cry-Baby* (1990), *Serial Mom* (1994), *Pecker* (1998), *Cecil B. Demented* (2000), and *A Dirty Shame* (2004). While filmmaking remained a central component of his directorial brand, however, Waters’s career has been marked by such a degree of brand extension that it is difficult to primarily refer to him as a director anymore. Since *Shock Value*, he has published three additional books, as well as two collections of his screenplays.¹ He began working in the fine art world, manipulating photographic images and stills from his own films to satirically comment on media saturation and popular culture.² While his lectures at colleges, universities, and film festivals have continued since the 1970s, Waters also performs what is essentially a rotating stand-up act, mixing well-known anecdotes from his career with observations on contemporary events.³ He has appeared in numerous documentaries and has acted for film and television, most recently playing longtime idol William Castle in an episode of *Feud: Bette and Joan*.⁴ His older projects, meanwhile, have been revivified through the work of other directors and artists. Most

notably, both *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby* were adapted as Broadway musicals (in 2002 and 2008, respectively), with *Hairspray* going on to win eight Tony awards before being re-adapted for the screen in 2007 by director Adam Shankman.⁵

The sheer volume and variety of work that Waters has produced over the last three-and-a-half decades is nothing short of staggering. Nevertheless, adopting the perspective of directorial brand development and drawing connections to (rather than sharp distinctions from) his work in the 1960s and 1970s offers a theoretical and historical framework through which to better appreciate Waters's present-day career. The breadth of his contemporary work, for instance, has its origins in the director's first steps toward brand extension in the late 1970s. His current traveling comedy show finds its roots in his early college lectures, while his copious written work began in earnest with his first published essays in *Oui*. More broadly, Waters's current status as a kind of knowing queer oracle commenting on current events and contemporary culture in his shows, books, and interviews can be traced to how he assiduously balanced eccentricity and insight in public appearances dating back to *Pink Flamingos*. Considering Waters's entire career as a continuing set of questions surrounding directorial brand development allows such linkages to come to the fore, illuminating the long-standing logics behind the range and longevity of his creative output.

Such questions also extend beyond Waters himself. Certainly, he was prescient in his understanding of how creating and cultivating a brand helps an independent filmmaker to distinguish themselves amidst competition both from other low-budget directors and from Hollywood. This lesson has been taken up by many notable figures in contemporary American independent cinema, for whom their films constitute but the largest element within a constellation of cross-media projects and public roles. One sees this, for example, in Quentin

Tarantino, a methodical self-mythologizer whose voracious cinephilia has manifested not only in his films but in his work as a producer, theater owner, and champion of outmoded filmic technologies and degraded genres. Kevin Smith, as well, combined his penchant for low-budget character studies with his passion for comic books, turning his menagerie of burn-outs and mallrats into a proto-expanded universe that has encompassed film, television, and graphic novels. Applying the rubric of directorial branding to these and other, similar figures reveals the interconnected nature of a filmmaker's various projects, providing greater insight into the shape of their career and their evolving relationship to cinema and culture.

David Lynch offers a particularly fertile case study in this regard. Like Waters, Lynch gained initial notoriety from a midnight-movie sensation, *Eraserhead* (1977).⁶ He worked continually throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s within both film and television, creating a highly-coherent body of work that (unlike Waters) was frequently met with rapturous critical praise. Lynch has also branched out into visual media, music, and novels, each with aesthetic and thematic links to his filmic work. Perhaps most notably, he has developed a singular persona in media appearances that mixes gnomic observations with a poker-faced affection for Americana kitsch. Lynch's public identity parallels that of Waters in its complex relationship to his own cinema, simultaneously underlining the strangeness of his movies and leavening their often-disturbing content with his own endearing eccentricities. Finally, like Waters, he has used his name to brand events and products, including his forthcoming "Festival of Disruption" and even his David Lynch Organic Coffee. Examining Lynch through the lens of directorial branding provides the space to analyze these interconnections between a filmmaker's cinema, work in adjacent media, and carefully crafted public persona.

Indeed, what this mode of analysis ultimately brings to the fore—and that Waters’s own career so fruitfully embodies—is the need to address the interconnected forces of art, industry, and culture that underline any attempt at directorial branding. The common elevation of Waters’s 70s-era period over his more recent work rests partly on the assumption that his later films caved to Hollywood conformity, defanging his cinematic project in the process. While one can undoubtedly find formal and stylistic shifts across Waters’s career, this analysis neglects the fact that Waters has centered the imbrication of creativity and commerce from the very beginning, viewing them as inevitably-connected concepts within American cinema. His insight came in how he blurred the boundaries between transgressive aesthetics and industrial prerogatives. One finds such negotiations within the careers of most major American independent directors—indeed, most artists across media. To consider the creation and cultivation of a directorial brand is to move beyond the binary of imaginative expression and commercial capitulation. How filmmakers address this fundamental question can illuminate strategies that are frequently trans-medial, sometimes contradictory, and always revealing about both the individual and the larger systems within which they operate.

Waters continues this process up to the present day. In 2017, it was announced that Camp John Waters would take place at Club Getaway in Kent, Connecticut.⁷ The three-day adult summer getaway gleefully played upon the double meaning of “camp,” combining such traditional outdoor activities as swimming and making smores with a John Waters’s film festival, burlesque lessons, and a Waters-themed costume contest. The director himself spoke at the event and evaluated the campers’ outfits. Observing the throngs of fans gallivanting in the woods, he observed with typically wry wit, “It’s like Jonestown, but with a happy ending.”⁸

One could easily view this event—whose entry fee went as high as \$599 per person—as a nostalgic cash-in, commodifying the warm memories of his own fans. Waters would likely agree. The ability to attract audiences with a self-conscious gimmick is a skill that has stayed with him since the mid-1960s, if not earlier. And yet, reading descriptions of participants roaring in approval as the typical summer-camp space of their youth became overrun with drag queens, punks, and fellow self-described social outcasts makes one realize that the Waters's brand embodies more than just a marketing hook. These scenes return us to the Baltimore churches in the 1960s, or the Palace Theatre in San Francisco, or the midnight-movie audiences at the Elgin in New York, or the many suburban venues across America that temporarily housed Odorama in the early eighties.

In each instance, Waters turned the typical exhibition space into a realm of carnivalesque revelry, offering outrageous sights and communal shocks to all assembled. The impulse remains within him to not just make films but to orchestrate events that leave audiences with their jaws on the floor and laughter ringing in their ears. It is one of his most significant contributions to American cinema and culture, and it's certainly one that animates him still. For all the changes that have occurred in the career of John Waters over the last fifty-four years, one can still glimpse the presence of the underground exploiteer presiding over the crowd—a sly smile on his face, a mischievous glint in his eye.

¹ John Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters*, 2nd ed. (New York: Scribner, 2003); John Waters, *Role Models* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010); John Waters, *Carsick: John Waters Hitchhikes Across America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014); John Waters, *Trash Trio: Three Screenplays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); and John Waters, *Hairspray, Female Trouble, and Multiple Maniacs: Three More Screenplays by John Waters* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005). Waters's 2015 commencement address at the Rhode Island School of Design was also reprinted in an illustrated volume. John Waters, *Make Trouble* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2017).

² Examples of his art work and connections to the art world can be found in John Waters, *John Waters: Director's Cut* (Zurich: Scalo Publishers, 1997); John Waters and Bruce Hainley, *Art: A Sex Book* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003); Marvin Heiferman, et al., *John Waters: Change of Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004);

John Waters and Brenda Richardson, *Unwatchable* (New York: Marianne Boesky Galley, 2006), and Todd Oldham and Cindy Sherman, *John Waters (Place Space)* (Los Angeles: AMMO Books, 2008).

³ One iteration of these shows was filmed: *This Filthy World* (Jeff Garlin, 2006).

⁴ *Feud: Bette and Joan*, episode 6, “Hagsploitation,” directed by Tim Minear, written by Tim Minear and Gina Welch, aired April 16, 2017, on FX.

⁵ *Hairspray*, music by Marc Shaiman, lyrics by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman, dir. Jack O’Brien, chor. Jerry Mitchell, Neil Simon Theatre, New York, NY, August 15, 2002–January 4, 2009; *Cry-Baby*, music and lyrics by David Javerbaum and Adam Schlesinger, dir. Mark Brokaw, chor. Rob Ashford, Marquis Theatre, New York, NY, April 24–June 22, 2008.

⁶ For a discussion of *Eraserhead*’s history as a midnight movie, see J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 214–251.

⁷ For coverage of the first Camp John Waters, see Michael Schulman, “Camping with John Waters and His Band of ‘Filthy Freaks,’” *New York Times*, October 14, 2017, accessed June 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/style/john-waters-camp.html>.

⁸ Waters quoted in *ibid.*

Bibliography

Archival Sources

Film-Makers' Distribution Center Archives. Film-Makers' Cooperative, New York, NY.
John Waters Collection. Wesleyan Cinema Archives, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT.

Books, Chapters, and Peer-Reviewed Articles

- Anger, Kenneth. *Hollywood Babylon*. Phoenix, AZ: Associated Professional Services, 1965.
- Annovi, Gian Maria. *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Performing Authorship*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- Becker, Howard S. *Art Worlds*. Rev. ed. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008.
- Bell, Shannon. "From Ticket Booth to Screen Tower: An Architectural Study of Drive-In Theaters in the Baltimore–Washington D.C.–Richmond Corridor." In *Constructing Image, Identity, and Place: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture IX*, edited by Alison K. Hoagland and Kenneth A. Breisch, 215–227. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003.
- Benshoff, Harry, and Sean Griffin. *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006.
- Benson-Allott, Caetlin. "Camp Integration: The Use and Misuse of Nostalgia in John Waters' *Hairspray*." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 26, no. 2 (2009): 143–154.
- Brecht, Stefan. *Queer Theatre*. New York: Methuen, 1986.
- Breckon, Anna. "The Erotic Politics of Disgust: *Pink Flamingos* as Queer Political Cinema." *Screen* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 514–533.
- Brooks, Adrian. "A Tale of Two Subcultures." *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 30–33.
- *Flights of Angels: My Life with the Angels of Light*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2008.
- Brooks, Claude Thomas. "Waters: '...I've Always Tried to Sell Out.'" *Motion Film and Video Production Magazine*, 1982, 20–23. Reprinted in *John Waters: Interviews*, edited by James Egan, 105–111. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.
- Brophy, Stephen. "How Film Exhibition Has Changed in the Past 50 Years: An Interview with George Mansour." *Cineaction* 51 (February 2000): 55–59.
- Bryan-Wilson, Julia. "Handmade Genders: Queer Costuming in San Francisco Circa 1970." In *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977*, edited by Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner, 76–93. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
- Burnett, Colin. *The Invention of Robert Bresson: The Auteur and His Market*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 4th ed. New York: Routledge Classics, 2007.
- Castle, William. *Step Right Up! I'm Gonna Scare the Pants Off America*. 2nd ed. New York: Pharos Books, 1992.
- Clark, Randall. *At a Theater or Drive-In Near You: The History, Culture, and Politics of the American Exploitation Film*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- Clepper, Catherine. "'Death by Fright': Risk, Consent, and Evidentiary Objects in William

- Castle's Rigged Houses." *Film History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 54–84.
- Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.
- Cunningham, Daniel Mudie. "A Star Thing." In *Andy Warhol*, 84–91. South Bank, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2007.
- Curry, Renee R. "Hairspray: The Revolutionary Way to Restructure and Hold Your History." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1996): 165–168.
- "To Star is To Mean: The Casting of John Waters's *Hairspray*." In *Cultural Power, Cultural Literacy: Selected Papers from the 14th Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film*, edited by Bonnie Braendlin, 167–178. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University Press, 1991.
- Davis, Ben. "Children of the Sixties: An Interview with the Owners of the Elgin." *Film Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 2–15.
- Dyer, Richard. *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Edwards, Kyle Dawson. "Brand-Name Literature: Film Adaptation and Selznick International Pictures' *Rebecca* (1940)." *Cinema Journal* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 32–58.
- Egan, James, ed. *John Waters: Interviews*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.
- "Where Will John Waters Be Buried." In *John Waters: Interviews*, edited by James Egan, 211–227. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.
- Eiliers, James McColley. "Sebastian's Nocturnal Dream Shows." *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 15, no. 3 (May/June 2008): 30–31.
- Foreman, Richard. "During the Second Half of the Sixties." In *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas & the New York Underground*, edited by David E. James, 138–144. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Frey, Mattias. *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016.
- Gamson, Joshua. *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the Seventies in San Francisco*. New York: Picador, 2005.
- George, Bill, and Martin Flack. "The Late Show Presents the Divine World of John Waters." *The Late Show*, 1974, 6–12. Reprinted in *John Waters: Interviews*, edited by James Egan, 38–46. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.
- Gordon, Stephen J. "Filmmaking in Baltimore: 1956–1979." In *Baltimore: A Living Renaissance*, edited by Lenora Heilig Nast, Laurence N. Krause, and R.C. Monk, 174–175. Baltimore: Historic Baltimore Society, Inc., 1982.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2010.
- Griffin, Chloé. *Edgewise: A Picture of Cookie Mueller*. New York: B-Books, 2014.
- Groom, Nigel. *The Perfume Handbook*. Edmunds, Suffolk: Springer-Science+Business Media, 1992.
- Harries, Dan. "Camping with Lady Divine: Star Persona and Parody." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 12, nos. 1–2 (1990): 13–22.
- Heffernan, Kevin. *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Heiferman, Marvin, et al. *John Waters: Change of Life*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004.
- Heller, Dana. *Hairspray*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

- Hoberman, J., and Jonathan Rosenbaum. *Midnight Movies*. Rev. ed. New York: Da Capo Press, 1991.
- Hodsdon, Barrett. *The Elusive Auteur: The Question of Film Authorship Throughout the Age of Cinema*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2017.
- Holmlund, Chris. *Female Trouble*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017.
- Hunter, Tab, with Eddie Muller. *Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2006.
- Israel, Ron. "Center Stage." In *Baltimore: A Living Renaissance*, edited by Lenora Heilig Nast, Laurence N. Krause, and R.C. Monk, 168–170. Baltimore: Historic Baltimore Society, Inc., 1982.
- Ives, John G. *John Waters*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992.
- James, David E. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Jay, Bernard. *Not Simply Divine*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
- Kane-Meddock, Derek. "Trash Comes Home: Gender/Genre Subversion in the Films of John Waters." In *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, edited by Christine Gledhill, 205–218. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Kapsis, Robert E. *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Krahulik, Karen Christel. *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
- Kreul, James. "New York, New Cinema: The Independent Film Community and the Underground Crossover, 1950–1970." PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2004.
- Leeder, Murray. "Collective Screams: William Castle and the Gimmick Film." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 4 (August 2011): 773–795.
- Leitch, Thomas. *Film Adaptation and its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.
- Levy, Emanuel. *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- *Gay Directors, Gay Films?* New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Mayne, Judith. *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- MacDonald, Scott. "John Waters' Divine Comedy." *Artforum*, January 1982, 52–60. Reprinted in *John Waters: Interviews*, edited by James Egan, 71–92. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.
- Mekas, Jonas. *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959–1971*. New York: Collier Books, 1972.
- "Showcases I Ran in the Sixties." In *To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas & the New York Underground*, edited by David E. James, 323–324. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Metz, Walter. "John Waters Goes to Hollywood: A Poststructural Authorship Study." In *Authorship and Film*, edited by David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger, 157–174. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Milstead, Frances, with Kevin Heffernan and Steve Yeager. *My Son Divine*. New York: Alyson Books, 2001.
- Missabu, Rumi. "Fopping it Up: Former Cockette Rumi's Story." In *Smash the Church, Smash*

- the State! The Early Years of Gay Liberation*, edited by Tommi Avicolti Mecca, 150–155. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009.
- “Mr. Peep’s Diary.” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, October 20, 1965. Reprinted in *John Waters: Interviews*, edited by James Egan, 3–4. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.
- Murphy, J.J. *The Black Hole of the Camera: The Films of Andy Warhol*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- Nunes, Elise Pereira. “Sex, Gore and Provocation: The Influence of Exploitation in John Waters’s Early Films.” *Transatlantica* 2 (2015): 1–18.
- Oldham, Todd, and Cindy Sherman. *John Waters (Place Space)*. Los Angeles: AMMO Books, 2008.
- Peary, Gerald. “John Waters in Provincetown.” *Provincetown Arts Magazine*, 1997, 22–26. Reprinted in *John Waters: Interviews*, edited by James Egan, 59–70. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.
- Pela, Robrt L. *Filthy: The Weird World of John Waters*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2002.
- Plantinga, Carl. “Disgusted at the Movies.” *Film Studies* 8 (Summer 2006): 81–92.
- Quarles, Mike. *Down and Dirty: Hollywood’s Exploitation Filmmakers and Their Movies*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1993.
- Rabinovitz, Lauren. *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943–71*. 2nd ed. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003.
- Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1967.
- Renay, Liz. *My Face for the World to See*. New York: L. Stuart, 1971.
- Rippy, Marguerite H. *Orson Welles and the Unfinished RKO Works: A Postmodern Perspective*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009.
- Rodden, John. *Performing the Literary Interview: How Writers Craft Their Public Selves*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.
- Russell, James. “Producing the Spielberg ‘Brand.’” In *A Companion to Steven Spielberg*, edited by Nigel Morris, 45–57. Malden, MA, Oxford, and Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017.
- Russell, Kate J. “The Cinematic Pandemonium of William Castle and John Waters.” *ReFocus: The Films of William Castle*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018. (Forthcoming)
- Samuels, Stuart. *Midnight Movies*. New York: Collier Books, 1983.
- Schaefer, Eric. *“Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!”: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- “Pandering to the ‘Goon Trade:’ Framing the Sexploitation Audience Through Advertising.” In *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, edited by Jeffrey Sconce, 27–35. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Schoonover, Karl. “Divine: Toward an ‘Imperfect’ Stardom.” In *Hollywood Reborn: Movie Stars of the 1970s*, edited by James Morrison, 158–181. New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Michael Moon. “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion (written with Michael Moon).” In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 215–251. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Segrave, Kerry. *Drive-In Theaters: A History from Their Inception in 1933*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1992.

- Shepard, Benjamin. "Play as World-making: From the Cockettes to the Germs, Gay Liberation to DIY Community Building." In *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, edited by Dan Berger, 177–194. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010.
- Sobchack, Vivian. "The Dream Olfactory: On Making Scents of Cinema." In *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*, edited by Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka, 121–143. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013.
- Staiger, Janet. "Finding Community in the Early 1960s: Underground Cinema and Sexual Politics." In *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, edited by Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett, 39–76. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Stevenson, Jack. *Desperate Visions: Camp America: John Waters, George & Mike Kuchar*. London and San Francisco: Creation Books, 1996.
- Studlar, Gaylyn. "Midnight S/Excess: Cult Configurations of 'Femininity' and the Perverse." In *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, edited by J.P. Telotte, 138–155. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991.
- Suárez, Juan A. *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Telotte, J.P. "Part III: The Midnight Movie," In *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, edited by J.P. Telotte, 103–105. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1991.
- Tent, Pam. *Midnight at the Palace: My Life as a Fabulous Cockette*. Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2004.
- "The Theatre of the Living Arts." In *An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions for a New American Art*, edited by Todd London, 355–360. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013.
- Tinkcom, Matthew. *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Trattner, Bernadette. "Visual Arts." In *Baltimore: A Living Renaissance*, edited by Lenora Heilig Nast, Laurence N. Krause, and R.C. Monk, 189–191. Baltimore: Historic Baltimore Society, Inc., 1982.
- Tyler, Parker. *Underground Film: A Critical History*. New York: Grove Press, 1969.
- Tzioumakis, Yannis. *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006.
- "Marketing David Mamet: Institutionally Assigned Film Authorship in Contemporary American Cinema." *The Velvet Light Trap* 57 (Spring 2006): 60–75.
- van Ooijen, Erik. "Cinematic Shots and Cuts: On the Ethics and Semiotics of Real Violence in Film Fiction." *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 3 (2011): 1–15.
- Waters, John. *Carsick: John Waters Hitchhikes Across America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.
- *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters*. Rev. ed. New York: Scribner, 2003.
- *Hairspray, Female Trouble, and Multiple Maniacs: Three More Screenplays by John Waters*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005.
- *John Waters: Director's Cut*. Zurich: Scalo Publishers, 1997.
- *Make Trouble*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2017.
- *Role Models*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010.
- *Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste*. 3rd ed. Philadelphia: Running

- Press, 2005.
- *Trash Trio: Three Screenplays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.
- "Whatever Happened to Showmanship?" In Waters, *Crackpot: The Obsessions of John Waters*. Rev. ed. 13–23. New York: Scribner, 2003.
- and Bruce Hainley. *Art: A Sex Book*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003.
- and Brenda Richardson. *Unwatchable*. New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery, 2006.
- Wagh, Thomas. "Cockteaser." In *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, edited by Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz, 51–77. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Woodward, Suzanne. "Taming Transgression: Gender-Bending in *Hairspray* (John Waters, 1988) and its Remake." *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 10, nos. 2–3 (2012): 115–126.
- Wyatt, Justin. "The Formation of the Major Independent: Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood." In *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steve Neale and Murray Smith, 74–90. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Articles, Trade Press, and Online Sources

- "7 Clergyman Ask Assembly to Liberalize Abortion Laws." *Baltimore Sun*, March 7, 1968.
- "8-Year Old Director." *Variety*, October 21, 1964.
- Alexander, Harvey. "A Talk with John Waters About John Waters, About Maelcum, and About Baltimore." *Up to Speed*, Winter–Spring 1976.
- Allen, Tom. "Adventures on the Sleaze Patrol." Review of *Desperate Living*. *Village Voice*, October 24, 1977.
- Altman, Billy. "He Who Laughs Most Laughs Best." *Creem*, February 1978.
- "An Interview: Underground Movie Director Revolts to Entertain." *The Retriever*, November 9, 1971.
- Ansen, David. "Dirty Soap." Review of *Polyester*. *Newsweek*, June 1, 1981.
- Applebaum, Irwyn. "Freakin' at the Freakers' Ball." *34th Street Magazine*, October 4, 1973.
- Arnett, Earl. "Despite Everything, Film Festival Quality Seems to be Improved." *Baltimore Sun*, May 7, 1977.
- "Maryland Film Festival: Another Art Form." *Baltimore Sun*, February 26, 1968.
- "Arnold's 'Procuress' Prints at \$11,000." *Variety*, March 1, 1972.
- "Artist to Display 150 Works." *Baltimore Sun*, March 24, 1968.
- "Arty and 'Freak' Films Packaged to Theatre Trade by New Line; Sex, Too." *Variety*, July 4, 1973.
- Auerbach, Alexander. "Wheels Deal at Cannes, but Some Sit and Wait." *Boxoffice*, June 9, 1980.
- Baltake, Joe. "Is This Grotesque Enough for You?" Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 1973.
- "Baltimore Film Festival." *Harry*, February 21, 1970.
- "Baltimore Film Festival II Announces Award-Winners." *Baltimore Sun*, April 22, 1971.
- "Baltimore International Film Festival May 13–21." *Boxoffice*, May 9, 1977.
- "Baltimore's 9th International Film Festival Schedules Varied Program." *Boxoffice*, May 1, 1978.
- "Balto 'Mondo Trasho' in Campus Pincho of Its Figleafed Hero." *Variety*, November 13, 1968.
- Bever, Michael L. "Waters Gravely Discussed Disgust - The Other X." *Oshkosh Advance-Titan*, October 16, 1975.
- Blonder, Larry. "Sweet, Sweet Divine." *Dimensions*, November 5, 1971.
- Bennett, Marty. "College Pix's 'Block Booking.'" *Variety*, August 20, 1969.

- "Bicentennial Salute to American Film Comedy." The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/5379/releases/MOMA_1976_0039_31.pdf.
- Blevins, Steve. "Desperate Living: Fishing in Shallow Waters." Review of *Desperate Living*. *Gay Community News*, September 3, 1977.
- Bradford, Len. "Film: Showing at Md. Institute Includes Films of Anger & Bresson." *Harry*, December 16, 1969.
- "Film: Have You Ever Killed Anybody Before? No, But It Would be Something New..." Review of *Multiple Maniacs*. *Harry*, April 17, 1970.
- "Radical Theater Experiment." *Harry*, June 1, 1970.
- Brady, James. "New York Intelligencer." *New York Magazine*, April 16, 1973.
- "Brandeis Panel Talk Scheduled." *Baltimore Sun*, April 30, 1969.
- Broderick, Frank. "Trash." *Philadelphia Gay News*, February 5–18, 1982.
- Brown, Charles H. "Freaks at a Far-Out Flick." *Welcomat*, October 3, 1973.
- Buckwheat. "The Passion According to the Cockettes." *Berkeley Tribe*, June 19–26, 1971.
- Calendo, John. "Meet John Waters, King of Sleaze." *Oui*, December 1975.
- Cameron, Alan. "Not Just Another Pretty Picture." *New Haven Advocate*, May 17, 1978.
- Campbell, Bob. "'Disney of Film Underground,' Director Waters Here Tonight." *Arizona Daily Wildcat*, February 6, 1976.
- Canby, Vincent. "Female Trouble." Review of *Female Trouble*. *New York Times*, February 13, 1975.
- "Plain Folks are Plain Tough." *New York Times*, June 14, 1981.
- "What's So Good About Bad Taste?" *New York Times*, February 23, 1975.
- "When Movies Take Pride in Being Second-Rate," *New York Times*, June 7, 1981.
- "Where Are the 'New Women'?" *New York Times*, June 28, 1981.
- "Where Does 'Flamingo' Road Lead?" *New York Times*, May 6, 1973, sec. 2.
- "Canon Collins to Give Nuclear Weapon Talk." *Baltimore Sun*, February 22, 1963.
- "Cape Cod." *Boxoffice*, October 2, 1978.
- "Capital Punishment Council to Assemble." *Baltimore Sun*, February 19, 1966.
- Carruba, Joseph. "Her Majesty, Queen Edie." *Parlee* 4, no. 6 (1978).
- Catharsis, C. "Multiple Maniacs – A Celluloid Atrocity." *Harry*, April 3, 1970.
- Cedrone, Lou. "'Devil's Angels in Neighborhood.'" Review of *Roman Candles*. *Baltimore Evening Sun*, May 16, 1967.
- "From 'Riot' to 'Trash.'" Review of *Mondo Trasho*. *Baltimore Evening Sun*, March 20, 1969.
- "Waters and His 'Maniacs.'" Review of *Multiple Maniacs*. *Baltimore Evening Sun*, April 14, 1970.
- "Waters Premieres New Film, and the Audience Loves It." Review of *Desperate Living*. *Baltimore Evening Sun*, June 1, 1977.
- "With 'Polyester,' Waters has Cleaned Up His Act, Sort Of." Review of *Polyester*. *Baltimore Evening Sun*, May 19, 1981.
- "Center Stage Season to Open October 24." *Baltimore Sun*, September 10, 1972.
- "Charges are Dropped in Nude Film Making." *Baltimore Evening Sun*, February 7, 1969.
- "Children's Show in Columbia." *Baltimore Sun*, February 16, 1968.
- Childress, Anne. "Institute Hosts Film Festival." *The News American*, February 27, 1967.
- "The Screen: A 'Gala World Premiere.'" *The News American*, March 10, 1969.

- "The Screen: 'Multiple Maniacs' Premiere." *The News American*, 1969.
- "Waters Strikes Again." *The News American*, March 16, 1972.
- "Church Concert." *Baltimore Sun*, April 10, 1966.
- Chute, David. "Apostle of Sleaze." Review of *Desperate Living*. *Boston Phoenix*, April 24, 1979.
- "Still Waters." *Film Comment*, May/June 1981.
- Clarens, Carlos. "Polyester." Review of *Polyester*. *The Soho Weekly News*, June 3, 1981.
- Clark, Dennis, and Alan Reese. "A Conversation with the 'Pink Flamingos,' King of Sleaze." *Towerlight*, May 3, 1974.
- "Clergymen Back Open Housing." *Baltimore Sun*, November 7, 1966.
- Cohen, Paul. "Current Baltimore Film Festival's Quality on High Level Surpassing Earlier Efforts." *Student Press*. Publication date not available.
- Cohen, Scott. "Checking In." *Playboy*, April 1982.
- Cohn, Lawrence. "10 Years of U.S. Offbeat 'Midnight Movies' Phenom." *Variety*, November 5, 1980.
- Coleman, Chico. "John Waters: 'I Try To Make the Trashiest Pictures I Can.'" *The Daily Texan*, February 4, 1976.
- "A Conversation with John Waters!" *The Magic Theater*, Summer 1978.
- "Corner Theater Film Festival." *Baltimore Sun*, June 21, 1970.
- "Corner Theater Moves Downtown." *Baltimore Sun*, July 16, 1967.
- "Corner Theatre Temp. Closed." *Harry*, July 3, 1970.
- Crist, Judith. "Smutty Waters." Review of *Female Trouble*. *New York Magazine*, February 24, 1975.
- Cromelin, Richard. "Edith Massey Stays in Character." *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1978.
- "Pop News." *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 1978.
- Curry, Bill. "The 'Pink Flamingos' Preview: If You're Lucky You Won't Be Invited." Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 21, 1973.
- D'Antoni, Thomas V. "Pink Flamingos." *Harry*, April 1972.
- David, Henri. "Read On..." *Gay News*, July 13, 1979.
- "Dellinger Plans Peace Rallies." *Baltimore Sun*, March 22, 1969.
- Dempsey, John. "College Film Course Lack Only Money." *Baltimore Sun*, May 18, 1969, SD1.
- Di Vincenzo, Joe. "Valentine's Day is Setting for Divine Conversation." *The Gleaner*, February 20, 1974.
- Dilts, James. "Baltimore's Underground Movie Producers." *Baltimore Sun*, July 9, 1967.
- "Competing for Title of 'Filthiest People Alive' in Movie." *Baltimore Sun*, December 11, 1973.
- "Distribits: 'Desperate Living' at New Line." *The Independent Film Journal*, July 22, 1977.
- "Distribits: New Line Gets 'Female Trouble.'" *The Independent Film Journal*, January 22, 1975.
- "Distribits & Exhibs: New Line Gets Chabrol's 'La Rupture.'" *The International Film Journal*, December 11, 1974.
- Dobbin, Muriel. "Flower Mart – Work of a Year." *Baltimore Sun*, May 7, 1961.
- Dorsey, John. "Film Festival Grows More Exotic." *Baltimore Sun*, April 13, 1980.
- "Film Forum Takes Baltimore to the Movies." *Baltimore Sun*, September 10, 1978.
- "Dudelson to Top New Line Cinema Distribution Wing." *The Independent Film Journal*, December 24, 1975.
- Dunn, Linda. "George on His Maypole Enjoys 55th Mart." *Baltimore Sun*, May 11, 1967.

- Eagleblade, Raven. "STARZ Brings Divine to Long Island." *L.I. Connection*, November 4, 1981.
- "Edie Rocks at Cluster's 1st Live Show." *Baltimore Sun*, April 28, 1978.
- "Edie's Career Continues to Flourish." *Baltimore Sun*, December 7, 1980.
- Eliscu, Lita. "Hand-Held: Underground and College Films: Over and Under." Review of *Mondo Trasho. Show: The Magazine of Film and the Arts*. Publication date not available.
- "Ellen Burstyn Lectures." *Variety*, September 3, 1975.
- "Fair Display to Show Life at Hopkins." *Baltimore Sun*, September 23, 1970.
- Fassbinder, Rainer Werner. "Fassbinder on Sirk." *Film Comment*, November/December 1975.
- Feingold, Michael. "Theatre: Isn't It Antiromantic?" Review of *Women Behind Bars*. *Village Voice*, May 24, 1976.
- "Festival of Films." *Baltimore Sun*, March 3, 1968.
- Fields, Danny, and Fran Lebowitz. "Pink Flamingos & the Filthiest People Alive?" *Interview*, May 1973.
- "Film Competition Planned." *Baltimore Sun*, December 10, 1970.
- "Film Fete at Park School." *Baltimore Sun*, October 16, 1966.
- "Film Forum Bills American, French Movies." *Baltimore Sun*, December 16, 1969.
- "Film Forum Bills Movies by Sirk and De Sica." *Baltimore Sun*, January 21, 1979.
- "Film Forum Sets Schedule." *Baltimore Sun*, January 14, 1979.
- "Film on War to Be Shown." *Baltimore Sun*, April 11, 1969.
- "First Newly-Built Stand in 30 Years; Boston's Kenmore's O'Neill Start." *Variety*, May 1, 1963.
- "Focus: Poster Detail Now Travels in Style." *Baltimore Sun*, June 5, 1977.
- Foote, Greg, Michelle McGlade, and Suzanne Walsh. "A Tribute to Trashiness." *Bryn Mawr-Haverford College News*, March 1, 1974.
- Gardner, R.H. "'Changes' A New Thing at Corner Theater Café Club." *Baltimore Sun*, September 11, 1968.
- "Film Fest Opens Wednesday." *The Baltimore Sun*, May 18, 1969.
- "Film Festival Awards Program." *Baltimore Sun*, March 10, 1967.
- "Maryland Film Festival." *Baltimore Sun*, March 2, 1969.
- Gaver, Chuc. "Ooh-La-La-Divine!" *The Drummer*, February 19, 1974.
- Geerdes, Clay. "The Cockettes." *Door*, September 29–October 13, 1971.
- Gelormine, Phil. "Are Movies Better Than Ever? Or Are There Just More of Them? The Answer is Yes to Both Questions." *Billboard*, March 31, 1973.
- Gire, Dann. "'Polyester's' John Waters: the 'Baron of Bad Taste.'" *The Daily Herald*, September 11, 1981, sec. 2.
- Giuliano, Mike. "The Fine Art of Film Making, Waters Style." *City Paper*, December 1, 1978.
- Goldwyn, Ronald. "'Pink Flamingos' Jams TLA Every Weekend." *The Sunday Bulletin*, February 24, 1974, sec. 5.
- Gormley, Jr., John H. "Dedication Keeps Drive-Ins Alive." *Baltimore Sun*, July 27, 1988.
- Graham, David. "Fab Film Fete." *Harry*, April 10–23, 1971.
- Grobel, Larry. "Female Trouble." Review of *Female Trouble*. *Los Angeles Free Press*, August 1–7, 1975.
- "John Waters: 'I Don't Want to Go to Jail For Making a Movie.'" *Los Angeles Free Press*, August 22–28, 1975.
- Hagan, Siobhan. "Baltimore Film Fêtes." *Mid-Atlantic Regional Moving Image Archive*, May 7, 2014. Accessed September 18, 2016. <https://marmia.org/2014/05/07/baltimore-film-fetes/>.

- Hammett, Corinne F. "'Scout Around For Some Ketchup': Underground Movie Group Surfaces." *The News American*, April 19, 1970.
- "Waters Does It His 'Lavish' Way." *The News American*, May 27, 1977.
- Hanna, Frederick J. "A Teen-Age Reply to 'God is Dead.'" *Baltimore Sun*, May 26, 1966.
- Harris, Joann. "Baltimore Film Fete Planned for Saturday." *Baltimore Sun*, April 12, 1970.
- "'You're a Star,' Said the Man in Pigtails to the Girl in Spurs." *Baltimore Sun*, March 26, 1972.
- Henderson, Randi. "Beyond Bad Taste." Review of *Desperate Living*. *Baltimore Sun*, May 16, 1978.
- "'Polyester' Takes a World Bow Tonight." *Baltimore Sun*, May 15, 1981.
- "The Thrills and Challenge of Being Divine." *Baltimore Sun*, May 24, 1981.
- Hendrickson, Paul. "At Home with the Sleaze King." *The National Observer*, July 17, 1976.
- Henry, Mike. "Cock-ettes." *San Francisco Good Times*. August 21, 1970.
- Hiltner, George J. "Liss Indites Poetic Screed; Mondo Malef-Actors Freed." *Baltimore Sun*, February 8, 1969.
- Hogner, Steve. "John Waters' Movies: Trash with Class." *Austin American-Statesman*, February 2, 1976.
- Horn, Stu. "Are You Ready for 'Female Trouble'?" Review of *Female Trouble*. *The Drummer*, October 22, 1974.
- Hunter, Stephen. "As a Spectacle, 'Polyester' Premiere is Just Divine." *Baltimore Sun*, May 16, 1981.
- "Short Films: Big Play on Small Screen." *Baltimore Sun*, September 10, 1982.
- Hyder, William. "A Baltimorean's Commercial Pays Off: A Film Festival 'Cleo.'" *Baltimore Sun*, June 30, 1968.
- James, Will. "No Dummy." Review of *Shock Value*. *Gay Community News*, November 14, 1981.
- Judell, Brandon. "I'd Like to be a Dog Catcher, Or: Will John Waters Ever Make the Great American Comedy." *GaysWeek*, March 6, 1978.
- "Judge Reluctantly Removes Indecent Exposure Case." *Baltimore Sun*, November 13, 1968.
- Kael, Pauline. "Fellini's Mondo Trasho." Review of *Fellini Satyricon*. *The New Yorker*, March 14, 1970.
- Kanigel, Robert. "The Bizarre World of Edith Massey." *Baltimore Jewish Times*, April 6, 1979.
- Kilday, Gregg. "Dick Tracy to Make Movie Debut." *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1977.
- Kilpatrick, Mary. "I Remember When...The Flower Mart was Something New." *Baltimore Sun*, May 8, 1949.
- King, Bruce. "Polyester." Review of *Polyester*. *Mom...Guess What!* December 1981.
- Klahr, M. Rex. "A Different Kind of Coming Out Party." *Performance*, May 31, 1973.
- "John Waters: 'I Show Them What They Don't Want to See.'" *Performance*, April 19, 1973.
- Kory, Lin. "Essence of Divine." *Michael's Thing*, August 27, 1973.
- Lee, Craig. "Eccentric Edith Massey at Lingerie." *Los Angeles Times*, August 17, 1982.
- Levine, Richard H. "Flower Mart (Hardy Perennial) Blooms Again." *Baltimore Sun*, May 12, 1966.
- "Local Filmmaker's Junk Coming." *The Provincetown Advocate*, 1971.
- Lodge, Sally A. "John Waters." *Publishers Weekly*, July 17, 1981.
- Lor., "Polyester." Review of *Polyester*. *Variety*, April 22, 1981.
- Lynton, Stephen J. "Rally Held to Support Panthers." *Baltimore Sun*, December 21, 1969.

- Lyons, Sheridan. "Movie-maker Likes to Hear Laughs." *Baltimore Sun*, November 15, 1981.
- Makarovich, Michal, "Color It Pink: Flamingos and Feces – A Review of John Waters." Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *The Paper*, April 6–13, 1972.
- "March Film Festival." *Baltimore Sun*, February 4, 1968.
- Maslin, Janet. "The Screen: 'Polyester,' An Offbeat Comedy." Review of *Polyester*. *New York Times*, May 29, 1981.
- McCarthy, Todd. "Female Trouble." Review of *Female Trouble*. *Hollywood Reporter*, August 1, 1975.
- McFunn, Dimples. "Divine Filth on Film." Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Berkeley Barb*, August 9–15, 1974.
- McGarity, Neal. "Waters, Cool and Amiable, Comments on Latest Flick." *The Retriever*, October 28, 1974.
- McLean, Donald. "San Francisco," *The Advocate*, July 16, 1975.
- Mekas, Jonas. "Movie Journal." Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Village Voice*, September 27, 1973.
- Meyer, George. "John Waters' Films Are an Exercise in Bad, Bad Taste." *Currents (Tampa Tribune)*, November 11, 1977.
- "Midnight Rides of 'Pink Flamingos.'" *Variety*, April 3, 1974.
- "Midnight Specials." *American Theatre*, February 2013.
- "Mike White in U.S.; Nervous about Long Strike by Actors." *Variety*, August 20, 1980.
- Mills, Michael. "John Waters," *The Wallpaper Journal*, December 9, 1981.
- "Moody Blues to Appear at Civic Center." *Baltimore Sun*, March 27, 1972.
- Morris, George. "Female Trouble." Review of *Female Trouble*. *Bright Lights Film Journal* 7 (1978).
- "Interview: John Waters." *Take One*, March 1978.
- Mullinax, Gary. "Waters Film Tests Public Tastes Again." *Sunday News Journal*, March 26, 1978.
- "Multiple Maniacs' Billed." *Baltimore Sun*, September 27, 1970.
- Murf. "Mondo Trasho." Review of *Mondo Trasho*. *Variety*, February 11, 1970.
- "Museum Director to Speak." *Baltimore Sun*, October 18, 1968.
- "Music Notes Organ Recital." *Baltimore Sun*, November 21, 1965.
- Musto, Michael. "Desperate Living: Not a Pretty Picture." *Soho Weekly News*, October 20, 1977.
- "Edith Massey: The Egg Lady Goes Punk." *Soho Weekly News*, October 12, 1978.
- "Native son John Waters' 'Polyester' Sets Baltimore Situation's New Mark." *Variety*, June 3, 1981.
- "Negative Pickups a New Policy for N.Y.'s New Line Cinema." *Variety*, August 11, 1976.
- "New Line Acquisitions." *The Independent Film Journal*, August 20, 1973.
- "New Line Cinema Corp." *Variety*, September 13, 1967.
- "New Line Cinema Planning its First Film Production for 1977 Release." *Boxoffice*, November 15, 1976.
- "New Line Joins New Pic Throng at Cannes Fest." *Variety*, May 11, 1977.
- "New Line Making Maiden Feature." *Variety*, January 26, 1977.
- "New Line Will Handle Gaul-Sichel Program of Erotic Fest Items." *Variety*, January 26, 1972.
- "New Line's Got 'Nada.'" *Variety*, October 2, 1974.
- "New Line's New Ones." *Variety*, August 9, 1978.
- "New Line's 'Polyester' Bows May 29, Wide." *Variety*, May 13, 1981.

- “New Line’s Pres. Gratified by Exhib Response; Indie Company Launching Own Productions.” *The Independent Film Journal*, June 25, 1976.
- “New Line’s Shaye to Cannes Fest; Has New Capital.” *Variety*, May 19, 1976.
- “The New Liners: GNP, Saliva Films.” *Variety*, May 8, 1974.
- O’Rourke, P.J. “Film: Let It Be/Leave It Alone.” *Harry*, June 1, 1970.
- “Going to Water’s.” *The Chesapeake Weekly Review*, June 5, 1970.
- “Pink Flamingos.” Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *The Herald*, March 31, 1972.
- “‘Outlaw Cinema Festival’ Begins July 30 at Nuart.” *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 1981.
- “‘Outrage’ Has Limits.” *Variety*, February 12, 1975.
- Parnum, John E. “Shock Value.” Review of *Shock Value*. *Cinemacabre*, Fall 1982.
- Pearry, Gerald. “The Second Coming of Tab Hunter.” *The Globe and Mail*, July 1982.
- Pennington, Bruce. “Through the Looking Glass: Two Opinions on *Women Behind Bars*.” Review of *Women Behind Bars*. *Washington Newsworks*, March 4–10, 1976.
- Perzov, Starla. “Multiple Maniacs’ Freaky!” *Student Press*, publication date not available.
- Polak, Maralyn Lois. “Interview: John Waters: Is He Brilliant or Truly ‘The Filthiest Filmmaker Alive’?” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 23, 1976.
- Postel, Louis. “‘A Lot of People Were Upset That We Put the Baby in the Refrigerator...’ An Interview with John Waters.” *Provincetown Magazine* 1, no. 2 (1977).
- “Potent Waters.” Review of *Shock Value*. *Numbers*, January 1982.
- Rasen, Edward. “Just Divine: The Inside Story of the 400-Pound Drag Queen Who Got to Play Jackie Kennedy.” *The Organ*, July 1971.
- Redfern, Gregg. “Witching Hour Has Laughter.” Publication and publication date not available.
- Reed, Rex. “State of Stupefaction.” Review of *Female Trouble*. *Daily News*, February 21, 1975.
- “Repertory Company to Present Coward’s ‘Blithe Spirit.’” *Baltimore Sun*, July 14, 1971.
- Richards, David. “Freaking People Out is Divine’s Talent, But He Feels He’s No Freak.” *The Washington Star*, February 25, 1976.
- Rino. “Pink Flamingos.” Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Variety*, December 11, 1974.
- Robins, Wayne. “Pink Flamingos.” Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Creem*, November 1973.
- Robbins, Jim. “New Line Plans Four New Films.” *Boxoffice*, August 18, 1980.
- Robinson, David. “Cynical Redemptions of Cinematic True Love.” *The Times*, May 9, 1980.
- “Rock Groups’ Stratospheric Prices Spur College Interest in Film Fare.” *Variety*, December 24, 1969.
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. “Excremental Visionary.” Review of *Shock Value*. *Soho Weekly News*, September 16–22, 1981.
- Rousuck, J. Wynn. “Film Festival Turns 10.” *Baltimore Sun*, April 15, 1979.
- “Midnight Movies.” *Baltimore Sun*, January 25, 1981.
- “‘Polyester’ Doing So-So Business.” *Baltimore Sun*, July 19, 1981.
- “Workaday Makers of Sick Flicks,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 18, 1981.
- Sarff, Douglas. “Flamingos Not the Only Shame.” *The Advocate*, January 15, 1975.
- Scarupa, Henry. “He Cultivates ‘Sleaze’ Like a Rare Orchid.” *Baltimore Sun*, March 27, 1977.
- “Judge Liss: Actor, Singer, Emcee, etc., etc.” *Baltimore Sun*, April 2, 1978.
- “Queen of Punk Rock.” *Baltimore Sun*, April 16, 1978.
- Scheirman, Richard. “‘Sleaze King’ Discusses Latest Film.” *The Daily Texan*, November 16, 1977.
- Schoettler, Carl. “Baltimore’s Junk Film King.” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, March 16, 1972.
- “‘Mondo Trasho’: It’s Junky But Not Dirty.” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, March 11,

- 1969.
- "Underground Film Show." *Baltimore Evening Sun*, May 11, 1967.
- "School Lists Film." *Baltimore Sun*, March 12, 1967.
- Schulman, Michael. "Camping with John Waters and His Band of 'Filthy Freaks.'" *New York Times*, October 14, 2017. Accessed June 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/style/john-waters-camp.html>.
- Scott, Jay. "Cult Film King Searching for Sweet Smell of Success." *The Globe and Mail*, May 25, 1981.
- "Documenting and Satirizing Prejudice Against Gay Sensibility, Which Could Become a Historical Curiosity." Review of *Shock Value*. *The Globe and Mail*, October 3, 1981.
- "Polyester: Silly Smell of Success." Review of *Polyester*. *The Globe and Mail*, September 17, 1981.
- "Sculptures on Display." *Baltimore Sun*, May 4, 1969.
- Sefcovic, Enid "John Waters, the King of Baltimore Film Makers." *The News American*, October 10, 1974.
- Segers, Frank. "Foreign Pix Pick Up More Biz in U.S." *Variety*, May 9, 1979.
- "Service of Thanksgiving." *Baltimore Sun*, April 25, 1964.
- Severson, Jack. "'The Egg Lady' is Back, and Is She Clucking!" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 31, 1978.
- Seymore, James W. "Pink Midnight: A Divine Time at the Late Show." *The Washingtonian*, September 1974.
- Shales, Tom. "The Good, the Bad, and the Tasteless." *Washington Post*, March 4, 1974.
- Shaye, Robert. "Showmanship A La Mode – 1975." *Variety*, January 15, 1975.
- Shelsby, Ted. "Drive-in Theaters Fade as Habits Change; Land is Wanted for Other Uses." *Baltimore Sun*, January 31, 1982.
- Sherbo, Dan. "Flamingo for a Day." *The Gay Alternative*, Summer 1974.
- "Shock Value: A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste." Review of *Shock Value*. *Publishers Weekly*, June 12, 1981.
- Simon, David. "Students Find Profits on Campus." *Baltimore Sun*, October 3, 1982.
- Sipe, Dan. "The Known Unknown vs. Ecstatic Exploration." Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Pennsylvania Voice*, February 13, 1974.
- Siskel, Gene, "Lighting Up a Setting of Darkness." Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1973.
- "'Troubles' and Trash Float Past the Fans of Polluted Waters." *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 1975.
- "Six Great American Tell 'What Xmas Means to Me.'" *High Times*, November 1977.
- Sloan, Bob. "The Politics of 'Pink Flamingos.'" Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Pennsylvania Voice*, February 13, 1974.
- Smith, Howard. "Scenes." *Village Voice*, December 28, 1967.
- and Brian van der Horst. "Scenes." *Village Voice*, January 27, 1975.
- and Tracy Young. "Scenes." *Village Voice*, March 15, 1973.
- Smith, Jack. "'Pink Flamingo' Formulas in Focus." Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Village Voice*, July 19, 1973.
- "Spanish Film at Center Stage." *Baltimore Sun*, December 17, 1978.
- Stack, Peter. "Divine: Born to Be Cheap." *San Francisco Chronicle*. Publication date not

- available.
- Takiff, Jonathan. "Edie the Egg Lady is Set to Deliver." *Philadelphia Daily News*, September 1, 1978.
- "Talent Talk." *Billboard*, November 19, 1977.
- "Talks." *Baltimore Sun*, November 10, 1978.
- Tarbox, Aubrey. "More Art Distribs Entering Campus Market for 'Series'; Sell Theme, Not Each Film." *Variety*, December 25, 1968.
- "Theatrical, Non-Theatrical Markets Sold At Same Time by New Line." *Variety*, October 23, 1974.
- "Think MPAA Moving to Regard Violence and Not Only Erotica." *Variety*, November 20, 1974.
- Thomas, Bill. "Hallmark, Beware! Edie Cards are Here." *Baltimore Sun*, December 16, 1982.
- Thomas, Jeff. "Pink Flamingos Dive." Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Los Angeles Free Press*, January 10, 1975.
- Thomas, Kevin. "'Female Trouble': To Err is Divine." Review of *Female Trouble*. *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1975.
- "Pink Flamingos' Strictly for the Very Open-Minded." Review of *Pink Flamingos*. *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1974.
- "Waters: Taking a Nasty Turn." Review of *Desperate Living*. *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 1977.
- Thompson, Bubbles. "Blueboy Interviews John Waters." *Blueboy*, November 1977.
- Treby, Guy. "Talking Heads: John Waters Smells Success." *Village Voice*, May 20–26, 1981.
- Turan, Kenneth. "Baltimore's King of Repulsion." *Potomac (Washington Post)*, April 20, 1975.
- "Where You Are When the Lights Go Out." *Potomac (Washington Post)*, February 24, 1974.
- "Underground Film Fest on Commercial Industry Doorstep." *Variety*, February 4, 1970.
- "Underground Film Fest Set." *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1970.
- "University of Baltimore Plans Film Festival." *Baltimore Sun*, March 31, 1972.
- Veasey, Jack. "John Waters: A Successful Black Sheep is Tickled Pink Over Bad Taste." *Philadelphia Gay News*, August 21–September 3, 1981.
- Verrill, Addison. "Butchery and Lechery Tide Ebbing?" *Variety*, June 26, 1974.
- "Dudelson: Cannon To New Line; Plan Calls for Four 'Class' Pix." *Variety*, March 20, 1974.
- Von Wiedenman, Donald. "Interview: John Waters." *The Advocate*, June 16, 1976.
- Waesche, James F. "Park School's First 50 Years." *Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 1963.
- Wald, Matthew L. "Cinemas, Like Cells, Survive in a Harsh World by Multiplying." *New York Times*, October 30, 1977, sec. 8.
- Wallach, George. "NYU, UCLA Best at Student Fest." *Back Stage*, November 28, 1975.
- Walls, Don. Review of *Mondo Trasho*. *The Daily Record*, March 14, 1969.
- "Walter's [sic] Film to Premiere." *Baltimore Sun*, March 12, 1972.
- Ward, Robert. "Meet John Waters, the Underground Director of the Most Repulsive Movie Ever Made." *Gallery*, June 1974.
- "Warhol 'Women' Self-Deal at 90-10, But Seeks Distrib." *Variety*, March 1, 1972.
- "Waters Films: Tasteless, Vulgar, Campy." *Provincetown Advocate*, August 9, 1979.
- Waters, John. "All My Trials." *Oui*, May 1978.
- "Casting for the Heavies." *Oui*, November 1978.
- "The Filthiest People Alive!" *New York Native*. September 21–October 4, 1981.

- "Fran Lebowitz." *Interview*, September 1981.
- "Mondo Video." *American Film*, June 1982.
- "Silver Screen." Review of *Spirits of the Dead*. *The Red Brick* 1, no. 1 (October 1969).
- "Troubled Waters." *Oui*, August 1979.
- "Water's." Review of *Paranoia*. *The Red Brick* 1, no. 1 (October 1969).
- "Waters Interviews the Divinity." *High Times*, January 1983.
- Watkins, Roger. "Legit's White into Films 80% Brit. Banks Unhappily Have One Word Only for Pix—'Collateral.'" *Variety*, June 10, 1981.
- Weisgal, Fred. "Jingling Judge." *Playboy*, 1969.
- White, Slaton. "Ugh! Master of Bad Taste Cinema Returns with New Film." *The Diamondback*, September 9, 1977.
- Whitehall, Richard. "A Smorgasbord of Films." Review of *Mondo Trasho*. *Los Angeles Free Press*, January 30, 1970.
- Wilkes, Paul. "Baltimore's Disconnecteds." *Baltimore Sun*, December 17, 1967.
- "Willard Van Dyke." The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, January 1986, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/6278/releases/MOMA_1986_0012_12.pdf?2010.
- Winsten, Archer. "'Desperate' is Not for the Living." Review of *Desperate Living*. *New York Post*, October 15, 1977.
- "Divine Well-Suited in 'Polyester' Material." Review of *Polyester*. *New York Post*, May 29, 1981.
- "'Wizard of Oz' Goes to 'Pot,' Is Now 'Wizard of Odd.'" *Baltimore Sun*, March 10, 1966.
- Wolf, William. "Comic Obscenity." Review of *Female Trouble*. *Cue*, February 17, 1975.
- Wong, Herman. "Actor Tab Hunter Plays Lead in Dinner Theatre." *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1982.
- Yeager, Steven. "John Waters: 'I Show Them What They Don't Want to See.'" *Performance*, April 19, 1973.

Filmography

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920)
Battleship Potemkin (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
White Zombie (Victor Halperin, 1932)
Cocaine Madness a.k.a *Cocaine Fiends* (William O'Connor, 1935)
Reefer Madness (Louis J. Gasnier, 1936)
Destry Rides Again (George Marshall, 1939)
The Wizard of Oz (Victor Fleming, 1939)
Mom and Dad (Kroger Babb, 1944)
Fireworks (Kenneth Anger, 1947)
Eaux d'Artifice (Kenneth Anger, 1953)
Obmaru (Patricia Marx, 1953)
All That Heaven Allows (Douglas Sirk, 1955)
Baby Doll (Elia Kazan, 1956)
The Mole People (Virgil Vogel, 1956)
There's Always Tomorrow (Douglas Sirk, 1956)
Written on the Wind (Douglas Sirk, 1956)
Poor White Trash (Harold Daniels, 1957)
Macabre (William Castle, 1958)
Behind the Great Wall (Carlo Lizzani, 1959)
House on Haunted Hill (William Castle, 1959)
Imitation of Life (Douglas Sirk, 1959)
The Nun's Story (Fred Zinnemann, 1959)
The Tingler (William Castle, 1959)
Wedlock House: An Intercourse (Stan Brakhage, 1959)
Homicidal (William Castle, 1960)
Scent of Mystery (Jack Cardiff, 1960)
Cosmic Ray (Bruce Conner, 1962)
Flaming Creatures (Jack Smith, 1963)
Normal Love (Jack Smith, 1963)
Sleep (Andy Warhol, 1963)
Scorpio Rising (Kenneth Anger, 1963)
Short Circuit (David Wise, 1963)
Born of the Wind (Mike Kuchar, 1964)
Empire (Andy Warhol, 1964)
Hag in a Black Leather Jacket (John Waters, 1964)
Straight-Jacket (William Castle, 1964)
Beauty #2 (Andy Warhol, 1965)
Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (Russ Meyer, 1965)
Vinyl (Andy Warhol, 1965)
The War Game (Peter Watkins, 1965)
Andrei Rublev (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1966)
The Chelsea Girls (Andy Warhol, 1966)
King of Hearts (Philippe de Broca, 1966)
The Graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967)

Imitation of Christ (Andy Warhol, 1967–1969)
Roman Candles (John Waters, 1967)
Weekend (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967)
Eat Your Makeup (John Waters, 1968)
Spirits of the Dead (Federico Fellini, Louis Malle, and Roger Vadim, 1968)
Diaries, Notes and Sketches (Jonas Mekas, 1969)
Fellini Satyricon (Federico Fellini, 1969)
Mondo Trasho (John Waters, 1969)
Paranoia a.k.a. *Orgasmo* (Umberto Lenzi, 1969)
Pig Pen a.k.a. *Porcile* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1969)
Sympathy for the Devil (Jean-Luc Godard, 1969)
The Tattooed Man (Storm de Hirsch, 1969)
Bloodthirsty Butchers (Andy Milligan, 1970)
The Diane Linkletter Story (John Waters, 1970)
El Topo (Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1970)
Gimme Shelter (Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin, 1970)
The Honeymoon Killers (Leonard Kastle, 1970)
Image, Flesh and Voice (Ed Emshwiller, 1970)
La Rupture (Claude Chabrol, 1970)
Let It Be (Michael Lindsay-Hogg, 1970)
Multiple Maniacs (John Waters, 1970)
Pagan Rhapsody (George Kuchar, 1970)
Jimi Plays Berkeley (Peter Pilafian, 1971)
Luminous Procuress (Steven Arnold, 1971)
Women in Revolt (Paul Morrissey, 1971)
The Seduction of Mimi (Lina Wertmüller, 1972)
Pink Flamingos (John Waters, 1972)
The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973)
Last Tango in Paris (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1973)
Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1974)
Conversation Piece (Luchino Visconti, 1974)
Female Trouble (John Waters, 1974)
The Four Musketeers (Richard Lester, 1974)
Nada a.k.a. *The Nada Gang* (Claude Chabrol, 1974)
Revenge of the Streetfighter a.k.a. *The Street Fighter's Last Revenge* (Shigehiro Ozawa, 1974)
The Street Fighter (Shigehiro Ozawa, 1974)
A Very Natural Thing (Christopher Larkin, 1974)
Jaws (Steven Spielberg, 1975)
Monty Python and the Holy Grail (Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, 1975)
Naked Came the Stranger (Radley Metzger, 1975)
The Outer Space Connection (Fred Warshofsky, 1975)
The Rocky Horror Picture Show (Jim Sharman, 1975)
Shampoo (Hal Ashby, 1975)
Chinese Roulette (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1976)
Satan's Brew (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1976)
Andy Warhol's Bad (Jed Johnson, 1977)

Desperate Living (John Waters, 1977)
Eraserhead (David Lynch, 1977)
Stunts (Mark L. Lester, 1977)
Get Out Your Handkerchiefs (Bertrand Blier, 1978)
Airplane! (David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, Jerry Zucker, 1980)
My Dinner with Andre (Louis Malle, 1981)
Polyester (John Waters, 1981)
Raiders of the Lost Ark (Steven Spielberg, 1981)
Reds (Warren Beatty, 1981)
Shock Treatment (Jim Sharman, 1981)
Superman II (Richard Lester, 1981)
Urgh! A Music War (Derek Burbidge, 1981)
Gandhi (Richard Attenborough, 1982)
Porky's (Bob Clark, 1982)
Lust in the Dust (Paul Bartel, 1985)
Hairspray (John Waters, 1988)
Cry-Baby (John Waters, 1990)
Serial Mom (John Waters, 1994)
Pecker (John Waters, 1998)
Cecil B. Demented (John Waters, 2000)
A Dirty Shame (John Waters, 2004)
This Filthy World (Jeff Garlin, 2006)
Hairspray (Adam Shankman, 2007)
Tab Hunter Confidential (Jeffrey Schwarz, 2015)