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## **“The vanguard—and the most articulate audience”:**

### **Queer Camp, Jack Smith and John Waters**

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*Art is one big thrift shop.*  
—Jack Smith

*I genuflect before Jack Smith, the only true “underground” film-maker.*  
—John Waters

*I must move fast, you understand me / I want to go down in celluloid history*  
—The Smiths, “Frankly Mr. Shankly”

Early in her essay, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Susan Sontag introduces the concept of a “Camp eye,” a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. She argues that while “the Camp eye has the power to transform experience ... not everything can be seen as Camp. It’s not all in the eye of the beholder” (277). She then shifts from a “Camp way of looking at things” towards the idea of a quality found in “campy” objects, grounding this latter point by tracing a brief list of items in the “canon of Camp” (277): clothes, furniture, elements of visual décor. John Waters’s appearance on the popular television cartoon *The Simpsons* (“Homer’s Phobia”) uses a very Sontagian concept of “Camp”; as a value attributed to certain naïve and démodé things. This might more properly be termed “kitsch,” and gets directly conflated with monetary value in the episode. Waters plays the owner of a store that sells overpriced pop-culture memorabilia; his encounter with the Simpsons is one of love for their “precious,” “classic,” un-self-consciously American suburban home. Marge, Lisa, and Bart Simpson are taken with Waters’s “festive” sensibility, while Homer must work through his homophobic fear of Waters and what he perceives to be his potential “influence” on Bart. Waters flirtatiously tells Homer that not only his house and record collection, but he himself has “camp value.” What is rather insidious about this presentation of “camp” is the way in which camp value and retail value become synonymous; and the subjective element of camp becomes indistinguishable from the process of commodification, reduced to a hybrid but un-radical

form of commodity fetishism. In this rendition, queer camp is domesticated and appears only in its mummified form: kitsch.

Against this focus on objects, I wish to take the “Camp eye” as a point of departure for an examination of camp (lower-case “c”) as a way of seeing, a set of relations with the world, a mode of artistic production, a refined form of irony, and an effective mode of critique. To do this I feel we must avoid Sontag’s stress on “campy” objects, and instead look at what she calls the “vulgar” use of the term as a verb: “to camp.” As a verb, camp implies activity and process; this invigorates the radical possibilities that lie within it. I will however tentatively suggest not a “canon” but a tradition of camp ways of seeing, a distinctly queer avant-garde tradition full of intertextual cross-referencing, allusion, and mutual admiration. The two figures I have chosen to illustrate this more contingent concept of camp are John Waters and Jack Smith. This essay will involve a reading of two re-released films: Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1962) and Waters’s *Pink Flamingos* (1972). Both films have earned great notoriety in terms of efforts to censor their distribution due to “obscene” (explicit, homoerotic, transvestite) content, and an equally avid following with circulation ranging from East Village midnight screenings to Congressional hearings. [1]<sup>1</sup>

Both filmmakers are often invoked as “queer” and as having created and participated in what is called a camp aesthetic. I would like to make use of both the term “queer” and the word “camp,” as well as the ongoing critical debates surrounding them, not in a way which participates in what David Van Leer has called a “turf war” regarding “ownership” (20–21) of these positionalities and strategies, but rather in the hope of further “democratizing” their application and radical possibility, along the lines suggested by Judith Butler in her essay “Critically Queer.” What Butler argues regarding the term

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<sup>1</sup> In the programme notes for the 1998 Walker Art Center (Minneapolis) retrospective of Smith’s work, “Jack Smith and his Secret Flix,” Jim Hoberman’s excerpted essay “Crimson Creatures: The Case Against *Flaming Creatures*” gives some of the story:

Privately-owned theaters and university film societies across the country chose to screen Smith’s film amidst its growing controversy. Numerous lawsuits and trials resulted, including a supreme court hearing where five of the nine judges dismissed as moot a municipal judge’s ruling that *Flaming Creatures* was “a smutty pervyance of filth [that] borders on the razor’s edge of hardcore pornography.” Justice Fortas, one of two dissenting justices who voted to reverse the decision, was nominated for chief justice by Lyndon Johnson in 1968. Upon learning this, Senator Strom

“queer” might equally apply to the term “camp”: “If the term ‘queer’ is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage” (228).

Despite the fact that Waters’s television appearance was mired in Sontag’s sense of camp “taste,” his own films, especially *Pink Flamingos*, suggest an evaluation of camp value that renders it much less easily commodified, and deploy a camp strategy that in fact ironically comments on the process of commodity fetishism and proper economic circulation. Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* has a unique history of circulation and criticism which involves Sontag herself in a way that illuminates her own critical bias.<sup>2</sup>

What Sontag’s notes give us is a set of concepts to work with, if only to reject them in the end. Three stand out as being of particular importance: “10. Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman.’ To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (280); and

1. ... Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization. 2. To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical. (277)

These notes are strikingly similar to the mode of representation that Fredric Jameson has attributed to postmodernism in his famous essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society.” What Jameson both reveals and bemoans is the way in which postmodern art has lost any sense of history through which it can place itself in space and time. Postmodernism’s dominant artistic mode is pastiche, a form of blank parody, or infinite quotation and recycling. Both Jameson and Sontag indicate that this stance results in an

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Thurmond, the ranking Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, then organized a “Fortas Film Festival” in Room 2228 of the Senate office building.

<sup>2</sup> As I will go on to argue, Sontag defends Smith’s film from censorship by rendering it a trivial and harmless object to be consumed.

inability to challenge the logic of late capitalism, Sontag calling camp “dandyism in the age of mass culture” (289) and Jameson closing his piece with the open question of whether postmodernism could take forms which could work against rather than with the consumerist logic of late capitalism (202). What neither author considers is: firstly, the motivating factors, including sexuality and gender, which may influence parody that appears “blank” and disengaged; and secondly, that indifference to “content” is a major critical and political strategy. In fact, “slighting content” may be the most important move in the denaturalization and deconstruction of discourses and their various truth-effects. Indeed, Wilde’s line “to be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up” (quoted in Sontag 282) points out how Culture masquerades as Nature. The “quotation” and “quotation marks” which Sontag and Jameson attribute to both postmodernism and camp can thus be understood to function in a profoundly de-naturalizing way.

In his introduction to *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, entitled “Reclaiming the discourse of Camp,” Moe Meyer criticizes Sontag’s rendition of camp as aristocratic “taste,” objecting to her utter de-politicization of camp, and foreclosure of its potential to critique bourgeois values. I want to follow Meyer in asking how camp may in fact critically engage bourgeois and aristocratic “taste,” confronting and subverting it in a way that is in fact political. Critiques of Sontag usually focus on her phobic de-homosexualization of camp, displayed in her remark that while “homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard—and the most articulate audience—of Camp ... Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste ... if homosexuals hadn’t more or less invented Camp, someone else would” (290–91). In “Sontag’s Urbanity,” D. A. Miller is right to note the way in which this “someone” became Sontag herself, and the ubiquity of Sontag’s name in discussions of camp (including my own) attests to this fact. While I think it is important to stress the specifically queer tradition in which camp emerged (this indeed will be one of the goals of this paper), I think that Jack Babuscio’s alternative positing of camp as an exclusive “gay sensibility” is not without an equally problematic essentializing impulse.

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Moe Meyer insists on our “reclamation” of the discourse of camp, and camp’s queer specificity (5). Queerness is not the same as homosexuality here. Michel Foucault’s suggestion that homosexuality is radical not in and of itself, but for the potentialities it may open up, is an important reminder (Foucault 383; Halperin 114). To tether camp to homosexuality is not to ensure that both are radical, but to sever the two is almost always a homophobic move. In fact, “camp” has been increasingly understood in its specificity as a form of queer praxis, and its history as a queer survival tactic is undeniable. Yet, the goal will be to possibly forego “ownership” of camp, and not to cease continual questioning of what its politics may be. I will go on to suggest that camp and “ownership” are antithetical.

That neither John Waters nor Jack Smith, as gay male artists, provided an answer to the seeming invisibility of homosexuality in Hollywood films (i.e. *The Celluloid Closet*) aggravated their gay contemporaries. The director of the Homosexual League of New York, in a letter to Jonas Mekas, explained that he found *Flaming Creatures* “long, disturbing, and psychologically unpleasant ... Why don’t filmmakers produce an authentic film about a love affair or something between two boys which takes place in a contemporary homosexual setting?” (quoted in Leffingwell 74). Waters is constantly asked similar questions by the gay press. But what does camp allow us to question if not the possibility of the “authentic,” domesticated bourgeois “love affair”? It is precisely for their “psychologically unpleasant” suture-disturbing cinematic strategies that Waters and Smith may provide a healthy antidote to the conservative push of gay film and criticism.

Yet Smith and Waters are also potentially at odds with my own discourse; the terms “drag” and “camp” themselves may in fact be resisted by the very texts to which they are being applied. First of all, the critic faced with Waters’s rejection of the notion that his films have much at all to do with “drag” or “camp” must conjecture why this is. In an interview for a gay magazine, Waters explains that he sees the word camp as “20 years out of fashion” (Marcus 48). He mainly objects to the word “campy,” preferring “great trash,” but his explanation reveals that he is thinking of a Sontagian model: “Camp, to me, is talking about Tiffany lampshades in 1966 in an antique shop with two old queens—which I don’t mind doing, but it’s a very outdated word. I would never use

the word camp” (48). However, if we understand camp in a way that significantly differs from Sontag’s “taste,” then we can read Waters’s films as camp in a much more queer, political, and subversive way.

Waters, and his 300-pound star actress, Divine, “The Most Beautiful Woman in the World” (Waters 146) have each argued repeatedly that their films are not about drag (Marcus 44). Since both Jack Smith and John Waters use drag in their films, it will also be important to inquire into the relationship between camp and drag, and to remind the contemporary reader of the potential differences between the flourishing of interest in drag and camp in the academy and popular media since the 1990s, and their roles in the films of Smith or Waters. One of the distinguishing features of drag as deployed by Smith and Waters is a “messy” quality, a disjunctive “readability” of mustachioed men in makeup, visible falsies, and sometimes visible male anatomy. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Moon, and John Waters have each contrasted this to the “sanitized” drag of other celebrity female impersonators (*Tendencies* 220, Marcus 44).

I agree with Carole-Anne Tyler’s point in her critique of drag and camp—unfortunately conflated—that it is important to read “each instance of drag (and its interpretations) symptomatically rather than to insist that it is always radical or conservative” (33). It is important to keep in mind, then, that camp is almost always met with ambivalence, and may itself be structured by a sort of ambivalence—be it the kind of psychic ambivalence Tyler finds in drag’s “dis-identifying” relation to women (also remarked upon by Marilyn Frye [hooks 148]), or Water’s ambivalence with the application of the term to his films. We need a discussion of camp that neither escapes its problematic aspects nor works against this tension, but instead engages and perhaps works with this tension within camp and its deployment (*Absolutely Fabulous* might be a useful text for exploring this ambivalent dynamic between women and gay men). I will thus consider “the politics of ambivalence” as they are played out in camp practice and criticism, in the work of Smith and Waters, and that of Sontag and myself. Of special importance to my discussion will be Sontag’s “objective” defence:

I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can. For no one who shares in a given sensibility

can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion. (276)

Hopefully the very difference between theory and practice will become blurred beyond the tidy distinction found in even some of the best cultural studies work—hence my use of Water’s own explanation of his films in his book *Shock Value*, my awareness of my own personal investment in these works, and the strategic use of the concept of “praxis.”

### *Flaming Critique*

Susan Sontag’s review of *Flaming Creatures* makes a claim that she had previously made about camp, namely that “there are no ideas, no symbols, no commentary on or critique of anything in *Flaming Creatures*. Smith’s film is strictly a treat for the senses” (229). In opposition to this gourmet delectation of Smith’s film, as simply a “visually ... generous” treat to be consumed (228), I wish to argue that *Flaming Creatures* is in fact critical, but in a camp modality that critics like Sontag do not perceive. What is critiqued in *Flaming Creatures* is in fact this very act of “consumption” in which Sontag delights and through which she made her critical reputation. Sontag’s technique for handling the very real police censorship of the film for its “obscene” homosexual and transvestite content is to argue against making moral judgments about art:

Needless to say, I’m not denying that there are certain events about which it is necessary to take a position ... All I’m saying is that there are some elements in life—above all, sexual pleasure—about which it isn’t necessary to have a position—abandon the old task of always either approving or disapproving of what is depicted in art—or, by extension, experienced in life. (229)

I am somewhat sympathetic to this desire, found in both Sontag and Roland Barthes (Barthes 29–31). Perhaps the truly camp response would be to reject the very distinction between “art” and “life” made by Sontag. Yet it is worth considering the “by extension” which links art and life: to consider the way Sontag’s piece ignores the real conditions surrounding the release of *Flaming Creatures*, effacing the artwork’s ability to critique those attitudes, and Jack Smith’s agency, especially in her statement that the film is

indifferent to technique. It is for her own indifference that Sontag herself can be critiqued. I wish to argue, via, but against Sontag, that within the film, through its technical artistry, a challenge is made to the audience's ability to take a position relative to the subject matter. However, this does not result in indifference, but rather an ambivalence that sustains rather than undermines the value of critique.

Above all, this is accomplished through Smith's innovative camera work. *Flaming Creatures* begins with credits that play with the notions of readability, surface, and artifice that Sontag argued are central to camp stylistics. In front of elaborate arabesque script titles pass "Arab-esque" women with blankly seductive faces, periodically obscuring the titles. An opening shot reveals a highly artificial tableau with a large white flower-filled urn, while black-and-white film stock gives a ghostly, luminous quality to the compositions and flattens the surfaces. We see a transvestite in white formal women's clothes holding a bouquet of lilies encounter a woman in black adjusting her breasts in her dress. Much of the acting in the film resembles *tableaux vivants*, which play with the distinction between person and object. Likewise, the various dance/chase sequences in the film are highly stylized and oddly mechanical (like Busby Berkeley's stunning 1930s musical numbers).

The encounter between these two characters is followed (interrupted?) by a sequence of indeterminately gendered persons applying lipstick, while a readably "gay" male voice reads with great camp flair from an ad for the new heart-shaped lipstick. Kissing sounds and lip smacking almost drown out his voice. Seen through the lens of Freud's stages of libidinal development, the sequence is thoroughly "oral." The penis and breasts that appear are perceived as "suckable." A man (possibly Jack Smith himself) asks the lipstick ad-reader how one removes lipstick from a cock, and is met with a curt and ironic answer that the lipstick is "indelible." The penis and breast are also seen as "shakeable," and various shots show a flaccid penis and a breast being shaken. The breast shaking however takes the form of a "rape" as a series of (mainly transvestite) "women" molest the woman in black, by shaking her breasts vigorously. On the soundtrack we hear screaming, wailing, and a deep drone, like a storm. This sequence is foreshadowed by a shaking lamp, which introduces the theme of jiggling and shaking. First body parts, then

the camera itself starts to shake. The shaking penis parallels humorously with the shaking camera, cleverly mocking the common understanding of the camera as phallic. This shaking hand-held camera is deeply disorienting—so while the viewer is enticed by the display of naked bodies, the screaming soundtrack and unstable camera have an unsettling effect. The camerawork, through a sort of homology, leaves the viewer shaken. These two sequences manage both to reorient cinematic desire in an entirely oral direction, and to problematize the phallicism of the camera and the erotic gaze through disruptive techniques. As Diana Fuss has shown, parallel to the obsession with anal eroticism that pervades the popular consciousness regarding homosexuality, runs an eroticized and pathologized perception of gay men's orality (84). *Flaming Creatures* expands and explodes this "oral fixation." Jack Smith's own appearances in two of Ken Jacobs's films, *Blonde Cobra* (1963) and *Little Stabs at Happiness* (1959–63), are also strikingly "orally fixated"; in *Blonde Cobra* he chews maniacally on a baby doll's crotch between frantic puffs on a cigarette and, in *Little Stabs*, he sits pining on a rooftop in a Poirot costume, sucking on little balloons.

A later sequence involves a transvestite vampire emerging from a coffin and sucking the neck of a sleeping victim, invoking both the myth of the homosexual/transsexual vampire with an uncontrollable oral libido, and the entire B-movie monster tradition which Smith's next major film effort *Normal Love* lovingly revives with its mermaids, serpentine women, and mummies. *Normal Love* was never completed; *Flaming Creatures* remains his only completed film, after which he opted for live, improvised screenings involving massive re-editing of past footage, and performance pieces.

Thus, Sontag's own vampiric "consumption" of this "treat for the senses" meets with an ironic double within the filmic text itself. Edward Leffingwell recounts the real-world encounter between Smith and his supposed "allies," Jonas Mekas and Susan Sontag:

Smith's charges concerning Mekas's collusion and corruption ran deeper than such accounts might warrant. He had previously condemned Mekas for sacrificing *Flaming Creatures* to the courts, and insisted that as the film's champion, Mekas

had opposed censorship only because it was a radically chic thing to do at the time: It made Mekas appear a saint while enhancing his career. Further, he claimed Mekas had hypnotized Susan Sontag with his vision of free cinema, while diverting her attention from the socialistic commitment implicit in the organization of the Film-Makers Co-op. He also charged Mekas with stealing the careers of young filmmakers by imprisoning them in his vaults, only letting them out at night, and then only rarely. (81)

Taking David Van Leer's cue to read such anecdotes with an ear for the way in which gay people "speak most volubly between the lines" (19), it is worth noting that Smith frames his rejection of Mekas's attempts to expropriate his artistic control by utilizing gothic/B-movie discourse. (In 1978, Smith presented *I was a Mekas Collaborator*, a comic performance that traced the development and decline of his relationship with Jonas Mekas.) Note Smith's use of the gothic tropes of imprisonment in vaults, hypnotism, and sacrifice of helpless victims (including the film itself). Smith perceives the very real disparity of power between himself and his critics. He was an often poverty-stricken, yet defiantly "UN-commercial" queer underground filmmaker. Jonas Mekas and Susan Sontag both made their careers through championing, but also quite literally expropriating, the art of such underground artists. Smith's camping involves a strategy of appropriation (or as Van Leer has phrased it "re-appropriation" or "queening")—drawing on debased traditions of Orientalism and B-grade gothic. By contrast, Sontag's prime mode is that of expropriation as a means of advancing her own name as a critic. Sontag, Mekas, and Frederic Jameson, each of whom has made a name through their criticism of queer avant-garde art (Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol), enact a displacement of one name by another; whereby Sontag becomes camp's new inventor (Miller 213), and Andy Warhol's "*Diamond Dust Shoes* [on the dust jacket for Jameson's *Postmodernism*] become the trademark of 'Jameson', theorist of postmodernism" (Dellamora 36).

Smith appropriates various, mostly debased or decadent, genres. Visually, he combines Orientalist tropes (mostly Arabian, in tribute to his idol Maria Montez's *1001 Arabian Nights*), Latin dance, and Victorian Gothicism. The spectrum is so wide that critics both denounce the imagery as "pornographic" and exalt it as a triumph of

Baudelairian cinema (Mekas). In fact his imagery is both lofty and debased. But Smith's appropriation is not simply visual, it is also importantly aural—equally crucial is Smith's distinctive approach to sound. In Ken Jacobs's portrait of Jack Smith, *Blonde Cobra*, Smith's collaboration on the score sometimes overpowers the filmed material to the point that the film lapses into patches of black dominated by Smith's childish musing and deranged ranting, alternated with romantic 1930s love songs. This "classic camp" '30s popular music is combined with opera, Hawaiian ukulele, and '50s rock & roll in the rest of Smith's work, especially *Flaming Creatures*. This juxtaposition of high and low (opera with rock), noted by Sontag, is crucial to camp. But the most important aspect of Smith's use of sound is the way in which the music is borrowed, placing him in a tradition of creative appropriation. John Waters's films are equally striking for their use of debased, delinquent pop for a soundtrack; an inspiration he attributes to fellow queer avant-garde filmmaker Kenneth Anger's homoerotic biker film *Scorpio Rising* (1964): "I loved it. Kenneth Anger was the very first person—and I don't think anybody ever did this before—that used pop music the way now every movie does. I copied him—everybody copied him" (Stevenson 44; the interviewer adds "yeah, like *Blue Velvet*..."). This use of popular music is less remarkable for its juxtaposition of high and low art forms than for the particular way in which Anger, Smith, and Waters lace the music with erotic undertones and double-entendre. In the 25th Anniversary release of the soundtrack to *Pink Flamingos*, Waters's notes indicate an entire philosophy of what he calls "filth music."

Waters believes that this sort of appropriation counts as "cultural terrorism," which reveals that the stakes of appropriation are much higher than the word "borrowing" may indicate. Oscar Wilde's famous aphorism that "talent borrows, genius steals" reverberates through the stylistic appropriations of both Smith and Waters. But if Waters acknowledges that he and Smith copied Anger, this is still very different from the sort of "stealing" which Smith accuses Mekas of doing, which I have termed expropriation. Expropriation is not cultural terrorism or Wildean inspired thievery: it is an attempt to control circulation, to possess artwork.

In order for this not to become a “turf war,” we must consider the textual strategies deployed by these artists which might themselves function to critique their potential expropriation. The disjunctive camera effects of *Flaming Creatures* resist attempts to simply “consume” its lushly composed surfaces. In contrast to this avant-garde and non-narrative technique, John Waters’s films are gratuitously narrative (often melodrama or true-crime), but achieve similarly disjunctive and critical ends. First, I will consider the meta-commentary on representation I find in Waters’s *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) and *Female Trouble* (1974). I will move from here to a more thorough analysis of his arguably most notorious film, *Pink Flamingos*, which explicitly thematizes “turf war” and thus allows us to consider the stakes of the opposition I have set up between queer/camp appropriation and expropriation.

*The text is (should be) that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the Political Father.*  
—Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

*Hand in glove / the sun shines out of our behinds / no, it's not like any other love / this one is different—  
because it's us*  
—The Smiths, “Hand in Glove”

Waters is remarkably self-reflexive about representation. While it may seem that revulsion is what he hopes to elicit—and he has indicated as much in *Shock Value*, stating that “if someone vomits watching one of my films, it’s like getting a standing ovation” (2)—his films refuse any attempts to disavow the characters and their pleasures. For example, *Multiple Maniacs* features a freak show called the “Cavalcade of Perversions” where straight suburbanites come to gawk at Divine and other cultural deviants (“real life” fetishists and homosexuals). However, Divine and company have the last laugh by trapping, robbing, and shooting the gawking suburban couples. Another example is Mink Stole’s uptight upper-class character Peggy Gravel in *Desperate Living* (1977), who is completely unable to separate herself from her carnivalesque surroundings in the outlaw town in which she finds herself. Likewise, in Divine’s show at the end of *Female Trouble*, Divine asks the audience “who wants to die for art?” and shoots at the hapless audience members. This is a powerful refusal of any sort of audience absolution.

*Female Trouble* explores the pleasures of public display with a plot revolving around a photo-essay on “Crime & Beauty,” starring Divine as model, embarked upon by the upper-class Donald and Donna Dasher. Scenes of Divine sashaying down the streets of Baltimore in both *Female Trouble* and *Pink Flamingos* draw on a certain filmic tradition of shameless public displays by women (some Hollywood examples: *Stella Dallas*, *Jezebel*, and *Gilda*). This co-implication of shame and shamelessness is not simply a reversal, but rather shame engenders specific forms of subjectivity, as well as strategies of pleasurable redeployment. From here I would like to ask what is at stake in Divine’s own enactment of Laura Mulvey’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” (62) as a pleasurable sensation. How is an experience of paranoia and shaming stares registered by Divine and Waters’s films? What is the pleasure in public display of this sort, for Divine and for the viewer?

Waters explains a scene in *Pink Flamingos*:

One scene I guess you could call erotic, especially if you’re a “chubby chaser,” featured Divine sashaying down a crowded Baltimore street in the dead of winter, dressed only in a clinging cocktail dress and full makeup. None of the real life shoppers realized a film was being shot, because the hidden camera silently tracked Divine from a moving car. All they saw was a huge, scantily dressed “woman,” oblivious to the weather, undulating her way down the street with the confidence of a fashion model on the runway. Blowing kisses and smiling to dumbfounded strangers, Divine was unveiling his “look” for the world to see. Heads swirled and people did double takes. We left a cop on the corner totally agape. When the crowd would start screaming and laughing and seemed on the verge of a disturbance, Divine would leap into the car, we’d drive to another unsuspecting block, deposit her, and start the cameras rolling once again. (15)

While this may seem like a cheap transgressive thrill (and it is), Waters’s camera allows for a flagrant public refusal of embarrassment (and fear). Watching this and similar scenes, the spectator is allowed to experience the *jouissance* of Divine’s public drag, and the frenzy of Divine’s “glamor fits.” Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon explain that in the figure of Divine they find: “a certain interface between abjection and defiance, what

Divine referred to as ‘glamor fits’ and which may be more broadly hypothesized to constitute a subjectivity of glamor itself” (*Tendencies* 218). This “subjectivity of glamor” or “divinity effect” is dramatized in Divine’s modelling sprees. After one such spree in *Female Trouble* she declares “God I had the most fabulous walk over here. Everyone was staring and gawking at me like I was a princess.” Later, in front of Donald Dasher’s camera, Divine says “I’ve got exhibitionism throbbing in my veins!” From Mulvey’s assertion that “to-be-looked-at-ness” is culturally overdetermined as feminine, we might speculate that drag is one of the ways in which (fat) gay men can reconfigure their bodies, and the looks directed at them, as desirable. Unlike what Judith Butler has criticized about the conflation of performativity with drag performance, i.e. the notion that there is an unmarked “one” who can “do” gender, Divine’s drag is a reformulation of a pre-existing system of gendered identifications, between gay men and fat women as both abject, marked categories. Divine, as a 300lb. gay man, is not “doing” drag, but rather through drag, he is playing out those identifications. As Moon and Sedgwick put it:

If Glenn Milstead hadn’t become Divine, what would he have become? Doesn’t it devalue a creativity as deep as the bones and musculature, imperfectly delible as lipstick, and as painful as 300 pounds in high heels, to define it in terms of the inconsequential terms of the free market in genders and identities? (*Tendencies* 224)

This is an important argument: gender is neither essential (to one’s sex) nor free-floating or discretionary, but is complexly pre-figured and refigured in Divine’s “character.” Waters is thus quite self-conscious about representation—the erotics of public display, the exploitation of the Dasher’s camera, which doubles for Waters’s own, and the audience’s desire to see more but to have an avenue of escape. But more than representation is at stake in Waters’s *Pink Flamingos*.

#### *Shoplifters of the World, Unite and Take Over*

*Pink Flamingos* stages a battle over the title “the filthiest people alive” between Divine’s family—her “hillbilly” son Crackers, her glamorous travelling companion Cotton, and her infantilized girdle-wearing mother Edie—and an uptight middle-class married couple,

Connie and Raymond Marble. The Marbles run a baby ring, selling babies from kidnapped hitchhikers impregnated by their long-suffering butler “Channing” to lesbian couples and investing the money in schoolyard drug-dealing. They believe that this proves that they are filthier than Divine. A series of pranks escalates until Divine and family capture the Marbles and execute them for “ass-holism” in a “kangaroo court” before the tabloid media. Divine declares to the press “Filth is my politics, Filth is my life!” I wish to examine the dichotomy the film sets up between Divine’s brand of filth and the Marbles’ attempts at one-upmanship, and to explore what indeed may be “the politics of Filth.”

The narration of the film is obviously biased in favour of Divine, with a deep contempt for the Marbles. While Divine’s crimes are slightly more “petty” (playing pranks, shoplifting, urinating on others’ manicured lawns), they are tactical and improvised, whereas the Marbles literally “run” filth like a business, complete with an office. Class plays a major role in the dichotomy between Divine and the Marbles. Divine and her family are “white trash”<sup>3</sup> —they steal their food, they distrust the police and even the mailman, and they live in a trailer with no address. Divine’s mother, the rotund Edie (Edith Massey), sleeps in a crib, and is obsessed with eggs. While Divine presumably pays the “egg man” for delivering the eggs, the role of the egg as a market product is problematized by the film. While Edie waits anxiously for the egg man, Divine’s son “Crackers” has bizarre, violent sex with Cookie (who is in fact a spy for the Marbles) which involves both voyeurism (Cotton, Divine’s travelling companion, watches through the window) and bestiality—Crackers forces Cookie to hold live chickens between them as they have sex. This scene has since caused such controversy with animal rights activists that Waters felt the need to address it in his book *Shock Value* and the “afterword” to the 25th anniversary edition of the film. Waters explains that he eats chicken and knows that the chicken doesn’t arrive on his plate from natural causes. He also jokes that he thinks the chicken got a good deal: it got to be in a movie, it got fucked, and afterwards got eaten by the cast members. In a later scene, Edie asks Divine if there

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<sup>3</sup> I use this phrase with great hesitation, since Waters himself has said that “in six months, no one will say ‘white trash’... it’s the last racist thing you can say and get away with” (Friend “White, Hot Trash”).

would be no eggs if there were no more chickens. Divine comforts Edie and tells her that her fears are simply “egg paranoia.” But this “egg paranoia” signifies much more; it in fact uncovers the working of a deeply mystified operation: the animal product industry. The consumption of the chicken/eggs suddenly loses “comforting,” “cheery,” and “kind” connotations (cf. The Smiths, “Meat Is Murder,” and Waters’s *Serial Mom*). Waters comments on the system of commodification itself though his emphasis on the hidden, dirty, and perverse operations behind a pristine, desirable product—the egg as commodity fetish *par excellence*. This system of masked production and fervent consumption is the very system from which Divine’s family absents itself as non-productive, parasitic “trash.” The camp I find in Waters lies precisely at this level of “trash,” as the re-evaluation of the filthy and the abject. By contrast, the “camp value” we find in the *Simpsons* episode and in Susan Sontag’s “Dandyism in the age of mass culture” commodifies this former, much dirtier process. Here we are literally given an answer to the chicken and egg question: camp must be stripped of its critique of the workings of commodification before it can itself become a commodity to be consumed.

Consumption takes other forms in *Pink Flamingos*, equally graphic and subversive. The Marbles call the police, snitching on Divine’s birthday party—a cowardly move revealing their ability to appeal to the authority of the Law despite their claim to criminality and filthiness.<sup>4</sup> However, the wild carnivalesque party ambushes the police’s ambush, massacres and eats them. An unforgettable shot shows Divine smiling a bloody grin while brandishing a leg of “Pig”—literalizing the counterculture link between the police and pigs. Like the pseudo-anthropological “primitive,” “savage” tribe, Divine’s party eats their enemies.

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<sup>4</sup> In this way, the Marbles are strikingly similar to the Dashers from *Female Trouble*, who encourage Divine to pursue a life of crime, then testify against her in court in exchange for complete immunity. The “kangaroo court” before the tabloid press, at the end of *Pink Flamingos*, reveals two important aspects of Waters’s philosophy about crime. First, it hearkens back to the history of spectacle and folk-criminals, and second, it reveals that the tabloid press is partly responsible for the fact that criminals are instant celebrities. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum relate Waters’s particular take on celebrity to Andy Warhol: “Warhol’s only-in-America theory of celebrity (‘in the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes’) [arrives at] Waters’s own dictum: ‘A new criminal is the hottest of all media stars; it’s the only kind of celebrity that can happen literally overnight’” (163).

But the film is far more famous for another representation of consumption, what is technically termed “coprophagy”—literally eating shit. In an early phase of the rivalry between Divine and the Marbles, the Marbles send Divine a birthday gift of a “turd” in a box. This “gift” playfully reveals Freud’s insight that “it is probable that the first meaning which a child’s interest in faeces develops is that of ‘gift’ rather than ‘gold’ or ‘money’” (*Standard* 130–31). Regarding the latter connection, Freud remarked “it is possible that the contrast between the most precious substance known to man and the most worthless, which he rejects as ‘something thrown out’ has contributed to this identification of gold with faeces” (*Collected* 50). This connects with *Pink Flamingos*’ concern with all that is rejected: trash as “something thrown out.” Divine’s extra-diegetic answer to the Marbles’ attack on her Divinity is to prove herself the filthiest actress alive by eating dog shit on camera, in a famous single take which finishes off the original version of the film. In effect, *Pink Flamingos* argues that the answer to attempts to destroy the abject and the filthy is to internalize both the threat and the filth, through oral incorporation. This “primitive” process at the heart of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* works in *Pink Flamingos* to subvert rather than solidify the social order. Almost as notorious as Divine’s coprophagy is the scene at Divine’s birthday party in which a contortionist makes his asshole appear to sing. Thus, the film’s “oral” logic, like that of *Flaming Creatures*, transforms body parts and their uses in directions that work against proper social usage (cf. Guy Hocquenghem). In the two notorious sequences of *Pink Flamingos*, the anus and the mouth become confused, a confusion similar to the confusion of shaken body parts in *Flaming Creatures*.

Both Waters and Smith are thus concerned with the status of the object, the commodity, and ways in which “proper” circulation of money, commodities, bodies, and pleasures can be subverted and rerouted. Both settle on “trash” as a defining rubric with which to thematize the “waste products” of proper circulation. William Burroughs dubbed John Waters “the pope of trash,” and Jonas Mekas argued that Jack Smith’s art explored “The End of Civilization” where his theatre sets became “like this culture that seems to absorb everything and everybody—a huge dumping grounds, and open mouth of graveyards” (Leffingwell 49). On a similar note, Stefan Brecht explains that Smith used

materials which were “with puritanical strictness, in demonic purity junk—in substance, shape and monetarily of absolutely no value” (Leffingwell 43). Again, we must note the gothic motifs surrounding Smith’s work: demonic, open mouth of graveyards, etc. But Mekas colludes with the culture of absorption he seems to indict. Smith and Waters attempt to imagine other forms of countercultural “absorption” or incorporation.

What distinguishes recent “Generation X” (or “Y”) marketing of the kitsch value of the past from what I am calling camp is the fact that the latest marketing of kitsch is intricately tied to what Jameson calls postmodernism’s “nostalgia”—a desire for a past which is nevertheless inaccessible (190). Retro marketing cuts youth off from the past through disavowal of the past, whereby history becomes kitsch. Kitsch appears to be desire for, and love of, the debris of the past, but it in fact involves a disavowal, a certain embarrassed laugh at the past. Camp, by contrast, is an embrace of debris refusing disavowal. Sontag is right when she argues that “people who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as ‘a camp,’ they’re enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling” (292). Kitsch, for Sontag, is “the absence of this love” (292). Unfortunately, Sontag is too caught up in objects to understand the significance of this feeling. Commodification involves a mystification of the history of an object’s production (like the chicken-egg relation), whereas Waters and Smith jeopardize the process of objectification, and find camp in the waste products of production itself. Camp deliberately embraces waste without the attribution of monetary value involved in the lucrative market of kitsch.

The Marbles’ real mistake lies of course in attempting to take possession of Divine’s title of “the filthiest person alive,” and this cautions us against a natural desire to protect against the expropriation of camp by claiming ownership of it. The same should apply to the term “queer.” Indeed, in *Pink Flamingos* we see an uncanny parallel between debates over who gets access to the term “queer” and the one-upmanship of the Marbles’ and Divine’s “family” over the title of the “filthiest people alive.” The real contest staged by *Pink Flamingos* is the battle between those who would domesticate filthiness and queerness, and those who queer and filthy the domestic. Divine’s hex, accomplished by licking the Marbles’ home, queers the domestic space. This is in contrast to the gratuitously marital straight Marbles, who confine and domesticate the queer and the

filthy (some examples: Channing the butler locked in the closet, the pregnant kidnapped hitchhikers in the basement, their exploitation of lesbians). The Marbles burn Divine's trailer, but Divine makes love *to* and *in* their house (incestuously, with her son). What is at stake here, and in Waters's other filmic "battles," is a refusal to let the queer and the grotesque be disavowed or domesticated. Divine's family are outlaws with no address, whereas the Marbles at "3900" with their "central heating" always seem to have recourse to non-queer structures of authority (the Holy Seal of Matrimony, the Police). What we must realize is that camp—and queerness—is always relational, tactical, and de-territorializing: Divine's family and their filthiness works like Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizome" (7), plugging-in everywhere in unpredictable ways.

In Waters's films, the "grotesque" bodies of the fat lady and the queer refuse to be quarantined, and instead disrupt any *cordon sanitaire* separating off the audience. The very act of looking at freaks only brings them pleasure and fame (Stevenson 42). Waters's films let no one off the hook, on or off screen. Divine's "monstrosity" refuses to be safely confined to the screen. Waters has crassly explained that fat people "take up more room on the screen" (128) but what can be extrapolated from this is that Divine's monstrosity is like that of a monster in a 3-D monster movie, bursting beyond the limits of the screen and attacking the audience who attempt to distance themselves from the monster. As Judith Halberstam has explained: "The monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities, and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities" (27). Thus, a goal for the queer audience of Waters's films is not to repudiate difference and monstrosity, but to discover the power of monstrous alterity.

Donald Morton has argued that Waters and his critics, Sedgwick and Moon, get as much mileage as possible out of "shock," giving a mild "start" to normative sensibilities (which he likens to Duchamp's "urinal," 134). This "materialist" argument is not only uncharitable, and limited in its understanding of what can be political, but may miss what Waters sees as the value of shock. I agree with Sedgwick and Moon's claim that while isolated moments from Waters's oeuvre may seem to be a simple reassignment of

meanings of filth and value, there is much more at stake; symbolically, politically, erotically in the various displacements of value enacted in films (236).

Sontag's mistake was in thinking that simply suspending moral judgment is the enlightened attitude to take towards Jack Smith or John Waters. While their films refuse a comfortable, suturing position for the spectator, they equally refuse to let the spectator off the hook. The audience is positioned by Waters and Smith's films, but this positioning is always unsettled and unsettling. What results is a sort of "ambivalent" relation that is not the privileged, urbane tolerance Sontag calls for. It is rather more akin to the psychic process involving both a desiring and a disowning impulse. But since Sedgwick has argued that queerness must repel disavowal, the spectator must remain under the sway of the film.

Mikhail Bakhtin claimed that carnival laughter is profoundly ambivalent (11–12), and it is worth considering the stakes of comedy. Waters's films claim to make fun of everyone, both the status quo and his various subcultural audiences (gays, hippies, bohemians). Smith's first reaction to the scandal surrounding his film was to claim that it was originally designed as a comedy but was transformed into "a sex issue of the Cocktail World." The 1996 documentary based on Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* is unusually preoccupied with the figure of the sissy as an object of the audience's derisive laughter, but the power of queer laughter is not given due attention. Esther Newton claimed that camp's usefulness for gay people is as way of laughing at one's incongruous situation instead of crying (109). Kathleen Rowe has also claimed that the power of laughter, most especially the carnivalesque figure of the laughing fat woman, has not received the attention it is due in feminist film studies, a field which has focused its energy primarily on melodrama (1–21). Waters's films especially refuse to let the audience simply laugh at his characters. This is why the sarcasm of kitsch, as it has been so skilfully mastered by the advertising industry (especially *Old Navy* and *Enzyte*), should not be mistaken for camp. The sarcastic laughter of so much recent marketing is only disavowal, and bears only the bitter fruit of kitsch, often with a reinstatement of heteronormativity. Whether camp is "postmodern" is a question which will remain open, but its possibility as a form which might work to criticize consumer capitalism needs consideration. If Waters's films

seem bitter, however, it is only a platform from which Divine and her entourage make their moves of cultural terrorism. For Smith and Waters, camp is not simply a laughing matter, it is also aggressive, even violent.

This ambivalence of camp proposes an art of inversion (the invert's art). In the case of drag, there is a very thin line separating the glamorous from the grotesque. In *Flaming Creatures* and its reviews, eroticism seems to tread a fine line between "rape" and "orgy." For at least one municipal judge, *Flaming Creatures* "borders on the razor's edge of hard-core pornography"<sup>5</sup>. In comedy, there is a subtle distinction between laughing *at* and laughing *with*, between laughing and crying, and between humour and violence. For the artist and critic, there is a subtle distinction between appropriation and expropriation. But finally, the last inversion I wish to perform is in arguing that understanding/deploying the modalities of camp is not simply a minoritarian gay survival tactic, but is a central pursuit of critical and cultural studies.

#### Notes:

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<sup>5</sup> Hoberman concludes "Crimson Creatures" with a Lacanian observation regarding the phallus unveiled: "Those rudely brandished dicks, neither wholly erect or entirely flaccid, are only penises. As funny as it is poignant, *Flaming Creatures* is guilty of a criminal disrespect more serious than burning the flag. In so casually representing the male organ, it desecrates the underlying symbol of all power structures—including the U.S. Senate." John Waters, likewise, treats the male member with no respect—it is compared to an obscene pickle and a turkey gizzard, and is violently cut off in *Pink Flamingos* and *Desperate Living*. This aspect of their respective works no doubt contributes their "ambivalent" reception.

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